

A shirtless man with a beard and dark hair is looking down. He has a tattoo on his upper chest that looks like a baseball with the words "LITTLE LEAGUE" and "1988" on it. His right hand is resting on his stomach. He is wearing grey shorts. The background is dark.

Broken

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Warning: Due to mature subject matter, such as explicit sexual situations and coarse language, this story is not suitable for anyone under the age of 18.

Triggers: Flashbacks of domestic abuse and miscarriage (not FMC) and panic attacks. Please be kind to yourself when deciding if this story is one you want to read.

*Broken contains spoilers to Burned in the first chapter, so please consider reading Liam and Violet's story before you continue.

Dedication

To my wonderful husband.

Thank you for always supporting me.

I love you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prologue

Lucy

Seventeen years old

“We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready.”

A smile stretches across my lips as I look up at Jude, loving him even more for the flash of concern and nerves swimming in his gray eyes. We’ve been dating for six months, and when I told him a few weeks ago I was ready to have sex, *wanted* to have sex, he kissed me breathless, then tucked my head under his chin and told me there was no rush.

He knows what happened three years ago, so I get his hesitation, but I’m more than ready to give him my v-card.

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?” I wink and gesture towards my naked body, lying beneath him as he keeps most of his weight on his forearms, not wanting to crush me under his muscled frame.

“No jokes, Luce.” Jude’s nose rubs against mine, but he pulls back to look at me, sincerity shining in his eyes. “I refuse to fuck this up. You’re it for me, so tell me now if you’re having second thoughts.”

I run my fingertip over his brow, then down his straight nose and around his full lips before answering him. “I love you. And I want my first time to be with you.”

I pull his head down so I can press my lips against his, hoping he can taste the honesty in my kiss. He lifts his head and smiles tenderly at me, adjusting his weight so he can cradle my face against his palm. “I love you, too.”

His eyes stay on mine as he slides the condom on, watching for any signs that I’m not ready. He won’t find any, but I appreciate the attentiveness anyway. My eyes flutter closed as his warm lips brush against my forehead, sparks of lust warming my belly.

When we’re done, I snuggle into Jude’s arms, feeling as though something I lost a long time ago has found its way back to me, like I’m finally able to take a deep breath and enjoy the burn in my lungs, reminding me I’m alive.

It feels a lot like hope.

A buzzing noise on the nightstand has me grabbing Jude’s phone and handing it to him, the frustrated look on his face telling me it must be his dad.

The man hates that my mom and I aren’t as well off as Jude’s family is, but my boyfriend has repeatedly told me he doesn’t care what his parents think, as long as he has me.

“Do you need to go?” The clock on my nightstand says it’s just after midnight, well past his weekday curfew.

“Yeah, I guess I do.” He looks down at me and smiles, pushing a piece of hair away from my face before he kisses me, slowly sliding his tongue against mine before he gets up to get dressed. I tug on my discarded t-shirt, smacking Jude’s ass when he bends down to tie his shoes.

“I wouldn’t do that again unless you want it reciprocated, babe.” His tone is teasing, but the heat in his eyes says he’s up for it if I am.

“Hmmm, maybe later.” I rise up to my tip toes and wrap my arms around his neck, bringing his lips down to mine for another quick kiss before I nudge him towards my door. “I’ll see you at school.”

With a final kiss to the tip of my nose, he grins and slowly shuts my door behind him, careful to not wake my mom sleeping down the hall.

After I give him a couple of minutes to make his exit, I go to the bathroom down the hall, taking my time to look at myself in the mirror, wide eyes and flushed cheeks looking back at me.

What a change three years can make.

I go to the kitchen for a glass of water and notice the front door isn't clicked shut all the way. Rolling my eyes, I push it closed and lock it, knowing Jude was trying to be extra quiet and must not have shut it all the way by accident.

When I go back to my room, I can't help smiling at the rumpled sheets, knowing I made the right decision in trusting Jude tonight. My smile turns into a frown when I see my window cracked; I know I didn't leave that open. I go to set my water down on the bookshelf by my bed when I hear the floorboards moan behind me.

Too quickly for my brain to process what's happening, a hand covers my mouth, the instant shot of adrenaline and panic making the backs of my hands tingle. My glass falls to the floor with a loud *crash*, cold water spilling over my bare feet.

I struggle, trying to get out of the tight hold I'm in, but my strength is nothing compared to whoever snuck into my room. Even if I was strong enough, the cold chill of a knife against my throat has me stilling, the roaring pulse in my ears making me lightheaded.

"Hold still, bitch." I don't recognize the voice, but something sinister in its tone has dread pooling in the pit of my stomach, mixing with the adrenaline until I have to swallow back the bile inching its way up my throat. "Looks like someone got nice and dirty tonight, isn't that right, Dolly?"

Dolly? What the hell?

I'd say something, but he still has my mouth covered with his gloved hand, his hot breath panting against the back of my neck. I desperately try to get enough oxygen in through my nose, but I'm failing, black spots already staining my vision as I force myself to stay in the moment and not give in to the panic attack nipping at my heels.

"You thought you could just move on, have some fucking picture perfect life?" His hand leaves my mouth and grabs a chunk of my hair, yanking my head back enough for me to lock eyes with him through his ski mask. I can't tell if they're blue or gray in the darkness of my room, but the pure hatred in them has me whimpering, unable to push words past my trembling lips.

"The moment you find happiness, I'll be there to obliterate it." His promise is sealed with the sting of the blade cutting into my skin, warm blood leaking from the wound, soaking into the collar of my shirt.

When I hear my mom call my name, I can't stop the paralyzing fear wracking my body. The man lets go of my hair and presses his hand against my mouth once again, pressing the blade harder against my neck.

"It'd be a real shame if I had to hurt your mom, Dolly." His words are a whisper against the side of my head, but I hear the threat loud and clear.

Mom can't see this, she's already been through too much because of me. I start struggling again, managing to pull the man's hand away from my mouth long enough to gasp out my plea. "I understand. Leave. Please, leave us alone."

I only have a second to appreciate the small victory of being let go when I'm hit in the back of my head.

Then my world goes dark.

Chapter 1

Cameron

“Why am I not surprised in the least that your birthday is on Valentine’s Day?”

I wink at Violet and set down my beer. “Because I’m the most lovable guy you know, Vi-Vi. Sweet, caring, smart, hot, and incredibly good in bed.” My best friend’s girl rolls her eyes and smiles, shaking her head at my answer.

Tyler scoffs and shares a knowing look with Liam. “And so damn humble.”

Liam chuckles and rests his arm around Violet’s shoulders, dropping a kiss to her head while Ty quirks a dark brow at me, daring me to disagree with him.

I grin and take a look at all the people who came out to our favorite bar, Jackson’s, tonight, noting a particularly sexy blonde staring at me from across the crowded room. I lift my glass to my lips as I slide my eyes over her curvy body, her knowing look echoing my dirty thoughts. “If you got it, flaunt it, baby.”

“Oh, you do an excellent job of that part, don’t worry.”

I’d know that sweet voice anywhere, but I’m powerless over my head turning towards Lucy anyway, soaking up that playful smirk as she slides into our booth next to Tyler.

I quickly take stock of her, noting the underlying sadness in her blue eyes when her gaze snags on Violet’s casted leg. The girls haven’t talked about what happened last month in front of

me, but I know they're both distraught over the betrayal. Fuck, I'm still shaken from it all.

A fast glance at the healing burns on Vi's forearm has flashes of that night swirling in my head, the moments I literally tried to breathe life into her unmoving lungs hot and sticky in my mind.

Liam catches Lucy's eye and they share a sad smile, both of them carrying guilt that neither deserves. The only fucker who deserves to drown in his guilt and rot in prison is Cooper, but much to all of our dismay, Vi didn't want to press charges against him. Through all of the conversations I've had with Liam, it sounds like Lucy kept quiet about her opinion, only offering unwavering support to her best friend.

I know she's burying how hurt she must feel. From the few interactions I had around Lucy and Cooper, they seemed closer than Violet was with him. So not only did he utterly destroy his relationship with Vi, but he lost Lucy, too.

Her usual spark is a weak flicker some days, totally snuffed out on others. Luckily for me, I seem to be the only one able to put some of that fire back in her broken soul.

"Hey Sunshine, nice of you to finally show up." I shoot her a grin and wave over the waitress, internally wincing when I realize I've slept with her before. I'm always upfront about my no strings attached deal, but something about seeing...Sarah, her name tag says, around Lucy makes me feel weird. The look Sarah gives me says she's down for a round two, but she knows better than that.

"What can I get you, Cameron?" Her eyes leap to Ty and Liam, but after seeing the former brooding, as usual, and the latter cuddling up with Vi, her attention strays back to me. I don't miss the snort Lucy lets out, nor do I miss the chance to push her a bit, if only to scare off the shadows clinging to her like a wet cloak.

"I'll take another porter, and a huckleberry cider." Lucy's focus tightens on me, a question in her eyes that I smirk at. If

she thinks I haven't picked up on her little quirks, including her drink of choice, she has another thing coming.

I look at everyone else and they shake their heads, so I turn back to Sarah and tell her that's all for now. I can't help but notice Lucy's attention sticking to the waitress as she walks away, a little frown working its way across her freckled forehead.

"How was Hope's?" Violet looks at her friend, most likely noting the same sadness I picked up on earlier, and grabs Lucy's hand, squeezing gently.

Now that Vi is fully moved into Liam's new house, Lucy's alone in the apartment on the edge of campus, something none of us like. Lucy asked Kloey, the girls' other friend, if she wanted to move in, but her lease isn't up for a few more months, and breaking it would cost her more than she's willing to spend right now. Lucy insisted she would be perfectly fine living alone, but I don't like it one bit.

Lucy glances down at Violet's engagement ring and a genuine smile stretches across her full lips. "Work was good. Mrs. James came in to pick something up for her granddaughter, and Kloey swung by for an hour or so to catch up." None of us miss the quick look she sends Ty's way, but she continues before he has a chance to say something. "Hope invited me to go on her next scouting trip to Texas."

"Holy crap, that's awesome! Why didn't you start with that?" Vi jumps up and pulls Lucy out of the booth and into a hug, awkwardly trying to keep her balance while still in her cast. Liam's hand goes to her lower back as he watches the girls squeal their excitement, a gentle smile on his face.

When he told me he was going to propose to Vi, I was so fucking shocked that I almost dropped the to-go lunches I'd picked up for everyone who'd been waiting at the hospital. I never thought I'd see the day he'd find someone strong enough to see through his insecurities and love him how he deserves.

I know, I'm a sappy shit sometimes. But the dude went through some fucked up things as a kid, and I'm glad he has Violet, even if they had to go through hell to get their happy ending.

"Am I the only one who doesn't know what this scouting trip means?" I look between Tyler and Liam, but neither one says anything. Violet lets Lucy go and both of them sit back down, Vi turning to me with a bright smile on her face.

"It means Lucy gets to help Hope look at hundreds of vendors and choose which clothing lines they'll sell in the boutique."

"Well I'll be damned, Sunshine. Looks like you're working your way up the ladder. Don't forget us little people when you're rolling in the dough." When I see faint pink rush to her cheeks, I push a little more. "I'm down if you wanna be my sugar mama, just putting that out there." The laugh she lets loose makes my chest pinch and I suck down the last gulp of my beer so I don't stare at her too intently.

Still doesn't stop me from soaking in her beauty, though.

Her blue eyes are dark right now, but they'll change depending on her mood. I'm sure Violet would be able to name the exact shades of blue, but I'm no artist.

The wavy strands of her fiery hair are loose tonight, brushing against her delicate shoulders, one of which is peaking out of an oversized cream sweater, begging for my lips. She probably weighs 130 pounds soaking wet, but her ability to hold her own more than makes up for how tiny she is.

I once saw her get in between a dude and his girlfriend at the bar when they were having a fight, not an ounce of fear on her determined face when the guy went to push her out of the way. Of course, I didn't let it get that far, but Lucy seemed ready to brawl regardless of my back-up. I asked her later how she knew the girl and she admitted she didn't know her at all.

“How’s your capstone going? Any luck finding your final participant?” Lucy smiles at Vi, then takes a sip from Ty’s water glass since there’s only four on the table. He doesn’t seem to mind, just gives her a little smirk.

What the fuck is that about? He’d bite my head off if I touched his stupid water.

“Actually, yes, I did.” Violet grins and pivots so she’s facing Tyler. “Ta-da!”

Lucy twists around so she’s looking at him, a look equal parts surprise and excitement lighting up her face.

“No shit? That’s awesome!” She slams his water glass down and gives him a hug. To all of our surprise, he lets her, gently patting her back while only looking mildly uncomfortable. Little slivers of jealousy work their way into my chest and I rub the heel of my palm against my sternum to relieve the ache.

“I honestly can’t believe I didn’t think about it sooner.” Violet grins at Tyler and leans into Liam’s chest when he tightens his arm around her shoulders. “As the artists of the group, we have to stick together.”

“Hey, what about that get well picture I made you?” I slap my hand to my chest and act like I’m offended she didn’t ask me to help her with her capstone, but I know Ty just wants the attention off him. I’m a nice guy, so I’ll take one for the team.

“You mean those stick figures that looked like they were boning?” Lucy laughs, quirking a red brow at me.

“I wouldn’t say boning as much as I’d say flapping around in the wind.” Liam grins at Lucy and laughs.

“At least you knew they were stick figures, I had no fucking clue what I was looking at,” Ty grunts.

I’m about to defend myself when Sarah comes back with my beer and Lucy’s cider. I don’t miss that Lucy doesn’t say thank you, only gives a tight smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. When she catches me looking at her, she gives me a quick

glare before asking Liam about the ballet studio one of his crews has been working on the past week. I'm only half listening to his response, my attention stuck to the redheaded spitfire who's laughing at something Liams says.

When I feel someone's eyes on me, I look up to see Vi watching me watching her best friend, a look of hesitant curiosity in her hazel eyes. I just give her a smirk and look around the room, noticing at least three chicks looking back at me with bedroom eyes.

“Picking out your next conquest?”

The question has me turning back to my friends, but it's Lucy's reply that has me biting off my response, having assumed the question was directed at me.

“Conquest seems like a strong word. I prefer...meal for the night.” She winks at Violet and returns her attention to some guy leaning against one of the pool tables in the back, his eager stare making it abundantly clear what he wants from Lucy. If her sly smile is anything to go by, she's ready to give as much as she gets.

Bitter jealousy lashes against my ribs for the second time tonight, but I tamp it down, instead going with humor as I scoff. “He looks like a Bieber wannabe. I'm sure you could find better than that.”

Lucy's gaze slides to mine, challenge snapping in those blue eyes of hers. “One, don't hate on Justin. Two, don't worry about it.” The smile on her face seems a bit forced, but I'm sure the smirk I send her way looks the same as awkward silence fills our table.

“You wanna help me go to the bathroom real quick?” Violet slowly pushes to her feet and Lucy instantly gets up, wrapping her arm around Vi's waist.

“No problemo, babe.”

Liam's eyes stick with the girls until they turn the corner to the bathrooms, then his stare swings to me. “Don't even think

about it.” He gives me his serious look and I jerk my head back.

“What? What are you talking about?” I look over at Ty and he’s glaring at me too.

“Don’t think we can’t see you wanna hook up with her.” Ty rubs at his brow, then lets out a big breath. “She’s not just another girl, man.”

My hackles rise at that. “What the hell does that mean? Are you just trying to keep her for yourself?”

“Jesus Christ, both of you shut up.” Liam glances around the bar and continues. “Look, you and Lucy are both...very casual when it comes to hooking up. I don’t know how that would work out if you were to get together, and I don’t want to deal with the fall out. And I definitely don’t want Violet to get stuck in the middle of any drama right now.” He looks at me with pleading eyes. “She’s still messed up over what happened, and the last thing she needs to deal with is her best friend being heartbroken over you.”

Ouch. “Don’t you think you’re being a little dramatic about this? We’re both adults. And who said I wanna hook up with Lucy, anyway?”

Ty and Liam share a bemused look before Ty answers. “You stare at her like a lovesick puppy, man.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true.” Liam drains his beer and looks at me for a few seconds before he continues. “If you’re serious about wanting to be with her, it has to be more than a one night thing. And honestly, I’m not sure she’s ready for that right now.”

“That fucker did more damage than he could have ever imagined.” Ty’s words are a dark murmur, and I wonder if he really *does* have feelings for Lucy. The thought has my stomach reeling.

“Look, I know the score. I’ll admit that I’m interested, but contrary to popular belief, I’m also not an idiot.” I give each of

my friends a glare. “I know she’s not in a place right now to get involved in a serious relationship.”

“And you are?” Liam looks at me, but there’s no sarcasm in his voice, only honest curiosity.

“I...I don’t know.” I’ve always wanted a wife and kids, maybe a dog or two. *Eventually*. You can’t grow up in a huge family like mine, full of love and support, and not want that for yourself someday.

But what do I really have to offer? I have no clue what I want to do after graduation. You’d think having my dream of playing professional baseball ripped away from me years ago would have given me plenty of time to figure out my life, but nope.

Still fucking clueless.

None of us say anything after that, choosing to stew on our thoughts until the girls get back from the bathroom.

“I’m surprised you didn’t want to join us in the bathroom, Liam. I know how much you like it back there.” Lucy gives my boy a teasing smile as she helps Vi back into the booth, then settles herself next to Ty, taking a long drink of her cider.

Liam doesn’t respond, just gives Violet a look filled with heat. When he whispers something in her ear, I turn away, giving them a moment. Of course my eyes slide to Lucy, who’s looking at the couple with a happy smile on her face. It’s then I notice what her sweater says. *My book boyfriend is better than yours!* is plastered across her chest, enhancing her small, perfect tits behind the soft-looking material.

“Who’s your book boyfriend?” I keep my eyes on hers, knowing she’ll give me shit if she catches me checking out her chest.

“You ask as if you’d recognize a single one of them.” Lucy grins at me, one brow raised in a challenge.

“You forget that I have two younger sisters who love to read and tell me all about the hot guys in their books.” I hold

up a finger and start ticking off the characters I remember them fawning over. “Could it be Gideon Cross? Maybe Jaxson Reid? Garrett Graham? Oooh, I know. It’s that Rhysand dude, isn’t it? Mere mortals aren’t enough to keep you satisfied, huh?” We both ignore Ty’s pained groan and Violet’s burst of laughter, instead just staring at each other, her small grin mirroring my own.

“Cameron Conrad, are you trying to impress me right now? Because it’s working.” Her confession has me glancing down at her glass, noting that it’s nearly empty. No doubt the alcohol has loosened her tongue enough to give me a compliment sans the usual bite I’ve become addicted to, yet her admission pleases me nonetheless.

“I told you, sisters.” I shrug my shoulders and trail my eyes over Lucy’s features, her heart shaped face, slightly upturned button nose, and freckles for days. “I may or may not have stolen a book or two to see what all the fuss was about.”

“No you did not!” Violet blurts, then laughs as she looks at my honest expression. “Oh man, this is great.” Now both of the girls are laughing, and I have to say, they’re both beautiful. Vi’s strictly in sister territory now that she’s with Liam, but I can’t help noticing the cute little snort Lucy lets out when she tries to get a hold of herself.

Those first few days after everything went down with Violet were fucking rough, and seeing Lucy nearly dead on her feet, unwilling to leave the hospital for more than twenty minutes at a time, made me almost as worried for her as I was for Vi.

The fact that she’s here, laughing with her girl and throwing barbs my way with only a bit of liquid courage has the tightness in my chest loosening a bit. Not all the way, but it’s enough.

For now.

“Who wants to dance?” Lucy looks at me and Ty, knowing Vi can’t do much more than hobble with her cast, and Liam

won't leave her side. Ty just gives her a flat look, leaving me as the last option. When her gaze slides to mine, I jerk my chin towards the dance floor.

"I'll be out there in a sec." She gives me an appreciative smile and kisses Violet on the cheek before making her way into the mass of bodies grinding to the music pouring from the huge speaker in each corner of the bar.

"She's not ready." Violet's serious tone catches my attention, her eyes locked onto mine. "But she will be, eventually. Don't give up on her."

Liam and Ty keep their mouths shut, but I can hear their *I told you so* loud and clear. I reach across the table and pat Vi's hand while Ty slides out of the booth. "Your boy already gave me the talk, Vi-Vi. Don't worry. I'll keep it in my pants." I get up before she has a chance to respond, scanning the room until I see a flash of red in the center of the dancers.

When I make it to Lucy, she's already dancing with some chick I don't recognize, a smile on her face. When she sees me, she yells something to the girl and they both look at me and giggle, dancing back to back. I grin, sandwiching myself between them.

"What's so funny, ladies?" I grab Lucy by the hips and twist her around so her back is to my front, and we're both facing the other chick. Something citrusy hits my nose and I can't help lowering my head to take another deep breath. The shudder that wracks her small frame doesn't go unnoticed by me, but she's clearly set on ignoring it.

"I was just telling Sammy how well read you are, Cam." Lucy turns around in my arms and puts her small hands on my chest. "No need to be modest, I happen to know that Sam loves smut, too." She winks and pulls out of my arms, leaving me dancing with her friend. It's not long before I'm surrounded by women who can't keep their hands to themselves, the heavy bass unwinding everyone's worries until only the beat of the music matters.

Three songs come and go before I lay eyes on Lucy again. She's dancing with the Justin Bieber dude, grinning up into his face. When I try to get closer, I'm blocked off by a particularly persistent brunette.

"Hi, Cameron." Her tipsy words slip out of admittedly lush lips, but I'm on a mission. Gently peeling her hands off my stomach, I catch Lucy looking over at us, a look of amusement painted across her lips. I shoot her a plea for help, but I don't have a chance to see her response before Mystery Girl is grinding her ass against my junk.

Normally I'd be down, but I'm not feeling it tonight. When I spin the girl around so I can let her down easy, I feel another hand wrap around my bicep.

"Sorry babe, but this one's taken."

Both Mystery Girl and I look at Lucy, a warning tainting her otherwise innocent smile. I sling an arm around her shoulders and grin down at the other girl, apology in my eyes. Lucy slots into place at my side, my hand finding her hip and pulling her just the slightest bit tighter against me. Want and need brush against my sternum, rolling around and bathing in how good it feels to have her body this close to mine.

"Have a good night." I lead us to the opposite side of the dance floor and let out a huge breath, spinning Lucy so she's facing me, my hands still wrapped around her waist. "Thanks for the save."

"I'd say it was your birthday present, but I actually got you something else." The sneaky look in her eyes has me slightly worried until I see what she pulls out of her back pocket, tags still attached.

"A Speedo." My eyes bounce between hers and the shiny blue fabric. It's not just any Speedo, but a very, very small one.

"I saw it and instantly thought of you." The laugh that falls out of her mouth makes me happier than any birthday present

ever could, especially knowing the lyrical sound has been buried under her grief lately.

I grab the blue atrocity from her hand and hold it up to my hips. “Not sure if this’ll fit.” I smirk at her, but that quickly turns into a glare when I look at the tag and see it’s an extra small. “Okay, Sunshine, you’ve declared war now.” I glance down at her, expecting a sassy retort, but her smile disappears at the endearment.

“Why do you call me that?” We’re not dancing now, just standing there like two rocks in the middle of a writhing sea. I bend my head so she can hear me, my lips brushing the shell of her ear when I reply.

“You’re not ready for my answer, Sunshine. Ask some other day.”

Her cheeks heat and I rub my thumb over the warm skin, her breath catching. “Are you sure you only stole your sisters’ books once or twice?” I’m sure her question was meant to be a tease, but the fact that she’s staring at my mouth tells me her mind is elsewhere.

And as much as I’d like to fall into her sweet oblivion, I know our friends were right about her not being ready for anything serious. So I just smile and twirl her around, dancing until we’re both out of breath.

It’s the first time since I was seventeen that I go home alone on my birthday.

But fuck if it isn’t the best one yet.

Chapter 2

Lucy

Sunlight brushes against my eyelids as I wake up the next morning, coaxing me to get out of my incredibly warm blankets. I crack an eye open to see snow falling outside and can't help that I look like a kid on Christmas morning when I yank my covers back and hurry to the window, my breath fogging up the glass.

For New York, this is super late in the year to have our first snow, but I'll take it. Even if it means I'll have to leave for class a few minutes earlier than normal so I can stop and enjoy all of the snow covered buildings on campus.

After I take a quick shower, I look in my closet for a warm outfit. "Alright, Lexi. Help a girl out." I named my closet Lexi because she deserves a name. Whoever thinks I'm weird for it can bite me.

I smile to myself when I remember Cameron's face after he saw what size I picked for his present. I know he's on the other end of the sizing scale, but I couldn't help myself. The man needs to check that big ego of his every once in a while, and I'm just the person to help him with the task.

When I start the coffee pot, I set out two mugs, then frown at them and put the second one back on the shelf.

I'm so freaking happy for Violet and Liam, and I wouldn't want my girl with anyone other than someone who would, *and did*, put his life on the line to save hers, but I miss her more than I thought possible.

Well, that's not completely true. I knew I would miss her, but the acknowledgement hasn't lessened the blow of how lonely living alone can be. The first time I came home and automatically yelled, "Honey, I'm home" and realized no one was here, I can admit I felt equal parts stupid and sad. Which, in turn, made me feel like a brat because my loneliness meant my best friend found her soulmate.

So, I sucked it up and watched *Coyote Ugly* for the millionth time while eating a dinner of brownies I'd made that morning with a tall glass of oat milk.

I'm classy, I know.

Shaking off my melancholic mood, I check my backpack to make sure I have everything I'll need for my classes today, then lock up. I tug my dark green beanie lower on my head, then start the short walk to Hartford's campus. Vi and I were lucky to snag this apartment, and even luckier the landlord hasn't hiked our rent the past few years. Even with Vi moved out, my paycheck from Hope's is more than enough to cover rent and food.

I know I'm not the artist my best friend is, but I absolutely adore how our little town of White Plains looks covered in a white blanket of snow. Each little bungalow that lines the street to campus looks so cozy, with their warm yellow porch lights and picture windows.

As I approach the outskirts of campus, I take a moment to look around all of the brick buildings, the light dusting of snow only adding to their scholarly appeal. My footsteps are muted under my black ankle boots, the snow muffling any noise that may break the spell-like feeling covering the school grounds like a veil. With one final look at the hushed courtyard, I open the heavy door that acts as a gatekeeper for Robal, our business building.

I'm a little early, so finding a seat in the middle of the auditorium style classroom isn't hard. I pick a spot a few rows from the front, but not so far back that I won't be able to hear what the professor says.

Gayle Short is one of the best profs I've had over the last four years. She's a hardass, but she knows her shit when it comes to running a business, and she's taken me under her wing since my sophomore year. She's actually the one who told me about the job at Hope's, promising me the more experience I get in the world of fashion and clothing, the better equipped I'll be when I'm ready to open my own boutique.

"Good morning, Sunshine!" I whip my head to the left and see Cameron, clad in a Hartford hoodie and washed out jeans, strut his way down the aisle until he folds his tall frame into the seat next to me. "What's that look for? Aren't you glad to see me?"

I stare at his handsome face a little too long to be polite, but it can't be helped. His strong jaw is covered in just the right amount of scruff, and his soft brown hair looks like it could use a trim, but is tempting my fingers nonetheless. A straight nose and plush lips complete his face, the only imperfection a small scar on his chin, slightly lighter than the rest of his golden skin.

"Hello, earth to Lucy." Cam's large palm sweeps past my face twice before he grins at me, tugging on a piece of my hair. "I know I just rolled out of bed ten minutes ago, but I can't look that bad."

"What are you doing here?" I force myself to turn forward again, pulling out my tablet and keyboard to take notes. "We're halfway through the term, there's no way Short would let you in this late."

"She teaches the same class in the afternoon, but for some reason it was canceled, so all of us got pushed into this one." I look around and notice at least ten new faces, most of them looking pissed off about attending an 8am class instead of their previous afternoon time. "If you ask me, it's better to have this class in the morning, anyway. Your brain is sharper than it is later in the day."

I stare at him again, a smile tugging the edges of my lips upward.

“What?” His brown eyes look like honey in the morning light, warm and inviting.

“I agree with you. I purposefully schedule my more challenging classes in the morning so I can be fresh minded. I don’t know how many times I tried to convince Vi and…” I barely catch myself, pain slicing through my chest as I look down at my keyboard, avoiding Cameron’s gaze.

“Sunshine.” His voice is soft, but the steel in his tone has me looking up at him. “You couldn’t have known what was going on, so don’t you dare try to blame yourself for what happened.”

I look into his eyes and see fierce determination, as if he’s willing to fight my demons alongside me if only I’d ask for his help.

He has no idea I’d happily embrace a demon if it meant the other ghosts from my childhood would stay hidden forever.

“You’re wrong. I should have known something was up.” I let out a breath and watch as more of our classmates filter into the room. “I… I knew he loved Violet, but after she made it clear she was only interested in friendship, I thought he got it. When he started pulling away from me, when his temper was getting the best of him in a way I’d never seen before, I honestly thought he was just feeling the pressures of senior year.”

“How did his temper get the best of him, Lucy?” The direct question has me looking at Cameron again, his jaw clenched and eyes full of barely restrained anger.

“He never hurt me, if that’s what you’re asking.” I keep going when he just stares at me. Maybe talking about it will help ease the relentless ache I’ve had in my chest the last month. “It was little things at first, him getting really upset over a bad call when we were watching the Giants, or hating on a professor for giving him a C on his research paper in chemistry. Looking back on what happened with Miles, I should have known he wasn’t himself. Yes, Miles is a fucking

bastard who should have kept his hands to himself, but the way Cooper went after him...it was like he was going to kill him right in the middle of the art gallery.”

Flashes of Cooper punching Miles over and over again fill my mind, making me squeeze my eyes shut against older, more painful memories trying to rip through my carefully curated barrier.

A warm hand on my cheek has my eyes flying open in time to see anger and concern warring for dominance in Cameron’s golden gaze. “You promise me he never touched you?”

I let out a soft breath and gently pull his hand away from my face, setting it back in his lap. “I promise.”

“Has he tried to—”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore, okay? Can we just drop it for now?” I try to camouflage the wobble in my voice by clearing my throat, but I don’t think I succeed.

“Alright, Sunshine. For now.” His eyes trace over my face once more before he faces forward and grabs a notebook and pen out of his bag.

We’re halfway through class when Professor Short tells us about our final project.

“You and a partner of your choosing will create and present a marketing plan for a business. The business can be real or fictitious, but if you choose the latter, please refer to the rubric regarding the extra slides needed in your presentation.” Short looks around the room and smiles. “For today, I’d like you to find a partner and start brainstorming. I’ll be showing exemplars throughout the next few weeks, but I want your businesses nailed down beforehand.”

When I sweep my eyes around the room, Cameron lets out a low chuckle. “Don’t even think about it.” He gently grabs my chin, his thumb brushing against her cheek. “We’re partners.”

I roll my eyes, but don't argue, pulling my face away from his hand as I open my notebook to a new page. "Fine. Do you have a preference between picking a business that already exists or making one up?"

"Not really. What are you thinking?" His eyes zero in on my teeth digging into my lower lip, but he quickly trains his gaze on mine before grinning at me.

"If you really don't care, I'd like to do it for a clothing boutique." I smile and raise a brow, pointing my pen at him. "Is that too girly for you, Conrad?"

"Not at all." He gives a small shake of his head, but I can tell something's off with him.

"What's wrong?" My gaze snags on his tight fist laying on the desk and I slowly unclench his fingers with my own before studying him more closely. "If you'd rather do Hooters, I guess I can handle that."

He laughs at my joke, just like I wanted him to. His tight posture eases, his shoulders loosening the slightest bit, until he takes a breath, letting it out slowly.

"As much as I'd love to see you present our project in a Hooters uniform, I'm fine with the clothing store idea."

I purse my lips, but don't call him on his shit. Clearly he doesn't want to talk about what's bothering him, but he let the Cooper topic drop, so I'll give him this. "Fine. We can make it a men's and women's clothing store, that way we have a larger target audience."

He smiles, tugging a piece of my hair before I can slap his hand away. "Sounds good to me."

"What kind of clothing do you feel most comfortable in? What makes you feel good about yourself? Something that allows you to be comfortable and confident at the same time." I've been absently sketching a storefront on my paper, but I've left the sign blank. Big picture windows show undressed mannequins, little awning above the displays making the whole place look inviting.

When I look up at Cam, he's staring into space, fingers tapping at his thigh. I'm honestly surprised he hasn't made a joke about his birthday suit, but I can tell he's holding something in.

I stop drawing and keep my attention on his warm eyes, waiting until he looks at me to continue. "What are you thinking about?"

"My baseball uniform." He runs his fingers through his hair and looks around the room, noticing other pairs of students huddled next to each other, jotting down ideas. "It's where I felt most at home."

"How did I not know you're on the baseball team?"

"I'm not." He glances at me and smiles at the confusion furrowing my brow. "Long story short, I fucked up before I had a chance to make something of myself."

I want to ask him more, but I know better than anyone what it's like to have stories better left untouched. Nodding slowly, I look back at my sketch. "Okay. We need to find a marriage between sports uniforms and mini skirts." When I give him a smile, we both laugh.

"Sounds like a challenge I can't refuse." He's still a little out of it, but I just roll with it, sketching as we brainstorm.

We stay for another twenty minutes, coming up with ideas and shooting them down just as quickly. I can tell Cam's feeling slightly guilty about us trying to work in the sport aspect of the business, but I assure him we'll figure it out.

"I'll see you all on Monday. Have a wonderful day." Professor Short's goodbye has me blinking up at the podium as our classmates hurry towards their next classes. A glance out the windows to my right confirms that winter is most definitely here to stay, the skiff I walked through this morning now at least a couple of inches thick across the cobblestone paths and wrought iron benches.

"What's your next class?" I look up to see Cameron waiting for me, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Stats 243 over in Hoke. You?”

“Health 440 in Epson, but it’s not until ten. I need to swing by the intramural office in Hoke anyway, so I’ll walk with you.”

I nod and head towards the aisle, making my way to the door when I hear a couple exchanging heated words in the front row. No one else is paying any attention to them, but I can’t tear my eyes away from the violence I see swimming in the dude’s eyes.

“So you didn’t fuck him behind my back, Kate? You’re saying everyone else is lying?”

“Yes! Why won’t you believe me?” The girl looks like she’s on the verge of tears, but I know I should mind my own business.

That is, until the dickface grabs the girl’s wrist in an ironclad grip. I pivot so quickly the couple doesn’t see me standing in front of them until I’ve bent down and pushed my face into the asshole’s personal space. “I suggest you let her go right now.”

The surprise on the guy’s face quickly morphs back to his violent anger as he looks at me, taking his time to rake his dark eyes over my body before responding. “Mind your business, bitch.”

Wrong answer. I grab the girl’s bag from the ground and swing it over my shoulder, but as soon as the weight settles against my back, I feel someone gently slide it off my shoulder. I look up to see Cameron glaring at the guy as he holds the backpack in a tight fist. “You heard her, dude. Let the girl go and get out of here.”

The girl, Kate, yanks her wrist out of the prick’s grip and shoots me an anxiously grateful look as she gets up. When she looks back at her hopefully *ex* boyfriend, her eyes are a bit clearer. “I don’t want to be with you anymore. Please, just leave me alone, Brad.”

Brad, aka dickface, sneers at Kate. “As if I’d want to stay with someone as loose as you, sweetheart. It was fun while it lasted, but no one wants to date a skank.”

I feel Cameron tense at my back and I throw an arm across his chest before he can take a step forward. I lock eyes with Brad and make sure my smile is full of hate. “Leave her the fuck alone. And while you’re at it, figure out why you think manhandling anyone is the right thing to do.” I turn towards Cameron and Kate, ready to leave this shit show behind, when I hear the slimeball’s retort.

“Just admit it, Red. You saw me and wanted me for yourself. I’ll be honest, every time I see you around campus I wonder if the carpet matches the drapes. Wanna put me out of my misery?”

This time I’m not alone in holding Cameron back, Kate holding his arm while I push at his chest.

“He’s trying to get in our heads. Let’s go.” I grab Cam’s face and tilt it down to me, his eyes locking on mine. The violence I see there has me stepping back, and he must see the sudden change in me because he instantly cools and grabs my hand, pulling us towards the door.

The three of us remain silent until we’ve left the building, the snow muting the usual sounds of students coming and going. I grab Kate’s hand in mine and look at her wet eyes. “Are you okay?”

She sniffs and wipes a tear away with the back of her hand. “Yeah. I just feel stupid.” A self deprecating laugh forces its way past her lips and into the cold air. “I swear, he’s never been physical like that before. I feel so freaking stupid for not knowing he was like that.”

Cameron gives her a small smile and hands over her backpack. “If he tries to contact you, or corner you, you have to let someone know. Don’t try to keep it a secret and handle it on your own.”

“I know.” She looks between us and gives me a sad wave. “Thank you. For stepping in. I guess I’ll see you guys around.” And then she’s walking in the opposite direction of Robal, her footprints little shadows against the blinding white snow.

“You okay?”

I look up to see Cameron watching me with concern in his eyes, snowflakes stuck to his long lashes.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I kick at the snow and let out a long, visible breath into the cold air. “Just hate seeing that kind of thing.”

Something in Cameron’s hand catches my eye, and I see it’s my beanie. I must have left it behind on my desk. Instead of handing it over, he slides it onto my head, softly running his thumb over my cheek as he looks down at me with a tender expression on his face.

“You know it probably wasn’t the smartest idea to butt in when that dude was easily twice your size, right?”

I glare at him and start walking towards my next class. “What was I supposed to do, just let it happen and turn a blind eye like everyone else did?” He follows beside me, quiet for a few steps before he answers.

“No, I don’t expect you to sit back and not do anything. I was about to say something when you beat me to it and got in the guy’s face. I’m honestly just curious if you stopped to think about your own safety before you stepped in to help that girl.” He sneaks a peek at me, but quickly looks ahead again.

“I didn’t think about anything other than helping her get away from him.” My truth is hushed, but Cam hears it regardless.

“That’s what I thought.”

We’re silent for the rest of the walk to Hoke, our breaths little clouds accompanying us along the way. When I turn to say goodbye to Cameron, the look on his face has my words

frozen on the tip of my tongue. He looks like he's being pulled apart, and I hate it.

"What is it?" My question is soft, not wanting to push him.

"I'm fucking torn, Sunshine. And I feel like shit over it." He runs a hand through his shaggy hair and looks down at me, his brown eyes dark and serious. "The way you stepped in to help that girl is something I would do, would expect any decent person to do, if they saw what was happening. But the incredibly selfish part of me doesn't want you putting yourself at risk like that."

I don't know what to say to that, so I just stare up at him until he curses under his breath and pulls me into a hug. I let myself relax into his warmth for a breath, then another, before I pull away.

"Don't worry about me, Conrad. I can handle myself just fine." My usual sass is buried deep this morning, but I bring it out in hopes of making him smile.

His answering smirk looks just as forced as he tugs on a piece of my hair before rubbing his thumb over my cold cheek once again.

"I'll see you later, Sunshine."

Before I have a chance to remind him about swinging by the intramural office in Hoke, he's already walking away from me, head bent against the wind, the flurry of snowflakes making him look like a blurry dream.

Chapter 3

Cameron

“Hold still, man.”

I let out a grunt, but do as I’m told. Last thing I need is Ty fucking up my touch up because I can’t handle a little pain. You’d think after all the surgeries and needles I dealt with after I tore my ACL that I’d be fine around a tattoo gun, but fuck if I can’t help hating the little machine.

“Why are you so tense? You’re usually shitting rainbows and throwing confetti wherever you go.” I wait until he stops to get more ink before flipping him off.

“I think the better question is, why do you always seem to be busy whenever the girls invite Kloey out with us. What’s up with that, Princess?”

“Call me Princess again. I dare you.” His gray eyes hold mine as he holds his machine a centimeter away from my nipple. I laugh, but value my nipples enough to keep the nickname to myself.

“Seriously, don’t think I don’t recognize her.” I leave the bait hanging, but he doesn’t bite, just finishes one side of the laces on my piece before wiping away the excess ink. I huff out a breath and let him stew while I get out my phone and scroll through Lucy’s profile. She hasn’t deleted any of the pictures she has with Cooper, which surprises me. I know I really shouldn’t stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, and Sunshine would be the first to agree with me on that, but

there's no way in hell that she's ever going to be hanging around that prick again.

“Why are you glaring at your phone?”

“Just reading my daily horoscope,” I reply with a smirk, continuing my stalking of Lucy's insta. “Wanna hear yours? You're a Scorpio right?” I smile, both of us knowing I'm full of shit. My best friend doesn't even bother with a response, just rolls his eyes and focuses on my tattoo.

One of Lucy's pictures grabs my eye, her head thrown back in laughter, exposing her delicate throat. Her eyes are squeezed shut, but I'm sure as soon as she opened them, they were full of the mirth I can almost feel while I eye her collar bone poking out, her shoulder bare in one of the oversized sweaters she loves wearing.

“If you're watching porn while I work on you, I'm going to kill you.”

“What makes you think I'm watching porn?” I lock my phone and grin. Tyler's eyes narrow before he starts in on the script portion of my tattoo.

“Your pupils are huge and your breathing changed.”

“What the fuck, Ty?” He only lifts a dark brow before getting more ink. “I'll have you know that *Naughty Nurses 9* doesn't come out for another week, so no, I wasn't watching porn while my best friend tattoos me.” I roll my eyes, but can't help chuckling at his unamused look.

“What were you looking at then?”

“Nosey much?”

“Avoiding much?”

“Fuck, I was looking at Lucy's profile, okay?” I see his eyes darken at the mention of her name and once again wonder if there's something going on that I don't know about. “You don't, I mean, you aren't interested in Lucy, right?”

Ty rears his head back and shoots me a surprised look. “Hell no. Not that I don’t like her, but I’m not interested in her like that.” He gives me a pensive look before coating a paper towel in cleaning solution and wiping my skin clear of any leftover smudges of ink. “What do you want with her, Cam? Because if it’s just a fling, keep it in your pants. Liam doesn’t need to be stuck in the middle of that drama after everything that happened with Violet.” If the harsh tone in his voice wasn’t enough to tell me he’s serious, his stormy eyes would certainly get the point across.

“You think I don’t know that? Because I do, man. I fucking do.” I sit up and wait for Ty to put the plastic wrap around my chest. “I know you and Liam are all about the brooding bad boy thing, but you know me, I’m a lover. I would never intentionally hurt Lucy. I just don’t know if she’s ready to try something more serious...like I am.” The admission surprises both of us, but as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know they’re the truth.

I want Lucy McGuire, but I have no idea if she wants me.

“Have you talked to Violet about this?” Ty finishes with the wrap and throws my shirt at my face while he starts cleaning his station.

“No.” I start to pull out my cash but Tyler just glares at me until I put it back in my wallet. “I don’t wanna bring up the shit with Cooper, but that’s what worries me the most about Lucy. They were tight, man.”

“He’s a piece of shit. The girls are better off without him.” The force behind his throw when he tosses his plastic gloves away is harder than necessary, but I get his anger.

“I know that. We all know that. But the girls are still struggling with how to handle moving forward with him, and it scares the shit out of me. If he were to hurt Lucy the way he did Vi...I don’t know how Liam stopped himself from killing him that night.”

We stare into space, memories drowning us both until the company phone rings at the front counter, the trill loud enough to jolt me from my thoughts. I shake my head and grab my jacket before looking at Ty.

“I don’t like her living alone. I know you have your issues with Kloey, but I was really hoping she would move in with Lucy after Vi moved out.” To my surprise, Ty nods his head, a soft look in his eyes I’ve never seen before.

“I was honestly hoping for the same thing.” His eyes harden to gray sheets of ice before he continues. “But that’s not going to happen, so you need to trust that Lucy will reach out if she needs anything. Everybody heals at different paces.”

I hide my surprise at his deep words, but must not manage it entirely because Ty punches my arms and tells me to leave before he decides to take my money after all. I’m halfway to my Jeep when my phone rings.

“Hey, Mom.” I unlock my car door and start the heater, glad I wasn’t inside long enough for the snow to crust over on my windshield. A few minutes of defrost should do the trick.

“Hi sweetie, what are you up to?”

My mom’s voice is always something I’ll associate with warmth and love. She’s a family therapist, and she’s damn good at what she does. I don’t know how she managed to run her own practice while raising six kids, not to mention dealing with my dad’s crazy work schedule, but she always did it with a smile on her face.

You might think a middle child like me would get lost in the chaos, but Mom and Dad always made time to spend with each of us alone, whether it was a baseball game, ballet recital, ice skating, or building igloos in the backyard.

“Not much, just finished a touch up with Ty, now I’m heading home to get some grub. What about you, how’s that early empty nest syndrome treating you?” I’m just giving her shit; I wouldn’t joke if I knew she was actually upset about Sav heading to college this fall.

I glance down at the bracelet I still wear on my left wrist that she made me when she was little. It's just a hemp friendship bracelet, color-leached as all hell, but she was so proud when she made it for me, only four or five years old at the time. I've worn it pretty much every day since then.

“Good lord, sometimes I think that girl will be the death of me. She thinks I don't know about her sneaking out to see that boyfriend of hers, but I don't have the heart to tell her that his Honda civic isn't as quiet as she thinks. If a little rebellion is what makes her feel in control, then so be it.” My lips curve into a smile as I connect my cell to bluetooth and start making my way home, keeping my eyes peeled for people who don't know how to drive in the snow.

“So you're telling me that after raising six children, you and Dad are ready to enjoy some peace and quiet?”

“And walk around the house naked. Don't forget that part.” I can hear the smile in her voice, the laugh coming out of my belly pushing away the lingering anxiety I've been feeling over what to do about my feelings for Lucy.

“How's Dad doing? Is his shoulder still bothering him?” Dad tore his rotator cuff in his early thirties and it gives him grief every now and then. Last time I talked to him, he was icing it while going over game film.

“His flare up seems to have settled. Most likely due to the fabulous CBD lotion I got him at the indoor farmer's market the other day, but you know him, he'll never admit my 'hippie stuff' works wonders for his pain.”

I snort and make a careful right turn onto the main drag of White Plains, going extra slow past Hope's Boutique. I can't see through the glare on the window from the snowy sidewalks, but I'm pretty sure Vi mentioned Lucy working today when her and Liam were over last night for dinner.

“I'll be sure to tell him your CBD salve keeps my knee from flaring up, try to push him towards reason.” I roll past the

shop and watch people walking up and down the sidewalks as I stop at the light.

“You’re my favorite child, have I ever told you that?”

“If only I hadn’t heard you say that to Jared, Tanner, Beau, Melody, and Savannah, I might even believe you.” We both laugh and I change the subject. “Does Dad have any flexibility during spring break, or are you guys going to be staying in Westbury for the break?”

It’s still weird for me to think about them not living in White Plains anymore, but it’s been almost a year since they moved for Dad’s job. Mom offered to stay in White Plains with Sav while she finished her senior year of high school, but my little sis took one for the team and all three of them made the move this past summer.

“Hmmm, let me check.” I hear Mom’s exhale, then a flutter of paper in the background, like she’s checking her calendar. She swears she stays more organized when she physically writes things down instead of putting events into her cell’s calendar like the rest of the population. “Looks like spring training will be consuming our break. Maybe you could come down and stay for a few days?”

“Yeah, I’ll see what the guys have planned and let you know.” I pull into our driveway and kill the ignition, jogging up the porch steps to get inside where it’s warm.

“How are my boys doing? Is Liam still working too hard, or has Violet made him see reason?” I smile at the motherly worry woven into her inquiry, knowing she loves Liam and Tyler like they’re her own children. Shit, Liam spent half his childhood and adolescence at my house, celebrating birthdays and holidays with my huge ass family. Ty wasn’t here quite as often, but Mom loves him just the same, if not in a quieter way.

“He’s good. Vi’s settled the restlessness in him, made him see his worthiness.” I cringe at how touchy feely I sound, but it’s my mom’s fault. “Ty’s his moody self as usual, still saving

up to open his own shop. He's taken on a shit ton of duties at Golden Ink, so I'm sure he's feeling more capable in his ability to run his own place. Dude just needs to believe in himself, because his tats are freaking awesome."

"That they are." I smile, remembering Ty's face when my mom asked him to tattoo a butterfly on her ankle. He'd just started his apprenticeship and didn't have any experience, but Mom wanted to be his first client. So he did it, against the advice of the other artists in the shop.

And you know what? It didn't turn out half bad. Sure, the wings weren't perfect, and the body is a little on the thin side, but I swear my mom almost cried when she saw it, smiling at the tiny flare of pride in Ty's eyes that had for so long been snuffed out by his overbearing parents.

"How are your classes going? Are they helping you decide what direction you want to go after graduation?" Mom's question breaks me out of my reminiscing, and I toss my keys in the bowl by the door before toeing off my boots and heading to the kitchen.

"They're alright. Still have no idea what I want to do with my life, but other than that, it's all good in the hood." I grab an orange and start peeling it, waiting for the response I know is coming.

"It'll come to you, sweetie. Don't stress. Enjoy your senior year, spend time with your friends, and don't drink past midnight on Sunday nights. No one likes to be hungover in Monday's 8am class."

"Ha! I actually have one of those now, so I'll be taking that advice to heart."

"Are you saying you haven't been taking it to heart the past hundred times I've told you, Cameron Conrad?" I can tell she's joking, so I ham it up to make her laugh.

"Oh, I never drink past midnight on any night of the week, don't you worry about that."

“Who are you, and what have you done with my son?” Mom’s laugh makes me smile as I slide a piece of orange in my mouth and watch the snow falling outside the window.

We chat for at least another twenty minutes before she says she has to get ready for date night with my dad. When we finally hang up, I check the clock to see that it’s only five in the afternoon. Tyler’s working until eleven tonight, and Liam and Vi are probably cozied up in their new house, especially since Violet’s burns and leg are still healing.

I flop on the couch and scroll through my phone for a few minutes before I get bored, then I’m up again, on my way to my room to change into shorts and a cut off.

This rockin’ bod isn’t going to maintain itself.

Chapter 4

Lucy

I've always known I wanted to work in the world of clothing and fashion. There's just something about an outfit making a person feel confident, maybe even a little sexy if the mood calls for it, that I can't resist.

