

MARY WATERFORD



KEEPING

Lucy

Esperance Valley : BOOK TWO

Keeping Lucy

MARY WATERFORD

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CHAPTER 1

Lucy

I sat in a bar in downtown Seattle, staring out the window at the rain as I nursed a margarita, contemplating how my life had come so far off course. Career-wise, things were great: I'd just wrapped up a week of seminars on IT security at the world's largest computing firm, and next month I was running an audit at NASA. *NASA!*

But that was the only part of my life that was going according to the very detailed, very well thought out plan I'd mapped out for myself. Up until two years ago, Richard and I had walked that path together, pretty happily. Not earth-shattering happiness, maybe more like mild comfort. But I certainly hadn't been *unhappy*.

Until I wanted to head down a different path and Richard... well, he just didn't want to come along. So here I was, sitting alone in a bar, divorced at thirty, living with my parents. Moving back in with them had felt like an all-time low.

I loved my parents dearly, but waking up again in the room I'd left more than ten years ago meant I started every day with a reminder that I wasn't anywhere near where I'd wanted to be. At least the decision to stay in my hometown rather than head back to San Francisco was already made: I was closing the deal on my very own house next week. That was something, at least. Maybe when I was living on my own for the first time in my life, I'd start to feel better. More in control.

The bartender placed another margarita—my third—in front of me. I looked at him questioningly, since I hadn't ordered it, and frowned when he gestured toward a man across the bar.

He was tall and reasonably handsome, with wavy blond hair and a chiseled mouth. Superficially handsome, I suppose, but his expectant smirk ruined the whole look. Aside from the fact that he wasn't nearly as hot as he thought he was, I just wasn't the casual fling type of girl. I'll admit, sometimes I wondered if I was missing out in that department, but not when it came to this guy. Nope, no way. Seeing him push back from the bar, his eyes on me, had me sliding the drink away resolutely, declining his offer. He scowled in response, as if I needed further proof that he was a dick.

Much to my relief, he shrugged and set his sights instead on a group of women sitting at the other end of the bar, leaving me alone. Turning away, I caught sight of myself in the brushed mirror that lined the back wall of the bar. I stared at myself for a long moment, wondering what on Earth about me had caught the man's eye. My long blond hair was pulled back in a tight, low bun and there was a weary look in my green eyes that I could see even at this distance. I was dressed for business in a high-necked cream shirt and slate-gray suit, cut to disguise my shape as much as possible. Really nothing remarkable or sexy about me, I thought objectively. The man's attraction was probably based purely on the fact that I was on my own. Great.

Heaving a sigh, I decided to get back to the hotel and reached for my purse. My flight back home to Esperance, North Carolina tomorrow was early. I had to get my life back on track, and that meant a lot of focus and hard work. Fortunately, that was exactly what I was good at.

"Lucia?"

I snapped my head around sharply when I heard the name that only one person had ever called me. My heart leapt, and I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face as I jumped up to greet the man behind me. "Dante!"

He moved in, kissing first one cheek, then the other. I leaned back, surveying him. The ten years since I'd last seen him had been more than kind to Dante Moretti. He was tall, well over six feet with broad shoulders, and thick black hair cropped close. It was his eyes that really pulled at me, though. Dark and fathomless, with just a hint of devilry in them. And he

smelled...oh goodness...*absolutely amazing*. Heat pooled in my belly at his closeness, surprising me. His hands didn't leave my waist as he looked at me, his palms warm through my clothing. I tried not to blush under his scrutiny. Maybe it was the margaritas?

“What are you doing here?” we both asked at the same time, making me laugh.

“Business trip. What about you? Do you live in Seattle?”
Wow, was my voice always so... squeaky?

“No, I came here to catch up with my sister Stef, but she's had to go out of town unexpectedly. So I thought I'd have a look around. I had no idea the sights of Seattle were so very lovely.”

The sparkle of mischief in his eyes had me smiling, then I realized he meant me. He thought I was lovely? Oh my. I had no idea what to say to that, and I didn't trust my voice not to shake or squeak again anyway. I felt locked in with his hands still on my hips, mine resting on his upper arms. Neither of us seemed inclined to pull away. Why would I? Feeling his hard muscles under my hands, I could happily stay here all night, early flight or no early flight.

Dante moved first, dropping his hands and pulling back. “Will you have a drink with me?”

I nodded, still not trusting my voice, and grabbed my handbag and coat. We made our way through the bar to the dining area. I was hyper aware of Dante's hand on the small of my back as he guided me to a rounded booth. By the time we got there, my heart had sped up and I was a little breathless.

I scooted across the rounded bench until I was sitting at the halfway point and was pleased and surprised when Dante did the same. We sat very close together, our thighs almost touching. The scent of him filling my head almost made me dizzy. When he moved his arm so that it was resting on the bench behind me and turned his body a bit to face me, I had to stop myself from scooting even closer. *Get a grip, girl.*

“Have you eaten?”

I shook my head. I'd been planning on heading back to the hotel and raiding the mini bar, since sitting in a bar eating on my own seemed pretty sad.

"Stef told me you can't miss the house pizza here. You wanna share?" He smiled as he spoke, and I felt my insides turn to mush.

Forcing myself to think straight, I finally answered, "Okay, sure, sounds good."

"Great. What are you drinking?"

"A glass of red, please." It was time to dial back on the margaritas, judging by how warm and languid I was feeling.

"Okay, I'll be right back."

I watched him as he walked across the crowded room to the bar. He had that sort of a commanding presence that meant people naturally stepped aside to allow him to pass. It was a far cry from what I remembered from ten years ago. Back then, he'd been pretty wild, drinking a lot and raising hell any chance he got. I had been the complete opposite, already in a committed relationship with Richard, planning our future with way more precision than your average twenty-year-old.

Then something had happened that changed everything for Dante: a car accident that left a close friend in hospital and Dante badly shaken. He'd left Esperance not long after, and I hadn't seen or heard from him since. But watching him now, leaning casually on the bar, his tall frame relaxed, whatever he'd been doing since leaving Esperance had been good for him.

Glancing my way, he caught me staring and gave me a wink. My heart stuttered painfully. From just a wink! Rolling my eyes at myself, I shifted over a little on the seat so that there would be a bit more space between us when Dante came back. I'd never reacted to a man like this before. All gooey, hot, and distracted. It made me a little uncomfortable.

He returned with our drinks, sliding in next to me on the U-shaped bench. I noticed he didn't move in as close as he had been before and didn't know whether to be grateful or sorry.

“So, what’s everyone up to? Your dad still working?”

“Yeah, busy as ever.” I wrapped my fingers around the stem of the wine glass and leaned back against the padded back of the seat. “Working with Matt, of course. They’ve got a couple of guys working with them and they partner with—” I cut myself off. I’d just been about to say Jake and his older brother Gabe, but I wasn’t sure if that was a sore subject, since Jake was the one who nearly lost his life in the car accident that had caused Dante to leave Esperance.

“Partner with...?” he prodded, when I didn’t go on.

“A local landscaping company.” *Much safer.* “Dad and Matt do the home renovations and send work the landscapers’ way, and vice versa.”

“Sounds great.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Did Matt end up marrying that sour-faced bitch?”

I burst out laughing. “Sour-faced biatch” was the perfect way to describe my brother’s ex-wife. “Clarice? That he did.” My smile faded as I recalled the pain Clarice had put him through. “It lasted about five years, I think, before it got too much for him. She was pure poison, cheating on him all the time, trying to take all his money. All sorts of bullshit.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you. He’s okay now, though. He just got engaged to a beautiful girl who loves him to pieces, so Clarice did him a huge favor in the end.”

“That’s good. And Elissa? Claire?”

“Making me a four-time aunt. El has twin girls and a baby boy, and Claire’s partner Jen is pregnant.”

“Your parents must be over the moon about that.”

“Yeah, they are. They love their grandkids. It’s adorable. They’re always babysitting. Honestly, that part’s a bit much for me, but I’ll be in my own place soon and be able to sleep in at the weekend again.”

Dante frowned. "You're living at home?"

Way to sound like a loser, Lucy. "Yeah." Taking a sip of wine, I didn't look at Dante for a long moment. I wasn't quite sure what to say, because explaining that I'd moved back from San Francisco after my world fell apart and I'd spent the last few months trying to get my head back on straight was too much. The fact that I still didn't really feel I had succeeded in that made it even harder. Raising my eyes to Dante's, I saw a question there, but also sympathy. *Keep it simple.* "I've just moved back from San Francisco because I'm fairly recently divorced," I explained flatly.

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks." Immensely relieved when he let that drop, I asked, "What about you? Your family all good?"

"Good enough, I guess. Mom's in Raleigh. She's got a cleaning job."

"That's good." There was an odd tone to his voice I couldn't make out. His mom always struck me as a quiet, subdued sort of woman. I couldn't remember ever seeing Dante's dad. I wasn't sure how to respond to it, so I moved the subject along. "And Stefania is here in Seattle, you said? What's she up to?"

"She's a punk."

"She was always a little wild," I agreed, smiling at the affectionate note in his voice.

Dante laughed, a deep rich sound that skittered across my skin. "No, I mean she's a real punk. In a band. A punk band," he clarified when I looked at him blankly.

"No way!"

"Yep. Lead singer and guitarist. I've seen her band a few times. They're loud, but they're pretty good."

"That's amazing. I can't imagine her all grown up like that. How old is she now?"

"She's twenty-two. Yeah, it's weird, that's for sure. But she's happy, so I'm happy."

“That’s so great.” The conversation trailed off and I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Sipping my wine, I flicked Dante a look from under my lashes. He was watching me. Was I only imagining the heat flickering in his dark eyes? “Oh good, here’s our pizza.” Grateful for the distraction, I gave the waiter a dazzling smile when he placed the pizza and plates on the table. He blinked, giving me a bemused smile in return.

“That poor kid. He didn’t know what hit him,” Dante said when the server left, his voice tinged with amusement.

“Huh?”

“You slayed him with your smile, Lucia.”

I snorted. “I did not.” I wasn’t the sort of woman who slayed men, or boys, with my smile. At all. Ever. Taking the plate Dante handed me, I did my best to ignore the tingling up my arm when our fingers brushed. “So, uh, tell me what you’ve been up to?”

“When I left Esperance” —I didn’t miss the shadow that passed over his face— “I joined the Air Force. I’m on leave, waiting to be reassigned. Maybe a promotion.”

“That’s so great. Do you like it?”

“I do. They put me through college. Taught me discipline. I don’t know if you remember, but that was something I was in desperate need of back in the day.”

“I might vaguely recall that, yes.”

Dante smiled ruefully. “Well, they gave me that and more. The pay is great, and the travel is fun. What’s not to like?”

“No—”

He quirked a brow when I didn’t continue.

Clearing my throat, I dove in. “No wife, I mean.”

“No.”

There was a strange flatness to his reply. Weird. He was young, fit, gorgeous, with a great job. He was a catch by anyone’s definition. I looked at him for a long moment,

wanting to ask more, but at the same time feeling like it would be crossing a line.

We continued eating our pizza as we chatted some more. Every so often I caught him watching me, and every now and then his eyes would flick down to my lips when I talked. It seemed crazy, but if I didn't know better, I'd say he was attracted to me. And yet I wasn't really the kind of girl guys crushed on or lusted after. Being above average height at five foot ten and on the curvy side, with a serious personality to boot, I was never going to be the fun party girl a guy like Dante went for. That's why Richard and I had worked so well together. He was a no fuss kind of guy and liked it that I didn't expect endless compliments and flattery.

But now, sitting here tonight with Dante, staring into my wine, I felt a flash of regret. A stupid, momentary longing to be exactly the kind of girl he liked. Pretty and peppy and fun. *And thin*. I shushed myself immediately for that last one. It wasn't like I had a lot of hang ups about my body. Cooper women were "built on majestic lines", as my Nan used to say. Usually, that was a source of pride for me, but sometimes, no, most of the time, I felt ...unsexy. Biting back a sigh, I raised my eyes to his.

"I'd almost forgotten how pretty you are."

The breath whooshed from my lungs when he reached up and ran the tip of his finger down my cheek. Oh. My. God. He looked like he was going to kiss me. I let out a gasp and his eyes dropped immediately to my parted lips. With a knowing light in his eye, he leaned in slowly, giving me enough time to pull back if I wanted to. No way was I doing that. I was utterly spellbound, breathless with anticipation, my heart hammering.

The corners of his mouth hooked up in a devilish smile and he closed the remaining distance between us, pressing his lips to mine. I forced myself to breathe, felt his scent wash over me and heat pool in my core. He cupped the back of my head and held me there, demanding I open my lips for him. This was no sweet, gentle, exploratory kiss. It was a full-on assault that had me reeling.

I loved every single second of it.

CHAPTER 2

Dante

Lucy freaking Cooper. Sweet Jesus, she was even hotter than I remembered. And what a kisser! My long, boring weekend waiting for Stef to get back to town had just morphed into something seriously amazing. There was no way I was passing up the opportunity to spend some quality time with this woman. Especially not when she kissed like this. I pulled back slowly, smiling again when her eyes fluttered open and she looked at me sleepily, like she'd been drugged. "When are you heading out?"

"Hmm?"

My smile widened. "Esperance. When do you have to go back?"

"Oh. Umm, first thing in the morning."

"Good. We have plenty of time."

"Do we?"

"We do."

"What for?"

"For all the wicked things I want to do to you."

Her eyes clouded in confusion. "I don't understand."

"What don't you understand, *cara*?"

"You're saying you want to..."

"Take you back to my hotel and fuck you senseless, yes. Or your hotel, if it's closer."

Her mouth dropped open in an O of surprise that had me thinking all sorts of dirty thoughts.

“You want to fuck me?”

“Christ, yes.” I tilted my head to one side, eyeing her as a horrifying thought flashed into my mind. “You don’t want to?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s just that no one has ever said that to me before.”

“You were with what’s-his-name for over a decade, and he never said he wanted to fuck you senseless?”

That made her giggle. “*God*, no. That would have been way too crude for Richard.”

“Does that mean he also never actually did fuck you senseless?”

She blushed and shook her head.

“Well, that’s a crime.”

“It wasn’t that he didn’t...that we didn’t...it was just that I...”

I was dying to know how she was going to disentangle that jumble of thoughts, but although her confusion was adorable, she was also clearly uncomfortable. “You don’t need to explain. I get it.”

“You do?”

“Sure. Richard has a tiny dick. Worse, he has no idea how to use it.” I grinned when she burst out laughing. “Me, on the other hand...”

“Yes?” she asked when I left the sentence hanging.

“Come back to my room and you’ll find out.”

She hesitated for just a brief moment before taking a deep breath, looked me square in the eyes and said, “Okay.”

My dick went instantly hard. “Let’s go.” I paid the bill and helped her with her coat, taking her hand and dragging her outside. “Drugstore.”

“Oh. Right.”

I looked up and down the street, suddenly feeling a little desperate.

“My hotel’s just around the corner and there’s a drugstore two doors away.”

“Perfect.” I had to force myself not to drag Lucy down the street, but I was pleased to note that she matched her strides to mine pretty well.

Warm air washed over us when we entered the drug store and Lucy took her gloves off immediately. My blood humming, I picked up a basket and headed straight to the aisle with the condoms, dropping two boxes in the basket before taking a moment to think what else we might need.

I flicked a glance at Lucy, noting the blush that stained her cheeks as she perused the shelves. Did she want to buy something but was too shy to say so? Hmm, interesting. I wandered further down the aisle and just before I turned at the end, I checked. Yep, she was quickly grabbing something from the shelf and shoving it in her pocket.

She caught up with me just as I pulled a weighted eye mask from the shelf. Her blush deepened when I winked at her before putting it in the basket. I continued on, finding the last of what I was looking for.

“Seriously?” She muttered under her breath, her cheeks an absolutely adorable shade of pink by now.

“When it comes to orgasms, Lucia, I don’t mess about. It’s a serious business.”

“Right.”

We headed back to the front of the store and waited in line at the checkout. When there was only one person in front of us, I leaned over and said, “Put it in the basket.”

Her eyes flew to mine. “Wh-what?”

“Whatever that is in your pocket.” I held up the basket. “It goes in here.”

“No, it’s fine, I—”

The person in front of us moved to the next available counter but I didn't step forward. "I'm not going to let you pay for it." I said, holding her gaze and the basket, waiting patiently. It wasn't until the guy behind us huffed his impatience and Lucy realized I wasn't going to give up that she took the box from her pocket and dropped it in the basket.

The checkout operator chattered away happily while she cashed us out, but to my immense amusement, Lucy spent the whole time looking down at her feet. We stepped back outside and I stopped, reaching into the bag and pulling out the box I'd taken from her. Personal lubricant. I raised an eyebrow, eyeing her questioningly. "You really think you're going to need this?"

She looked like a little girl who'd been caught stealing. "Well, it's just—"

Before she could say anything further, I grabbed the front of her jacket in one hand, hauled her against me and kissed her. My desire for her had been building all evening, and now, just a few steps from her hotel, I let a little of it go. Let her feel something of my need for her, until she was melting against me, her hands on my hips. When I thought she'd finally got the message, I raised my head. "I don't think we'll be needing it, do you?"

Dazed, with her lips swollen from my kiss, she shook her head.

"Good girl." I dropped the lube in a nearby bin and, taking her hand, led her through the front doors of her hotel.

CHAPTER 3

Lucy

Dante all but dragged me across the lobby with its mosaic tiles and funky, bold artwork to the elevators, tapping his toe impatiently as we waited, watching the numbers slowly descend to the ground floor. When the elevator doors finally opened with a loud *ding*, I had to press my hands together to stop them from shaking. I was more than a little nervous, but holy fuck, that kiss. It had set me on fire and now I felt like a hot ball of need, ready to throw myself at Dante the moment the doors closed.

“What floor?”

“Thirty-two.” I moved next to him as I spoke, gasping when he put a hand to my shoulder and pushed me away. What the fuck?

He pressed the button, then said, “Unless you want me to tear your clothes off right now, you’ll stay over there.”

Oh. Wow. Heat lanced through me at his words and the look in his eyes and it was all I could do not to suggest he push the emergency button so we could just go for it here. Instead, I stood against the opposite wall, watching the numbers light up as the elevator ascended, praying that it went all the way without stopping. It did. Pulling my room card from my handbag, I felt Dante very close behind me as I walked the short distance from the elevator to my room. My heart hammered as I tried to put the key in the slot, his hands at my hips and his breath hot on my neck. Fuck, my hands were shaking so much I couldn’t get the key in the slot.

Dante reached around me, slid the card in and pushed the door open the second the green light came on. I'd barely taken two steps into the room when he whirled me around and shoved me back roughly against the door. Dropping the shopping bag on the floor, he cupped my face, gazing into my eyes for a long, scorching moment before lowering his head and kissing me. Hard.

Holy shit. I'd never been kissed like this before. So demanding, so hungry, like he'd just crawled through the desert and I was his first drink of water. I shoved at his coat, pushing it off his shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. He did the same to mine, taking my suit jacket with it, barely breaking the kiss. I felt his fingers at the buttons of my shirt and felt a sudden wave of nerves. What if he didn't like me? Didn't think I was sexy? Before I could worry about that too much, he raised his head, his eyes glittering as he looked at me.

"Take your hair down."

With trembling fingers, I pulled out the bobby pins and slid the hair elastic off so that my hair tumbled to my shoulders. I'd always liked my hair, considering it my best feature, so to feel Dante take it in his hands and run his fingers through it before murmuring, "Gorgeous," eased some of my anxiety. "Now, where were we?"

"I think we were about here." With my hand on the back of his neck, I pulled him into me, almost having to go on tiptoe to reach up and kiss him. I loved the feeling that gave me, that I wasn't some giantess, too big to be hot, like I always felt with Richard— *No, stop! Don't bring Richard into this!*

"Stop thinking," he growled against my lips.

With those words, he reached for my shirt again, but instead of undoing the last few buttons, he ripped the shirt open and tore them off, smiling wickedly when I gasped. With his arms around me, he walked backwards until he hit the bed. I was on fire now, desperate to feel his hands on me everywhere. As if reading my mind, he dropped to the bed, pulling me forward so I was standing between his knees.

Reaching down, he slid my shoes off and threw them behind me before trailing his hands up the back of my legs, to the hem of my humdrum, gray skirt. He pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses across my midriff, over my bra, his tongue circling my nipples through the cotton until they were hard peaks. The whole time, he murmured softly, half in English, half in Italian. I couldn't quite catch the words, but I got the meaning. I was a goddess, beyond beautiful, so desirable. I'd never been spoken to like this before, and it set me on fire.

Until, that is, he pushed my pencil skirt up to my waist. I stilled when he pushed me back slightly and I realized he was frowning with disapproval.

"Wh-what's the matter?"

"This." He gestured at me. "This is a crime. All this perfection, clad in the most boring underwear I've ever seen."

"I..."

Then he grabbed the edge of my panties and with one swift movement tore them off. Just ripped them right from my body.

"Holy fuck." I almost melted on the spot.

"Much better." He dropped my shredded underwear to the carpet and with his hands on my hips pulled me closer again. "Now, Lucia, I'm going to watch while you come undone and I'm going to enjoy every second of it." With one arm low around my waist, he held me still while he ran his hand up my inner thigh, touching me lightly between my legs. I whimpered as my knees almost gave way and I had to hold onto his shoulders to steady myself. Fuck, nothing had ever felt this good. "Mm, that's it." He pulled his hand away, licking his finger, tasting me, his eyes dark with desire. "So delicious. So perfect. So wet," he said, putting his hand back between my legs. "Come for me, Lucy."

As if I had a choice. He moved his hand lightly at first, just a soft, feathery touch against my clit, his arm around my waist and my hands on his shoulders anchoring me. My legs buckled and my breathing turned ragged when he slipped first one

finger, then two, inside me. He played my body like it was a finely tuned instrument and he was a virtuoso.

He moved his hand faster, his palm brushing against my clit, sending shockwaves of pleasure surging through me. The pressure built and I closed my eyes, letting my head fall back and my hips move instinctively until the pleasure bloomed in my core and spread from there, making my body tremble and jerk, and I did what he wanted: I let go, coming completely undone for him, moaning, crying out.

When I stilled, he pulled me into his lap, holding me gently with my head on his shoulder while he ran his fingers through my hair. He let me float dreamily in the afterglow for a few moments before shifting me slightly so I was sitting up and facing him.

Cupping my face, he kissed me softly, languorously, tangling his tongue with mine, drawing out the kiss as I sighed against his lips. I could feel his cock, hard and insistent, pressing against my hip, and I felt the first flares of fresh heat swirling inside me. Desperate to get my hands on his skin, I leaned back slightly, undoing the buttons of his shirt one by one, pushing the material aside so I could run my hands over his chest. His hard muscles clenched under my palms, and I let my hands drift lower. The position was awkward, so I moved slightly so I could reach, brushing my hand over the hard bulge in his pants, feeling my inner muscles clench in anticipation. I wanted this, so badly. Wanted to feel him inside me. But he clearly wasn't in a rush, just pushing his hips against my hand, threading his fingers through my hair while he kissed me.

His hands roved over me, removing my clothes until I was naked in his lap. I should have felt uncomfortable and self-conscious, but the way his eyes followed the path of his hands over me, I was anything but. It seemed like he just couldn't get enough of me. That he loved what he saw. I'd never felt more beautiful.

Dipping his head, he ran his tongue over my nipple. "Tell me what you want," he said, squeezing my other breast, running his thumb over the other nipple.

It was time to be a little daring, to make the most of this erotic feeling he created in me. “You want to hear what I want?”

“Mm hmm.”

“I want your cock.”

He raised his head, surprise and heat flaring in his eyes.

“Right now.” I stood and went to collect the shopping bag he’d dropped near the door. When I turned back to him, he was already stripping off his pants, his cock thick and hard as he wrapped his hand around it. Retrieving the box of condoms from the bag, I tore it open and hastily pulled out a foil packet. Not being quite brave enough to do it myself, I handed it to him, watching while he rolled it on.

He wrapped his fingers around my wrist, his eyes moving over me, leaving a hot trail in their wake. “You want it, take it.”

Oh god, he was going to let me be in charge. I’d expected him to pull me down on the bed and crawl on top of me, but no, with his hands on my hips he guided me so that I was straddling him. Lowering myself slowly, I shuddered when I felt the tip of his cock at my entrance. He was much, much bigger than I was used to and as I lowered myself further, I felt him fill me, stretch me wide so I had to shift a little to take all of him in. Dropping my forehead to his, I stayed there for a moment, my eyes closed, reveling in the feeling of him, the scent of him, of us, washing over me.

“Eyes on me, Lucia,” he growled.

I raised my head, looking him directly in the eye, almost drowning in the dark intensity I saw there.

“I want you to know who you’re fucking.”

I moved my hips slightly, rocking against him, shivering at the feel of my clit rubbing against him. “I know who I’m fucking,” I replied breathlessly. How could I not? Dante Moretti was a revelation. I kept my eyes open regardless, did as he said, watching him as I moved my hips again. His clenched jaw and furrowed brow told me he was about to tumble over the edge. Fuck, I loved that. Loved that I could do

that to him. So I moved some more, faster, up and down, but not yet fast enough to get either of us off.

“Christ, you’re a torment.” With his hands cupping my ass, he spurred me on, pushing me to move harder and faster on him. I gave up trying to pretend I was in control and just let go, letting his hands set the pace until I was chasing my second orgasm, riding the rising tide of pleasure, moaning and crying out. When I was just about to peak, I felt him slap my ass, swift and shocking. The stinging sensation reverberated through me, sending me toppling over the precipice.

My body shaking, I screamed out, raking my nails across his shoulders, completely out of control. I felt him tense up, his hands bruising me as he held me still while he came, his cock jerking inside me. The intensity almost overwhelmed me and I collapsed against him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and burying my face in his neck. Never, ever, had I felt anything so intense or amazing. I’d had no idea my body could respond like that. I could feel Dante’s heart thundering, hear his labored breathing while his hands stroked up and down my back, soothing me. The greatest revelation of all was that I could do to him exactly what he’d just done to me.

I felt him press a kiss into my shoulder. “We have a problem.”

I snapped my head up. “Do we?”

Pushing the hair back from my forehead, he smiled. “There’s no way one night is going to be enough.”

“Indeed.” I couldn’t agree more.

“Change your flight.”

I smiled back. “Okay.”

“Stef gets back Monday.”

“Okay,” I repeated.

He brushed his lips lightly across mine and pushed me to my feet. As he went into the bathroom, I grabbed my phone from my bag, glancing around at our clothes strewn across the floor. It looked like a room where two people had just had wild sex. *Well, I guess that’s what it is*, I thought, grinning to myself. I

logged into my airline booking and changed my flight to Monday morning. Then I straightened up the room, hanging my skirt and jacket in the wardrobe, sighing and smiling at my ruined shirt and destroyed underwear. By the time Dante came out of the bathroom, everything was put away and I was lying on the king-sized bed, thanking whatever gods had prompted me to get a room upgrade: I couldn't imagine trying to squeeze Dante into a standard double bed.

I couldn't take my eyes off him as he walked across the room. He was so incredibly mind-blowingly hot, and all mine for three whole days. He climbed in next to me and I wondered what I should do: Richard had always rolled onto his side, his back to me, after we had sex. Dante didn't leave me wondering for long. He lay back and pulled me into his arms, tucking me against his side and resting his hand on my ass. With my head on his shoulder and my hand on his chest, I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep, happy and satisfied.

CHAPTER 4

Dante

Holy. Shit.

An armful of Lucy Cooper was a fucking awesome thing to wake up to, even if her honey-blond hair was all over my face. From her steady breathing I could tell she was still asleep and I didn't want to disturb her, so I carefully moved her hair, tucking it out of the way. She stirred immediately, pushing her arm out from under the duvet and squirming a little. Since we were spooning with her back to my front, the movement had her butt wriggling against my dick. Of course, it stood to attention immediately. She squirmed some more, pushing her hips back against me. I took it for the invitation it was and pressed a kiss to her creamy, white shoulder, sliding my hand up to cup one full breast under the covers.

She inhaled deeply. My dick got even harder. "Christ, you are so gorgeous," I murmured softly, grinding my cock against her ass, squeezing her breast. "So beautiful." I buried my face in her hair and inhaled deeply. "And you smell amazing."

"You don't have to say that stuff, you know."

"Mm?"

"I mean, I don't need you to say all that stuff to me."

"What stuff? The truth?" She went still, making me frown.

"Lucia, what are you talking about?"

"You don't have to overdo the compliments. I don't need them."

“What the fuck? Turn around.” She didn’t move and I could sense her agitation. “Turn around and look at me.”

There was no way she could ignore the commanding tone of my voice and she rolled over to face me, pulling her hair to the side but still looking at me with a guarded expression.

“Did you ever come to my place, when I lived in Esperance?”

Her little frown as she tried to remember was fucking adorable.

“A few times, when I was babysitting Stef.”

“Well, do you remember, in the hallway, there was a painting on the wall?”

She shook her head. “Not really, no.”

“Well, there was. It was a cheap, tacky picture of Venus, the Goddess of Love. It hung across from my bedroom door.”

“Okay.”

“I used to jerk off to that painting.”

“Oh my god, thanks for sharing—”

“And when I used to jerk off,” I continued, pretending she hadn’t said anything, “I used to imagine your face on that body.”

Her green eyes widened in shock, then a beautiful, soft blush stained her cheeks. “You did not!”

“Fuck yes, I did! She looked exactly how I pictured you naked, and more than ten years later, it turns out I wasn’t wrong.” I squeezed her ass and pulled her closer to me. “All milky curves and luscious tits. You were a walking wet dream as far as I was concerned.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No, you’re crazy. Sticking with a pasty-faced dickwad who obviously had no idea how to appreciate what he had.” Seeing that she was about to argue further, I silenced her with a kiss, rolling onto my back and taking her with me so that she was

sprawled on top of me. “And now, my sweet little goddess, we’re going to live out my fantasy.”

“Are we?” she asked, a little breathless, a little uncertain, and a whole pile of hot.

“We are.” I pushed her hair back from her face and tapped her nose. “Now, ask me what my fantasy was.”

She swallowed heavily before asking in a low voice, “What was your fantasy?”

“You, sitting on my face, your thighs wrapped around my head while I tongued your pussy until you screamed my name.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

“Exactly. Come here.” I pulled at her, but she resisted.

“I can’t.”

“You can and you will. Would you really deny me a lifelong dream?” She was still unsure, so I kissed her again, slipping my tongue into her mouth, sliding my hands over her soft skin until I felt her melt against me. “Let me. It’ll be hot,” I whispered against her lips. When she finally nodded her assent, I almost exploded right then and there.

Hauling her up my body, I scooted down a little, giving her room to straddle my head. Fuck, she was so divinely beautiful and the way her scent filled my head was driving me crazy.

“Is...is this okay?”

“It’s perfect,” I reassured her. Cupping her ass to keep her still, I ran my tongue up her slit, the taste of her driving me even wilder. “Christ, you taste so good.” I licked her again, moving my hands up to squeeze her breasts, tweaking her nipples until they stiffened against my fingers. I could tell that she hadn’t quite let go yet, wasn’t quite ready to surrender to the pleasure, as uncertainty still clouded her eyes. I slid my hands down, pulling her thighs a little further apart, reaching in, parting her lips, exposing her clit more so I could give it the attention it needed. She shivered and inhaled sharply when I took it in my mouth and sucked, and I knew with just a few more licks, I would have her whimpering with need. So that’s exactly what

I gave her. I licked and sucked and flicked my tongue against her until her hips started bucking and her taste flooded my tongue. “Yes, that’s it, good girl. Give it all to me. Let go.”

She whimpered at my words and when I looked up her head had fallen back and her hands were gripping the headboard. I squeezed her tits, pinching the nipples until she was moaning with pleasure. Then I really gave it to her, holding her hips tightly so that she couldn’t move, flicking my tongue hard against her clit, and in less than five seconds she shattered, screaming my name as her body convulsed above me in orgasm. *So. Fucking. Hot.*

Barely giving her time to catch her breath, I flipped us over and threw her back on the bed, a little roughly this time, and reached for a condom. Her chest was still heaving from her orgasm, her hair spread across the sheets, her eyes unfocused and her skin glowing. Christ, she was everything I’d imagined and so much more. If I didn’t get inside her right this second, I was going to come all over the sheets. Hastily rolling the condom on, I got to my knees and grabbed Lucy’s ankles, placing them up on my shoulders.

I held onto her thighs as I pushed inside her, groaning at how tight and wet she was. Knowing she needed time to build up again, I clenched my teeth and pulled out slowly, then pushed back in. She let out a soft sigh, reaching up to hold onto my forearms as I moved, her moans encouraging me.

“You like that?”

“I do.”

“Tell me what you want.”

Her inner walls tightened around me. “I want...”

“Tell me.” I pressed a kiss to her ankle.

“I want you to fuck me so hard I can’t think straight.”

That was all the permission I needed. Holding onto her, I rammed back inside hard. “Like this?”

“Oh, *fuck!* Exactly like that.”

I did it again and the cry she let out raced across my skin, settling at the base of my spine and spurring me on. My fingers dug into her lush thighs, holding her still while I shoved in again. Flexing my hips, I leaned forward, pushing her legs back so that next time I shoved into her, I was buried all the way to the hilt. Looking down, I pulled out of her and pushed back in, the sight of my cock coated in her slickness sending me over the edge. I let go and rammed her hard, pounding her body into the mattress. She gripped the sheet above her head in tight fists, squeezing her eyes shut as her whole body flushed with pleasure.

She looked exactly like the goddess of love from my teenage fantasy, all pink skin and voluptuous, bouncing curves. It seemed to me that her body was made for sex and sex alone, and the sight of her sprawled beneath me, taking everything I could give her and loving it, sent me over the edge. Just as her inner muscles clamped around me in climax, I had my own orgasm, coming deep inside her with three hard thrusts.

Dropping her legs to the mattress, I fell forward, barely managing to prevent myself from crushing her as I landed on her. I braced myself on my elbows and buried my face in her neck while I tried to catch my breath. We lay still for long moments, Lucy tracing lazy circles up and down my back while I waited for my racing heart to settle.

Finally, I rolled off her and onto my back, staring up at the ceiling. "I wish I could travel back in time."

"And why's that?"

"So I could tell teenage me exactly how fucking hot it was to have you sitting on my face, screaming my name. Think of all the extra orgasms I would have had."

She giggled. "You really are crazy."

"Mm, you're probably right. But I'm also really hungry. Let's have a shower and head out for breakfast."

"That sounds like a good plan. Just give me a minute till I can move again."

Chuckling, I forced myself up from the bed and turned around, hauling Lucy to her feet and into the bathroom. “I’ll hold you up.”

“Good. I think you’ll have to.”



Of course, Seattle in November meant rain. Lots of it. We decided to move to my hotel, since Lucy was due to check out anyway and I had my room for the rest of the weekend. So we packed her stuff and took a cab to my hotel, even though it was only a few blocks away, then headed to a nearby diner.

“What would you like?”

Lucy didn’t even look at the menu. “Blueberry pancakes. And coffee. What about you?”

“Think I’ll go with bacon and eggs. And coffee.”

The server came and took our order, and when she’d gone, I leaned back in my chair, watching Lucy as she gazed out at the pouring rain. She looked so pretty, wearing a soft pink wool sweater and with her hair falling around her shoulders. I spoke softly. “Hey, you wanna know something?”

She turned her green eyes back to me and I lost myself for a moment, just looking at her.

“What?”

“Your tits look great in that top.”

As I knew she would, she blushed and quickly looked around to see if anyone had heard. “You can’t *say* stuff like that!” Her eyes were dancing, despite the blush.

I shrugged, grinning. “Why not? It’s the truth.”

“Well... Thank you, I guess.”

“You’re welcome.”

I found myself deeply curious about her. I wanted to know everything about her. What she'd been doing married to a dickless wonder for so long, for a start. But instead I asked, "So tell me, what made you go into IT?"

She paused so long that I almost forgot what my question was. Then she shrugged and said, "Richard thought it was the best option."

I frowned. "And what about you? What did you think?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong, it wasn't like he forced me into it or anything like that. It was just that as we neared the end of high school, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do."

"Really? If I'd had to guess, I would have expected you to go work with your dad."

She tilted her head and eyed me curiously for a moment. "That's very interesting."

"Is it? Why?"

"Because that's kind of what I was thinking at the time. Dad used to take me and Matt to work with him during summer vacation and I really loved it." She stopped, turning to look back out the window, maybe pondering what might have been.

"So, what stopped you?"

"He—we—just thought IT was probably an easier option for a woman than construction. And that there would be more opportunities for both of us if we left Esperance. It seemed like a solid, practical career. Which, to be fair, it is."

"Do you like it?"

"I don't...hate it? I can't say I'm passionate about it, but it pays the bills really well, plus I have a lot of flexibility with my hours. I'm certainly not complaining, put it that way."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

The server came back with our coffee just then, so we let the conversation go for a moment. Once she'd gone again, I said,

“So, can you tell me what happened between you and Richard?”

Shadows flickered in her eyes and for a moment I thought she wasn't going to answer. “When we first got together, I thought we were so alike, so compatible. We're both very particular. *Anally retentive* I believe is the term.” She smiled ruefully. “We got along really well. We had the same goals, same interests...mostly.”

That caught my attention. Something about her tone when she said “mostly” made me think she'd blended her interests with his in a way that was less than fair to her. “That sounds... good?” I said, the faint question in my voice encouraging her to go on.

“Yeah, it was. We'd always agreed on our future. Richard had it all worked out. How long we would work in our jobs for, when and where we would vacation. When we would upgrade cars, or houses. When we would retire. Every single second of every year was planned out. I liked that at first, because it made me feel secure and in control.”

“I'm sensing a but.”

“Yeah. Exactly. But. In the last few years, as I got older, I started wanting different things. I was deviating from his map. I started talking about changing things up, making different plans.”

“What sort of plans?”

There was a brief hesitation before she said, “I started really wanting to move back home.”

I could tell there had been more to it than that, but I let it lie. She was already opening up a lot. “That makes sense. Your family are very close.”

“We are. I was missing them a ton. The few visits per year he'd decided on just weren't cutting it for me anymore.”

“That's fair.”

“Yeah, well, Richard didn't think so.”

“Asshole.”

“Ha! I’m starting to see that now. Because he just wouldn’t budge. No matter what I said, how much I argued, how hurt I was, all he would say was, *that’s not the plan*. Over and over and over, like a recording, as if that settled the matter. Even though it was far from settled for me., I was forced to let it go or I’d go mad.”

She looked so sad and lost that I reached out and took her hand, holding it in mine. “So what happened then?”

“I tried to come to terms with it, tried to convince myself that what we had was so good, it wasn’t worth risking it all over being stubborn. But then I felt all the years ahead closing in on me. Pressing on me so much I could hardly breathe. I felt smothered by our future, crushed under the weight of Richard’s meticulous plans.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you. It’s all for the best, for sure, so you don’t have to feel too sorry for me. Anyway, long story short, I gave him an ultimatum, he threw it back in my face, I left.

“And then?”

“At first he couldn’t believe it. He must have thought I was bluffing, but once he realized I wasn’t, he accepted it.”

“And you moved back home.”

“I moved back home,” she repeated, her soft, sweet smile going straight through my heart.

“I bet your parents love having you back.”

“They do,” she replied with a giggle. “I felt like a celebrity when I first moved back. But it wouldn’t surprise me if they’re sick of me now. They haven’t said anything, but I’ve been there for a year. I can’t wait to move into my own place.”

“That sounds amazing.”

The server came with our food and we ate quietly for a while. I liked it. The silence felt very comfortable.

Pushing away her empty plate, Lucy said, “What about you? I only recently found out that you joined the Air Force when

you left us.”

Left us. That stung. I pushed aside the memories of my last few months in Esperance. They’d been hell. “Honestly, being an air force pilot is the perfect job for me. All the discipline of the defense forces, with all the fun of flying planes at supersonic speeds. What’s not to love?”

She chuckled at that, making me smile. Until her laughter faded away and she watched me closely. I braced myself because I knew what was coming. Knew she wasn’t going to let me push aside the memories. “Tell me.”

I didn’t even pretend not to know what she meant. Blowing out a breath, I said, “You know Jake and I were pretty wild.”

“Yup,” she said wryly.

“At first, we were young and stupid and it was harmless enough, but then it almost wasn’t. We were a terrible influence on each other, always pushing for the next crazy idea, testing those limits. We couldn’t really do that much damage when we were younger, but when we got old enough to get our hands on alcohol, that all changed.”

“The accident.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at my coffee cup, almost like I was seeking relief in the last of the black liquid at the bottom. “We nearly killed Emma.” It was a bald statement of fact, spoken flatly with no emotion.

Lucy gasped. “No!”

“Yes. We were speeding along the back roads, driving like the fucking morons we were, totally wasted on my mom’s homemade grappa. Emma was coming the other way in her car. Jake had to swerve to miss her. That’s why he hit the tree.”

I didn’t feel like I deserved one ounce of the sympathy I saw swimming in her gorgeous eyes. “You were just kids, Dante. Wild and stupid, for sure. But you didn’t mean any harm.”

“What we meant and what happened are two different things, though, aren’t they? Jake could have killed Emma and damn

near killed himself. And me? I walked away without a scratch. I paid zero price.”

“Doesn’t sound like it, talking to you now.”

I smiled bitterly. “Yeah... Maybe you’re right.”

“What happened after that?”

“Once we knew for sure that Jake was gonna make it, I went and saw your dad.”

“That was a smart move.”

My smile came a little more naturally this time. “It really was. I felt like the road I was heading down was a one-way street with a bad ending, that there was no way I was strong enough to stop myself. So I asked your dad what I should do. He grilled me for over an hour, asking me what I thought I was good at, what I hated, what I was afraid of. Honestly, it was harder than the process for joining the air force.”

“It was worth it, though?”

“Sure was. He’d seen a recruitment ad a few days before and figured the air force would give me everything I needed. He was right. I owe him my life.” It wasn’t a lie. “I’m pretty sure I’d be dead if he hadn’t done what he did.”

“Well, I’m glad he did it, then.”

“Me too. He’s an amazing man.”

“He’s pretty special.” Turning to get the server’s attention, Lucy indicated that we wanted our coffees topped up.

Once she’d been and gone, I was put back under the Lucy Cooper microscope. I couldn’t even say I hated it, which was weird, considering I’d never told anyone, ever, what I’d just told her casually over breakfast in a Seattle diner, with the rain pelting against the window.

CHAPTER 5

Lucy

I picked up my coffee mug that the server had refilled for me and breathed in deeply, closing my eyes for a moment.

One of my favorite things about drinking coffee was that first smell of a freshly-poured cup. Plus, it gave me time to gather my thoughts. There was so much I wanted to ask Dante, but I didn't want to push it and go too far. "So, we've established that my dad is amazing," I said lightly. "What about yours? I don't think I ever remember seeing him in Esperance."

"He's...not amazing. I used to think he was, but you know, you grow up and learn a thing or two."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, well, it is what it is."

I'd been so young, barely more than a child and completely wrapped up in Richard when Dante had lived in Esperance. I had no idea how troubled he'd been, but I could see it now, and all it did was fill me with even more questions.

"And your mom? She seemed pretty sweet." I remembered Giovanna Moretti as a quiet, self-effacing sort of woman, who was always nice to me. Now I thought about it from a more adult perspective, I think "worn down" would have been a good way to describe her.

"Mom...loved dad."

Well, that really wasn't saying much. "What does *that* mean?"

There was that shrug again, like he was dismissing my question. Not me, but my question. “Just that. Stef says our mom loved Dad so much, it left no room for anything else. Certainly not for us.”

“That sounds pretty shit.”

“It is what it is.” That again. It was obviously his go-to line and it made me sad. “We can’t all have Bruce and Ellen Cooper as parents. I mean, just look at what they did for Gabe and Jake, taking them in after their mom died. That can’t have been easy.”

“No, it can’t. And don’t get me wrong, I appreciate them to the moon and back, love them to pieces and will forever be grateful to be their daughter. But even with all their support, I still made a shitty marriage, didn’t I?”

“You thought you were doing the right thing at the time.”

“Yep, exactly. I saw my folks, so happily married and devoted to each other, and I wanted that for myself. So I jumped at the first offer, not realizing that what made their marriage work so well was completely missing from mine.”

“What was that?”

“Passion. My dad loves my mom with every fiber of his being. His whole world revolves around her. Anything she wants, he wants to give her.”

“But not in a bad way.” I heard, loud and clear, the part he didn’t say: *like the way it is for my mom and dad.*

“No, exactly, not in a bad way. Not to the exclusion of everything else. But I couldn’t get Richard to love me more than his best-laid plans and why are we even talking about me again?”

He chuckled. “Because you’re fascinating.”

“And you don’t want to talk about yourself.”

“Busted.”

“It’s okay. We don’t have to. What are we gonna do for the rest of the day?” He waggled his eyebrows at me, making me

blush and giggle like a schoolgirl. “We can’t do that *all* day.”

“Wanna bet? Seriously, the weather’s pretty shitty.” He gestured out the window at the rain still battering the pavement. “There aren’t too many options.”

I hesitated, then thought it was worth a try. “Maybe we could take a wander around Westlake Center Mall? I want to start thinking about Christmas presents and window shopping helps me get ideas. It’s not too far.”

“Sure, if you like.”

Whoa. Richard hated shopping without a plan. He needed to have a bullet-point list and a map of the shopping center or the deal was off. “Great.” I put my hand up to ask the server for the check.

“Nope.” Dante raised his hand and pulled my wrist down, catching her eye before I could.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting the check.”

“You paid for dinner last night and I’m staying at your hotel. I can cover breakfast.”

“No way. When you’re with me, I look after you. End of story.” He said it a little fiercely, which did all sorts of things to my insides.

“Oh. Well. Okay. Thank you.”

While Dante took care of the check, I wondered when the endless comparisons in my mind to Richard would stop. Because Richard had always insisted on fifty/fifty, right down to the penny, even when he was earning twice as much as me before I’d started my consulting business.

Helping me into my coat, Dante dropped a kiss on my nose, then took my hand and linked his fingers through mine as we walked to the door. Another thing Richard never did. He hated public displays of affection.

Well, at least if I was going to make these constant comparisons to my ex, they all kept falling resoundingly in

Dante's favor.



We took a cab to Westlake Center and dashed inside, with Dante holding me close against him putting his jacket over my head to protect me from the rain. After that, he just followed me around, with more patience than anyone I'd ever shopped with. I was a painfully methodical shopper, and I knew it, but I liked to be meticulous about it.

"What are you doing?" he asked me when we were standing in a toy shop.

"Hmm?"

"With that." He gestured to my phone, which I was using to scan the bar codes of various Pokémon toys on the shelf.

"Oh, I've got a gift app, so I can keep track of all the presents I buy. That way I don't repeat past gifts or go over my budget."

"Amazing."

I smiled. "Not really."

"Trust me, it is. If it were me, I'd just buy half the store and take my chances."

Laughing, I said, "Well, that thought gives me hives, so I think I'll stick to this method, thanks all the same."

"Fair. What next?"

"I wanna check out some perfume for my mom. I think she must be just about due for a new bottle. And maybe get some ideas for something for Jen to help her in her third trimester. No idea what, though. We're starting from scratch with that one."

In the department store, I added my mom's perfume to the app and Dante helped me pick out a foot massager for Jen. After that, we just wandered from store to store. I was starting to get used to Dante touching me all the time, either holding my hand, or putting his arm around my waist, or slipping his hand

into the back pocket of my jeans. That was probably my favorite, because it kept me close to him and made me half believe he really meant it when he said I was hot.

Something in a nearby store window caught my eye and I stopped abruptly, making Dante bump against me. “Sorry, I just wanna go over there.”

“No problem.”

Seriously? It was like nothing ever irritated the man.

“You hike?” he asked when I dragged him over to the outdoor goods store.

“We did, when we were kids, but I stopped when, um...”

“Let me guess. Richard.”

“He has allergies.”

Dante muttered something under his breath I didn’t quite catch.

“Whatever you just said, I think I agree.” I looked at the boots longingly, remembering how much I used to love hiking, wondering when I would get the chance to go again.

“Come on.” Dante pulled on my hand, dragging me into the store. “No just scanning the barcode and adding them to your app. We’re gonna actually buy a pair.”

“What? No, that’s stupid.”

“Why?”

“It’s a waste! How often am I going to get the chance to use them?”

“Never, if you don’t buy them.” He tapped the end of my nose for emphasis.

Damn. I could hardly argue with that.

“Here. Try these.” He handed me a pair of Scarpa Mont Blanc boots.

“Oh,” I gasped. “I love them!” He’d even picked the right size, so I sat on a low bench, ripped my leather boots off and put the hiking boots on. “Fuck,” I muttered, because they were

amazing. They were black and green, with a sturdy sole, a Gore-Tex lining, and a leather upper. Way more than I needed for any hiking I'd be likely to do around Esperance, but I really, really loved them.

Dante signaled to the clerk, who came over with a friendly smile. "What can I do for you?"

"We'll get these ones, please."

"You bet. You've made a great choice. These are perfect for glacier walking, if that's your thing."

I giggled. "Not usually, but I'll take them anyway, thank you."

Dante reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet.

"Dante! No. Absolutely not."

"What? I said I'd look after you and I meant it."

"And I never would have agreed to that if I knew it included five-hundred-dollar hiking boots."

"Lucia—"

Normally I melted when he called me that, but on this I had to draw the line. "No, I'll get them myself. Thank you anyway, though." To mollify him, I stood on tiptoe in my brand new hiking boots and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Just shopping with me and not complaining is looking after me."

I could tell he wanted to disagree and insist, but something in my look must have let him know I was really serious. "Fine."

I smiled at the grumbly tone. "Thank you."

The clerk smiled at both of us. "My husband does that all the time, too. It's so cute."

I didn't know how to reply to that. But I didn't say anything, because explaining to her that we weren't married would be awkward and unnecessary. I noticed Dante didn't correct her, either.

We walked out of the store hand in hand, Dante carrying the bag with my ultra-amazing hiking boots. "What now?" I

asked. He gave me a knowing look in reply, and I felt heat pool in my belly. “Well. I suppose you’ve earned it.”

His answering chuckle had my breath hitching. As we rushed out of the mall and into a waiting taxi, I felt my blood warming in anticipation. Nothing had prepared me for how Dante Moretti could make me feel, or what he could make me do.

CHAPTER 6

Lucy

“**W**hat the fuck even is citrus ponzu?”

Dante laughed. “I have no idea, but it’s part of the tasting menu, so just go with it.”

“Hmph.”

We were sitting in one of the top restaurants in Seattle, where Dante had insisted we go when I said I rarely ate anywhere other than the major chain restaurants. Why? You guessed it, Richard, who had liked to eat at places he knew well where he wouldn’t be surprised by an odd ingredient that triggered one of his many food allergies, or by the size of the bill. This place Dante and I were in was pretty impressive, with polished concrete flooring, fancy wood paneling on the walls and booths, and floor-to-ceiling wine racks at intervals between the panels.

“I know exactly what you’re doing, you know,” I said with a pout.

“Is that a fact?”

“Yeah. You’ve gone with the whole tasting menu idea, so that I don’t just order the cheapest thing on the menu, since you’ve already made it clear you’re paying.”

He laughed again, completely unrepentant. “Just enjoy it and don’t be such a grumpy pants about it.”

I bit my lip and looked at him uncertainly. “I *am* being a grumpy pants, aren’t I? I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.”

“You are, but don’t worry about it. It’s adorable.” He reached over and ran the tip of his finger down the back of my hand. “Let me spoil you, Lucia. Please.” He said the last part softly, in a low voice that made my heart stutter uncomfortably.

I put the menu down and took a deep breath, letting go of my resistance. “Well, when you put it that way...”

“Good girl.”

The waiter, impeccably dressed in a dark maroon suit, with his blond hair meticulously combed and held in place with just the right amount of product, delivered the wine menu with an understated flourish. “Good evening. I’m Sebastian. I’ll be looking after you tonight.” He clasped his hands together. “So, what do we have here? Birthday? Anniversary? Engagement?” He even went so far as to flick a look at my left hand.

“Birthday.”

My eyes widened at Dante’s answer as he gestured to me.

“Ah, happy birthday.”

“Yes, it’s her twenty-first.”

Poor Sebastian tried so desperately to hide his surprise. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. If you could make it extra special, we’d be really appreciative. As you can imagine, it’s a pretty big night.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Please let me know of anything you need.”

“You are outrageous,” I whispered, trying to smother my laughter as the waiter walked away.

“Just having a bit of fun,” he said with a wink.

I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen from my bag and started drawing.

“What are you doing?”

“I sketch sometimes. Wait a sec.” I covered it with my hand so he couldn’t see what I was drawing. It was rough, seeing as I did it in about three minutes and it was more like a caricature

than a proper rendering, but I was pretty pleased with it as I held it up to show him. “I believe this is what the kids these days call ‘surprised pikachu face’.”

“What the fuck?” He took it from me and gazed at it for a long moment. “Lucy, that’s amazing! It looks just like him.”

I’d drawn Sebastian’s face right at the moment when Dante had said it was my twenty-first birthday.

“We have to give it to him.”

“No way!” I hissed, reaching across the table to snatch it out of his hand. But he held it out of my grasp.

“It’s very flattering, he’ll love it.”

“Stop!” I said, laughing. “Give it back so I can tear it up.”

“What will you give me for it?”

“Huh?”

“In exchange. You want the napkin so badly, what will you give me for it?”

My eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”

“Jesus, Lucia, that’s a loaded question. Pun fully intended.”

“Don’t even think about asking for a blow job.”

“Dammit.”

“Okay, fine. How about I give you a kiss. On the lips!” I added, because I could see he was about to ask where.

“Done! You drive a hard bargain, my lady, but I can’t resist.”