What I *can* resist, however, is messy dressing rooms. I mean, seriously, is it that hard to lay your no-gos on the chair in the corner? It must have been for whoever wrecked the small space, because inside out jeans and shirts are strewn all over, including one skirt hanging from the door handle. With a huff, I grab it all and head back to the front of the store so I can keep an eye on things while I fold.

I'm finishing up when a blonde woman a few years older than me walks into the store, heading straight for the clearance racks in the back.

"Good evening!" I walk her way and notice she's carrying a reusable bag with Michelle Branch's *Everywhere* album on it, and I can't help my excited gasp. "You like Michelle Branch? I love her music, but I swear no one ever knows who she is when I bring her up."

The woman glances down at the bag and then up at me, a sad smile curving her mouth. "Yeah, it was my mom and I's favorite CD of hers. We'd play it on repeat whenever we went on a road trip."

It *was* their favorite. I don't think the past tense is because they found a different artist they liked even more, so I don't

press the issue, only give her a small smile.

“Are you just browsing tonight, or is there something you’re on the hunt for?” I fix a shirt that’s about to fall off its hanger as I wait for her reply.

“I need a new shirt for work, but I see a few here that I’ll try on, so I think I’m good for now.” Her gray eyes meet mine for a second before she drops eye contact completely. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Just let me know if you need anything.” I head back to the counter and look over the store, noting some of the folded jeans on our front display table could use some attention.

“Build it Better” by Aron Wright comes on the radio and I can’t help singing along while I tidy up the shop. Outside the massive front windows, winter has fully taken over our town. The sidewalks are shoveled, but it’s snowing so hard that they’ll be slick again in no time. The streetlamps and their warm golden light illuminate the fat snowflakes falling from the sky and I can’t help thinking about another time when it was snowing, my blood staining the snow as I waited for help.

“I’m almost done, I’ll be out in a few more minutes.”

I turn in time to see my customer slide her phone back in her bag while she lingers by the baby section of the store, trailing her hands over the soft pink onesies we just got in yesterday. She looks at the price tag and slips it back under the collar, now looking at the adorable hats that match the onesies.

The woman slowly makes her way through all of the infant clothes, eyeing all of the girl merchandise more closely than the boy stuff. She’s carrying two shirts, but doesn’t take any of the baby clothing before she makes her way up to the counter.

“Find everything you need?” I smile as I ring up her shirts, taking the hangers and tossing them in the bin to my left. When the woman sees the price and winces to herself, I quickly add the promo code Hope said to use when we thought

it was necessary. The slow breath working its way out of the woman's chest says it was a good call.

"Yes, thank you. I work at Roger's Grill and spilled ketchup on my last good work shirt, so these were very needed."

"I love that place." My smile fades when I remember who I usually went there with, but I force those thoughts to the side as I fold the two shirts and bag them up.

"Thanks again. Have a good night." Her smile is tentative, but sweet nonetheless.

"You too. Be careful out there, it's probably super slick out right now." She only nods and pushes her way out the door, the snow flurry quickly swallowing her up.

The next half hour goes by quickly, and I'm glad for it. I don't know if it's the weather or classes or what, but I'm exhausted. We're usually not open this late, but on the third Saturday of every month, all of the downtown shops stay open until 7pm, some even offering alcohol and light snacks.

I close up the till and am doing a final check over everything, making sure the fitting rooms are clean for tomorrow, when I hear a noise coming from the back room where we keep the extra freight. I'm making my way across the store to check it out when the lights shut off, the radio going silent.

My pulse picks up when I think I hear someone try the back door that's always locked, but surely I'm mistaken. I make my way to the counter, surprised by how little the streetlamps outside help to light up the boutique. I wiggle the mouse to wake up the computer, but the POS is dead. I grab my cell and notice that I'm not connected to the Wi-Fi anymore, so the power must be out on everything.

I look out the window, but it doesn't look stormy enough to cause an outage. Another quiet click from the back room has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end and I spin around, only able to make out the table full of shirts a few feet in front of me.

“Hello?” I feel like an idiot right now, like one of those characters in a low budget scary movie. When no one replies, I quickly walk to the front entrance, the only place where light is pooling in from the sidewalk. The chilly weather must have sent people home sooner than usual, because I don’t see a soul outside.

I scroll through my contacts list and my heart pinches when I see Cooper’s name. If only he wouldn’t have been a fucking piece of shit, he’d be the one I’d call right now. Hope is out of town, and Vi told me earlier today that Liam finally deemed her healthy enough to bone down, so I won’t be interrupting their sexy time with my sudden power outage.

Letting loose a breath, I know that leaves two others. Tyler’s probably working late at Golden Ink tonight, so I scroll back to Cameron’s name and hit the green button.

“Hey Sunshine, what’s up?” His happy voice dilutes some of my fear, but not enough to stop the shakiness of my request.

“I need your help. Can you come down to Hope’s?”

“What’s wrong? What happened?” I can hear the soft thuds of his feet against his stairs, meaning he was probably up in his room, then the jingle of his keys and door slamming shut. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. The power went out, and I’m just being stupid, but I swear I heard someone in the back room right before the lights went out.” I peek outside and once again take note that there’s no one else outside. “I’m just being a chicken, but if you could come here and check things out with me, I’ll owe you.”

“I’m already on my way. Don’t hang up.” His words are clipped, but still calm. “How long ago did the power go out?”

“Maybe a minute. I called you as soon as I found my phone.”

“I’ll be there soon. Stay by the front door.”

“Okay.” I wait for another few minutes, every little sound making me jump, before I see Cameron pull up in his black Jeep. He’s not wearing a coat, just shorts and a t-shirt, his hair wet like he just got out of the shower.

I unlock the door to let him in and Cameron looks me over in the little bit of light that’s coming through the front window. His hand goes to the back of my head and he pulls me into a quick hug. “You sure know how to spice up a Saturday night, Sunshine.” His joke makes me smile against his chest, but I don’t answer as I rub my hands up and down his cold body. When I look down at his arms, they’re covered in goosebumps.

“I’m sorry I freaked you out so much that you didn’t even grab a coat.” I look up at his worried expression and jerk my chin towards the back of the store. “I swear I heard something right before the lights shut off.”

“Stay here, I’ll check it out.” He lets me go and heads towards the back, turning on his cell’s flashlight, but stops when he hears me behind him.

“I’m not letting you die alone! I’ll be your back up.” I raise my brows at him, but he probably doesn’t see since it’s so dark in here.

“Stay by the front door, Lucy.”

“No.”

“You’re so fucking stubborn.”

“You’re just now figuring that out?” I walk past him, but he snags my arm and pushes me behind him before we both start walking.

“I’ve always known you’re stubborn.” His hushed words are the only noise as we make our way to where I think the breaker is. Cameron starts flipping switches, but nothing happens. After he flips every single one, I start to get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. When I was waiting for him, I could see that other shops’ window display lights were still on, so this wasn’t a normal power outage.

“I’m no electrician, but I’m pretty sure someone fucked with this.” Cam’s light flashes around all of the cardboard boxes containing freight still needing to be unloaded, but we don’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“Let me grab my stuff from up front and we can go. I’ll call Hope and let her know what’s up.”

Cameron gives up on the breaker and nods, following me to the front counter. After I grab my purse, we go out the front door and I make sure to lock it before we walk to my car a couple of blocks away.

I grab my keys out of my purse, but something catches on the keychain and falls to the ground at my feet. When I pick it up, I realize it’s a cloth doll, about the size of my hand. It has red yarn for hair, a purple cotton dress, and blue X’s for eyes. The mouth has stitches over it, in the same red thread as the hair.

When I read what’s written on its stomach, the writing looking rushed and chaotic, I immediately drop the doll and slap my hand against my car, making sure the nausea in my belly doesn’t knock me over.

This can’t be happening. He’s still in prison.

Right?

Cameron picks the doll up before the snow can smear the ink completely, scanning his eyes over the warning.

“What the fuck is this, Lucy?” His hard gaze locks on mine and he softens his tone when he sees the fear on my face. “When could someone have put this in your purse?”

“I...I don’t know. The only time I wasn’t within eyesight of it was when...when we were in the back just now.” I sway on my feet and Cam grabs my shoulders before I can slip on the icy road.

“Did you lock the door behind me when you let me in?” His question is quiet, but the steel threaded through his tone tells me he isn’t happy about our night’s latest development.

“I must not have.” My admission is barely a whisper, carried away by the falling snow. I give myself three more seconds to feel the fear, then I suck in a big breath and look at Cameron as I attempt a casual shrug. “It was probably just some kids looking to have some fun. It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? Are you serious right now? What part of *You should have kept your mouth shut* seems like a joke to you?” Cameron stares at me for too long before continuing. “What is this person talking about, Sunshine?”

Memories hit me like a freight train, one after another, but I don’t let it show on my face. I refuse to let that vile man ruin anything else in my life.

“Nothing.” I brush off his hands still resting on my shoulders and unlock my car. “Thank you again for coming down here. I’m sorry that I interrupted your Saturday night.”

“Sunshine.” His eyes are pleading with me to tell him the truth, but he’s wasting his time. “I need to know what’s going on.”

Instead of answering him, I unlock my car and grab my ice scraper/brush thingy so I can brush off all of the snow on my car. I make two swipes before Cameron yanks the brush from my hands. “I’ll do it, just get in the car.”

I don’t push him, knowing he’s pissed at me. When he’s done, he opens my backdoor and throws the scraper onto the floorboards, then slams the door shut. I roll my window down to thank him, but he’s already bending down so we’re eye-to-eye.

“I don’t know what you’re hiding, Lucy, but I wish you would trust me enough to let me in.” His words hurt, but I force myself to paste on a sassy smirk.

“You already did the macho man thing once tonight, let’s not go over your quota for the night.” He doesn’t say anything to that, just stands up and crosses his arms. I huff out a breath. “Thank you again. I’ll see you later.”

I try, and fail, to ignore that he doesn't move from his spot until I'm halfway down the block.



"I'm so proud of you, honey. The costumes looked amazing." Mom looks over at me, pride shining in her blue eyes. Everyone always tells us we could be twins, but I know they're just being nice. I'll never be as beautiful as she is.

Especially when she's rocking a pregnancy glow that can be seen from miles away.

I think she was nervous when she told me she was pregnant, not knowing how I'd feel about her truly moving on with someone who wasn't my dad. But she had nothing to worry about, because I can't wait to have a little sister. Sure, we'll be quite a few years apart, but that doesn't change how much I already love her.

"Thanks, Mom." I glance out the car window as she drives us home. When I look at the dashboard clock, I wince. "Sorry it ran later than I said it would."

I helped design and sew all of the costumes for our high school's winter play. I was lucky the theater teacher let a freshman help so much, but my design teacher, Mr. Kohl, is awesome and pushed me to be as involved as possible.

"Nonsense. Don't worry about it." Mom smiles, but we both know what's waiting at home. We're quiet the rest of the ride, both of us powerless over the tension seeping into our bones.

Lars, my mom's husband, has been getting more and more aggressive lately. When they first started dating, and eventually got married, he was the ideal guy. Smart, kind, stable.

That all slowly went out the window the longer we lived with him. His son, Micah, is clearly scared of him, never wanting to be in the same room as his dad. I hate that such a horrible person is going to be the father of my sister, but I'll keep her safe. Mom said as soon as the housing prices lower,

we'll find somewhere for the three of us to live. Somewhere we can come home to and feel safe.

I should have made sure we left the play earlier, instead of staying for the hugs and flowers afterward in the green room. We're almost thirty minutes past the time Mom told Lars we'd be home, and there's nothing he hates more than people disrespecting his time.

"I'm so proud of you, Lucy. You're going to do amazing things." Mom pulls into our driveway and looks at me with forced happiness. She thinks her encouraging words can act as a barrier and protect me from the angry man inside our home. I give her a small smile, letting her know that I appreciate her attempt, then we crunch our way through the snow to the front steps.

I hear the yelling before I see him.

"God dammit, Micah. No wonder your whore of a mother didn't want you. You're twelve years old, not a fucking baby. Why can't you—" Lars sees Mom and halts mid-rant, his anger swinging into us like a blast of cold wind, cutting through any warmth still lingering from our pleasant evening.

"Sorry we missed dinner. The play was longer than we thought." I hope my explanation will appease him, but the ugly sneer on his face says otherwise. Cold eyes hold mine as he speaks to my mom in a hard voice.

"Tanya, fix me some dinner."

"Don't talk to her that way." I hold his gaze, praying I can take the heat of his temper tantrum so Mom doesn't have to.

"Go to your room." Lars looks over at Micah and jerks his chin as his son. "You, too. Now."

I'm about to argue, but Mom catches my eye and shakes her head. I want to say more, but pissing Lars off isn't going to help anything. I heave my backpack higher on my shoulder and glare at Lars, but he just smiles at me with malice painted across his lips.

I'm in my room for maybe ten minutes when I hear my mom scream. I slam my door open the same time Micah does, both of us sharing a scared look before bolting into the living room.

“Mom!”

Chapter 5

Cameron

It's been weeks since Lucy called me to help her down at Hope's. Weeks since she tried to brush off the creepy as fuck doll that someone left in her purse.

She's managed to avoid me, sitting in between people in our 8am class so I can't sit next to her, telling Violet she's not feeling well when we all get together for dinner. It's been a miracle the few times I've coerced her into working on our business project, and even then, our conversations were strictly academic.

That shit stops now.

I'm waiting outside her apartment, freezing my ass off in the snow, when she walks out. She lets out a little yelp when she sees me, but quickly schools her features into a mask of indifference.

Fuck that.

"What are you doing here, Cameron?" I could weep at hearing her soft voice for the first time in weeks, but I'm too pissed right now.

"I think the better question is, why are you avoiding me like I'm the bubonic plague?" I cross my arms and refuse to admit how beautiful, albeit tired, she looks in her green beanie and fluffy coat.

"I'm not avoiding you."

“Bullshit. Don’t lie to me, Sunshine. It’s unbecoming.”

“Why are you here?” She locks her door and starts walking, me tight on her tail. When she steps over a patch of ice, she doesn’t quite make it, slipping backwards. I catch her easily, her back hitting my chest as my arms wrap around her, the citrus scent of her soap making me bite my lip to keep from groaning.

Reluctantly, I let her go, and she gives me a quiet thanks before we keep walking.

“I’m worried about you. That’s why I’m here.” I hold my hand up when she tries to say something. “I don’t have some ulterior motive, Lucy. I’m your friend.”

She glares at me, her scoff a cloud of hot breath left behind in her fast pace. “I’m not a damsel in distress. I can handle my own shit.”

“For fuck’s sake, Lucy. I’m not trying to be some macho man. Have you forgotten I was there when you found a goddamn voodoo doll in your purse with it’s fucking mouth sewn shut?”

She squeezes her eyes shut against my outburst, fingers clenched into fists, turning red in the cold without gloves. The need to grab her hand and warm it up with my breath has my fingers twitching, but for some wild reason I don’t think she’d allow the comfort.

“Just drop it, Cameron.” We’re on the edge of campus now, the sidewalks shoveled by the grounds crew earlier this morning. Lucy stops so abruptly I almost run into her, my hands landing on her shoulders so I don’t hit her and take us to the ground. She spins around and looks up at me with her big blue eyes, the vulnerability in her gaze cutting through my chest. “Please,” she whispers, keeping her attention on me.

I grab her face and bring my forehead to hers as I take a calming breath. My lips brush against her beanie when I make her the only promise I can.

“If you tell the police what you found in your purse that night, I’ll back off. You need to tell someone, and unless you want a permanent sidekick – that’s me, by the way – then I suggest you do this one little thing for me.”

“It won’t help. It never does.” Her eyes widen when I pull back, like she didn’t mean to say that out loud. Spinning on her heel, she waves her hand as if to brush aside our conversation. “I’ll go to the station after classes today, okay?”

I catch up with her, throwing my arm around her shoulders as we walk across the quad to our class. “Thank you. I can go with –”

“No. I’ll do it myself.” She flicks her eyes up at my less than assured glare, but she surprises me when a small smile slides across her pink lips before she looks away. “Thank you for caring.”

“Anytime, Sunshine.” I pull my arm back and open the door to Robal, both of us stomping our boots free of snow before making our way to the lecture hall across the main floor of the building.

We’re presenting our project for Professor Short today, and even though our study sessions the last few weeks have been sterile, I know we’ve come up with something pretty sweet.

“Alright folks, who wants to go first?” Short looks around the room, attention snagging on my raised hand. “Cameron and Lucy, perfect! Come on up and get set up while I find my scoring rubrics.”

“We got this in the bag, Sunshine.” She rolls her eyes at me, but I still see the small grin curving her lips as she inserts our USB drive into the laptop and pulls up our presentation. Once it’s projected onto the big screen behind us, we dive in.

“Welcome to Conrad’s Closet. Where every member of the family can find exactly what they’re looking for.” We share a smile before launching into how we identified our target audience, how we’d market to them, how we’d keep them coming to our store, and all the other stuff we needed to cover

according to the project instructions. By the time we're done, I feel great about what we ended up with.

"Very good. Thank you for starting us off strong." Short gives a quick nod and looks for the next team ready to go.

When it's time for us to head to our next class, we walk together until the path splits. I can't help grabbing Lucy's arm and turning her towards me, my gaze lingering on the smudges under her eyes. "Let me know if you change your mind about me going with you to the station. They might want my statement, anyway."

She doesn't pull away from me, but I swear I can hear her cementing the bricks back in place, repairing the wall I broke through not five minutes ago in class.

"I'll be fine." She picks a piece of lint off my jacket and forces a smile. "I'll text you later, okay?"

I pull her into a hug, letting out a sigh of contentment when she hugs me back. "Alright."

I press a kiss to her head and we say our goodbyes before I make my way to the campus cafe to grab some breakfast, doing my best to shake the uneasy feeling swirling around in my gut.

In my hurry to catch Lucy before she left for class this morning, I didn't eat anything. Maybe that's why my stomach feels so out of sorts.

The blast of warm air hits my face a second before the smell of fresh cinnamon rolls does, making my stomach growl at an embarrassingly loud volume. After I get my food and coffee, I head to an empty table in the middle of the room.

"Conrad! Over here, man." I look up and see Marcus, a guy from one of my business classes, waving me over to his table.

"Hey man, what's up?" I set my stuff down and dig in, groaning when I take a huge bite of my cinnamon roll.

"Jesus, you need a room with that thing?" Marcus shakes his head, laughing at me when I nod. "My morning class got

canceled. Figured I'd come here to get some extra studying in before my exam in Calc today.”

I wipe my mouth with a napkin, because I'm not a total animal, and shake my head at him. “Can't believe you're taking math for fun. Seems like torture to me.” I take a drink of my coffee and tilt my head. “Do you even use numbers, or is it all weird symbols and shit?”

“It's not that bad.” He rolls his eyes and jerks his chin towards my backpack. “Thought you didn't have any early classes this term.”

“I didn't. Professor Short had to switch some things around, so I'm taking the same class at 8am instead.” I smile, thinking about my new partner, and echo his earlier words. “It's not that bad.”

“Fair enough. You playing in the intramural game next week?”

“That's the plan. Gotta show off for the ladies somehow, right?” I smirk and take another bite of heaven, keeping my groan to myself this time. He clearly can't handle my healthy appreciation for amazing baked goods.

His loss.

“Or maybe one lady in particular?” He gives me a knowing look and circles something in his textbook before looking at me again. “You looked pretty cozy with that redhead before you came in here.”

“You creeping on me, Marc?” I bat my lashes at him and give him a cheeky grin.

“You caught me. I'm secretly in love with you and can't handle seeing you with anyone else.” His deadpan response has me cackling, which in turn breaks his façade, eyes crinkling with his laughter.

Multiple girls turn our way, most of them gazing at Marcus. I'm confident enough in my masculinity to admit he's a good looking dude. Dark hair and gray eyes, big enough to play

football and smart enough to take upper level math courses for fun.

“I think half the female population of Hartford would weep if that were true.” Which is pretty impressive, considering he’s only been here since September.

“Oh, fuck off. And don’t change the subject.” He smirks at me before draining the last of his coffee. “Are you really giving up all the sex you could ever want for that girl? Because it looked like your eyeballs were temporarily replaced with hearts when you were saying goodbye out there.” He jerks his chin to the window behind me, which has a perfect view of where I said goodbye to Lucy.

“I don’t know, man. Never done the whole girlfriend thing.” I wouldn’t hesitate for a second if I thought Lucy was down, but I’m not an idiot.

“Well, good luck with that. If she’s the one, there’s not much you can do about it.” We both grab our trash and head out, saying we’ll see each other in class.

Marcus’ parting words stick in my head for the rest of the day, because he’s right. I can’t change the way I’m starting to feel about Lucy.

I don’t think I’d want to even if I could.

Chapter 6

Lucy

“Why do baseball pants make every guy look ten times hotter?” I scan the infield again and catch myself paying extra attention to Cameron at shortstop, yelling something to the batter that makes everyone close enough to hear laugh while the batter flips him off with a smile.

“Personally, I prefer Timbs and faded jeans, but to each their own.” Violet smirks and bumps her shoulder against mine.

“Really? I like skinny jeans, maybe with a rip or two, but strong enough thighs that you know he could pick you up and have his way with you against the nearest wall.”

Vi and I stare at Kloey for a solid three seconds before all three of us bust into laughter, drawing weird looks from the other fans watching the intramural game. It’s almost mid March, and the tight hold winter had over the past few weeks is slowly releasing, opening up the blue sky for the first time in what feels like months.

“And you teach people’s children?” Violet’s tease makes Kloey stick her tongue out, the shiny metal ball pierced through the middle more proof that she’s much more than your average elementary school teacher.

“The kids love you, that’s all that matters.” I pat her knee and recall how all of her students hugged her goodbye the other day when I picked her up after school and all the little munchkins were loading onto their buses.

Vi and I met Kloey at the beginning of the school year, when we were at Jackson's for karaoke, and I can confidently say we have broken her out of her hermit-ness, little-by-little.

“And some of the single dads, too. Don't forget that part.” Violet wiggles her eyebrows at Kloey's eye roll and crosses her casted foot over her knee, wincing when she accidentally hits my leg. “Sorry. It comes off next week, and I can't freaking wait.”

I look down at the cast and admire the little pictures she's painted on it. As if a little paint could cover the true horror of that night.

Vi grabs my hand and holds it in her lap, not saying anything. Her engagement ring catches the light and I run my thumb over it, smiling when I remember the day Liam asked me if Vi had any preferences for such things.

I told him as long as it came from him, she'd love it no matter what. They'd come so close to losing each other, she would have said yes if he'd proposed with a quarter machine ring.

“Okay, I guess I can get on board with baseball pants, too.” Kloey eyes the batter who just struck out, ending the inning, and she smirks as he walks back to the dugout. She knows about what happened to Vi, and I'm sure her change of subject isn't a coincidence.

“Smart woman.” I give her a grateful smile and watch as Cam's team jogs towards their dugout. When he catches me looking at him, he lifts a brow and gives me a sexy smile, one that says he knows I like the way he looks. I shrug and tune back into the conversation Violet and Kloey are having, but I don't miss the deep chuckle I'd know anywhere, one that has heat rushing to my cheeks.

“I'm telling you, his skills are off the charts. I've always been drawn to colors and how they enhance our lives, but Ty's work is almost all deep blues, grays, black and white. It should

be morbid or depressing, but it's the exact opposite." Violet looks down at her cell and blushes, quickly hiding the screen.

If I had to guess, I'd say one hot construction boss is sexting my best friend right now. She grins when she sees me looking at her with a raised brow. "What? He's just letting me know he's on his way to pick me up."

Uh huh. I let her off the hook, though, commenting on Tyler's work instead of calling her out for sexting right next to me. "It makes sense that his color palette is closer to what he tattoos with, I guess."

I sneak a peek at Kloey and see she's become intensely interested in her nails, the dark red polish chipped here and there. I feel like we're close enough now that I can dig a little, but I keep my voice quiet and look at the players on the field when I ask my question. "How do you guys know each other, Klo?"

Her shoulders stiffen and she stares back at me with so many emotions that I grab her hand without thinking. Vi's stern look says I should mind my own business, and I'm about to take her advice when Kloey answers, her voice full of hurt.

"We knew each other a long time ago. I thought he was my best friend, but I was wrong." Violet and I wait for her to continue, but that's all she says. I'm about to assure her that she can talk to us about anything, but Cameron struts out of the dugout, bat in hand, and steps up to home plate.

His strong thighs fill out his pants in a way that has me squeezing mine together. Large veins cover his forearms, popping when he readjusts his grip on the bat. He says something to the umpire and the man barks out a laugh, shaking his head.

The first pitch is a ball, second a strike. If he can hit the ball between center and left field, he might have a chance to get on base, maybe even manage a double.

The next pitch is another ball. "Come on Peters, gimme something pretty!" Cameron's request has the pitcher

laughing, and a beautiful curveball slides right into the strike zone, but Cam doesn't go for it. Instead, he looks up to me in the stands and winks. Kloey and Violet let out little giggles, but I just give him my best *show me what you got* look, to which he nods like he's picking up exactly what I'm putting down.

The pitcher does his wind up, lets the ball fly from his hand.

Crack.

The ball lands right where it should, neither outfielder quick enough to catch it out of the air before it's hitting the ground and bouncing towards center field. Cam is already halfway to first base by the time I take my eyes off the ball, slowing as he reaches the base, knowing he won't have a double after all.

The small crowd cheers, but my attention has zoomed in on Cameron's face, slightly pinched in pain. One of his teammates jogs out of the dugout while the opposing team has a quick huddle at the mound. The guy asks Cameron something, to which he grins and shakes his head, handing over his batting glove.

When the next player approaches the box, Cam leads off first, knees bent, hands fisting as he waits to steal second. He gets his chance when the catcher drops the next pitch, but the player is fast, fast enough that Cam is going to have to slide to have a chance at safety. A quick glance towards home plate and I know he's thinking exactly what I am.

His slide looks great from here, called safe by the field umpire, but I know something's wrong when he doesn't immediately stand up. I, however, *do* stand up, waiting for Cameron to push himself off the muddy ground, maybe even crack a joke, but neither of those things happen as he says something to the second baseman. The guy sticks his hand out and helps Cameron to his feet, but he's favoring his right leg so much that the other player grabs Cam's arm and puts it

around his shoulder, then wraps his own arm around Cameron's waist, helping him limp to the dugout.

People clap as they make their way off the field, and Cameron smiles and waves, but I can tell he's in pain. "I'll be right back." I don't wait for Vi or Kloey's response before I'm walking down the bleachers, careful not to slip on the wet metal.

When I make it to the edge of the dugout, I see one of the coaches of our soccer team looking at Cam's knee, his sock pulled down and pant leg pushed up enough that I can see the swelling from here. "Did you hear a pop?"

"Nah, I'd know if I tore anything. It's just a sprain, nothing I haven't dealt with before. But thanks for checking me over, Coach." Cam smiles at the woman and slaps her on the shoulder. "Now get out there before you miss more of the action."

When the woman slides past me, a few of the players notice I'm awkwardly standing outside their dugout.

"Hey, sweetheart. What brings you down here?" A guy with black streaks under his eyes runs his gaze over me before giving me a wink.

The comment brings Cameron's eyes to mine, but he breaks the connection to look at the player who called me sweetheart. "Keep your eyes to yourself, Billings." The player smirks, but does as he's told while I push my way past other players and sit on the bench beside Cameron.

"What happened?" I look down and see his knee is already bigger than it was a few seconds ago.

"Twisted it wrong." He chuckles at my worried look. "Don't worry Sunshine, I'll be fine in a few days."

"Has this happened before?" I look at his eyes and see the amusement on his face, but don't care enough to pretend like I don't care if he's hurt or not.

“I tore my ACL senior year of high school. After the initial recovery, it’s usually fine unless I do something I shouldn’t, like sliding.” He sighs and pulls down the leg of his pants, twisting around and grabbing a bottle of water. I’m momentarily frozen as I watch his Adam’s apple bob up and down as he drinks, a drop of water running down his strong chin and landing on his lap.

His exaggerated throat clearing has me realizing I’ve been caught, but he doesn’t say anything as he grabs his mitt next to him on the bench.

“You’re not going out there!” I yank the mitt from his hands, putting it behind my back, and an amused grin lights up his golden eyes. When he slides close enough his good knee bumps mine, warm fingers trailing down my arm, I let out a quiet sigh I hope none of the other players hear. Cameron’s nose runs along my neck and I remind myself to breathe, but that only makes me more lightheaded when I suck in a lungful of his scent, all clean sweat and pine.

“It’s cute that you think you can tell me what to do, Sunshine.” He leaves a hot kiss on my neck, right below my ear, before pulling away. “But you’re right, I won’t be playing again anytime soon.” His heated gaze rakes over my face, dropping lower until I know he can see my nipples poking through the sports bra I’m wearing. Luckily, his eyes sweep our surroundings, reminding both of us that we’re not alone.

“Come on, I’ll drive you home.” I expect him to argue that he needs to stay for the rest of the game, but he must be in more pain than he’s letting on, because he doesn’t put up a fight when I stand up with his mitt and grab the hoodie next to him that says Conrad on the back.

Violet and Kloey are waiting for us outside, Vi’s worried gaze going straight to Cameron’s knee. “Are you okay?” Her hazel eyes look mostly green in this light, complementing her freckles that started coming out with the sunshine a few days ago.

“No need to worry. It’s just a little sprain, that’s all.” He hobbles over to her and gives her a hug, pulling Kloey in as well, making her laugh. “There’s room for one more, Sunshine.”

“I’m good over here, thank you.” I roll my eyes, but can’t stop the small smile curving my lips. He lets the girls go, but looks down at Vi’s cast.

“It’s coming off soon, yeah? How are you feeling?” His gaze sticks to my best friend, taking in her expression as she answers. I haven’t talked to him about it, but I’m sure performing CPR on Violet was *quite literally* life changing for both of them, not something easily forgotten or brushed off. There’s no romantic nature to their connection, but it’s still there, strung between them like a cord.

“I’m fine. Only a twinge of pain in my leg every now and then.” She looks down at her arms, bared in her t-shirt. “If only these would go away, I’d be over the moon.”

Cameron lifts her chin with his finger and gives her a soft smile. “You’re perfect the way you are, Vi-Vi. If you were any more beautiful, we’d never get Liam to let you leave the house.” He winks as she laughs, and I appreciate his ability to heal with that humor of his. I’m surprised to feel heat at the back of my eyes, and quickly blink it away before anyone notices.

“Klo, are you okay with Liam giving you a ride home? I’m going to drive Cameron home in his Jeep.” I look at Violet to make sure she’s fine with that plan, and she nods.

“No problem. I’ll text you tomorrow.” I give them both a hug before turning towards Cameron, who’s looking at me with a small smile on his face.

“I don’t really need you to drive me home, you know that, right?” I turn my head just in time to see pain twisting his lips into a grimace.

“Deal with it, Conrad.” I smirk at his mock glare.

“Are you gonna wear a sexy nurse’s outfit and nurse me back to health, Sunshine?” The hope shining in his eyes has me laughing hard enough to throw my head back.

“In your dreams, babe.”

I have to scoot the seat up at least a foot before my feet reach the pedals, making him laugh as he buckles himself in. “You’re cute.”

I just glare at him, making sure to adjust the mirrors before pulling out of the parking lot. The last thing I need to do is hit someone’s car right now. He’d never let me live it down.

I turn on the radio and switch it to my favorite station, letting out a squeal when “I Want It That Way” by Backstreet Boys is just starting. Cranking the volume up, I can’t help myself when I start to sing along with Brian and Nick. I may or may not add some dance moves when the chorus comes on, but who can blame a girl?

Cameron stares at me for a solid five seconds before laughing, his eyes shining with humor and affection.

When it gets to the really dramatic part, I hold out my fake microphone towards Cameron and after rolling his eyes with a grin, he belts out Nick’s line perfectly, finishing the rest of the song with me.

“I’d like to say I’ve never done that, but...sisters.” He lifts his hands and shrugs, making me laugh again. I haven’t felt this light in a while, and I know it’s not a coincidence I’m feeling this way around Cameron. He just has a welcoming and cozy vibe that I get sucked into whenever I’m around him.

When I sneak a peek at the man in question, he’s already looking at me, a sly smile on his plush lips. His backwards baseball hat is giving him a sexy, sporty look I’ve always loved, but it’s his strong jaw, covered in a few day’s worth of stubble, that has me wondering what his face would feel like against my palm...or thighs.

“What?” I’d like to say there’s a bite to my words, but they come out softer than I intend.

“You look good driving my Jeep.” My eyes are on the road again, but I feel his gaze trailing up and down my body like a tempting caress. My nipples tighten, the air in the small space between us saturated with his unique scent, and I squeeze my legs together to relieve the ache his attention is stirring in me.

“I bet you say that to all the girls.” I make myself roll my eyes and smirk, looking at him as I pull up to a stop sign. His gaze is locked on my mouth, his white teeth biting into his lower lip while his hot stare lingers too long to be polite.

Oh god, why is that so hot?

“No one drives my car but me, babe. So no, I don’t say that to all the other girls.”

Well, shit.

I don’t know what to say to that, so I just drive us to his place without saying anything else. He doesn’t need to know his admission has me feeling all sorts of things I shouldn’t be feeling right now.

No. He doesn’t need to know that at all.



Cameron

“Seriously, I’m fine. Can you just sit down for a second?” Lucy’s been fussing over me since we got home, asking where I keep my ibuprofen, ordering me to sit down on the couch and grabbing an ice pack from the freezer, putting a pillow under my knee. I know she’s just avoiding me after I couldn’t keep my thoughts to myself on the drive home.

But fuck, what was I supposed to do? When I saw she was just as affected as I was, tight little nipples poking through her thin Hartford shirt, my control snapped.

The memory of her soft, pale skin against my lips when I kissed her neck in the dugout has my dick hardening, but even I can admit I’m not in the best shape right now to take advantage of having the house to ourselves.

“Hold your horses.” Her response sounds muffled, like she’s looking in the fridge or something. When she walks into the living room, she’s carrying a glass of water in one hand and a plate with cheese, crackers, and a peeled orange in the other. After setting the water down, she reaches into her back pocket and takes out the bottle of ibuprofen and tosses it to me. “Shouldn’t take that on an empty stomach.”

I pop three of the little red pills and wash it down with a few gulps of water, then take one of the orange slices and hand it to her. “Shouldn’t take care of someone on an empty stomach.” Her grin mirrors mine as she shakes her head at me, taking the fruit from my hand.

I should turn away when she licks the juice from her fingers, but I don’t.

“How’s it looking?” She peeks under the ice pack and gently sets it down before looking at me with concern burning in her blue gaze. She isn’t wearing any make up today, and I can’t help thinking she doesn’t need any of it. I lift my hand and cradle her face in my palm, surprise spiking my pulse when she doesn’t pull away.

“It hurts like a bitch, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. Nothing I haven’t handled many times before.”

“Tell me more about when you tore it.” She finally sits back, pulling her face from my hand, but she’s still close enough her knees brush my thigh as she situates herself so she’s sitting criss-cross, facing me.

I take my hat off so I can run a hand through my hair, then snag one of the crackers off the plate in my lap. “I love baseball. Always have, always will. The guys and I were on the same little league team when we were little, but I’m the only one who loved the game enough to stick with it.”

I throw another piece of cheese and a couple crackers in my mouth before continuing. “When I was a junior in high school, scouts started showing up at my games. I played first base back then, and I was damn good at it. By the time senior year

rolled around, I had offers from so many schools, I didn't know which one I would choose." I feel the rueful smile curve my lips when I think back to what a cocky little shit I was.

I guess a ton hasn't changed.

"But..." Lucy snags a slice of orange from the plate and waves her hand for me to keep going.

"I was at a party, one of the last ones of the summer before I was supposed to leave for Texas A&M. The chivalrous lad that I am, I was helping a girl jump out of the back of a truck."

"And what were you doing in the bed of that truck, Mr. Conrad?" Her playful tone has my tugging on a piece of her bright hair.

"A gentleman never kisses and tells." Her snort has me grinning, but it dims when I continue. "It was a freak accident, almost unbelievable. I jumped over the side of the truck, and when I landed, most of my weight landed on my right leg. I can still remember the pop it made, feel the instant nausea from the pain and certainty that my career as an MLB player was over before I even had a chance. It took a few days to get the MRI results, but I knew it wasn't just a sprain. I called my college coach, and he had no choice but to pull my scholarship."

"Was baseball the only reason you wanted to go out of state?" The question catches me off guard, but I answer it with honesty.

"No. I love my family, but I wanted to have some space for once. Yeah, I would miss 'em like hell, Liam and Tyler, too. But I wanted something that was only mine." I set my half eaten snack on the coffee table and throw my arms onto the back of the couch. "Moral of the story, don't be chivalrous."

"Cameron." I look over and see warmth and understanding shining in her eyes. Looks like my humor isn't fooling her this time.

"Sunshine," I murmur, her name just a whisper on my lips. When I lean towards her, she doesn't pull away. I brush my

nose against hers, gauging her reaction. “Tell me to stop.” Her lips part at my demand, but no words leave her mouth.

My hands cradle her face as I brush my lips against hers.

Once.

Twice.

Three times before I slide my tongue along the seam of her lips, asking for permission. When she opens for me, I don't stop the growl that rips from my throat.

Her lips are softer than I'd imagined, her tongue flavored with the orange we shared. When I suck her bottom lip into my mouth and trace the curve with the tip of my tongue, the fiery whimper I'm rewarded with makes me grin.

Carefully, so I don't hurt my damn knee and ruin the moment, I wrap my hands around her waist and pull her up and over until she's straddling my lap, never breaking our kiss. Her fingers tug at my hair as she rocks her hips against me and I can't help grabbing her ass, bringing her as close to me as possible.

I pull my lips from hers so I can press a soft kiss against her neck, working my way down to her shoulder as I tug her collar out of my way. “You okay with this, Sunshine?” Her eyes are hooded with lust, her pulse a wild flutter in the hollow of her throat.

Hesitation and lust battle in her gaze, but the latter wins.

“Yes.” Her response is just a sigh, but it rings clear in the space between our heated bodies. I tease her nipples through her shirt and rock into her heat at the same time I suck the delicate skin along the column of her neck. When I run my teeth over her shoulder, the sound she makes has me ready to say fuck it to the pain and carry her to my room.

“Am I hurting your knee?” The worry in her voice is enough for me to pull back and look at her, want and concern swirling in her eyes.

“No, babe, you’re fine.” I nip her bottom lip, then go in for another kiss, this time twisting my tongue with hers, a wicked game of give and take that has my body temp rising. Reaching behind my head, I pull off my shirt, tossing it who knows where.

Lucy’s hands trails up and down my abs, her greedy mouth swallowing the growl I let loose against her lips. I can feel how hot her pussy is through her jeans, and don’t even try to stop my hand from cupping her, pressing my thumb over her clit and making slow circles through the denim.

“Oh, shit.” She throws her head back and grinds against my hand, her movements slow and torturous, eking every ounce of pleasure she can. “Feels so good.”

The need to feel more of her against me is an unrelenting demand drumming inside my head. I pull her shirt off and unclasp her bra in record time, taking in her pale skin, freckles everywhere. Her nipples are tight little buds, the dark pink skin making my mouth water.

Unlike other girls I’ve been with, I don’t see any insecurity in Lucy’s gaze, and it makes me that much more turned on knowing she’s confident in what she wants. Her hands frame my face as she slows our pace, making every swipe of her tongue against mine seem even more delicious.

“Fuck. So good, Sunshine.”

I trail my fingers up her spine and anchor one hand at the back of her neck while the other glides down to her ribcage, pressing her against my chest as I kiss her slowly, our lips sliding together in an unhurried way that has me gently rocking my hips against her, knowing the friction against her clit must be killing her.

I keep my eyes closed as I drag my lips down her neck and against her chest, flicking my tongue over a hardened bud, biting it before I suck away the pain. I move to her other breast and pump it, drawing her body closer to mine while I lash at

her nipple, rocking my hips faster, her little whimpers making my cock jerk.

“Cameron...fuck, don't stop.” When she throws her head back and moans, I notice a small scar on her neck, right below her jaw.

I brush my thumb over the puckered skin and everything stops.

It's like a bucket of ice water just upended over Lucy, her warm, pliant body now board-straight and unmoving. When she tries to get off me, I grab her waist, keeping her in place.

“What's it from, Lucy?” I don't have to tell her what I'm talking about. She knows.

“Nothing. I...I should go.” She avoids eye contact, pushing at my chest again. I don't fight her this time, and my hands slowly slide off her body as she stands. Within seconds, she's back in her bra and shirt, grabbing her purse from where she left it on the side table. “I'll see you later.”

“You don't have your car, remember.” I know my tone sounds pissed, but I don't know what the fuck just happened. One minute she's into it, the next she's freezing me out, no hint of the sassy girl moaning my name.

Her shoulders slump at my words, but just as she's about to come up with some other bullshit excuse for leaving, Ty walks in the front door. His eyes swing from Lucy to me, still sitting on the couch with an ice pack, erection mostly gone by now, thank fuck.

“What happened?” His keen gaze catches Lucy righting the edge of her shirt that was caught in the waistband of her jeans, but he doesn't comment on it, just jerks his chin towards my knee.

“Twisted it during the game today. Not a big deal.” I look at Lucy, but she won't look at me.

“Do you think you could give me a ride home?” She's trying to act casual, but she's not fooling anyone when her

attention stays locked on Tyler.

“Sure, why don’t you start it up.” He tosses her his keys, eying me up and down. “I’ll be out in just a sec.”

Lucy doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even spare me a glance before she’s out the door.

“You wanna tell me what I just walked into?” His gray eyes are hard, tatted arms crossed over his chest.

I blow out a big breath and let him see the confusion I’m feeling right now. “I have no idea, man. One minute she was hot, the next she wasn’t.”

He doesn’t say anything, just stares at me. I’m not sure what his angle is, so I just glare right back, the pain in my knee finally catching up to me.

“Thought you were playing it cool with her.”

“Oh, don’t give me that shit. She was into it just as much as I was. You know I wouldn’t do anything to hurt her.”

His shoulders relax, eyes warming a bit. “I know.”

Before I can say anything else, he’s out the door. After a few seconds, I see his 4Runner reverse and head towards Lucy’s apartment, leaving me alone to overanalyze whatever the fuck just happened.

Chapter 7

Lucy

The ride to my apartment is silent, something I deeply appreciate.

Other people would have badgered me with questions, but not Tyler. I'm not sure if it's because he doesn't want to hear about my drama, or if he's giving me space to figure out what the hell just happened. Either way, I'm grateful.

When we take the last turn onto my road, I notice one of the planters Vi and I picked out for the porch a few months ago is tipped over, the black soil a stark warning sign against the cream welcome mat. As we get closer, I can see the door is slightly open, the knob jammed to the right, clearly busted up from whoever was here.

"What the hell?" I run my eyes over the entire front of my apartment, but I don't see any other damage. Ty parks against the curb across the street and looks at me, his face tight with intensity.

"You're going to stay in the car, Lucy. Don't fucking get out until I come get you."

"I'm not letting you go in there alone! Are you crazy? Whoever did this could still be there." My eyes dart back to the ajar door, hoping like hell whoever broke in is long gone by now.

"Lucy." Ty puts his strong hands on my shoulders and looks into my eyes until he has my undivided attention, the

threat of danger clenching his jaw until I swear I hear it pop. “Get out your phone, call Victor, and stay the fuck put until I get back here. Alright?”

I seriously consider arguing with him, but I find myself nodding instead, relief filling his stormy gray eyes before he gives me a fast nod of his own. He doesn't say anything else, just locks the doors before quietly shutting his behind him.

I pull up my contacts and scroll to Victor's name, hitting the call button and putting it on speaker before I look up, just in time to see Tyler slowly walk up the porch steps, looking at the overturned pot and fucked up doorknob.

“Detective Storm.” Liam's dad is a great guy, but I really wish I'd stop talking to him under such bad circumstances.

“Victor, it's Lucy. I'm parked outside of my apartment on Monroe, and it looks like someone broke in.” Ty gently pushes the front door open, then walks inside.

“Are you alone, Lucy?” His tone is stern, but still calm enough to keep me from losing my shit.

“Tyler was dropping me off. He's checking things out right now, but—”

“God dammit, that boy—”

“Can you send someone here? He's inside now.”

“What's your address?”

I tell him, waiting for Tyler to come back out.

“Stay in your car, I'm sending someone right now.” I can hear a radio go off in the background, static covering the message coming across the line. I look towards where I know the police station is, hoping to hear sirens, but movement at my front door has me swinging my gaze to the left again.

Tyler steps out, looking freaking pissed, then walks over to me. I get out of the car as he shakes his head at me. “Whoever did this, they're gone now.”

Victor hears Ty's report and asks to talk to him, so I hand my phone over before crossing the street. I need to see my apartment, know how bad it is. I can hear Tyler talking to Victor, answering questions as he follows behind me, but I tune them out as I climb the three steps and look inside.

Everything in the living room looks in place, the little couch Vi and I got from our favorite thrift store on 2nd is pushed up against the wall separating the living room from the kitchen, just like always. The large tv mounted to the wall is in one piece. None of the lamps are turned over, all of the decor and pictures on the wall are still where they should be.

I force myself to keep going, entering the kitchen, knowing Ty didn't have that angry look on his face for nothing. Nothing seems out of the ordinary here, either. All the pictures, my class schedule, random magnets from road trips Vi and I have taken over the years, everything is still stuck to the fridge like it was this morning before I walked over for the game. The leftover tarts I made to snack on with the girls are still on the counter, seemingly untouched.

I'm distantly aware that Tyler isn't on the phone with Victor anymore, but the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach is already leading me to the hallway that branches from the living room.

I peek in Violet's old room and let out a breath, not seeing anything vandalized or shoved around in here. Most of her stuff is at Liam's, but she still has some of her summer clothes in the closet, a few canvases stacked against the closed closet doors.

That only leaves my room, and I suddenly feel childish for thinking this could've been a random break in. Of course it's not.

I actually made my bed this morning, but you'd never know by looking at my ripped sheets. The canvas picture of Vi and I that I ordered off Shutterfly last month is slashed clean through, the gash perfectly across my neck. The drawers of my

dresser are all pulled out haphazardly, some of my clothes falling over the edges.

I could have dealt with all of that, but when I look over at my desk and see what waits there for me, my throat closes up, eyes stinging with tears.

The vintage Singer sewing machine my mom saved and saved for when I was in middle school, the one she gave me on my fourteenth birthday, is absolutely smashed to pieces, the yards of fabric and thread I so painstakingly organized in the plastic cubbies next to the desk all ruined with what looks to be black ink.

A sob rips from my chest as arms wrap around me from behind, and I cry harder when it's not pine and amber filling my nose. Tyler assures me we'll figure out who did this, but I cry even harder when I realize this destructive message in my room is the very reason why I'll never let Cameron get close to me again.



Cameron

I pull up outside of Lucy's apartment, a police officer parked in the driveway, the cruiser spinning its blue and red lights round and round.

When Tyler called me and told me to pack a bag and get my ass over here, telling me that someone broke into Lucy's place, I didn't hesitate. I threw the first couple shirts, jeans, sweats, socks and briefs I found in my room, then grabbed my backpack on my way out the door.

Lucy and Ty are talking to the officer in the front lawn when I approach, having left my stuff in my car for now. When Lucy sees me, I see a flash of relief in her stare, but in the next blink, hard resolve wipes away any lingering sentiment from her face.

"Did you notice if anything was missing, Ms. McGuire?" Lucy bites her lip and shakes her head, not saying anything

when I walk up behind her. The officer shoots me a look, letting me know she's wondering who I am and why I'm here.

"I'm a friend of Lucy's."

"I called him," Ty admits, shooting a look towards Lucy, gauging how pissed she is. Her eyes flick to me, but she doesn't say anything, just turns back to the officer.

"I think I might know who did this." Lucy's words are hushed, soft enough that the officer asks her to repeat herself. "I said, I think I know who might have done this. But I'm not sure, and I don't have any proof."

I feel my eyes widen, and I'm about to ask her what the fuck she's talking about, but Ty shoots me a look that shuts me up.

"And who would that be, Ms. McGuire?" The officer's eyes stick to Lucy's face like glue, picking up on her hesitancy.

"My ex step-father, Lars Jackson." Lucy's gaze goes hazy, but quickly sharpens when the officer clears her throat. "He's...at least, I thought he was...still in prison, but maybe he got out. The other day, at the boutique I work at, the power was cut. There was a child's cloth doll left in my purse with a warning written on it. I reported it a while ago." Her eyes fall to the ground before she continues in a quiet voice. "I...I didn't want to believe it was anything other than some stupid prank, but now with this happening tonight, I'm not so sure anymore."

My stomach twists at her words. Did she really suspect it was this guy, even back then, and not say anything? I let her drive home to an empty apartment that night, where whoever the fuck did this could have been waiting for her.

Fuck!

"Why would you think this was done by Mr. Jackson?"

Lucy looks at me and Ty, and before she can ask for privacy, I catch my friend's eye and jerk my head towards the apartment.

“We’ll be inside, Sunshine.” I take the steps slowly, my knee still aching a bit. I do a fast scan of the place, but everything seems fine. I must look confused, because Ty speaks up before I say anything.

“The fucker only ruined her stuff, nothing else.”

I storm to Lucy’s room, having been here enough times over the year to know where it is. What I see has me feeling sick with rage, something that’s usually Ty’s domain, yet all I see is red as I look around the small space, noting there isn’t a single thing in here that wasn’t fucked with somehow.

“I don’t like it, man. Not one fucking bit.” Ty looks at me, cold fury in his eyes. “I think you should stay here. If she refuses to move in with us for a while. Which is what I’m guessing will happen.”

I run a hand through my hair and nod. “Yeah, she’s not going to be alone until we find who the fuck did this.”

“Agreed.” Ty’s hard tone has me looking at him, and not for the first time, I wonder if he has feelings for Lucy.

“Are you sure you’re not into her, man?” God, I sound like a pussy, but I need to know.

“No, dickhead. I’m not crushing on your girl. But I care about her, and I don’t want to see her get hurt.” His gaze takes in all the chaos in the room. “Especially after what happened with Violet.”