I fully intended to give him just a light peck as I leaned over the table, but Dante being Dante wasn’t having any of that. He put his hand to the back of my head, drawing me close, and as soon as our lips met he opened his, running his tongue across mine. I probably should have pulled back, since we were in the middle of a very fancy restaurant. But I couldn’t help myself. I opened my lips, shivering as our tongues entwined, forgetting for a moment where we were. “You know something...” I began, when he finally let me go and I could catch my breath again.

“What?” he asked, handing me the napkin.

As I tore it to shreds, I said, “I remember my mom saying something about you that I’m just now learning is very true.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. She said you were the kind of kid that when you wake up in the morning and your feet hit the floor, the devil says, *Oh shit, he’s up.*” I was expecting him to laugh, but instead, a shadow flickered across his face, followed by a slight frown before he gave me a strained smile. Without thinking, I reached out and covered his hand with mine. “I didn’t mean to upset you, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not upset.”

I wasn’t convinced. Tilting my head to the side, I looked at him for a long moment, piecing together everything I knew about him, trying to figure out why such a lighthearted comment would have bothered him so much. “Is it because you don’t like who you were, back when my mom knew you?”

Surprise flared in his eyes, and then he nodded in answer.

“Well, she meant it as a compliment, I’m pretty sure. She liked you a lot. She has photo albums full of pictures of you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That’s how I found out about you joining the air force. Just recently, I was showing baby pics of Matt to his fiancée Zara, you know, to tease him. We got really into it, so we kept going, right up until our teenage years. So many photos of you and Jake, and Emma, of course.”

He ran his finger lightly over the skin of my wrist. “How is Emma? She and Jake got married, yeah?”

“Oh. No, actually. They broke up not long after the accident.”

“Shit, I wasn’t expecting that. Those two were perfect together.”

“Yeah, it surprised everyone, not gonna lie. But neither of them has ever talked about it, so no one really knows what happened. Just that Em went out of state for college, went to

Cambodia with Doctors Without Borders as soon as she graduated, and was barely seen in Esperance for years.”

“Wow. She never got together with anyone else, then?”

“No. She was engaged for a little while to someone she worked with in Asia, but she broke it off. I caught up with her around Christmas of that year, and she said he just wasn’t right for her. She said she tried to force a spark, but it wasn’t there, so she thought it was best to end it.”

“And Jake?”

“Dates a bit, but nothing very serious, from what I can tell. Emma is back in Esperance now, because her father isn’t well. She’s become good friends with Zara, so we see much more of her now than we used to, through Matt and Gabe. I think there’s something still there for Jake. He watches Emma a lot when he thinks she’s not looking.”

“Oh, man. That sounds hard.”

“Right? I’ve tried to nudge them together as much as I can, but Matt and Gabe think I should just leave it. Maybe Gabe knows something I don’t, but I’ve always thought they were made for each other and I really think if they could just spend enough time together to clear the air, maybe they could reconcile.”

Our first course came before he could reply, which gave me more time to think about the accident and its aftermath. “What about you and Jake? You left town as soon as you found out he was going to pull through. Did you stay in touch?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because we both agreed that we were bad for each other, and that someone would get hurt if we continued on the way we were. Fuck, someone *did* get hurt. He did! I went to see him, he was lying there all beaten up, bruised and bloody, more worried about Emma than himself. I told him I was leaving to join the air force, we wished each other all the best, and that was that.”

“Wow. So he lost his best friend and the love of his life in the space of a week.”

“God, when you put it that way, I guess he did. But of course, I didn’t realize he intended to end things with Emma when he and I had that conversation.”

“Poor Jake.”

“Yeah.”

There was a long pause. The dish in front of us was some weird concoction of tuna and mushrooms that Dante pushed at with his fork, lost in his memories. I felt the silence growing between us and, seeking to relieve it, said, “What part of this is the ponzu, do you think?”

He gave himself a little shake, coming back to the present, and gave me a smile. “Who knows? Let’s see how it tastes.”

“Let’s.”

After that, we kept the conversation to lighter, safer topics. I asked where he thought he might be posted next, he asked about my new house. I pulled up the internet listing and showed him photos, describing the furniture I’d already ordered and how I was going to decorate each room. We talked about my work, the challenges of working in a shared office space and how much I was looking forward to having a whole house to myself, with a dedicated room for my business.

While we talked, we ate a lot of weird, interesting food, which led to Dante talking about some of his experiences posted overseas. I loved the way it was all so casual and comfortable. I also loved how he kept sharing his food with me, because that was something else Richard never did.

“You know, Richard was shorter than me,” I blurted out, seemingly out of nowhere, because of course Dante wasn’t privy to my random inner musings.

But he just said, “Yeah?”

“Yeah, he was kinda weird about it, to be honest.”

“In what way? Here, you gotta try this.” He dropped some wagyu steak on my plate.

The gesture made me smile. “And we would never eat stuff like this. He would always police what I ate: I think he was worried about me overshadowing him.” As if Dante would need to worry about anyone overshadowing him.

“Forgive me for saying so, but he sounds like a real fuckhead, Lucy. I don’t know how you put up with him for all those years.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to wonder that myself.”

“You’re amazing, and gorgeous, and hot as hades. You deserve better. Much better.”

He spoke with such intensity that I paused in the action of stabbing my fork into the beef. “Um, thanks.”

“I mean it, Lucia. I know, I know, this is just a dirty weekend and we’re going our separate ways on Monday, but I want you to know this and fully believe it. You. Deserve. Better. Are you listening to me?”

I nodded wordlessly. I couldn’t speak around the sudden tightness in my chest.

He leaned forward, grabbing my hand. “You deserve what your parents have, for all the reasons you just said. You deserve someone who is passionately devoted to you and lives to make sure you’re happy. Don’t settle for less. You got me?”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I deserve someone who is passionately devoted to me and lives to make sure I’m happy and I won’t settle for less.”

“Good girl.” He let go of my hand and leaned back in his chair, his sudden intensity dissipated. “Now, tell me what you think of the steak.”

The final course arrived, a beautiful dish of edible flowers and a sugary syrup and once we’d eaten our fill of that, Dante got the bill. “What now?”

“How about a movie?”

“Sounds good.”

It was a quick cab ride to the nearest cinema, and in less than ten minutes, we were standing in line, looking at the Now Playing screen. Nothing really grabbed my attention, so I turned to Dante. “Anything you wanna see?”

Toying with my hair as he perused the list, he said, “Yeah, the ten fifteen session looks good.”

I frowned, squinting at the screen. Maybe I needed glasses, but I couldn’t see any movies listed for ten fifteen. “Which one is that?”

“It’s a private screening in my room with two amazing stars.” He leaned into me and whispered in my ear. “It’s called *Lucy Cooper Comes All Over My Cock*.”

I burst out laughing, even as heat flashed through me and I blushed like crazy. “That sounds perfect.”

We turned without another word and left the cinema, hailing yet another cab. As soon as we were in the back seat, and he had given the hotel details to the driver, Dante pulled me hard against him and kissed me hungrily. I gave as good as I got, tangling my tongue with his, pushing my fingers through his hair, pressing myself against him urgently.

Pulling up front of the hotel, Dante thrust a fifty-dollar bill into the driver’s hand, growled, “Keep the change,” and dragged me from the cab. The elevator ride up to our room took forever, since we’d got in with two older couples who were going to the floor above ours. The whole ride up, Dante kept his hand firmly on my ass, holding me close to him, like he just couldn’t bear to keep his hands off me. Finally, we hit the twenty-second floor and were in the room in under five seconds. Dante immediately started stripping me, pushing off my coat, dragging my sweater over my head, kneeling in front of me to unzip my chocolate brown leather boots. I had to put my hand on his shoulder to steady myself as he tossed them behind him, where they landed on the soft carpet with a thud.

I was only vaguely aware of what he was doing as he maneuvered me over to the wide window, where downtown Seattle was spread out below us, shrouded in a light, misty

rain, the pavement and buildings shining like diamonds, crisp and clean.

Turning me away from him, so I was looking out the window, he unzipped my skirt and pushed it over my hips and down, holding me steady when I stepped out of it and kicked it aside. So there I was, in my cotton bra and undies, Dante fully clothed behind me, grinding his rock-hard erection against my ass.

“I want you to do something for me, Lucia.”

“Yeah?” I’d do absolutely anything he asked of me at that moment. I was putty in his hands.

“You see that building, across the way?”

I did, shivering when he pushed my hair aside and pressed kisses down my neck and along my shoulder.

“Now, imagine that everyone in it is watching us.”

I swallowed heavily, gasping when he cupped my breasts, teasing my nipples through the light fabric.

“You know what they’re thinking?”

He trailed one hand lightly over my stomach, pushing under the waistband of my underwear. “Mmm, so fucking wet.” He pushed one finger inside me, lightly rubbing my clit with his palm. My knees almost gave way, but he held me up with his other arm around my waist. “Now, where was I?”

I couldn’t remember for the life of me, lost as I was in the pleasure raging through me.

“Oh yes. All the people over there are watching us. You wanna know what they’re thinking?”

“What?” I dropped my head back on his shoulder, watching the opposite building, imagining the darkened rooms all occupied by people looking back at us. Dante increased the pressure of his hand, and I moved my hips restlessly against it.

He lightly grazed my shoulder with his teeth, making me moan. “Each one of those motherfuckers is wishing they were me, holding a hot, gorgeous woman in my arms while she

shatters.” He lifted his hand and grabbed my breast, squeezing until it was almost painful, at the same time as he bit the sensitive spot where my shoulder met my neck. I gave him what he wanted. I came in his arms, gripping the window edge as my body shuddered and trembled and I moaned with the pleasure of it. “Lucia. So beautiful. So perfect. And all mine.”

My chest heaved as Dante let me go long enough to undo his pants and push them down and roll on a condom. “Hands on the window. Show them your beautiful tits. People are watching, don’t forget.”

I placed my palms on the cool glass, bracing myself for what I knew was coming. Dante’s hands shoved my underwear down to my thighs and gripped my hips while he lined himself up with my entrance, and then he slammed into me, filling me so perfectly I thought I’d never get enough.

“Fuck, the things you do to me,” he growled as he pounded into me.

I felt him grip my hair, pulling just enough to make me arch my back, hitting my clit with every stroke. Going more than a little wild from the heat coursing through me, I braced myself against the window and pushed back against him, matching his rhythm, moaning over and over. He let go of my hair, leaning over me to squeeze my breasts and pinch my nipples. That was all it took to send me over the edge a second time. The pleasure bloomed through my core, radiating outward, making me convulse uncontrollably.

I almost collapsed when he pulled out and turned me around to face him. “Oh my god.” He was still hard. I knew what that meant. We were going for round three. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Of course you can. You’re a sex goddess.” Brushing my hair back from my forehead in a surprisingly tender gesture, he kissed me softly, gently entwining his tongue with mine, running his hands up and down my back in long, soothing strokes while I wrapped my arms around his neck. When my heart rate had finally slowed, he raised his head and smiled at me. I smiled back, because I felt like he was saying, *Look at us, aren’t we amazing? Isn’t this so much fun?*

“Hold on, *cara*,” he said, cupping my ass and lifting me easily, like I weighed no more than ninety pounds.

“Jesus,” I whispered, wrapping my arms tight around his shoulders and my legs around his waist, my trust in him absolute. I knew there was no way he would let me go, let me fall.

He pressed me against the window and I gasped at the feel of the cold glass on my back and ass, an exquisite counterpoint to the heat Dante radiated in front of me. He thrust into me, watching me with dark-eyed intensity as he started moving slowly and gently. As my breathing started to turn ragged, he lowered his head and kissed me, tangling his tongue with mine. He kissed me endlessly, patiently, sweetly, like he couldn’t get enough of me. I had never felt sexier or more beautiful in my life.

I surrendered to it all, to him, to the pleasure he gave me. Just let it all spin out, wash over, fill me until I was on the brink of my third orgasm. Riding the wave, falling apart as I crested, holding on while I felt Dante jerking inside me in his own release.

When we were both done, he pulled out and lowered my feet carefully to the floor. I leaned against him, wrapping my arms around his waist, resting my head on his chest, reveling in the feel of his hand gently stroking my hair.

“God. I think I need to lie down. I think my bones have melted. Or turned to rubber. Or something.”

I smiled at the deep chuckle rumbling under my cheek. “Okay. Come on.” He half-dragged, half-carried me to the bed and tucked me in. I was starting to fall asleep even before he came back from the bathroom, but I vaguely registered him curling around me and pressing a kiss into my hair.

CHAPTER 7

Dante

Cold, morning sunlight peeked around the edges of the thick, gray curtains, desperately seeking entry. I knew what that meant. The rain had finally stopped. We could actually do something outside today. Lucy stirred next to me, running her hand over my chest and snuggling closer.

We had about twenty-four hours left before she flew out, and I intended to make every one of them count. “You know what we should do today?” I asked, moving my palm over her lush ass.

“Mmm?”

I smiled. She sounded so cute when she was sleepy. “We should go hiking.”

She raised her head abruptly, her eyes wide with excitement. “Yes!” She looked towards the windows, noticing, as I had, the lack of rain. “It won’t be too wet still?”

“Not with those brand spanking new ice-climbing boots of yours.”

“Great! Let’s go.” She threw the covers back and rolled out of bed. I took the opportunity to admire her luscious ass as she padded to the bathroom.

“It’s not even eight o’clock, *cara*.”

She stopped at the doorway and turned back to smile at me wickedly. “So? You sorry you suggested it? Are you too worn out after last night?”

“Never.”

“Come in here and prove it to me, then.”

That was all the invitation I needed.



“**Y**ou ready?” People brushed by us, heading towards the start of the trail. Everyone was making the most of the sunny weather and the trail was busier than I’d expected.

“Yep!” Lucy gazed down at her boots rapturously. She looked so endearing, like a little toddler who’d just received a much wished-for gift from Santa Claus. It made me smile.

“After you, then.” I watched as she started walking, taking long, fluid strides. Her ass, snug in dark blue jeans, was a sight to behold. And believe me, I beheld. Until she glanced at me over her shoulder and caught me perving, that is. She shot me a sweet, sexy smile that had my heart doing a slow, uncomfortable roll that almost robbed me of breath. *It’s just because she’s so hot, that’s all*, I told myself as I lengthened my stride to catch up with her. I had to rub my hand across my chest to get my heart to settle just the same.

“Wow, it’s so beautiful.”

“Yeah.” It was a magical morning. The air smelled fresh and clean, still holding the damp from the recent rain. Lucy was positively glowing from it, her eyes alight. We stopped for a moment to give way to a group coming the other way on the narrow track.

“I can’t get enough of the trees.”

I couldn’t get enough of her. Standing on the edge of the trail, gazing at the surrounding pines and firs, their trunks shining in the morning sunshine as they reached for the heavens. A little further on, the path was wide enough for us to walk side by side, so I linked my fingers in hers, liking the way we naturally fell into step. I also liked the way she didn’t feel the need to fill the silence with talk, content just to walk along by my side, enjoying the scenery.

I moved behind her as we stepped across a narrow wooden bridge, admiring the swing of her high ponytail and, of course, her butt. It made me want to kiss her. A lot. Once that idea popped into my head, I couldn't get rid of it, so by the time the trail widened again, I'd formed a plan.

"What's that up there?"

"Where?" Lucy stopped mid-stride, looking up into the forest, a small questioning frown on her face.

"Up there. Can't you see it?"

"No." She was adorably confused. "All I see are trees."

"Let's go check it out."

"Are we allowed?"

I had no idea. "Of course. There's no rule that says you must stay on the trail."

"Okay."

I pulled her up the incline and, once I thought we were far away enough from everyone else, ducked behind the wide trunk of a Douglas fir and pushed her back against it. "There's not actually anything up here to check out, is there?" Her eyes were sparkling with amusement and more than a little lust.

"Sure there is."

"Where?"

"Right here." I leaned in, brushing my lips lightly over hers, reveling in the sweet softness. With a sigh, she opened her lips for me. I took it for the invitation it was, delving my tongue into her mouth, letting the scent of her fill my head. She made a small sound in the back of her throat that shot straight to my cock. "Christ, Lucia."

"I know."

I pressed against her, biting back a groan when she grabbed my hips, pulling me closer still. There was no way I could fuck her here, without a condom and with hordes of people moving so close below. "We should stop," I ground out,

sliding my hands under her sweater and cupping her breasts, instantly making me a liar.

She broke away. I thought she would step back and head back down to the trail. But she didn't. Instead, she grabbed my coat in tight fists and turned me, so that our positions were reversed and my back was to the tree trunk. I had no idea what she was up to, but when she pulled my head down, giving me a kiss that dripped with need, I went with it.

“You want me, Dante?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Didn't bring any protection?”

I shook my head.

“Well then, I guess we'll have to wing it.”

My pulse leapt when she reached for the fly of my jeans, and my knees almost buckled when she slipped her hand inside, wrapping her long fingers around my cock, stroking up and down in a tight fist. “You keep doing that, we're going to make one hell of a mess.”

Her lips curved in a wicked smile and she sank to her knees. Holy. Fuck. My knees almost buckled when she pulled my pants down, freeing my cock so she could wrap both hands around it.

“You're going to do something for me.”

Oh hell, I liked this side of her. “*Cara*, I'd commit murder for you right now, if you asked me to.”

Her smile widened, then she leaned in and flicked her tongue over the tip of cock, making me jump. “Good. You're going to come for me.”

“I don't think I have a choice.”

Running her tongue up and down my length, she kept her eyes on mine. “In my mouth.”

“Jesus, Lucy.”

The sight of her, on her knees, her pretty pink lips wrapped around my cock and wanton desire in her eyes was... At that moment, I didn't even have the words to describe what it was. But it sure was something.

I couldn't take my eyes off her, the way the bobbing of her head made her ponytail swing, the way she sucked my cock like it was the most delicious thing she'd ever feasted on. The sounds of voices and laughter floated up from the trail, adding a bit of spice to the whole thing. We were highly unlikely to get caught, but the chance was there, and that was enough to make my heart race even more.

I wasn't sure what got me going the most. The way she closed her eyes while pleasure flitted across her face, the low moan at the back of her throat, or the slurping noises she made. Maybe all of it. I wrapped my hand around her ponytail and let my head fall back against the tree trunk, moving my hips as I felt my whole body clench. Hot pleasure settled in the base of my spine and I let go, coming with a glorious spurt straight into her mouth. She swallowed it all, gulping it down like it was nectar, then sat back on her heels, wiped her hand across her mouth and smiled up at me, a light of triumph in her eye. I pulled her to her feet and into my arms, sagging against the tree because I could barely stand up straight.

"Aren't you a bundle of surprises. Blush like crazy when I tell you your tits look great, but then suck me off in a semipublic place as though you've done it every day of your life."

She giggled. "What can I say? You're a terrible influence." Leaning back, she reached up and brushed my hair back from my forehead. "Thank you."

"You're thanking *me*? I think it should be the other way around."

Grinning, she said, "I never imagined I could do something that naughty, and now I have. I've even lived to tell the tale."

"Oh yeah? Who exactly are you going to tell this tale to?" I pushed her away gently so I could straighten out my clothes, eyes twinkling in amusement.

She laughed again. “Not my mom, that’s for sure.”

I shuddered comically at the thought and, taking her hand, pressed a kiss to her temple. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

We walked the next two miles to the summit without talking much, because the higher we went, the steeper it got, which made conversation difficult.

The trail ended at a rocky outcrop that offered a truly magical, stunning view of a sprawling valley, bathed in soft sunlight and a gleaming lake far below.

“Wow,” Lucy said, awestruck.

“Yeah.” Looking at Lucy’s face, I knew that this was by far the best idea I’d ever had. Well, second best. Asking her to come to my hotel in the first place was the best.

We climbed over the rocks for a little while, taking in the vista from different angles, breathing in the crisp air.

“Wanna sit?” I retrieved two bottles of water from my backpack.

“Thanks.” She took one from me and sat down on a low rock nearby, leaning into me comfortably when I joined her.

Then we just sat there for maybe an hour, soaking in the scene as people came and went around us. A thought occurred to me that I was almost too scared to acknowledge, because it seemed too big: as I sat with my arm around Lucy, a feeling of immense peace washed over me that was completely unfamiliar. I was so accustomed to the sense of restlessness that constantly gnawed at me, of always feeling like I had energy to burn. Quiet contentment wasn’t something I ever felt. And, ironically, that quiet contentment gave me a rush. The only other times in my life when I felt a rush like that was when I was forty-five thousand feet in the air, going three thousand miles per hour. When there was nothing but me and the wide-open sky, and one slight lapse in concentration meant a plummet to earth and certain death.

I never imagined I'd find anything that would give me that same feeling when I had my feet on the ground. But here I was.

It scared the shit out of me.

"We should go."

"Oh—sure, okay."

My abrupt tone had clearly surprised Lucy, but she took it in stride, getting to her feet and taking in the view one last time before smiling at me and turning back to the trail. I followed in silence, lost in my thoughts. We only had the rest of the day and tonight left before we parted ways for good.

We'd never made any promises to each other. How could I, when I could be sent anywhere on the planet next week? And how could she, fresh off an awful marriage and still trying to find her feet? No. I'd just have to take this momentary peace for the gift it was.

Maybe, if I was really lucky, it could sustain me for a while.

CHAPTER 8

Lucy

Had it really only been three days? Bizarre. I lay sprawled on the hotel bed, admiring Dante's naked back. He was sitting on the end of the bed in gray sweats, flipping through channels on the big screen television. My mind wandered back to Friday night, sitting alone in that bar, feeling like such a loser. So much had changed, yet everything was still the same.

I'd never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would meet a man that could do to me, or bring out in me, what Dante did. I had to stifle a giggle, imagining how Richard would have reacted if I'd ever tried to give him a blow job in public like I'd done to Dante this morning. He would have had a fit.

But here I was, flying out first thing in the morning, going back to my old life, living pretty much like I had since I left Richard. Work, family, friends. Rinse, repeat. Except for the first time in my whole life, I didn't really have a plan. That should have scared me, but lying here waiting for Dante to choose a movie for us to watch, I didn't feel scared at all.

"What are you in the mood for?"

You, always you. I almost said, but I bit it back. "*Maverick?*"

"Get fucked."

I laughed out loud. "What? I like perverting on hot air force pilots."

"Well, I don't." He flashed me a grin, enjoying the joke. "*Glass Onion?*"

“Yes, please! I’ve been meaning to watch that.”

“And for dinner?”

“I’m happy with a burger and fries.”

“Perfect. I’ll have the same. Can you order? I just have to call Stef to find out when she gets in tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sure.”

Our last night together was spent curled up in bed watching a fun movie, eating greasy, salty delicious food. My idea of the perfect night. I just couldn’t let myself think about the fact that it was our last.

As soon as the movie was over, Dante dropped our food trays on the floor in the hallway and, coming back inside, took a flying leap and jumped onto the bed. He pulled me into his arms and kissed me hungrily. I responded instantly, wrapping myself around him and kissing him back, acutely aware that I had to make the most of our last few hours together.



“**W**hat’s the time?” I whispered.
“Five thirty.”

I rolled over, snuggling into Dante, throwing my leg over his hip. “So I’ve got about an hour...”

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t nearly long enough. Did Dante feel the same way? Maybe. Because this time when we had sex, it felt entirely different. He kissed me endlessly, slowly building the heat between us with soft, careful touches, like I was made of glass. He went down on me, holding my hands while I came, then kissed his way back up my body, letting me taste myself on his lips.

Then he started all over again, building the fire afresh until I was aching for him. When he finally crawled on top of me, he braced his elbows either side of my head, watching me as he

thrust inside, his eyes holding me with their intensity. I felt the world fade away, with no thoughts of the past or the future. There was only the present. Me. And Dante. And this... whatever this was.

I dug my heels into the mattress, pushing up to meet his strokes, needing the release, but at the same time, desperately wanting to prolong it. My body had other ideas. Pleasure rolled through me in ever increasing waves and I couldn't fight it anymore. "Kiss me," I gasped, gripping his hips as my body bucked under his. We came together and when he collapsed on top of me, his face buried in my neck, I thought, *I don't want to leave*. But more than that, *I don't want to lose this*. A stupid thought, of course. My life was too uncertain right now for me to get into a relationship, and Dante didn't even know where he'd be living next week. *Let it go, Lucy*. Take the amazing weekend as the gift it was.

An hour later, Dante was handing my suitcase to the taxi driver and turning back to me, pulling me against him and wrapping his arms around my shoulders. I buried my face in his chest. This was it. Goodbye. I felt badly, the driver was waiting, but I couldn't let go. "If you're ever, you know, around Esperance way, look me up?" I murmured into his shirt.

"Of course." It was our way of pretending this wasn't the end. He cupped my face, gazing into my eyes for the longest moment before pressing a kiss to my lips.

"Thank you." Such simple words that didn't convey nearly as much as they should: Thank you for having fun with me. Thank you for making me feel hot and beautiful. Thank you for showing me what my body was capable of. Thank you for the orgasms. "For everything."

He nodded. "Bye."

"Bye."

I got in the cab, forcing myself to smile at him when he closed the door behind me, blinking back tears as my taxi pulled away from the curb.

CHAPTER 9

Dante

“**N**o fucking way!”

I pretended not to notice the heads turning as my sister ran across the arrival lounge and threw herself into my open arms. “For fuck’s sake, Stef.” Stumbling backwards, I braced myself when she leapt up and wrapped her legs around my waist, then spit out a mouthful of her blue hair.

“Oh my God! I told you to meet me at my apartment, not the fucking airport!”

“I got bored and couldn’t wait,” I said with a grin, almost overcome by the surge of affection I felt at seeing her. I gave her a close look, wanting to see how she was doing. I hated that her chronic fatigue messed with her like it did. “You look great.” My baby sister had the punk look nailed down: long, bright blue hair, a nose ring, ripped black jeans, combat boots and a leather jacket. Hardly anything like the young girl I used to give shoulder rides to, but little Stef was still in there, hidden underneath her punk chick persona. I saw it in her big brown eyes when she smiled at me with the same hero worship she’d always had. It made me feel ten feet tall.

“Thanks. I feel pretty okay.”

“Good.” I took her bag and flung my arm around her shoulders, pressing a kiss to her temple. “Let’s go get lunch, I’m starving.”

“Excellent plan. You’re coming to my gig while you’re here, right?”

“When is it?”

“Friday night.”

“I think I’m washing my hair that night.”

“Funny.”

“Seriously, I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Liar. You hate punk music.”

“But I love you, so I’ve got my earplugs ready. And I plan to drink a lot of beer.”

Hustling her into a waiting cab, she chuckled. “It’ll be fine. I’m bummed I wasn’t here when you got in, though. What did you get up to all weekend?”

For some reason, I hesitated to answer. It would be the simplest thing in the world to say, “*You remember Lucy Cooper? Used to babysit you back in Esperance? We spent the whole weekend together and it was the hottest weekend of my life. She only left this morning, but I miss her already.*”

I could have said that, but I didn’t. Instead, I said, “This and that. Not much.”

I felt her eyes on me, fully aware my voice sounded odd, but I kept my head turned away, gazing out the window, hoping she wouldn’t pursue the topic. “Well, I hope it wasn’t too boring. Now: ask me about Arizona.”

I turned to her with a smile. “How was Arizona?”

“Shit, mostly.”

“Oh. Sorry to hear that.”

She shrugged. “It’s fine. It’s just another producer to cross off our list. We’ll find the right one eventually.”

“I know you will.” She was way too talented and driven not to get what she wanted.

“And in the meantime, we’ll write more songs, produce more videos, and maybe go viral on our own.”

“That would be fucking amazing.”

“It really would.”

CHAPTER 10

Lucy

“Thanks so much for the ride, and, you know, everything.” I got out of the back of Matt’s truck, searching in my handbag for my keys.

“No problem.”

“Here they are!” I pulled out the keys with a flourish, took a step up the drive, then stopped dead in my tracks, just staring at my new house. It wasn’t big, by any means, but it was cute, with its red brick front, dark blue metal roof, tiled porch and bay window in the living room. Best of all, it was all mine.

“You think we might, you know, actually go inside at some point?”

“Haha. Sorry. I’m just admiring it. It’s so perfect.”

“It’s very gorgeous,” Zara agreed quietly.

I shot Zara a look. She was standing next to the truck, her arms folded across her chest. Her dark hair was pulled back in a low ponytail and her blue eyes were serious as she gazed at my house. She was as tall as me, but willowy, and she wore her usual jeans and a sweatshirt, with a puffer jacket over the top against the late November chill.

Seeing what I thought was sadness in her eyes, I looked between her and Matt. Yep, something was definitely up with his fiancée. She was always a little quiet, but today even more so. He returned my gaze, flicking Zara a quick glance that I interpreted perfectly – he wanted me to talk to her about whatever was upsetting her – so I nodded in

acknowledgement. “All right, let’s do this.” I led the way up the drive to the front porch, bubbling with excitement.

The lock was a bit stiff when I turned the key, making Matt say, “I’ve got some WD40 in the back of the truck. I can spray it before we leave.”

“Awesome, thanks.”

We stepped inside. Drawing a deep breath, I said, “Hmm, it’s pretty musty. I think I’ll open the windows to air it out before I actually move in.”

“Good idea. Where do you want these?” Matt held up two large cans of paint.

“Kitchen, please. They’re for the cupboards in there.”

“Okay. And then I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“You have? You know I said no housewarming presents.”

“It’s nothing much, so don’t freak out.”

Zara and I waited while Matt put the paint away, then went back out to his truck, returning with a small, fold out picnic table and three chairs. “You wanna grab the other thing for me, Zara?”

“Sure.”

I followed Matt into the kitchen. “Okay, spit it out quick, before she comes back. What’s up?”

“She’s really upset with her mom because she’s being a grade A bitch about the wedding. She’s trying to take over because she thinks it’s not big or glamorous enough.”

“Fuck, hasn’t that woman done enough damage?”

“You’d think so, right? But she won’t quit, and Zara doesn’t know what to do.”

“Shh—she’s coming back. Leave it with me.”

Zara stepped into the kitchen with a filter coffee machine under her arm and a shopping bag in her other hand. “It’s not much, just your parents’ old machine, but they thought you might want to have coffee in your new house today.”

“Aww, thank you! That’s so sweet.” I took it from her, placed it on the counter and plugged it in. “Everything I need is in here, I’m guessing?” I asked, taking the shopping bag from Zara when she nodded.

I started the coffee while Matt told Zara he’d just gotten a text from his Dad and had to head over to help him with a job, but he’d be back in an hour. It was impossible to miss the tension in her voice when she replied, and I glanced over my shoulder to see her resting her head on his shoulder while he hugged her comfortingly. *That fucking bitch mother of hers!* Once Matt had gone, I thought about how best to approach the situation while the coffee was brewing. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure. I knew what my instinct would be if it were *me*, but I really wasn’t sure that was right for her. Frankly, she was a hell of a lot sweeter than I would have been in her circumstances.

I brought our coffee to the little picnic table and opened the Tupperware container she’d brought. “Lemon loaf! Amazing!” I cut us each a slice, then decided to get straight to the point. “So, I hear your mom’s being an asshole about the wedding.”

She flinched, then gave me a small, sad smile. “Oh, did Matt say something? Yeah, she is.”

“Tell me.” I leaned back in the chair, blowing on my coffee to cool it, while Zara told me all about her awful mother. There was a lot to tell. When she was finally done, I put my coffee mug down and clasped my hands together on the table, giving her a direct look. “Okay. I want to say something, but I’m worried it might upset you.”

“Go ahead,” she gestured with a listless wave of her hand. “It couldn’t possibly upset me more than I already am.”

“Okay. I just want to say, even though she’s your mom, you don’t have to keep her in your life, if you don’t want to.”

Zara stared at me, a small frown on her brow.

“I just feel that she always, *always*, makes you feel like shit, yes?”

“Yes.” A quick, unequivocal answer.

“You don’t owe her anything: not your time, not your energy, not your love.” I reached across the table and clasped her hand. “You’ve got all of us now, so you’re not alone, is all I’m saying. If you want to cut her out of your life, we’ll all be here for you.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes, but she blinked them back. “Thank you. I’ll think about it.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, but I caught the strength there and pulled away, satisfied that I’d at least planted the seed of an idea.

“I’ll always be here if you need to talk about it. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t.” Picking up a piece of lemon loaf, she put it in her mouth, watching me intently while she chewed.

I laughed. “Why are you being so creepy?”

“Am I?” she asked when she’d swallowed. “Sorry. I’m just wondering what the hell happened in Seattle to make you decide to spend the whole weekend there. It can’t have been the weather.”

Don’t blush, don’t blush, don’t blush. But of course, I did. I knew I should tell her, but for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. “Nothing. I just thought it might be nice to give mom and dad some space over the weekend.” That didn’t sound at all convincing, but to my surprise, after subjecting me to a long, assessing look, Zara seemed to accept my story.

“That was nice of you. So, what did you do?”

“Oh, you know, this and that.” *Dante and Dante, that’s what I did.* “I went to a really nice restaurant for dinner, saw a movie, did a bit of shopping. Um...” *And I had the most amazing sex of my life, an experience unlikely ever to be repeated,* “Oh yeah! I got some hiking boots, and actually used them. There are some great trails around there.” I tried not to blush again at the memory of what had happened on the hike, what I’d done. But the fact was, I could still taste Dante on my tongue, smell him on my skin, see him in my dreams. *Fuck. Get over it, Cooper, don’t make it weird.*

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. It sounds great. It can’t have been easy, on your own like that. Good for you.”

“Thanks.” I heard Matt’s truck rumbling down the street and blew out a breath of relief as Zara got up and started clearing the table.

CHAPTER 11

Dante

I was only half joking when I said I'd bring earplugs to the gig, because my sister's band was nothing if not loud. But she did look amazing up there on stage, holding the crowd in the palm of her hand. We'd had a great week together, the most time we'd been able to spend together for years. I could see a new Stefania evolving from the sweet, precocious child she'd been, and I loved it. I especially noticed her maturity and focus, how she managed her illness these days, seeming to know instinctively when to slow down, rather than get frustrated and try to push through, like she'd done in the past. She was still bucketloads of fun though, cheeky and irrepressible.

But even enjoying her company as much as I had, it wasn't enough to dull the ache I was trying my hardest not to acknowledge. I don't know how many times in the past week I'd considered reaching out to Lucy. It would have been so easy. She had a consulting business under her own name and a website with her contact details splashed all over it. It would only take two seconds to text her and tell her I missed her. But I didn't.

Instead, I hung out with Stef and waited, with increasing impatience, to get my next work orders. If I only knew where I was headed next, this gnawing restlessness might subside. But there'd been a holdup with my paperwork or some shit, so I'd been left hanging for far longer than was usual between postings. It made me jittery.

“Hey, big guy.”

I looked down to see a short, skinny woman with dark, spiky hair and big brown eyes smiling up at me. “Hi.”

She ran her gaze over me and licked her lips before getting up on her tiptoes and saying, close to my ear, “You here alone?”

I nearly said no, but I didn’t. The fact was, I was very much alone. “Yeah. That’s my sister up there on stage.”

She wasn’t that interested in my sister, it seemed. She barely glanced at the stage before running her hand up my chest to my shoulder. “You feel like some company?”

Did I feel like some company? Fuck yes, I did. But not her company. She was nice-looking, and under normal circumstances I would have jumped at her suggestion. But she wasn’t tall enough, or curvy enough, or blond enough. She didn’t have serious green eyes that lit up with shocked laughter when I said something outrageous. And I knew without a shadow of doubt that if I complimented her on her nice tits, she wouldn’t blush. So instead of taking her up on her offer, I shook my head. “No thanks. I’m just here for my sister.”

Her face fell, then she scowled. Flattering, I guess. “Suit yourself.”

“Thanks.”

She went off in a huff, leaving me to nurse my beer and turn my attention back to the onslaught of noise up on stage.

A few hours later, stretched out on Stef’s sofa bed, I brought up Lucy’s website on my phone again, like the complete fucking loser I was. There was a lovely professional head shot of her, in her office with her gorgeous blond hair in a tight bun, wearing the same bland suit she’d worn at the bar on that first night. The memory of what happened after the bar, when I told her to take her hair down and she had, made me instantly hard. Great, now I was going to have to refrain from jerking off in my sister’s living room.

A notification pinged. A new email. More than a little hoping it might be from Lucy, as if the power of my longing might have reached her, I clicked it. It wasn’t from Lucy. It looked

like the wait was over and I was finally being given my orders. I sat bolt upright, reading through the details again.

You've got to be fucking kidding me.

Kingsley Airforce Base, NC.

“If you're ever, you know, around Esperance way, look me up?” she'd said. Well, guess what, Lucia. You're about to be seriously looked up. I fell back on the thin mattress, gazing up at the ceiling, a small smile spreading across my lips.

It took me hours to fall asleep. I couldn't stop picturing Lucy's face when I saw her again.

CHAPTER 12

Lucy

Late fall sunshine streamed into my living room, bathing all my new furniture in fresh, bright light. The place looked great. Polished wooden floors. A big, comfy sofa in a deep navy-blue denim fabric. Cushions in a light pink shade that contrasted well. A thick cream rug on the floor. An open fireplace with wood already stacked next to it, ready for its first lighting. Oh, yeah. Something told me I'd be spending a lot of time in this room.

"You've done so well, Luce." Emma stood near the bay window, the sunlight making her blond hair look, as always, like an angel's halo.

"Thanks, Em."

It had been a frantic few weeks, closing the house deal and getting everything delivered and put in place. Luckily, I had such an amazing family and great friends that I'd barely had to lift a finger. And it had all turned out exactly how I'd shown Dante, just a few weeks back when we'd sat in that stupid, fancy restaurant. *Fuck, don't think about that.* My throat grew tight at the memory, at how he'd teased me about the different shades of blue I was trying to decide on for the sofa.

"It's the top cupboard you said you wanted the platters in, yeah?" Zara called from the kitchen.

"Yeah, thanks."

"Great. Can you please get your ass in here so we can give you your housewarming present already?" That was Allegra, or Ally for short. We'd only met a few months ago, when she was

helping Zara get her Great-Aunt's house ready for sale. Who would have guessed that instead, Zara and my brother Matt would fall head over heels in love and end up living in the house themselves? So sweet.

“What the fuck?” I squinted at Emma with narrowed eyes. “I very clearly said no presents. I already owe you all so much already.”

Her blue eyes glowing mischievously, Emma flapped her hands dismissively. “It's a gift that'll keep on giving, trust me.”

“Uh huh.” We went into the kitchen, where Zara and Ally were already at my little round table.

I already loved this room. Pretty lace curtains hung at the window and the freshly-painted blue cabinetry looked amazing. I folded my arms across my middle, trying my hardest to glare at them both, but they looked so excited, I just couldn't do it.

A big box sat in the middle of the table, covered in plain paper. Ally, her dark curls piled high on her head, gestured to it. “Open it so we can use it.”

Laughing, I stepped forward and did my usual.

“For fuck's sake, not like that!”

My “usual” was to peel the tape off slowly and carefully and neatly fold the paper so I could use it again. Laughing some more, I said, “Fine,” and ripped the paper off all at once. “You didn't!”

“We did!” Zara said, clapping excitedly.

“A Keurig?! I mean, Mom and Dad's old machine has been doing the job, but I've wanted one of these since forever.”

“We know!”

“Aww, thanks you guys.” I hugged them all. “Let's set it up.”

“Yes!”

Ally reached into a canvas bag that was on the floor next to her chair and pulled out a container. “Definitely. I've got

chocolate brownies that are dying to be served with a good coffee.”

Ten minutes later, we were sipping coffee from my new mugs, the brownies in the middle of the table, when I heard the front door bang open.

“Luce?”

“In here,” I called back, recognizing my brother’s voice.

“We’ve got your office equipment. Which room?”

“The one nearest the door, thanks. I’ll make you guys coffee in my *brand-new Keurig machine*.”

I jumped up to switch the coffee machine back on. With my back to the kitchen door, I didn’t need to look to see it was Matt who walked through it thirty seconds later. Zara’s happy face said it all. Judging by Ally’s scowl, Gabe came in next. I smiled to myself when he greeted her, using her full name like he always did, and her scowl deepened. She swore she didn’t like him, but—what’s that old saying? Oh yeah. *Methinks the lady doth protest too much*.

My heart sank when Jake came in behind the other two and I caught Emma’s reaction: a subtle shift in her chair, a slight hunching of her shoulders as she drew in on herself. It made me feel so bad for her. And Jake did what he always did, too: looked for her the moment he stepped in the room, tried to disguise the flare of feeling that hit him when he caught sight of her. I sighed as I watched him shove his hands in his pockets and lean against the wall, keeping as far away from Emma as possible in my tiny kitchen.

While I made the coffee, Gabe leaned back against the bench with a white booklet in his hands. “What have you got there?”

“The instructions for your furniture. It can be arranged in a few different configurations, so you have to choose.”

“Oh, cool.”

Gabe was a mellow kind of guy, with dark hair and blue, soulful eyes. “Zen” was always the word my mom used to describe him. He took a pair of glasses from his back pocket

and put them on, starting to show me the different ways the office furniture could be laid out. Ally made a weird noise in the back of her throat, and I glanced at her. She was staring at Gabe, almost horrorstruck. What the fuck?

“You okay, Ally?”

“I didn’t know you wore glasses.” The note of accusation in her voice was clear.

“I didn’t, until last week.” Gabe watched her for a moment, amusement dancing in his eyes. “What, you got a problem with that?”

“No, why would I?” Exactly. Why would she? But it sure seemed to piss her off.

I had to bite back a chuckle as I handed Gabe his coffee. “Anyway, tell me which configuration you guys think will work best for the space.”

After I’d approved their choice and made the coffees, the men grabbed a brownie each from the middle of the table and went off to sort out my office.

“All right, spill. What’s the problem with Gabe wearing glasses? They suit him.”

Zara, laughter glimmering in her eyes, filled me in. “Ally thinks guys that wear glasses are really hot.”

“I do not. Well, only some guys, anyway.”

I burst out laughing. Poor *Allegra*.

“Sure, sure.” I sipped my coffee, trying to smother my smile. Ally’s reactions to Gabe were a source of endless entertainment to me.

Since the guys took quite a while installing my office furniture and the girls didn’t want to go anywhere, we decided to order pizza for dinner. Things got a little awkward when Matt offered to get some beers and Jake said none for him.

“Since when do you say no to a beer?” I sputtered.

He shrugged, flicking a glance at Emma, who didn’t notice. “Since now, I guess.”

I frowned. Did Jake still have a drinking problem that he was trying to get over? Because if so... “That’s fine, I don’t feel like beer either, Matt.”

My brother seemed to catch on pretty quickly. “Okay. I’ll just grab soda, then.”

“Sounds good.”

Jake gave me a slight nod, thanking me. I nodded back. Shit. I was well aware of Jake’s past history with drinking, but I was annoyed at myself for not realizing up till now that it could very well be something he was still battling.

Once they’d all left, I tidied up the kitchen and went and sat in my office for a little while, admiring the new furniture. The guys had done such a great job setting it up and I loved it. Working in here was going to be a dream. I needed to get something for the walls, though, to keep me inspired. Maybe a picture of that lake near Seattle—

With a shake of my head, I let out a sigh. *Stop doing that!* The last thing I needed in my office, where I spent hours and hours every day, was a reminder of that weekend. And Dante.

Who was I kidding? It was pointless. Everything made me think about him. He’d wriggled his way into every aspect of my waking life. And yet I was unlikely to ever see him again.

I really needed to let it go.



Not only did thoughts of Dante fill my mind when I was awake, he was a regular star in my dream life, too. I dreamt about him nearly every night, to the point where I almost couldn’t wait to go to sleep. Sometimes the dreams were hot, and I would wake up, drenched in need. Sometimes they were sweet, where we were just shopping or walking around. He’d tell me how beautiful I was and kiss me tenderly.

There was one dream that happened frequently, though, and it was frankly a little bit weird: we were in a big brass bed, floating on a calm, inky blue ocean. Bright stars spangled the

sky above us as we lay there, with Dante's hand resting on my stomach. He'd smile at me and I'd smile back, feeling such peace and happiness that when I woke and realized it was just a dream, I wanted to cry.

I don't know if it was the dreams that did it, or maybe I just wasn't suited to living on my own, but I started to find myself feeling a bit lost. I loved having my own house and having complete control over my space, but I just didn't love the actual being alone part. There was a constant, nagging feeling that something was missing.

CHAPTER 13

Lucy

“**A**nd in the morning, I’m making WAFFLES.”

“Nice, Chloe,” I chuckled. “That’s it, stir it like that. You wanna try cracking the eggs, Mila?” Chloe’s twin sister nodded her head solemnly. The two four-year-olds girls were polar opposites: where Chloe was a loud chatterbox, always making people laugh, Mila was very quiet, constantly watching everyone around her, taking everything in.

They’d slept over last night and were now in my kitchen making waffles because, according to my sister Elissa, Mila had told her I was “sad”. This spurred Chloe into action. She decided that the best way to cheer me up was to have the two of them stay with me, eat sausages and grits for dinner, ice cream for dessert, watch a Shrek movie marathon, and finish up with pancakes for breakfast. The pancakes turned into waffles, thanks to Donkey.

They were good girls, and I’d loved every second of it, but Mila had been pretty close: I wasn’t *sad*, exactly. Just flat, I guess would be a better word. Or empty. I was really struggling to find my mojo.

“Good girl,” I said, helping Mila stir the eggs into the mix.

It didn’t seem to matter what I did to try and feel better. Nothing worked. I’d sat in my office for three days straight putting together a five-year plan. I’d plotted a chart for business growth, which led to budgeting for some house upgrades, and ideas for investing the surplus. It was so good to see it all mapped out and know that I could achieve it. It was

also the sort of thing that normally made me feel calm and in control. This time it hadn't worked, and I knew why. The personal life plan was...not great. The years stretched ahead of me, lonely and empty.

It had made me add something to the plan that I'd never had in there before. I was already thirty, and I decided that if I hadn't met someone by the time I was thirty-five, I was going to have a baby on my own. It felt huge, to write that down, but also completely right. I'd be in a great position financially by then, and living back in Esperance meant I had all the family support I needed. It was totally doable. Seeing it laid out like that, I promised myself that before I got into another committed relationship, the guy had to be absolutely sure he wanted kids with me. Anything less was a deal breaker.

While I was having all those ideas and making all those plans, I resolutely pushed any thoughts about Dante away, no matter how hard they tried to creep in. It had been four weeks since Seattle. Seriously time to stop thinking about him.

"Okay, the next part involves the hot iron, so you girls can set the table instead."

"Can we have maple syrup, Auntie Lucy?"

"You sure can, Chlo. Is that all right, Mila? Or would you like something different?"

"Sprinkles?" she asked quietly.

"Yes! That's a great idea." I pointed to a low cupboard where I kept all my baking stuff. "They're in there." I watched them as they set the table, Chloe chatting all the while, and smiled fondly. Damn, they were cute. Having them sleep over had only reinforced my desire to have kids of my own. Maybe five years was too long to wait. Maybe I could bring it forward. Thirty-three was a good age, and that gave me just over three years to work the plan.

"Helloooooo!"

"Mommy!" Chloe and Mila raced to the front door and I hustled after them, scooping baby Xavier from my sister's arms so that she could cuddle her daughters.

“You’re just in time for waffles,” I said when the girls had finished greeting her.

“Yay to that.”

I served the waffles, then asked her, “Coffee?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Sorry I got here so early. Tom wanted to do some work and Xavier and I were in the way.”

“No problem. We can hang out here as long as you like.”

I made Elissa’s coffee first before sitting down with my own.

“Here you go, Auntie Lucy.”

“Thank you, Chloe.” I eyed the mess of waffle she’d made for me and felt my stomach turn. Might be best just to stick with coffee, I thought, picking up the mug and inhaling the rich, delicious scent. Fabulous. I took a sip, then scrunched up my nose. Ewww.

“What’s the matter?”

“Sorry, there must be something wrong with the pods. The coffee tastes funny.”

Elissa took a sip. “Mine tastes fine. Did you use a different pod for yours?”

“No, I’ve only got the one kind.” I smelled it again. “Weird. It smells okay but tastes gross. I’ll make another one, see how it goes.”

“Ha! That’s exactly what happened to me when I was pregnant. Loved the smell of coffee, couldn’t stand the taste. Such a ripoff.”

I froze, my hand hovering over the jar of coffee pods. Pregnant? No, that was impossible. We’d been careful the whole time. Giving myself a shake, I made a second cup and brought it back to the table. Aware that Elissa was watching me, I sniffed the brew before taking a sip. “Fu-fudge.”

“Here, let me try.” Elissa took the mug from me and tasted it. “There’s nothing wrong with it. It must be you. You’re not pregnant, are you?”

She was totally joking, but I felt the breath still in my lungs and heat prickle across my skin as my heart lurched.

“Luce?”

Feeling more than a little dazed, I said, “Hmm?”

“Everything okay?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t it be?”

“I dunno, but you had a really weird look on your face just now.”

“Just trying to figure out what might be wrong with the coffee.” I wasn’t sure she really believed me, but thankfully, she changed the subject to what she was thinking of getting our mom for Christmas. Which of course made me think of going shopping with Dante, which in turn made me think about the perfect sex we’d had where we’d always been perfectly careful.

Hadn’t we?



I was officially late, and I don’t mean for a fucking meeting. And I was *never* late. Never, ever, ever. Except I was now. Fuck. Three days. All the math checked out. I was sitting in my living room, my fingers wrapped around a mug of tea, since coffee was ruined for me now, shaking all over as I thought about it. The urge to run straight to my mom was almost overwhelming, but I resisted it. Somehow, I still hadn’t said a word to anyone about running into Dante in Seattle. I wasn’t sure why not. Maybe it was because of our shared history, the scars that were left behind after the car accident. Maybe not for me so much, but definitely for Jake and Emma. Talking about Dante might open old wounds. At the very least, it would lead to a hell of a lot of questions. So here I was, freaking out that I might be pregnant and not having anyone to lean on for support.

The best thing to do, of course, would be to woman up and get a pregnancy test. Not right now, though. Right now I was just

going to sit on my hands, and pretend my whole life wasn't on the brink of imploding.

CHAPTER 14

Lucy

Was the constant nausea because I was actually pregnant, or so anxious that I might be that I'd made myself sick?

I put it off as long as I could, but really, waiting wouldn't change the answer. It was probably best to get it over with. I went to New Bern to get the test, since the last thing I needed was anyone I knew seeing me buying it. I'd pulled my head out of the sand just enough to accept the need for confirmation. I wasn't ready for any more than that just yet.

Back at home, I peed on the stick, set it on the sink, washed my shaking hands, then sat on the edge of the bathtub, waiting. Maybe I should have called my mom. Or Elissa. Or the next-door fucking neighbor. Or anyone. OMG, doing this by myself had been the worst idea ever. I could feel the blind panic building in my head and I really needed someone to talk me down off the ledge—

And there it was. Two blue lines.

I burst into tears. I covered my face with my hands and sobbed for a good long while. Finally, pulling some toilet paper off the roll, I dabbed my wet cheeks, catching sight of myself in the mirror when I threw the scrunched-up ball of paper in the wastepaper basket.

Wow. I did not look like someone who was ready to be a mom. I looked like a hot mess, my hair in a sloppy bun, my face pale and blotchy from crying and nausea, my eyes red-rimmed and anxious.

So much for the five-year plan, I thought bitterly as I left the bathroom and went into the kitchen. I took a good, long drink of water, staring out the kitchen window, thinking. That five-year plan had been so perfect, proof that I was over my breakup with Richard and ready to think about the future again. Now the plan had gone up in flames, and it made me mad. Stupidly, blindly enraged. Didn't I deserve to have something go right? Hadn't I earned that, after living through the hell on wheels that was my marriage to Richard? All those times I deferred to his plans, his wishes, the second I finally got to live life on my own terms, bang! There goes the rug from under my feet. I bet the powers that be were having a good old laugh up there at my expense.

The anger coursing through me made me feel powerful and in control, so I fed it. Fucking *Dante*! How did this even happen? Did he not notice that a condom broke? It was all his fault.

Then I heard it.

Knock, knock, knock.

CHAPTER 15

Dante

It had been a hectic few weeks. Getting my ass to North Carolina. Reporting for duty. Getting all my belongings shipped and settling into a new routine. I'd been promoted as well, so there was a lot to do.

Finally, I had a day free and the very first thing I wanted to do was go see Lucy. I considered phoning her first, but then thought better of it. I knew where she lived from when she'd shown me the listing for her house and figured a surprise would be much more fun. She'd said to look her up if I was ever down her way, hadn't she? She wouldn't mind. If I got there early enough, maybe I could take her out to lunch, then settle in for a little afternoon delight.

I didn't let myself think about what I might do if I saw anybody else from the old days. What if I bumped into Jake? Or Bruce? What had Lucy told them about us? Everything? Nothing? Something in between?

Esperance looked pretty much the same, with its weird town square that was supposedly a replica of the village the town founder's wife had grown up in back in rural France. I'd always thought that the guy must have been a total weirdo, but as I caught sight of the cobbled pavement and gazebo in the center of the square, I smiled. Maybe it really was just as romantic as everyone always said.

At least driving through town didn't make me feel anything more than a stirring of lust at the idea of seeing Lucy again. No hidden demons from my past rising up to hit me smack dab in the face, which was a relief.

My body stirred as I got closer to Lucy's. Fuck, I couldn't wait to kiss her again. I shifted in my seat as I thought about doing a lot more than kissing her.

The GPS took me straight to her house, a cute little red brick home on a narrow street in the valley. I pulled up in front of it and cut the engine. *Shit, I should have stopped for flowers.* Oh well, maybe I could buy her some at lunch. My heart thudding heavily, I got out of the car and walked up her drive, feeling a buzz of anticipation in my gut as I raised my hand to knock.

CHAPTER 16

Lucy

Great, now someone was at the fucking door! Because of course I couldn't even have a nervous breakdown in peace. A heavy scowl on my face, I stomped down the short hallway, planning to send whoever it was on their way with a strong *fuck you*. I swung the door wide and froze solid.