I stiffen at the memories flooding my mind, that awful night something I’ll carry with me to my deathbed. A horrible thought pops into my head, and I snap my eyes to Ty.

“You don’t think this was Cooper, do you?”

“He’s still in rehab, so no. I don’t think so. But it could have something to do with that Tommy guy.” He lets out a long breath and turns around, me following close behind as we make our way back outside, where Lucy is wrapping up her conversation with the officer.

Sharp eyes take me in as I wrap my arm around Lucy's shoulders, the officer asking for my name. When she's done asking me some basic questions, I share a look with Ty and guide Lucy towards my Jeep. He can bring up the shit with Cooper, but I rather not have Lucy relive that night if I can help it.

Once we're out of earshot, I pull her into a hug. At first, she lets me hold her, warm and pliant in my arms, but it doesn't last long. Before I can count to three, she's pulling away, asking me why I'm here.

"Are you kidding me right now? Ty calls me and says someone broke into your house, and you don't understand why I'm here?" I think I let a little too much hurt lace my words, because a flicker of regret flashes in her blue eyes before they harden once again.

"I appreciate that you came to make sure I'm okay." She crosses her arms and cocks a hip. "But I'll be fine. You can leave now."

A harsh laugh rips from my throat, no humor to be found. "Okay, Sunshine."

"I'm serious, Cameron."

"I'm not leaving unless you do. Come stay with Ty and I for a while until this gets resolved." I grab her hand and force her to uncross her arms, but she slowly untangles her fingers from mine.

"I'm not moving in with you."

Now I'm the one crossing my arms. "It's settled then."

Her brows furrow. "What's settled?"

I smile down at her, bracing myself for her reaction as I stick a hand out.

"Hi, I'm Cameron. Your new roommate."

Chapter 8

Lucy

Fuck.

Fuckity fuck fuck. I slam my bottle of conditioner down a little too hard, but I don't care. I work the product into my long hair as I try to think of a way to get Cameron to leave. Telling him the truth would just open a can of worms I'd rather leave closed until I figure out what the hell to do about the latest taunt from Lars.

Things have been normal since moving to White Plains four years ago. I wouldn't have allowed myself to get close to Violet or Kloey, otherwise. There's no way I'd put their lives at risk.

"You okay in there, Sunshine?" Cameron's voice startles me enough to let out a yelp. "Lucy? Are you okay?" I hear the doorknob jiggle, and I'm glad I remembered to lock it.

"I'm fine!" I pour my lemon verbena body wash into my hand and start washing my arms, then use my loofah to reach my back, slowly washing away the nervous sweat that's coated me since I walked into my wrecked room an hour ago. I stand under the hot spray, watching the suds swirl around the drain until the water starts to cool. I quickly rinse out my conditioner and turn off the shower, wrapping myself in my favorite yellow towel.

I need to find a way to get Cameron out of here. I know he wants to protect me, but his very being here is what could make things ten times worse if whoever broke in here earlier is

still keeping tabs on me. Obviously someone is, if they were able to find me here, in New York.

Mom and I thought moving across the country would put enough space between us and all of the horrible memories, but we were wrong.

My ransacked room looks horrible, but most of my clothes seem to be okay, just flung around everywhere. After some searching, I find some leggings and a long sleeve shirt to wear, then pad into the living room.

Cameron's on the couch, forearms braced on his knees while he holds his head in his hands. He jerks his head up and runs his eyes over my body, as if he's making sure I'm all in one piece. As much as I want to melt into that protective stare, I force myself to hang my hands on my hips and look back at him with a sassy look on my face.

"This is silly, Cameron. I don't need you to stay here with me. I'm sure whoever did this is long gone, and Officer Rickett said she'll have a cruiser drive by a few times tonight to make sure everything's okay."

His brows nearly touch his hairline, stubbornness shining in those golden eyes of his. I take the three steps separating us at a slow pace, my mind trying to fight my body, the former knowing the closer I get to this man, the more addicted I become, the latter not giving one single fuck.

When I'm within reaching distance, Cameron pulls me between his thighs and holds my hips, distress warping his handsome features.

"You honestly think I'm going to let you stay here alone, after someone broke into your apartment?" He lets his face thud into the softness of my belly, biceps straining against the cotton of his shirt as his grip around my hips tightens. "I'm already compromising here, Sunshine. What I should really do is toss you over my shoulder and make you stay with Ty and I until the police figure out who the fuck did this."

“Toss me over your shoulder?” I roll my eyes, but I can’t help thinking how hot that could be if things were different. “What are you, a Neanderthal?”

Cameron’s nostrils flare, but he doesn’t say anything, just stares at me until my thirst for a fight sizzles out. He must see when the last spark leaves me, because he slowly stands up and pulls me into a hug. I don’t hug him back, but that doesn’t stop me from loving how warm he is, his strong hands rubbing circles on my back.

“Do you want me to help you clean up your room tonight, or do you want to sleep in Vi’s old bed?” His lips brush against my hair, and I hold in the shiver wanting to zip up my spine. I let out a deep breath and pull out of the embrace, looking towards the hallway.

“Probably tonight.” I grab some garbage bags from the kitchen and slowly walk to my room, Cam right behind me, offering his silent support. I hand him a bag and ask him to put all of the ruined bedding in it, while I get to work looking through everything else strewn across the small space.

We work in silence for a few minutes before I can’t handle the quiet, my thoughts only fanning the flames of fear licking up and down my body when I think about what might have happened if I was home when whoever did this broke in.

Or even worse, if Violet had still lived here and been home alone.

“Why business?” Cameron seems surprised by my question, but answers me nonetheless.

“Honestly, at first I picked it because most of the other athletes on campus were majoring in business, so I thought I’d do the same thing.” He starts looking through the ruined fabric around my desk, folding pieces that seem unharmed, while tossing the ones with ink stains into his trash bag. “I’ve always been a people person, so the idea of running a business that helps others is pretty intriguing to me. But I don’t know exactly how I’ll do that yet.” He looks a little embarrassed

when he says that, like he should have all the answers right this moment.

“You traveled abroad for a year after you graduated high school, right?” I peek at him when I ask my question, trying not to notice how big he looks in my small bedroom.

“Yeah, I know it sounds cliché as hell, but I wanted to get out of America, see what life is like somewhere else in the world. Didn’t have baseball to look forward to, so I just said ‘fuck it’ and booked a ticket. I had already saved up my paychecks from my summer jobs and my parents matched me, so I had a decent chunk of change to last over the year. Since it was just me, I stayed at hostels most of the time, bunking up with other travelers. It was awesome.”

“Where did you go?” I pick up the picture of Violet and I at our first glow rave, freezing in our white t-shirts and shorts, covered in different colors of goo, our smiles wide and inhibited. I run my finger across the slit someone cut into the canvas, right along my throat, and have to blink a few times to ward off the memories trying to suck me under.

I notice too late that Cameron isn’t talking, just staring at the picture in my hands, eyes harder than I’ve ever seen them. When his gaze flicks to my face, I can tell he’s about to ask me something I have no interest in talking about.

“Tell me what’s going on, Sunshine.” He sets his garbage bag down on my mattress and turns to me, determination warring with confusion and concern in his eyes. “You said you thought it was your step-dad...”

“Ex step-dad.” I look away from him and finish folding a shirt before closing the drawer and moving on to my closet, which seems fairly untouched except for a few dresses that must have been yanked off their hangers.

“Why do you think it was him?” Cam comes up behind me and picks up a dress, grabbing a free hanger and putting it next to the others on the wooden dowel running across the length of

my closet. His tone is quiet, and I can tell he's trying to give me room to open up to him, but I can't.

The warning from so many years ago rings clear in my head, making the back of my eyes sting with unshed tears.

The moment you find happiness, I'll be there to obliterate it.

I can't let that happen. Cameron is a good man, and he doesn't deserve to be wrapped up in all of my baggage.

"Look, I get that you're trying to play the knight in shining armor, but it's unnecessary." I put the last dress back on its hanger and look at Cam. I hate myself for what I'm about to say, but I can't let him get caught in the crosshairs following me everywhere I go. "I'm not going to sleep with you, and I know that's all you're interested in anyway, so why don't we call it a night, and you can be on your way?"

I lost my nerve halfway through my horrible words, so I'm looking at my feet when I start to turn around. Cameron's strong hand grabs my arm, stopping my momentum. His grip isn't bruising, but he doesn't let go until I look up at him.

By the pissed off look on his face, I'd say I hit the mark with my poisonous words. His lips are pursed into a thin line, his jaw ticking while he lets out a slow breath through his nose.

"You're pissing me the fuck off, Sunshine. You and I both know I'm not here to fuck you." His eyes bounce between mine, looking for what, I don't know. "I'm here because I'm your *friend* who doesn't want you to be alone after some psychotic fucker broke into your house and slashed up your bedroom."

"Cameron, I—"

"I'm gonna take a shower, Sunshine, and when I get out, you better be ready to talk." He doesn't wait for my response, just walks out of my room and down the hall to the living room. I hear him pick up his bag and slam it on the bathroom counter, then shut the door. I wait for the click of the lock, but

it doesn't come. Even when he's pissed at me, he doesn't shut me out completely, just in case I need him while he's in there.

God, it makes me want to cry and scream at the same time. There's a reason I never sleep with the same guy twice. Never keep in touch with any of my one night stands. I was given a clear warning many years ago that any happiness I found would be ruined, and I refuse to let Cameron be collateral damage.

By the time I hear the shower shut off, my room is as good as it's going to get for tonight. I found some extra sheets in the hall closet, along with a comforter and pillowcase, and made my bed. I vacuumed up all of the glass from one of my broken picture frames, the photo of my mom and I at my high school graduation now loose on my desk, leaning against the ruined Singer.

The sight of my smashed sewing machine breaks through the resolve I've been holding onto, and tears start to fall down my cheeks. I sink to the floor in front of my desk, arms wrapped around my knees.

Just a few seconds. I'll give myself a few breaths to feel scared and sad, then I'll suck it up and come up with a plan.

I squeeze my eyes shut and let a shudder work its way through my body, a quiet sob falling from my lips. My forehead rests against my knees and I just...let go.

But a second turns into a minute, and then a minute turns into more chest-wracking sobs as all of my worst fears dance behind my eyelids, reminding me that no matter how far I go, Lars will always find me. And with finding me comes the very real possibility of him finding Mom.

I can't let that happen. I need to call her tomorrow.

Fuck, how did this happen? Things have been so quiet the past few years; no letters, no phone calls with quiet breathing on the other end, none of what Mom and I dealt with after the arrest. So why now? What did I do to piss him off?

Warm arms wrap around my shoulders and I cry even harder, knowing I'm not strong enough right now to resist Cameron's comfort. When he lifts me up, I open my puffy eyes and blink at the most beautiful man I've ever laid eyes on. He's in a soft white t-shirt and sweats, his feet bare. His brown hair looks almost black in its wet state, his honeyed eyes hesitant, and I hate myself a little more when I think about my role in putting such uncertainty in his gaze.

I expect him to ask me more questions, but he just closes his eyes and rests his forehead against mine, rubbing his nose along my cheekbones before kissing both my eyelids. I hold onto his neck a little tighter when he sets me on the bed, not wanting to let go of the feeling of safety I get whenever I'm around him.

When he presses a kiss to my head and turns to go, I grab his arm, not wanting to be alone, yet fully accepting that I seem like a crazy person, telling him to go one moment and wanting him to stay the next. "Can you...can you stay until I fall asleep?"

I close my eyes, readying for the rejection I deserve, when I feel my bed dip under his weight.

"Yeah, Sunshine." His words are a whisper, but strong and sure as he tucks me into his side, pulling the covers over us. It's not lost on me that he's already ripping down the walls I've so carefully crafted to keep him out of my heart, but I'm too wrung out to care right now. Especially when he rests his chin on top of my head and starts trailing his fingers over my back, lulling me towards sleep.

I'm almost out when Cameron breaks the silence wrapped around us like a fragile piece of glass.

"I won't let anything happen to you, Sunshine. I promise."

I drift off to the sound of his heartbeat, a steady rhythm I wish I could fall asleep to every night.

Chapter 9

Cameron

I get up early so I can make breakfast for Lucy before we head to our 8am class. When I woke up around three this morning, I forced myself to leave her warm bed and spend the rest of the night on the couch. She grabbed my arm in her sleep, and I almost stayed, but I knew her moment of weakness wouldn't see the light of day, and I didn't want to deal with more of her tough chick act.

It's a little after seven when I hear the bathroom door shut and lock. I'm just plating up the eggs and bacon I made when she comes into the kitchen, fully dressed and ready for the day. Her eyes are lined in black, something she rarely does, but I can understand why she wants to feel a little more hidden from the world today.

Her skinny jeans and tight blue sweater hug her body like I wish I could, but I force myself to look at her face, only slightly puffy from her crying last night.

"Good morning." I nod to the cup of coffee I made her and she raises a brow, then looks at the food I push in front of where she's leaning against the island.

"What's all this for?" Her lips pucker to blow on the hot coffee and I bite my cheek to stop myself from thinking about what she would look like with her lips wrapped around my cock.

"I thought we'd have a quick bite to eat before heading to class." I grab two forks from the drawer next to the sink and

hand one to her, taking up a spot on the island opposite her. She doesn't say anything at first, just takes another tentative sip of her coffee before biting into the omelet I made for her.

"Mmmmm, that's good." I lift my eyes in time to see hers still closed, her jaw moving slowly as she chews. The moan she just let out has my balls tightening, but I don't say anything, just keep eating like the good boy that I am.

"What's your schedule look like today? I figured we'd ride together, but I'll give you my keys if you need to leave for work before I'm done with classes for the day." I gulp down the orange juice I poured for myself while I wait for her answer, admiring how the blue of her sweater brings out the different shades of red in her hair.

Shit, maybe Vi's artistic abilities are finally wearing off on me.

"I usually walk to school since we're so close." She takes another bite and looks out the window, a small frown furrowing her delicate brows when she notices the rain that started an hour ago.

"Okay, we'll walk." I shrug and take a bite of my bacon, leaning my elbows on the island as I take a good look at my girl. Her eyes are tired, even her freckles look duller than I've ever seen them. She has her hair pulled into a high ponytail, but pieces have already fallen out, framing her pale face. Her gaze bounces to mine and I think she's about to call me out for looking at her, but she surprises me when I hear her question.

"What about your knee?" She looks half worried and half relieved, like surely my minor, *minor*, injury yesterday will be enough to get me off her tail.

No dice, baby.

"It's fine. I'm right as rain, Sunshine." I shoot her a wink and put my empty plate and fork in the dishwasher. "But it's been raining since I've been up, so we might want to take the Jeep so you don't get all wet."

I can see Lucy biting her tongue at my comment, but I just smile and head to the living room where my backpack is, checking to make sure I have all the shit I'll need for my classes today. I'll need to swing by my place to pick up some more clothes, but that can wait until later today.

“Alright, I'm ready to go.” I glance up and see Lucy waiting for me, arms crossed, a look of indifference on her face.

So we're back to this now. Great.

I'm about to take the L when I notice her looking at my knee again, worry clear in her gaze. I decide to be an asshole and take advantage of it, already knowing what I want to do to draw her out of her head.

“Shit!” I grab my knee and put a hand on the couch armrest, really hamming it up with a wince and everything. Lucy's on me in a flash, grabbing my arm as if she's strong enough to keep me up.

“I knew it was bothering you more than you let on! What do you need? Ice? Heat? I think we have a heating pad Vi and I use when we get really bad cramps, I can try to—”

Her words are cut off when I press my lips to hers, one hand finding its way to the back of her neck while the other cradles her face, my thumb caressing her cheekbone.

I feel the exact moment Lucy's surprise dissolves into need, her lips moving with mine, opening for me when I gently press on her chin with my thumb. She tastes like mint, her tongue hot against mine as we fight to control.

“What do you want, baby?” I pull away to kiss up her neck, my tongue darting out to taste her warm skin. Her citrus scent is even stronger right here, and I don't stop myself from taking a deep breath of her into my lungs, then letting it out slowly as I kiss my way back to her wet lips.

“Make me forget.” When she nips my lower lip and licks away the sting, I lose it.

Grabbing her by the ass, I pick her up and walk her to the nearest wall while she wraps her legs around my waist. When I grind my dick against her heat, her whimper is almost as loud as my satisfied growl. Her lids are heavy with lust when I look at her flushed face, but I need to make sure we're on the same page.

"You okay with this, Sunshine?" I keep my eyes trained on her, waiting for the green light to take us both to pleasure town, but her blue eyes slowly clear, the need fading away as she catches her breath. I take that as my sign to let her go, but I don't go far, only leaving a few inches between us as I rest my arms on the wall, bracketing her head.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let us get carried away like that." Her whispered apology stings, because I know she was just as into it as I was, but I don't let the rejection show. Instead, I just smile down at her and lift her face with a finger until she's looking up at me with guilt and indecision in her troubled gaze.

"I know you're trying to come up with some reason this can't happen, but we both know it's happening whether we're ready for it or not." When she starts to say something, I press my finger against her soft lips. "We're going to be late for class, so let's table this for now."

I push off from the wall and grab my keys off the coffee table, slinging my bag over my shoulder as I *very obviously* adjust my hard dick so it's not awkwardly pressed against my zipper. When I see Lucy looking, I smirk and gesture to the door. "Ladies first."

"Oh, please." I'm pushed onto the porch by my angry roommate, and then she locks up behind us. After scoffing at the grin on my face, I see her lips twitch before she walks to the passenger side of my Jeep and waits for me to unlock it.

And because I'm an ass and want to get a true smile back on her face, I only unlock my door and let myself in, starting up the engine and turning on the heater. I roll down the passenger window and grin at Lucy, who's glaring at me.

“Sorry Sunshine, you gotta sing if you want in.” I turn up the radio and start to laugh when I hear Justin Bieber’s “Boyfriend” playing. This song is old, so I have no idea why it’s playing, but it couldn’t be more perfect since I know Lucy loves the dude.

“I’m not singing. I’ll just walk.” She starts to turn away and I swallow my pride as I start to rap with the second verse of the song, not missing a single word. As I reach the chorus, Lucy’s glare has gone from surprise to mirth. When the bridge is about to start, I raise my brows at the beautiful girl standing next to my vehicle. She rolls her eyes, but starts belting out the lyrics just as smoothly as I did. When she’s done with the bridge, I unlock her door and she laughs as she gets in.

“You suck.” She clicks her seat belt in place and I reverse out of the driveway.

“You loved it, don’t even lie, Sunshine.” I wink at her and maneuver out of her neighborhood and towards campus.

“The Biebs *is* pretty hot.” I grunt my disagreement and she smirks at me, her eyes brighter than they’ve been the last few weeks.

“I think we can both agree that I’m way hotter than the Biebs, though, right?” I look over in time to see the fantastic eye roll made just for me, but I only laugh.

“How’s your neck, Cameron?” Lucy looks worried all of a sudden, which makes no sense.

“What do you mean, how’s my neck? It’s fine.” I turn on my blinker as we get to the road that leads to campus, looking for any walkers or bikers before making the turn.

“I just figured it must be killing you since your head is so big.”

I glare at her little quip, but inside I’m jumping up and down, giving myself a slap on the back for making her laugh *and* poke fun at me.

Two for two, baby.

“Hardy har har. Lucy’s got jokes.” I pull into the free parking lot and get out to grab my backpack from the backseat, Lucy doing the same.

We power walk to class in silence, not wanting to get soaked from the rain. I hold the door open for her, then hurry in after and shake my head like a wet dog, earning a yip from Lucy.

“Sorry.” I wince when I see a drop of water roll down her forehead and onto her nose. I use my finger to wipe it away, then smile down at her unimpressed glare. “I guess I was the one who got wet.”

She does a good job trying to keep a straight face, I’ll give her that. But it only takes a second for her lips to betray her, curling into a small smile as she spins around and heads into our classroom.



“Hey man, what’s up?” I just dropped Lucy off at Hope’s, so I’m at home, picking up some stuff. Tyler must be at work, because the house was dead silent when I got here a while ago. When Liam’s call came in, I’m not too proud to say I might have let out a tiny shriek.

“Just wanted to make sure you remembered tonight is Violet’s birthday party. And to remind you that she does *not* want strippers.” I know he’s serious, but I can hear the humor in his voice.

“But I already paid for ‘em, man! It’s too late now.” I laugh as I throw another shirt into my bag, then walk into my bathroom to grab my shampoo and other bathroom shit.

I love how Lucy smells, but I’d rather not use her girly shit again, thank you very much. I swear the guy in my Econ class gave me a weird look when he passed behind my chair earlier today, but I just ignored him.

“I really hope you’re kidding. I’m not about to explain to my fiancé why there are naked women running around her bonfire.”

“Who said anything about women? I wouldn’t do that to my Vi-Vi. I specifically asked for the hottest guys they had, clad in their best construction worker outfits.” I can barely get the last part out before I bust out laughing, imagining the look of horror on Violet’s face if I did such a thing.

“I don’t know why we’re friends.” Liam deadpans, but I’d bet good money on him holding back a smile right now.

“Because I’m a funny bastard that brightens up your day, that’s why.” I throw my razor into my shave kit and toss the whole thing in my bag. “What time should we be over?”

“Ty said he gets off at seven, so if you’re riding with him, seven works for us. I’ll have the food ready around six, just in case some of Violet’s friends from school come early.”

I don’t say anything when he assumes my “we” meant Tyler and I, but I do grimace a bit when I realize Lucy must not have talked to Violet about what happened yet, or else Liam would know I was staying over at Lucy’s for the foreseeable future.

“I’ll be there at six then, with alcohol and strippers.”

“Just the alcohol, asshole.”

I don’t have time to say anything to that because he hangs up on me. I laugh to myself and check the clock on my nightstand, seeing it’s almost five. Lucy said she’s off at five thirty, so I finish getting my stuff together, grab Vi’s actual present, and head to Hope’s.

When I get there, I’m greeted with the unwelcome sight of some dude hitting on Lucy. They’re standing next to each other, his arm around her shoulder as he says something in her ear, making her laugh hard enough to throw her head back.

Jealousy burns in my chest, especially when the guy pulls her into a hug and kisses the top of her head. *I’m the only one allowed to do that!* Shaking the thought from my head, I clear my throat and they both look over at me.

The guy is in chino pants, a tucked in polo, and fancy looking shoes that shine more than a new penny. His blonde hair is slicked back from an admittedly good looking face, but I still don't like how he had his hands on Lucy, who's looking at me with a weird look on her face.

"You said five thirty, right?" Shit, that sounded less than friendly. I stick my hand out to the guy and introduce myself. "Hey, I'm Cameron. Lucy's friend."

"Dane. Nice to meet you." He shares a look with Lucy before continuing. "Lucy and I have some of our design classes together. I needed to pick her brain for one of our assignments, but I have to get going."

After some quick goodbyes between Dane and Lucy, it's just us in the shop, and I can't help my mouth from opening.

"Dane seems very...nice." Fuck, I sound like a pussy. Lucy's snicker pulls my attention from the freaky mannequin I was looking at, her stomach shaking under her tight sweater as she tries to hold in more laughter. "What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Sunshine."

"Cameron."

My name on her lips makes me want to do things I have no right thinking about right now, so I just stare at her, crossing my arms and waiting while she closes up the till.

"Do you have everything you need before going to Liam and Vi's place, or do we need to swing by your apartment first?" I push open the door as she brushes past me, her citrus scent hitting me square in the face.

"I have everything I need." She locks the door and looks at me. "Are you still insisting on staying with me?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods, Sunshine?" I put my hand on her lower back while we make our way to my Jeep, my fingers tingling with the need to lift up her sweater and run my hand over her soft skin.

“Can we maybe keep what happened yesterday to ourselves?” Her request is quiet, but I hear it anyway.

“Um, that would be a ‘hell no.’ Violet would chop off my balls if she knew I knew and didn’t tell her.” I swallow, not liking the idea of one of my favorite body parts bearing the brunt of Violet’s wrath. “Besides, she’s your best friend. Why wouldn’t you tell her?”

I open the passenger door and wait for Lucy to get in before I crowd her, one hand on the console and the other on the roof of the Jeep. When I rub my nose along hers, she bites her lip but doesn’t say anything.

“You need to tell her, Sunshine. She loves you and wants to be there for you.” I pull back and see my words are hitting their mark when she gives me a small nod.

“I’ll tell her. Just maybe not tonight. It’s her birthday, after all.” She looks at me like I’ll agree with her, but she knows better than that.

“Try again, sweetheart.” I run my finger along her collar bone peeking out from the edge of her sweater, her pulse fluttering at the base of her neck. “Vi-Vi needs to know why you have the most amazing roommate in the world.” My words are joking, but I’m actually dead serious. Our friends deserve to know what’s going on.

“You’re so frustrating.”

“You’re so beautiful.”

The rest of the ride to Liam and Violet’s is silent, but I don’t mind. If someone needs to show her some tough love, I’ll volunteer as tribute.

Chapter 10

Lucy

“I’m telling you, it was hilarious. I think I might have peed myself.” Violet laughs into my shoulder as she loses her balance on the picnic blanket we’re sitting on next to the fire Liam made an hour ago. Rocky and Max are making their rounds, gladly scarfing down any bits of food people drop on the grass.

“It was not hilarious. It was awful, don’t believe a single word out of her drunk mouth.” Kloey glares at Vi before all three of us burst into laughter, the empty wine coolers at our feet making us giggly and warm.

I needed this, more than I care to admit. When I finally fessed up to Violet about the power being cut at Hope’s and the break in last night, she started crying and hugging me, which then led to Liam making a beeline for his girl, wondering why she was so upset on her birthday.

Needless to say, everyone thinks it’s a good idea for Cameron to keep staying with me until we find out who’s behind all this.

My eyes wander around the backyard, our friends from Hartford mingling with some of the people the guys invited tonight. I can admit I’ve been staring at one person in particular all evening, his thin sweater doing nothing to hide his strong back, arms, and abs. I swear, if his sweater was any tighter, I’d probably be able to count his abs. And drunk me is *very* into that idea.

“In all seriousness, how did you answer the kid? I left before I got to hear your answer.” Violet downs the rest of her drink and looks over at Kloey, who’s sitting cross legged on the other side of me.

Violet swung by Kloey’s school earlier today to have lunch with her since her afternoon drawing class was canceled, and one of Kloey’s students came in from recess to tell her that his dad wanted to take her on a date.

And then he proceeded to ask Klo if she was going to be his new mommy.

“I told him in the nicest way possible that I was *not* going to be dating his father, but I loved being his teacher. I didn’t touch the mom comment since I’m not sure what that situation is like at home.”

“Good call.” I nod in agreement, which makes the world spin a bit before it rights itself again. A deep laugh catches my attention in the back corner of the yard, and something that feels a hell of a lot like jealousy wraps around my chest. Cameron’s talking with a girl from our morning class, both of them smiling. I think her name is Cora.

I’ll admit she’s beautiful, with long dark hair and legs that go on for miles. From the few partner exercises I’ve done with her, she seems like a really nice girl, not catty in the least. I should be happy Cameron is seemingly hitting it off with her.

She laughs at something Cam says and pushes at his chest with her perfectly manicured hand. Well, I’m assuming it’s perfect, but I can’t see very well from here. I’d like to say it’s because the sun set a while ago, but the multiple drinks I’ve had tonight might be more responsible for my poor eyesight right now.

When Cameron makes her laugh again, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Pasting on a smile, I tell myself they’d make a cute couple.

Cora and Cameron. How fucking cute, indeed.

“Earth to Lucy.” A hand waves in front of my face and I blink a few times before looking at Kloey, a small frown settling between her dark brows. “Did you hear anything we just said?”

“You think I’m funny and have great taste in clothing?” I give her a hopeful grin and drain the last of my cider, tossing the empty bottle next to the others.

“Well, yes, that’s true, but that isn’t what I was saying.” Her eyes flick to where Cameron and Cora are still talking, but I keep my gaze firmly on my friend. “I was asking if you’re free to do a mini girl’s road trip for spring break.”

My grin falls and I look at my lap, picking at the pink polish that started chipping earlier this morning.

“I have to work. Hope and her daughter are going on a vacation and she needs me to run the shop while they’re gone.” I glance at Violet and see her and Liam smiling at each other, the blush staining Vi’s cheeks visible even in the tiny flickers of light coming from the fire. “Do you think he’s going to let you out of his sight?”

Short of going to class with her, Liam’s been at Violet’s side pretty much nonstop since the fire. I don’t blame him one bit, but I have a hard time believing he’s okay with Kloey and Violet going on a trip together, even if it’s only for a few days.

“We talked about it.” She rolls her eyes and grins. “Well, he tried to go all caveman and tell me it wasn’t safe, but I made him see reason.”

“You gave him a blow job, didn’t you?” I give her a knowing look and she throws her head back and laughs, causing Liam’s smile to soften even further. The love in his gaze is so intimate that I have to look away.

Knowing I may never have that connection with someone hurts, but I’m still over the moon happy that Vi and Liam are rock solid in their relationship.

“I may or may not have used some persuasive techniques, but a lady never kisses and tells.” She winks at me and looks

at Kloey, who's too busy staring at something to notice our attention. When I follow her line of sight, I see Tyler talking with one of the guys I recognize from Golden Ink. I think his name is Bones, but I could be wrong about that.

After being caught ogling Cameron earlier, I decide to leave Kloey to her glaring and look down at my phone. I heard it go off with a text a while ago, but we were right in the middle of Violet telling us about her capstone progress, so I didn't look at it.

When I unlock my screen and see who the text is from, I immediately click the power button to darken the screen, not wanting Violet to see. I quickly excuse myself, saying I need to use the bathroom, and start to get up, nearly falling back down on top of Kloey.

“Okay, no more alcohol for me.” I make myself smile at my friends, check to make sure I have my balance, then walk into the house. Only once I'm leaning against the island, back to the party, do I look at my phone again.

Cooper: I'm so fucking sorry, Lucy. Can we talk when I get out of here?

I blink at the text message while my stomach spasms, moments from that night swirling around me like a tornado, sucking the breath from my chest.

Liam grabbing my shoulders and shaking me, telling me that Violet was missing.

The picture of her tied to a chair, blood dripping from her mouth.

Her burned and broken body in the hospital bed, still unconscious.

I don't realize I'm crying until a sob falls past my lips, my breathing too fast, making me feel lightheaded. I close my eyes and try to suck in some air, but my lungs won't cooperate. I try to think about what I'm hearing, but the only sound I register is the blood whooshing in my ears. I think

about what I taste, but the bitter tang of fear doesn't help pull me out of the panic attack, either.

"Sunshine?" Warm hands grab my face, but I can't seem to find it in me to open my eyes. "What's wrong?" The alarm in his voice should make me feel something, but the attack has me fully in its grasp, an unrelenting pressure against my diaphragm.

I shake my head, feeling more hot tears trail down my cheeks and onto Cameron's hands. I try to speak, but my throat is too tight, my heart beating too fast behind my ribcage.

"Breathe, baby." Cam's hands leave my face, and before I know what's happening, I'm in his arms, my back to his chest. "Take a breath for me, Sunshine." His words are soft and calm, but I'm still on the edge of hyperventilating, shaking my head again.

"Feel me." He sucks a breath into his lungs, his chest inflating against my back. "Do it with me, Lucy."

On his next inhale, I follow along, but the air whooshes out much faster than his slow exhale. I feel one of his hands rest against my heart, the other against my belly. He takes another big breath, and I manage to copy it this time, our breaths in sync. The smell of amber and pine swirls around me, warming my cold body until the feeling in my limbs gradually returns.

I have no idea how long we stand there, with Cameron whispering words of encouragement in my ear, his voice a tether pulling me back to safety. When I open my eyes, I see we're facing away from the party, meaning he kept my meltdown as private as possible.

My hands still feel a bit numb, my arms hanging against my sides still unable to move. When I start to clench and unclench my fingers to get some warmth into them, Cameron tangles our fingers together and wraps our arms around me, his chin resting on the top of my head.

The next breath I let out is shaky, like my lungs aren't quite ready to work properly. Exhaustion is trying to sweep me into

its abyss, but I force my eyes to stay open, not wanting to prolong my vulnerability.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Cam doesn’t take back the question when I tense up, just rubs the back of my hands with his thumbs, patiently waiting for me to answer.

I debate ignoring him, but the weight of all the secrets I’ve kept is a living thing around my neck, trying to pull me down until I’m drowning in a sea of half truths and lies.

I’m tired of treading the vicious waters alone.

“Cooper wants to talk to me.” This time it’s him who’s tensing, his grip on my hands tightening. When I untangle my body from his, he doesn’t stop me. His brown eyes are almost black, his normal smile nowhere to be found on his handsome face.

“You’re not talking to him, Lucy. No fucking way.”

The alcohol and panic attack must have taken their toll on me. I normally wouldn’t let him, or anyone else, make such demands of me like that, but I can’t seem to muster the energy to argue with him.

Honestly, I feel broken, my will to fight seeping out of all my cracks, spilling onto the floor at our feet. I look into Cameron’s eyes and see the moment he realizes I’m not going to argue with him, not now, anyway. His intensity softens and he pulls me into his chest, arms wrapping around my body.

He smells like clean laundry and amber, and I couldn’t care less when he notices me taking a deep breath of him as I bury my nose in his chest.

My hands trail down his torso, making his abs tense and release in a way that has me thinking about how he’d feel beneath me, filling me, leaving no room between us. When I slide my hand underneath his sweater and feel his hot skin, I sigh, resting my forehead against his pec, his heart beating loud enough for me to hear.

His hands do some exploring of their own, slowly kneading their way from my hips to my waist, dragging the edge of my shirt up with his movements. When I press a soft kiss to the base of his neck, his grip on my waist tightens, and I push myself tighter against his warmth, wanting to forget about my breakdown and just feel safe for a while.

When I look up, his gaze is already on mine, want and need warring with hesitation. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his face closer to mine, then press my lips against his. I think he might pull away, but his hands stay glued to me, anchoring onto my ass and pulling me flush against his hardness, making me whimper into his mouth.

“I don’t want to think about it.” I kiss him again, harder this time, tracing the edge of his lower lip with my tongue before nipping it. His quiet growl vibrates through my chest as I grab the soft hair at his nape and kiss just underneath his jaw.

“Sunshine.” One of his hands leaves my ass and grabs the back of my head, angling my face to just where he wants it. When I rub the heel of my palm up and down his hard cock, he jerks into my hand, making me smile into our kiss. I can feel myself getting wet, my core clenching around the emptiness that demands to be filled.

“Let’s get out of here.” My request is quiet, but it seems to break whatever lust bubble we’re in because Cameron gently pushes me a few inches from him, his eyes raking over my face as he runs a hand through his messy hair.

“Yeah, alright. Let’s go say goodbye and we’ll hit it.”

I find Violet snuggled up with Liam on one of the outdoor couches she and I picked out a few weeks ago, and wish her happy birthday one more time before I start looking for Kloey. When I see her in the far corner of the yard talking to some hottie I don’t recognize, I leave her to it and head towards Cameron.

He’s doing that weird bro hug thing with some guy I don’t know very well from class, when Cora comes up beside him. I

don't hear what she says because I'm still too far away, but the smile and hug he gives her makes me see red.

I'd like to say it's the alcohol still running through my system that makes me slide up beside Cameron and wrap my arm around his waist, giving a sickly sweet smile to Cora while doing so, but that would be a lie. Between my mini break down and the make out session, my head is feeling fairly clear.

"Hi, Carol, right?" I feel Cameron go still under my arm, but he doesn't say anything.

"Cora." She smiles, not picking up on my jab. "But you wouldn't believe how many times I've got that when I grab a coffee." She laughs at her own joke, but I only give her a tight smile.

"Ready to go?" I look up at Cameron, who has an amused look on his face.

"Yep." He nods at Cora one more time and turns us around, choosing to walk through the side yard instead of through the house. When we're inside his Jeep, he gives me another weird look.

"What?" I can't keep the sass out of my tone, but I don't really want to, anyway. Cam's white smile flashes in the darkness of the cab as he pulls away from the curb, and I realize I didn't make sure he was okay to drive. "How much did you drink tonight? Are you fine to drive?"

Cam flicks his gaze to me and then brings his attention back to the road. "I only had one beer, I'm good."

"You only had one beer the whole night?" I angle my body so I'm facing him, his profile in stark relief against the moonlight shining into the car. "Since when are you mister responsible?"

"Since you and the girls downed two drinks before I even had half of mine, that's when." He looks at me with a grin and winks. "I know you're a lightweight, and one of us needed to be able to drive us home tonight, so I took one for the team."

Hmmm. Okay, I guess that's kinda sweet of him.

"Well, thanks." I look out the window when I continue. "And...thanks for earlier, in the kitchen." He's silent for a beat, then lets out a deep breath.

"My sister, Melody, used to have panic attacks. It's not my place to say what caused them, but it was bad. Mom made sure all of us knew what to do for Mel, so I guess my instincts just kicked in."

I nod, but don't say anything for the rest of the ride. I feel weird, confused about what I want right now.

When we were kissing in the kitchen, I was caught up in the moment, not thinking about the consequences sleeping with Cameron could lead to. Now that my buzz is gone, I can still admit to myself that I want him more than I should.

Maybe it's one of those things where we just need to get it out of our systems, then this attraction between us can fizzle out.

Or maybe Lars is still watching me, or having someone else watch me while he's still in prison, and they'll see Cameron walking into my apartment and put a target on his back.

Dammit, why is everything so screwed up?

When we pull into my driveway, I look around the area, making sure I don't see any cars I don't recognize. Everything seems fine, but Cameron doesn't miss my worried look.

"What is it?" He looks around, trying to see what could have upset me.

"Nothing, let's just get inside. I'm cold." It's not a lie, I *am* cold, but that's not why I walk a little faster than needed to the door, unlocking it and then relocking it behind Cameron. When I turn to go to my room, I'm spun around and pushed against the door, Cameron's face only inches from mine.

"I know there's more you're not telling me, Lucy. And I want you to know, no matter what it is, I'm here for you. I'm

not leaving you.” His eyes aren’t dark with arousal like earlier, but the sincerity swirling in his golden stare is just as potent.

I almost break, right there in my living room. Almost tell him all of the reasons we can’t be together.

But I don’t.

Instead, I just give him a sad smile and change the subject.

“The sheets on Violet’s bed are clean if you want to sleep in there. No sense in you sleeping on that little couch.”

Little sparks of frustration light up his gaze, his nostrils flaring a bit as he grinds his teeth together, but he just nods at me. I’m still stuck between him and the door, so I just stand there, staring at his face, memorizing the strong line of his nose, the lush curve of his lips, the angle of his cheekbones. Eventually the tightness in his jaw relaxes, and he’s running his eyes over my own features.

We stay like that, soaking up one another, for a long time. Long enough that I start breathing a little faster, the scent of pine and amber swirling around the small space between our bodies. When I lift up to my tip toes and press a kiss against his cheek, he doesn’t stop me.

When I slip underneath his arm and say goodnight, he doesn’t stop me, either.



“Mom!” I rush out of my room, noticing Micah is just a few steps behind me. When we get to the living room, I almost fall to my knees at what I see.

“Get back to your fucking rooms! Now!” Lars is looking at me like he wants to kill me, but I can’t make myself care right now. Not when Mom is on her hands and knees, blood dripping from her mouth into the cream carpet.

“Don’t touch her!” I fly across the room and squeeze myself between him and my mom, pushing against his chest.

“Lucy, go—”

Slap. Lars' backhand has my head snapping to the left, blood coating my tongue and lips where my teeth must have cut through the tender flesh.

"Dad, stop! Don't hurt her!" Micah tries to help Mom up, but Lars pushes him on his ass, sneering down at his son.

"Get out of my sight, you little shit." Micah stares at his dad from his place on the ground, tears forming in his eyes. I force myself to stop looking at him and help Mom stand up, my breath catching when she winces and bends in half, holding her stomach.

"We need to go to the hospital, Mom. Come on, I'll drive you." I don't have my license, but I don't care about that right now.

"You'll do no such thing, you little bitch." Lars grabs a chunk of my hair and shoves me as hard as he can towards the coffee table. My bare feet slip on a puddle of blood on the carpet and I don't catch myself before smacking the side of my head on the corner of the table.

I think I might have passed out for a few seconds, because Micah is gone and all I see is Lars kicking my mom, who's trying to protect her stomach with her arms as tears, blood, and snot run down her swollen and bruised face.

"No! Get away from her!" I push myself up and only sway on my feet for a moment before lunging at Lars, managing to catch him off guard enough that he loses his balance, having to catch himself against the wall.

When sirens sound in the distance, Lars' eyes bulge, his attention darting between me and my Mom. The pure hatred in his eyes has the hair on the back of my neck rising, but I force myself to break eye contact with him and start helping Mom up. I manage to get her to her feet, slowly making our way to the front door as the sirens get louder and louder.

When I glance behind me, Lars isn't there. He must have left out the back door, but I couldn't care less at this point. All

I care about is getting Mom to the hospital. They need to check on her and my baby sister, make sure they'll both be okay.

We're both barefoot, and when I look behind us to make sure Lars really is gone, both sets of our footprints are bloody, the red standing out against the white snow like a stain I'll never be able to wash from my mind.

Mom falls to her knees, bringing me down with her, one arm around her belly and one around my shoulders as the ambulance pulls into our driveway.

"Oh god!" Mom bends over again and holds her stomach, her breaths coming faster as she cries harder and harder. "I'm so sorry. So, so sorry. My girls."

"Lucy! Wake up, baby. You're having a nightmare."

I wake up gasping for air, my throat raw from crying in my sleep. Cameron flicks on my lamp and holds my face in his hands, worried eyes bouncing between mine as I try to get my breathing under control.

"You're okay. I'm here. I've got you, Sunshine." He pulls me to his chest and smooths my hair down, kissing my forehead and murmuring soft words until my pulse slows to a normal beat.

"I'm sorry I woke you." My voice is hoarse from screaming, my eyes still wet and burning.

"Don't be sorry. I'm glad I was here." He pulls back and looks at me, wiping a stray tear from my overheated cheek. "How often does this happen?"

I bite my lip and look away, deciding whether I should be honest or not. When I look back at his golden eyes, so open and loving, I decide to go with honesty. "Used to happen every night, but now it only seems to happen when something triggers me. I think the panic attack earlier threw my body into survival mode and my mental barrier was weaker than usual." I force a dry laugh out of my throat, shaking my head. "I'm a real winner, huh?"

“Don’t. Don’t put yourself down.” Cam nudges me over and climbs under the covers with me, leaving the lamp on as he adjusts the blankets so that we’re both snuggled up, my head against his chest. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I don’t respond at first, choosing to watch his fingers trail up and down my arm instead, getting lost in the feeling of his warm skin against mine. I always wake up from my nightmares feeling frozen to the bone, but Cameron’s warmth is keeping me from my usual chattering teeth and body shudders.

“I dreamt about the night my mom miscarried my little sister.” My admission is barely above a whisper, but I know he heard me because the air in his lungs gets trapped for a second, his heart *thud thudding* against my ear loudly before he starts breathing again.

“I’m so sorry, Sunshine.” He kisses my hair and holds me a little tighter, his cheek resting against the top of my head.

“It was my fault. Mom and I were coming home late from a play. I didn’t know how long it would take, so we got home later than Mom had told my step dad we’d be home.”

“None of that is your fault, baby.”

I nod, but the guilt I carry is a demanding thing, like a sharp stone in your shoe, relentlessly reminding you of its presence with each step. “He was pissed that we were late. Sent me to my room and by the time I heard my mom screaming, it was too late.”

“Baby.” The anguish in his voice has another round of my tears falling on his bare chest, but I don’t bother wiping them away.

“He pushed me out of the way when I tried to stop him from hurting her. If I wouldn’t have passed out, I might have been able to stop him before he...” I can’t keep talking, my throat too tight for words to find their way into the hushed air of my room.

“You are not responsible for that sick fucker’s actions, Lucy. And I’m sure your mom has told you the same thing.” He’s right, but that does nothing to assuage my guilty conscience.

When I don’t respond, Cameron doesn’t push me. Just flicks off the lamp and continues to hold me until my breathing is back to normal, body slowly lulled to sleep by his chest moving up and down with inhales and exhales.

“Thank you.” I snuggle even deeper into his warmth, my limbs going lax as sleep pulls me under her spell.

“I’ll always be here, Sunshine. Always.”

Chapter 11

Cameron

“You ain’t makin’ that. No way, no how.”

“Ye of little faith, grasshopper.” I smile at Willie and take my shot, the basketball swishing through the net like a hot knife through butter. I grin at the wide eyed eleven-year-old and cross my arms. “You were saying?”

“Lucky shot, do it again.” He runs over to where the ball rolled against the chain link fence and throws it back to me, giving me a look that says there’s no way I’ll make the basket again. We’re playing HORSE at the park where we usually hang out when the weather’s nice enough, and it looks like I’m about to win.

Baseball has always been my calling, what makes my blood sing and all that cheesy shit. But basketball was always a close second.

And my three pointers never miss. The sound of net brushing against the ball is music to my ears, but Willie doesn’t share the sentiment, if his grumpy face is anything to go by.

I started volunteering at our local Big Brothers and Big Sisters organization last year. Willie’s been my Little ever since I finished the mentor training, and I’ve found that taking him out of his head, tossing a ball around or going for a hike, is the best way to get him to open up about how he’s doing.

His mom passed away a month before we were matched together, and his dad was beside himself when Willie started acting out at school, starting fights and refusing to listen to his teachers. Ryan, his dad, thought bringing him to BBBS would help, but it took me at least four meetups before he would even talk to me.

Thankfully that uneasy trial period is over, and I can confidently say I'm someone Willie trusts enough to talk to. It's one of the things I'm most proud of, even more so than all of the baseball trophies my mom still has displayed in my room.

"How'd you do on that math test the other day?" I take a swig from my water bottle as I toss the other one to Willie. His light blonde hair sticks out from under the Mets cap I got him for his birthday, reminding me I need to schedule a haircut for our next hangout. I'm probably due for one, too.

"It was fine." He doesn't look at me, though, just keeps his blue eyes locked on the ground, scuffing his sneaker against the asphalt.

"Define fine for me, Willie boy."

He rolls his eyes, but I catch a grin stretching across his face before he turns away from me.

"I got an 88%."

"What! That's awesome man, congrats." I sling an arm around his neck and give him a good noogie. "Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

He yanks out of my hold and rights his hat before smirking at me. "Didn't want you to feel awkward in the presence of greatness."

"Ha! Alright then, I see how it is." I laugh, shaking my head as I check my phone. We don't have much time before our hour is up, so I ask him what I really want to know. "How's the therapy going?"

Willie lets out a breath and dribbles the ball a few times before answering me. “It’s alright. The lady doesn’t push me if I don’t wanna talk about my mom, but I know that’s why I’m there, so I’m doing my best to answer the weird ass questions she throws at me.”

I ignore his minor profanity and nod, clapping him on the shoulder. “That’s good to hear. Trust me, my mom’s a therapist, so I know all about those deep questions.”

“Your mom’s a shrink?” He picks at an invisible piece of lint on his shorts, not meeting my eyes. I don’t bring up my mom very often since Willie lost his mother so recently, but I want him to know he’s not alone in feeling uncomfortable during his therapy sessions.

“Yep, and she was always asking me how I felt about everything. Still does, actually.”

“And you told her?” His question is laced with disbelief, but also hope. Hope that it’s okay for him to talk about his feelings when everything in our society is telling him that he should be fine by now, that boys should be tough and never show too many emotions.

“Sometimes it was weird, but yeah, I always checked in with her about how I was doing. It just became a normal thing, like brushing your teeth or checking the air in your tires before you go on a bike ride.” I swing open the gate to the outdoor court we’re in and start walking towards the center, knowing Willie needs to be moving before he starts to clam up.

“I just don’t see how bringing up my mom will change anything. It’s not like it’ll bring her back.” His voice cracks at the end, and I wrap my arm around his shoulders as we keep walking.

“That’s true, but you can’t keep stuff bottled up in here.” I tap right over his heart. “If you’re feeling sad or mad or anything else, you gotta talk it out or else it’ll fester into something ugly.”

“I guess that makes sense.” His eyes meet mine for a second and he smiles, but he’s a preteen if I’ve ever known one, so the sentimental moment doesn’t last any longer than it takes him to wiggle out from under my arm. “Enough about me. Let’s talk about you and your lady troubles.”

“What makes you think I’m having lady troubles?” I shoot him a glare and press the crosswalk button at the intersection we’re standing at. “The ladies love me.”

“You had a pissed off look on your face when you showed up this morning. I’m a genius, remember, so I put two and two together.”

I laugh at his joke, then make sure we’re not about to get run over before we cross the road. He’s not far off, given I wanted to rip someone apart after seeing how heartbroken Lucy was when I woke her from her nightmare.

Fuck, if that Lars prick wasn’t already in prison, I don’t know if I’d be able to stop myself from hunting him down and making him regret the day he came into Lucy’s life. What he did to her mom is so monstrous I can hardly wrap my head around it.

I’m usually a happy guy, but if you fuck with my girl, or anyone she loves, all bets are off.

Willie doesn’t need to deal with my drama, though, so I paste on a smile and throw my arm around his shoulder. “Thanks for the concern, but all is good in the hood. No need to worry about that.”

“Uh huh. Keep telling yourself that.” He laughs and spends the rest of our time together talking about the new video game he got the other day, saying he wants to beat me at it next time we hang out.

I’m waving to Ryan and Willie as they pull out of the center’s parking lot when my phone rings, my niece’s face taking up the entire screen when I accept the Facetime request.

“Hey, Goose! What’s my favorite niece up to today?”

“Uncle Cameron! I made a sand castle at the beach today. Daddy said it was the bestest castle ever!” She manages to hold the phone far enough away from her face that I can see her princess room in the background, the customized “Giselle” sign I had made when she was born still hanging above her bed.

When Jared, my oldest brother, told my family he was going to be a dad, I had no doubt he’d be awesome at it, even if it wasn’t exactly planned. I went to the baby store closest to our house and bought the first stuffed animal I saw, which happened to be a goose. From there, the nickname stuck, and she’s been Goose ever since.

“I bet it was awesome! What are you doing now?” I hop into my Jeep and snap my phone into its dashboard holder, then start making my way to Lucy’s apartment.