Dante Moretti. On my doorstep. Looking hotter than hot, because of course he fucking did. Grinning at me. Fucking *grinning* at me! Exactly like the agent of chaos he was. "What the fuck do you want?"

His expression morphed into one of confusion and he reeled back as if I'd punched him. Good! That was exactly what I felt like doing. Without a word, I turned and walked back down the hall. He could come inside if he dared.

For some reason, the kitchen felt like a good place to have a knock-down, drag-out fight, so that's where I went. There was a tiny, rational part of me that tried to speak up, but the irrational, raging, totally-thrown-off-balance part of me was much bigger. And she was looking for a fight.

"Lucia?"

"Do *not* call me that!"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"What the fuck is wrong with me? That's a great fucking question, isn't it? You want me to tell you what the fuck is wrong with me?"

“Yes!” His answer had a tinge of anger to it that I liked, because it meant I could really let him have it.

“Fine! I’m pregnant. That’s what the fuck is wrong with me!”

He stood frozen like a Roman statue, staring at me for so long I thought maybe he’d actually turned to marble. Then he said, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Oh, ridiculous, is it? You would say that. Typical!”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I didn’t know myself, it didn’t make any sense. But nothing about this situation made sense. “How *dare* you! How dare you come here, with that look on your face!”

“What look?”

I gestured. “*That* look! I just told you I’m pregnant and *don’t be ridiculous* is the best you can come up with?” I knew it was big news, that I’d just dumped it on him like a bucket of ice and I was being totally unreasonable. But I was in full flight. Nothing could stop me. “And don’t even think about asking if you’re the father.”

“I wasn’t going to, but, Lucy, I don’t want a baby.”

“Well,” I nearly said *neither do I* but that wasn’t true, so I just went with, “fuck you.”

“How did this happen?”

I gave a mocking laugh, fishing around for a suitably sarcastic retort.

“Don’t say it, obviously I know how it happened. But we were careful, Lucy.”

“Not careful enough, obviously! And isn’t that just like you? Always so fucking reckless! All the risks, all the fun, leaving the mess for everyone else to clean up! You haven’t changed a bit.” He went white and I briefly felt a pang, realizing I’d hit a nerve, gone too far, my anger and fear tipping me over into outright cruelty.

“You know what? I don’t need this shit! Fuck you, Lucy.”

Yes! “Fuck you, too.”

He took a deep breath, running his hands over his face. “I’ve been posted at Kingsley, maybe you can look me up when you’re ready to talk about this like adults. If not, fuck you and have a nice life.”

“Fine.”

And then he was gone, only just barely refraining from slamming the front door behind him. I was shaking all over, trying to draw in enough oxygen as my stomach roiled. Tasting bile, I put my hand on my mid-section in an attempt to calm the nausea.

Nope. I turned to the sink and threw up.

CHAPTER 17

Dante

I drew in a deep, shuddering breath as I got behind the wheel of my car and gunned the engine. There were so many emotions coursing through me that I couldn't make sense of a single one of them. Confusion, shock, anger, hurt. Anger again. More hurt. The look on Lucy's face when she said what she did about me being reckless burned in my memory. It had hurt because it was true. I *was* reckless, I did hurt others. Maybe not now, but before. I couldn't be trusted. And I definitely couldn't be a father. There's no way a kid would benefit from having me as its dad.

Fucking hell. Pregnant.

As I drove out of Esperance, my plans for lunch and afternoon delights long forgotten, I wracked my brains to think how it had happened. There was not one instance where a condom had fallen off, or that I'd gone in bareback. That was too reckless even for me. The only answer was that one had broken, but the tear had been so small that I hadn't noticed. We'd had a lot of very enthusiastic sex, so that was most likely.

And now Lucy was left to bear the child and the consequences. I knew I wouldn't leave her high and dry, but I was still reeling. I couldn't wrap my head around it, couldn't think straight. There was no playbook for this sort of situation, no obvious path to follow.

It was an almost two-hour drive back to base. By the time I'd cleared security and pulled up in my assigned parking spot, I

still hadn't come to any conclusions. For now, I'd give Lucy a few days to cool off. Then I'd reach out.

CHAPTER 18

Lucy

“Are you sure you’re okay, sweetheart?”

Nope, I definitely was not. I was lying on the couch in my parents’ living room, trying to force myself to drink the lemon tea mom had made for me without spitting it right back up. I’d barely eaten a thing in the three days since Dante had stormed out, but I’d grabbed a bucket from the laundry room, just in case. “Sure, Mom. It’s just a stomach bug.”

My mom leaned down and pressed her lips to my forehead. I smiled despite myself, remembering the countless times she’d done this in my childhood. No need for a thermometer with my mom. “Hmm, no fever, but maybe you should go to the doctor. You’re looking very pale.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “It’s just stress. From work. Work stress.” I forced myself to meet my mom’s gaze, knowing that she wasn’t even slightly buying it. I wasn’t sure why I didn’t just blurt it out: *Mom, help me, I’m freaking out. I’m pregnant, you wouldn’t believe who the father is, but he doesn’t want to have anything to do with me or the baby, and I have no idea what to do.* But that would make it all too real. Best to keep quiet.

“How about some chicken broth and dry toast?”

“That would be great, thanks, Mom.”

She covered me with a blanket and went into the kitchen. I closed my eyes, listening to her moving around, making me soup because she loved me so much and wanted to look after me. Tears stung my eyes. Fuck, I was making such a mess of everything. Closing my eyes, I tried to rest, but my churning

stomach wouldn't let me. Sighing, I rolled onto my back, staring up at the ceiling. Dante's face appeared in my mind's eye, pale and hurt, shocked by the supremely shitty things I'd said to him. It was so mean and dammit it was so unlike me. My heart tightened painfully every time I thought of it. If nothing else was resolved between us, I had to at least apologize for that, let him know that had been out of line and I didn't mean it.

The problem was, I didn't know how to reach him. He hadn't left his number and he wasn't listed anywhere that I could find online. If I had to, I supposed I could contact Stef and get his details. It had taken all of two seconds to find her band's name and contact details online, but that could be a problem. I didn't know what she knew and hearing from me out of the blue could be weird.

No, it looked like I'd have to drive to Kingsley and ask for him. Could you even do that? Just turn up at a military base and ask to see your baby daddy? *Fuck*. I grabbed my phone and looked up their website. It was pretty informative and it turned out you could, in fact, just show up to base and ask to see someone. So that's what I'd do. Drive two hours to Kingsley, give my credentials, ask for Dante, and hope that he'd agree to see me. Simple.

The anxiety had my gut churning some more and I reached for the bucket, throwing up the small amount of tea I'd just managed to drink. My head was swimming when I lay back down. Maybe driving that far wasn't the best idea, but if I didn't it was just delaying the inevitable. I was better and stronger than that, and I really needed to make things right with Dante.

CHAPTER 19

Dante

“Sir?” A young man approached me tentatively, the hesitation in his voice obvious. In the last three days, I’d developed a reputation for being grumpy as fuck. Go figure.

“What is it?” I scowled, turning the music down on my headphones.

“There’s a young lady at the Visitors Center for you.”

Lucy. My heart skipped a few beats, which made me scowl some more. “Okay, I’ll be right there.” I stepped off the treadmill and wiped my face with a towel. At least she’d had the grace to come to me, rather than make me come to her. I took my time getting changed, feeling petty enough that the small act gave me a jab of vicious satisfaction.

I regretted the delay the minute I stepped into the Visitors Center. Lucy got slowly to her feet, putting her hand on the edge of the chair to steady herself. She wore leggings and an oversized sweater and her hair was a mess. More than that, though, she looked shaky and pale, maybe even a little gaunt, and all I wanted to do was rush to her and take her in my arms before she fell over.

“Can we... Can we talk?”

I nodded wordlessly and led the way outside. It was bitterly cold, but there wasn’t really anywhere else on base I could take her where we could have a private conversation. “Is this okay?” I gestured to a little park near the entrance gate.

“Yeah, the cold air is kinda nice.”

I helped her put her coat back on and waited while she took a small sip from a water bottle, before saying, “How are you?”
Lamest fucking thing ever.

She shrugged, heading towards a path that ringed the park, her steps slow and measured. “I’m...okay.” Unable to help myself, I put my hand under her elbow, noticing the way she swayed when she walked. She stopped abruptly, put her hand over her stomach, closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. “Sorry. I get sick a lot.”

“That’s okay.” I searched for something to say that would break the awful tension between us but came up empty. Instead, I said, “How did everyone take the news? It must have been weird—”

“I haven’t told them yet.”

Whoa. Now that surprised me. The Coopers were a very open family with no secrets from each other, at least as far as I could remember.

“I wanted to make things right between us first, you know, figure out where we...” She stopped again, swaying slightly.

“Lucy?” I stepped closer, feeling my gut clench when she looked up at me. Her eyes did not look okay.

“Sorry, I just...I feel...” Her voice was breathy and unsteady and she reached out, gripping my arms.

More than a little alarmed, I said, “I think we should get you to a doctor.”

“No, it’s okay...mayb—”

Before she could finish the thought, her eyes rolled back and she fell against me in a dead faint. Fuck. I slowly lowered her to the ground, painfully aware that it was wet and cold. *Fuck*. Trying not to panic, I grabbed my phone from my back pocket and dialed the base ambulance. They said they’d be there in two minutes, so I picked Lucy up and, moving to a park bench, sat and cradled her in my arms.

Sure enough, the white and orange base ambulance pulled up to the curb right away. They moved with careful, professional

precision as they got out, opened the back doors of the van, and pulled out a wheeled stretcher. I wanted to scream at them to hurry the fuck up, but kept my trap shut.

“What’s going on here?” The first EMT was a small, efficient woman with big blue eyes and her hair tied up in a neat bun. She seemed capable enough, I guess. Her partner was tall, broad and looked like a WWE wrestler.

“She’s pregnant, maybe around two months along or a little less. We were talking and she suddenly went really pale. Her eyes went strange: her pupils dilated and her eyes rolled back in her head, then she passed out.”

“Okay. Lift her up here.”

I gently placed Lucy on the stretcher, watching while they did whatever medical stuff they needed to do. I didn’t understand most of it, beyond taking her pulse and lifting her eyelids to shine a flashlight into her eyes. She was completely unresponsive, pale, limp.

“And you are?”

I knew without a doubt that if I answered *just a friend*, they’d ask for next of kin details and I’d be shut out. So, without thinking about the consequences, I said, “Captain Dante Moretti. I’m her fiancé.”

“Okay, well, we’re going to take her to the hospital. You can ride with us if you like.”

“Great, thanks.” I was impressed at how calm I sounded, since inside I was a big ball of panic. The ride to the hospital was short, thank goodness, and in no time they were pushing the stretcher bed through the double doors, relaying a stream of information to the waiting doctor.

Then everyone was gone, the EMT’s onto their next call and the doctor and two nurses with Lucy beyond another set of double doors. The doctor had given me a curt, “Wait here,” before following behind the stretcher. So that was it. All I could do was take a seat in the waiting room. I didn’t even know if I should contact someone. It would be hella weird to call Bruce Cooper right now and give him the news. What

would I say, exactly? I let myself off the hook by telling myself I'd call them when I knew more about what was going on and how Lucy wanted to handle it. If she still hadn't told them about us or her pregnancy, it wasn't my place to do it without speaking with her first. Fuck, what a mess.

Before I could spiral too far into complete and utter panic mode, a young woman came over with a clipboard. Handing it to me, she said, "We just need to get these details down, starting with your insurance, if that's okay."

"Sure thing." At least it gave me something to do.



A nail-biting hour later, a nurse came out. I jumped to my feet, my heart hammering. She smiled at me reassuringly, and I took a deep, steadying breath. Surely she wouldn't look like that if Lucy was in a coma, or...dead.

"Dante, is it?"

"Yeah. How is she? Is she gonna be okay?"

"She will be. She's severely dehydrated, so we've got her on a drip. We've got some other tests in the works to be sure, but for now she's okay and I know you'll be happy to hear the baby is fine. You're welcome to come through now and see her."

"Thanks."

I followed her through the double doors, my mind whirling. There was something I needed to do; I just had to convince Lucy to go along with it. I'd done all the necessary research on my phone in that long, agonizing hour and I was ready to act the moment she said she was on board.

The nurse gestured through the open doorway of a private room, saying softly, "The doctor will come and see you when we have the test results. For now, I'll leave you two alone." Then she left.

Okay. I could do this. I could make it right. I stepped through the door, taking a moment to reassure myself that Lucy really was okay. “Hey.” She turned her head. I could see that she already looked better. Still pale, but not as bad, and her eyes didn’t look as sunken, or her cheeks quite as hollow. A clear bag hanging from a pole was dripping a steady stream of fluids into her arm and I knew it was why she looked so much better. She also had a peg on her index finger, feeding data into a machine on a table next to the bed. It was obvious she was getting the very best care, and it confirmed for me that my plan was a good one.

“Hey. Sorry for all the drama.”

I shrugged, pulling up a plastic chair and sitting close to her bedside. “How are you?”

“I already feel a lot better, thanks. One of the nurses said they suspect hyperemesis gravidarum.”

Fuck, that sounded bad. “What’s that?”

“Excessive nausea and vomiting. Think morning sickness on steroids.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Not gonna lie, it hasn’t been great. But apparently there are drugs and stuff they can give me so I can keep food down and not get dehydrated again.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah.”

The conversation lapsed, and the silence was uncomfortable. I blew out a breath. Time to lay it all out.

“Dante—”

“Lucy—”

We smiled when we both started at the same time, then she said, “You go first.”

Good, because I need to move fast. “I need to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Would I be right in assuming that you don’t have insurance coverage for this, since you’d have no reason to think you’d need maternity cover in your policy?”

“You would.” She kept her face carefully neutral, giving nothing away.

“So have you given any thought to how you’re going to pay for it?”

“I’m thinking of leveraging some of the equity in my house. I don’t have as much as I’d like, and it would set me back a fair bit, but it’s doable.”

“What if I could arrange it so that you didn’t have to do that?”

A brief pause. “I’m listening.”

I took a deep breath. Okay, that was a start. “If today has taught us nothing else, it’s shown that things can go very wrong very quickly, and only the best available care can ensure that the worst doesn’t happen, right?”

“Right.”

“I looked into it while I was in the waiting room. This hospital has won the Airforce Hospital of the Year the last two years running. And their particular strength is Obstetrics.”

“And you’re telling me this because...”

“Because if we get married, you’ll have access to the best prenatal medical care the US military has to offer.”

She stared at me for a long moment, then said, “What the fuck, Dante? We can’t do that!”

“Of course we can. I already told the EMTs I was your fiancé.”

“*What?!*” It was only about two decibels short of a shriek.

“It was the only way they would let me ride in the back of the ambulance with you.” I left the rest unsaid: *And there was no fucking way I was letting you out of my sight.* “Look, don’t overthink it. It’s simple. You don’t have the insurance

yourself,” I waved my hand over her, where she lay on the bed, “and you’re already having problems. If it turns out to be a high-risk pregnancy, you’ve got a much better chance of getting a good outcome if we do this.”

“Fuck.”

She knew I was right, I could tell.

“That’s outrageous, Dante.”

“The whole situation is outrageous , but all we can do is make the best of it.”

“That’s true.”

This was the only thing I could think of that would get anywhere close to making it right for her. “I’ve researched it. We can take care of it this afternoon.”

“*What!!!*” Again with the almost-shriek.

“Or tomorrow, if you want to sleep on it.” I had to be careful not to push her too hard.

“So... How would it work? Would I have to live on base? Or would you live with me?”

I frowned, remembering what I’d seen over the years. “It’s not uncommon for the family to live off base and for the serviceman to go home on their off days. It should be fine for things to stay as they are. I stay at my lodging here, you live at yours. I might visit every now and then, to make it look good.”

“I see.” She chewed her lip. “And how long does this fake marriage have to last? Until the baby is born? Until it’s one? When it starts school?”

Fuck, she really was considering all angles, even better than I had. “Since it’s the prenatal care we need, we could file for divorce once the baby’s born. As long as I’m listed as the father on the birth certificate, I’m sure my insurance should still cover the kid until they’re 26 years old. As for you...”

“I’m on my own.”

“Yeah. I doubt I’d be able to keep my ex-wife on my insurance.”

“I see.” Seconds went by, leading into minutes, while Lucy lay there, staring at the ceiling, a small frown on her brow. I could almost hear the cogs turning and I started preparing more arguments. But then she shocked the ever-living fuck out of me. “I’ve thought about it. My answer is yes.”

Relief flooded my veins and I sagged against the back of the chair. “Great, I’ll get it all set up.”

“Okay.”

There was nothing else to say, so I told her to get some rest and I’d be back later.

Neither of us had even smiled.

CHAPTER 20

Lucy

Had any bride in the history of the world ever looked shittier than I did? Probably not. I still wore yesterday's baggy sweater and leggings with my dark brown sheepskin boots. I'd accessorized with a cute pair of pressure point wrist bands given to me by the hospital to help with the nausea. At least I'd been able to shower and wash my hair.

Still, I felt a million times better than I had yesterday. An overnight stay in the hospital, proper hydration and a good night's sleep had me feeling like a different person. This different person, unfortunately, was questioning the decisions made by the weak, painfully unwell version of herself yesterday.

I'd been so terrified when I woke to find myself in the hospital, hooked up to machines that beeped ominously. My first thought had been that I'd lost the baby and I'd been overwhelmed by the devastation that swamped me. Dante's unshaking belief that this was the right move, was what had me pushing the car door open and stepping out into the freezing December air.

He closed the car door behind me, but before I could head to the steps of the Goldsboro Courthouse steps, he put his hand on my arm. It was the first time he'd touched me since catching me yesterday. "Here. You need this."

I looked down to see he was holding out a ring box. "Are you serious?"

“If we’re really gonna go through with this, we may as well do it right.”

“I guess.” I took the box and opened it, blinking a little at the simple diamond solitaire ring. It wasn’t flashy, but it also didn’t exactly look cheap. “This is a bit much for a fake marriage, don’t you think?”

He shrugged. “If this were for real, that’s the kind of ring I’d choose for you. I don’t want anyone thinking I’d give you junk.”

I wasn’t really sure what to say to that, so without another word, I slipped the ring on my finger. The weirdest thing was that it was pretty much exactly what I would choose for myself, if this were real. Hoo boy, that was a path it was much better not to walk down. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Ten minutes later, we were husband and wife. Dante had taken care of everything, including wedding rings. How odd to see a wedding band on his left hand and know it was because of me.

“I’ll drive you home.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.”

“It’s two hours.”

“And?”

“How will you get back again?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

I sighed. Man, he was stubborn. “Fine.” Maybe it was for the best. The long drive would give me the chance to say what I had to say. I slipped into the passenger seat and buckled my seatbelt. Dante turned the key, giving the car a moment to warm up.

“Here, you need these,” he said, reaching into the back seat and, picking up a small shopping bag, dropped it in my lap.

There were some dry crackers, pretzels, some boiled candy, an apple and two bottles of juice. A snack bag. He’d made me a snack bag. “Oh,” was all I could think to say.

Easing the car into traffic, he explained, “You need small, regular meals so you don’t get sick again.”

“Of course. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I waited until we were out of Goldsboro, gathering all my courage to say what was on my mind. “I need to tell you something.”

He flicked me a glance I couldn’t read, and turned his gaze back to the highway. I took that as permission. Taking a deep breath, I blurted it out. “I was wrong to say what I said.”

“About what?”

“About you being reckless and leaving others to clean up your mess. And I’m really sorry. Really, really, sorry.”

“I see.”

Hmm, not quite the reaction I was expecting. The next few miles flashed by and he didn’t say anything else. Should I apologize some more? No hardship, I was genuinely sorry. The hurt in his eyes when my words hit home still haunted me.

Finally, he spoke. “You weren’t wrong.” His voice was so low I barely caught it.

“Dante—”

“Don’t argue with me. You were right. I am reckless and wild and barely consider the consequences of anything. It’s part of me, like a genetic disorder, I guess.” He gripped the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. “It’s exactly why I don’t want to be a father.”

I frowned. That made absolutely zero sense to me. Everything I knew about Dante up to this point told the opposite story. He’d definitely *been* wild and reckless in his youth, there was no question of that. But he had matured since then, to the point that there was barely a glimmer of the old Dante in the man sitting next to me. It hurt me even more to think that my words had made him feel that way, and there didn’t seem to be anything I could do or say to convince him that he was wrong. Fuck.

More miles went by. I ate the pretzels and drank some juice. Dante kept his eyes on the road. The silence gave me plenty of time alone with my thoughts. “It was why I left Richard, you know.”

“What was?”

“Do you remember when I said he and I wanted different things in life?”

“Yeah.”

“This was the different thing. Children. I wanted them, he didn’t. I didn’t even need to have them right away, but I wanted his assurance that they were in our future. He was unable to give me that. So I walked.”

“Fair enough.”

“And that’s why there’s no way I can get rid of this baby.”

“I get it.”

“But it’s a weird situation for both of us. We’re both victims of circumstances.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“I understand that you have your reasons for not wanting this and I accept that it’s your choice, as much as I hope you’ll accept it’s mine to keep the baby.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought. I feel confident that I can do this on my own. I’m financially stable, I can work from home. My family are around to support me. Long story short, you’re off the hook, if that worries you at all.”

He shifted in his seat, not looking at me. “Good to know.”

Fuck, this was awkward. Not sure what else I could say or do, I grabbed an apple from the bag and munched on it. We were about forty-five minutes out of Esperance when I decided it was time for the next big talk. “I’m not sure what to tell my family.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, too.”

“You got any answers?”

He shot me a half smile, the first I’d seen on him for hours. “Obviously, it’s up to you. They’re your family. But I’m assuming you’re not thrilled to say we got hitched for the insurance benefits?”

“Um, no, I don’t think I want to do that.” It would be the simplest solution, because it was the truth. The problem I had was that it was so mercenary. My parents had married for love and that love had sustained them for nearly four decades. Here I was, with a quickie marriage I didn’t expect to last a year, with another failed marriage already behind me. It definitely felt better to pretend it was a love match, I guess.

“Okay”, he said. “At this point, I think we just say we met in Seattle, decided to spend the weekend together and by the end of your visit, we realized we were in love. I asked you not to say anything at first, until I’d had time to come to terms with everything. But the baby changes all of that and here we are.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t quite cover the marriage thing. Plenty of couples have babies without tying the knot.”

“Not us. As soon as you found out, that was it, we knew what we had to do. And we’re ridiculously happy about it, of course.”

“Of course.” We were probably the least happy newlyweds on the planet. “And the living arrangements? Why don’t we live together?”

“Because my work is very intense right now and it’s better that I stay on the base, but I’ll be with you as much as possible. That way, ‘as much as possible’ is just as much as we want. You don’t have to see me again until the divorce, if you don’t want to.”

The thought of that made me feel weird. “I don’t think I’d get away with that, to be honest. I also can’t see my family not wanting to see you. I mean I have no idea how that’ll go, given the...history...but I think it’s unavoidable.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“We only have to do this until the insurance coverage is approved. Once we’ve got that, we can do what we like.”

“How long will that approval take, do you think?”

“I can’t imagine it would be more than a few days. It’s just a rubber stamp.”

“What happens if it doesn’t get approved?”

“Let’s not think about that until we have to.”

“Okay.”

A few minutes later, we pulled up in my driveway. I ran through the cover story again, to make sure I had it down. *What a wicked web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.* Who said that, anyway? Who cares. They’d been right.

I went to open the car door, but stopped when Dante put his hand on my arm. “I should give you my number.”

“Oh, duhh, of course.”

I punched it into my phone, grabbed the shopping bag and said, “Thanks for all this.”

“No problem. Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

“And let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.” I took my keys from his outstretched hand, felt the tingle when our fingers brushed together and pulled away quickly. All of this was hard enough without adding the double whammy the slightest touch from him still had on me. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

I got out of the car and walked inside without looking back.

CHAPTER 21

Dante

Lucy: *I'm afraid I have bad news.*

I jumped to my feet, already instinctively reaching for my car keys.

Me: *Is everything okay?*

Lucy: *Yes, everything's fine, health-wise. But I've told everyone about the baby.*

My heart sank. They were giving her a hard time.

Me: *It didn't go well?*

Lucy: *It went better than I expected. I was super nervous, especially about telling Mom and Dad, but once they got over the initial shock, I think they're excited. Mom was also ecstatic to realize her intuition is still intact, since she swears she knew it wasn't just a stomach bug that made me so sick.*

I smiled.

Me: *Okay, so what's the bad news? This all sounds great.*

Lucy: *Mom is rabidly insistent that you come for Christmas. I explained that they usually had stuff at the base for service personnel, but she's not taking no for an answer. Plus, baby and marriage aside, she would love to see you.*

Dante: *And your dad?*

I couldn't imagine many men being happy to meet the guy who'd just done what I'd done to his daughter. That hurt, because Bruce Cooper's opinion of me still mattered, even after all these years.

Lucy: *Dad wants to shake your hand and say congratulations and drink a beer with you. And grill you for all the details of what happened after he dropped you off at Kingsley.*

That was unexpected. Nice, but unexpected. Then I had a thought.

Dante: *If it would be too weird and uncomfortable for you, I can easily find an excuse to stay away.*

Lucy: *I'm fine with it if you are.*

Dante: *It'll mean—* My fingers paused, not sure how to word what I was trying to say. *It'll mean acting like a proper couple.*

Which meant touching each other, being affectionate, pretending to be in love.

Lucy: ...

The three dots hovered, then vanished, then appeared again.

Lucy: *I'll just pretend we're in Seattle.*

I had no idea what to say to that. What did she mean? Just that remembering Seattle would make it easier to fake it, or something more? Fuck, this was complicated enough without me seeing a hidden meaning in everything she said to me.



I sat in the parked car, Lucy at my side, looking through the windshield at the Coopers' house. It had barely changed in the years since I'd left Esperance. The sandstone brick looked mellow in the cool winter light, and the tiled roof—blue-gray, if I remembered right—was covered in snow. The cream pillars that lined the wide verandah gave it an added elegance. I smiled, remembering how Ellen had insisted to Bruce that the pillars had to be there, to complete the look she was going for. He'd grumbled, but he'd done it. More than a decade later, I could see she'd been right. The whole house looked elegant, yet homey. It was the best house on the street. Okay, I was putting way too much thought into pillars, to

avoid thinking about what was coming. I was nervous as fuck. A Cooper family Christmas felt like a big deal to me.

“You good?” Lucy asked, reaching for the car door handle.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No reason. You’re just giving off a vibe.”

“No vibe. Let’s go in.”

We were running late because I’d arrived at Lucy’s that morning with a box full of gifts for her family, only to realize that she had a box ready to go as well. We figured that a married couple giving separate Christmas gifts to the wife’s family would look weird. So we’d taken the time to change the gift tags on all the presents to be from both of us. It was a stupid detail that seemed to stress Lucy out, and of course that made me feel stressed too.

Now we were late, would probably be the last ones to arrive, and I had no idea what I should even expect when I walked through the front door. I retrieved the boxes from the trunk and walked behind Lucy up the pathway, dragging my feet like a child that didn’t want to go to bed or some shit.

With her hand on the door handle, Lucy looked at me over her shoulder, her green eyes shining with concern. “You ready?”

I swallowed. I was doing this for her. All for her. Making sure she was okay was the primary objective, and standing here like a wuss wasn’t helping with that. “Sure, of course.”

There was a LOT of noise coming from the living room—talking, laughing, a child giggling. Until we entered it. Everyone fell silent at once, even the little baby sitting on Elissa’s lap. It was as though they’d orchestrated it. I felt all eyes on me and had to swallow hard, forcing myself not to take a step backward into the hall under the scrutiny.

“Yay! Auntie Lucy’s here! Now we can open presents!” A little girl was sitting so close to the Christmas tree she was practically underneath it, with three wrapped gifts in her lap.

Her comment broke the spell and everyone started talking at once. Ellen and Bruce came forward first, taking the boxes

from me and handing them off to Matt.

Then Ellen hugged me. “It’s so good to see you again, Dante.”

It was so genuine, so sweet, that if I were a weaker man, I might have cried.

“Son.” Bruce shook my hand.

“Mr. Cooper.”

“None of that. It’s Bruce, okay?”

That would take some getting used to. The other Cooper siblings greeted me and introduced me to their partners. I knew Gabe and Jake would be the hardest to say hello to, with so much broken history between us. Lucy quietly stepped away, helping her small nieces add our pile of presents to those already under the tree, asking her mom if she needed any help in the kitchen. It was a thoughtful gesture that gave me the space I needed to greet my old best friend with a bit more privacy.

The last time I’d seen Jake, he was lying broken in a hospital bed, a crisp white bandage around his head and his face all swollen. I felt a rush of emotions at seeing him again, looking so much older, but healthy and still familiar. “Hey, man.”

“Hi.” We shook hands, but it didn’t seem like enough, so I pulled him in for a hug, giving him a hearty clap on the back. “It’s good to see you,” he said, slapping my back in return.

“Likewise.”

“We’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

“We sure do. Hey, Gabe.”

“Hey. Good to see you.”

“Thanks. You too.”

“*Pleeeeee* can we open the presents now. I’m being so patient and it hurts my tummy.”

Everyone laughed at Elissa’s little girl, who I found out was called Chloe. Ellen directed me to sit on the sofa next to Lucy, while Bruce put on a Santa hat and started handing out

presents. And just like that, I had become part of the Cooper family Christmas.

I couldn't deny it, I liked it. A lot.

Very conscious that we had to look like a blissfully in love, newlywed couple, I put my arm along the back of the sofa, behind Lucy, so that she was tucked right into my side. I thought I heard her breath hitch, but she didn't pull away. I managed to resist the almost overwhelming urge to pick up a lock of her hair and twirl it around my finger.

"That's so perfect for her," she breathed softly when Ellen unwrapped the cream cashmere sweater I'd bought her. Bruce seemed pretty pleased with his antique spirit level, which made me happy. That had been the hardest gift to find. I was surprised at how much pleasure I got watching everyone open the various presents I'd brought. The only person who got regular gifts from me was Stef, and we usually didn't have the luxury of being together when she opened them.

Matt's fiancée Zara seemed to be thrilled with the portable pizza oven I gave them, pulling out her phone and taking a picture. "Ally loves these, so get ready for a patio pizza party every other weekend when the weather is good."

"Oh, this is so thoughtful." Claire and Jen pored over the baby box I got, pulling out every item in turn and oohing and aahing over each one. And Elissa was almost more excited than her twins at the family pass for a nearby fun park.

I felt a little uncomfortable watching Jake and Gabe open their presents, especially when they both went quiet, holding the shirts in their hands and just staring at them. Signed Charlotte Knights shirts. Each signed by Jake and Gabe's respective favorite players from when we used to hang out. We'd spent a lot of time going to games together.

"Where did you get these?" Jake asked.

"Online."

"Thanks, man. Amazing."

"No problem."

Gabe got up and shook my hand. “Thanks for this. You’ll have to come to a game with us.”

“Sounds great.”

Before I could say anything more, an ear-splitting scream tore through the air. “Oh my god, Chloe, what’s the matter?” Elissa hurriedly handed her baby off to her husband and jumped to her feet.

“A Bluey onesie! My favorite! Look, Mila! Can we put them on right now, Mommy?” She waved around the blue hooded onesie like a victory flag.

“Sure, as long as you say thank you to Auntie Lucy and Uncle Dante first.”

What the actual fuck. *Uncle Dante*? I stiffened, felt more than heard Lucy’s sharply indrawn breath, then braced myself as Chloe catapulted herself into my lap, while Mila climbed quietly into Lucy’s. Without an ounce of shyness, Chloe threw her arms around my neck, gave me a sloppy kiss on the cheek and said thank you. Mila, obviously much shyer than her sister, looked at me cautiously. Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, I murmured, “Fist bump?” She nodded, so I put a fist out, she tapped hers to mine, which was very cute, said a quiet thank you and climbed down again from Lucy’s lap, taking her onesie to Matt, so he could help her put it on.

“Uncle Matt’s her favorite. When he’s here, we might as well not exist,” Lucy explained with a chuckle.

“I see.” I watched as Matt helped Mila into the suit with practiced ease. He was obviously very used to caring for his nieces. It was adorable the way she climbed up onto his lap once she was dressed and immediately snuggled in. It gave me a strange pang to see them that I wasn’t ready to think about, so I turned my attention back to Chloe.

“This is the best present *ever!*” She was standing in the middle of a pile of wrapping paper, hugging her arms around her body.

“Does that mean we should take your Elsa dress back to the store?” Bruce joked.

Chloe looked concerned for a moment, a worried frown on her little face. Then her face cleared again. “I know! I can wear both!”

While Chloe was putting her Elsa dress on over her Bluey onesie, Lucy turned to me, her eyes dancing, and said quietly, “I think you’re in charge of all future present buying.”

I grinned and, without even thinking about it, tapped her nose. “And I did it all without an app.”

We both went still, gazing at each other for a long moment. We’d been pretty careful not to mention Seattle or say anything that might stir up memories of that weekend. It wasn’t a deliberate, conscious decision; it just seemed easier to focus on the here and now rather than bring up the weekend that had led us to this strange point.

“And now, we’ve got something special for the lovebird newlyweds.”

We both turned our heads to look at Elissa.

“What’s this?” Lucy asked, taking the envelope Elissa was holding out to her.

“If you open it, you’ll find out.”

It was clear that it was a gift for both of us and I hoped it wasn’t going to be something that would make Lucy feel awkward. No such luck. Lucy opened the envelope, removed a sheet of paper and read what it said. A weekend for two at a winery—the honeymoon package, no less. There were pictures of the cozy living room of a little cottage with a fireplace, a hot tub with a bottle of champagne and two flutes sitting beside it, a couple getting massages together, and a woman sitting in a chair with green goo and a blissful expression all over her face.

Ellen piped up. “We realized that you’d been too unwell to organize a honeymoon and since you hadn’t mentioned taking one, we all kicked in and got you this. You can take it any time you like, it’s good for twelve months.”

“Oh, wow, thanks, Mom. That’s great. Thanks, everyone.”

Lucy did an admirable job of faking her excitement and I did my best to do the same, smiling and nodding while Claire talked about a work colleague's experience at the same place. It was "pure luxury" and we'd "love it so much", apparently. It was awkward as fuck, but we got through it. Until the next awkward moment, of course.

"What about you, Luce? What did Dante get you for Christmas?" Jen asked.

"Oh, um..."

"We were running too late this morning for us to swap presents, so we'll do it later, when we get home," I put in smoothly. It was true as far as I was concerned, since I did have a present for her in the trunk of my car. We hadn't talked about buying presents for each other, so I didn't know if she'd got me something, but there was no way I was giving presents to her whole family, plus Gabe and Jake, without having something for her as well.

Lucy shot me a grateful look, and I smiled at her reassuringly. A few minutes later, Ellen said it was time to get dinner happening, which meant everyone hustled to clean up the living room before moving into the kitchen, to do what they had to do to prepare.

Lucy hung back after everyone left the room, looking at me uncertainly.

"What is it?"

"Just, you know, it must all be a bit weird and uncomfortable for you. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It can't be any easier for you."

"Uncle Dante. A couples weekend. Buying presents for people you barely know. Going to a baseball game with two friends you haven't seen for over a decade." She let out a sigh. "It's... a lot."

Unable to help myself, because she looked so uncertain and guilty, I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "It will be well worth it once the insurance is approved."

“You’re so calm about it.”

“I’m just doing what I’ve gotta do to make sure you’re okay.”

That made her smile. “I appreciate that.”

“Good. Just don’t tie yourself up in knots about all this surface shit. Okay?”

“Okay,” she replied with a sigh. “I’ll try not to.”

“Good. Now, let’s go eat.” I let her lead the way to the dining room, giving in to the urge to flick a glance down to her ass. Still as perfect as ever, and now completely off limits. Ouch.



Hours later, after the dishes had been cleared from the table and the dishwasher turned on, Ellen lit the candles in the middle of the dining table and dimmed the lights. It had been a loud, boisterous Christmas and I’d loved every second of it. When I was younger, Moretti family Christmases were quiet things: usually just me, my mom and Stef. If Dad bothered to visit, Mom was happy and went to a lot of effort. If he had to “work,” she would sink into a black depression, leaving Stef and I to make the best of the holidays on our own. Once I joined the air force, if I couldn’t make it back home, Christmas was on base, which was only slightly less depressing than my childhood ones.

The Cooper Christmas, though... It was something else. No one cared that there was barely any room to move in the small dining room and that we were all squished in. There were Santa hats, and ugly sweaters, and food. So much food. I loved the way everyone pitched in, so that it wasn’t down to one person to do all the work, cooking or otherwise. Bruce had made a glazed ham out on the barbecue and every time he went outside to check it, frigid air blew inside. Somehow, he always forgot to close the door behind him. By the fourth time he went to check it, Gabe took up position, ready to open and close the door for him.

Ellen made the turkey, Elissa was in charge of the gravy, Claire and Jen took care of the roast vegetables and Gabe and Jake supplied a green bean casserole. Zara had made both apple and pumpkin pies, and there were plenty of jokes about skipping straight to dessert. Lucy explained out of the corner of her mouth that Zara and her friend Ally were chefs, so everyone was always thrilled when they cooked or baked for these kinds of things.

Within minutes of Ellen laying out the last of the food and declaring it was dinner time, everyone was eating. Elissa and Tom's baby, Xavier, wasn't really in the mood for a big meal, and didn't seem to like the highchair either, so Tom took him on his lap. Once Lucy had finished eating, she offered to take him so Tom could eat his meal in peace. I'm not gonna lie, seeing her holding a baby hit me square in the gut. The whole thing just seemed to come so naturally to her, and I could see why she'd felt that backing out of the pregnancy wasn't an option. The baby chuckled adorably while she blew raspberries on his hands and cheeks, then held her hands while he stood on her lap, bouncing up and down. When that had worn him out, he tucked his head into her shoulder and passed out against her while she patted his back.

"He asleep?" she asked me softly after a few minutes.

I nodded.

"I'll go and put him down in his cot."

She couldn't push her chair back, so I got up so she could get out, then realized she might need help with the cot or whatever so I followed her. "Just pull the blanket back, thanks," she whispered when we were in the spare room at the end of the hall. Lying the baby gently down, she pulled the blanket over him, ran her hand over his hair lovingly before straightening and stepping back, glancing up at me with a soft smile on her face. The smile froze. "What is it?"

Something about watching her looking after the baby so tenderly had made my heart squeeze uncomfortably, and it must have shown on my face. "Nothing. We should get back."

“Okay.” She didn’t seem convinced, but followed me out and back down the hall. We got to the front hall just in time to hear a knock on the door. “That must be Ally. She said she might drop in.”

Lucy opened the door and two women stepped hurriedly inside, shivering against the cold December air. The first one I didn’t know, but the second was Emma, holding a box in her hands.

“Dante! Oh my god!”

Lucy took the box hastily so Emma could throw her arms around me in a hug. “Hey, Em. It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too!” She held me a moment longer, her arms still tight around my neck, before stepping back and looking up at me, her eyes shining. “Holy fuck, were you always this tall? Or have I shrunk?”

I chuckled. She hadn’t changed a bit. “I might have grown an inch or two.”

“Well, it suits you. You did well, Luce. Oh, sorry, this is Allegra, Ally for short.”

“Hi.” Shaking my hand, she switched to Italian, asking if I spoke it. When I said yes, we had a rapid exchange where she asked whereabouts in Italy my family were from and I asked the same about hers. Then she asked if I like cannoli.

“*Si, certo.*”

“Good, take these so I can bring my presents in.”

We waited for her to grab a box from just outside the door, then Lucy led us back to the dining room. The first thing I noticed was Jake and Emma and their respective body language. They kept their distance, barely looking at each other. Both looked like they’d rather be anywhere else than in a room together. It broke my heart because I remembered when the three of us were as thick as thieves. The two of them had been just so good together. I caught Lucy’s eye just as I was putting Ally’s cannoli in the middle of the table and we were sitting down. She’d been watching them too, and made a face at me, as if to say, *I know, but what can we do?*

With the new arrivals, space was at even more of a premium and I found myself squished even closer to Lucy. I wasn't complaining: she smelled divine and felt so good pressed against my side when I put my arm along the back of her chair.

"Check it out," she said in a low voice for my ears only, gesturing ever so slightly to Ally and Gabe. She'd somehow organized the seating arrangements so that they were sitting together and the frown on Ally's face was a far cry from how she'd looked a few moments before in the front entrance. When Gabe turned away to say something to Tom on his other side, she leaned in ever so slightly and took a deep breath. What the fuck? She was *smelling* him? I looked at Lucy with one quizzical eyebrow raised. Her eyes were dancing with laughter as she leaned closer and said, "It's like watching a tv show. I love it. I'm not afraid to be bossy, so I arrange things so they're near each other whenever I can."

"You're a devil."

She giggled softly. "I know." Then she leaned even closer, whispering, "Who knows, maybe one day she'll thank me." We were close enough that if I moved half an inch, I could kiss her. I saw the moment she realized it too, in the widening of her eyes and the parting of her lips. If she licked her lips right now, when we were this close, I'd give in and kiss her. I wouldn't be able to stop myself.

"That's it! I've had enough!"

We both jumped at Bruce's sudden barked exclamation, the guilt in Lucy's eyes mirroring my own. Had we been found out?

"Have you, dear?" Ellen asked patiently.

"Yes! We officially need a bigger dining room."

Ellen laughed. "We sure do."

"What do you think, son? When can we get it done by?"

"Spring, I'd say, Dad, as long as you don't mind stopping here and there for wedding stuff." Matt smiled at Zara, pulling her close to press a kiss to her temple.

“Sounds good to me! Do you reckon we go out the side that way, or out the back that way?”

“Why not both?” Lucy countered.

That did it. Everyone had a vocal opinion on what would be best. I enjoyed the dynamic immensely, backing Bruce up when he asked if I thought French doors straight out to the deck would work. There was something about a friendly family argument on Christmas night that got to me.

As the conversation wore on, Lucy relaxed against me more and more, until her head was on my shoulder.

Ellen looked across at us, smiling fondly. “Take your wife home.”

I nodded and without even thinking about it, dropped a kiss onto Lucy’s brow. “Come on.”

“I’m okay.”

“Sure you are. I’m pretty sure I heard you snoring just now.”

“Fuck off,” she said sleepily, getting to her feet when I pulled the chair back, making me chuckle.

The short car ride home was quiet, with Lucy curled up in the passenger seat, her eyes closed. It was well past midnight when I pulled into her drive.

“You can stay the night, if you like.”

I hustled after her when she got out of the car. The driveway was slippery and I didn’t want her falling over—wait, she was asking me to stay the night?

“It’s a long drive back and I have a spare bed. It’s a king single, so you’ll be a little squished, but it’s definitely better than driving back now.”

“Okay, thanks.” I completely ignored my twinge of disappointment and followed her inside.

Yawning, she pointed to the room at the end of the hallway. “Just through there, the bed’s made up already. You just have to climb in. I always leave this hall light on, and that room is the bathroom, if you need it.”

“I’m sure I’ll figure it out. Go to bed.”

She smiled. “Sir yes sir. I feel like I should salute or something, but I’m too tired. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Fifteen minutes later, lying in what I realized would be the baby’s room soon, I couldn’t sleep. It was ridiculous how much I had enjoyed today. It wasn’t just the Cooper family Christmas, although that was amazing. It was Lucy. Sitting next to her, having my arm around her, the whispered exchanges. Ellen’s “*Take your wife home*” had hit me in the solar plexus, hard. If only...but no, that was pointless. Punching the pillow in frustration, I rolled onto my side, my thoughts all of Lucy as I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 22

Lucy

I woke up the day after Christmas to a quiet house. Stepping out into the empty hallway, I had a flash of disappointment. *Well, that's just stupid.* What did I think was going to happen? I'd find Dante in the kitchen, bare-chested and whipping up pancakes? If only... Nope, don't go there. My situation was what it was, and I couldn't change it. I had to make the best of it.

My stomach rumbled and I knew if I didn't eat in the next five minutes, the hunger would turn to nausea, so I hurried into the kitchen. Since I couldn't have a gorgeous air force pilot make me breakfast, I'd have to fend for myself.

Moving to the fridge, my heart skipped a few beats and I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. Attached to the fridge door with a magnet was a note.

Lucy— There's an omelet mixed up in the fridge, ready to go. You were out of juice so I ran to the store and got some. Drink up, you need the vitamins. Talk soon, D

It was so blunt and matter-of-fact, but I felt ridiculously touched by it. He saw that I was out of juice, so he bought me some. He took care of my breakfast, even though he wouldn't be here to eat it with me. I felt the sting of tears and had to close my eyes to hold them back. *Get your shit together, Cooper;* I said to myself, straightening my spine determinedly and starting to fix my breakfast.

Plate of eggs and glass of juice in hand, I turned to the table and gasped. There was a wrapped present in the middle of the

table! I'd thought Dante was just kidding when he'd told my family we'd run out of time to exchange presents. Sitting down, I ate a mouthful of omelet before hefting the small, flat box in my hand. Jewelry. I took a photo of it and sent it to Dante.

Me: *What is this?*

Dante: *Hmm, looks like a Christmas present to me.*

Me: *Funny, I didn't think we were going to exchange presents.*

Dante: *Why would you think that?*

Why *would* I think that? I guess because our situation was so fraught and confusing, I wasn't sure if a gift exchange would make it better or worse. But I didn't really feel like saying all that, so I just said,

Me: *No reason. Can I open it?*

Dante: *Of course.*

Smiling, I took another bite of omelet. It really was delicious. Then I slowly pulled off the wrapping, drawing the process out since no one was here to hassle me about it.

Dante: *What's taking you so long?*

That made me giggle.

Me: *I'm savoring the moment.*

Dante: **Eye roll emoji**

Giggling some more, I folded the paper and placed it neatly on the table. One more bite of eggy goodness, then I lifted the lid. Grabbing my phone, I hastily typed.

Me: *This is too much.*

Dante: *No, it isn't. Put it on.*

I lifted the delicate gold chain out of the box and held it up. A small diamond pendant hung from it, catching the morning sun just right, sending a prism of light dancing on the wall behind the table. Pulling my hair to the side, I put it on, then took a quick selfie so I could see how it looked. I had to admit, the man had impeccable taste in jewelry. On impulse, I sent the

photo to Dante. I wasn't exactly looking my best, but oh well. Fuck. Was that too much? Should we be sending selfies to each other? Three dots hovered, indicating Dante was typing, then disappeared, replaced by...

Dante: *Beautiful.*

Did he mean me, or the necklace? How should I respond? If I said thanks, would that make it seem like I thought he meant me? Was I massively overthinking all this? Of course I was. Best to keep it simple.

Lucy: *It's lovely. I did get you a present, by the way. I'll give it to you next time you're here.*

Dante: *No problem.*

Lucy: *And thanks for the omelet. It's delicious.*

Dante: *Also no problem.*

That seemed a natural finishing point, so I didn't reply again, just finished eating my breakfast. Ten minutes later I was putting the clean dishes away when there was a knock on the door. Going to answer it, I was surprised to see Ally.

"Hi! I wasn't expecting you, was I?" I was worried I'd forgotten if we'd made plans. I'd gapped on a few things lately.

"Not at all," she reassured me. "I stayed at Zara and Matt's last night and just thought I'd get out early to give them some peace. Plus, I've got some stuff for you."

"Oh, thank you. Come on in." I swung the door wide, taking a bag from Ally and following her down the hallway into the kitchen. "What is all this?"

"Zara was telling me how you've got really bad morning sickness, and one of the ways to manage it is frequent small meals. So I made you some."

"Babe! You didn't!"

"Of course I did," she said with a grin. "No, sit, I'll do it. You don't mind if I make a coffee, do you?"

"Go for it."

Ally unpacked two bags full of small meals into the fridge, all portioned out and neatly labelled. “I only did four days’ worth, because your hot husband said he was on base over the next few days, but he’d be back after that.”

“Thanks.” Best to ignore the pang at the word husband.

“He is very hot, by the way.”

“That he is.” *He’s not mine, though.* Maybe Ally sensed the unspoken thought, because she turned from the coffee machine and looked at me for a long moment. It was all I could do not to squirm in the chair.

“Okay. What’s going on?”

“What? Nothing.”

“Bullshit. You look as guilty as sin.”

“I do not!”

She narrowed her eyes at me. I couldn’t help it, I gave in. The tangle of lies and deceit was eating me up inside, and I desperately needed to confide in someone. Ally was the perfect confidant, being on the outer edge of the family. “Dante and I didn’t really fall madly in love in Seattle. Yes, we met up there, and yes, we had a dirty weekend, but when it was over, we parted ways, never expecting to see each other again. Then he got posted to Kingsley and came to see me. I’d only just found out I was pregnant, and I’d already started feeling really sick, so rather than throw myself into his arms, I yelled at him. We had a huge fight, he left, then I felt really bad about some of the things I said, so I went to see him.” I stopped the mad rush of words and took a deep breath.

“Jesus, this is starting to sound like a soap opera.” Ally’s eyes were wide. “What happened when you went and saw him?”

“Well, like I said, I was already sick, and I hadn’t been eating much, so I fainted.”

Bringing her coffee to the table, she pulled out a chair and plonked onto it, resting her chin in her hand and watching me avidly. “Suitably dramatic. I’m loving it.”

I chuckled. “Thanks. Anyway, Dante called the ambulance, I was rushed to hospital, when I was okay again, he was at my bedside, proposing marriage.”

“I’m assuming that’s not the grand romantic gesture it sounds like?”

My smile faded. “No. We were both freaking out, to be honest, and he figured that because the hospital at the base is so good, I’d be better off getting prenatal care and having the baby there. Getting married was the logical way to get the insurance coverage needed for that.”

“So it’s a fake marriage/insurance scam type arrangement...”

I winced and dropped my gaze.

“Hey, no judgement. You gotta do what you gotta do. I’m a bit confused, though.”

“What about?”

“You guys looked pretty good together last night. Are you sure you’ve got the ‘fake’ part of the marriage right?”

“Dante doesn’t want to be a father, so yeah, there’s not much we can do with that hanging over our heads.’

“What, so you aren’t banging right now?”

I shook my head glumly.

“That seems like a heartbreaking waste.”

I nodded even more glumly.

“There’s nothing stopping you, though. It’s not like you can get pregnant again.”

I giggled. “Girl, you’re outrageous.”

Ally tossed her hair over her shoulder. “You know it. But, seriously, what have you got to lose?”

“Honestly, it’ll just make it way more complicated, and it’s already messy enough.”

“Fair.”

“Anyway, thanks for listening. It’s been really hard not being able to talk about it.”

“Any time. Nice necklace, by the way.”

I reached up and touched the diamond. “Thanks.”

“New?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say a word.”

“Think I’ll make some tea.”

CHAPTER 23

Lucy

How many times can you check your phone to see if your fake husband has texted you before it's considered obsessive? It was a stupid way to spend a snowy Friday afternoon, so I put my phone on the charger in my bedroom and grabbed my sketchbook from the office. A cup of tea, a football game on the television and a little bit of drawing should take my mind off him.

I started the first outline, frowning when it didn't quite come out right, ripping the page out of the book, scrunching the paper up, starting again. The second attempt was a little better, but I didn't quite get the shadows right. Hmm, no. *Rip*. The next try was even better, but the hands and feet were still out of proportion. I became absorbed in the process, forgetting where I was as I drew image after image. Finally, I smiled to myself, shading in the lines of the sketch until it was how I pictured it in my mind: a sweet little baby, with round cheeks and teeny tiny fingers and toes. Perfect.

A knock at the door had me jumping to my feet, instinctively tying my dressing gown tighter around my waist. "Who is it?" I called tentatively, stepping into the hallway.

"It's Dante."

I gasped, standing frozen for a moment. What was he doing here at nine o'clock at night?

"You wanna let me in? It's freezing out here."

"Of course, sorry." I rushed to open the door, blushing as my body went into overdrive at the sight of him, brushing snow

from his hair before stepping inside, an overnight bag in his hand. *An. Overnight. Bag. In. His. Hand.* “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

His eyes were dark and intense, making my heart thud painfully. Something had happened. Something bad. “I think we’re being investigated,” he said bluntly.

“What makes you think that?” The painful thudding sped up, making me put my hand to my throat, hoping to calm the racing pulse I felt there.

“I called today to get a progress report on the claim and the lady on the other end was pretty evasive. I pushed a bit but she shut me down. It felt weird.”

“Oh.” I had no idea how to respond to that.

He dropped the bag to the ground and took off his coat. “I’ve been calling you for over two hours, but your phone is off.”

Fuck, I’d been so ridiculous about looking for texts from him that I’d missed his phone calls. “My phone’s on the charger.” I brushed by him to close the front door, my mind spinning. “So what does this mean?”

“It means I have to stay here until the insurance stuff is approved.”

“I see.” I felt such a confusing rush of emotions that I didn’t know how to process them. Fear over the insurance, excitement at the idea of Dante staying with me, confusion about being so thrilled, even more concern about how him staying here would work, and guilt about putting him in this position.

“I’m so sorry, Lucy. I didn’t intend for this to happen. I’ll need to keep my stuff in your room, so it looks legit, but I can sleep in the spare room.”

“Right.” Annnnd add disappointment to the emotions cascading through me.

He pushed his hand through his hair. “We have to be careful. If this goes wrong, I could lose my career.”

Fuck. “I understand. Of course you can stay. Crap. I never would have agreed to all of this if I’d thought your career could be at stake.” There was a definite edge of panic to my words.

He put his hands on my upper arms, rubbing gently, reassuringly. “I’m sure it’s just routine. This’ll all be over before we know it.”