“I’m making cookies. I’m gonna feed ‘em to Molly when they’re done.” She drops the phone and it takes her a while to pick it up and flip it around so I can see her face again. “Molly, say hi to Uncle Cameron!”

I wince at her high pitched squeal while she shoves the phone into the face of their golden retriever. Molly deserves an award for putting up with Goose’s energy level. Maybe I’ll bring her an extra bone next time I see her.

“Giselle, it’s time for dinner. Let me talk to Uncle Cameron while you go wash your hands.” Jared appears on the screen behind Goose and kisses her head before sending her to the bathroom to wash up.

“How’s it going, man?” Jared’s tired eyes meet mine, his dark blonde hair disheveled. Giselle’s mom isn’t in the picture, so he’s been doing the single dad thing for years now. Luckily, he owns his own company, so he had flexibility when Giselle was younger and wasn’t at school for most of the day.

“Can’t complain. Winter term is almost over, so I’m looking forward to the break and not having to worry about classes for a couple weeks.” I pull up outside Lucy’s

apartment, parking against the curb since her car and Tyler's 4Runner are already taking up the driveway.

I didn't want Sunshine to be alone when I was with Willie, so Ty came over to keep her company, much to her frustrated dismay. She was still grumbling about me being overprotective when I left, but if she thinks I'm leaving her alone before we figure out who broke into her place, she's crazy.

"You still trying to figure out what you want to do after graduation?"

"Yep. Right now my tentative plan is to work for Liam this summer, just to have some money coming in, then I'll pull my head outta my ass and figure out my life." I let out a self-deprecating laugh, knowing time will move quicker than I want it to, and before I know it, I'll need to decide how I'll use my business degree.

It'd be a hell of a lot easier if I wouldn't have fucked up my knee. I'd be playing for the MLB, doing what I love, making enough money to never have to worry about my future.

"Well, you know the offer still stands for you to come work with me. It'd look good on a resume." Some of the ornery streak we got from our dad shines in his eyes when he smirks at me. "And I promise I'll only have you get me coffee once a day."

"Wow, how big of you. Thank you so much for that amazing offer, bro." I laugh, but it fades away quickly. "But for real, thank you for the offer. I don't know anything about welding, but it's good to know I've got options."

We chat for a while longer, me sitting in my Jeep and my brother wrangling my crazy, wonderful niece into eating dinner at the table instead of inside her princess tent, which Jared has set up in the middle of their living room.

They live in Florida, too damn far if you ask me, but that's where J's job took him out of college, and it's where Giselle's maternal grandma is. Despite her daughter being a horrible

mother to Goose, Wendy is actually a pretty awesome lady, and I know she helps Jared out a lot with Giselle.

I'm just hanging up, walking into the apartment, when I hear Ty make a noise I've never heard him make. It's a mix between a grunt, squeal, and yell.

"I swear to fucking god, Lucy, if you stab my balls with that needle, I will never help you with anything again." My curiosity is more than piqued as I quickly toe off my shoes and toss my windbreaker on the hook.

"Oh relax. Didn't you get your dick pierced, like, forever ago?"

"How the fuck do you know about that?"

"Have you met Cameron? Once you tell him something, it might as well be blasted across a billboard."

I reach Violet's old room, which is now serving as a makeshift craft room, just in time to see Lucy on her knees in front of Tyler, who is, I shit you not, standing in front of her in nothing but a pair of what looks to be swimming trunks.

"What the hell is happening and why don't I have my camera right now?"

Lucy lets out a startled yelp a millisecond before Tyler yells, pulling away from Lucy and holding his junk.

"Fuck! You pricked me!" Ty's accusatory look is aimed at Lucy, but he quickly turns to me and gives me a glare that would probably kill lesser men. "What the fuck, dude? You couldn't have made your presence known when she *didn't* have a needle next to my dick?"

"Nope!" I grin at him and look around the room, noticing a few other pairs of shorts and a flowery shirt thing flung over the back of the desk chair. "What are you guys doing, anyway?"

I'm trying not to overthink why Ty would agree to whatever this is, but my mind is spinning a bit. Probably

doesn't help that I know Ty's in even better shape than I am, his tattooed torso on full display right now.

"Tyler's helping me with some adjustments on my summer clothing line I'm creating for my capstone." Lucy shoots Ty a guilty smile as she stands up. "At least, he was until I poked his balls with my needle." She stretches her arms above her head and my eyes zero in on the sliver of bare skin between the top of her yoga pants and bottom of her t-shirt. Her hair is up in a messy bun and she doesn't have a lick of make up on her face, her freckles and pink lips on full display.

"Why aren't you wearing a shirt?" My question comes out a little rougher than I want it to, but Ty just shoots an *I told you so* look at Lucy, not answering me.

"I needed to see the whole picture. Make sure the waistband of the trunks didn't seem too thick or thin, and make sure the length of the shorts complimented the length of his torso, not just his legs." Lucy's gaze is still roving over Tyler, but there's no heat in her stare, just a calculated gleam shooting through her blue eyes.

Because I'm a little shit, I can't help smirking at Ty while I very clearly look at his crotch. "Seems like there's too much room in the groin area, Sunshine. You might need to take it in a bit."

Tyler's gray eyes narrow as he glares at me and crosses his arms, but Lucy's stare turns contemplative, not picking up on my joke whatsoever.

"You think so? I think it looks okay...but I'll admit I haven't made very many swimming trunks before, so maybe you're right..." She grabs a pin out of the cushion thing she has around her wrist and starts to kneel in front of Tyler again, but he grabs her shoulders and spins her around so she's facing me.

"Cam's full of shit, Lucy. Both of you, get the hell out of here so I can change."

“Are you sure they feel okay? You wouldn’t be able to tell that they’re not from the store?” Her worried tone softens Ty’s glare, but not enough for him to allow her around his junk with that sharp ass pin.

“They’re great. Never had a nicer pair of trunks in my life.”

Lucy tries to ask him more questions, but he shoots me a look and I decide to take mercy on him and guide her into the kitchen so Ty can get dressed.

“So, how many pieces do you have to make for your show?” I open the fridge and pop the top off a bottle of water, downing it all before she answers.

“I have to make six different looks. Most of my stuff is on campus, but the trunks were harder than I thought, so I brought them home to tinker with them.” She gives me an evil little smile and shrugs before grabbing a granola bar from the cabinet. “I may or may not have made the matching women’s bikini to fit Kloey’s measurements.”

I toss my bottle into the recycling bin and lean against the island. “Not sure he’s gonna be up for any match making, Sunshine. They’ve got some shit between them that might not go away very easily.”

“What do you know?” Lucy stands in front of me with her hands on her hips, eyes bright with the possibility of getting the inside scoop.

“Sorry, Charlie. My lips are sealed. Ty’s shit isn’t my business.” I bop her on the nose with my finger and wrap my arms around her waist. “And it’s not yours, either.”

She tries to pull out of my embrace, but I don’t break my hold on her. With a little huff, she gives up and rests her hands against my chest, looking up at me with a worried look on her face.

“I’m not trying to be a busy body, I swear. But I can tell they have feelings for each other, and I hate seeing them both unhappy whenever the other even looks at the opposite sex.”

“They gotta do their own thing, babe.” I put my finger over her lips when she tries to say something about my term of endearment, which only makes her eyes light up with challenge.

“I’m not going to butt in, I was just wondering if you had any knowledge that might help me understand what’s going on between them.” She gives me a little pout and it’s all I can do not to kiss her.

“How about we focus on us? I was thinking we could go out tonight, grab some burgers and catch the newest *Fast and Furious* at the theater.” I can feel her tensing up, but I don’t let her go. When she looks into my eyes, the sadness I see there has me holding her even tighter, her soft curves lining up with all my harder edges.

“Cameron...that sounds like a date, and we’re not going down that road.” She looks down, but I lift her face up with a finger under her chin, brushing my thumb over her lower lip. I don’t miss the flare of heat my soft touch unearths, but I don’t act on it.

“Why are you so against this, Sunshine? I’m into you, you’re into me.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” Her eyes narrow on me, and when she pulls away from me this time, I let her go, cold air filling the space where she just was.

“I want you to tell me the damn truth, Lucy.” I run a hand through my hair, about to lose my shit if she doesn’t just spit it out, but Tyler chooses that moment to walk into the kitchen.

“I’m heading out. I’ll catch you guys later.” Lucy thanks him for helping her out and gives him a quick hug, which he tries to avoid but she’s having none of it, and then he’s gone.

When Lucy tries to walk back to her room, I grab her arm and spin her around. “We’re not done talking.”

“Yes. We are.” She glares at me and tries to walk away again, but I just stand in her way, making her throw her hands

in the air in frustration. If I was so worked up, I'd think it's cute.

“Is it because you think I'm not serious? I know I've slept around, but it's different with—”

“It's not safe for you, okay? I care too much about you and I refuse to let him hurt anyone else.” The moment the words slip out of her mouth, her eyes go wide. She tries to say something, but I beat her to it.

“What the fuck do you mean it's not safe? Did someone threaten you? When did this happen?” My rapid fire questions hit her hard, each one making her flinch. I bite my tongue to keep myself from saying anything else, but she doesn't say anything.

“I shouldn't...I shouldn't have said anything. Forget it, I'm just tired. I'm going to take a nap.” I stop her from leaving, my hands on her shoulders keeping her in place.

“We can take a nap together later, Sunshine. We're talking about this, and we're talking about it right now.”

Chapter 12

Lucy

Shit.

Of course I couldn't just keep my mouth shut. And now I'm in a faceoff with Cameron in my little kitchen, wondering how I'm going to tell him the truth without freaking him out.

So I'm pretty much screwed. Cool.

I suck in a deep breath and hold it for a few seconds, then let it out through my nose. "Can you just trust me that I'm trying to do what's right?" It's a last ditch effort, one that he doesn't bother responding to. When I don't say anything else, he just crosses his ankles and leans back against the counter.

"Whenever you're ready. I can wait." He raises his brows at me, his stupidly handsome face a mask of patience.

"Fine. You want to know the truth? Here it is." I cross my arms and get on with it. "When I was little, my dad passed away. My mom didn't handle it very well, and we got kicked out of our house because she lost her job. When she finally managed to pull herself out of the deep depression she fell into, things were pretty good. Sure, we didn't have a ton of money, but we had love, and that's all that mattered to us."

Mom had landed a job at the local bank and I was just starting to get into fashion, making friends that had the same interests as me. We had to share a bed because all we could afford was a studio apartment above someone's garage, but it was ours.

“Skip forward to when I was fourteen, she met a guy named Lars. At first, he seemed awesome. He had a son, Micah, a couple of years younger than me, and we got along well enough. We moved in with them, because their house was a lot bigger than the one Mom and I were living in at the time, and we were a big, happy family.”

I can feel my chest tightening, the tears biting at the back of my eyes, but I force myself to keep going.

“It started out so small, just like most bad things do. An accidental shove here, a push there. Sketchy friends of his randomly showing up at the house, watching me a little too closely. I didn’t realize how bad it was until I saw my mom with a black eye. He hadn’t laid a hand on me, but the more I paid attention, the more I noticed the undercurrent of violence that followed my step father everywhere he went.”

God, I still remember the first time I saw him hit Micah. He got a B- on his math test, and Lars was furious. He said a son of a lawyer should be getting A’s on everything, then backhanded him so hard he fell out of his chair.

“It was the end of my eighth grade year when Mom got pregnant. I think she hoped it would change how Lars acted, stop the abuse for some reason. And it did. For a while, anyway.”

I close my eyes when I think about what comes next, but the warm hand against my face gives me the strength to keep going, as do the whiskey eyes looking at me with fierce protection shining in them.

“He...he hurt her so badly one night that she lost the baby.” The tears are running down my cheeks now, especially when I think about what caused that fight, but I don’t bring it up. “I tried to stop him, but I wasn’t strong enough. When the police officer came down to the hospital where Mom was being held overnight, I told them the truth. That Lars had been abusing my mom and Micah for months, and he was the reason my little sister never had the chance to live.”

“Baby.” Cameron pulls me into his arms and I let out a hiccup, shaking my head against his hard chest.

“He knew it was me. Mom tried to lie and say she fell, but I told the police the truth.”

“What happened to him afterwards?” Cameron’s question is quiet, but full of ice, sending a shudder down my spine.

“There was a long court battle. Since he was a defense attorney, he knew all the right people to pad his legal team with, but in the end, it wasn’t enough. Especially since he tested positive for multiple substances when they tested him after the arrest. He’s in prison now. Or at least, I think he is. I always thought abuse survivors were notified when their abusers were released, but my mom would have said something to me if Lars got out early. Which leaves me to wonder who broke into the apartment if Lars is still locked up.”

“I don’t like this, Lucy.”

“That’s not even the end of it.” I give him a wary look, but he just rubs his thumb across my cheek, giving me the space to talk when I’m ready.

“After everything that happened with Lars, Mom and I moved to another town in Oregon. By the time I was a senior, things were somewhat normal. Mom had a good job at the local bank, and we had just moved into a new house in a really cute neighborhood. I had a boyfriend, Jude, who I was head over heels in love with.”

Cam gives me a small smile, knowing that it obviously didn’t work out with my high school boyfriend, but he doesn’t say anything.

“The night I lost my virginity to Jude was the first time in years that I allowed myself to let go and believe that maybe life wouldn’t be so bad after all. I loved him, he loved me, and we were even planning on going to the same college.”

“But...”

I squeeze my eyes shut, blinking away a fresh round of tears.

“After Jude left, I went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. When I went back to my room, someone came up behind me and held a knife to my throat.” Cameron’s thumb instantly rubs against my scar, one I try to keep covered with foundation. “The guy accused me of having a perfect life, and basically said he’d be watching me so he could ruin any happiness I managed to find for myself.”

“Did you recognize his voice?”

“No, and I didn’t see him either. He knocked me out and was gone by the time my mom found me. When all the reports were made with the police, and they had everything they needed from us, Mom and I started packing. We moved to New York a week later. My Aunt Linda lives in Goshen, and she let us stay with her for a while until Mom found a job.”

“Does Violet know about this?” Cameron lets go of me and fills a glass of water under the sink, then hands it to me. “Take a few sips for me.”

I drink half the glass before answering him. “She knows about Lars, about my mom losing the baby, but I didn’t tell her about whoever was in my room that night.”

He shakes his head, nostrils flared with emotions I wish I could shield him from. “You’re delusional if you think I’m leaving your side until we figure this shit out.” He holds up his hand when I start to protest. “I get it, you’ve never committed to a guy because the last time you did, you were threatened. But I’m not going anywhere, Sunshine. You’re stuck with me.”

A lump lodges itself in my throat, so I just shake my head, another tear slipping out of the corner of my eye.

I refuse to put him in danger, even if I want him more than my next breath.

Cameron looks me over, from the unmatched ankle socks on my feet to my messy bun, a determined look in his eyes.

“Let me be there for you, Sunshine. Don’t run away from us, from what I know you feel everytime we’re in the same room as each other.”

“Did you not just hear what—”

“I heard you loud and clear. Some fucking psychopath is fucking with you, and you’ve lived your life accordingly.” He notches one hand at the back of my neck and the other on my waist, pulling me close enough that I can see the little flecks of gold in his eyes. “I’m not saying I’m gonna go all 007 on you and turn into some badass who finds the bad guy and takes care of him. I’m awesome, but I’m not Pierce Brosnan.”

I let out a snort, but I can feel the small smile trying to tug the side of my mouth up. Cameron sees it too, smiling at me with hope in his gaze while he presses us chest to chest.

“Don’t push me away, Sunshine.” I close my eyes and instantly feel Cam’s lips brushing against my forehead, my eyelids, my cheeks. “Let me be there for you.”

I let out a shaky breath and look up. The need to have someone else help carry the weight I’ve had hanging off me for years is so damn tempting, but I couldn’t handle it if something happened to Cameron.

“Stop. Don’t let your mind twist this up.” He bends his knees so we’re eye-to-eye, mine filled with apprehension while his are shot through with sincerity and another emotion I’m too scared to mention. “Just say, ‘Okay Cameron, I’ll choose to trust you and show you my tits.’”

A weak laugh escapes before I can think about it, some of the tension leaking from my body as Cameron rubs his thumb slowly against the side of my neck. I know I’m putting him in harm’s way, but I’m also fucking tired. Having someone in my corner, someone who knows everything, is too tempting to pass up.

“Okay Cameron. I’ll choose to trust you.” I press my hands against his hard chest, his heartbeat under my palm grounding me.

“And...” His eyes are bright, hands falling to my ass, pulling me tight against his body.

“And I need to get back to campus so I can sew up another shirt or two.”

The deep chuckle he lets out has my toes curling, but the sweet grin on his face has me smiling right back.

“I’ll take it, Sunshine. I’ll take it.” He slaps my ass and reluctantly pulls away. “Let me change out of these clothes and I’ll be ready in five.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to argue with him, tell him I don’t need an escort, but I stop myself and nod instead. As if he can see my internal battle, he smirks before heading into the hallway. “You’re learning, Sunshine.”

I roll my eyes and push down the feeling that I’m doing something wrong, grabbing everything I need to bring to campus instead.

The only thing we can do now is play the waiting game.

At least I’m not alone for this round.

Chapter 13

Lucy

“What’s taking you so long, woman? It’s four days, not four weeks!”

I look up and see Cameron leaning against my door frame, watching me pack what I hope is an acceptable amount of outfits to choose from for the long weekend he convinced me to take. Apparently, he got a hold of Hope and worked his magic, because I’m now a free woman for the next four days. Since we’re both on spring break, we don’t have to worry about missing any classes or studying for finals.

Cameron won’t tell me where we’re going or what we’re doing, hence the reason I’ve packed half the shit inside Lexi.

“If you’d just tell me what we’re doing, I could have been done an hour ago.” I blow a piece of hair out of my eyes and toss in another pair of warm socks, just in case it’s chilly.

“I told you we’d be inside, didn’t I?” He crosses his arms and stares at my two suitcases with a bit of shock on his face. Clearly he doesn’t completely understand my need to match my outfit perfectly to whatever activity we’re doing.

“That literally does not help at all! No context at all.” I grab a ponytail holder next to me and snap it his way. He snatches it before it can hit him in the face, but he’s grinning at me by the time I look up from zipping my bag shut.

“Sorry, Sunshine. Mum’s the word.”

“You’re so annoying.” He might even believe me if I didn’t have a stupid grin on my face when I say it.

“Can I take this to the Jeep now?” He’s already grabbing the suitcase closest to him, so I grab the one I just zipped and nod.

“Considering I have everything from formal wear to boho chic in these babies, I’d say I’m good to go. So yes, let’s bounce.”

“Let’s bounce?” Cameron quirks a brow. “Are you sixty-nine years old?”

“Odd choice of age, Conrad. Got something on your mind?” I smirk at him as I lock up, but he only widens his eyes, looking all innocent.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Can you please explain it to me?”

Ha! He asked for it.

“It’s when two people go down on each other at the same time. Pretty satisfying if you ask me, but to each their own.” I give him a little shrug and toss my bag in the back while Cameron does the same. When I go to shut my door, he’s in the way, slowly crowding me against my seat.

“You have a dirty little mouth, Sunshine. Anyone ever tell you that?” Pine and amber fill my nose and I make a show of running my nose up Cam’s neck until my lips are brushing against his ear.

“This mouth can do lots of things, Cameron.” I nip his lobe and lean back, running my gaze over his freshly shaven face before looking into his eyes. His pupils are twice their normal size, his jaw tight and nostrils flared. When his thumb presses against my bottom lip, I can’t help sucking it into my mouth and lightly scraping my teeth over the pad.

If the heat in his eyes is anything to go by, he’s as ready as I am to take our relationship to the next dirty level.

There have been plenty of long touches and cuddling the past couple of weeks, but nothing past that. He's even been sleeping in Violet's room, never pressuring me to do anything before I'm ready.

Considering I'm sucking his thumb like it's his dick, I think he knows what my intentions for this weekend are.

"You're making me want to throw you over my shoulder and say fuck it to our plans." He slowly pulls his thumb from my mouth, leaning in so his lips ghost up and down the column of my neck. "Would you like that, Sunshine? For me to bury myself inside you and not come up for air until you can't say anything other than my name?"

Oh fuck.

I think I need to change my panties.

But two can play that game, and I'm quite the player when need be. I run my fingers through his hair and pull his head back so I can whisper my words against his warm lips.

"But then you wouldn't get to see the surprise I packed. And that would be a real shame, trust me." I flick my tongue against his upper lip and then suck the bottom one into my mouth, biting with just enough pressure to make Cameron growl into my mouth, his hands moving under my shirt so his calloused fingers can glide over my ribs, eliciting goosebumps along my exposed skin.

"Fuck me, you're something else." He pulls away then, making a show of adjusting himself before he shuts my door. When he's back in the car, I lean my elbow on the console and rest my chin in my hand, batting my eyelashes.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going now?" Maybe his testosterone riddled brain will slip up and give me the information I've been asking since last night. His grin has my own falling off my face, a pout in its place.

"Not a chance."



Cameron

“You didn’t!”

“Oh, I definitely did.”

Lucy looks at the tickets I tossed on the table of our Airbnb ten seconds ago, pure happiness making her eyes look the bluest I’ve ever seen them. Pride has my chest puffing out, knowing this is something my girl would love the moment I heard about it from my mom.

I also knew Lucy would most certainly want to agonize over what to wear to the event, so I made sure we got to Manhattan with plenty of time for her to get ready.

“How...how did you get these? I thought the show was sold out weeks ago.” Her gaze shoots to mine, but I just smile. She doesn’t need to know how many strings I had to pull, how many people I had to play phone tag with to get these damn tickets. All that matters is the priceless excitement painting her face.

“I’m a man of many talents, babe. Don’t worry—” My response is cut off by Lucy throwing herself at me, peppering my face with kisses while I laugh, grabbing her waist and running my hands up her ribs. I quickly spin her around and wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her hair to the side with my other hand. Burying my nose in her neck, I kiss her soft skin, making my way to her shoulder, then slowly back to behind her ear.

“Are you trying to distract me?” Her breathless question has me grinning against her neck. “Because it’s working.”

I don’t say anything, just run my lips over the back of her neck, taking in a deep pull of her citrus scent. When she lets out a quiet moan, I can’t help rubbing my hard dick against her ass. I run my hands up her body, slowly taking her shirt with them until I have it tossed to the floor beside us. When I unclasp her bra, she doesn’t protest.

I grab her perfect tits in my hands and groan when I feel her pebbled nipples against my palms. I kiss and lick the side of

her neck again, then bite down gently while tweaking a nipple between my knuckles.

Before I know what's happening, Lucy spins around and attacks my lips with hers, heat and desperation swirling between our bodies.

"How much time do you need to get ready?" I bend down and grab her ass, prompting her to wrap her legs around my waist as I walk us into the little bedroom off the kitchen.

"At least an hour," she murmurs against my neck before sucking hard enough that she'll leave a mark.

Good. I want everyone to know I'm taken.

"As much as I'd love to keep this going, baby, we might be cutting it a little close for time." I slowly let her go, her body rubbing against mine as I set her down, keeping my hands on her waist even once she has her balance. Her eyes are still happy and light, but a furrow pops between her brows as she looks at me.

"How much did those tickets cost?"

A signed Ichiro baseball and a lot of groveling and promises to an old friend, but she doesn't need to know that.

"Don't worry about it, Sunshine." I kiss her one last time, knotting my fingers in her hair and tipping her head so I have the perfect angle to tangle my tongue with hers. I pull away slowly, kissing her swollen lips one more time before walking to the door.

The sight of her, half naked, panting, eyes dilated, has me wanting to once again toss our plans out the window, but I know she'll love this more than any fancy dinner I could have taken her to.

"Let me know when you're almost ready, and I'll call an Uber."

The soft smile stretching across her lips shoots straight to my heart. "Alright."

She's not ready to hear how I feel, how I've felt for a while now, so I just shut the door behind me and walk out to the living room, flopping down on the couch.

Forty-five minutes later, I've already changed into some slacks and a button down when Lucy walks into the room, sucking the breath right out of my lungs.

She's in an emerald green dress that clings to her soft curves, the floor length silky material almost touching the floor, with a slit that cuts up past midthigh. Her chest is completely covered, the material leaving her arms bare, but going up past her collarbones like a halter top. When she does a little spin for me, I see her back is bare, a little bow behind her neck the only thing holding her dress up.

"How do I look?" Other girls might feel self conscious when asking this, but not Lucy. She knows she looks good, but she wants me to say it out loud for her.

"You look fucking incredible, Sunshine." And that's an understatement. Her makeup isn't overdone, but I can tell she's wearing some kind of stuff on her eyelids that makes her blue eyes pop more than usual, her dark red lashes coated in black.

I walk up to her and gently tug on a piece of hair she left out of the complicated twisty thing she has going on at the back of her head. "I'll be honest. I'm shocked, yet not shocked at all, that you packed this dress not knowing what we were doing." I grin and step back, letting my eyes roam from her face, all the way to her pretty pink toes and up again. When she hangs her hands on her hips and rolls her eyes, I can't help but laugh.

"Of course I packed this. I had to keep my options open." She takes the three steps needed to stand in front of me and lightly smacks my chest with the back of her hand. "And it's a good thing, too! I can't go to a Layla Viskoski show in a t-shirt and jeans."

I fake a gasp and put my hand against my heart. “Oh my god, don’t even joke about that!”

We both laugh, because I’m fucking hilarious, and wait for the Uber to get here. I could have driven, but I wanted us to be able to have a few drinks if we want to. Plus, Manhattan traffic is a fucking joke on a good day.

When we’re dropped off in front of the Magnolia Hotel, even I can admit I’m a little taken aback by all the people in their fancy clothes walking up the grand staircase. Inside, a man in a tuxedo takes our tickets and points to the ballroom where the show is taking place in twenty minutes.

The huge foyer is speckled with waiters offering hors d’oeuvres, their crisp black uniforms blending into the dark color scheme of the room. Tall tables wrapped in burgundy tablecloths are spread across the room, people with glasses of champagne lingering at them before heading into the event.

“Pinch me.” I look down at Lucy to see a look of awe and excitement on her face. When I wrap my arm around her waist and start guiding us towards one of the bars on the edge of the room, she gives me a soft smile. “Thank you. No one has ever done something like this for me before.”

“I’d do just about anything to make you smile like this, Sunshine. Get used to it.” I kiss her on the cheek, then order us two glasses of champagne before we head into the ballroom. I can’t help but wince, just a tiny one, when I see other guests wearing things I wouldn’t be caught dead in.

I’m talking plastic transparent pants and hats bigger than a microwave. Seriously, how could that be comfortable?

Lucy’s laugh catches my attention, and when I glance at her, I know I’ve been caught.

“Don’t worry, Layla’s stuff is more on the traditional side of fashion, so you shouldn’t see too much nudity.” My eyes snap to hers, my apprehension making her giggle. “Oh man, you should see your face right now. Priceless.” She takes a sip of her drink and winks at me as we find our seats.



I'd like to say I can name every new style and sourced material from the fashion show we just watched, but that would be a lie. My eyes were glued to the girl sitting next to me, her excitement and glee almost tangible. And she doesn't even know the best part.

After a five minute standing ovation for this Viskoski lady, Lucy's pulling me away from our seats and towards the restrooms at the back of the room.

"I'll be just a second." She kisses my cheek, but I grab her hips and bring my mouth down on hers, softly biting her lip before pulling away slowly. Surprise and heat sizzle in her gaze, but I twist her around and tap her ass.

"I'll be waiting, Sunshine. Don't take too long." She says something under her breath, but I don't catch it. While I'm waiting, I check my phone to see if I've missed any calls or texts. When I check Instagram, I tap on Ty's profile and smile to myself when I see his latest post. The wicked tattoo of a woman's face, half normal, half skeleton, already has hundreds of likes.

Ever the supporter, I double tap before sliding my phone away. It's not long before Lucy is back at my side, asking me what I want to do for dinner.

"Actually, I already have something planned." Taking them out of my pocket, I pull out the other set of tickets I didn't show her earlier, a smug smile on my face.

"What the fuck? Cameron?" Her expression is a weird mixture of excitement, nerves, and worry. "How did you get these? Are you secretly a con man or something?" Her huge eyes stay glued to the after party tickets I scored for us.

These ones cost me a helluva lot more than an Ichiro ball, but it's so fucking worth it.

"I have my ways." Lucy grabs the tickets from my hand and we head upstairs, where the after party is being held. I

guess this hotel has multiple places to hold events, including one that...has a champagne fountain?

“You see that, right? I’m not dreaming right now?” Lucy doesn’t break eye contact with said fountain, just nudges me with her elbow. “Is that an ice sculpture behind it?”

My eyes flick to the hunk of ice that looks like a gigantic ball gown, then to the extravagant center pieces of white lilies and crystal vases set on each table around the room. A long banquet table lines the back wall, filled with a shit ton of food. The lighting is moodier in here, not as bright as the show was downstairs.

I let out a low whistle and smile at Lucy. “Looks like we’re playing royals tonight, baby. Let’s go get something to eat, then you can mingle.”

“Mingle! I can’t mingle with these people. I am but a peasant in the midst of greatness. One does not simply mingle with this crowd, babe.”

I smile at her slipped endearment, but continue guiding us to the food. I’m freaking starving, so I know Lucy has to be at least a little hungry, too.

Once we have our food, we claim one of the high top tables and people watch while Lucy gushes about the outfits she saw earlier on the runway. Seeing her in her element, the passion heating her cheeks to a rosy pink, freckles on display under her light makeup, makes me want to bend her over the table and claim her in every way imaginable.

I am not a caveman, however, so I do none of those things. Instead, I encourage her to walk around and eavesdrop on a few conversations and see if she can casually butt in. She eventually agrees, and before I know it, I’m watching my girl throw her head back and laugh at something another woman said to her, her hand resting on Lucy’s forearm as if they’ve known each other forever.

“She’s lovely.” I jerk at the feminine voice by my ear, swinging my eyes to the woman standing next to me. Her sly

smile does nothing to hide her sharp gaze as she continues looking at Lucy across the room. “Who’s she wearing, do you know?”

“Ahh, I honestly have no idea.” I look back at Lucy just in time to see a man step up behind her and put his hand on her back, whispering something in her ear. She smiles politely, but neither he nor I miss how she steps away from his touch. Her eyes stray to me, and she does a double take when she sees who’s standing next to me.

“Introduce us?” I look back at my companion and nod, both of us walking towards a starstruck Lucy.

“Hi, I’m Layla.” The designer raises her hand to shake Lucy’s, who’s looking a bit faint.

“Hi, hello. I’m Lucy. I love your work.” Layla and I both smile at Lucy’s introduction, and thankfully the woman next to me doesn’t seem stuck up in the slightest. In fact, she’s in jeans and a hoodie, not exactly what you’d think a fashion icon would wear to a show, but what do I know?

“I’d love to know who you’re wearing tonight, Lucy. I think I’m in love.” Layla sweeps her eyes over Lucy’s dress and smiles, taking a drink from the glass of water in her hand.

“Oh, um, it’s mine actually. I made it a few weeks ago.” The blush staining Sunshine’s cheeks is so fucking adorable. She’d probably punch me if I said that out loud, but what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

“It’s gorgeous. Have you made anything else?”

“Oh, yes. My college capstone is a small line of summer and spring wear. I have some pictures on my phone if you’d like to see?” Lucy’s hand moves to the clutch she said matches her dress perfectly, but she doesn’t grab her phone until Layla nods her head.

“I’d love that. Why don’t we take a seat?”

Lucy looks at me with wonder in her blue eyes, but I just wink and excuse myself, grabbing a beer from the bar before

leaning against the wall, ankles crossed, watching my girl chat with someone she's idolized forever.

A guy around my age comes up to me and follows my gaze, nodding as he takes a drink from the brown bottle in his hand.

“Lucky man.”

Yeah. I really am.

Chapter 14

Lucy

“Oh my god, that was amazing.” I throw my clutch on the side table by the front door of the adorable BnB Cameron rented for us and smile up at the man that made it all happen. “Thank you for tonight.”

“You’re welcome, Sunshine.” He locks the door behind him and steps out of his dress shoes before looking at me. “Are you tired?”

I should be. It’s past midnight, but I’m feeling wired. And turned on.

“I’m not tired.” I slowly make my way to Cameron, my heels clicking against the hardwood floor. “I *am* ready for bed, though.”

The anticipation filling his eyes matches my own, and before I know what’s happening, he’s got me over his shoulder, making his way to the bedroom in record time. My giggles are cut off when I’m lowered to my heels again, Cameron’s warm hands wrapping around my waist as I clasp my fingers together behind his neck.

“You ready for this, baby?” His words scrape across my skin, igniting little sparks up and down my spine as he presses his hardening length against my belly. When my eyes flutter closed and I feel the pins in my hair being pulled out, one by one, I let out a hum of delighted pleasure. He doesn’t rush me for my answer, and I let him finish freeing my hair before opening my eyes again.

The voice inside my head, the one that's followed me around since I was seventeen, whispers I shouldn't do this. That I should cut the sweet man in front of me out of my life so he doesn't have a chance to become collateral damage.

"Don't." Cameron's hands frame my face, waiting until we're staring at each other, sharing the same breath. "I'm not letting you go. I'm not letting you fight this battle on your own. And I'm not letting you sabotage the best night of your life."

"How do you know it's the best night of my life?" I can't keep the sass from my words, which only has Cam grinning down at me.

"Because, Sunshine, I know you. You've always wanted to go to a fashion show. You love Layla Viskoski and her newest line, and you've been wanting to see her work in person for years."

"How do you—"

"The lady even gave you her personal number to call her once you've graduated. If that's not freaking worthy of the best night ever, I don't know what is." A dirty smirk pulls his lips up to one side, his eyes heating into dark golden pools. "Sinking inside your sinful body and finally making you mine is just the cherry on top."

The strangled sound falling from my lips is a mix between a whimper and moan, his words wrapping me up until all I feel is a sense of safety I haven't felt in years. Cam can tell, the smile stretching across his face full of masculine triumph.

I keep my eyes on his as I start to unbutton his shirt, appreciating the lack of an undershirt. When I push the cotton fabric over his strong shoulders, my eyes latch onto a tattoo on his chest. It looks like baseball stitches were imprinted on his skin, a quote between them.

Every fall is a chance to rise. I kiss right over the words, his pecs flexing under my lips. "When did you get this done?"

"Once I knew Tyler wouldn't fuck it up."

We both let out a quiet laugh, but mine turns into a moan when Cameron's lips brush against the sensitive skin just below my jaw. When his tongue traces the shell of my ear the same time his thumbs graze my nipples, my knees threaten to give out.

“Turn around, Sunshine.”

I do, my hair swept over one shoulder before I've found my footing again. Cameron's hot breath fans over the back of my neck as he presses soft kisses along my hairline, nipping my lobe before making his way to the tip of my spine. When he pulls the string holding up my dress, any doubts about giving myself to him crumple to the ground along with the satin around my feet.

“Fuck me, baby. You were wearing these the whole night?” His hands squeeze my ass, the lace panties I wore just for him a bright red against his grasp.

I smile and spin around, gently kicking my dress aside. Cameron's gaze goes from my heels to my face, but instead of touching me, he takes a step back, slowly pulling his belt off, then popping the top button of his slacks open.

When he slides off his pants and briefs, his heavy cock bounces under its own weight, making the pressure building between my thighs almost unbearable. The V of his Adonis belt makes my cheeks heat with desire, the muscles of his stomach just as sculpted.

I can't wait to rest my hands against his strong thighs and worship him with my mouth. His cock is long and thick, with veins running up and down the shaft. The head is a dark pink, and I lick my lips when I see a clear bead of liquid there. When his long fingers wrap around his length and pump once, twice, three times, I think I might faint.

“If you keep looking at me like that, this won't last nearly as long as we both want it to, Sunshine.” He stalks forward without taking his eyes off me, then kneels on the floor so that his lips line up perfectly with my lace covered pussy. “I guess

you picked the right heels.” The wink he sends me is pure lust, and I can’t seem to muster up a response, because he’s pressing soft kisses to my belly, working his way down.

I’m making sounds that should be embarrassing when his strong hands glide up the back of my thighs, anchoring onto my ass and kneading until a soft gasp falls from my lips. I didn’t realize my eyes had closed until they’re flying open at the feel of Cameron’s hot tongue tracing my hip bones, one of his hands coaxing my legs to widen. His tongue laps at the lace covering my core, the heat from his mouth shooting waves of pleasure through my body. When he sucks my clit through the material, my hips buck into his face, shamelessly seeking more friction.

He laughs quietly, taking his time to slide my last remaining piece of clothing down my legs, his strong hand holding my hip as I step out of the soaked material. Warm fingers trail up my calf, gently tracing the sensitive skin behind my knee, before coaxing my leg onto his shoulder, leaving me completely open to his gaze.

“Hold onto me, baby.” I can feel his demand against my lower belly, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin with each word. His thumbs glide down from my hip bones until they’re holding me open, rubbing tight little circles on either side of my core.

His first lick is soft, starting from my entrance all the way to my throbbing clit, which he sucks into his mouth and flicks gently before it pops out of his mouth. I let out a moan when he sucks my lips into his mouth, suddenly glad I decided to visit my waxing lady last week.

“More.” My request is breathless, but Cameron hears me. His hot tongue spears into me the same time he circles my clit, and I can’t help grinding my hips into his face, allowing the pleasure to bathe me in a wave of bliss.

“God, you’re so fucking perfect.” His growl vibrates against my clit and I tangle one of my hands in his hair, keeping him right where I want him. When he pushes a finger

inside me, sucking my clit into his mouth again, my heart stops for a second. “Are you always this wet for me, Sunshine?”

Oh god. I can’t handle this. He’s too much and not enough all at once.

Instead of waiting for a reply, Cameron adds another finger and keeps toying with my clit, alternating between deep pulls and tight circles. When he scrapes his teeth across the swollen bundle of nerves, I lose my balance. But he’s there, both hands on my ass, picking me up and laying me out on the bed before I can blink, my legs over his shoulder as he looks at me from between my legs.

The sight of his strong shoulders stretching my legs wide, his plush lips wet with my arousal, makes my core clench, missing his tongue. The look he gives me as he runs his finger around my opening, teasing me with bursts of hot breath against my clit, drives me insane.

“Cameron.” I don’t know what to say, I just know I don’t want him to stop touching me.

“I got you, Sunshine. Let me hear those moans again, baby.” And then he’s eating me like he’s starving, like he’ll die if I don’t come in the next twenty seconds. His tongue plunges into me while he pinches my clit between his knuckles and I see white. My muscles tighten, the pressure building, ready to snap at any moment. When Cameron’s hot gaze finds mine, his face buried between my legs, I tip over the edge, squeezing his head between my thighs.

Wave after wave of pleasure radiates from my clit to my legs and arms, my inner muscles clenching around his tongue, his thumb still rubbing lazy circles around my clit. The hand holding my hips in place moves down, and suddenly I’m being spread open again, Cameron’s tongue lapping up my release as he groans against my oversensitive clit.

As the last spasm leaves me, I’m distantly aware of my heels being taken care of, and then I’m blanketed with

warmth. I open my eyes to see Cameron looking down at me, pride shining in his gaze.

“Do I need to go wash my face, or—”

I don't let him finish his sentence before I'm pulling his mouth to mine, moaning at the taste of me on his tongue. My hands smooth over his shoulders, back, and then ass, pulling his hips into mine. His cock rubs against my sensitive clit the same time my nipple is covered in the wet heat of his mouth, and I can't help the moans slipping from my lips.

“Feels so good.”

I hold his head against my chest, whimpering when he bites down on the bud, then laves away the pain.

My hand moves between our bodies and finds his cock, hot and hard against my stomach. When I pump my fist from base to tip, the growl I'm rewarded with has me smiling. I use my free hand to grab Cam's face and pull his body up mine so we're face to face. I stroke his length again and this time both of us moan, our lips brushing, noses rubbing together.

“I need you.” My whispered admission floats in the air between us, igniting a look of pure lust from the man above me. I slowly slide his cock against my pussy, coating him in my slickness. When I notch his head at my entrance, I bite my lip at how good it feels.

Cameron's eyes zero in on me, his brow furrowing. “Should I use a condom?”

His question makes me smile, because as much as he hopes I'll say no, I have no doubt he'd use one if I told him to.

“I'm on the shot, and I'm clean...” I let my silent question hang, waiting for his confirmation.

“Me too. I've never gone without a condom before.” His eyes bounce between mine, the tension on his forehead easing. “I can't stand the thought of anything between me and your hot pussy right now.”

“Such a gentleman.” I smile, but it’s quickly replaced with a whimper when Cameron pushes one thick inch inside me, his wide head stretching me open, the sweet mixture of pleasure and pain making me scrape my nails along his shoulder blades.

Mistaking my sound for pain, he stops, running his thumb over my cheek.

“How long has it been?” There’s no judgment in his eyes, but the possessive relief is clear when I answer him.

“A few months.” He rewards me with another inch, only to pull back again so only the tip is wrapped in my heat. When I squeeze my muscles, trying to suck him deeper, Cameron groans against my lips.

“Do you need slow and sweet, or fast and hard?” His arms are shaking, but I know it’s not from holding his weight. He’s holding back, waiting for me to tell him what I want.

When I look into his eyes, I feel something click inside me, like the lock I put on my heart years ago has finally popped open. I’m surprised when tears fill my eyes, but Cameron seems to understand something perhaps even I don’t at the moment, and simply wipes them away with a gentle smile on his lips.

“Everything.” I roll my hips and take another inch of him. “I want everything you have. Fast, sweet, hard, slow. All of it.” I follow my words with a deep kiss, my tongue pushing past his lips and flicking the roof of his mouth, flipping a switch that has him grabbing my ass and positioning my hips slightly in the air.

“You have all of me, Sunshine. But I’ll be happy to remind you.” And then he’s pushing his cock deep inside me, until his head hits the end of me. “Feel that, baby? Do you feel how much I want you?”

He follows his question with another deep thrust, pushing the air from my lungs, leaving me breathless, helpless against the pleasure he’s giving me.

“This is right, Lucy. This is exactly where we’re supposed to be.” He pulls back and looks at me, lust and love battling for dominance in his gaze. “I’m done letting you fight this.”

I don’t say anything, just nod as he slows his pace even more, the head of his cock sliding against a spot inside me only he’s been able to find. We both look down at the same time, watching his cock slide in and out of me on a lazy stroke, slicked with my arousal. The groan Cameron lets loose against my neck is enough to make me tip my hips even higher, urging him to go faster.

“We’re gonna go fast and hard, because I think that’s what we both need right now.” He snaps his hips against mine, rubbing his pubic bone against my clit before pulling almost all the way out and slamming back inside me until we’re notched together again. “And after your sweet pussy milks my cock for all it’s worth, I’ll give it to you nice and slow.”

The delicious friction from his thrusts are making it hard for me to respond, but I force myself to look at him, my hands landing on either of his stubble lined cheeks.

“How about you stop talking and start doing, Conrad.” I grab the headboard and press my chest into his face, moving my hips to take him even deeper than before.

“Fuck. Yes.” Before I can take another breath, my nipple is between his teeth, the sharp bite making me yelp, then groan when his knuckles pinch the other one.

With every thrust, I feel myself getting closer to the edge, my tummy tightening when one of Cam’s hands finds its way between our sweaty slicked bodies.

Slippery with my wetness, his thumb circles over my clit the same time he hits that special spot deep inside me. His teeth scrape over the column of my throat, then bite the juncture between my neck and shoulder as he slips a finger inside me, stretching me more than I’ve ever experienced.

When he curls his finger in a come hither motion, all I see are stars as his cock continues its ruthless pace.

“Feel good?” I see the dark smile on his face as he looks down at his hand, licking his lips before snapping his attention back to me.

“Yes,” I murmur, grabbing his head and bringing it back to me so I can kiss him. “Don’t stop.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” His lips crash against mine, my heart squeezing extra hard when he bites my lip and keeps it between his white teeth, slowly pulling away until it pops out of his grasp.

“I’m close.” His finger is stoking a fire deep in my belly, while his cock stays relentless, never stopping.

“Give it to me, baby. Let me see you.” The pressure in my core is coiling, tighter and tighter until Cameron slaps my clit, and then I’m falling over the edge, chanting his name over and over as each spasm shoots pleasure through my limbs, leaving me weightless in his arms.

“Sunshine.” The quiet praise has my eyes flicking to Cameron’s, his rhythm becoming uneven as he loses himself to the pleasure. He rests his forehead against mine as hot bursts of his release fill me, bringing on another deeper orgasm from me.

A deep groan falls from his lips when he feels my muscles gripping him again, his orgasm lasting longer than I thought was possible.

Our pants are the only sound in the room as we each come down from the high, hands roving, kisses pressed to sweaty skin, soft moans pushed past swollen lips.

When our gazes connect, I feel my heart split at the emotion written all over Cameron’s face. His fingers push my sweaty hair out of my face, and then he’s kissing me again.

The kiss is slow, purposeful. No lust or impatience to be found.

“Cameron.” His name on my lips feels like a prayer, all of the happiness and safety he’s brought into my life covering me

in a sense of security and rightness that I've never felt before.

His eyes soften even more before he kisses the tip of my nose, the same powerful emotions reflected in his eyes.

“I know, Sunshine. I know.”

Chapter 15

Cameron

“Let’s call it early today, guys. Have a great Easter.” Professor Roostings gives us a smile and powers off the projector with a click of his remote.

I slide out of the front row seat I claimed three weeks ago for my Health 425 class and swing my backpack over my shoulder. I love this class, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t happy to get out early.

When I walk into the hallway, the beautiful redhead sitting in a fluffy chair looks up at me with a smile on her lips, and I couldn’t stop my answering grin even if I wanted to.

“That was fast.” Lucy starts closing her *History of 1800s Fashion* textbook before I make my way to her. By the time I’m standing in front of her, she has her laptop slipped inside her bag and stands up, ready to head to lunch.

“Roostings let us out early.” I slip my knuckle under her chin and tilt her face up so I can kiss her, relishing that my girlfriend isn’t shying away from me. In fact, she’s the one who wraps her arms around my waist and nips my bottom lip, effectively making me wish we were at home and not in the middle of the business building.

I smack her ass and sling my arm around her shoulder, leading us towards the cafeteria. “Be good, woman.”

“That’s not what you were saying last night.” Lucy gives me a smirk as she pulls her phone out of her pocket, laughs,

then puts it away.

“What’s so funny?”

“Violet wants to do the Newlyweds competition Jackson’s is holding this weekend. I guess the winners get a gift card to some fancy restaurant.” Her blue eyes look up at me, squinting against the spring sunshine that’s hopefully here to stay. “Do you wanna go?”

“Unless you got me drunk and flew me to Vegas, I’m not remembering our wedding. Which means we aren’t newlyweds.” Although the idea of calling Lucy my wife someday feels damn good.

“They’re just making a play off the tv show. Any couple can sign up.” She elbows me in the side and scoffs. “And I would never get married in Vegas. I’m classier than that, thank you very much.”

“Are you sure about that, Sunshine? Because I watched you eat peanut butter out of the jar while watching The Bachelor last night.”

“That has absolutely nothing to do with my level of class.” She sticks her nose up in the air and I can’t help the laugh that rolls off my tongue. When I see her lips twitch, I know she’s seconds away from giving me that beautiful laugh I love so much.

“Uh huh. What about the bracket you and Vi filled out for the show?”

“People do that for March Madness, why can’t we do it for The Bachelor?” She swings open the door to the cafeteria and looks at me over her shoulder. “Just admit it, I’m a classy bitch.”

“Not sure if calling yourself a classy bitch makes you classy, but okay. I’ll go along with it.” I grin down at her and steal a kiss before we get in line behind a group of guys.

She gives me a devilish grin before grabbing a plate. “That’s right, you will. Or else you’re not getting any for a

week.”

“Lucy McGuire, are you trying to tell me you could go a week without all this?” I swipe my tongue out to wet my lips, then roll my teeth over my bottom lip before dragging my shirt up to scratch at my abs. Her retort sticks to her tongue as she watches my hand with apt attention, her eyes full of heat. I’m about to say fuck it to lunch and find an empty classroom to take care of my girl, but some guy ahead of us in line is staring at Lucy. She doesn’t notice at first, but must see the flicker of annoyance on my face when I look over at the guy clearing checking out my girlfriend.

“Lucy?” The guy steps closer, maybe six or seven feet from us, but that’s close enough to make me clear my throat, grabbing the dude’s attention for a split second before his eyes are back on Lucy, who looks like she’s seeing a ghost.

“Jude?” Her eyes are wide, sweeping up and down the length of the guy as she slowly shakes her head.

Why does his name sound so familiar?

“Fuck.” Jude’s quiet curse has me snapping my eyes back to him right as he wraps his arms around Lucy, his hand on the back of her head, eyes closed while he clearly takes a deep breath of her into his lungs.

Who the fuck is this tool?

Lucy pulls out of his embrace, but his hands are still on her waist as his eyes bounce around her face, taking her in.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were going to school in Michigan.” Lucy’s question makes me frown, not liking how she seems to know this dude’s whereabouts when I have no clue who he is.

“I transferred here at the beginning of the year.” Jude’s answer is quiet, his attention still roving up and down Lucy’s body like he knows it intimately.

And holy. Shit.

I know where I’ve heard that name before.

He's the only who Lucy told me about weeks ago, the guy who took her virginity.

The one she loved so much that she trusted him with her body and heart. The one who she wanted to protect so badly that her and her mom moved across the country.

Fuck.

I've missed what they've been saying during my little epiphany, but no one could miss the bright smile Lucy's aiming at her ex, nor the look of happiness on Jude's admittedly good looking face.

I need to do something other than stand here and look like an idiot.

Shaking my head, I wrap my arm around Lucy's shoulders and stick my hand out. "Hey man, I'm Cameron. Lucy's boyfriend."

Jude swings his attention to me, to my arm around Lucy, then back to my face before taking my hand in a firm shake.

To his credit, he doesn't try to squeeze it like other dudes would, but the smile he was sporting five seconds ago is long gone.

"Jude. Nice to meet you." His gray gaze snaps to Lucy again, silent questions swirling in his eyes. To my relief, Lucy looks up at me with a smile and wraps her arm around my waist before looking back at Jude.

"I had no idea you were here. My mom never mentioned it."