His touch did confusing things to my insides, so I stepped away. “Let’s hope so.” He didn’t say anything more, but his gaze flicked over me. I folded my arms across my middle, feeling weirdly exposed in my pajamas and dressing gown. “I’ll show you where you can keep your stuff.” I led the way to my bedroom, feeling a stupid stab of relief that I’d made the bed that morning. Going to my wardrobe, I hurriedly pushed my clothes aside so that half the hanging rail was empty, then bent down to scoop my shoes to the side too. When I was done, I turned to look at him over my shoulder, about to say something, but then lost my train of thought. Had he been checking out my ass? I straightened up hurriedly, fluffing my hair for some stupid reason, and wordlessly gestured to the space I’d made for him.

“Thanks.”

“I was just about to make a cup of tea. Have you eaten dinner?” I turned away, heading towards the door.

“Yeah, I grabbed something quick on the road.”

“Okay. Would you like a cup of tea? Coffee?”

“Tea would be great.” I left him to put his clothes in my wardrobe, carefully avoiding thinking about how that made me feel, and went to the kitchen.

I made the tea and for some dumb reason put it on a tray with a little jug of milk and bowl of sugar, like some proper English butler or something. When I got back to the living room, Dante was already there, staring down at the open sketch book I’d put down on the coffee table when he’d knocked at the door. There, in all its glory, was my sketch of a little baby. Putting the tray on the table, I quickly flipped the sketch book

closed. “It’s a funny habit I’ve gotten into. I feel so shit all the time but imagining the baby makes it feel worth it. It’s a form of compensation, I guess.”

“I’m sorry.”

There was a world of meaning in the simple sentence that I didn’t know how to respond to, so I just stood there, gazing at him. I wanted to apologize as well, but also reassure him that it would all be okay in the end. Problem was, I needed that reassurance as much as I suspected he did. The silence dragged on, until I felt it pressing on me. “It’s fine.” Pathetic response, but oh well. “How do you take your tea? It seems stupid that I don’t know, but I don’t think I’ve ever made you tea before. Or have I?” Becoming ridiculously fixated on minute details was a new habit. Great. My hands shook a little as I poured milk into my cup.

“I don’t drink tea often, why would you know? Black for me, thanks.”

I handed him his cup, then retreated to the furthest corner of the couch, tucking my legs under me. Dante sat at the other end and we both turned our gaze to the television. I tried to think of something to say, some conversation starter that would make it feel less strained, but my mind was a blank. I finally came up with “How’s work?” *Brilliant, Cooper. Just brilliant.* I had no idea what Dante actually did for work. Obviously, he flew planes, but that didn’t seem to be something you’d do on a day-to-day basis.

“It’s good.”

“That’s great.”

“How about you?”

“Great. I’m working on an audit for NASA, which is pretty cool.”

“Great.”

“Yeah.” Jesus, could this possibly *be* any more awkward? If I didn’t hold the memory of Seattle so tortuously clearly in my mind, I’d wonder how we ever managed to make a baby together.

“Lucy...” He began. When had he stopped calling me Lucia? Fuck, I missed that.

“Yeah?”

“Are you upset?”

Oh god, he was going to want to talk it through like a couple of grownups. I took a sip of tea to buy myself a bit of time. “No, not upset as such.” He didn’t say anything, or prompt me further, just sat there gazing at me, his face carefully blank. “I’m just... Confused, I guess.”

“Right...”

“Aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. It’s not like I’ve ever fake married anyone before. There’s no briefing for this.”

“Exactly.”

“We just have to make the best of it, I guess?”

“Yeah.” I had no real idea how to do that, so after a pause I said, “And how do we do that?”

He shrugged, giving me a wry smile. “Fucked if I know.”

That made me laugh, which eased some of the tension. We could do this. “I guess we just be honest with each other, you know. Keep communicating. Checking in, like you just did for me. All that good stuff. And you know, as long as you put the toilet seat down, it should all be fine.” He chuckled at that, and I felt the familiar rumble reverberating through me.

Jeez, it was going to be a long few days...or however long this was going to take...if just him laughing could turn me on.

CHAPTER 24

Lucy

“**T**hanks so much, Mom, I really appreciate it.”

“Any time, darling. I really enjoyed it.” Mom turned into my drive, pulling to a stop behind my car. “It’s not every day I get to see my grandbaby for the first time like that.”

I ran the tip of my finger over the ultrasound picture, still struggling to believe that was actually my baby growing inside me. “It’s pretty amazing, isn’t it?”

“It sure is. Such a shame Dante couldn’t take you. I’m sure he would have loved to have been there.”

“Yeah.” I bit back a sigh. Lies, lies and more lies. Little ones, all adding up in ways that made me feel like shit. Why not add one more to the pile. “But he couldn’t get out of his shift and it was the only scan appointment they had available.” Better to say that than I thought it best to leave him out of it, because I’d had a little daydream that one look at the scan would change his mind, and make him suddenly want to be a dad. It was dangerous ground and better for both of us if I went without him. Then my daydream turned into a nightmare, where I imagined driving all the way to the Base hospital for the scan only to find out something had happened to the baby. I didn’t want to be by myself if that happened. So I was grateful when Mom had agreed to go with me. Being Mom, of course, that meant I wasn’t even allowed to drive. “I’ll show him the pics, at least.” More lies.

“He’ll love them.”

“Yeah. Okay, I’ve got a bit of work to do, so I’d better get inside. Thanks again.”

“No problem.”

Once inside, I slipped the ultrasound photos into my sketch book, figuring that it was unlikely that Dante would see them accidentally. Waiting for my computer to boot up, I gazed at the pictures, a small smile curving my lips. Even though it was a pretty crap situation in general, I knew it would be all worth it in the end. Just for fun, I outlined a drawing of the baby, then drew a stork, flying through the air over my house, holding a swaddled infant in its beak.

My computer finished starting up and auto loaded my email program, which was already beeping at me urgently. Letting out a sigh, I closed the sketchbook and pushed it aside, getting down to work. A few hours later, all the urgent emails were dealt with, and I was onto a compliance report for NASA. It was already behind schedule; if I didn’t get through the next section before the end of the day, I’d really struggle to catch up. Stifling a yawn, I promised myself I’d stop after this and eat some of the grits left over from the day before. I’d never really liked grits before being pregnant, but they were one of the few foods I could keep down these days that I also liked the taste of. So, grits it was.

Finally, an hour later, I was done with the NASA report. I’d accomplished more than I’d expected to, but I was paying for it with fatigue and the early rumblings of nausea. Great. Switching my computer to standby, I got to my feet, stretched my arms over my head with a big yawn, and looked out the office window. The sun had long since set and my street was shrouded in snow, glinting in the soft glow of the streetlights. Very pretty, for sure, but I didn’t see what I was looking for: Dante’s car coming down the street. It was silly to even look. He wasn’t due for another few hours.

Forcing myself to turn away from the window, unwilling to get stuck there gazing out longingly for him, I went to the kitchen. Grits, shower, then a rom com, or maybe I could research baby items I’d need. That would be quite nice, to be honest. I opened the pantry door.

I stopped, staring at the shelf. Where were the grits? I pushed aside the sauce bottles, the bags of flour, sugar and pancake mix. Fuck, no grits anywhere. I stood back, a heavy frown on my face. I could easily have put them in the fridge, I guess. I was becoming increasingly absent minded, so that was totally something I could have done. Nope, no luck there. I felt desperation welling inside me. I really, *really* wanted those grits. Not wanted. Craved. Craved them like they were a life-sustaining force. Hell, maybe they were.

They had to be in there somewhere. Frantically, like a junkie, I started pulling everything out of the pantry, tears of desperation pricking my eyes. I was way too tired to go to the store just for one box of grits. The idea of having to do that or go without made me start crying in earnest.

I was so engrossed in crying and tearing the pantry apart, that I didn't hear the front door open or Dante's footsteps coming down the hall.

"Lucia?"

I sobbed even more, because I loved when he called me that and I'd missed hearing it so much.

"What's wrong? Is it the baby?"

I straightened, shooting him a quick glance. He looked a little frantic, and I couldn't blame him. I must have looked crazy, standing in my destroyed kitchen, my face all blotchy and red.

"Tell me! What is it? Has something happened to the baby?"

I shook my head, gesturing to the cupboard mutely because I couldn't find the words to explain exactly what was wrong with me. He looked from me to the cupboard and back again. My sobbing had subsided to quiet weeping now, so that was something, I guess.

"Please, tell me what's going on."

I took a deep, shaky breath. "I just had a really hard, long day and I was so tired, and all I wanted was to make some grits, then have a shower and flop on the couch, but there's no grits here, and I thought I had some left, but I must have eaten them all, and now I have to go to the *store* or have *pancakes*

instead.” The last words were bordering on a wail. I really was that pathetic.

His shoulders slumped with relief. “Poor baby.” He stepped forward, pulling me into his arms, wrapping me in a tight embrace.

“It’s so dumb,” I sniffed, sliding my arms around his waist and resting my head against his chest. Man, he smelled so good, I could stay here all night. Just stand here in my chaotic kitchen and breathe him in.

“It’s not dumb. You had a long day and you wanted grits.” He dropped a kiss on the top of my head and I almost wanted to start crying again because it was so incredibly sweet. “You go and have a shower, and I’ll run to the store.”

“Oh no, you don’t need to do that. It’s fine, I can just have pancakes.”

“Pancakes are not grits. I don’t mind.”

I pulled back slightly to look up at him. “You’ve just driven nearly two hours, it’s late, you don’t want to go out again.” His smile made my heart squeeze.

“Sure I do.” With his hands on my shoulders, he pushed me away gently. “Here, eat some of these to tide you over until I get back.” And in the grandest of unromantic gestures, he fished a package of pretzels from the pile of food on the floor and handed them to me. I took them from him, ripping the bag open while I tried to find a way to stop him from going out so late on my behalf. “Don’t argue with me. It’s barely nine o’clock. I can handle ten minutes out to the store and back.”

Well, that was pretty forceful, and yeah, a little bit hot. It was hard to argue. “Okay.”

“Good girl.”

Did he do that on purpose? I munched on another pretzel, giving him a steady look, but he looked the picture of innocence. It was just my overactive hormones making me imagine things that weren’t there. Or my suddenly perfect memory, that recalled him saying that to me while he made me come. Great, now I was blushing. Time to get out of there.

I came out of the bathroom thirty minutes later, looking decidedly unsexy in flannel pajamas, fluffy slippers and my favorite dressing gown. I'd taken the time to blow dry my hair, so that was something, I guess. Now I was ready to tidy up my pantry and make some grits. I stopped short in the doorway, biting my lip. Dante was at the stove, in my now spotless kitchen, stirring the contents of a pot with a wooden spoon. Was this some kind of sex fantasy? It was indescribably hot to me, making me want to rush in, rip off his clothes and kiss him all over.

When he looked up at me, I noticed his eyes flick up and down, taking me in. Again, that urge to fluff at my hair was irresistible. "Out."

"What? I can take over from here. They're my grits, you already bought them for me, you don't have to make them for me as well."

"I said out. They're nearly done. You can have them in the living room."

Grumbling something about autocratic bastards who thought everyone had to do everything they said, I did exactly as he ordered.

My stomach was on the verge of nausea by the time he brought them to me, so instead of arguing, I just meekly said, "Thank you," and took them from him gratefully.

He sat on the other end of the couch, picking up the tv remote and stretching his long legs in front of him, settling back. "Do you mind?" He gestured towards the television with the remote.

"No, go for it. I wasn't watching anything." As I ate the grits—they were really delicious—I tried not to think about how utterly married and couply it was to sit in a lamplit living room together, the wife in her pjs eating comfort food, while the husband channel surfed.

"Everything go okay today?" he asked quietly, breaking me out of my little reverie.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” He flicked me a look before returning his gaze to the television. I felt like I didn’t want to go on about the baby too much, knowing how he felt about it, but it seemed weird to not elaborate. “Everything’s measuring as it should, all the vitals are perfect. All my vomiting doesn’t seem to have affected the baby.”

“What about you?”

“I’m fine. Well, not totally fine, obviously. We haven’t quite got the nausea under control, but I’m not losing weight anymore, which is something. And maybe I’ll be one of the lucky ones, where the extreme nausea settles down after the first trimester.”

“Good.” He seemed about to say something more, then think better of it. “My sister called today.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. She’s able to get away for a few days and wants to come down to visit.” He looked at me uncertainly.

“Great! I’d love to see her.”

“You do know what that means, though...”

I frowned. “Do I?”

“She’s going to expect to stay with her brother and his new wife. It would be very strange if I didn’t say she could.”

“And?”

“That means I’ll have to sleep in your room.”

“Ohhh.” Man, I was dense.

“I can’t really tell her not to come...”

“No, you definitely can’t, and a hotel is out of the question. How long will she stay for?”

“Only a few days. I’ll take her to Raleigh to visit our mom, hang out for a bit, and that’ll be that.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure we can handle it for a few days.”

“Thanks. I’ll let her know.”

CHAPTER 25

Dante

Stef arrived on Lucy's doorstep two days later, stomping the snow off her boots and barreling inside, throwing her arms around me before she'd even taken off her coat.

"Oh my god, I'm so fucking excited!"

"Sshh, Lucy's working."

"Oh, sorry." She dropped her voice to a whisper, which wasn't much quieter than her normal speaking voice.

The office door swung open and Lucy stepped out, looking adorable in gray sweats and a hoodie, with her hair piled high on her head. "It's okay, I was just about to take a break. Oof!" She took a half step back, bracing herself as Stef gave her a big hug.

"I am beyond excited! I can't wait to be a *zia*. And I love that you've finally tamed my brother." She punched my arm. "Marriage and babies, hey, Dante? Who would have thunk it? It's so good to see you again, Luce. Thanks so much for letting me stay. Where should I put my stuff?"

Blinking in confusion, clearly struggling to keep up, Lucy said, "Um, the last door on the right, end of the hall."

"Great. Thanks." Moments later, Stef bounced back out. "Is it okay if I make coffee? The trip was brutal."

"Oh, sure, of course." Lucy still seemed to be reeling.

"I'll make it," I volunteered.

Stef beamed at me. “Thanks!” She followed me into the kitchen and dropped into a dining chair. “So, I’m dying to hear how all of this came about. Do you wanna fill me in, Lucy? Men are terrible at remembering all the facts and I want to know *everything*—” Holding up her hand, her eyes dancing, she said, “Well, not everything, just the G rated stuff. Ya know.”

Lucy sank into another dining chair, looking more than a little overwhelmed. “Well, we hadn’t seen each other for ten years, of course, then we bumped into each other in Seattle.”

“Seattle?”

I felt Stef’s eyes boring into me, but I kept my back to her.

“Seattle, yes.” Lucy’s confusion was evident. “We hung out that weekend when you were away.”

“Funny, bro, you never said.”

Yeah, because I had no idea what that weekend would lead to, and just wanted to keep it to myself.

I shrugged as I handed her a mug of coffee. “It was none of your business.”

“None of my business? My brother had just met the love of his life and was about to get married and it was none of my business?” She was looking at me through narrowed eyes and it was at that exact moment that I realized letting her stay had been a bad idea. A very, very bad idea.

“At the time, I didn’t know where I was going to be stationed or how we were going to make it work, so there wasn’t much to tell.”

“Riiight, makes sense,” she replied, her skepticism so thick I could almost see it.

I made Lucy’s tea, grabbed her favorite cookies from the shelf, and brought everything to the table. Sitting down, I handed her my coffee mug. She held it to her nose, closed her eyes and inhaled rapturously. A blissful expression came over her face that had my dick stirring, but I ignored it, smiling at her when she handed the mug back to me.

Lucy, realizing that Stef was staring at us, explained. “I can’t stand the taste of coffee anymore, but I still love the smell.”

“Cute. And yet shitty too.”

There was a knock on the front door.

Once Lucy had left the room to answer the door, Stef leaned across the table, about to say something to me, but I lifted my hand to stop her. Then Lucy came back moments later with a guest.

“Everyone, this is Naomi Perkins, from the insurance company. This is my husband, Dante, and his sister, Stef. She’s staying with us for a few days.”

I jumped to my feet, reaching out to shake the woman’s hand even as my heart sank. She was short and dumpy, middle-aged, with dishwater blond hair, beady blue eyes, and a dull gray business suit.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise.” She flicked a look from me to Stef.

“Holy shit! I *love* your shoes!”

Naomi’s stern look melted immediately and she beamed at Stef. “Thank you so much! Shoes are my weakness.”

“Mine too! Can I get you a coffee?”

“That would be great, thank you. Milk, three sugars.”

“You got it.”

We all sat back down while Stef made the coffee, Lucy next to me, her back ramrod straight and her grip so tight on her mug her knuckles were white.

Naomi removed a manila folder from her briefcase and laid it on the table, then pulled red-framed glasses from her cleavage and put them on. Clearing her throat, she began. “Your insurance claim has been passed to me for assessment, given the, ah, abrupt nature of your marriage and subsequent request for maternity cover. I’ll ask a few basic questions and so long as I decide that it’s all above board, everything should be fine.”

“Great.” The tension in Lucy’s voice was clear, so I put my arm along the back of her chair, trying to reassure her. “And if you decide it’s not above board?” Maybe Lucy was trying to make a joke, but Naomi’s eyes snapped to her.

“Then your coverage will be revoked, your recent claim will be denied, you’ll be required to repay the funds already remitted on your behalf, and your husband will be referred for disciplinary action. After that, I couldn’t say.” She put an emphasis on the word *husband* that had my gut clenching.

“I see. Thank you for clarifying.”

“Well, it’s the most romantic story ever, so buckle up, Buttercup!” Stef put the mug of coffee down in front of Naomi. “I’ll leave you to it. I just got in from Seattle and I’m desperate for a shower.” She bustled out of the room. I wanted to call her back in, needing the buffer.

Lucy took my hand, linking her fingers through mine. They were shaking slightly, so I gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“It’s pretty straightforward, as I said. Just some basic questions to start with.” Her pen was at the ready. “How did you meet?” When neither of us answered, she looked at us over the top of her glasses. “It’s a pretty simple question, guys.”

“Oh, well, um, we knew each other years ago, when Dante lived in Esperance as a teenager. He was very close to my, um, I guess you could say foster brother, although that’s not entirely accurate.” Fuck, she was babbling. Time for me to take over.

“Unfortunately for me, Lucy was already dating her high school sweetheart, who she ended up marrying not long after graduating. Isn’t that right, *cara*?” I continued smoothly.

Taking a deep breath, she shot me a shaky smile. “Yes, that’s right. It wasn’t until after I divorced—”

“When did that happen?”

“What, the divorce?”

“Yes, the divorce.”

Lucy gazed at her for a moment, a blank expression on her face. “Um, we separated last year and everything was finalized a few months ago. I’m not sure of the exact dates, but I can check for you.”

“I see.” She took some notes and the tightening in my gut turned to churning. It did not look good. Then, to my surprise, she put the cap back on her pen and flicked the folder closed. “Thank you. That’s enough for now.”

Lucy shot me a look, her eyes wide. She was clearly thinking the same as me. This wasn’t the end of the investigation. It was just the beginning.

Naomi packed everything away in her briefcase and stood, pulling her suit jacket down. “Thank you for your time. No, don’t get up,” she held up her hand as Lucy moved to get up. “I’ll see myself out.”

The front door closed behind her with an efficient click, leaving the only sound in the house the running of Stef’s shower.

“Fuck,” Lucy breathed, finally turning to look at me. “We shouldn’t have done this, Dante. I should have just gotten a second mortgage, or borrowed from my parents, or something. Anything but this.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I lied. “It’s not just about the coverage, Lucy, it’s about getting you the best medical care possible. And that’s at Kingsley.” Rubbing her back, I said, “Don’t worry about it for now. We’ll spend a bit of time getting our story straight so that the next time she comes over, we’re better prepared.”

“Okay.”

For now, I would just do what I always did. Not think about the future, or the consequences of my actions.

CHAPTER 26

Lucy

The snowy landscape flew by, sparkling prettily in the winter sunlight. Inside the car, the silence was heavy.

Yesterday had been fucking awful. I'd fucked it up so badly with Naomi, and now there was a real chance Dante would lose his job, his career, everything he'd spent more than a decade working for. Because of me. Because of a baby he didn't even want. Underneath all the turmoil and stress, that was the prevailing thought. This was a lot of effort for someone who didn't even want the baby. But I didn't say that to him.

Once Naomi left, we'd treated each other with such stifling politeness that when Stef asked Dante if he wanted to head to Lacey's for a game of pool, I was, frankly, grateful to see the back of him. I felt so bad for him, and the tension between us was making me feel sick.

I'd buried myself in work for the rest of the day, eating dinner with Dante and Stef and heading straight back into the office after we all cleaned up the kitchen. At bedtime, it was just as agonizing as the rest of the day had been. I'd kept so close to my side of the bed I was in danger of falling out. Dante had done the same thing, leaving a space in the middle of the bed big enough for a whole extra person. I'd lain there trying to go to sleep, wanting desperately to roll over into his arms, just to have him hold me and tell me it was all going to be okay. Now we were heading to Raleigh, with Stef in the back seat maintaining the same heavy silence as us. Fun times for all of us, I guess.

“Can I ask you something?” I said, when the quiet finally got too much. Neither of them replied, but I asked it anyway. “Why don’t you spend Christmas with your parents?”

Stef snorted. “Yeah, that’s a great question.”

“Stefania,” Dante said warningly.

“What?”

“There’s no need to be like that.”

“I don’t see why not. Just answer the question already.”

Dante blew out a breath, glancing in the rearview mirror at his sister before flicking me a look. I was sorry I’d asked. “Mom couldn’t see us for Christmas this year because Dad made plans to take her on some romantic weekend getaway.”

I frowned. “They were going to spend Christmas together without you guys?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t get it.”

“There’s nothing to get,” Stef said. “Mom is obsessively in love with Dad, to the exclusion of literally anything and everyone else, including us. He says jump, she says how high, then jumps twice as high as he says.”

“Oh.” My parents were madly in love, of course, but I couldn’t imagine them choosing to spend Christmas day without us. They lived for family gatherings, big and small, and I’d always felt like we were the center of their world. I tried to remember Angelo Moretti and failed. Although I racked my brain, I honestly couldn’t remember ever seeing him in Esperance. “What about your dad, then? Does he love your mom?”

Another snort from Stef. “Oh, sure. When it suits him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just what I said. He comes and goes as he pleases, sometimes for years at a time. When he’s gone, Mom sinks into a black depression. When he comes back, it’s like the sun has come

out. She doesn't give a fuck about anyone but him. And Dante."

"Oh, so she does love Dante?"

"Only in as much as he is Dad's perfect mini-me."

"Really?" That didn't seem to mesh with what I knew about Dante.

"In her eyes, yes."

"I see." Maybe I did. Maybe I was starting to get a better picture of the man I'd married. Or not. Who knew? It was very complicated.

Dante flicked on the turn signal and slowed down, turning into the entrance of a trailer park and following a dirt track around the outer edge of the park, until he pulled to a stop. "Your mom lives here?" It was quite different from the sweet little house I'd remembered them living in when I used to babysit.

"Yep, for now at least. Which just means Dad's between scams, or cons, or tricks, or whatever the fuck he does." Stef shoved the car door open abruptly, grabbed her bag from the seat and said, "Fuck, let's get this over with already." Dante watched her walk around the front of the car and stomp up the steps, irritation obvious in every line of her body as she banged on the door.

"Is that all true?"

"Pretty much." Without another word, he got out of the car, waiting for me at the steps when Stef stepped inside. He gestured for me to go in ahead, holding the screen door open for me. Giovanna was standing at the stove, wearing an apron, a cigarette dangling from the side of her mouth. She was a small woman, and her shoulders were more hunched than I remembered, her once-black hair streaked with gray. The whole trailer reeked of tobacco. It made me want to gag.

"For fuck's sake, Mom, put that thing out." Stef moved to the dining area, opening one of the windows and gesturing for me to sit near it. "Now, Mom, or we head straight back out the door."

“Well, hello to you too,” Giovanna grumbled, dropping her cigarette in the sink. Then she caught sight of Dante and her face almost split in half, her smile was so big. “There’s my boy! Look at you, so like your father.”

I caught Stef’s eye roll and felt a squeeze of sympathy for her. It was clear which of her two children was Giovanna’s favorite. Dante submitted to her hug before coming to sit next to me at the table. Giovanna went back to stirring the pot on the stove, ignoring us. She’d barely even glanced at me. Talk about fucking weird.

I pulled my coat tighter against the cold coming in through the window.

“How was your Christmas?” Stef’s tone was aggressively annoyed.

Giovanna shrugged. “Your father was expecting some money, but it didn’t come, so we just stayed here.”

“How lovely for you.”

I noticed that Giovanna didn’t ask them about how they’d spent the holiday.

“What are you making?” Dante was obviously the peacekeeper in the family.

“Ravioli. But we’ll have to spread it out, I didn’t realize you were bringing someone else with you.”

“Yes, you did, Mom. I told you on the phone. This is Lucy Cooper. She used to babysit Stef back in Esperance, you remember?”

Giovanna gave me the once over, then turned her attention back to the stove without saying anything more. I sat there, trying to remember if she was always this odd. I gazed around the trailer, looking for anything that might jog my memory. My eyes fell on the picture of Venus that Dante had told me about and a blush spread across my cheeks. I shot him a look, blushing some more when I found his eyes on me. He shifted, pulling his coat closer around him. The action shot heat to my core. Was he trying to hide an erection?

The whole time all this was going on, Giovanna was stirring the food, not paying any attention to us. I felt the tension building in Stef until she finally spat out, “Fuck this.” She pulled a present out of her bag and threw it on the table. “I’ll wait in the car.” The screen door slammed shut behind her, making me jump.

“That girl. Always so disrespectful.”

The muscles in Dante’s jaw bunched up, like he was grinding his teeth. Even with the open window next to me, the atmosphere in the trailer was stifling. Giovanna lit another cigarette and left it hanging from the side of her mouth as she pulled bowls from the cupboard. I shot Dante a desperate, frantic look. I couldn’t stay here one second longer.

“Sorry, Mom. Something’s come up. We can’t stay for lunch.”

She gave us a look of mild surprise. “Suit yourselves.”

I didn’t really know what to say as we got to our feet. The usual platitudes seemed more than a little out of place. *Thanks for lunch?* No. *It was lovely to meet you?* Hardly. “Um, bye.” That would have to cut it, and on that note, I went outside and joined Stef in the car.

“So, yeah, that’s Mom. In case you’re wondering, I live in Seattle because it’s as far away as I could get from her.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well. It is what it is.” She suddenly sounded much older than her years.

Dante’s frown was heavy when he came out, closing the door gently behind him and getting in the car.

“How much did you give her?”

“Not much.”

“Fuck, I don’t know why you even bother.”

“Because she’s my mom.”

“Barely. I guess that’s the burden of being the favorite, though.”

“I guess so.” He turned the key in the ignition, and I wondered how we were going to get through the long drive back to Esperance.

“I love you for that,” Stef said softly.

“I love you, too.”

I put my sunglasses on, even though it wasn't that bright out, because I didn't want them to see the tears in my eyes.