"Weird. I swear Tanya and Mom gab at least once a week." His smile is genuine, and I hate to admit that the guy seems like good people. I guess that should make sense, knowing Lucy wouldn't let herself be vulnerable with just anyone.

"Do you want to sit with us?" Lucy looks up at me, probably a bit surprised by my invitation. But I just grin down at her, burying my jealousy deep enough she won't see it.

This Jude guy might seem great, but it doesn't mean I'm not a bit on edge knowing he's been inside my woman.

"I'd love to, but I was just grabbing something real quick before my study session." His attention once again lands on Lucy, a smile stretching across his face. "I'll call you. We need to catch up."

Lucy doesn't miss my hand tightening against her hip, but she doesn't acknowledge it. She just nods her head, telling Jude her number, suggesting they should grab coffee sometime soon.

We're through the food line and sitting at a table towards the back of the huge eating area before I speak up.

"So. That was interesting." I take a huge bite out of my sub sandwich, probably more aggressively than necessary, running my eyes over Lucy's face.

"Yeah, I had no idea he was here. It's weird seeing him. I... I didn't end things between us very well." Her worried eyes meet mine and I swallow, waiting for her to keep talking. When she doesn't, I bite the fucking bullet and ask the question that could cut me apart.

"Do you still love him?" My eyes don't stray from her face, not wanting to miss any microexpressions that may contradict her words.

"Yes. But I'm not *in* love with him anymore." She lets out a breath and looks at me, her blue eyes shining. "Seeing him unearths a lot of memories I'd rather forget, you know? I honestly never thought I'd see him again."

"Yet you said you wanted to grab coffee with him. So which one is it, does he bring up painful memories, or do you want to be best friends?" The bite in my tone doesn't go unnoticed, but instead of her usual sassiness, she gives me a soft smile, tangling our fingers together on the table.

"You have nothing to worry about. Trust me."

“That dude looks like he could have walked off of a magazine cover. How am I supposed to trust he doesn’t want in your pants?”

“You’re supposed to trust me. That I won’t go down that road.” Her gaze is sharp, bouncing between my eyes. “You asked for my trust, and I gave it to you. Now it’s your turn.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just glare into space.

Because I’m fucking mature like that.

“Cameron.” The lilt in her voice has me looking at her, the glare sliding off my face when I see her smile. “All you have to do is say ‘Okay Lucy, I’ll choose to trust you and show you my dick.’”

Shit.

I fucking love this girl.



“If your partner could have dinner with anyone, alive or dead, who would it be? You have one minute.”

Easy peasy.

I jot down my answer and look at Liam and Tyler, both of them looking confident in their answers, although Ty looks like he would rather be anywhere but here. The other contestants are writing their answers down, but not all of them look as confident as I’m feeling.

“Alright, time’s up.” The chick hosting the event walks over to the bar where Lucy, Violet, and Kloey are waiting, along with the rest of the contestants. When the girls come back and sit next to us, Lucy smacks a kiss on my cheek.

“You better not fuck this up, Conrad. I just bet Vi ten bucks that we’ll beat them.”

“Ha! I know my woman, McGuire.” Liam shoots her a playful grin and drags Violet on his lap. “You guys aren’t winning.”

“Okay, let’s start with you guys on the end.” The host goes through the first three couples, two of which don’t match their answers. Then it’s Liam and Violet’s turn.

“Okay, Beautiful. Let’s show ‘em how it’s done.” They flip their signs at the same time, both having written Daisy on the white paper. I don’t know who that is, but the soft look in their eyes when they look at each other has me looking away, giving them a moment.

We’re next, and no surprise here, I know my woman. We both have Audrey Hepburn written down, our high five making my ears pop before I pull her in for a kiss. “We got this, babe.”

“Damn straight.”

Kloey and Tyler are next, and I swear to god I can feel the tension between them from here. I have no idea how the girls convinced Tyler to come tonight, let alone partner up with Kloey.

Sensing my question, Lucy leans in to whisper in my ear. “I told him if he didn’t come, I would invite the guy Kloey’s been casually hooking up with.”

Tyler and Kloey flip their signs, Jo Boaler on both of their papers. No clue who that is, but the surprised look Kloey shoots Tyler says enough.

It’s the last round when the three of us guys are leaning against the bar, having already answered the next question on our papers before grabbing our last beers for the night.

When I catch Liam smiling at Violet, I elbow him in the gut, making him spill some of his drink on his shirt. If it wasn’t an old white t-shirt, I might even feel bad.

“How’s wedding planning going?” I sneak a peek at Lucy and grin when I see her laughing at something Kloey said.

“Violet’s pretty much handling everything so far. We don’t want anything huge, just something small by the creek on the back of our property.”

“Sounds dreamy.” I sigh, batting my lashes at him.

“Oh, fuck off. Not like you’re far off from the same outcome.” He jerks his head towards Lucy, who catches his eye and mouths, *You’re going down, Storm.*

“She’s not ready.” I take another drink of my beer and set the bottle down, staring at the wet condensation on the label.

Ty cocks his head, looking at me with a raised brow. “Are you?”

There’s no joking or teasing in his question, and I’m glad for that. I know I clown around plenty, but my feelings for Lucy are anything but funny.

They’re all consuming. She’s ruined me for anyone but her.

“Yeah, man. I think I am.” I force a laugh and run my fingers through my hair. “I love her. But I haven’t said it yet. Don’t wanna freak her out.”

“Don’t wait to say it. If you feel it, you should tell her.” Liam pats my shoulder and starts heading for the girls, leaving Ty and I behind.

“He’s right.” I look at Tyler, but his gaze is focused on Kloey, who’s laughing at something the waiter just said to her, his eyes falling to her chest before walking away with an empty drink tray.

“Am I supposed to take advice from someone who is clearly fucking pining over a woman, but isn’t doing a damn thing about it?” My question is a bit harsh, but true nonetheless. When Ty rips his attention from Kloey and looks at me, there’s a pain in his eyes that I haven’t seen in a long time.

“Yeah, Cameron. You are.” He grabs his drink and heads over to his seat beside Kloey, not looking at her once.

Well, fuck. Apparently we’re diving into the deep end of the pool tonight, ladies and gents.

By the end of the night, Lucy and I come in third, Liam and Vi second, and much to everyone's surprise, Ty and Kloey win.

Neither of them seem particularly pleased with those results, but quick enough, Lucy and Violet drag Kloey onto the dance floor and they're laughing in no time. Tyler, on the other hand, left the second he could.

Not wanting to touch that topic again, I work my way onto the dance floor and wrap my arms around Lucy, her hands instantly grabbing onto mine when I rub them up her ribcage, burying my nose in her hair. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Liam take Violet in his arms, no doubt enjoying her cast finally being gone.

"Last Last" by Burna Boy comes on, bringing a smile to my face. Lucy was just saying she loved this song.

When I spin her around, she has such a carefree smile on her face, flushed from the drinks and hot grind of bodies around us, that I lose my breath for a solid three seconds.

This woman is mine. And I want everyone to know.

I guide her hands to my shoulders as mine grab her waist, moving our bodies to the beat. I bend so my nose rubs against hers, our lips a whisper away from touching. Even in the dim light, her blue eyes are sparkling, her happiness shining through and hitting me right in the heart.

I love you.

I don't say it, but I'm sure anyone who looked at me right now would see it in my eyes, in my soul that's so tangled with hers I don't know where I end and she begins.

It's been weeks since our little getaway to Manhattan, and things have been great. But I know my Sunshine. If she feels too much, she'll get scared and pull away from me. She's an amazing advice giver, but she doesn't always practice what she preaches.

But I can be patient.

I *will* be patient.

Because she's worth the wait.

Chapter 16

Lucy

“Uncle Cameron!” A blonde tornado hits Cameron’s legs before we’re inside his parent’s craftsman style home.

“Goose!” He grabs the little girl under her arms and spins her around, making her laugh and scream, before setting her down again. “Have you taste tested the pumpkin pie yet? Is it safe to eat?”

Her sneaky grin makes me laugh, which catches her attention, her big green eyes looking up at me. I crouch down so we’re the same height and smile at her messy pigtails and mismatching outfit.

“Hi Giselle, I’m Lucy.” She looks at me, button nose scrunched up while she assesses me.

“Are you Uncle Cameron’s girlfriend?”

I look at Cameron, but he’s busy rolling our suitcase into the foyer.

And yes, I said suitcase.

As in, singular.

As in, we’re freaking sharing a suitcase like an old married couple.

I secretly love it, but I gave him a hard time about needing at least three quarters of the space. All he packed were a couple pairs of briefs, some socks, and two shirts.

I guess he's planning on wearing the same jeans the whole time? I don't try to understand his male logic.

"Yes, I'm his girlfriend. Is that okay with you?" I wait for her approval like it's a grade on a final exam, knowing this girl means the world to the man that means the world to me.

"If you can put up with him, you're good in my book."

"Hey!" Cameron whips his head towards us as I laugh harder than I intend, letting out a snort right as his, I'm assuming, brother Jared walks into the living room where we've migrated to. We smile at one another, but Cameron slugs his brother's arm before I can introduce myself.

"What are you brainwashing my niece with, bro? I'm the best thing to ever happen to this family."

"Oh, please." The remark comes from a beautiful brunette who walks into the room, looking younger than us, maybe by a year or two. "I can't believe your nose didn't grow three inches just now." Cameron grabs her in a headlock and gives her a noogie.

"Sunshine, meet my wonderful sister, Melody."

"And his even wonderfuller sister, Savannah." This time it's a blonde girl walking into the room, who quickly pinches Cameron's side before giving me her hand. "Sorry you had to meet them first. We try to keep them locked in the basement, but it doesn't always work."

"Hey!" Jared and Melody yell at the same time, making me chuckle.

When Giselle rolls her eyes and says, "See what I'm working with here, Lucy?" I lose my shit, laughing so hard a tear rolls down my cheek.

"Now, now, what's all this ruckus going on in my house?"

I wipe my eyes and smile at the beautiful woman walking into the room, her cream sweater and black cigarette jeans making her seem both cozy and classy, something I admire instantly.

Cameron moves to my side and wraps his arm around me, his strong fingers flexing against my shoulder. “Mom, this is Lucy. Lucy, this is my mom, Tina Conrad.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Conrad.” I stick out my hand, and she shakes it, resting her other hand on mine, sincerity and kindness shining in her brown eyes.

“The pleasure is mine. But please, call me Tina.” With a final pat, she lets me go and smiles at Cameron. “Anyone who can deal with his shit is always welcome in my home.”

“Grandma, that’s a dollar for the swear jar.” Giselle runs out of the room, presumably grabbing said swear jar while the rest of us laugh at her obvious eagerness.

“She’s saving up for a new bike helmet.” Jared’s explanation has Cameron laughing again.

“She’ll have more than enough by the end of the day, I’m sure of it.” He slides his hand off my shoulder and grabs our bag from the foyer, jerking his chin towards the stairs. “I’m gonna give Lucy the tour. How long until the food’s ready?”

“Another half hour. Take your time.” Tina smiles at us, but Cameron’s siblings all smirk, their resemblance striking as they each cross their arms and raise a brow.

“Yeah, take your time.” Savannah laughs, spinning around to catch Giselle as she runs into the room with her jar. “Come on, G. We’re going to give the couple some alone time.”

“Why?”

Melody follows her sister towards what I assume is the kitchen as she answers her niece. “Because we’re the best sisters in the world, that’s why.”

I don’t hear anything else because we’re up the stairs now, Cameron leading me to the left of the landing area. After we walk down a relatively long hallway, he opens the last door on the right, waving me inside with an exaggerated bow. “Ladies first.”

I snort at his antics while I take in his room, the trophies and medals snagging my attention. When I look at them, I realize my boyfriend wasn't joking about being a baseball star.

"You won all of these?" There must be fifty awards crammed on the shelf, some spilling over on the small desk in the corner. The sound of springs squeaking has me turning my head, and I find Cameron on his back, hands laced behind his head, a cocky smirk on his handsome face.

"Of course I did, Sunshine. You think I was lying when I told you I was hot shit?"

I roll my eyes and walk over to him, quickly taking stock of the rest of the room. The walls are a light gray, complementing the dark blue comforter on the bed. The nightstand is a simple one drawer piece, but the lamp catches my attention. The base appears to be made of a huge mason jar, and inside it are a ton of random knick-knacks.

Cameron follows my gaze and smiles, sitting up so his legs are spread wide, his feet on the ground. "Mom kept everything she found in my pockets when she was doing laundry. Did it for all of us, actually. You should see Sav's, it's basically all rocks."

"That's such a fun idea." I push myself between his legs, loving the way his hands find their place on my hips. "But I thought your parents and Savannah just moved here a while ago. Why does it look like this could be your childhood bedroom?"

"Mom wanted it to feel like home. When we helped them move, she made sure to keep our rooms as close to how they were when we were growing up as she could." His words are soft, his eyes roaming my body until they land on my face. "I like you being here."

I run my fingers through his hair and smile. "I like being here. Your family is awesome, and I haven't even met your other brothers or dad yet."

“Beau and Tanner should be here any minute. Dad had to check on something at the field real quick, but he wouldn’t dare be late and risk upsetting my mom.”

“What does your dad do?” I’m super curious, and Cameron’s never actually told me. When his eyes light up, I know it must be something he admires.

“He’s one of the offensive coaches for the New York Mets.”

I feel my eyes bug out of my head while I squeeze Cameron’s shoulders. “Are you for real? How have you not mentioned this before?”

His laugh is quiet as he pulls me closer to him, my knees hitting the edge of the bed. “Just needed to make sure you weren’t with me because of my famous dad, that’s all.”

I scoff and try to push away from him, a grin pulling up the side of my mouth. “Oh please. You were probably just waiting for the moment you could catch me off guard.” I try to pull away from him again, but he grabs my hips and situates me so I’m straddling him, looking down at his sparkling eyes.

“You got me.” He bucks his hips into me and winks. “I guess you gotta punish me now.”

I rock my hips over his hardening length and let out a quiet moan when I hit my clit just right. I don’t realize I’m biting my lip until Cameron pulls it out from between my teeth, his stare locked on my mouth.

“Who needs Easter dinner when I have a perfectly good snack in my lap?”

We both laugh, then groan when he gently rocks against me again, the friction both too much and not enough. I lean forward and bury my nose in the warmth of his neck, sucking in a deep hit of his pine and amber smell.

“As much as I like where this is headed, I’m not meeting the other half of your family with sex hair.” I smack a kiss on his lips before getting up, smirking at his obvious erection as I

cross my arms. “Take your time, Conrad. No one wants to see that.”

His laugh has me shaking my head as I shut the door behind me, and I slowly make my way downstairs, where I can hear quiet conversation and clinking dishes.

The kitchen smells amazing, but it’s the two handsome men finishing setting the table that catch my attention first.

“Can I help with anything?” My question has both guys snapping their heads in my direction, but even with all my online stalking before the trip, I still can’t tell them apart.

“You see her, right? I’m not hallucinating?” The one on the right says, jerking his chin at his brother. “Birthday wishes really do come true, man. I asked for an angel and here she is.”

“Oh fuck off, Beau.” The brother on the left walks over to me and shakes my hand. “I’m Tanner. Sorry about him, Mom dropped him on his head when he was a baby.”

“True story,” Melody confirms from somewhere behind me.

“I’m Lucy. Nice to meet you both.” I don’t know what else to say, so I swing my gaze around the kitchen to see if there’s anything else for me to help with.

“Dad’s back!” I think that was Savannah’s voice, but I can’t be sure. I see Giselle run from the living room to the front door faster than I’d think a four year old could move.

“Papa!”

“There’s my little pumpkin!” The sound of giggles and shrieks get louder as Cameron’s dad walks into view, an upside down Giselle in his arms. When he sees me, he shifts his granddaughter so he can shake my hand. “Chris Conrad. You must be Lucy.”

“According to your son over there, I’m an angel. But yes, I also go by Lucy.” Chris looks like an older version of Cameron, but his hair is lighter, closer to dark blonde than brown. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s an inch or two shorter than Cam, but still huge compared to me.

“Which one of you assholes are already hitting on my woman, huh?” Cameron walks into the room looking as hot as ever, his dark blue shirt stretching across his chest in all the right places, making his biceps strain against the soft fabric. His jeans are just tight enough that I can appreciate his ass, and his chestnut hair looks like it needs a trim, but the way it flops over his forehead is nearly indecent.

No erection in sight, thank goodness.

When he circles behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, I lean back and enjoy the ease we’ve so quickly fallen into.

“That would be Beau. As per usual.” Jared gives Cam an eye roll as he grabs his daughter from Chris, telling her to go wash up for dinner.

“Hey, you can’t blame me for appreciating a beautiful woman.” Beau winks at me and sets a basket of rolls on the table. He’s probably an inch taller than Cameron, which makes the guy huge. He’s more muscular than Cameron and Jared’s leaner builds, but he’s not bulky. Tanner is nearly identical to him, which makes sense since they’re twins.

“Get your own girl, bro. This one’s taken.” Cameron kisses the top of my head and pats my ass. “Can we eat yet? I’m fucking starving.”

“And so classy.” Melody winks at me and takes my hand. “You can sit next to me. Everyone knows I’m the coolest sibling.”

“Says who? I didn’t vote on this, did you Tanner?” Beau’s question has me laughing, but Tanner just solemnly shakes his head at his twin.

“I had no say in this. It’s blasphemy, if you ask me.”

“I second that.” Savannah plops down on the other side of me, a smile on her lips.

“Third,” Cameron says.

“Fourth.” That comes from Jared.

“Sorry kiddo, looks like you’re voted out.” Chris ruffles Melody’s hair before sitting at the head of the table, a grin on his face that he clearly passed onto his children.

Melody grabs a piece of ham off the serving plate in front of her as everyone else finds their seats, Cameron sitting across from me. “You’re all just jealous I have the best bone structure.”

Suddenly everyone is talking at once, some refuting the claim, some wanting to compare profiles. The Conrads don’t stop talking once during the meal.

And it’s fucking amazing.

I was so close to having my own sibling, but I never had the chance to experience how much a table full of people you love can make you feel like you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be. Sure, I had Micah for a while, but he was a boy and younger than me, so we didn’t have a ton in common. Nothing like Cameron and his siblings.

Through all of their jests, even a blind person could see how much they all love each other. When I thanked Melody and Savannah for educating their brother in the way of book boyfriends and Backstreet Boys music, I wasn’t sure if Beau would ever stop laughing.

Cameron catches my eye while I’m musing and gives me a soft smile, seemingly knowing where my head’s at.

I smile back, finally able to acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be, too.



“I’ve never seen him like this.”

I look at Chris, who’s sitting next to me on the outdoor couch that overlooks the backyard. We’re watching the others play a friendly game of football, with Tina playing QB for both teams. I think Cameron, Tanner, Giselle, and Melody are winning, but Beau, Sav, and Jared are totally holding their own.

They tried to get me to play, but I was much too full from all the food I ate. Plus, as much as I enjoy watching sports, I'm not really interested in partaking.

"What do you mean?" I set my water bottle on the glass coffee table in front of us and look at my boyfriend's dad, his kind blue eyes watching his family, a soft smile on his face.

"In love."

I don't say anything, just let my gaze linger on Cameron as he playfully picks up his niece and runs her into the end zone, the football securely pressed against her chest as she yells, "Touchdown, baby!"

"He's a good man, Lucy. I know it seems like he doesn't take life seriously sometimes, but he has the biggest heart I've ever seen. And I have no doubt whatsoever he'll be a wonderful husband and father someday."

Shit, I thought it was Tina I'd have to watch out for, but I should have known her husband would be just as perceptive and sentimental.

"I think so, too." He must hear my silent *but*, because he looks at me and tilts his head to the side, waiting for me to continue. "I don't...I don't have a perfect past."

"Who does?"

I look away, watching Tanner catch a perfect spiral from his mom and make a touchdown, flipping off his twin in the process. Cameron looks over at me, a huge smile on his face, and my heart pinches at the happiness I see there. When he mouths, *You okay?* I give him a smile and nod.

"I tried to put up a fight. I really did. But he's persistent."

"Ha! He gets that from his mother." Chris chuckles and claps when Melody jumps on Jared's back and brings him to the ground, trash talking with the best of them. When I see Giselle run to the side of the yard and pick up her swear jar, I let out a chuckle of my own.

"Your family is beautiful."

“It is.” He bumps my shoulder with his before jerking his chin towards Cameron, who’s got Giselle on his shoulders now, their victory dance making everyone laugh. “There’s room for you, Lucy. My boy has plenty of love to give, but so does his crazy family.” He pats my arm and walks to Tina, giving her a kiss that makes everyone but me shout boos and groans their way.

Cameron says something to Jared that I can’t hear, but I can tell it was ornery by the way his oldest brother gives him a noogie. After he makes his escape, he runs over to me and throws himself on the couch, his breaths still slightly labored after running around for so long.

“You and my dad best friends now, Sunshine?” He grins and plants a fast kiss on my lips. “Don’t go jeopardizing my spot as the favorite kid, alright? I have a reputation to uphold.”

I don’t say anything, just stare at his happy smile and carefree attitude, my heart growing until I worry it might burst right out of my chest.

Every single attempt at pushing him away seems stupid now. But I guess they don’t say hindsight is 20/20 for nothing.

“What’s that look for?” Cameron’s eyes catch mine and don’t let go as I straddle his lap, audience be damned.

“Just having an epiphany, no big deal.”

“Hmmm,” he murmurs against my lips. “I like the sound of that, baby. We should celebrate. Naked.” He winks and presses a soft kiss to the corner of my mouth before standing up with me in his arms.

“Gross.”

“Get a room already!”

I bury my face in Cameron’s neck as we both laugh, but he doesn’t stop. Not when we make it to his room. Not when he strips me down to nothing. Not when he makes me come on his tongue. Twice.

He doesn't stop until it's utterly and abundantly clear to both of us that my entire fucking soul belongs to him.

Chapter 17

Cameron

“I never thought I’d see you so pussy-whipped, and yet, here we are.” Tyler looks up in the sky and makes a show of looking to his left and right. “I don’t even see any pigs up there.”

“Oh, fuck off. You’re just mad you don’t have a girl to go home to.” I raise a brow while he holds the door to our house open since my hands are full with Sunshine’s birthday present.

And damn, it’s a heavy bastard.

“I used to have you. That was close enough to domesticity for me.”

“Just admit it, you miss me. It’s okay to let your emotions show every once in a while.” I set the gift down and flop on the couch, grinning at my best friend. “You do have those, right? Emotions?”

I’m teasing, but I can’t help riling him up a bit. Now that I’m living with Lucy, I don’t get to see him as often as when I lived here, so I gotta take what I can get.

“You’re such a chick. Do you and Lucy braid each other’s hair at night? Talk about all the cute boys you saw that day?” He’s trying to change the subject, and because I love the guy, I’ll bite.

“My mouth’s too busy with other things to be gabbing about boys.” I wink and put my hands behind my head, enjoying the look of my best friend feeling uncomfortable.

“Keep your night time activities to yourself, dick.” He walks into the kitchen and comes back with two beers, handing one to me before he sits down on the chair perpendicular to the couch.

“How’s work?” We haven’t shot the shit lately, so I have no idea what’s been going on at the tattoo shop.

“Fine. My SBA loan got approved, so I’m looking into some of the vacant properties around town this weekend, see if I like anything enough to set up shop.” His tone is quiet, and he’s not making eye contact. If I didn’t know him better, I’d think he didn’t give a shit about what he just said.

Because I *do* know him, I know he’s excited, but scared he’ll fail.

“Holy shit, man. Congrats.” I tip my bottle towards him and take a swig.

“Thanks. A couple of the artists at Golden said they’d follow me, so that takes off some of the pressure to find employees immediately.” He runs his hand through his black hair and stares off into space. “It’s a huge risk. I can’t fuck this up.” The doubt in his eyes when he looks at me makes me want to give him a hug, but I don’t particularly feel like getting decked right now, so I stay put.

“Everyone loves your work, Ty. You have followers out the ass, and you’ve been the most requested artist at Golden for years now.” I take another chug from my bottle and set it on the coffee table. “You deserve this. Don’t let your inner Eeyore ruin your chance at success.”

His gray eyes land on me, a furrow between his dark brows. “Are you just blowing smoke up my ass, or do you really think I have a chance at this?”

The fact that he’s asking me this, being vulnerable enough to ask my opinion, makes me both happy and sad. Happy because he trusts my opinion, but sad because his parents have managed to put so much doubt in his head over the years that he can’t see the forest for the trees when it comes to his talent.

“No smoke here. You’re good at what you do. People will gladly pay to have your work on their bodies.”

He shakes his head, clearly ready to push the conversation to another topic. “You still planning on working with Liam after graduation?”

I nod, but don’t say anything else. I’m proud of my friends for making a name for themselves, especially with how relatively young we are, but I can’t help feeling a bit jealous.

How am I supposed to provide for my future family if I don’t figure out what the hell I’m going to do with my life?

“Have you ever thought about somehow combining your business skills with your athletic background?”

“Sure, but that’s about as far as my brain goes. I’ve thought about coaching, but it’d be too easy for people to think my dad had a hand in whatever success I’d gain.”

“Who cares what other people think? If you wanna coach, then you coach. Don’t make it harder than it needs to be.”

I let out a frustrated breath and drain the rest of my beer. “Coaching is just something I’d wanna do for fun. I want to make a bigger impact on my community, I just don’t know how yet.” I glance at Ty and see he’s looking at me with his serious eyes.

So, his normal everyday expression.

“You’ll figure it out, man. Try not to stress over it too much.”

“Says the dude stressing the fuck out over opening his own tattoo shop.”

He cracks a rare grin and points his beer at me. “Touché.”

We hang out for another hour, brainstorming for Liam’s bachelor’s party. It’s mostly him shooting down all of my amazing ideas, but it still has me in a good mood when I leave to pick up Lucy from work.

When I'm outside Hope's, I shoot a quick text to Violet, making sure we're all set for Liam and Lucy's surprise birthday party, then head inside.

The first thing I hear is my girl's laugh. It's the sweetest sound I've ever heard, but that doesn't stop the unease in my gut when I see who's standing next to my girlfriend.

"It was crazy, I can't even begin to explain to you how taken aback I was." Jude is leaning against the counter, his attention squarely on Lucy. It's clear as fucking day to me that he's still into her.

Honestly, I can't blame him. Much.

She's amazing. But she's mine.

I make sure the bell above the door dings extra loud when I shut it behind me, causing both of them to swing their heads in my direction. The soft smile on Lucy's face has some of the pressure in my chest dissipating, but the slightly uneasy expression coming from Jude has me back on edge.

"Hey, babe. You 'bout ready to close up?" I walk around the shabby chic island the POS sits on, completely ignoring Jude, and wrap my arms around Lucy, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

And because I'm not a total prick, I jerk my chin at Jude, asking him what's up.

"I was just telling Lucy about one of our classmates who's made it big in the music world. Trying to convince her to go to a show when his tour comes through in a few weeks."

My hackles rise, the need to mark my territory an unwanted feeling in my chest. I'm a chill dude, not possessive like Liam. Not broody like Tyler.

Right?

Wrong. This dude took something from my Sunshine that was special, and it's something that will always keep them connected. Sure, I have her now, and never plan to lose her,

but this guy needs to get the memo that she's off the market for good.

"Thanks for the tip, man. My girl loves dancing, so we'll be there." I look down at Lucy, but she pulls away and starts closing the till, leaving me to carry on a conversation I'd rather not endure.

"How long have you guys been together?" Jude's tone is neutral enough, but the way he's looking between Lucy and I like we're some science experiment has me clenching my teeth before answering.

"Do you mean since I knew Sunshine wanted in my pants, or since she actually got in said pants?"

I barely have any time to appreciate the dark look Jude shoots me before Lucy gasps and shoves my arm. "Go wait for me in the back. Now." Her eyes are on fire, her irises a deep blue. If I didn't know better, I'd say she's even blushing a bit.

What the hell? Is she embarrassed to be with me? Does she still have feelings for this guy?

"I think I'll wait out here, thanks." I flick my eyes back at Jude and wave my hand at him. "Lucy needs to close up, we'll see you later."

"I wasn't done talking with her, actually. I think I'll stay a while longer." The look he gives me has my left hand aching to knock some sense into him, but I won't bring more violence into Lucy's life. She's had a fuck ton more than her fair share.

"Cameron, go wait for me in the back." Her quiet demand has me swinging my head towards her, the air between us thick with tension. I've never seen her look this pissed, especially not at me.

I glare at Jude and I make my way to the breakroom in the back. "If you're not gone in thirty seconds, she won't be able to stop me from helping you out."

Jude crosses his arms, looking at me with an expression I can't pin down. "Noted."

I wait in the back for at least ten minutes before Lucy comes to me. If I wasn't so pissed, I'd appreciate how good she looks all worked up, her cheeks pink, chest moving up and down a bit faster than normal.

“What the actual fuck, Cameron? I think I need to shower after you peed all over me out there.”

“Oh please, that was nothing. He was hitting on you right in front of me. What was I supposed to do? Stand there and watch while some guy invites my woman on a date?” I throw my hands in the air and lean against the table, my eyes trailing up and down Lucy's body, loving her soft curves even in the middle of a fight.

“He was not hitting on me. We were talking about an old friend, not making plans to go screw behind the building.”

A vision of them together slams into my head before I can stop it, him pushing her against the wall and claiming her mouth. Her little moans of pleasure that belong to me. His lips against her neck and exposed shoulder.

“You don't get it.” I stand up and crowd her against the wall, just like Jude did in my horrible vision. Lucy's eyes snap to mine, anger and confusion mixing in her gaze.

“Get what?”

“He's been inside you.” I close my eyes, pressing my forehead against hers, not wanting her to see how much that admission kills me. “He's had your trust, your body, your heart. Knows your quirks and pet peeves. He's heard your whimpers and felt your touch against his skin.”

“Cameron...”

“I'm not a saint. I've been with plenty of women, but I didn't love a single one of them, Sunshine. But your connection with Jude is different. You loved him enough, trusted him enough, to give yourself to him. After everything you'd been through, you chose him.”

Fuck, that hurts to think about. I hate that, even though we didn't know the other existed, I wasn't there to be the one she gave all her secrets to. The one she wanted by her side after she weathered the worst storm of her life.

And now he's back in her life, clearly wanting to rekindle their relationship.

"Cameron." The pleading note in Lucy's voice has me opening my eyes and pulling my face away from hers, looking down at the woman I'm in love with.

"Do you want him in your life again?"

"Yes." Her hands hold me in place when I try to back away, not wanting to break down like a pussy in front of her. "But I'm not in love with him anymore. Jude will always be special to me, and that's not something I would ever want to change."

I scoff, looking away, but she keeps her hold on me. "He was an anchor for me when I needed someone in my corner, and I will forever be grateful for his love and friendship during that time in my life. But my heart belongs to someone else now."

My gaze collides with hers as she lets go of any lingering anger, a small smirk pulling up the side of her mouth. When she grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me closer, I don't resist.

"What are you saying, Sunshine?" My hands find their way to her face, cradling it gently.

"I'm telling you to stop worrying about Jude. I have no intention of reconnecting with him in a romantic way. I can't say I don't want him in my life, because I've missed him and left in a way I know broke both of us, but I only want friendship. That's it."

It's not a declaration of love, but it has something deep inside me settling, the need to throw something across the room now gone.

I know I should wait for a better time, but my cards are already on the table, so there's no point in stopping now.

"He may have your firsts, but your lasts belong to me, Sunshine." I kiss her slowly, pressing my body against hers until there's nothing between us. When I pull away, her eyes are closed, but they open when I kiss her cheek, running my nose along her jaw and pressing a soft kiss on her neck.

"Sunshine?"

"Yeah?" The sweet smile on her lips does me in, banishing any doubt lingering in my heart.

"I love you." The look of shock on her face makes me chuckle, but I push on. "You don't need to say anything back. I just wanted you to know." I pull her into my chest and keep her close, smelling her shampoo as I kiss the top of her head.

"My life is still a mess. I can't let you—"

"It's too late for that now, babe. You're it for me, regardless of all the skeletons in your closet." I wrap my arms around her until they find her ass, easily picking her up so her legs can wrap around my waist.

"Cameron—"

"Stop talking, Sunshine. You're ruining my moment." I smirk at her and rock my hips against her core, loving the small moan on her lips. "Let me show you how much you mean to me."

An idea slides into my head and I can't help the grin stretching across my face as I carry Lucy back into the main part of the boutique. All of the lights are off, but anyone walking by could see us if they took the time to peek in the windows.

"I want everyone to know you're mine, Sunshine. I want every single person downtown to hear your screams and know they're for me." I set her on her feet and spin her around so we're both facing the front of the store.

“This is such a bad idea.” Lucy’s warning is weak at best, her hips grinding back against my now hard cock telling a completely different story than her words.

I push her hair to one side and kiss the back of her neck as I flick her nipples through her shirt, the hard peaks making my mouth water. “You don’t have security cameras in here, do you?”

“No.” Her answer is exactly what I want to hear, but only because I’m about to take her in the middle of this shop.

“We’ll need to change that soon. Need to know you’re safe when I’m not here with you, and people knowing it’s under surveillance will help with that.” I unbutton her jeans and stick my hand under her panties, groaning against her ear when I find her wet and ready.

“I’ll talk to Hope about it.”

“Good girl.” I nip her lobe and push her towards the table until she’s bent over it, her sweet ass ready and waiting underneath the skin tight denim. I kneel behind her and make quick work of her jeans and underwear, thanking the heavens she’s in flats and can easily step out of her clothing.

I slowly run my hands up her thighs as I bite the globes of her ass, the sounds coming from my woman making me even harder than I already was.

“Open up, baby.” Lucy widens her stance and I swear there’s nothing better than seeing how much my need is affecting her. It’s dark, but the light coming from outside is enough to catch the shiny wetness between her legs, practically begging for my tongue.

Lucy’s groan as I push two fingers inside her has me quickly unbuttoning my jeans and yanking on my zipper, my cock slapping against my stomach as I pull it out. I move so I’m sitting, facing the opposite direction, and have much better access to the little bundle of nerves I love so much, giving my dick a squeeze before focusing all my attention on my girl.

When I suck on her clit, I'm rewarded with soft thighs pressing against my head and fingers tangling in my hair. Her reaction has me making fast pulls on the hard nub, scraping my teeth against her every few seconds.

"Slower," Lucy whimpers, her request turning me on even more because she knows what she likes and isn't afraid to ask for it.

I change my pace, pumping my fingers inside her, syncing each thrust with the suction I'm giving her clit. You wouldn't think slowing things down would be hot, but fucking shit, it just makes the pleasure I'm giving her last that much longer.

I take my time, every so often pulling my fingers out of her pussy and smearing her arousal all over her clit, then licking at her essence while she gets louder and louder, the grip she has on my hair bordering on painful.

"I'm so close." I curl my fingers against her G-spot the same time I scrape my teeth over her clit and she loses it, her muscles clamping down on my fingers as she rides my face, seeking out each ounce of pleasure she can.

When the spasms finally stop, I stand up and use the slickness on my fingers to coat my dick, stroking myself while I trail gentle kisses up Lucy's neck and cheek until she turns her head and presses her lips against mine, moaning when she tastes herself on my tongue.

I yank off my shirt while lining myself up at her entrance, then slowly lick inside her mouth, wanting to mark every inch of her body as mine. I pull away, looking into her eyes as I push inside her. When I'm as deep as I can get, I pull almost all the way out and slowly sink into her heat again. And again.

I keep up the tortuous pace until we're both shaking with the need to come. When Lucy takes my hand and sucks two of my fingers deep into her hot mouth, I bite my lip at how amazing she looks. Eyes full of heat, cheeks red even in the dim lighting, hair crazy. When she guides my fingers to her clit, I smirk down at her.

“My cock ain’t enough for you, Sunshine? You need my fingers, too?”

“God, yes.” She starts meeting my hips thrust for thrust, bending down over the table again, sweeping aside the t-shirts that are undoubtedly wrinkled and smell of sex. “I always want your hands on me.”

“Your wish is my command, baby.”

I grab the bottom of her shirt and pull it off quickly, then take care of her bra so she’s completely naked. With my fingers back to her clit, my other hand pushes her back down, my body curving over hers so I can reach beneath us and twist her nipple, dragging a quiet moan from her lips.

“Louder, Sunshine,” I whisper into her neck, biting the soft skin there before sucking away the pain. “I told you I wanted everyone to hear you.”

Her pussy clenches at my words and I have to bite my lip so hard I taste copper, not wanting to come before she’s screaming my name. I pump my hips faster, making tight circles around her clit as I tweak her nipples.

“More. I need more, Cameron.”

The sound that leaves me can only be described as animalistic, the need to satisfy my woman something deep and primal beating inside my chest. I pull her up so her back is stuck to my front, our sweat combining and making our skin slide deliciously with each of my thrusts. This angle is tighter and I’m powerless against my balls tightening, my orgasm zipping up my spine.

“Need you to come, baby.” I slap her clit. Once. Twice. The last time I make sure to pump as deep as I can go, and the scream she lets out would be lost in my orgasmic haze if it wasn’t so loud.

“Oh fuck, Cameron! I’m...coming.” Her inner muscles squeeze my dick so hard I think I see some stars as I work us through our orgasms, never letting up the circles I’m lazily drawing on her swollen clit. When the last of her spasms fade,

I keep rocking inside her, my cock sliding so fucking smoothly I groan quietly into her hair.

“You feel so fucking good, Sunshine.”

“Who knew you were a closeted exhibitionist.” She laughs when I slap her ass. I pull out, watching my cum drip down her thighs as she turns around and faces me, her hands moving around my neck.

I look into her eyes and even though I know she’s too scared to say it, I know she loves me too. But I won’t rush her.

Instead, I grab her waist and hoist her onto the table, pulling until her ass is almost off the edge, then slide back into her wet heat. “Who said anything about closeted? I’ll have my woman anywhere she wants me, especially when there’s a chance someone could see just how crazy I make her.” I wink and she just smiles at me in a way that has my heart flipping over like I’m a teenage girl.

A more serious look wipes away her easy grin and she cups my face in her hands. “You don’t need to worry about Jude. Yes, I had sex with him once. Yes, I was somewhat violently ripped away from the part of my life that he inhabited, without much choice in the matter.” She lets out a big breath and uses her legs around my waist to push my cock deep inside her, my hips grinding in a way that has her biting her lip before continuing. “But you’re the one I chose now, Cameron Conrad. You’re the one I want kicking me in my sleep and hogging the covers.”

I scoff at that, but she just smirks and keeps going, slightly breathless with my slow thrusts into her pussy. “Your heart is pure, and I’m afraid my life will taint it with stains that will never come out, but I’m realizing now that I’m too selfish to stop giving you everything I have to offer.”

I feel myself getting harder, her words like a balm for the worry I felt when I walked into the store earlier. “I would rather be stained by your love than walk away from you for even one. Fucking. Second.” Each word is pressed into her

with my cock, hitting deep enough to mix a bite of pain with the pleasure. “So mark me, Sunshine. Make me yours.”

This time we go even slower than before, our faces so close together that our lips brush on each exhale. Hands trail hot skin, mouths slide over shoulders and necks, bites soothed with tongues. When I know we’re both close, I look at Lucy while I rub my thumb softly over her clit.

“I love you, Sunshine.” Her eyes fill with emotion, but she blinks it away and pulls my face to hers so she can kiss me, her tongue sliding against mine in a way that sends me over the edge. “I’m coming,” I whisper, my cock jerking deep inside her.

My admission has her whimpering, kissing me as her pussy clenches around my cock, drawing out my pleasure until I lose my balance enough that I rest my weight against the table, caging Lucy against my chest as we both catch our breath.

“You’re going to help me clean this all up, right?” Lucy’s seriousness only lasts a few seconds, both of us laughing as we look at the mess we made.

“Yeah babe, I’ll help.” I press a kiss to her forehead, then to her lips, my tongue slowly tangling with hers before I pull away and help her to her feet. When I see my release running down her thighs, I can’t help wiping some of it up and sticking my fingers inside her, pushing the evidence of my orgasm back inside her.

“So barbaric,” she murmurs, her breath hot against my bare chest.

“If I could have you full of me for the rest of my life, it wouldn’t be enough.” I’m only half joking, but I pull away, knowing we need to clean up before someone really does see us through the picture windows up front.

As exciting as this was, no one gets to see my girl naked and vulnerable like this.

No one but me.

Chapter 18

Lucy

“Thanks for your help, Matt. You’re a lifesaver.” The sweet sophomore who offered to model for my capstone project blushes as he hurries out the door, waving over his shoulder right before he leaves my line of sight.

I have two more weeks before our fashion show debut, and I’m equal parts nervous and excited. All of my outfits are ready, just final tweaks needed here and there before the big day. It’s been a pain in the ass to have to do everything on campus, since my Singer was ruined, but I’ve managed to get everything ready with plenty of time to spare.

Seniors get a large bank of lockers at the back of the design classroom, saving my ass from having to transport all of my materials back and forth from my apartment.

I fold everything as neatly as I can before clicking my padlock closed, then grab my bag and head out.

It’s late, darkness having taken over Hartford an hour ago. Cameron’s at a movie with Willie, so it’s just me, myself, and I for dinner tonight. I think there’s a frozen pizza in the freezer, maybe even some left over salad from last night.

Damn, someone should give me a Michelin star already.

As I push out the door and into the chilly evening air, I wave at Tim, one of Hartford’s amazing custodians, before starting my jaunt across the quiet grounds towards home. It’s

May, so it's not freezing by any means, but we're still far from summer nights when tanks and shorts are warranted.

Thank goodness our capstone show will be indoors, or else I'd have a lot of frozen models on my hands.

I'm passing our college radio station when my phone rings, making me jump. I press my hand to my heart for a few seconds, willing my pulse to slow down.

Things have been calm lately. Cameron thinks I'm at home right now, but Matt texted me a couple of hours ago saying he could do his last fitting tonight after his study session was over, so I came down here without really thinking about having to walk home alone.

Shaking my head, I look down to see it's my mom calling me. I let out another breath and push the green button. "Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"Lucy. Where are you?" Her voice is strained, like she's trying to keep her tone even but can't quite manage it.

"I'm walking home from campus. Why, what's wrong?"

"You're alone?" Alarm has her words tipping up at the end, like a glass of water about to overflow.

"Yeah, I was finishing up a project for my capstone. One of the guys who's modeling for me has some extra time to—"

"How far from home are you?"

Movement from the corner of my eye has my heart leaping, and I just barely catch sight of someone in a black hoodie round the corner of Robal, their steps silent against the cobblestone pathway. "Five minutes." I scan the quad as I pick up my pace, keeping an eye out for anyone who looks dangerous. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Lars was released three days ago."

"What? How is that possible?" I can hear the shakiness in my voice, but I don't care. My head is starting to feel too light,

like I might pass out. I close my eyes and force air into my lungs, trying to listen to my mom's answer.

"...good lawyer, because they found some loophole Cynthia wasn't even aware of." Cynthia Sinclair is a pitbull in the courtroom. She also happened to be my mom's lawyer years ago, offering to take on the case pro bono since she felt so passionately about making Lars pay for what he did to my family.

"He doesn't know we're in New York, right?" As the question leaves my mouth, flashes of my wrecked room flicker in my mind, reminding me *someone* knows I'm here. I start walking again, every shadow and sound making me wish I would have stayed home tonight.

"I don't know, honey. I wouldn't count on it, especially since he has so many connections." I can hear my mom moving around, probably pacing back and forth like she always does when nervous or frustrated. "I don't even know what I want you to do. Part of me wants you to drop your classes and come live with me so I can keep an eye on you. But the other part of me knows you may be in more danger living with me in case he tries to find me."

"Mom. You're freaking yourself out. Take a deep breath and hold it." I hear her do as I say, and I wait until she's taken a few calming breaths before continuing. "It's going to be okay. I have Cameron..."

My phone beeps with an incoming call. Speak of the devil. "Mom, I have to go, but I'll call you in the morning, okay? We'll get more information from Cynthia and make a game plan that we both feel safe with."

"Are you home yet?"

"Almost." I see Cam's jeep out front and let out a sigh of relief. "Just a couple of blocks away. I'll call in the morning." By now Cameron's call has gone to voicemail, but I care more about making sure my mom's okay right now.

"Okay. Be vigilant, and lock your doors. I love you."

“I love you, too.” I barely have time to hang up before my phone is ringing again, Cameron’s smiling face looking at me from the screen. I accept the call, but don’t have time to say anything before his worried voice shoots through the line.

“Where are you? Are you okay?” Shit, now I feel stupid *and* guilty for leaving the house tonight.

“I’m fine. I’m almost home.”

“What the hell, Lucy?” I look up and see him fling open the front door, looking left before swinging his head to the right, phone still pressed to his ear. His gaze slams into me and I swear I can feel his fear and frustration from thirty yards away.

“I’m sorry. I had to meet up with someone on campus and do their last fitting.” I pull my phone away and hang up, now only a few feet from him. “I didn’t mean to freak you out. I thought I’d beat you home.” His face hardens at my words, anger igniting the golden brown of his eyes in the porch light.

“So you weren’t going to tell anyone that you walked to campus, at fucking night, alone? You thought that was a good idea?” He runs his hands through his hair and curses, grabbing my arm and dragging me into the house before locking the door behind us. “And you didn’t even answer my call.”

“I was on the phone with my mom.” The bite in my tone has him spinning towards me, pinning me to the front door.

“I don’t care if you were on the phone with the president, Sunshine. I came home and you weren’t here. No note, no text saying you had to leave. Nothing.” Worry starts to mix with the anger in his eyes, and I wrap my arms around him, burying my face in his hoodie.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” His arms tighten around me, and I let myself fall into his embrace. “I should have texted you, but I didn’t want to bother you while you were with Willie.”

“It wouldn’t have bothered me, babe. I need to know you’re safe.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head, then pulls away enough for me to see his handsome face. “Why was your mom

calling so late?” I try to keep my face neutral, but it must not work, because Cameron’s expression turns dark once again.

“She, um...she let me know that Lars was released a few days ago.” I bite my lip and look at the floor, deciding now would be a great time to start unlacing my boots. I take my time, but the silence coming from my boyfriend outlasts my efforts to avoid his stare.

Confusion, anger, worry. They’re all spiraling in his gaze as he looks at me. “So you’re telling me that not only were you walking alone, in the dark, but your crazy, abusive, motherfucking ex step father was released days ago and could be stalking you at this very moment?”

“It wasn’t dark when I walked down to campus.” The incredulous look painted across his face has me pushing past him, towards my room. I can feel him following me, but I don’t say anything.

I get why he’s angry, but I had no idea about Lars being out of prison. Hell, I thought he’d be in there for at least fifteen more years before I had to worry about him again.

“Where do you think you’re going? Our conversation isn’t over.”

“Oh, yes it fucking is. I’m not going to stand there and listen to you belittle me. I—”

“I’m not belittling you, Lucy. I’m just pointing out facts.”

I yank off my jacket and throw it on the chair by my window. When I look around for a hair tie, I don’t see any, which pisses me off even more. I hear Cameron clear his throat and when I aim a glare his way, I see a scrunchie in his upheld hand. I snatch it out of his grasp without so much as a thank you, putting my hair into a messy bun on top of my head before finding some pjs to change into.

“I’m done living my life in fear, Cameron. You’re the one who decided to date me even after I warned you of all my baggage. If you can’t handle it, you can leave. I’m sure Tyler misses your amazing companionship.”

“What the fuck, Lucy?” The hurt on his face makes me want to take my words back, but I’m too stubborn to do such a thing. Instead, I pull off my jeans and shirt, replacing them with my pajamas. When I try to walk past Cameron to go to the bathroom, he blocks my way, grabbing my face with enough pressure to get my attention, but not hard enough to hurt me.

“What’s going on? Why are you saying things I know you don’t mean?” His eyes bounce between mine, waiting for my answer like it’s the most important thing to him right now.

“How do you know I don’t mean them?”

“Because I know you, Sunshine. I know you love me and you’re just too scared to admit it to yourself. But you don’t—”

“Don’t put words into my mouth, Cameron.” His head snaps back as if I’ve slapped him, eyes wide and nostrils flared.

“You want me to leave?” His words don’t sound like a question. No, they sound like a threat, a threat that could tear us both apart depending on how I answer him.

“I want you to trust me. I want to go to the fucking grocery store without looking over my shoulder. I want to walk to work and feel safe enough to leave my pepper spray at home. I want my mom to worry about me getting a tattoo, or getting drunk at a party, not whether or not I’ve been kidnapped by her ex.” I’m aware that I sound hysterical, but I can’t stop the words from spilling out. “I want my baby sister to be alive, not taken from this world before she ever had a chance to take her first breath. I want to feel safe in my own home, not having the lingering fear of someone breaking in again. And I want you, but I don’t know how to let myself take what you so willingly offer.” My last words fall on a sob, my knees crashing to the carpet on a muted thud. I bury my face in my hand and cry, letting the stress of my life drown me until I’m so caught up in the current that I don’t even notice I’m being lifted onto my bed.

“Shhh, I’ve got you.” Strong hands rub my back as wave after wave of grief and sadness wash over me. “I’m right here, baby.”

I don’t know how long we sit there, me bawling my eyes out and Cameron holding me against his chest. Eventually, I’m able to take in a full breath and let it out slowly, the tightness in my chest easing the slightest bit. A finger under my chin has my gaze locking with his, my breath catching in my throat when I see the anguish on his face.

“I hate that I can’t take away your pain.” His thumb wipes away a stray tear before his palm cradles my cheek. “I would do anything to never have to see you like this again.”

“You mean you’re not attracted to redheads who lose their temper and cry all over your shirt?” My attempt at humor is weak, but he gives me a small smile anyway.

“Those are actually my favorite kind of redheads.”

I drag my eyes around my room, remembering how trashed it was a few months ago. If Lars had enough connections to make that happen while in prison, I can’t imagine how much worse it could get with him out as a free man.

“Things are probably going to get ugly. Whoever broke in here is most likely linked to Lars, which means he knows where I live.” A violent shudder wracks through my body, making Cameron hold me closer to him, his chin resting on my head.

“I think we should stay at my place for a while. Pack up what you need, drive around and make sure we’re not being followed.” A rush of worry has me yanking back, away from the comfort I seem to only find in Cameron’s arms.

“I don’t want to bring trouble to your house. That place is all Tyler has, and he might not want me there.”

“He’ll be fine.” Cameron stands up and stretches, then goes into Lexi and grabs one of my duffle bags. “Pack as much as you can, then we’ll go.” He bends down and kisses my head,

but for maybe the first time ever, it does nothing to settle the dread in my belly.

Chapter 19

Cameron

“Balloons?”

“Check.”

“Food?”

“Check.”

“Alcohol?”

“Double check. I got this on lock, Vi-Vi. Don’t you trust me?” I give her my most innocent look, but that doesn’t stop her from rolling her eyes and grinning at me.

“That’s the scary part. I do.” She gives me her full smile and I pull her into a hug, happy as shit she’s doing so well. “Tyler’s picking up Lucy from Hope’s in an hour, so we still have some time to get this stuff set up. Liam shouldn’t be home until then, either. I made sure Greg knows he’s on distraction duty if my fiancé tries to leave early.”

We both share a look, knowing Liam isn’t the kinda guy to clock out before any of his crew does, even if he is the big boss man.

“Is Greg bringing Mia?” I love that little squirt, although I probably shouldn’t say *little* for much longer. Every time I see her at one of Liam’s work picnics, she looks like she’s grown another inch. I have to say, I’m gonna miss the tea parties and dress up Liam and I got roped into over the years.

I rocked that feather boa like no one’s business.

“Yep, they’ll be here.” She lists off all the other people coming, including the mother of my girlfriend. “She’s going to love you.” Violet’s eyes shine when she looks up from the cluster of balloons she’s tying to the food table. I can’t help the slight wince crinkling my face when I think about the *tiny* fact that Lucy hasn’t said those three little words yet.

Violet being Violet, she picks up on my uneasiness, a soft smile curving her mouth. “She’ll get there, Cam. It’s honestly a miracle she’s opened up this much with you. Lucy doesn’t trust easily, let alone *date*. Admitting she loves you is the last piece of control she has. She’s scared of what Lars could do, and you being with her is putting a target on your back.”

I let out a frustrated breath, slapping the stack of napkins down a little too roughly, but I don’t fix them. “I wouldn’t care if the world’s deadliest assassin was after her. She’s endgame, Vi. Don’t even know how I’m standing here, talking to you when my heart is currently at a damn boutique downtown.”

“Oh my gosh, can you please say that again so I can get it on video? That was the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.” I glare at her hopeful smile, shaking my head while I yank the plastic off the stack of cups by the punch bowl.

“Not helping, Violet.”

“Oh, come on. You have to see how she feels about you. If she didn’t love you, she wouldn’t be happily living with you, acting as if you’re already an old married couple.”

“Old married couples say they love each other.”

“Cameron.” She gives me a look over her shoulder while I follow her into the house, petting Rocky and Max when I walk past them on their beds. “Give her time. What you really should be doing is freaking out over meeting Tanya for the first time.” She winks at me, opening the fridge and pulling out a few bottles of sprite.

“Moms love me, I’m not worried about that.” I smirk, knowing I seem full of myself. But, come on, how could someone not love me?

Why don't you ask your girlfriend, bud?

Violet laughs, standing on her tiptoes as she tries to grab a huge glass canister. I gently push her aside and grab it, setting it on the counter before grabbing the ice.

“As much as I don't want your head getting any bigger than it already is, you're probably right. Tanya is a great lady, and all she wants is for Lucy to be safe and happy.” Vi looks up at me and smiles. “Since you check both of those boxes, and you're not too hideous in the looks department, I think you'll do just fine.”

I chuckle, some of the tension leaving my body as I sling an arm around her shoulder. “You saying I'm a handsome devil, Vi?”

She snorts as she pours the sprite into the drink dispenser. “And so humble.” We both laugh at that, because shit, she's got me there.

The next hour flies by, both of us taking on different tasks, making sure Liam and Violet's place is ready to host all the people coming to this surprise birthday party. Since their special days are less than a week apart, it made sense to do something collaborative.

I'm a little nervous Liam won't appreciate having to share Violet with so many people on his birthday, but I already decided I'll make sure everyone's gone by ten, giving my boy plenty of time to be alone with his woman after the party.

He's so in love, he'd do just about anything to make Violet happy, and since this party was her idea, I know he'll go along with the plan.

A knock on the door has Vi walking to the front of the house, leaving me to do the last run through of the back yard, making sure we're ready to rock. I connect my phone to the bluetooth speaker Liam set up months ago and put on a playlist I think everyone can enjoy.

“Here he is!” Violet walks out the back door, closely followed by Tanya, both women smiling at me. I haven't met

her yet, but I recognize the petite redheaded woman from photos I've seen on Lucy's phone. "Tanya, this is Cameron Conrad. Cameron, this is Tanya, Lucy's mom."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. McGuire." I put my hand out, thankful I thought to ask Vi earlier what last name Lucy's mom went by since it never came up with Lucy. I guess after she divorced Lars, she went back to McGuire so her and my girl would have the same last name.

"Please, call me Tanya." She bypasses my hand and pulls me into a hug, forcing me to hunch over her tiny frame. Her shoulder length hair tickles my nose, but I don't mind. I may have seen pictures of her before, but I'm still taken by surprise to see how much she looks like Lucy.

"I'm so glad you could make it." Violet stands next to me, smiling at Tanya while she fiddles with a package of candles she bought for the cake later tonight.

"I wouldn't miss it! Not only do I get to meet my daughter's mysterious boyfriend, but I get to meet this Liam boy who's swept you off your feet." She winks at Violet, pushing the strap of her purse up her shoulder before she looks up at me again. "You're not going to break my baby's heart, right Cameron?"

Shit.

Going for the big guns right off the bat. Guess I shouldn't be surprised given who her daughter is.

"Not the plan, ma'am. If anything, she's the heartbreaker." I try to contain the raw truth of those words with a smile, but I'm not sure I'm fooling anyone.

Another knock at the door has Violet excusing herself, giving Tanya a quick hug before she goes, leaving the two of us alone. I wouldn't say it's awkward, but it's a bit weird to be standing here with my girlfriend's mom for the first time without a buffer. Violet wanted to make sure everyone got here before Liam and Lucy did, so I knew this moment was coming.

Doesn't make it any easier, though.

"Lucy told me you're a business major. Any idea what you want to do with that?"

Fuck, of course she'd want to start with the one question I don't have the answer to.

"I'm honestly not sure yet." I run a hand through my hair and look towards the creek running through the back of the property before glancing down at Tanya. She's looking at me with an encouraging smile, so I continue. "I'd love to somehow work in the sports world, since that's where my heart was taking me before fate had a different idea." I nod to the scar on my knee, visible in the shorts I'm wearing.

"What sport did you play?"

"Baseball. Tore my ACL when I was weeks away from heading to college on a full scholarship. Decided to stay close to home after that, major in business since it seems general enough to help me get into lots of different jobs."

Fuck, do I sound flakey? I hope not, because I really need this woman to like me.

"I'm sure you'll figure out something." Tanya catches my gaze and gives me a genuine smile, allowing me to let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I smile back, feeling lighter than I did a minute ago.

"I love your daughter, Ms. McGuire." I swallow, looking back to the creek, sunlight hitting the water in a way that has little bursts of light sparking into existence. "She told me. About everything that happened. And I want you to know that I'm all in. I'm not scared. I'll do anything within my power to keep her safe."

"Cameron?" Her tone has me swinging my attention to her, the green top she has on making her red hair pop against the evening light. A serious look has the delicate skin around her eyes creasing, but she doesn't look angry. "First, it's Tanya, not Ms. McGuire. Second, I already knew all that, but I appreciate you telling me."

“How did you...?” I don’t know how to word my question, so I just let it hang there.

“I know my daughter. The way she talks about you whenever I’m on the phone with her tells me everything I need to know.” Something that looks a whole lot like regret washes over her features, hands clenching around the purse strap across her chest. “I’m still scared about what he could do now that he’s out, so I can’t tell you how relieved I am that Lucy has you right now.”

I swallow, the sound loud between us despite the commotion of people coming through the house to the backyard. “As long as I’m breathing, I won’t let anything happen to her. I promise you that.”

Blue eyes so much like her daughter’s look at me, apprehension warring with acceptance. She must believe me, though, because it’s relief shining in her gaze as her tense shoulders relax, a small grin stretching across her face.

“I can see why Lucy trusts you.” She pats my arm before turning away, heading into the house as a group of Liam’s work friends walk out towards me, plates of more food that we don’t need in their hands.

As much as I’d like to stew on my conversation with Tanya, I promised Violet I would help host this thing, so I put a lid on it for now.

Winning over Lucy’s mom?

Check.



“Surprise!”

The look on Liam’s face is fucking hilarious, but all my attention stays with Lucy, her eyes wide and happy as they cling to me, only diverting a second to Violet before coming back to me.

“Oh my gosh, what did you guys do?” Lucy smiles, then squeals when she sees her mom, rushing to give her a hug as I

make my way to her. I catch the little glare Liam shoots me, but he's quickly attacked by one very excited Mia, followed by an equally sweet fiancé.

"How are you here? Don't you have to work?" It's Thursday, so I get why Lucy would be confused, but she should know how much her mom loves her. Taking off a couple days from work was a no brainer, and she tells her daughter just that.

"I can't believe you two pulled this off." Lucy smiles at me, throwing her arms around my waist while I kiss the top of her head.

"Of course we did, Sunshine. Not only do I get to surprise my woman and make her happy, but I get to watch Liam squirm under all the attention he's getting." I jerk my chin towards where Liam is now pinned between two older ladies, both wives of managers at his company. One is patting his cheek while the other nods her head towards Violet playing with Mia.

The look Liam has tells me he's not quite ready for what the women must be hinting at, which just makes me laugh harder, catching his attention.

He may or may not fly the bird behind the women's backs, but I can't tell because Kloey is now blocking off my line of sight.

"Happy birthday!" Kloey hugs Lucy and Tanya introduces herself. I just stand there, happy to be here with all my friends, enjoying a moment safe from any drama. Ty eventually finds me, telling me about the location he finally picked for his shop. He picks my brain on a few things before I get pulled away to help Violet put out more food.

Hours later, as people slowly say goodnight to the little bubbles of guests they've been talking to, I sneak into the house and make sure Lucy's gift is still right where I left it in the guest bedroom.

When I'm near the kitchen, I hear hushed voices coming from the foyer and slow my pace, recognizing both girls instantly.

"...not ready. I honestly don't know if I'll ever be." Violet sounds upset, but not angry.

"I get that. I just wanted to see how you were feeling about it. I don't...I don't know what I'll do yet, but I needed to talk to you before I made any decisions."

"Even if I wanted to talk to him, Liam wouldn't be okay with it. And I love him too much to put him through anything more than he's already had to deal with because of me."

"He loves you, Vi. He's not 'putting up with' anything to be with you." Lucy's conviction makes me smile, because she's right, but my smile quickly turns into a frown at Violet's words.

"How does Cameron feel about you talking to Cooper? I can't imagine him having a much better reaction than Liam."

What. The. Fuck?

"I haven't told him about the recent text messages, but the last time it came up, he wasn't happy about it."

"I'm not letting you get within ten miles of that fucker." I round the corner to find two sets of eyes staring at me, one wide with surprise, the other narrowed in stubbornness. I look at Violet, the scars on her arms visible even in the low lighting. She follows my gaze and gives me a sad smile.

"I'm going to go check on everyone out back." When she passes me, she gives me a hug, pulling my head down so her words can't be overheard. "He was a big part of her life, Cam. Before we even knew you guys. She needs support right now, not anything else." Violet's hazel eyes shine with emotion, but she quickly pulls away and heads outside, the patio door quietly clicking shut behind her.

"Why didn't you tell me he's been reaching out again?" I try to mask the hurt in my question, but it doesn't work. The

pain is as obvious as the rug on the floor between us.

“I didn’t want you to stress out over it, especially if I decide to tell him I’m never talking to him again.” Her worried gaze bounces between my eyes as she slowly walks towards me, only hesitating a second before wrapping her arms around my middle. I don’t return the embrace, and she notices, pulling away from me and crossing her arms.

“He tried to kill Violet, Lucy. How in the fuck can you forget that?”

“I haven’t forgotten anything! I hate him now just as much as I did the moment I realized he was the one who took Violet.” A shuddered breath leaves her lips as she looks at a spot over my shoulder, not meeting my eyes. “But I haven’t forgotten the good times, either. And believe me, I’ve tried.”

“How is he even getting a hold of you? I thought he was in rehab.” I clench my jaw so hard it pops, but I can’t seem to care one fucking bit. The only thing I care about is the fact that my girlfriend has been talking to someone who ruined all our lives, lives we’re only just now shaping back into some semblance of normality.

“He’s been out for a while now, I guess.” Her answer is barely above a whisper, the fire in her eyes now smothered under weariness. “And I haven’t been talking to him. I don’t answer his messages when they come in...but I’m wondering if I should.”

I close my eyes and force myself to take a deep breath and hold it.

One Second.

Two.

I let it go, my eyes opening to see Lucy looking at me with an expression I can’t decipher.

“I’m so fucking angry with him, but I can’t forget all the good times we had, either. I just don’t understand how the guy who used to make sure Vi and I could go to parties and not

worry about being freaking drugged is the same guy who ended up fucking drugging my best friend. It just doesn't make sense."

She starts pacing, lost in her own world. Back and forth, not looking at me. Which is probably a good thing, because I'm about to lose my fucking mind.

"You're not seeing him, Lucy." The hard edge in my voice leaves no room for argument, but she only stares back at me with a sad look, shaking her head.

"You can't stop me. If I make up my mind and decide to see him, I will, regardless of whether or not you think it's a good idea."

I feel my right eye twitch as I glare at her, so fucking pissed off that I have to grab the back of my neck and turn away for a second, not wanting to say something I'll regret. With my eyes looking towards the people in the backyard, I let my heart bleed a bit more.

"Violet isn't up for this. She even said she wouldn't do it, even if she wanted it, because it would hurt Liam. Why is it different for you?" My voice cracks, but I don't give a shit.

"I'm not Violet, Cameron. My relationship with Cooper was different than theirs, and how she handles her grief is going to be different than how I handle mine."

"Yeah, because you want to forgive him and live happily ever after." I twist around just in time to see my words hit their target, and I think I might be sick. I can't lose her. This discussion feels heavier than it should, pushing me off balance when Lucy flinches, blue eyes full of unshed tears.

"I never said I forgave him. But I know firsthand how drugs can take over a person's mind, making them do things they might never have done if such poison wasn't in their veins to begin with."

"Fuck me. So now you're going to forgive your scumbag of a step dad, too?"

I regret it as soon as the words leave my mouth, and I swear my heart stops when Lucy looks at me with a pain so deep I can't even fathom it completely. When I take a step towards her, she retreats against the front door, holding out her hand as if she's afraid of me.

"Fuck, I didn't—"

"Stop talking. I'm done with your bullshit tonight." She tries to walk around me, but I grab her shoulders and spin her so she's looking up at me, tears now trailing down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I just...I can't let you put yourself in danger. We're already dealing with the threat of Lars, and now you're wanting to reconnect with the guy who kidnapped your best friend?"

"If everything with Lars is too much for you to handle, all you—"

"No, that's not what I'm saying, Sunshine. I'm saying I love you and don't want to see you get hurt again." I drop my forehead to hers, rolling it left and right as I catch my breath. "I love you so fucking much it's hard to breath sometimes. And the idea of you being in the same room as Cooper has me seeing red."

She doesn't soften in my arms like I want her to.

"It's not your decision to make." When she pulls away this time, I don't stop her. "Maybe you should stay at your place tonight, and I'll stay here."

"Fuck that." I'm not letting this come between us anymore than it already has. "Let's just...put it on the back burner for tonight, alright? Vi worked really hard putting this night together." I don't mention it was an equal effort from both Violet and myself when it came to planning tonight.

"Fine." She walks outside and shuts the door behind her, leaving me in the kitchen, staring after her as she gets sucked into a conversation with some of the college friends we invited. The smile she gives them is fake, but at least she's trying.

The rest of the night goes smoothly, other than my girlfriend solidly ignoring me. I help everyone find their dishes they brought food on, making sure everyone is fine to drive before they leave. It's just before ten when it's just six of us left, Tanya having gone to her hotel an hour ago.

The girls are talking quietly by the bonfire Liam lit a while ago, and I'm nursing the same beer I've had in my hand the past hour when Tyler, followed by the birthday boy, comes up to me.

"What's up your ass?" Tyler looks at me, quirking a brow as his gaze dances over my face. He has a water bottle in his fist, white gauze taped to his forearm from a new tattoo. How he had room for another is beyond me.

"You look like someone pissed in your cheerios," Liam tacks on, jerking his chin towards Lucy. "Trouble in paradise?"

I scoff, mainly because that's all I can manage to get out of my tight throat. I swallow another swig of my warm beer and stare at the ground before answering them.

"She wants to see Cooper." I keep my voice down, not wanting the girls to overhear me. The last thing I need is another fight with Lucy tonight.

"Fuck that." Liam glares at me, but I know his anger isn't meant for me. If Lucy opens herself up to reconnecting with Cooper, Violet might not be far behind, and I don't think Liam would survive it.

"That's exactly what I said." I let out a forced laugh, letting my eyes fall to the ground. "Lucy was very quick to remind me that I have no say over what she does." I don't try to hide the bitterness in my words, knowing my friends won't judge me.

"Did she actually say she wanted to see him?" Tyler's question has me snapping my eyes to his, anger lighting up my chest like a stick of TNT.

"Do think I'm just fucking making this up? I—"

“I’m not saying anything, asshole. I’m just trying to help you get your head on straight.” He glares at me, but doesn’t back down.

“She said she hasn’t responded to his texts, but he’s been asking her to meet up. She’s not sure what she’ll decide.” I drain the rest of my beer and throw the bottle in the makeshift recycling box I put out earlier.

“So it’s not a for sure thing.” Liam says, rather than asks. His eyes hone in on Violet across the yard, a fierce love shining in his gaze. For some reason, his reaction pisses me off.

“Yep, your woman is safe. Violet made it perfectly clear to Lucy she won’t be seeing Cooper ever again.” The bite in my words has Liam frowning at me, but I see relief in his eyes, too.

Fuck him.

Fuck all of this. Maybe Lucy was right, and we need a night apart. She can go home with Tyler and I’ll stay at her place, that way no one is interrupting Liam’s birthday sex.

One of us might as well have a nice night.

I jerk my head towards Lucy and pat my pockets, making sure I have my keys on me. I grab them and look up at Ty, already taking a step towards the back door. “Can you take Lucy to the house when she’s done? I think I need some space to get my shit together, so I’m gonna stay at her place tonight.”

Ty stares at me, no doubt trying to figure out where my head’s at. I want to laugh, knowing there’s no way he’ll get anywhere when I don’t even know how I’m feeling right now.

He finally nods, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I’ll take her home.”

I let out a breath and nod. “Thanks man.” I slap Liam on the shoulder and squeeze my keys in my other hand. “Happy birthday. Tell Vi I’ll come by in the morning and help with cleanup.”

His worried expression has me clenching my teeth, but he only nods as I turn around.

I feel like a fucking dick that I don't say goodbye to Lucy, but I don't trust myself not to say something I'll regret.

I'll talk to her in the morning.

Maybe then she'll see some reason.

Chapter 20

Lucy

I wake up to someone knocking on my bedroom door.

Why would someone be—

Everything from last night floods into my sleepy brain as I take in my surroundings. I'm in Cameron's room, where we've been sleeping since Mom called about Lars being released. I'm used to waking up with a warm body next to me, but the cold sheets to my left are more than enough proof Cam never came home last night.

I'm running my fingers through my ratty hair when another knock comes from the other side of the door. "I know you're awake. Are you decent?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm always decent, unlike your friend."

The door cracks open just enough so Tyler can make sure I'm actually dressed before he walks all the way into the room, cups of coffee in his hands, steaming in the early morning light.

"Thought you might need this." He hands over one of the mugs before sitting on the foot of the bed, giving me his full attention. I like the guy, but he can be freaking intimidating when he wants to be, his gray eyes all serious, contrasting with his black hair, not to mention all of his tattoos.

"Thanks," I whisper into my mug, taking a small sip before resting it in my lap. I should probably get up, maybe even take

a shower before class, but my body isn't getting the message. It would much rather wallow in bed.

"Can I ask you something?" Tyler's calm tone has me running my gaze over his face, wondering if he's about to blow up on me just like Cameron did at the party. I don't sense any deception, so I nod slowly and take another drink from my mug before setting it on the nightstand.

"Are you considering talking to Cooper?" To his credit, I can't tell what his opinion is one way or the other, his eyes clear of any judgements.

"Yes." I don't pull my gaze away from his, even though I feel awkward maintaining so much eye contact with someone before I've even brushed my teeth.

"Why?" Again, there's no attitude in his question. If anything, I'd swear there was almost a spark of something like hope in his hard gaze, but it flickers out before I have a chance to ponder further. I let out a long breath and look out the window, trying to find the best way to explain how I'm feeling.

"I feel like it's my fault."

"What is?"

"Everything that happened. Coop and I were closer than he was with Violet, we spent more time together. Watching football, going to parties, early morning pancakes after a night of drinking. I know how he likes his eggs cooked, how he refuses to go into an exam without having at least four sharpened pencils because he hates using pens. Every November he sends a bouquet of flowers to his grandma on her birthday, because that's what his grandpa did before he passed away years ago.

"He made me feel safe. I don't...I don't know how much Cameron has told you, but my childhood was not ideal, and I came to college with a lot of fear in my back pocket. And Cooper helped me in ways I didn't even notice. Walking me to night classes whenever he could, answering the door when the

pizza we ordered was delivered. I never told him anything about what happened in Oregon. Never. Yet somehow he knew how to make me feel safe without being overbearing.”

“Did you see the change in him towards the end?” Tyler’s voice is quiet, but still void of any of his personal thoughts.

“Yes, but I never knew how strong his feelings for Violet were.” I look into Tyler’s eyes and give a small shrug. “I should have known. I knew him better than anyone else, but I still fucked up and didn’t see the signs right in front of me. I think...I didn’t want my safe harbor to be unstable, you know? Sure, he’s smoked a few joints over the years, but that’s the extent of his drug use before everything went to shit.”

“Do you see yourself being friends with him again?”

I grab my coffee and take a few sips before answering, gathering my scattered thoughts, trying to make sense of my feelings.

“I don’t want him to feel abandoned. I know how drugs can change a person, so it’s not difficult for me to understand how whatever concoction he was taking could affect his thoughts and actions.” I set my mug down and cross my legs under the covers, resting my face in my hands. “I’m still so angry with him. So, so angry that I can feel it burning inside me. And I hate that. I hate that he fucked everything up and almost killed my best friend, which in turn almost killed Liam. I hate that you and Cameron were roped into it, and I hate that even after all of that, I still feel the need to see him. To see if the guy I knew and loved is still there. He helped me when I didn’t even know what to ask for, and I want to be there for him.”

Tyler stares at me, not giving anything away. I stare back, ready for him to tell me I’m being stupid. We’ve become fairly close the past few months, and I know he’s not one to sugar coat anything that comes out of his mouth.

“How does your relationship with Cameron factor into all this?”

“I want him to trust me. To know I need this...closure? I don't know what to call it, but I can't walk away without at least hearing him out. And I want Cameron to understand that doesn't mean I'm turning my back on him.”

“He loves you.” Tyler shakes his head, making a piece of dark hair fall over his forehead. “Your safety is something he's not willing to bargain with, and he sees your involvement with Cooper as a threat.”

“I know.”

“But it doesn't change anything.”

“No.” I play with a loose thread in the comforter before looking up again. “But I'm not against compromise. If he wants to be there, I'd be willing to agree to that. Not at the same table, but close enough that he could see me and know I'm not in danger.”

“Have you told him that?”

“I didn't have the chance before he blew up on me, so no.”

Tyler stands from the foot of the bed, running his fingers through his hair as he lets out a big breath.

“You weren't there that night, at the fire. When Cam and Liam had to do CPR on Violet.” He holds his hand out when I try to speak, trapping my response in my throat. “That's not something any of us will ever forget. Cam...he's lived a good life. Great parents, siblings who love him. He hasn't experienced heartache and disappointment and devastation. That night was the first time he got a glimpse of all the terrible shit that's out there, and in his mind, it's all because of Cooper.”

He walks to the doorway, but turns around before he crosses the threshold. “I'm not saying I don't get where you're coming from, because I do. You have no clue how much I get it, but I think you need to work out a compromise with Cameron on this.”

I don't say anything, but I nod. He gives me a small smile, draining the rest of his coffee. "Don't fuck it up."

I throw a pillow at his retreating form. "Thanks so much for that, butthead!"

His quiet chuckle lightens my mood, giving me the push I need to get up and make a plan.

I'm not losing Cameron.

When Tyler drops me off at my apartment, Cameron's Jeep is in the driveway. I let myself in, toeing off my shoes before setting my keys on the coffee table. I don't hear any signs that he's up yet, so I stay quiet as I walk to my room.

Any of my lingering frustration fizzles out at the view before me. Cameron has my pillow in a death grip, his head buried in the material so I only see half of his face. He's on the same side of the bed he usually sleeps on, the sheets pulled down so his strong back, arms, and thigh are visible in the light streaming in from my window, golden skin looking warm and soft, luring me to the side of the bed.

Slowly, so I don't wake him, I slide under the covers, wrapping my arms around his waist and burying my nose in his neck, taking a long inhale of his amber and pine smell. His arms contract around me, pulling me in even closer, our chests pressed close enough I can feel the steady beat of his heart.

"Sunshine?" His voice is deep, scratchy with sleep. When his eyes open, I see the exact moment everything from last night clicks into place. A furrow works its way between his brows, and I use my thumb to rub it away. "When did you get home?"

Home. When did it become ours and not just mine? I'm not sure, but I won't deny that I like the sound of it on his lips.

"Just now," I whisper against his warm skin, pressing a kiss between his pecs. "I'm sorry."

I feel just as much as I hear his growl before he grabs my waist, turning us so I'm laying across his chest while he's on

his back. He doesn't say anything, but the worry in his golden eyes has me running my fingers through his sleep mussed hair while I collect my thoughts.

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you sooner. When Cooper reached out for the first time, I didn't think I'd ever be ready to speak to him after what he did. I was too hurt, and everything was still too raw to ever think about healing what he has so fantastically ruined."

"But..." Cameron cradles the side of my face with one of his hands while the other plays with the ends of my hair.

"But I've had weeks to think about it now, and I know I need this. I need to talk to him." I turn my face and kiss his palm, then look at him again, tracing over his jaw, nose, and soft lips. "I know how this makes you feel, but I want your support in this. I know that's not fair, but I'm being selfish here. I need to know you'll support my decisions, even if you don't agree with me. I need to know you'll always have my back."

He lets out a breath and pulls me higher, our foreheads touching. "Okay."

I close my eyes and press my lips to his, letting the anxiety rush out of me like a rag being wrung out.

"I don't like it, but I'm not losing you over this. And I'm going with you."

"I know." I trail kisses down his neck, lightly sucking on his collarbone as I push myself up, straddling his hips. I look into his eyes, so warm and loving, and give him a small smile. "I'm not losing you over this, either."

I ghost my lips over his, pulling back at the last second when he tries to kiss me, making him release a sexy growl into the space between our bodies. I work my way down his neck and chest, giving special attention to his abs, licking each one as they tighten under my tongue. When I kiss the sensitive skin right above his briefs, I'm rewarded with a groan that has

my core clenching and nipples hardening into tight little buds, aching for his mouth.

“Sunshine?” I look up at my man, love shining so clearly in his eyes that I lose my breath.

But I won't be distracted. I hurt him last night, and now all I want to do is make him feel good. A quick glance at the clock on my wall tells me I have just enough time before we need to get ready for class.

I pull his briefs down until his cock springs free, lightly slapping his abs before I wrap my hand around him. I glide my tongue along the veins wrapping his length, then press an open-mouthed kiss to the tip before flicking the little divot just beneath his head.

I lick up the bead of precum that leaks out, his eyes half-lidded and swimming with untamed lust as I keep my eyes locked with his. When I finally take him to the back of my throat, I close my eyes and enjoy the feel of his hot skin sliding against my tongue. I use my hand to stroke where my mouth can't reach, finding a pace that drives us both wild.

Fingers find their way into my hair, but they're gentle, not pushing me down. When I cup his balls in my hand and gently rub them, I can taste how much he likes what he's feeling.

Moving a bit faster, I suck harder, giving his head special attention, flicking my tongue over his tiny slit, then taking as much of him in as I can.

“Fuck, baby.” His head is thrown back now, tan throat fully exposed, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows. God, he's so freaking gorgeous it's not even funny.

I suck even harder, moaning when I feel his balls tighten in my hand. The vibrations must feel good, because he starts thrusting in and out of my mouth. I rest my hands on either side of his hips, letting him take control, using my mouth for his pleasure. When I look at him through my lashes, he's already looking down at me.

“So fucking beautiful.” I wink at him and, ever so softly, run my teeth over his length. The strangled sound he makes has me wanting to punch my fist into the air, but I keep my celebration to myself. “I’m close.”

I nod my head as much as I can with his dick in my mouth, then put all my efforts into giving him just the right amount of suction.

“Fuck!” I feel the first of his release hit the back of my tongue and swallow, milking out his orgasm until he’s too sensitive for me to keep going. Licking my lips, I crawl up his body and nestle myself into his arms, loving the sound of his pounding heart under my ear.

“I hated waking up without you.” My words are barely above a whisper, but I know he hears me when his arm tightens its hold across my back. I watch my fingers drag over the light dusting of dark blonde hair on his chest, then down to his abs, the dips and groves moving with each of his breaths.

“I overreacted last night. The idea of you being in the same room as him has me wanting to punch something, but I hear you. And I trust you.”

I close my eyes, letting his words sew up the tear we both made between us last night. “I understand where you’re coming from.”

“But that doesn’t change your mind.” It’s not anger I hear in his response, but rather a weary acceptance.

“No, it doesn’t.” I push against his chest so I’m looking down at him, hair a mess and cheeks still flushed. “But I need you in my corner.”

“I’ve been in your corner for a long fucking time, Sunshine.” His smile is small, but genuine all the same.

“I think I’m finally starting to see that.” I smile and press a kiss to his lips, rubbing my nose against his. I’m about to swing my leg over his hips, but his cell’s alarm chooses that moment to start blaring, making us both jump.

“Cockblocked by the bell.” We both laugh, but he doesn’t twist to turn off the alarm just yet. Instead, he frames my face in his big hands, gaze bouncing between my eyes. “You’re it for me, Sunshine. I fucking love you, and I’ll do anything to keep you happy.”

The need to tell him I love him is *right there*, but now isn’t the time. Not when we’re so fresh from a fight.

“What’s our couple name? I need to know before I sign any official contracts.” His eyes pinch for just a second, but he gives me a gentle smile, letting me know I have time. He won’t rush me to spill my heart out.

“How about Luceron?”

I laugh, reaching over and turning the alarm off. “I guess that can work. I’ve heard worse couple names.”

“It’ll be a work in progress.” He tugs a piece of my hair and kisses me, slow and sweet.

“Deal.”

Chapter 21

Lucy

Ruby's is slow when Cameron, Tyler, and I get there, only a few cars parked out front. I sent a text to Cooper two days ago to set up a time to talk, and here we are.

Ty insisted on coming, and to be completely honest, I'm relieved. I don't trust Cameron not to go berserk the second I sit down with Cooper, but I *do* know his best friend can at least keep him somewhat under control if push comes to shove.

I push my door open after the Jeep rolls to a stop, but Cam grabs my hand, keeping me from getting out.

"Give us a second." He looks at Tyler, something passing between them, and then we're alone, Ty walking to the front door and disappearing into the run down diner.

"I gotta be fully transparent here, Sunshine. I don't like this one bit." His eyes look tired, proof he hasn't been sleeping well the last couple of nights. I'm sure I don't look much better. "But I know this is important to you, so I promise to keep my distance."

"Thank—"

"Unless he so much as looks at you the wrong way, then all bets are off. He doesn't get to fuck with you any more than he already has, you got me?" He's got one hand strangling the wheel while the other finds its way to cradle my face, his thumb rubbing my cheeks in slow circles. A muscle jumps at

his temple, and I swear I can hear his teeth grinding while he waits for my agreement.

I lift my hand so it's covering his, leaning my head into his touch. "I understand." He grunts, but doesn't say anything else, just pulls my face to his so he can press a hard kiss to my lips, then my forehead.

"Let's get this over with." He locks the Jeep and grabs my hand, holding the door open for me as the little bell rings above our heads. The smell of cinnamon rolls makes me nostalgic for all the times Violet, Cooper, and I would come here on Sunday mornings, but I bat away the memories as I scan the tables.

Tyler's sitting at the old fashion bar, a cup of coffee in his hand, chatting with the cook.

An older couple is getting their check at a booth to our left, their leftovers stacked in bright white to-go boxes.

A mom with three little kids has her hands full at one of the tables in the middle of the room, her toddler getting more food on the table than in her mouth.

And there, sitting by himself in the same booth we always used to sit in, is Cooper. He's looking down at his fisted hands on the table, but when he looks up, our gazes collide like two cars in a head-on crash. He sucks in a breath, his eyes darting to Cameron before focusing on me again.

I break our connection and look up at Cameron, but his hard gaze is on the man sitting fifteen yards from us, the one who upended our lives not so long ago. I let out a breath and put my hand on Cam's face until he looks down at me, so many emotions swirling in his eyes I can't begin to name them all.

"I'm going to be okay." I stand on my tip toes and kiss his cheek, his jaw tense under my lips. "You'll be able to see me the whole time." I start to turn around, but he grabs my waist and pulls me into a hug, his lips moving against my hair.

“I’ll be right over there, Sunshine. I won’t let anything happen to you.” He kisses my head and walks over to Tyler without looking at me, keeping his attention on Cooper instead.

I make my way over to the familiar booth and sit across from Cooper before he has a chance to try to hug me. I don’t think Cameron could deal with that right now, and I’m not sure I could, either.

Green eyes, clear and sober, shine back at me and I can’t help the soft sob that climbs up my throat, begging to be let out. His hand twitches on the table, like he wants to comfort me, but he must think better of it, because he doesn’t reach out.

“Lucy.” He shakes his head, running his eyes all over my face, most likely noticing the little bit of weight I’ve lost since he last saw me. His hair is still the same tawny color, but he’s had a hair cut recently, making him look older than before. As opposed to me, he looks like he’s put on more muscle than the last time I saw him, but maybe that’s because he’s been in rehab with nothing to do other than work out.

“Hi.” It’s just one word, but his shoulders fall from relief, like he didn’t truly believe I’d talk to him until my small greeting pushed past the dam of my lips.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Lucy.” His voice catches, emerald eyes locked on my face, bouncing back and forth between mine. He looks like he’s about to say more, but I interrupt him.

“How could you, Cooper? How could you do that to Violet? To all of us?” Tears sting my eyes, but I don’t blink them away. Instead, I let them fall, hoping they might relieve some of the pressure building up inside my chest like a bomb.

“Is she okay?” His question is barely above a whisper, but it cuts me open just the same as if it were shouted. The self resentment pulling the corners of his lips down and pinching his brow are the only things keeping me from losing the weak grasp I have on my control.

“She’s fine.” I don’t elaborate; he doesn’t deserve to hear anything else right now.

Cooper looks away, takes a breath, then turns back to me, determination and shame in his gaze. “I wasn’t myself. It was like all of my common sense, my ability to tell right from wrong, was turned off.” He clenches his teeth together, but forces his jaw to relax before continuing. “I was at the bar one night, feeling fucking sorry for myself. Some guy came up to me and we started shooting the shit. He seemed nice enough, so I stayed a couple hours longer, drinking way more than I should have.”

“This was that Tommy guy?” I flick my attention towards Cameron and see he’s staring at Cooper, but Tyler says something that gets him to break his glare.

“Yeah, but I didn’t know he was so fucking deep into the drug world. He let my drunk ass complain about Violet not loving me back, eating it all up with a fucking spoon. Now I know he was just waiting for some schmuck to take the place of his other peon who didn’t work out. I thought he was just some dude at the bar, lending an ear to a drunk college kid.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me?” I could have stopped everything if he would have just opened up. “I thought we talked about everything, Coop. Why didn’t I know about this?”

He looks down at the table, picking at the cheap linoleum peeling off the edges. “I was ashamed.” His eyes lock on mine, and the regret and anguish I see has another tear rolling down my cheek. “After the first time I took Molly, I felt on top of the world. The high was great, and Tommy always knew just the right things to say to me when I’d tell him about Violet.”

I shake my head, but let him continue. This might be the only time we talk about this, so I need to hear the whole story before I decide what I want to do about our friendship moving forward.

“Once Tommy found out who Violet was, and who she was dating, he was like a dog with a bone. He convinced me that a few anonymous texts would scare Violet away from Liam and straight into my arms. Whenever I’d try to say no, he’d threaten to hurt her.” He squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head again, pain splashed across his flushed cheeks. “And then I’m the one who ended up almost killing her.”

“How did you hide being high so well?” I trail my gaze over his shoulders, up to his face, unable to voice what I really wanted to ask.

How did I miss this?

“I wasn’t high all the time, but it was often enough that Tommy had plenty of opportunities to convince me that Violet belonged with me, and anyone in the way needed to be eliminated.”

“The fire at the community center? The vandalism at Liam house? That was all you?”

His nostrils flare, but nods slowly. “The community center was only supposed to be a few broken windows, but Tommy insisted on torching the place at the last minute. The house... that was all me. I was so far gone by then, alternating between blow and Molly, I have no idea why I thought fucking up his place would somehow break him and Violet up. That was my breaking point. I knew I’d lost any chance with her, my friendship with you. So I decided to take Violet to the stables to talk some sense into her.”

“You fucking drugged her and then Tommy kidnapped her, Cooper! What the fuck were you thinking?” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cameron get up from his seat, but Tyler grabs his arm to keep him back.

“In my fucked up state of mind, that was the only way she’d talk to me. I thought if I could get her alone, if I could tell her how in love with her I really was, she’d leave Liam and choose me.” He glares at me, but I know it’s just his anger

at himself manifesting on his face. “My mind was fucked up at the best of times. Right and wrong seemed like trivial things.”

“She almost died, Cooper.” My stomach cramps at the thought, my hand moving under the table to press against the pain.

“I know that, Lucy. Believe me, I’ve had to talk about this over and over again in my therapy sessions, and I’m more mad at myself than you’ll ever be. I will never forgive myself for what I did.”

“Yet you expect me to?” I couldn’t keep the poison from my words if I tried, but he only flinches a little, his eyes darting towards the bar before focusing back on me.

“No, I don’t. And I’m not stupid enough to think he will ever let you see me again.” He jerks his chin at Cameron, his gaze weary and tired. “I just needed you to know I wasn’t in my right mind when I did everything I did. It’s hard to explain it to someone who has never taken a substance before, but it’s like you’re a new person. Someone who feels like they’re on top of the world, until it all comes crashing down. And all you want to feel is that high again, and you’ll do whatever it takes to get there.”

I don’t say anything. I have no idea what to feel at this point, but I still don’t regret coming here.

“I’ve been clean since that night. I know you don’t care, but I want you to know. I’m never letting myself, or anyone else, down like that again.”

“I’m happy to hear that, Cooper.” My eyes fall to my lap, not knowing what else to say. I hate this so much, I can hardly sit still.

“How are you? Are classes going okay?” He looks timid, like I might snap at him, but he doesn’t take his question back.

“I’m fine.” There’s no way in hell I’m talking to him about everything that’s happened since he’s been in rehab. He doesn’t get to know my secrets.

“Your capstone, how’s that going? It’s coming up, isn’t it?” He forces a weak smile, but it drops when I don’t return it. His mouth opens like he’s going to say something else, but he changes his mind when he looks towards the bar. “I should go. Thank you for hearing me out. I don’t want or expect you to forgive me, but I wanted you to hear what I had to say.”

He gets up, throwing a ten dollar bill on the table, even though neither of us ate anything. I slide out of my side of the booth, then look up the same time he looks down at me, misery etched into the creases of his face.

I don’t know why I do it, but it’s like my body has a mind of its own when I wrap my arms around his waist, crying into his chest. “Why did you have to do this, Cooper? Why?”

His arms wrap around me, so tight I have trouble taking in a full breath. “I’m so fucking sorry, Lucy. So fucking sorry.” I feel his cheek press against the top of my head, his breath just as ragged as mine. “I wish I could take it all back. I’m beyond disgusted with myself. The world would be better off without me, but I’m too much of a pussy to—”

“No!” I pull my head away from his chest, looking deep into his wet green eyes, the flecks of gold dim in the diner’s lighting. I grab his shoulders, ignoring Tyler’s warning to Cameron to calm down. “Don’t hurt yourself, Cooper. Promise me.”

His gaze is sad, no life left in the face of my old friend. “You should go.” His empty gaze snaps over my shoulder, then back to me. “He’s about to blow.” Cooper gently pushes me back, shoving his hands in his pockets as he rocks back on his heels. “You have my number if you ever want to reach out.”

And then he’s gone, walking out the door and towards his old truck. I’m still staring after him when Cameron pulls me against him, his warmth bringing back some feeling in my numb limbs.

“You okay, Sunshine?” I can tell he’s holding back, trying to act more put together than he’s really feeling, but I don’t have it in me right now to make him feel better.

“Yeah. Let’s just go.” I pull away and give him and Tyler a sad smile, making my way to the Jeep.

I feel better than when we first got here, but it’s going to take some time to wrap my head around everything Cooper said, and I’d rather not deal with it in public.



“The tickets are booked!” Hope clicks out of the Expedia tab and claps her hands. “I’m so excited for this year’s convention. There are so many new vendors this year, you’re going to love it!”

“I can’t wait.” The smile on my face is genuine, the last few days helping me chew on my feelings towards Cooper. I’ve decided to not hate him, which is a big step. I’m not at a forgiveness level yet, but I understand now how much of a part the drugs played into his actions.

“It’s going to be awesome.” Hope twists her blonde hair into a claw clip and grabs her purse. “I have to pick up Brody from basketball practice, but we’ll flip through Airbnb next week and figure out where we want to stay, okay?” Her blue eyes scan the counter and I grin, snatching her keys from the shelf under the POS and handing them to her.

“Sounds like a plan.”

I spend the rest of my morning shift finishing up a report for one of my design classes, then rearranging one of the displays by the front window.

When Lacy, one of Hope’s other employees, comes in to take over for me, I grab the pink bag I put together a few hours ago and say a quick goodbye.

Summer is still a ways off, but it’s warm enough some of the shops along the main drag have their doors open, sandwich

boards dotting the sidewalk here and there, declaring spring sales and new merchandise.

When I push my way into Roger's Grill, the smell of burgers and fries makes my stomach growl, reminding me I only had a green smoothie for breakfast this morning.

I scan the restaurant, finding who I'm looking for working behind the bar, pouring a beer for one of the patrons sitting on a stool in front of her. I wave off the hostess, pointing to the blonde woman, who's now wiping down the counter with a wet rag. I take a seat at one of the stools and wait until she sees me, surprise lighting up her gray eyes.

"Oh, hi! How are you doing?" A smile stretches across her face as she sets the washrag down, resting a hand on her very pregnant belly.

"I'm good, thank you." I set the pink bag on the bar and nudge it towards her. "I was in the neighborhood and wanted to drop this off." I didn't want her to feel like I was giving her a handout, because I wasn't. When the latest shipment of baby clothes came in, I couldn't help picking out a few of my favorite pieces for my fellow Michelle Branch lover.

"How did you...?"

I wink and push the bag a bit closer to her. "I'm perceptive, what can I say?" A couple sits next to me, talking about what they're going to get to eat, and if they should get extra fries or not. I push off the stool and take a step backwards, sliding my hands in my back pockets as I look at her name tag. "Congratulations, Caitlyn."

Her eyes look shiny as she takes the gift and sets it below the counter. "Thank you. I...don't know what else to say. This was really sweet of you."

I wave my hand in front of my face, letting her know it's not a big deal. "Every little girl deserves something pink." I give her another small smile and turn on my heel, making my way back to my car a few blocks away.

My phone rings, and I grin at the screen when I see Cameron's face smiling back at me.

"Hi."

"Hey, babe. Where are you? I thought your shift was over at two?"

"It was, I just had to run an errand real quick. I'll be at your place soon." I'm close enough to my car now that I beep the fob, unlocking the doors as I wave at Lacy through the display windows of the shop.

"Good, because I need my woman. Stat." His playful tone has me rolling my eyes, but it doesn't stop the huge grin stretching across my lips.

I expected him to be in a bad mood after my talk with Cooper, but he's been his normal, cocky self. I think he could tell I was feeling better afterwards, and as long as I'm happy, he's happy.

"And what exactly are you expecting from me, Mr. Conrad?" I check my blind spot and pull onto the road, turning my radio off so I can connect the call to bluetooth.

"I can think of a lot of things I want from you, Sunshine. But you'll just have to wait and see." I think I hear the dishwasher close in the background, making me shake my head at how my life has changed so much in the past six months. I have a man who loves me, in spite of all the baggage I have, and he also does the dishes?

Fuck, I'm lucky.

"Hmmm, maybe we can use that new toy I got the other day." I bite my lip, squeezing my thighs together when Cameron groans into the phone.

"Get here. Now."

I laugh, but it gets stuck in my throat when I notice a dark sedan making the same turn as me for the third time in a row. I try to see the driver, but the glare from the sun is too bright.

“Sunshine? You okay?” My heart picks up speed in my chest, making my lungs work harder, my breaths turning into choppy bursts of air.

“I think someone’s following me.” When I make the next left, the car does the same thing, running a red light to make it through the intersection behind me. “What the fuck?” My voice sounds weird in my ears, like it’s far away, but I force myself to pay attention to the road, not letting the panic set in. If I do, I know I won’t be able to break out of the attack trying to take over my motor control.

“Lucy, listen to me, okay baby? Take a deep breath for me.” I hear movement in the background of our call, but I don’t focus on it as I suck a breath into my tight chest. “Good job, Sunshine. Now let it out.” I do as I’m told, my eyes flicking from the road to the car behind me.

“They’re still behind me. I think they tried to pull up beside me, but they weren’t quick enough.” My sweaty palms slide against the warm leather of my steering wheel, but I force my numb fingers to hold on.

“It’s going to be okay. I need you to start driving towards the police station, can you do that?” I nod my head, realizing too late he can’t see me. “Can you do that, baby?”

“Yes,” I whisper, the light ahead of me turning green. I hit the gas harder than necessary, my back pressed into my seat from the force of it. I’m watching a group of people cross the road a block ahead of me when my car is rammed from the back.

I scream, my head snapping forward, hitting the wheel before I can get my bearings again.

“Lucy! What’s happening? Where are you?” Cameron sounds frantic, his calm voice now hard with fear and anger.

“He rammed into the back of my car. I’m okay. I’m...” I look at the street sign as I cut through a yellow light, the dark car right behind me. “I’m by the old Pizza Hut on 6th.”

“Fuck!” I can hear the engine of his Jeep now, a purring sound the backdrop to his worried voice. “Okay, just keep going, try to keep as much distance between you and him as you can.” He honks his horn at something, cursing loudly. “I’m coming, Sunshine.”

I don’t answer him. All of my focus is on getting to that damn police station before this psycho runs me off the road.

I’ve managed to keep a car between us for the last two blocks, but he speeds around them now, running into my back bumper in a way that has my car spinning in the middle of the road, barely missing the car in the other lane.

I must scream again, because I can hear Cameron yelling through the fog covering my brain. I think I hit my head on the window, because I can feel a trickle of something running down the side of my face.

I look around, but my door is yanked open and I’m roughly unbuckled and pulled to my feet outside the car. People are staring, someone’s yelling at someone else to call 911, but all I can see are the angry eyes I thought I’d never see again.

“Miss me, Lucy?”

“Lars.” He looks older, like prison did a number on him. He’s in a t-shirt and jeans, something he’d never be caught dead in when he was a hotshot lawyer in Portland.

“I think it’s only fair you pay for what you did.” His words are spat between tightly clenched teeth, but I can’t help the sense of relief I feel when I know, whether I survive this or not, he’ll be sent right back to prison after this stunt.

Hopefully that fact that he’s here right now means he didn’t find Mom.

We both jerk our heads when sirens sound in the distance, but it’s the black Jeep I see skidding to a stop that has my eyes filling with tears.

He can’t be here. I can’t let him get hurt because of me.

“If you wouldn’t have pissed me off that night with your stupid little play, none of this would have happened.” He towers over me, my back pressed against my car, when I feel the cold kiss of a blade under my chin.

“Get the fuck away from her!” Lars snaps his head to the side, but he’s not fast enough. Cameron tackles him to the ground, the knife nicking my collarbone before clattering to the ground at my feet. The sound of flesh hitting flesh filters into my dizzy head and I look down to see Cameron straddling Lars, sending punch after punch into his face and chest. “You fucking piece of shit, how dare you touch her.”

I’m frozen, unable to stop him from wasting his energy on a now unconscious Lars. Movement from my right snags my attention seconds before two police officers pull Cameron off Lars. He tries to fight out of their hold, his wild eyes now on me, but the men don’t let him go.

“He was protecting me! Please, let him go!” I unglue my feet from the ground and rush to the officer still holding Cam’s arms behind his back, pointing back at Lars. “He made me crash. He had a knife, and he was going to use it on me if Cameron hadn’t taken him to the ground.”

“It’s true.” I look at the woman standing on the sidewalk, her hand clutching her little boy’s hand as she shoots a look at Lars, now coming to as the officers pull him to his feet. “She’s telling the truth. I saw him hit her with his car, then pull her out and put a knife to her throat.”

The woman’s words spark the barely contained fire in Cameron’s eyes, but I shake my head, pleading with him to stay calm and not end up in jail.

“I saw it, too,” another man says, his running gearing making it clear he must have been out for a jog before he witnessed this mess.

Seemingly satisfied for the moment, the officer releases Cameron with a huff, telling him to stay where he is. I don’t

waste a second before I'm flinging myself at him, allowing the sobs to break free now that I'm safe.

"Shh, I got you. It's okay."

"She ruined everything! The little bitch deserves to die." I swing my head towards Lars as Cameron's body tenses under mine. I hold onto his waist extra tight, not wanting him to get into trouble.

"That's enough, sir."

I don't hear the rest of what happens because a third officer guides us to the sidewalk, asking us to move our cars out of traffic now that she's taken pictures of the scene. Cameron moves both vehicles, only willing to leave my side when the officer says she'll stay with me until he's done.

I'm checked over by an EMT, who bandages my head and says I probably have a mild concussion, before Cameron and I give our statements. By the time we're allowed to leave, I'm dead on my feet.

"Let's get you home, Sunshine." I nod, not caring in the slightest that he's carrying me in front of all these people. He sets me in his passenger seat, buckling me in with a soft kiss to my forehead. "It's over now. You're safe." His nostrils flare when he sees the bandage covering the shallow cut on my collarbone, but he doesn't say anything else before shutting my door.

I'm asleep before we make it home.

Chapter 22

Cameron

Motherfucker!

I punch the bag again while Liam holds it still, letting the rage inside me bubble to the surface now that I'm not around Lucy. I didn't want her to see how fucking pissed I still am, but I don't have to hide anything from Liam, so we left the girls at his place while we went to the gym.

It's the first time I've been more than twenty feet from my girl in the last three days, but we both needed it. I could tell she knew I was putting up a front, but she didn't call me on it. Mostly likely because she feels guilty about what happened, which pisses me off even more. She took one look at the shiner I have, because that fucking asshole managed to get a shot in before I knocked him out, and burst into tears.

I go another fifteen minutes before needing a water break. When I sag against the wall, Liam crosses his arms and looks at me without saying anything.

"Spit it out, Storm." There's no heat in my words, but he bites back a small grin before answering me.

"Are we switching roles? Do I need to come up with some quip while you brood against the wall like a James Dean wannabe?"

A laugh finds its way up my throat, the feel of it rolling off my tongue foreign after the last few days. "Nah, let me stick to the jokes, man. You're much better at standing there and

looking pretty.” As if to prove my point, two girls walk by and check him out, their eyes running up and down his body before they turn the corner.

“You gonna tell me what’s up your ass, then?” He raises a brow at my glare, but doesn’t break eye contact.

“You mean other than the fact my girlfriend very well could have died the other day?” I throw my water bottle on the mat and throw a punch at the bag. Without Liam’s help, it sways back and forth on the chain, and my eyes track the movement before I keep talking.

If it were anyone else, even Ty, I don’t think I’d be this vulnerable. But fuck it, he’s the last person who would judge me right now. “She doesn’t need me anymore.” My gaze falls to my feet and I shake my head, trying to dislodge the fear winding its way through my heart like barbed wire, cutting me with every breath I try to take.

“What are you talking about?”

“The threat is gone. And believe me, I’m fucking estatic breaking his restraining order and parole sent Lars straight back to the pen, because he deserves to die there after everything he’s done.” The fucker denied being responsible for the break in at Hope’s and Lucy’s apartment, but he’s a lying bastard.

Liam nods slowly, taking a seat on the bench when I do the same. “But?”

I rake my fingers through my sweaty hair, trying to put my thoughts into coherent words. “I moved in because she wasn’t safe in her own home. What if...what if, now that he’s locked up for good, she’s done with me? What if I was just a necessity when she was in danger, but now that he’s gone, she realizes she doesn’t need me?”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

I snap my gaze up to Liam’s, the deadpan look in his blue eyes making me snarl. “Fuck you.” I rip off my gloves and throw them into my bag, not bothering to look over my

shoulder to see if my so-called friend is getting ready to leave, too.

“Calm your titties, Conrad. And fucking listen for once in your life.” I swing around, and I honestly think I might punch my best friend, but the look on his face stops me. It looks like he feels sorry for me, but not in a ‘you’re fucked’ kind of way.

The swell of anger I was riding high on just a second ago leaves me hanging, making me sag back to the bench with my head in my hands. “I told her I love her.”

“Good, because you do.”

“Yeah, I fucking do. But—” I cut myself off, not wanting to admit what’s been bothering me more than anything.

“But what?”

“She never said it back.” The miniscule blip of surprise in his eyes has my heart pinching in my chest, my fingers clenching around the edge of the bench to keep me from punching the bag without my gloves. “Every time I told her I loved her, every time she had the chance to say it back, she never did.”

He doesn’t say anything for a long time, but I appreciate that. He’s not going to fill my head with bullshit just to make me feel better.

“Look, I’m not about to get all girly on your ass, but take it from someone who’s had a fucked up childhood.” He waits until I look at him before continuing. “It’s hard as hell to tell someone you love them, especially when you think your past bullshit isn’t worth it for the other person to deal with.”

“I get that, I do. But, fuck! What else can I do to make her see how much she means to me?”

“Give her time, man.” He gives me a shove against my shoulder, a smirk crawling across his smug face. “Besides, her best friend is getting married, so she’s bound to get second hand love fever.”

I snort at his attempt at a joke, but the pressure on my chest lightens the slightest bit, the barbed wired unhooking a few barbs from my vital organs, but not enough for me to feel much better about my situation.

“I can’t even decide how I want to use my degree, how can she expect me to provide for her?”

Now it’s Liam’s turn to snort. “What makes you think that little spitfire would let you support her? Hell, I tried to go halves on lunch with her the other day and she waited until I used the bathroom to pay the whole bill.”

“That’s not the same, and you know it.”

“No, it’s not. But you can’t let this shit fester, Cam. Believe it or not, you’re the normal one out of the three of us. The fact that Ty is destined to be a tattoo god this early in his career and I inherited a construction company is fucking unusual.”

“I guess.”

Liam jerks his chin towards the front entrance and we start to weave our way through the machines next to the exit. “Seriously, she loves you. You know it. She knows it. We all know it. You just have to be patient.”

“Alright.” I shake my head and laugh up at the sunny sky. “Fuck, who knew I was such a pussy?”

“I’ve always known that.” He dodges my punch and laughs at his own joke like it was the funniest thing ever. I flip him the bird.

He’s right. I just need to be patient.



Lucy

“I think the maroon and sage green look the best, but it’s up to you, babe.” I slide the laptop onto the coffee table and stretch my back, the loud *pop* making us both laugh. Rocky and Max get up from their beds, tails wagging, ready for their humans to stop being so lame.

“Maybe we’ve been sitting here too long.” Violet pats Max’s head and closes the Pinterest board we started for her wedding ideas. “I’m going to toast up some leftover pancakes, you want one?”

“I would never turn down a leftover pancake. Do you even know me?” I fake outrage, pressing a hand against my chest as I raise my brows.

“You’re right. I’ll make you two.” She busies herself while I sit at the island, watching how at ease she seems in her new home. Between resting from my mild concussion and constantly fielding my mom’s calls, assuring her I’m fine and don’t need her to come live with me, I’ve been too busy to hang with my girl.

“You still loving your studio?” A wet nose brushes against my calf and I smile down at Rocky, giving him a good ear scratch.

“Yes. It’s amazing out there. The light filters in perfectly, and I love that I don’t have to worry about the mess I always end up making.”

“That’s awesome, babe. He done good.” She nods her head and slides a plate my way, setting down the syrup and peanut butter between us before we dig in.

“So, have you told Cameron you love him yet?” I choke on my pancake, reaching for the water glass in front of me. Vi laughs, shaking her head at me. “I’m taking that as a no.”

I swallow the rest of my food before answering her. “You’re right, I haven’t. But it’s not because I don’t love him. I do. It’s just... When he told me, I wasn’t there yet. Inside my head, sure. But outside, where bad shit always seems to find a way into my life? I didn’t want to jinx myself.”

Keen hazel eyes shine back at me, understanding clear in her gaze. “But now?”

“Now I know I’m ready. I just haven’t found the right time yet.” I take another bite, chewing slowly before I swallow. “I’ve been doing all the last minute stuff for the capstone

show, and then everything with Lars happened...it hasn't felt like the right time."

"He needs to know how you feel, Luce." She has a gentle smile on her face, but she knows better than anyone how quickly someone can be taken out of your life forever.

"I know."

We eat the rest of our meal without talking, just listening to the birds chirping through the screened back door, the dogs rough-housing on the rug next to the couch.

"How was Cooper?" My attention snaps to her, surprised she wants to know. I purposefully didn't bring it up, thinking she wasn't ready to hear about it.

"It was...hard. Weird. Horrible. Relieving." I blow out a huge breath and shake my head. "I could tell he was sorry for what he did."

Violet's jaw clenches, but she nods, wanting me to keep going.

"He explained a bit more of what happened between him and that Tommy guy. I guess...I guess I have a better sense of how he got tangled up until he was so far gone, he didn't know up from down, but that doesn't stop me from being beyond furious and hurt."

"Did he seem healthy?" I smile sadly at my best friend, her nurturing instinct making itself known, even while talking about the guy who could have gotten her killed.

"He looked okay. I thought people were supposed to lose weight during detox, but he looked like he'd put on some muscle since the last time we saw him."

"Did he say anything about me?" Her quiet inquiry is equal parts apprehensive, curious, and hopeful, and it breaks my fucking heart to know how much he broke us, yet we still care about him.

"He did, but I didn't tell him more than that you were okay." I reach across the island and take her hand, my thumb

rubbing over one of the healed scars on her wrist. “It still felt weird to talk about you.”

“I miss him.” My eyes widen at her statement, but she’s looking off into her backyard, a furrow between her brows. “I haven’t said anything to Liam, because I know he’ll never be okay with me seeing Cooper again. And I get that, I truly do. But it doesn’t stop me from missing all of the good memories we had together, you know?”

Her eyes find mine and I nod, knowing exactly what she’s feeling. “I think I’m picking up what you’re putting down, babe.” I squeeze her hand before pulling back, taking my plate to the dishwasher. “But I think you might be giving Liam less credit than he deserves. If you really wanted to reconnect with Cooper, I don’t think he’d deprive you of that closure.”

She scoffs, but the uncertainty in her eyes doesn’t go unnoticed. “I don’t think so, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not ready to see him, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be there.”

“Fair enough.”

We hang out for the rest of the day, doing more wedding planning stuff and thinking about possible bachelorette party ideas. Liam eventually kicks me out, claiming he needs some alone time with his woman.

When I get to my apartment, Cameron’s Jeep is in the driveway, making me smile at how much I love coming home to him. We decided it was safe to stay here now, so Tyler has the house to himself again.

I open the door and my smile instantly drops when I smell something burning. I run into the kitchen just in time to see Cameron pull out a tray of...well, I’m not sure what they’re supposed to be, but they’re black as shit.

“Well, crap. I’m almost certain those aren’t supposed to look like that.” Cameron gives me a sheepish grin, running flour coated fingers through his hair. That’s when I notice there’s flour everywhere. The counter, the knobs on the stove, cabinet handles, the sink. Even his black t-shirt has a smear of

white powder on it, right where a name tag would go, his chest much too wide for the apron he has on. If I had my phone on me, I'd snap a picture and send it to Violet; she'd get a kick out of seeing Cam in the pink apron she bought me for Christmas last year.

“What exactly are you trying to do, other than destroy my kitchen?” I can't keep the amusement out of my voice, but I hang my hands on my hips and quirk a brow anyway.

“I was trying to be sweet and bake you some chocolate pastries, but I think I fucked it up.” His gaze falls to the baking sheet on the counter, smoke still rising from the black lumps of dough. “Maybe we can scrape off the burnt stuff?” His hopeful expression makes me laugh, but I quickly school my features when he glares at me. I hold up my hands and give him an innocent look.

“How about we make something together? Maybe something a little more beginner friendly, like chocolate chip cookies.”

His glare melts into a sweet smile, and he pulls me into his arms when I try to squeeze by him to grab a cloth. “I can work with that idea.” His hands slide to my ass and pull me closer, his nose rubbing slowly against mine before our lips meet in a soft kiss. “I missed you.”

“I was only gone for a few hours,” I whisper against his neck, trailing my lips down the column of his throat, enjoying the way his pulse flutters in the hollow there.

“That's hours too long, babe. Just look what happens when you leave me to my own devices.” We both look around the kitchen, dirty bowls, utensils, and a jug of milk all spread out on the counter and island, a fine layer of flour covering it all.

“How exactly did you manage to get so much flour everywhere?” I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing, pulling away so I can start cleaning up the mess.

“I was using that mixer thing, and when I turned it on, everything just went *poof*, and bam! Flour everywhere.” The

look of shock on his face has laughter falling from my lips, and soon enough Cam's deep chuckle joins my giggles.

"I can't always be perfect, Sunshine." I feel his chest brush against my back, his arms caging me in on either side against the counter I'm wiping down. When I turn around, his eyes are full of dirty intentions, his tongue coming out to wet his lips.

"I don't know, you're pretty perfect to me." My words are breathy as he crowds me against the island, his hips pressing against mine while his hands slide up my ribcage, thumbs slowly sweeping just below my breasts.

"Need you now, babe." His eyes burn into mine, asking permission. When I nod, he brushes the bowl and wooden spoon to the ground and lifts me on the counter, pulling me to the very edge as his lips take mine in a harsh kiss. I tangle my fingers in his hair and pull hard enough to get a low groan out of him before he pulls away, peeling my shirt off and tossing it behind him.

"Who knew flour was an aphrodisiac?" I reach behind my back and undo the clasp on my bra, letting the material fall down my arms. Cameron's attention falls to my nipples a millisecond before his mouth is on me, his soft lips surrounding the achy bud as he uses his tongue and teeth to drive me crazy.

He pulls away, his breaths making his strong shoulders rise and fall under my hands. "You're so fucking beautiful, Sunshine."

My heart sings at his praise, and something he once said comes back to me. "Why do you call me Sunshine?" His eyes snap to mine, his gaze a liquid gold spilling over me, warming every corner of my soul until I feel like I'm glowing.

"When I wake up in the mornings, the first thing I look for is the sun shining in through the window. I've always been like that, even as a little kid." He smiles, trailing his hands down my ribs, unbuttoning my jeans before kneeling on the floor, slowly taking off my shoes and socks.

“When I saw you for the first time, you were sitting alone at a picnic table on campus, head turned down over whatever book you were reading.” His hands slide up the back of my calves as he stands, never taking his eyes off me. “I stopped walking, pissing off the dude behind me, but I didn’t give a single fuck because I was completely captivated by you.” I’m lifted off the counter just long enough for him to pull my jeans over the swell of my hips, my panties along with them, before he positions me back on the edge of the counter again.

“You looked up from your book, smiling softly at something you must have read, and the sun hit you in a way that had you glowing.” He stands back, pulling off the apron and his shirt with impatient movements, then flicks the button of his jeans open, keeping eye contact with me the whole time. When he’s completely naked, I expect him to touch me, but he leans against the opposite counter, licking his bottom lip as his eyes lazily trail up and down my body.

“I wanted you so badly I could taste it, the flavor of your kiss haunting me even before I knew your name.” My gaze lowers to where his hand is slowly stroking his cock, the head a dark pink tipped with a drop of liquid my tongue is aching to taste. “You looked like a fiery angel, and I swear to god I knew right then and there that you would ruin me for any other woman.”

“Why didn’t you say hi?” I tilt my head to the side, squeezing my thighs together to relieve some of the pressure building around my clit, the deep throbbing in my core reminding me how empty I am.

“I was going to, but you packed up and left.” His words are strained from pleasure, a groan ripping pasting his lips as his hand picks up speed. His head falls back to expose his tanned throat and I curl my fingers over the edge of the counter to keep myself from throwing myself at him. When he lifts his head, his eyes are on fire. “Every time I touched myself like this, it was you looking up at me with those blue eyes and freckled cheeks. Finding out you were as sassy as you were

beautiful was just the cherry on top.” He smirks, finally taking the two small steps it takes to press his body against mine.

“So, you’ve basically been in love with me for years.” I rake my nails over his stomach, loving the way his muscles twitch from the attention. When I look up, his gaze is still full of animal need, but love is shining even brighter than his lust.

His forehead falls to mine and he cradles my face in his palms. “Yeah, Sunshine. That sounds about right.”

I smile to myself, any doubt about telling him how I feel completely evaporated into the air of our messy kitchen. “Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah, baby. What is it?” His eyes are soft when he looks down at me, his fingers digging into my waist, slowly kneading my skin.

“I love you.”

His eyes widen, and then he’s kissing me like we’ll never see each other again and this is the only time we’ll have together. When he sucks my lower lip into his mouth and pulls at the tender flesh with his teeth, I feel an echoing rush of heat in my core, making me scoot even closer.

“Fuck, Sunshine,” he murmurs into the delicate skin behind my ear. “Need to hear you say it again.”

“I love you, Cameron.” I bring his face back to mine, looking into his eyes as I give him a watery smile. “I know I come with a fuck ton of baggage, and not even the good Prada kind of bag, but I’m yours.”

“I’m glad you’re finally seeing the light, babe. ‘Cuz you’ve been mine for a long fucking time now.” His hands land on my hips and pull, his cock sliding home, tunneling so deep we both moan at the pleasure and pain mixture.

“Oh, fuck.” I can’t move much in this position, but Cameron seems to be happy to do all the work, pumping his length into me over and over again, his eyes locked on where he’s pushing inside me, cock shiny from my arousal.

“Hold on, Sunshine.” Cameron lifts me off the counter, my legs wrapping tightly around his waist so he doesn’t slip out of me. While he walks us to my bedroom, I bring his lips back to mine, twisting my tongue with his, sucking it deep into my mouth.

My back touches the cool sheets for only a second before Cameron’s hot skin is rubbing against mine, his hips thrusting against mine at a speed I won’t be able to handle for much longer. He brings his thumb to my mouth and I don’t hesitate to suck it between my lips, getting the pad nice and wet.

“Good girl,” he whispers against my belly, his hot tongue making a trail to my nipple, where he bites before sucking the pain away. He pops his thumb out of my mouth and brings it to my clit, making slow circles around the throbbing bud, pinching it between his knuckles every few strokes.

“Don’t stop,” I whimper, digging my heels into his ass, feeling his glutes flex every time he pumps into me.

“Never,” he promises, angling my hips so he’s hitting the spot only he’s ever found deep inside me, my orgasm a waking beast inside me, getting ready to rip my world apart. I force my eyes open, not knowing when they closed, and look up at Cameron, his gaze already on me.

“I love you so much.” Tears prick the back of my eyes, but I don’t care if he sees how much he makes me feel. I’m done being scared.

“I love you, too.” He slows his pace, pulling almost all the way out before pushing into me so deep my breath gets caught in my throat.

I’ve had sex plenty of times, but this is the first time I realize that it’s never been just sex with Cameron. Even before I was ready to acknowledge how badly I was falling for him, we were always making love, *he* was always making love to me, showing me how precious I am to him.

“What are you thinking about?” His thumb brushes against my clit and he smirks when I don’t answer him right away,

getting lost in the zaps of pleasure his ministrations are giving me.

“I’m thinking I really hit the boyfriend jackpot.” I nip his lobe and even though I’m not strong enough to flip us, he can tell that’s what I’m trying to do, so he wraps one arm around my waist and switches our position so I’m on top, moaning at how deep he can get this way.

“Take what you need, Sunshine.” His hands find my hips and he watches with heated eyes as I use my thighs to lift myself up, then slam onto his cock, making him bite his lip and squeeze his eyes shut. “Fuck, you’re so tight. Need you to get there, baby.”

I grab one of his hands and bring it to my breast before moving the other to where we’re connected. “Touch me,” I beg, head falling back between my shoulders, my orgasm swimming closer to the surface when he flicks my clit and pinches my nipple at the same time he pumps his length inside me.

“Yes!” My voice is raw from all the noises he’s drawing from me, but I couldn’t care less. “I’m close.”

“Fuck yes, you are.” The hand tweaking my nipple falls away, and before I can whimper my disapproval, I feel both of his thumbs start to massage the lips of my pussy, putting even more pressure where he’s thrusting into me at a rapid pace. “Feel good?” His eyes are watching his hands, but he flicks his attention to my face when I nod, unable to form words.

When the first flickers of my impending orgasm start to creep in, I let out a loud moan, moving my hips faster. One of Cameron’s fingers slides inside me alongside his cock while his other thumb rubs hard circles around my swollen clit, pushing me over the edge with a loud cry.

“I’m coming! Oh, fuck, don’t stop.”

“Sunshine!” I look at the pleased pain creasing his brow as he starts to come, and it makes my orgasm last even longer, my inner muscles milking him until we’re both breathless. He

continues to move inside me, slowly working us down until we're both smiling softly at each other.

"Fuck." I fall to his chest, burying my nose in his neck, the smell of clean sweat mixed with his pine and amber making my core give another squeeze around his still hard cock.

"Shit, baby. Don't do that, a man needs a minute to compose himself." He slaps my ass as he bites my shoulder, earning him a playful growl.

"I can't help it if you smell amazing." I push up against his chest and look down at him, all messy hair and sated eyes. When he lifts his hand to the side of my face, I cover it with my own before leaning into his palm. "I love you."

His eyes spark, and suddenly I'm under him, his hands cushioning my head as he kisses me slowly, like we have all the time in the world. "I love you, too."

"Does this mean you'll officially move in here?" I don't bother hiding the hopeful tone in my voice, but the smile falls off my face when he pulls back and glares at me.

"What are you talking about, woman? I already officially live here." I laugh at his fake anger, shaking my head as his façade crumbles into an ornery grin, his eyes soft and happy. "So...about those cookies..."

I laugh and push him off me, needing to get cleaned up before I can even think about making him cookies. When I catch his eye over my shoulder, he's laying on his side, head propped on a hand while he watches me.

"What?"

He gets up and pulls me into his chest, knuckles under my chin so I'm looking at his handsome face. "When I saw you in the quad that day, I saw our life together, too. Sounds cheesy as fuck, but it's true. I saw a little redheaded girl running around our legs, playing fetch with a golden retriever, your belly swollen with another baby." He shakes his head, grinning to himself. "Scared the ever living shit out of me, but I saw it nonetheless."

I don't say anything. I don't know if I could force words past the tightness in my throat right now.

"I want that, Lucy. I want to give you everything you've ever wanted."

A tear falls from my eye, but he's quick to wipe it away, kissing my lips so softly I can't even be sure if he touched me at all. I don't think he expects me to say anything, because he lets me go after another few seconds, letting me know he's taking a shower and I should join him if I want to.

I stand there, naked as the day as I was born, just staring into space for at least a few minutes before he yells for me. My head is spinning with everything that just went down, but the deep sense of rightness covering my body like a warm hug puts me at ease.

Now that my life isn't in danger anymore, maybe I really can have everything Cameron so beautifully painted across the walls of my room.

Maybe, just maybe, I'm going to get the happily ever after I've always been too afraid to wish for.

Chapter 23

All that flour can't be sanitary in the least. And how fucking dare he touch my Dolly!

He should know she's mine. Always has been.

To play with.

To hurt.

To kill.

When that fucking imbecile ran her off the road, I thought he ruined my game.

But he made it that much better.

They think she's safe, when the fun is really just beginning.

Honestly, it's more than a little insulting they think Lars is the mastermind, but I'll admit, his little temper tantrum in the middle of the intersection was quite entertaining.

And the way Cameron so heroically sped onto the scene, practically banging on his chest, letting everyone know he was the big macho man there to save his woman?

Fucking pathetic.

They're still going at it on the counter without a care in the world, but I don't watch the show for much longer.

I still have one last domino to put in place before I break my little doll, and then all will be right in the world once again.

Chapter 24

Cameron

How could I have missed this?

“Sweetie? Are you still there?” My mom’s voice snaps me out of my head, but that doesn’t stop me from cursing under my breath.

“Yeah, I’m here. Just having a mini meltdown over here, no big deal.”

“Melt down? Tell me what’s going on.” I hear the therapist tone sneaking into her question, making me smile despite the fact that I’m absolutely fucked.

“Sav’s graduation is next weekend.”

“Um, yes honey. That’s what I just reminded you twenty seconds ago.”

“Shit.” I drag my fingers through my hair, looking around the room as other students slowly trickle in for class.

“You’re going to need to give me more than that. I’m good, but not that good.”

“That’s the same weekend as Lucy’s fashion show.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” I see Marcus walk in and give him a nod as he makes his way over to the seat next to me.

“Alright, it’s not that long of a drive. What time is the show? I know graduation is in the morning, so we’ll probably

be done by early afternoon at the latest.”

I squeeze my phone between my ear and shoulder as I yank out my laptop from my bag. “Show starts at four, I think.”

“Okay, we can work with that. I think you’d be able to make it to both if you’re sure to leave here by noon.” A car door slams shut in the background, the engine of my mom’s car coming to life shortly after.

“It’ll be tight, but I’ll make it work. Sav might kill me for skipping out on her party, but I’ll make it up to her.” I let out a relieved breath and drop my backpack between my feet, eyeing the professor who just walked in. “Mom. I gotta go, but I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you, too.” I hang up and slide my phone away, making sure it’s on silent first. Last thing I need is to be the dick whose phone goes off during a lecture.

“Hey man, everything alright?” Marcus drops his bag between his feet and opens his notebook, glancing at me as he settles in.

“Yeah, just figuring out some logistics for next weekend. Lucy’s capstone show is the same day as my baby sister’s graduation.”

“Shit, that’s unfortunate. I’m sure your girl would understand if you missed her show for your sister’s thing.”

“You’re not wrong, but I’m really hoping I don’t have to miss either one.” I know it wouldn’t be the end of the world, but I know how much this show means to Lucy, and I’ll be damned if I miss my chance to see Liam and Tyler strut down the catwalk.

I still can’t believe she convinced them to do it. Vi and Kloey? Sure, no problem. But my boys? Lucy must have promised months worth of snickerdoodles to make that miracle happen.

When I asked her why I didn't get to model, she said she wanted me to be able to enjoy the show, but I secretly think she didn't want other chicks looking at her man.

I mean, I'm smokin' hot, so I get why she wants to keep me hidden away, so I didn't fight her on it.

"Alright people, let's get started. There's three weeks left of the year and we still have a ton of material to cover." The professor starts her lesson and I hustle to pull up my Word document with all my notes.

Nothing like a little bit of ethics and communication to take your mind off your worries for a while, am I right?

Hours later, I'm sweating through my last rep at the bench press. Hartford has a pretty decent gym, and the dude who sits at the front counter lets me sneak Tyler in even though he's not a student here, so it's a win-win.

"You done, man?" I look up at Ty and nod, grabbing my water bottle and squirting some much needed liquid over my face. "Jesus, can you try not to be so cliché?" His annoyed tone makes me laugh, and because I like pissing the guy off, I make sure to shake my head hard enough that droplets land on him.

"What's up your ass today?" We switch places and I spot him as he pushes through his rep.

"I'm fine." He racks and tells me to add more weight, so I do, giving him a look that says I know he's full of shit. "I know you love talking all about your feelings, but some of us like to keep our shit to ourselves."

"Good thing you know I'm a stubborn fucker and won't drop it until you crack like an egg on Sunday morning." I grin down as he starts another rep, noticing he's put on more muscle since the last time we worked out together.

"Fuck off, Cam." He glares up at me, so I grab the bar and push, not letting him rack until he gives. It takes a few seconds, but he eventually growls like the animal he is and relents. "Fine."

I quickly grab the bar and wait for him to finish gulping down his own water before I hit him with my question.

“Is it about the shop?” He’s been working at Golden, but in any spare moment, his focus has been centered around closing on the location he found right off main street.

“No, shit’s going as well as can be expected on that front.” I don’t say anything. Years of experience have taught me my best friend won’t open up until he’s good and ready. “My dad wants to have dinner next week.”

Ah. That explains the pissy attitude. His parents aren’t the worst people in the world, but they have a knack for making Ty feel guilty about his career choice.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” I slap a hand on his shoulder, but he brushes me off.

“Yeah.” He grabs a disinfectant wipe from the dispenser next to the bench and wipes everything down, then grabs his stuff without saying anything else. “I’ll see you later.”

If I thought pushing him would result in answers, I’d stop him. Since I’m not a total dipshit, I know it’s better to let it go, so I grab my keys and water bottle and head out, too.

At least Ty knows what he wants and is going for it. He’s always wanted to own his own shop, and now he’s making it happen.

That’s a whole helluva lot more than I can say for myself. God, I sound so pathetic. The guy whose baseball dream went up in smoke can’t find anything else he’s good at.

How fuckin’ cliché can I be?

I’m sure my dad would love to hook me up with something, but I’m not about to take a handout, even from my own father. He’s worked his ass off to be one of the coaches for the Mets, and I’m determined to work just as hard for something I’m passionate about.

I just need to figure out what that is.

When I'm halfway across the quad, a laugh I'd know anywhere turns my head just in time to see Lucy sitting at a picnic table with Jude, his arm slung over her shoulder as she throws her head back and laughs again.

The fact they're sitting at *the* picnic table has my jaw clenching, not wanting this dick to taint one of the best memories of my life.

Neither of them notice my approach, but I know the instant Jude sees me because he retracts his arm and subtly scoots a few inches away from Lucy.

"I thought you had class right now." Shit, that didn't come out sounding very friendly, but fuck it.

Lucy snaps her head my way and frowns. "Hey. It was canceled. I ran into Jude and we decided to have a late lunch." She runs her eyes over me, but her attention flicks back to the fucker sitting next to her. "Jude was just telling me he got accepted into med school. Isn't that awesome?"

I clench my teeth and hope my smile looks halfway decent. "Congrats."

He jerks his chin at me, then looks at Lucy with a sense of comfortability I hate. "Luce used to get squeamish even talking about changing diapers, so I told her she won't ever have to help me with bedpans when I'm everyone's bitch as a first year."

She pushes his arm and says something that makes him laugh, but I don't hear it. I'm still caught up in what he said.

When would they have talked about changing diapers? Were they that serious when they were together? Did they talk about having a family together?

"You could always design my scrubs. Put little animals on them, something the kids would like." I snap my gaze back to Jude and he explains. "I'm going to be a pediatrician."

Of *fucking* course he is.

“You’re going to be awesome. You were always so good with the kids when we volunteered at the library read-ins.” Lucy smiles at him before looking up at me, patting the spot next to her. “Want to sit with us? You’re done for the day, right?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

No. No, I’m not good at all, but I can’t tell her that. I need to get my head on straight before I do something I’ll regret.

This feeling of inadequacy, mixed with jealousy, is choking me, and I need to get away, get some air before I drown.

Lucy frowns at me and tilts her head to the side. “Are you feeling okay? Why don’t I come with you and I’ll make you some soup?” She’s already picking up her trash and piling it on her paper plate, standing up and saying goodbye to Jude before walking over to the trash can by the doors leading to the cafeteria.

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?” I glance over at Jude, who’s now standing next to me, his eyes on my girl as she gets sidetracked, chatting with a girl I recognize from our morning class. “Don’t fuck up, man. You manage to find yourself someone like Lucy, and you don’t let her go.” I glare at him, knowing I shouldn’t make a scene, but unable to completely hold my tongue.

“You two seemed pretty cozy when I found you. Wanna tell me what that was about?” His cool eyes slide to mine, his lips twisting into a smirk.

“I lost her once, I don’t plan on letting that happen again.” He looks back at Lucy, an intense look of longing in his gaze that I want to scrub from my retinas. “When you inevitably fuck it up, I’ll be waiting in the wings.” He walks away without waiting for a reply, waving at Lucy before heading towards the community parking lot.

“Ready to go?” Lucy’s next to me, her hand reaching up to touch my forehead. “How long have you been feeling icky?”

I push her hand away, not meeting her gaze. “I’m fine.” I start walking towards her apartment.

Fuck, I mean *our* apartment. It’s ours now, right?

I’m so in my head, I don’t notice we haven’t said anything to each other the whole walk back. When I close the door behind me, I drop my bag to the ground and head to the kitchen for a glass of water.

“Why are you mad?” Lucy has her arms crossed over her chest, leaning against the fridge while she frowns at me.

“I’m not. Everything is fine.” I set my glass down a little too hard, the sound making Lucy jump.

“Is this about me having lunch with Jude? Because I really thought we were past this, Cameron.” The look on her face tells me she’s tired of my shit, but I can see the worry just under the surface.

“Can you really blame me, Lucy? He looks at you like you hung the fucking moon. He doesn’t even try to hide it!”

“Oh my god, you’re so frustrating!” She twists around and stomps to her room, but I’m hot on her tail.

“I’m frustrating? How would you like it if I spent time with one of the women I’ve fucked?” My words hit her like a slap, but I keep going, not giving a shit that I’ve lost my filter. “Only that wouldn’t even cover it, because I never told any of them I loved them.”

She shakes her head, tears clinging to her lower lashes. “You can’t hold that against me, Cameron. I didn’t even know you existed!” Her head tips up to the ceiling, fists tight at her sides when she looks at me again. “Can you try to tell me what’s really bothering you?”

I scoff, running my hand over my mouth, hating what I’m about to say. “He still wants you. And as much as it fucking kills me to admit it, he’s better for you than I am.”

Her eyes widen at my admission, face paling so her freckles stand out even in the late afternoon light spilling into the

room. “Stop. Just shut your stupid mouth before you break my heart.”

“He’s going to be a fucking doctor, Sunshine. How can I compete with that, huh?”

“It’s not a fucking competition, Cameron!” Her eyes are on fire, like she’s burning from the inside out, and I’m the only one who can stop the flames.

“It took you months to tell me you loved me!” I feel my cheeks flush with my outburst, but I can’t stop the words from tumbling past my lips. “Did you tell him you loved him when he fucked you?”

“Cameron, I—”

“Did you?” I yell, my chest heaving against the waves of darkness trying to suffocate me.

“I did, but—”

“I need to go. You don’t need me anymore. Lars isn’t a threat, so you’ll be safe.”

She rushes in front of me and grabs my shoulders. “I don’t want you to go. I thought...I thought we were good.” Her brows furrow, gaze bouncing between my eyes as she tries to read my mind.

“Why don’t you call Jude and let him know you’re free. I’ll bet he’d love to take you out.” God, I hate myself for the look of betrayal on her face, but I’m doing her a favor. Someday, when she has the perfect life with the perfect husband, she’ll thank me.

“What the fuck, Cameron?” The hurt swimming in her eyes is slowly turning to anger, and I force myself to give her a sneer, snapping the last thread keeping us together.

“He’ll even wear the scrubs you design for him, right? Match made in heaven!” I’m losing it. I need to get out of here before I inflict more damage.

“I don’t want Jude, I want you. I love *you*, Cameron.”

I laugh, but there's nothing funny about the sound. "I'm not what you need, Lucy." My voice breaks, but I keep going, committed to breaking us completely. "What can I even offer you, huh? I have no idea what I'm doing after graduation. I'm not going to be some hotshot doctor." I run my fingers through my hair and look up at the ceiling. "I could hardly get you to say you love me, so really, what the fuck am I still doing here?"

"I'm sorry! I was scared to admit how I felt." Her lips are trembling, head shaking back and forth as she tries to grab my hand, but I push it away. "You can't go, not after you made me believe in a future I never dreamed I could have." Her shoulders shake as a sob bursts from her chest. "What about our little redhead running around our yard? Don't take that away from us, baby. Please."

I blink away the moisture trying to leak from my eyes, biting my tongue so hard I taste blood. When I grab my keys and bag, I force myself to look at the only person who will ever hold my heart in their hands, pain slicing through my chest as I open the door. "Bye, Sunshine."

She drops to her knees and lets out a sound that has my eyes stinging, but I don't turn around. I keep going, shooting a text to Violet asking her to come check on Lucy, before jamming my key into the ignition and driving far, far away from here.

Chapter 25

Lucy

I stare at my coffee cup, watching the steam slowly rise from the burning liquid before it disappears altogether. I don't know how long I've been sitting here, wrapped up in a blanket on the couch, not giving one single fuck that my hair is greasier than it's ever been and I haven't changed out of this tank top for the past three days.

My *Good Vibes Only* mug makes me feel like the universe is laughing at me, but I can't seem to find the energy to even care, let alone get up and find a new cup.

Kloey brought me dinner last night, but I couldn't tell you what we talked about. Between her and Violet, I haven't felt completely abandoned, but even their best efforts fell flat when trying to cheer me up.

Both Liam and Tyler have called, but I ignored them, choosing to wallow in my self-pity a while longer. Most of my classes have wound down now, and I'm as prepared as I'll ever be for the showcase, so I haven't really had a reason to give up my hobo chic look that I've been rocking for the last week.

Jude texted me, but I ignored him, too.

I take a sip of my coffee and decide that today is the day I'm going to pull myself together. I'm going to shower, put on a killer outfit, and hope like hell I can keep it together in public without bursting into tears like I have been since Cameron *fucking* Conrad broke me.

I mean, really, how dare he. I can't help that I fell in love with Jude before I met Cameron. He can't hold that against me any more than I could hold his random one night stands against him. None of it should matter.

My eyes catch on one of his hoodies draped over the back of the couch and I squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to cry anymore.

His stuff is all over the apartment; his razor next to the sink, a pair of socks he tried to shoot into the laundry basket and missed by a few inches. Last night, I found the reading glasses he thought he lost under the bed, covered by a pair of my leggings.

I can still remember how devastatingly handsome he looked in them, the black frames making him seem like my very own Clark Kent while he read his textbook next to me as I highlighted one of my reading assignments.

I'm not sure when my apartment became *our* apartment, but his presence is everywhere I look. I slept in one of his shirts last night, the scent of him clinging to the soft cotton lulling me into a restless sleep. That was the only night I broke down and wore anything of his, but I don't regret it.

Shaking my head, I throw off my blanket and toss the rest of my coffee, knowing I need to get going if I don't want to be late for class.

I'm putting on my mascara when my phone rings. Glancing down, I see it's Grams, Violet's grandmother. I haven't talked to her in a while, but she's probably the only person I'd consider objective enough to give me some advice, so I press the green button before putting it on speaker.

"Hi Grams."

"Hi sweetheart, how are you?" Her tone is kind, but also a bit apprehensive, so I know Vi must have spilled the beans.

"I'm okay." Slight lie, but not the worst.

“Violet updated me on what happened, honey. I’m so sorry to hear this Cameron boy decided to be a little shit.”

I snort out a laugh, grabbing my backpack as I head out. “He was a little shit, but unfortunately Grams, I seem to have fallen in love with said shit, so I’m not really sure what to do here.”

It’s nice out, finally warm enough to only need a light jacket in the mornings. I wave at one of my neighbors weeding his garden, taking advantage of the nice weather.

“Well, it’s quite simple, really. If you love him, and you know he loves you, you don’t let him go. Period.” Her solution sounds logical, but it doesn’t help much. Not when I have no idea if Cameron truly doesn’t want to be with me anymore.

“I don’t think it’s that simple, Grams. He has it in his head that he’s not good enough for me. Did the whole martyr thing and broke up with me so I could be with this other guy he thinks would be able to give me a better life.”

“Ah, I see. The classic self-sabotager.”

I move out of the way for a guy jogging past me in the opposite direction, then check the street before crossing. “I don’t know how much Violet told you, but there’s been some crazy stuff happening, and I honestly think it’s spooked him. Maybe he doesn’t think I’m worth the trouble.”

“Lucy McGuire, don’t say that. You are worth it one hundred times over, he just needs to pull his head out of his ass, that’s all.”

I laugh, which I know was her intention, and shake my head as I step onto campus, only seeing a few other students this early in the morning. I’m not looking forward to seeing Cameron, but we have to turn in our final papers today, so I doubt anyone is skipping today’s class.

“He’s got some things to work through, and I think he needs to do that work alone. I love him, but I can’t be with someone who flips their lid every time I talk to an ex.”

“Hmmm, how serious was it with this ex?”

How honest should I be with her?

Fuck it, she reads bodice rippers, she can handle my candor. “I loved him and lost my virginity to him. Some very bad shit went down the same night we slept together, and I ended up leaving him without saying goodbye because I wasn’t safe.” I bite my lip, debating on adding the next part, but decide to go for complete transparency. “He also plans to become a pediatrician.”

She doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, but I can just barely hear the ocean in the background. She lives on Sanibel Island; Vi and I are planning a late summer visit to see her and I can’t wait.

Maybe my life will be ironed out by then.

“You know I adore you just as much as Violet, dear. But I have to be honest and say I can see where the young man is coming from. I would probably feel a bit threatened by your relationship with this ex boyfriend, too.”

“Ugh, not what I wanna hear, Grams.” She chuckles, but doesn’t say anything. “I guess I can see where he’s coming from. I just...I thought our relationship was strong enough to handle some jealousy, you know?”

“Is it just jealousy, though? It sounds like he feels inferior to this other guy, not only because you gave him your vajayjay flower, but he also has a plan for his future.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing at her use of the word *vajayjay*, and focus on everything else. I don’t know how I could have been any clearer about my feelings towards Jude now that I’m with Cameron.

And speak of the devil. My breath catches when I see Cam walking towards the business building, head bent towards the ground. I haven’t seen him since last week, and I can’t help running my eyes over his body, trying to see if he looks different, if he’s been as wrecked as I’ve been since he broke up with me.

“Grams, I’m about to step into class, so I gotta let you go.” I slow my pace, not wanting to get too close to Cameron. “Thank you for checking on me, it means a lot.”

“Of course, honey. You keep me updated. And let me know if I need to kick anyone’s ass.” I laugh, letting her know she’ll be the first person I’ll call.

When I walk into the lecture hall, I keep my eyes down, making my way to a seat in the back so I can look at Cameron without him being able to look at me. I’ve only been sitting for a minute when my eyes wander to where I used to sit next to him. He’s not there, but I saw him walk in the building, so he’s got to be here somewhere.

My eyes scan the room, snagging on the familiar flannel I’ve worn around the house more than once. I drop my gaze before he catches me, and soon enough, class starts, Professor Short telling us about the end of term homework assignments that need to be completed by next week.

With the free time I’ve had on my hands, and since I’m completely ready for my show, I’ve finished both assignments she’s talking about, but I force myself to pay attention to her regardless, afraid my eyes will once again land on Cameron.

We’ve got five minutes left in class when I feel his stare, a caress along my cheek and jaw, slipping over my shoulders and arm like a soft wave of warmth. He has little smudges under his eyes, like he hasn’t slept in days, and even from here, I can see how hard he’s grabbing the small flip down desk in front of him.

My focus snaps to Short when she dismisses the class, and our moment is broken as students start packing up, making plans for the weekend, some yelling across the room to get the attention of someone else.

Slowly, I slide my laptop away, zipping my backpack and keeping my eyes down, taking enough time that I know he’ll be gone when I look up.

I let out a little huff of breath and stand up, my heart squeezing in equal parts relief and frustration when I see that I was right. He's gone.

Of course he's gone. *He broke up with me, didn't he?* Why would he be waiting to talk to me?

I notice Katie, the girl who had a dickface for a boyfriend, is still putting her stuff away, and I head her way.

"Hey."

Her head snaps up and she gives me a genuine smile before slinging her backpack over her shoulder and getting up. "Hey! How are you? I couldn't help but notice you haven't been sitting next to that guy anymore..." Gentle curiosity fills her green eyes, but she doesn't push me as we walk out the door and towards the main doors.

"Yeah, uh, we broke up." I'm doing a shitty job of not scanning the foyer, and then the quad, for Cameron as we walk in silence for a beat. A sense of deep loneliness swirls around me, landing in my belly with a sick sort of finality.

"Did he get that memo? Because he's been staring at you every time I look his way in Short's class."

I take her little nugget of info and tuck it into my pocket for later, shaking my head at her. "He's the one who ended it, so yeah, he's aware of the situation."

"He what?" Her dark brows reach her hairline as she lets out a low whistle. "Damn girl, didn't call that one. I thought for sure he was looking all lovesick because you moved on."

I snort, still scanning the area for chestnut hair and golden brown eyes. "Nope, not sure how to move on from the love of my life, but I guess I'll be figuring it out soon enough." A broken laugh tumbles past my lips, but I'm not fooling her.

"I'm assuming you've tried to talk to him since he..." Her question dies off, her attention straying to the guy waving his hand over his head, inviting us to walk over to the table he's taken over. "Oh, I see." The wisp of disappointment in her

tone has me grabbing her hand, stopping us a few yards from where Jude is still smiling at me.

“No, it’s not like that.” I don’t want to get into everything with her right now, especially since we’re not really friends, but I don’t want any rumors rolling around campus, either. “Jude is a friend. Just a friend.”

Katie’s eyes snap over my shoulder and back to me. “Does he know that? Because he’s looking at you like you’re a snack he’s ready to eat.”

“I’m in love with Cameron.” My voice breaks over his name, but I keep going. “Jude, the guy over there, he’s special to me, but he doesn’t have my heart in a chokehold like Cam does.”

Katie’s eyes flicker between mine, her head nodding as her gaze fills with understanding. “Gotcha.” She takes a few steps away from me, thumbs tucked into her backpack straps. “Good luck with that, girl. I’ll see you later.” And then she’s gone, leaving me to deal with Jude on my own.

A lick of guilt sweeps up my back as I turn towards him. I shouldn’t feel like I have to *deal* with Jude. He was the most important person in my life at one point, and I won’t erase the memories I have with him.

But he needs to know my heart isn’t up for grabs. Once I’ve given Cameron some time to pull his head out of his ass, I’m taking him back whether he agrees or not. He was there for me when I tried pushing him away, and I don’t plan on letting him go, either.

“What’s up, Luce?” Jude stands and hugs me before I sit across from him, setting my bag aside. I pull in a deep breath, holding it for a second before blowing it through lips in a big gust.

“Look, you know I don’t beat around the bush, so I’m just going to come out and say it, okay?” He quirks a brow, looking like he’s holding back a laugh at my sudden seriousness.

“Hit me, McGuire.”

“I’m in love with Cameron.” His word choice now seems extremely fitting, because my statement seems to hit him in the chest, his body actually flinching the tiniest bit. I hate that I’m hurting him, but I refuse to lead him on in any way.

He shakes his head and looks away, a self deprecating laugh working its way past his lips. “Damn, Luce.” His eyes lock on mine, and I’m falling backwards into all of the times he looked at me like this, like I was the center of his world.

But I can’t be his anchor, even when he so willingly became mine so many years ago. “I won’t apologize for my feelings for Cameron, but I am sorry if I’ve led you on in any way.” I reach across the table and hold his hand in mine, hoping to somehow salvage our friendship. “You were the first person who made me feel safe and loved after everything with Lars went down, and I will always be grateful for that. You helped me heal pieces of my heart I thought would always be broken and jagged, but your love softened the edges enough that I could breathe again.”

“Lucy…” His gaze is full of longing, but I keep going.

“I love you, Jude. I always will. But I’m not in love with you anymore.” Fuck, I feel like an asshole right now. But it has to be done. If I have any chance at getting Cameron back, Jude needs to know exactly where we stand.

He gives my hand a squeeze before letting it go, giving me a smile, although it seems forced for my sake. “You know, when I first saw you in the cafeteria, I didn’t believe my eyes. You left town without saying goodbye, and sometimes, in the middle of the night, I’d think I made the whole thing up.”

I don’t say anything, but his words make a tiny crack in my heart. I wasn’t strong enough to say goodbye to him back then, but it seems our goodbye is happening now, at a table in the middle of campus.

“I won’t lie to you, Lucy.” His gaze trails over my face before locking on my eyes, pain and acceptance turning down

the corners of his lips. “I never got over you, but I think it’s because we never had any type of closure. Seeing you here, after all these years, fucked with my head.”

“I’m so sorry I left like that, Jude. Everything happened so fast, but that isn’t an excuse. I should have told you what happened, should have given us both the clean break we needed to move forward.”

“But you didn’t.” His words make me flinch, but he doesn’t take them back.

I grab my bag and stand. Only time will tell if our friendship can weather the storm my poor decisions threw us into so many years ago.

“I’ll see you around, yeah?” I don’t let the tears pinching the back of my eyes fall. He doesn’t need to deal with that.

“Yeah.” His voice is quiet, but he still gives me a small smile. “I’ll see you later, McGuire.”

I nod, then spin on my heel before he can see the tear sliding down my cheek.



Cameron

“You gonna tell me what’s got your panties in a bunch, or do I need to guess?” Willie crosses his arms and tilts his head, leaning against the fence at his back. We’re at the batting cages by the sports complex, and apparently I’m not doing a good enough job acting normal.

“What are you talking about, man?” I close the cage door behind me, putting the bat back and yanking my gloves off before sitting on the bench, sucking down a few gulps of water before looking at Willie.

“You just missed five pitches in a row. That never happens.” He sits next to me, a glare working its way across his face. “You make me tell you my shit, so it shouldn’t be any different the other way around.”

I laugh, ruffling his hair before he smacks my hand away. “When did you become so astute, huh?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to know something’s up. You’re usually talking my ear off, but you look like someone kicked your puppy.” He raises a brow, putting his hands behind his head and sticking his legs out in front of him, crossing his ankles. “I can wait. I’m a patient guy.”

This kid. Even though he’s calling me on my shit, I’m proud as hell he feels comfortable and confident enough to be my sounding board. It used to be me always prying information out of him between HORSE competitions and ping pong matches. Now, he’s wanting to be there for me, and I’ll be damned if that doesn’t make me feel like a proud big brother.

“You screwed up with Lucy, didn’t you?” My head snaps his way, his eyes keener than they should be at his age.

“What makes you think that?”

“Come on, man. I’ve seen the way you look at her. She’s the only one who could make you get stuck in your head like this.” He points at my face and makes a circle. “Now tell me what you did so I can help you pull your head out of your ass.”

“Language,” I scold, though he’s hitting the nail on the head.

“Yeah, yeah. Start talking.” He rolls his eyes, getting comfortable as he waits. We’ve had a few meetups with Lucy tagging along, and I think my Willie boy might have fallen for her just the smallest bit.

Telling him about my jealousy and inadequacies makes me squirm, but I can’t expect him to talk to me about his important shit if I won’t do the same.

“Ever since I blew out my knee, I’ve been a little lost when it comes to finding my path.” I look out of the corner of my eye, making sure he’s not about to give me a hard time about being cheesy, but he’s just sitting there with a patient look on

his face. “Always thought I’d make it to the MLB, make a name for myself outside of my Dad, you know?”

He nods, but stays silent.

“Obviously that can’t happen now. And I have no idea what else I’m passionate about.” I grab the bill of my hat and take it off, throwing it on the bench between us as I rake my fingers through my hair. “Lucy deserves someone who’s stable, someone who she can count on to take care of her, and I don’t know if I’m that man.”

My molars squeak against each other when I think about yesterday, seeing her and Jude holding hands in the quad, sitting at a table where everyone could see them talking, emotion clear on both their faces. Seeing them together cut through my weak defenses, sending me the opposite direction I had been walking before I could find myself yanking her away from him, crushing her to my side where she belongs... *belonged.*

I guess I need to use past tense now.

Willie interrupts my inner thoughts, scoffing at me like I’m the biggest idiot he’s ever met. He’s probably right. “What makes you think you’re not stable?”

“I have no idea what I’m doing after graduation. Which is less than a month away, mind you.” I look over the cages, seeing people enjoying their afternoons while I’m here complaining to an eleven-year-old.

“So what?”

“So what? Her freaking ex, who totally wants her back, is going to be a doctor.” I throw my hands up, then let them slap my thighs as I look at the kid sitting next to me, his eyes full of confusion. “And he’s very much still in love with her.”

“But she loves you. I could tell, when she came to the skatepark with us the other week. She looked at you like you look at her.” He winks, crossing his arms. “Like two love sick puppies.”

I snort, lightly smacking the back of his head. “I did not look like that.”

“You did.” He laughs, but sobers quickly. “Seriously, though. You’ve been there for me more times than I can count. Sure, you’re annoyingly happy most of the time, and never let me fall behind on my math homework, but I know you always have my back.”

Damn, is this kid trying to make me cry?

He must see I’m about to say something emotional, because he holds both hands in the air. “I’m only going to say this once, because this emotional shit is for the birds, so listen closely, old grasshopper.”

I grin, keeping my mouth shut while he waits for me to ignore his request and smother him in a hug. When I keep my lips zipped, he continues.

“You’re a good guy, Cam. You spend your free time with me, for crying out loud. Who cares if you don’t know what you wanna do? You’ll figure something out.” He looks into my eyes and gives me the smallest of grins. “She loves you, and you love her, so don’t let your hang ups keep you from getting the girl.”

He makes it sound so simple. Shit, Marcus told me the same damn thing when he asked me what was up my ass the other day in class.

And maybe it is that simple. “Who helped you become so wise, huh?” I knock our shoulders together, feeling lighter than I have in days.

“Just this guy who mentors me. He’s got a big head, but he’s a pretty decent dude most of the time.” He grins, then starts grabbing our stuff and shoving it in his duffle bag, giving me a second to collect my thoughts.

I really fucked up, but maybe there’s some hope for me yet.

“You ready?” Willie looks at me over his shoulder, already walking towards the center.

“Right behind you, Willie boy.”

Chapter 26

Cameron

“I present to you, Class of 2023!”

Graduation caps fly up from the rows of graduates, cheers and cow bells ringing from every section of the stadium. Sav waves at us from her seat, pointing to the upper level surrounding the stadium, letting us know that’s where she wants to meet us for pictures.

“I can’t believe our last baby is out of high school.” Mom looks at Dad, a sad smile on her face. “I remember when she was in diapers like it was yesterday.”

“She was the cutest little thing, all that blonde hair and attitude, even before she could walk.” Dad kisses Mom on the head and we start walking up the stairs.

“If I remember correctly, that attitude almost got her grounded on a monthly basis,” Mel quips as she wraps an arm around Mom’s shoulders, giving her a squeeze. “And hey, I thought you were looking forward to an empty nest. All the streaking you could ever want is at your fingertips now.”

“Gross, Mel.” Beau gives her a flat tire, managing to dodge her slap just in time.

“Beau, honey, there’s nothing wrong with being naked in your own home.” Mom gives him a little smirk before continuing. “Especially when your husband is still a little hottie at forty-seven.”

“Okay, now you’re grossing me out, too.” Melody leaves Mom’s side and hooks her arm with mine, tugging on it until I look down at her. “What’s up with you? You’ve been quiet all morning.”

I didn’t tell them about Lucy and I breaking up, but I guess there’s no reason to keep it a secret. “I fucked up, Mel.”

Her dark eyes glitter with uncertainty for only a second before realization bursts forth. “What happened? How did you fuck up?” Her grip on my arm tightens as her eyes sharpen on me. “You didn’t cheat, did you?”

I jerk my head back, hurt that she would even ask that. “Fuck no. Jesus, I’m an idiot, but I’m not that fucking stupid.”

“What did you do then?” Her tone is a bit softer, but not soft enough for Beau not to pick up on our little side conversation. When he looks at us with furrowed brows, Mel gives him the short and dirty. “Cam fucked up with Lucy. We need to come up with a plan of attack.”

Beau doesn’t even blink, just takes her instructions with a nod of his head. “Alright. How bad of a fuck up are we talking, here?”

I wince, remembering everything I said to her in the heat of the moment. “It was pretty bad”

Mel nods, as if she suspected as much. “It’s okay, we’ll figure something out.” She taps her chin with her finger, then points at me with wide eyes. “You could buy her a puppy. Chicks love puppies.”

“Liam already did the whole adopt a dog thing for Violet.”

“Shoot. Okay, let’s think about what else she likes.” Her voice is so hopeful, I don’t have the heart to tell her that I doubt Lucy will ever take me back.

“What about just telling her you’re sorry?” Beau suggests, shrugging his shoulders. “Chicks want honesty, right? Man up. Tell her you know you fucked up, but you’re willing to do whatever it takes to get her back.”

Mel and I stare at Beau, both of us not sure where this decent advice is coming from.

“What? You two aren’t the only ones who grew up with a therapist as a mom. I may look like I’m all bronze and no brain, but I’ve got a few cells to rub together up here.” He taps his temple with two fingers, waving Savannah over when he makes eye contact with her.

“It’s not a horrible idea,” Mel relents. “Not very epic, but solid advice nonetheless.”

I tongue my cheek, knowing I’ll have even more to apologize for after today. “Today is her fashion show.”

“What! And you’re going to miss it?” Melody pinches my arm, making me yank it away from her with a glare.

“Miss what?” Sav makes her way to us and quirks a brow, not wanting to be left out of the drama.

“Lucy’s fashion show,” Mel retorts, crossing her arms over her chest, giving me a little glare. “He’s not planning on attending.”

“What?” Mom’s head snaps in my direction, confusion furrowing her brow.

“Jesus Christ.” I rub a hand over my mouth, feeling the stubble I couldn’t be bothered to shave. “Can we focus on literally anything else other than my love life? I don’t know, maybe the high school graduate we’re here to celebrate?”

“Nope,” Sav chirps.

“Nice try.” That’s from Beau. Why couldn’t the level headed twin come today? Or Jared?

“You’re not going to the show, honey?” Mom lays her hand on my arm, tilting her head to the side. “I thought we agreed you’d have enough time to make it.”

“He broke up with her.” Everyone’s eyes snap to Mel, who just shrugs like I’m a lost cause. Meanwhile, the entire Class

of 2023 and their families are taking pictures and laughing, something we should really be doing right now.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about it.” I grab Sav and throw my arm over her shoulders. “Mom, start taking pictures.”

She does, everyone dropping the subject, albeit reluctantly. That is, until Dad nudges me with his elbow, giving me the fatherly *spit it out* look.

Letting out a breath, I rake my fingers through my hair, watching Beau and Melody lift Sav onto their shoulders, very precariously, I might add, while Mom tries to stop laughing long enough to snap the picture.

“What kind of a husband would I make, Dad? This other guy, her ex, he’s on track to become a freaking pediatrician. How can I compete with that?”

“Has she said anything to make you think she wants to be with this other guy?”

“Not really, no. But—”

“But nothing, Cameron. You got scared, it happens.” His hand comes down on my shoulder, his gaze serious. “What matters is that you fix it, son. That girl loves you. Don’t let her slip away before it’s too late.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, knowing he’s right. I’m an idiot, but I can fix it.

I *will* fix it. I look at my phone, seeing it’s already later than I thought it was.

“Go. Call us when you’ve got the girl.” Dad grins, giving me a little shove towards the exit. I press a quick kiss to the top of Sav’s head, telling her Beau has my graduation gift for her in his truck, and then make my way past all of the smiling families and crying toddlers.

I’m on the road for maybe an hour before my Jeep’s check engine light comes on. “No, no, no, come on, baby. You gotta get us back to our girl.” The lights on the dash start to flicker

before extinguishing completely, my headlights dying shortly after. “Goddammit!”

I pull over to the shoulder and pop the hood, having to yank hard to get my keys out of the ignition. Cars going well over seventy pass me as I get out to check my engine, but I don’t have time to worry about becoming roadkill at the moment.

“Shit.” I’ve spent enough time under hoods to know it’s most likely my ignition switch, but I start her up again, just to be positive. Sure enough, the engine comes to life, but stalls after a few seconds, my key now solidly stuck in the ignition.

“Fuck!” I hit the steering wheel, running through my options as the sting in my palm retreats. When I pull out my phone, I swear again, not knowing who I should call. All of our friends are helping with the show, so they’re out. Mom and Dad are hosting Sav’s party, so they aren’t an option either.

I swipe my screen until I see the Uber app, wincing at how much a ride will cost from here to White Plains, but I request it anyway. The little chat message tells me my driver is fifteen minutes away, showing me the little white car slowly making its way to me. “Come on, come on.”

I call the tow company we’ve had to use a couple of times over the years, and get everything squared away with them right as my ride pulls in behind me. Since my key is stuck in the ignition, I slide all the other keys off the keychain, pocketing them before I get out.

“Hey, man. Thanks for helping me out.” I slide into the back of the car, smiling at the young guy behind the wheel. He gives me a quick nod before checking his mirrors, then pulls onto the freeway again.

“No problem. Still going to Hartford?” He looks at me through the mirror and I nod.

“Yep, gotta win my woman back.”

“No shit? What’d you do?”

I spend a large portion of the trip back to White Plains telling my random Uber driver all about what an idiot I was, and if I'm being completely honest with myself, saying everything out loud forces me to realize how much of a dipshit I was.

Lucy's not materialistic. She's never once let on that she wanted a man to take care of all her bills, nor has she ever shamed me for not having my future planned out. Sure, Jude could be a problem, but she's always been more than clear about her platonic feelings towards him.

Whether he believes it or not, he'll never have the chance to be with her. Not if I have any say in the matter.

Hopefully, after she kicks my ass for being an insecure little pussy, she'll take me back.



Lucy

My eyes are glued to the package on my kitchen island, watching as if it might burst into flame at any moment. It was on the front porch when I got home from the gym, but there wasn't a return address, just my name written across the front in black ink.

Sighing, I grab the scissors and cut the tape holding the top of the box sealed shut. When I slide the lid off, I'm met with cream colored tissue paper and the smell of lavender. Curious, I push aside the paper and suck in a breath when I see what's inside.

My hands touch the cool amethyst colored material, a smile spreading across my face as I stand up and pull the dress completely from the box. There's a little note card at the bottom, and I pick it up with shaky fingers.

I can't wait to see you in this tonight.

Please forgive me.

I love you.

I frown, thinking it's weird Cameron didn't sign his name, but that doesn't stop me from dropping the card to the table and rushing to the full length mirror hanging from the bathroom door. I hold the dress up and see it's the perfect length, the deep purple color pairing nicely with my hair.

Looking at my phone, I see I only have a couple of hours before I need to be at the school. Spinning on my heel, I walk to my room and gently lay the silky material across my bed, admiring the beaded bodice, just sparkly enough to add depth to the sweetheart neckline without seeming too boujee.

My fingers curl around my phone, contemplating calling Cameron to thank him, but I decide to wait, wanting to see him in person when I inform him he's stuck with me for life and I don't care if he thinks I'm better off without him.

While I'm in the shower, my mind wanders to the conversation I had with Liam a few days ago.

“He’s a miserable sack of shit, Lucy. Not even Rocky can pull him out of his head. Please, if only for me and my own sanity, talk to the man and make him see he’s being a complete asshole.”

I shake my head, even though he can't see me. “He clearly doesn't want to be with me, Liam. I'm not about to beg for his love.”

He sighs, and I can almost see him rolling his blue eyes heavenward, swearing under his breath as he sits in his office. “No one said anything about begging. He's never been in love before, and he got spooked when that prick showed up and started fawning all over you.”

I know he's talking about Jude, but he's got it all wrong. “He was never fawning over me.”

“But you were his once. That means something, and it's messed with Cam's head.”

I growl, frustration nearly making me throw my phone across the room. “I can't help that I had a life before

Cameron! Yes, I had sex with other men, but Cameron was no saint, either.”

Liam chuckles in agreement, then covers his speaker while he says something to Mrs. James in the background. After a few seconds, he’s back. “Look, all I’m saying is...give him a chance to get his shit together. He fucked up, but he loves you.”

I don’t say anything. I have no words left, least of all the promises Liam wants me to make him. All I have is the truth.

“I love him, too.”

“I know you do. He’ll figure his shit out, Luce. In the meantime, I’m keeping track of how many times he cockblocks me at my own home, showing up to hang out because he doesn’t have anything better to do. You owe me a beer for each block.”

I snort, letting him know I don’t want to hear about his sex life, or lack thereof.

I smile to myself, wondering how many beers I owe him by now.

After I’m done in the shower, I dry my hair and start on my makeup, adding just enough liner to my lids to make my blue eyes pop. With an impressive maneuver, I manage to zip myself up in my new dress, letting out a girly squeal when it fits like a glove.

I’m about to put the final touches on my lip stain when I hear someone knock on my door. Frowning, I see it’s almost three, and the whole gang is most likely already at the college waiting for me.

Maybe Cameron is having flowers delivered, too?

I grab my heels from my closet and set them on the couch as I walk past it, hurrying to the door just as another knock cuts through the silence of the apartment. I don’t have a peep hole, so I just swing the door open, a smile ready on my face.

When I see who it is, the smile drops, rapidly replaced with a frown so deep the space between my brows aches.

“Mi...Micah?”

“Hello, Dolly.” I suck in a breath, my brain short circuiting as it tries to figure out what’s going on.

Shit.

This is really, really not good. “What are you doing here?”

He grins, but there’s something off about it. When he pushes past me into the living room, I’m too dumbfounded to stop him. My eyes track his movements, and after he glances around the room, his sharp gaze collides with mine, making my skin crawl.

“Cameron sent me to pick you up.”

Chapter 27

Cameron

Rick, my Uber driver, drops me off right at the entrance to the design building, and I thank him profusely before slamming the door shut and jogging to the doors. When I check my phone, I see it's just after three o'clock. Plenty of time to grovel before the show starts. I also see a few missed calls from Violet and Tyler, but I thumb them away, knowing I'll see them in just a second.

I take the stairs down to the green room area two at a time, knowing that's where Lucy said all the models would be getting ready. Low voices and upbeat music fill the space, and I'm hit with multiple people in various states of undress as I turn the corner.

Ignoring some chick who clearly doesn't care who sees her tits, I scan the room until I see my friends, all crowded around a clothing rack in the far corner of the room.

I didn't pay much attention when I first saw them, but as I get closer, I notice none of them are dressed in the outfits Lucy made. Which is odd, considering all the other models look like they're already getting ready for hair and makeup.

I'm a few yards away when Violet sees me, a look of relief on her face. "Oh, thank god. Is she just behind you?" She rises to her toes, looking behind me as I close the distance between us.

I frown, not understanding what's going on. "What are you talking about? Where's Lucy?" I swing my gaze around the

room again, looking for the flash of red hair I love so damn much.

“Cameron.” Kloey’s teacher voice yanks my attention to her, the look on her face stalling my heart. “She’s not here. We thought she was with you...” I shake my head at the question in her eyes, looking at Violet.

“She’s not answering her phone. I...” Her hazel eyes start to widen and she turns to Liam, his hands already reaching to cradle her face as he whispers something to her I can’t hear over the pounding in my ears.

It’s fine, she’s fine. We’re just all paranoid after everything with Lars.

Right?

Ty steps around the girls and stands next to me, his voice hushed with tension. “She told us to be here at three, and when she wasn’t here, we tried both of you.”

“When neither of you answered, we hoped it was because you were making up.” Violet pulls out of Liam’s arms to stand in front of me. “Liam called your dad to see if you were with them, but he said you left to come back here, so it made sense that you two might be making up and forgot about the time.” Her eyes flick to Kloey, who starts pacing next to our little group.

“I broke down on the way, I must’ve been out of service when you called.” I hold my hand out to Tyler and jerk my chin towards the doors. “I’m leaving, give me your keys.”

“We should all go,” Kloey says, her worried gaze colliding with mine.

“No.” Tyler’s tone slices through our tension filled bubble, making both girls flinch. His voice is only slightly softer when he continues. “You three stay here. We’ll keep you updated.” He shares a look with Liam, who nods his head while he wraps Vi and Kloey into his sides.

We're almost to the stairs that lead into the green room when I admit what's been bothering me. "That fucker, Lars?"

"Yeah?" Ty pushes a dude out of his way, not bothering to apologize, as we push out of the doors and jog to his 4Runner.

"I thought he was full of shit, but he swore he didn't know anything about what happened at Hope's and Lucy's apartment."

Ty's gaze snaps to mine as we both get into the vehicle. "You think it's someone else?"

I rake my fingers through my hair, pulling so roughly that a few strands fall onto my lap. "I don't know. Fuck!" I slam my fist against the dash, wishing we were already at the apartment.

"We'll get her man, but you gotta keep a level head, yeah?" His focus is on the road, but I can tell by the way he has the wheel in a death grip I'm not the only one thinking about worst case scenarios.

"Yeah, okay. You're right." I look out the window, trying not to snap at my best friend to drive faster.

She's okay. She just lost track of time getting ready, maybe lost her phone in the process. That's why she isn't answering anyone.

But even as I try to calm myself, I know none of it is true. She's been looking forward to this for months, there's no way she would lose track of time.

Which only leaves one option. My gut twists until I have to clench my teeth, my molars clicking from the pressure.

Whoever dares to fuck with my Sunshine better be ready to meet their maker, because I plan to put him so far in the ground he'll never be able to hurt her again.



Lucy

Micah's eyes trail my body, his lips twisting into a sneer. "Didn't think that dress would look quite this slutty on you, but I guess it'll do."

I suck in a breath, the back of my hands tingling with apprehension. I'm still having trouble connecting the man in front of me to the boy I knew years ago. He's older, taller than when I last saw him. And his voice...

"It was you." He just stares at me, an unhinged look taking over his features. "You're the one who broke into my room both times, aren't you?" I let out a hysterical laugh, shaking my head. "Once wasn't enough, huh? Cutting my throat and threatening me didn't do it for you, so you had to find me years later and wreck my life all over again?"

My words make him flinch, breaking him out of the weird trance he seems to be under. "*You* ruined everything, not me, Dolly." He closes his eyes, shaking his head and murmuring something under his breath.

"Why are you calling me that?"

His eyes snap to mine and I feel the back of my neck start to tingle with fear. "You were always so pretty. In those dresses you'd sew for yourself, your red hair so bright against your pale skin." He moves so he's right in front of me and pushes a piece of hair behind my ear. "I always thought you looked the best in purple, but tonight we'll see how you look covered in red."

I step back, the edge of my coffee table digging into my calves. "What are you talking about?" I keep my attention on Micah, but I also try to remember where I left my phone. If I can somehow call 911, maybe I can keep him distracted until help shows up.

"If you would have just kept your fucking mouth shut, I could have stayed with my dad. But no, you had to be a little fucking bitch and tell them all about what happened that night."

My eyes shoot wide, pain and anger making my words sound like they're being choked out of my throat. "He killed my sister!"

"But she was worse!" I jerk my head back, confused by his words, but I don't have time to figure them out before he continues. "Did you ever wonder what happened to me, Lucy? Ever reach out and make sure I was okay?"

I grimace, both of us already knowing the answer to that question. "You were sent to live with your mom...I'm sorry I never tried to contact you, but—"

"My bitch of a mother pimped me out, Lucy. Sure, she waited until I was fourteen, but that doesn't mean she didn't let her piece of shit boyfriend beat the hell out of me whenever he felt like it in the meantime." He laughs, but there's absolutely nothing funny about it. "Once I started bringing in the money, the beatings stopped. Apparently people don't like sleeping with underage boys if they're sporting bruises and swollen lips."

"Micah...I'm so sorry." I'm crying, my words barely finding their way past my lips. "But you—"

"And then here you are, living your perfect little life. You got to go to college, found your soulmate." His face hardens at the last part. "It was almost fun, tricking him. Knowing he had no idea who I was."

"What? Who are you talking about?" My chest starts to spasm, my adrenaline pumping blood to my limbs faster than I'm burning the energy, making me lightheaded.

"Don't you know? I'm a student at Hartford. My boy Cameron knows me as Marcus, but it wasn't too hard to start answering to a different name. Not when I knew the payout was so sweet."

I don't mean to let it happen, but a quiet whimper rips past my lips, my eyes stinging with angry tears. "Don't fucking touch him, Micah! I'm the one you want, so leave him out of this." My voice shakes, but I know he sees how serious I am

when he starts laughing, shaking his head like I'm a little kid throwing a temper tantrum.

"Oh, Dolly. How stupid can you be?" He rushes me then, grabbing my hair and yanking my head back so I'm forced to look into his crazed eyes. "I'm going to kill you in front of him, and then I'm going to kill him, too."

"No!" I kick him in the balls and strike my elbow into his windpipe, causing his hold to loosen enough so I can run to my room and lock the door. His fists land on the wood so hard I think it might splinter right then and there, but it holds.

"You wanna play, Dolly? Fine, we'll play." I hear his footsteps retreat as I look around my room, desperately hoping I'll see my phone.

"Fuck!" I think I left it on the counter in the bathroom before I answered the door. I rush to my window and push out the screen, ready to make a run for it when I hear my front door open.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

I don't wait to hear Micah's response to Cameron's question, instead I unlock my door and run to the living room.

"Cameron! He's not who you—"

"Sunshine?" His eyes take in my hysterical state, his gaze hardening when he sees the tears in my eyes. "What the fuck is going on?"

A clicking noise has both of us looking at Micah, and another whimper falls from my lips when I see he's holding a 9mm pistol aimed right at me.

"Surprise." Micah smiles at Cameron, but Cam's eyes are on the gun pointed right for my heart. "I thought my little experiment with your Jeep would keep you occupied, but the more the merrier, I suppose."

"Micah, let him go. He doesn't have anything to do with us."

“Shut the fuck up!” Micah steps closer to me, and now he’s only a few feet from where I’m standing.

“Marcus, what the fuck is going on? Put the gun away.” Cameron doesn’t look at me, but his body is angled towards mine, as if the invisible cord tethering us together is pulling tighter now that I’m about to die.

“Name’s not Marcus, it’s Micah.” His evil smile has the hairs on the back of my neck rising as he looks at Cameron. “But fuck, it was fun getting all the information I needed from you. Like an open book.” He laughs, then grows serious again. “Bet you didn’t know your little girlfriend here was responsible for ruining my life, did ya?”

Cameron frowns, stepping closer to Micah. “What are you talking about?”

Micah pivots, his gun now pointing at Cameron, his pointer finger flexing against the trigger. “Everything I suffered through with my shitbag of a dad was nothing compared to what I was forced to do for my mother.” He spits on the floor, eyes flashing with hatred. “Put a bullet through her head as soon as I could, but it wasn’t good enough.”

I take a step towards Micah, making him take his attention away from Cameron, and I let the reality of what’s about to happen wash over me. I look over Micah’s shoulder as a single tear falls onto my cheek, seeing Cameron looking at me already.

“I love you. Please don’t ever doubt that.” I see recognition flash in his eyes, but it’s too late.

“Lucy, no—”

I crash into Micah, startling him enough that his finger does what it’s been wanting to do for the last ten minutes. I scream as the bullet rips through my thigh, the pain making my stomach cramp so badly I think I might pass out.

Gritting my teeth, I jam my elbow as hard as I can into Micah’s gut. What I don’t see until it’s too late is his hand

punching into my face, knocking me back until I smack my head on the coffee table.

“Fuck you, you little–ugh!” I try to blink my eyes open, but the pain in my face and skull is making it hard to stay conscious. Or maybe it’s the blood loss from my leg.

“Shut the fuck up!”

What the hell? That sounded a lot like Tyler. I press my hand against the bullet wound, the pain making my mind sharp enough that I can open my eyes again.

Tyler is holding Micah while Cameron punches his face, rage and desperation painting his face a deep red color. A flash of silver catches my attention, but I don’t have time to yell before Micah has the blade out, stabbing Tyler in the arm. It catches him off guard enough for his grip on Micah to loosen.

The next few seconds seem to play in slow motion. Micah pushes Tyler back hard enough he falls on his ass. Cameron goes in for another right hook, but Micah bends at the waist and dodges the hit, grabbing his gun off the floor. His finger pulls the trigger for the second time tonight, and any pain I thought I felt was child’s play compared to what I feel when he shoots Cameron in the chest.

“No!” I don’t see what happens to Micah when Tyler grabs him from behind because all of my attention is on Cameron. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.” I slip on the blood already pooling around him, slamming down hard on my knees next to his chest as I put as much pressure as I can on the bullet wound. Dark red blood oozes between my fingers and I let out a sob.

His golden brown eyes look up at me, but I can tell he’s about to lose consciousness. “Sunshine.” His fingers twitch out of the corner of my eye, like he’s trying to touch me. “Love. You.”

“No! Don’t you dare leave me, Cameron! You don’t get to die!” I look around the room, tears blurring my vision as I try to find something else to put pressure on his wound with other

than my hands. I quickly grab a pillow and put all of my weight on it.

“Move, let me do it.” I’m shoved to the side as Tyler takes over, his face bloody. I look behind us to see Micah facedown on the floor, unmoving.

I hope he’s fucking dead, because if he isn’t, I’m going to finish him off myself.

“Cam, can you hear me?” Ty’s voice snaps my attention back to the moment, my head spinning from my own blood loss. “Cameron?” Sirens sound in the background, but the glazed look in Cameron’s eyes tells me they’re too late.

I bend my head closer to his, telling him I love him over and over again as I squeeze his hand in mine, our combined blood staining our fingers.

“Ty...” Cameron’s lips are turning blue, but he manages to keep his eyes on his friend. “Take care of her.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole. I’m not letting you die!” His voice cracks, though, eyes shining with unshed tears as he keeps pressure on the pillow.

“Sun...shine.” Our eyes meet and he gives me a small smile, a tear leaking from his eye before they both close, his breaths coming to a stop.

“Cameron!” I push up on my knees again, starting compressions. “Where is the fucking ambulance?” I fight off another wave of dizziness as I keep my arms locked, pressing into his chest as hard as I can.

I don’t know how long Tyler and I sit there, doing our best to keep Cameron alive, but eventually a team of EMTs rush through my open door, followed closely by Victor Storm. Ty and I are pushed away while one of the responders starts packing Cameron’s wound with gauze as the other takes over compressions. He’s lifted onto a stretcher after they manage to find his weak pulse, and within thirty seconds they’re yelling a quick shout over their shoulder, telling us which hospital they’re taking him to.

When Victor's gaze lands on us, I point to Micah. "It was him." I don't say anything else, already grabbing my keys from the bowl by the front door. Tyler's hand lands on my shoulder as he yanks the keys from my hand, passing me his cell instead.

"Call Liam. Tell him to meet us there." I start to say I'm fine to drive, but the words get stuck in my mouth as a few black spots swim in front of my eyes. I think I hear Tyler say something, but I'm not sure what it is. I can't really hear anything right now, my balance making me reach out and snag Tyler's arm before I fall.

"Shit. I got you, you're okay." I feel his arms go behind my back and knees, carrying me to the car and setting me down while he opens the door. He lifts me into the seat and clicks my belt into place, then pulls my eyelids open with urgent fingers. "Fuck."

I'm not sure what else happens, but before I know it, I'm being carried again. The cool air hits my cheeks and I feel tears on my face, but I don't know why I'm crying.

My clogged brain is yelling at me that something is wrong, that I need to see someone, but I can't get a grasp on any of my thoughts.

"Hey, Luce, we're here, okay? You're going to be okay."

Why did that sound like Violet? What was she doing here?

I try to open my mouth, to tell her that my leg is burning and I can't remember what I'm supposed to remember, but no words come out. A sharp prick of pain in the crook of my arm feels like a damn caress compared to my throbbing head and thigh, but even that pain starts to melt away until I'm floating on a cloud.

Far, far away, where blackness finally covers me with its cool embrace.

Chapter 28

Cameron

My mouth tastes like I swallowed half the Sahara Desert.

I crack an eye open, then immediately slam it shut when I'm blinded by the bright light coming in through a window to my left.

What the hell?

Keeping my eyes closed, I push myself higher on my bed and let out a low groan when heavy tremors of pain wrack my upper body, all zapping out from my chest. My eyes snap open at the intense ache and I look around the room, realizing I'm in a hospital bed.

White bandages are wrapped around my chest, but it doesn't feel like anything else is broken. I reach my hand to my head, and my eyes snag on the blood caked in the cracks of my fingers.

Snapshot after snapshot flash behind my lids, all of my memories from before I was shot tumbling into my brain at rapid speed.

I rip off the scratchy blue blanket covering my lower body and swing my legs off the side of the bed, grabbing the edges of the mattress when my vision blurs. I'm distantly aware of the sound of footsteps approaching my room, but I'm still trying to get a hold of myself before I ralph on the floor.

"What the heck do you think you're doing?" I open my eyes to see a worn out Violet in front of me, a cup of hospital

coffee in her pale hands, one of the straps on her overalls hanging off her arm.

“Where’s Lucy?” Shit, I sound horrible. I clear my throat and try again. “Lucy. Where is she?”

Violet’s focus falls to the bandage around my chest before she looks at me again, apprehension clear in her bloodshot eyes. “She’s on the second floor, in her own room.”

“What!” I rip the IV out of my arm, blood trickling from the puncture point. Luckily someone thought to put me in some basketball shorts, so Vi doesn’t get an eyeful of my naked ass.

“I really don’t think you should do that, Cameron.” She opens my door and shouts for a nurse before turning back to me. I spot a shirt I’m pretty sure is Liam’s folded at the foot of my bed and slip it over my head, grimacing at the pain in my chest.

“What happened? Is she okay?”

“She’s going to be fine, but I really think—”

“Ah, Mr. Conrad. I see you’re just as tenacious as Ms. Young’s beautiful friend downstairs.” The doctor sweeps his eyes over me, noting the IV fluid leaking onto the floor by my bare feet before nodding at the bed behind me. “Why don’t you take a seat? I know you wish to see my other patient, but I need to check a few things before I let you go. You’ve been through a tremendous trauma.”

“I’m fucking fine,” I snarl, pushing the doctor aside just as Liam and Tyler step into the room.

“Sit your ass down.” Liam glares at me, but it softens when he sees the wave of hysteria cresting in my eyes. “She’s okay. I just came from her room.”

If it were anyone else, I probably would’ve deck ‘em and been on my way. Since it’s Liam, and he’s been in my exact shoes, I settle for shooting him a death glare before sitting on my bed.

“Make it quick, doc. Need to see my woman, and if I’m not holding her in my fucking arms within the next ten minutes, you’re not gonna like what happens next.”

“Jesus.” Ty pinches the bridge of his nose, looking at his feet. “You two are a match made in fucking heaven, you know that?” His gray eyes meet mine, and I can tell he’s glad I’m okay, but there’s still frustration mapped over his forehead like latitude lines. “I think Lucy threatened her nurse with similar words not two minutes ago. *After* she made sure my stab wound was stitched up, of course.”

I smile at that, but it falls when the doctor pushes against my healing wound. “How’s the pain level? One to ten.”

“One.” I see Liam’s lips twitch, but Violet gives me a little glare of her own, crossing her arms. “Okay, fine. Seven.”

“That sounds more on par for the course, Mr. Conrad. Let’s take a look at those eyes now.”

The dude takes his sweet ass time, asking me more questions, poking and prodding my body until I feel like a science experiment.

“Alright, I’ll allow you to see Ms. McGuire, but I insist you use a wheelchair.” Violet walks to the corner of the room, pushing the chair I hadn’t noticed until now closer to me.

“Your chariot awaits.” She quirks a brow, waiting for me to refuse. If it were any other time, I would, but I’ll happily ride in this fucker if it gets me to my Sunshine faster.

I ease myself down, Tyler going around the back to start pushing me while Liam and Violet trail a few paces behind us.

“Mom and Dad?” I know Ty must have called them, but I don’t see either of them in the hallway.

“Cafeteria. I think I heard Beau challenging Mel to an applesauce eating contest.” I chuckle, then groan at the deep ache in my chest. That sounds like Beau, trying to ease the tension with humor. I guess I’m more like my older brother than I thought.

Another person pops into my mind and I grind my teeth as I dig the blunt edge of my nails into the armrests of my wheelchair.

“And Marcus? Or Micah. Whoever the fuck he is.”

“Arrested. Didn’t even claim to be innocent according to what Victor said. Dude’s totally unhinged. They found an entire shrine dedicated to Lucy in his basement apartment. Said it looked like he’d been keeping eyes on her for years.”

“Motherfucker.” Red tints the edges of my vision, but I force myself to take a deep breath. The last thing I need to do is have a heart attack and die...again.

The doctor told me that I coded twice on the way here, but they finally stabilized me enough to do surgery about twenty minutes after the ambulance dropped me off.

Nothing’s keeping me from my girl, not even a bullet to the chest.

Violet quickens her steps, getting to Lucy’s door before us, opening it wide enough for Ty to push me through. As soon as we get in the room, Lucy’s head snaps in our direction, her eyes meeting mine a second before she lets out a quiet cry.

I push out of the wheelchair and catch her against my chest when she loses her balance trying to get to me. I bite my tongue, keeping the pain her embrace is radiating through my chest to myself.

“I’m so sorry. I can’t believe this happened.” She pulls her head back, eyes full of tears as she slowly lifts the hem of my shirt and stares at my wrapped torso. “How much pain are you in?”

I pull her back to me, wrapping my arms around her small frame, burying my nose in her hair. I hear the door click shut, our friends giving us a moment to ourselves.

“I was almost too late.” The anguish in my voice is obvious, but I don’t try to hide it. “If I would have been—”

“Stop, this is not your fault. This is his fault. No one else’s, do you hear me?” She pulls away again, leading us to her bed. She’s still wearing a hospital gown, and when she goes to sit down, it slips enough for me to see a thick bandage wrapped around her thigh.

“Baby.” My thumb brushes against the wrap, gentle enough that I don’t cause her any more pain. I flick my eyes to hers and frown when I see tears trailing down her cheeks. “Does it hurt, Sunshine? Should I get a nurse?” I’m halfway off the bed when she grabs my arm, shaking her head as she sucks in a shaky breath.

“It’s not the pain that’s breaking me.” A sob falls past her lips as she tangles her fingers with mine. “I saw you die.” She squeezes her eyes shut, shaking her head back and forth, like she can wipe the memory from her brain. “I thought...I thought you were gone, and—”

“I’m here, baby. It’s over now, okay. I’m fine.” I pull her wet lips to mine and kiss her slowly, feeling her mouth tremble against mine. I cradle the back of her head with my hand, frowning when she flinches. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

She pulls my hand away from her head, but holds it in her lap, linking our fingers together. “I hit the back of my head on the coffee table when Micah pushed me down.” She lets out a slow breath, giving me a weak smile. “Along with the lovely new scar on my thigh, I have a mean concussion now.”

We both hear my teeth grinding with the pressure from my clenched jaw, but she doesn’t say anything. Instead, her eyes find the window, a sorrowful look on her face. “I can’t help but think...if I would have reached out to him, if I would have made an effort to see him and figure out where he went after Lars went to prison, maybe none of this would have happened.”

I’m already shaking my head, her words hurting more than my bullet wound. “No.” I pull her face to mine, kissing her forehead before pressing mine against shoulder. “You can’t put anything that sick bastard did on you, Sunshine.”

“But the things he said, the horrible acts he was forced to take part in...no one should ever have to go through something like that.” She leans her cheek against my head, letting out a harsh breath, ruffling my hair.

“You’re right,” I whisper, pulling away so I can look into her blue eyes. Eyes I thought I’d never see again as I felt my life slip out of me and onto the floor of her apartment.

“I love you, Cameron.” She presses a kiss to my cheek before moving to my lips, her hands cupping my jaw.

“I love you, too, baby.” I squeeze my eyes closed, knowing what I have to say next. “And I’m so fucking sorry I let my insecurities break us apart. I promise you, I will never let you go again. You’re stuck with me for life, you hear me?”

Her eyes are still shiny with tears when she looks up at me, but it’s the small grin on her lips that has my heart feeling whole for the first time in weeks. “Is that a marriage proposal? Because Violet got a dog, so I expect at least a hamster.”

We both laugh, then wince as our aches and pains make themselves known again. “Come on, let’s rest for a while before we decide what type of hamster we want.”

She smiles and nods, letting me help her get situated before I slip onto the small mattress next to her, the tiny blanket barely big enough to cover both of us.

“I guess this means I missed my own fashion show, huh?”

“Yeah, babe. I think that ship has most definitely sailed.” I kiss the top of her head where it’s resting on my good side. “We’ll figure it out, don’t worry.”

“Promise?”

“I promise, Sunshine.”

She falls asleep before me, her breaths evening out as her muscles slowly relax against me. Sleep comes for me soon after, and with my woman safe in my arms, I let myself slip into the darkness with a smile on my face.



Lucy

“Easy does it, babe.” Violet has my arm around her shoulder, even though I told her three times I could walk on my own.

Well, more like hobble on my own, but that’s besides the point.

“Yeah, easy does it, baby boy,” Liam quips at Cameron, his arm wrapped around Cam’s waist, mock concern furrowing his brows. “Do you want me to carry you?”

“Fuck off, Storm.” Cameron’s laugh is shortly followed by a groan, the pain in his chest still making deep breathing and laughing painful endeavors.

“Lay off him, Sassy Pants,” Violet glares at her man over her shoulder, then continues to walk me to the couch, helping me get settled as Liam does the same for Cameron.

They both look at us, arms crossed over their chests. “Do you think they can be trusted alone, Beautiful?” Liam flicks his gaze to Violet, but she’s giving Cameron a death glare, so she’s a little distracted.

“No sex.” Violet raises her brows and points at both of us, making sure we know she’s serious. The chuckle coming from her fiancé tells me he thinks it’s a lost cause, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Come on, Vi-Vi. You think a bullet to the chest is gonna stop me from having my woman now that she’s back in my arms?” There’s laughter in his eyes, but the pain is still there, just under the surface of his humor.

Vi cocks her hip, her messy bun flopping to the side when she tilts her head at him. “I think I remember you giving me the same damn warning when I was about to get out of the hospital.”

“She’s right,” Liam agrees, tossing his arm over her shoulder, pressing a kiss on the top of her head.

“Yeah, I am.” She looks at me and points her paint smudge finger at my thigh. “You just took a bullet to the thigh, and you have a concussion. And you.” She looks at Cameron, who’s trying his best to look as innocent as possible while his fingers slowly trace up the side of my uninjured thigh. Violet’s eyes zoom in on his hand, stopping it in its tracks. “You’re not supposed to have an elevated heart rate right now, so no boners for you.”

Liam gives up his attempt at a straight face, throwing his head back as he laughs, wiping tears from his eyes. “Damn, baby. You tell ‘em.”

“I just did.” She winks at him, then looks at me again. “I’ll call you in the morning, okay?”

I nod, hugging her back when she leans down to check my pupils one last time. She hugs Cameron much more gently, but I don’t miss her placing a kiss over his bandage poking out from underneath his t-shirt. He gives her a soft look, then kisses her forehead before she pulls away.

I’m sure other girls would be jealous of their connection, but that’s not me.

“You gonna give me a kiss on my head, Storm?” I smirk at Liam, tilting my head when he rolls his eyes.

“They’re fine, babe. Let’s go.” Violet looks us over once more, reminding us about the frozen meals her and Kloey made for us, and then they’re gone, leaving Cameron and I alone.

“Finally! I thought they’d never leave.” Cam slides his gaze to mine, but his eyes track the grimace working its way across my face when I move the wrong way, making my thigh throb. “You can’t have another pain pill for a couple of hours.” The worried look on his face makes it perfectly clear he hates seeing me in pain, but I shake my head, smoothing out my face.

“I’m fine.” I look at his face, a shade or two lighter than usual, but I think that’s to be expected when you die and come

back to life. “Are you hungry?”

His lips tick up, fingers pushing back my hair so he can whisper in my ear. “I’m always starving for you, Sunshine.” He presses a kiss below my ear, but stops himself and pulls away with a small pout. “Violet’s right, though. I won’t risk hurting you. Besides, I have something else I wanna show you.”

He pushes himself up, then holds his hand out and helps me to my feet. His arms wrap around my waist as his forehead finds mine, our breaths mingling in the small space between our lips. “I never had the chance to give you your birthday present.”

I blink, a small smile spreading across my face. “Is my present you in nothing but a big red bow, by chance?”

He laughs, kissing my cheek before slowly walking us to my room. “As tempting as that sounds, no, that’s not it.” He turns the knob of my door, but looks over his shoulder before opening it. “Close your eyes.”

I do, letting him take my hands and lead me the rest of the way into my room. He drops my hands, but doesn’t go far, his body heat warming my back as his nose trails up my neck from behind, leaving a path of goosebumps in its path. “I had Ty set it up when we were still in the hospital, so if it doesn’t work, it’s on him.” He laughs, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me tight against his chest even though it must be hurting his wound. “The fucker called me three times just to bitch me out, telling me the YouTube video he was trying to follow wasn’t the least bit helpful.”

I smile, eyes still closed. “Poor guy.”

Cameron grumbles his agreement against the back of my neck, the vibration shooting tingles up and down my spine. “Open your eyes, Sunshine.” He presses a kiss to the tip of my spine as I do what I’m told.

“Oh my god.”

Air. I can't seem to suck any of it into my lungs as I take in what's in front of me.

The old Singer sewing machine I thought was beyond repair is sitting on my desk, shining like it must have when it was brand new. "How did you do this?" I pull away from him, running my fingers over the arm and bed plate. "I thought...I thought it was ruined."

"I made a few calls and found someone who restores vintage Singers." I spin around and bury my face in his chest, trying to avoid his bandage as best I can.

"Thank you. This is..." I wipe a tear from my cheek, but Cameron catches the next two with his thumb, a soft look on his face that has my heart flipping in my chest. "My mom saved and saved for this. We hardly had any money, but she found this for sale and gave it to me for my fourteenth birthday."

"I know." He winks at me, but I frown at his words, making him smile even wider. "I called your mom. I needed to know what year the machine was, but I couldn't find it when I looked at all the pieces."

"I can't believe you did this. Thank you doesn't begin to cover it." I smile through my tears, pulling his face down to mine so I can kiss him. His lips are soft, his tongue gentle when it slides against mine. I press our bodies together, running my fingers through the hair at his nape, the feeling of overwhelming love washing over me.

"I love you so much." My words are barely above a whisper against his lips, but I know he hears me because his hold on my hips tightens, his sweet gaze focused on me.

"I love you, too. And I plan on showing you just how much for the rest of our lives, Sunshine."

I smile, my hand resting over his heart, the steady beat grounding me in the moment. "Promise?"

His eyes sparkle, hand mirroring mine, resting over my heart as he looks down at me with a smile on his face.

“Promise.”

Epilogue

Lucy

Six years later

“I can’t believe this is really happening.”

“Oh, it’s happening, Sunshine. It is so happening it’s not even funny.”

“Was that supposed to be a joke, Daddy? If so, you need some work.” Josie walks away, leaving me laughing at my husband’s offended face.

“Did our daughter just call me out?”

“She did, babe.” I pat his back, looking around the shop to make sure everything’s in place for the ribbon cutting ceremony in twenty minutes. He huffs out a laugh, shaking his head, mumbling something under his breath. I give him a wink and rearrange the cookies I made this morning.

“How are you feeling?” Cameron’s arms wrap around me from behind, his hands finding their place on my belly. Our son chooses that moment to kick, hearing his dad’s voice from the inside.

I cover his hands with mine, smiling as I watch Violet’s daughter, Lily, play hopscotch with Josie on the sidewalk. “We’re good. Hungry, but good.”

“Did someone say hungry?” We turn around just in time to see Kloey carrying a pizza box in her hand, the smell of cheesy goodness making my stomach growl even though I ate half an hour ago. “I thought you might need some extra sustenance, so I swung by the pizza shop on my way here.” She winks at me, handing the pizza to Cameron before chasing after her son, who looks like he’s heading straight for the girls.

“You gonna share any of this, Sunshine?” Cam’s eyes shine with mischievousness, but I know he’d let me eat the whole thing if I wanted to. He’s done it before.

“Hmmm, that depends, Mr. Conrad.” I walk inside my very own boutique, heading for the counter with the POS so he can set my snack down without getting grease on anything.

We have a plethora of options in the shop, ranging from baseball pants and jerseys, to maternity wear, to the crop tops teens are all about lately. Liam installed beautiful wooden shelving units on two of the main walls, and helped me restore the exposed brick on the others.

I needed the space to feel warm and inviting, and I think we did a great job, if I do say so myself. Violet even painted murals of wildflowers in each of the changing rooms, making the formerly drab area pop with all colors of the rainbow.

“And what’s that, Mrs. Conrad?” Cameron’s question brings me back to the moment, tingles working their way up my spine as his warm lips slide against my neck. I’ve been so horny this pregnancy, I’m certain lesser men would have just bought me a vibrator and told me to go to town.

Not my husband, though.

“Don’t go seducing me with all those people out there, mister. I have a very large ribbon to cut with even larger scissors, so there’s no time for funny business.” I flip open the lid to the pizza box and take a huge bite, groaning at how good it is. “Mmm, this is better than sex anyway.”

Cameron scoffs, taking a bite before he slips around the counter and walks backwards, a smile lifting his lips.

“Raincheck, baby. Need to keep my Sunshine satisfied.”

I roll my eyes, but the smile on my face almost hurts it's so wide.

Although I never got to display my capstone outfits, I still passed the class when my professors found out what happened that night. They didn't get to see the clothes on actual bodies, but they graded them nonetheless, giving me an A-. I would have been happy with a D+ as long as I passed.

That following summer, not only did Cameron land an amazing job at the Big Brother Big Sister nonprofit as a youth program manager, but he also encouraged me to do a two month internship with Layla Viskoski in Paris.

When she offered, my first reaction was a *hell yes!* Then, after about five seconds, I realized two months would feel like an eternity away from Cameron.

After some very seductive convincing on his part, I finally agreed to the trip.

And it was completely and totally amazing. I'd already gone on the scouting trip with Hope, but getting to see so many different stylists at the European shows was priceless.

I designed my first wedding gown a year after we graduated from Hartford, and it sold in one of Layla's shows a month later. Shortly after that, we found out I was pregnant with Josie.

I laugh to myself when I think about how nervous Cameron had been when I went into labor. I swear, if I didn't have a hold of his arm, he would have driven to the hospital without me.

Micah is still in prison, and after years of therapy with not only my own therapist, but my mother-in-law as well, I've finally forgiven myself for bringing so much shit into Cameron's life.

He always reminds me nothing was my fault, and I believe that, but it's still true he most likely wouldn't have found

himself with a bullet two inches from his heart if he wouldn't have met me.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?” Mom pops her head in the front door, her red hair shining in the afternoon light. She's gone to a few therapy sessions with me, and I think it helped us both heal from all the pain Lars and his son inflicted on us.

“Yeah, let me just put this in the mini fridge. I'll be right out.”

When I head outside, my eyes widen at all the people who came to support us. I'm just stepping into the crowd to check on a few last minute things when I see Grams.

“Hello, sweet girl.” She pulls me into a hug, her perfume reminding me of all the fun times we've had with her over the years. She spoils Josie and Lily almost as much as their own grandparents do.

“Hi, Grams. I'm so glad you made it.” I barely pull out of our hug before I hear Cameron's loud voice booming over the sound of the crowd.

“Alright, alright. Thank you all for being here. We're about to get started, so if you could grab a cookie and some punch, we'll be cutting ribbons in no time.”

“Better get up there, girl. Don't miss your own moment.” Grams winks at me and heads over to where Violet is holding Lily, Liam's arm wrapped around both of them as Lily feeds a cookie to him. Half of it ends up on his shirt, making him laugh before blowing a raspberry against her belly while Violet holds her steady.

“You about ready?” My head snaps up at Cooper's voice, still somehow amazed at how far we've come. We're not as close as we were in college, and we never will be, but we've fallen into a nice friendship, and I'm happy to see him here. After the look I saw Liam shoot his way earlier, I thought he might leave. Us girls may have forgiven him for what happened, but Liam never will, and that's okay, too.

“Yep. Let’s get this show on the road.” I give him a quick hug and walk over to Cameron’s parents, taking the large scissors from Chris while Tyler and Cameron hold the ribbon in place. Everyone quiets down when they see me standing by the huge bow Kloey tied in the ribbon last night, and I take a moment to soak in being surrounded by so many people I love.

“I want to thank you all for coming today. I won’t bore you with a long speech, but please know it means the world to me to have your support.” I swallow back the sudden emotion clogging my throat, looking up at Cameron when he wraps his arm around me, giving me a sweet look of encouragement. “Ten percent of each and every sale will always go to our nonprofit of the month. This month, we’ve chosen something very near and dear to our hearts.” My eyes find Willie in the crowd, and he winks at me, jerking his chin at Cameron when my husband follows my gaze. They still find time to see each other, but it’s no longer only through BBBS.

“Big Brother Big Sister will be our first nonprofit, but many more will benefit from your support of our little shop in the years to come.”

Cheers, clapping, and good natured yells from some of the players on the little league team Cameron coaches reach my ears, making me blink back tears as I grab his hand in mine, smiling at what we’ve built.

With trust.

Perseverance.

Love.

“Everyone, welcome to Conrad’s Closet!”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Romance Author

A.J. Ray was born and raised in Oregon, where she currently lives with her husband. A.J. loves sexy alpha heroes and quirky heroines, with plenty of steam and suspense to keep things hot.

Want to see what A.J.'s up to? Check out her Instagram (@author_ajray) or Facebook page (A.J. Ray's Spicy Studio) for updates on what's coming next!