CHAPTER 27

Lucy

“Do you ever stop and think about what a weird little town this really is? Or are you used to it because you grew up here?” Ally asked, pushing the pink lace café curtain aside and gazing out at the town square.

I laughed. “Oh, it’s definitely very weird. A replica of a medieval French town in the middle of North Carolina is not something you see every day.”

“It’s pretty, though.”

“Yeah.” Following her gaze, I felt a rush of affection for my quirky little hometown. “It’s a testament to true love, you know, how it endures.”

“Holy shit, now you’re getting sentimental. What’s going on?”

Before I could answer, I heard my name. “Lucy! How are you? I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Poppy, hi! This is my friend Ally. Ally, this is Poppy. She makes the best carrot cake this side of the Esperance River.”

Poppy, her pink hair in a short pixie cut and her blue eyes shining, gave Ally a big grin. “Great to meet you. I assume you’ve both ordered the carrot cake, so I’ll just go ahead and get it ready for you.”

“Thanks so much.”

Once Poppy had left, Ally cast an appreciative look over the little café. “I like what she’s done with the place. She seems pretty young to have such a good setup already.”

“Yeah, she was two years behind me in high school. She always aced home ec.”

“Awesome. I can’t wait for my carrot cake. But back to you. What’s the latest?”

I started by telling her about Naomi’s visit, adding that we were worried she would start hitting up family members for details.

“Seriously? They go that far?”

“They might. It’s insurance fraud, right? That’s a pretty big deal.”

“Fuck, that’s awful.”

“Tell me about it. I hate it.”

Ally waited until Poppy had delivered coffee, tea and cake and left again before saying, “Do you hate *all* of it?” I sipped my tea, watching her over the rim of the cup. Her eyes danced in response. “Spill. Tell me everything.”

“Well, his sister is staying with us for a while, sleeping in the spare room, so we’re sharing a bed.”

“How terrible for you.”

“The first night was actually excruciating, because we were so wound up by the insurance assessor’s visit. I was freaking out and so was he. But the next night...”

“You’re evil.”

“Absolutely nothing happened.”

“Bullshit. Two hotties that have had the dirtiest weekend in the history of dirty weekends shared a bed and *nothing* happened?”

I sighed. “Yeah. Nothing. Although if it’s any consolation, I woke up really early the next morning with him spooning me, which was nice. Then I went back to sleep and when I woke up later, he was already gone.”

“I don’t get it. Do you just not want him like that anymore?”

“Fuck yes, of course I want him! I’ve got a pulse, haven’t I? It’s torture. You wouldn’t believe how good he smells.”

“I would, actually.”

“I mean, of course he smells good, but this is next level. I don’t know if it’s hormones or maybe I’m going crazy, but the other day, I waited until he’d showered and snuck into the bathroom when he was done, just taking deep breaths.”

“That’s wild.”

“I know! It was so good though. It’s not just smelling him everywhere, either. Turns out he’s really good to live with.”

“How so?”

“He’s really neat, but not obsessively so. It’s like having a magic genie in the house who just tidies up all the time. My ex, even though he was super fussy, was actually a slob who somehow thought that his cock exempted him from having to clean up after himself.”

“Fuck that noise.”

“Seriously. We fought about it a lot, because that’s just not how I was raised. But he was super stubborn, and once he’d made up his mind about something, that was that.” I took a bite of carrot cake, sighing with pleasure at the flavor, sitting in the unhappy memories of life with Richard for a few brief moments. “He’s also really attentive.”

“I assume you mean Dante and not Fuckface.”

That made me smile. “Yeah, Dante.” I told her about the grits and how sweet he’d been about that whole incident. “I feel like sometimes he knows what I need even before I do. Pretzels, or a herbal tea, or a walk, or an early night.”

“That’s hot.”

It sure was. “Another thing. I’m really bummed that I can’t drink coffee anymore, but I still love the smell. So, you know what he’s started doing?”

“If the answer isn’t that he’s started fucking you, I’m gonna be sorely disappointed.”

I giggled. “Will you *stop*? No, he waits until I get up, even though I sleep in much later than I used to, because I’m super tired. Once I’m up, he makes his coffee and hands it to me to smell, so I can feel like I’m starting my day with one.”

“Smart guy. And sweet.”

I nodded in agreement. “Right? So all that’s great, but there’s still this weird tension underneath it all. We never, ever talk about the baby. The only time it’s ever touched on is when we’re talking about my medical care: doctor’s appointments or scans and stuff. Never anything about the baby itself. Some nights I’m surfing the net, researching prams or cots and shit and I’d love to know his opinion, get his input, and he’s sitting right next to me on the couch, so it should be so easy, but...I don’t say anything.”

“That sucks.”

“It really does. I sketch baby drawings a lot and I’m always careful to close the book so he doesn’t see them. It’s like I’m hiding a freaking addiction, or something. I just wish...”

I trailed off and Ally reached across and laid her hand over mine. “Oh, honey.”

“Thanks.” I forced another sip of tea through the lump in my throat. “The other tension is, you know, sexual.”

“Yeah, that bit I don’t get. Just fuck him already.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I’m not sure how adding orgasms to your already extremely complicated situation is going to push it all over the edge. I say, take it while you can get it, because once the insurance investigation is over, he’ll move out, right?”

The idea sat like a lump of lead on my heart. “Yeah, he will. Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. No question about it.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it. And if he wants to, then...”

“Girl, he’ll want to. That, you can count on.”

CHAPTER 28

Dante

I shifted in the seat, my heartrate increasing by the minute as I turned onto the road that led to Esperance. Four days.

Four long, excruciating days of being on base and away from Lucy. It wasn't meant to be like this. I wasn't meant to miss her. But I did. I couldn't help it. And resisting her was becoming harder by the day. If it weren't for Stef staying, I would have taken Lucy to bed days ago, and fuck the consequences and complications.

No pun intended.

If I were lucky, maybe Stef would go out for the night and I could have Lucy to myself for a few brief hours. I wondered how and when spending the night sitting next to a gorgeous woman I couldn't have anymore had become my favorite past time, but here we were. The supermarket was still open as I drove through town and on impulse, I pulled in, running inside to grab Lucy's favorite ice cream—triple chocolate fudge.

When I stepped through the front door a few moments later, I stopped in surprise at the sight that greeted me. "What are you doing?"

Stef had just put her coat on and was pulling her hair out of the collar. "I've checked into a hotel."

I frowned. "Why?" Had something happened? Had she and Lucy had a fight? It seemed unlikely. Looking at her closely, she didn't seem upset, either. I glanced into the living room. Lucy was there, curled up at the end of the sofa, the lamplight soft on her golden hair. I bit back the impulse to roll my eyes

at myself. Since when had I become so freaking romantic? Lucy caught the question in my eyes and gave a slight shrug. “Everything okay?” I asked, turning back to my sister.

“Sure. Everything’s fine. The venue for our next gig just cancelled so I can stay a while longer, that’s all. I figured it would be good to give you guys some space, so I’m heading to the hotel.”

“You know you’re more than welcome here.” I looked to Lucy for confirmation.

She shrugged. “I already told her that, but she insists.”

“Don’t stress. I thought I’d cruise down to Lacey’s. If I see anything I like, who knows, maybe the hotel room will come in handy. Unless you want me to bring a guy back here?”

I paled. “Fuck, no.”

“Exactly. That’s what I thought. I’ll call you tomorrow. Bye, Luce.”

“Bye!”

An Uber pulled up out front and honked its horn. Stef got up on tiptoe to press a kiss to my cheek and then she was gone, pulling the front door shut behind her, leaving me and Lucy in the house. Alone. The realization had my dick twitching instantly. It was hard enough keeping my hands off Lucy when Stef was around. Now that she was gone, I didn’t know how I was going to manage.

“Have you eaten? There’s left over apple pie in the oven.”

“Great, thanks.” I held up the shopping bag. “I got you some ice cream.”

The smile that lit up her face almost knocked the wind out of me. “Not triple chocolate fudge, by any chance?”

“You know it. You want some now, or later?”

“Later, I think. We just had dinner.”

“Okay.” In the kitchen, I put the ice cream into the freezer and fixed myself a slice of pie. “What’s new?” I asked, sitting down on the sofa and propping my feet up on the coffee table.

“Umm, I assume Stef told you she got a call from Naomi Perkins?”

Fuck. “She didn’t, no. Did she say how it went?”

“I was here when she took the call, and she put it on speaker. She was great, deliberately vague with her answers, totally sounding like a bit of an airhead, to be honest. Then she asked Naomi where she’d bought her amazing shoes and launched into a long and convoluted story about how she used to own a pair pretty similar, and how she’d lost them on a tour of...I forget where. I swear, I was exhausted by the time she finished the call.”

That made me chuckle. “Good for her.”

“Yeah.” Her face grew serious. “It’s still pretty shitty, though.”

“It is.”

“I’m worried about what will happen if this Perkins woman starts calling everyone in my family. We’ve been so vague with the details that I can’t imagine she’ll get the same version of events twice. It’s going to look terrible. I wish I was a better actress. She just made me so nervous that I couldn’t think straight.”

“I know, *cara*.” Her eyes widened in surprise. It was the first time I’d used a term of endearment since I got to Esperance, unless it was for show. I winced inwardly, because it was a sign that my self-control was slipping. “There’s nothing we can do now, but ride it out and hope for the best.”

“I guess.”

“If the worst does happen, we’ll figure it out.”

“It’s easy enough for me, all I have to do is find a way to pay the medical bills. It’s harder for you.”

“I’ll be fine.” She smiled at that, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. That made me feel bad. “I’m sorry for all this,” I said quietly.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Or yours.”

“Sometimes I wonder...”

I set my fork down, leaving my pie half eaten on the table. Something in Lucy’s tone had tension oozing through my system. “Sometimes you wonder?”

She looked away.

“Tell me.”

“If I’m doing the right thing, keeping the baby.” The last words were whispered so quietly I had to lean in to hear her, and the words cut at my heart. She didn’t deserve to feel this way.

“You are one hundred per cent doing the right thing.”

“You sound pretty confident.” Doubt still tinged her words. “I just never thought it would be like this, you know? I had this great five-year plan, with everything perfectly laid out. I’d have the house almost paid off, I’d have the business set up so I could take a step back, and I’d be *damned* sure to have the right level of fucking insurance cover. And that’s not even discussing what’s at risk for you, so...” She toyed with the tie of her dressing gown, running it through her fingers nervously. “If I...you know...then I could still do all of that. And you...”

The idea that she was having these thoughts almost broke me. “Listen to me, Lucy.” Her gaze snapped to mine at the tone in my voice. “Getting rid of the baby is absolutely not an option for you, so stop thinking about it. You’re only torturing yourself and feeling worse about everything. You can do this, you can make it work. And you won’t be on your own.” A stab of regret hit me for what might have been if I’d been wired differently. “I’ll support you financially, and you’ve got your family for all the rest. It’ll work out. And do not worry about me.”

I felt a rush of relief when she nodded and in a firmer voice, said, “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

“Good.” I picked up the plate and ate the rest of the pie, while Lucy went back to watching tv. “I’m gonna grab a quick shower now, if you don’t need the bathroom.”

Something flickered in her eyes when she looked at me, too fast for me to read before it was gone again. Then she said, “Sure, go ahead.”

Stepping under the streaming water, I turned it as cold as I could stand it. I’d be back in the spare room tonight now that Stef was gone, and I needed, desperately, to lower the heat in my blood. The cold water hardly brought any relief, and minutes later when I’d pulled on a pair of sweats and headed into the kitchen, I was at half-mast. I almost turned around to go to my room when I saw Lucy, standing at the freezer, pulling out the ice cream tub. She wore black satin pajamas, and her hair was down, flowing around her shoulders. It made me want to wrap it in my fist and kiss her senseless. Suddenly, I couldn’t remember why I was in the kitchen.

Pulling a spoon from the drawer, Lucy leaned back against the counter, opened the tub and scooped out a generous spoonful. I watched, spellbound, as she put it in her mouth, watching me the whole time. When she let out a soft moan of pleasure, I was done for, my cock rock hard and desperate.

Dammit, was she doing this on purpose? Licking the spoon, she flicked a glance down at my crotch and back up again. Yes, she fucking was. I had no idea what had changed, why sex was suddenly on the table, but I was fully prepared to pick up what she was laying down.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” I stepped closer.

Her smile was hot and sexy as fuck. “If it’s anything like what you do to me, yeah, I do.” She replaced the lid on the ice cream tub and put it back in the freezer. “I don’t know if it’s my hormones being so out of whack, or just the knowledge of how good it can be, but honestly, I can’t stop thinking about fucking you, Dante. It’s torture.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can resist you.”

Running her hand over my bare chest, her eyes dark with desire, she said, “Then don’t.”

That was all the invitation I needed.

CHAPTER 29

Lucy

My words hung in the air between us for a brief moment before Dante crushed his lips to mine in a merciless kiss. The dim recognition of how good he was to me, how we really could have had something special together, if only things were a little different, flickered at the edges of my brain before I surrendered completely to the soul-searing heat of his kiss.

I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck, tangling my tongue with his, living for the feel of his hands roaming over my body again as he pressed me back against the kitchen counter. He broke away to trail scorching kisses down my neck. “God, you smell so good,” I murmured, pressing my face against his neck and breathing him in. His scent filled my head like an aphrodisiac. Wildfire shot to my core making me shake with need. “Dante...”

He raised his head, his eyes glittering with desire. For me. All for me. Without warning, he grabbed the edges of my pajama top and ripped it open, sending buttons flying all over the kitchen, just like he’d done with my shirt back in Seattle. It was all I could do not to collapse to the floor.

“I’ve dreamt of fucking you here, just like this.” He rained kisses all over my chest, running his tongue over my nipples until they were two stiff little points. “Of watching you come when I do this.” He plunged his hand inside my pants, his long fingers finding me hot and wet for him already. “So fucking hot, Lucia. You’re gonna scream so loud when I make you come.” He grabbed my hair in a tight fist, so I was forced to

tilt my head up, watching while he rubbed my clit fast and hard, sending me flying over the edge, out of control, my body convulsing as I screamed his name.

“That’s it. Such a good girl.”

My chest heaved from the intensity of the orgasm and if he wasn’t pressing me so hard against the counter, my knees would have buckled and I would have fallen to the floor.

Letting go of my hair, he kissed me gently, soothing me. Before I could fully recover, he pulled back, smiling at me. “And that was just for starters.”

“Right.” My voice was soft and breathy, making his smile widen.

“I need this gone, though.” He pushed my pajama top off, throwing it on the floor. His gaze roved over me hungrily. I’d never felt hotter.

“And these.” He sank to his knees, sending fresh heat swirling in my belly when he reached up, hooked his fingers over the waistband of my pajama pants and pulled them slowly down to my ankles. The kisses he pressed over my thighs had my blood humming and made me desperate to feel his touch and his tongue between my legs. “Please...”

“So greedy for me.” He brushed the tip of his finger lightly across my clit, back and forth, making me shiver. “Beautiful Lucia, so beautiful.” Easing a finger inside me on the words, he reached up and cupped my breast, running his thumb over my nipple. His touch had me gripping the edge of the counter with white knuckles. “I can’t get enough of you,” he said, leaning forward and, with his eyes on my face, flicking his tongue over my clit. I whimpered as pleasure rippled through me and I unconsciously spread my legs wider to give him better access. He dove in, burying his face between my legs, sucking and licking at my clit, moving his finger inside me. Closing my eyes, I let my head fall back, surrendering to his touch so that there was only him, and me, and the amazing things he could do to my body.

I moved my hips mindlessly, faster and faster, until Dante wrapped his arm around my waist, anchoring me so that he was in complete control. He pushed a second finger inside me, the fullness enough to turn the ripples of pleasure into a tidal wave, until I was coming again, shuddering in an exquisite, wild release.

Rising to his feet, Dante wrapped his arms around me, stroking my back in soothing strokes until my heart rate slowed. His cock was still rock-hard, pressing against me so that the heat between us never completely went away. "Let's go to bed."

"Mm, no." I raised my head, eyes on his as I rubbed my hand against his erection. "I've waited so long for your cock again, I'd like to have it right now, please."

Grinning, he gave me a deep, languid kiss that had me melting against him, before raising his head. "One problem. I don't have a condom here in the kitchen."

"I don't want one. I'm already pregnant. I'm clean, and if you are too..."

"I am."

The idea of no barrier between us sent a thrill through me. "Fuck me right now, then."

He brushed his lips lightly against mine. "If you're sure..."

"I'm so fucking sure." To show him, I reached into his pants, wrapped my fingers around his cock in a tight grip and stroked up and down. "I don't think I can wait one more second to have you inside me."

He growled low in his throat, sending the pulse between my legs into overdrive. Without another word, he put his hands on my butt and lifted me onto the counter, letting all his restraint go as he kissed me. I pushed his pants off, freeing his cock, and dug my fingers into his tight ass, pulling him close to me. "God, I've wanted this so much." His voice was a low rumble against my ear. He grabbed the backs of my knees, pulling me forward so that I was on the edge of the counter and pushed all the way into me with one swift thrust.

“Yes! Fuck, that’s so good.”

He pulled out, then eased slowly back in, his jaw clenching at the huge effort at self- control. I trailed my hands over the muscles of his back, relishing the tension I felt there. I knew what the restraint was costing him and it thrilled me to know I could still have this effect on him. Pressing kisses against the side of his neck, I wound my arms around his shoulders, my voice low in his ear when I said, “Only you can fuck me this good, Dante.” I nipped at his earlobe. “Let go. Fuck me. Hard. I want all of it.”

His last shreds of control vanished at my words as his grip tightened on my legs and he spread them wide, pumping his hips against me, pounding into me over and over and over. The angle hit my clit perfectly, the friction almost painful in its perfection. Pleasure bloomed inside me, rippling outwards, pushing me higher than I’d ever been. The tension broke and I shattered, sinking my teeth into Dante’s shoulder as the heat consumed me. When my orgasm was finally over, I collapsed against Dante’s chest, a boneless puddle of bliss. I could feel his thundering heart under my cheek and I smiled. I’d done to him exactly what he’d just done to me.

He pulled out carefully, letting go of my legs and easing me to the floor. My knees were wobbly, and I wasn’t sure I could walk. Before I could say anything, Dante scooped me up in his arms and carried me to the bedroom. “Union break. We’re gonna go again in ten minutes.”

I giggled, too blissed-out to try and come up with a clever reply. In my bed, snuggled against him, I settled my head on his shoulder, closing my eyes when I felt him lightly stroking my hair. “Wake me in ten minutes.” I was asleep within a few seconds, my last conscious thought being, *If only...*

CHAPTER 30

Lucy

I drifted awake slowly—not long after dawn, judging by the pale light that seeped into my room—feeling utterly content. The niggling thought that had been playing around the edges of my mind for weeks was gone. As much as I desperately wanted the baby, the circumstances were obviously far from ideal. They were bad for me and worse for Dante, given that he could lose everything. But when I'd hinted at that last night, he'd been so adamant that keeping the baby was the right thing for me to do that I'd almost cried. It would have been so easy for him to go the other way, to jump at the chance to end all this drama. But he hadn't. He'd told me what I desperately needed to hear, giving me faith that it would all work out, somehow.

Turning my head, I looked at him, his gorgeous face relaxed, his arm draped across my middle, as though even in sleep he couldn't bear to let me go. As I lay there gazing at him, I felt such a flood of emotion hit me that I caught my breath and my whole body went still.

Almost as though he sensed something, Dante stirred, his eyes drifting open, a little dazed at first until he realized where he was. Then he smiled at me. Slow, sexy and sweet. That smile did all sorts of fresh things to my insides, making butterflies dance in my stomach and my heart roll over.

He shifted, pulling me closer, curling his body around mine. I breathed him in, letting his scent fill my head, like my own personal drug. The feel of his hand languorously gliding over my skin sent little tendrils of heat curling in my belly. I knew

what would happen next: Dante would push me onto my back and trail kisses down my body until he was settled between my legs. But turnabout was fair play and I really wanted to be the one to give him pleasure for once, so without warning, I slid my hands up his chest and pushed. He went with the movement, rolling onto his back, his eyes dark on my face when I sat up to straddle him.

Tucking my hair over my shoulder, I leaned down to brush his lips in a light kiss. When he went to deepen it, I pulled back, pressing soft, hot kisses along his jaw line, down his neck and onto his chest. I made my way down his body in a slow, tantalizing trail, teasing myself as much as him, because truth be told, I couldn't wait to take his cock into my mouth.

I wrapped my fingers around it, stroking slowly, delighting in how hard it was. Flicking the tip with my tongue, I heard his sharp intake of breath and heat flashed in my core. I loved how wanton and decadent it felt to give him this pleasure. Without warning, I took him all the way into my mouth, so that the tip of his cock was hitting the very back of my throat, and I sucked. Hard.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Mmm.” I bobbed my head up and down, sucking and licking and flicking, cupping his balls and squeezing his shaft.

“You're driving me crazy, *cara*.” His words were a low growl, as though it was taking all his energy to hold back his orgasm. While having him come in my mouth would be great, riding him while he did would be even better, so I stopped sucking.

I was already so hot for him and so wet that I knew I could come in a few seconds flat, but I didn't want that. So instead of straddling him, I lay on top of him, my breasts pressed against his chest while I kissed him. He seemed to sense what I was doing, because he kissed me back softly, letting our tongues tangle in a languid kiss, as though we had all day to lie in bed like this.

Finally I raised up, my knees either side of his hips and slowly lowered my dripping pussy onto him. His eyes went darker

still as I took him inside me, his hands resting lightly on my ass, letting me know I could set my own pace.

I flexed my hips, luxuriating in the feel of him filling me up. The intensity of his gaze on me as I moved up and down was almost more intimate than what we were actually doing. I liked that he didn't kiss me. That he, like me, didn't want anything to distract from the heat radiating from where our bodies joined.

As the fire built I increased the pace, never taking my eyes off his, and when I peaked, he saw it all, everything that he did to me, written on my face. The orgasm rolled on and on and I had to grip his shoulders to stop from flying away. I felt him stiffen below me as he chased his own release, milking the last drops of pleasure from me before I collapsed onto him.

He wrapped his arms around me, holding me close while our hearts thundered together. I couldn't say how long we stayed that way before I finally moved off him. It could have been a few moments, or a few hours. As I snuggled into him, running my hand over his chest, I pushed aside the melancholy thought that moments like these didn't last forever. It was best to make the most of them, and I planned to do exactly that, for as long as time allowed, because the uncertainty over what would happen after this was done, after Dante moved out, stretched in front of me like a yawning, gaping black hole.

CHAPTER 31

Dante

I was lying back on the bed, my arm under my head, watching Lucy putting the finishing touches to her makeup. “Did I tell you how amazing your tits look in that dress?” Our eyes met in the dressing table mirror, hers sparkling with amusement, despite the soft blush that stained her cheeks. Fuck, she was gorgeous.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, they do.”

“Thanks.” Rifling through a small makeup bag, she said, “Dammit, where’s my lipstick?” Getting to her feet, she smoothed the folds of her dress into place. “I’ve just got to put on lipstick and shoes, then I’m ready to go.” She ran her eyes over my naked chest. “You might want to think about getting dressed yourself, unless this thing is much less formal than you’ve led me to believe.”

I chuckled. “I’ve done many crazy things in my life but turning up to a work event in nothing but a towel, in mid-January no less, is not one of them.”

She went out and I hustled into my dress uniform, listening to her swearing in the bathroom, because she still couldn’t find her lipstick. It made me feel very married, and I tried not to think about how much I liked it. I was fully dressed by the time she came back in and she gave me an exasperated look of mock irritation. “So unfair, that you can get dressed in three minutes while I—”

“While you...?” I glanced up from securing my cuff links to find her staring at me, her mouth hanging open and her hand on her chest. “What?”

“Do we have to go to this ball?”

“Um, yeah, it’s kind of expected. But if you’re not feeling well, I can go on my own.”

“But if you do that, who am I going to fuck? You look so outrageously hot that I don’t think I’ll be able to keep my hands to myself in public.”

Laughing, I crossed to her and hauled her into my arms, running my hands down to her magnificent ass and pressing myself against her. “Hmm, maybe we don’t have to go after all.”

Giggling, she wrapped her arms around my neck and got up on tiptoe to kiss me. She went all in, putting enough heat into it that I seriously considered throwing her onto the bed and forgetting all about tonight, consequences be damned. But I couldn’t really do that, so I pulled back reluctantly. “Hold that thought. If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late.”

Her mournful sigh made me smile. “Okay. Maybe we won’t have to stay too late?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get us out of there as soon as I can. These things are relentlessly boring and I know what I’d much rather be doing this evening.” I squeezed her ass again, just to make sure she got my meaning.



To my surprise, the night wasn’t nearly as boring as I’d expected it would be. Having Lucy by my side made all the difference. For starters, I could barely take my eyes off her. Her floor length flowy dress was a deep, forest green, and her hair was pulled off her face and cascading down her back in soft gold waves. I also wasn’t lying about how amazing her tits looked. Jesus. The dress hugged her curves to perfection.

That wasn't all, though. It was amazing to walk through the receiving line with her, introducing her to my superiors, noticing the way she handled herself, confident, poised and friendly, making appropriate small talk before moving on.

Working from home, she spent so much time in leggings or sweatpants and baggy sweaters that it was fascinating for me to see this polished, professional version of her. It showed me why she was so successful with her work. It also made me feel proud to have her by my side.

Once the formal part of the evening was over, the band started playing and everyone got up to dance. I held Lucy close, letting her intoxicating scent tease my senses. Another couple who'd been sitting at our table, Jed and Marlene, moved closer to us. It was clear that Marlene had indulged in a little too much wine, judging by the glassy-eyed gaze she was levelling at Lucy. Stumbling a little, Marlene reached over and patted my shoulder. "Your wife is so lovely, and you two are just the cutest!" She turned to her husband and patted his cheek. "Isn't their love the cutest, Jed?"

"Sure is, sweetheart," Jed replied, smiling indulgently at his wife.

"You kids make sure you hold onto that. Don't take it for granted. That's the secret to a happy marriage. Don't take each other for granted. You know?"

"I do," Lucy replied smoothly.

"Good. You get it. Good for you."

"Sorry, she's a happy drunk. Think I might take her home. Good night."

"Good night." I waited until Jed helped Marlene off the dance floor. "Sorry about that."

"No problem."

She smiled but I could see tension in her eyes, so I said, "We can go, if you like."

"Yeah, I'm a little tired, that would be great."

We drove back to Lucy's pretty much in total silence. I wanted to ask her what she was thinking about, if what Marlene had said upset her, or freaked her out, or if she just thought it was the amusing ramblings of someone who'd had a little too much to drink. But I was too scared of what the answer would be, so I stayed quiet.

The minute I closed the front door behind us, however, Lucy surprised me by throwing herself at me, pressing her lips to mine in a hungry kiss. There seemed to be an edge of desperation to it as she dragged me down the hall, into her bedroom. "Hey, what's the rush?" I asked gently.

"Well, you know, you told me to hold that thought, and I've been holding it all night, so..."

"Okay, but still. We've got all night, *cara*." Wanting to soothe her tension, I kissed her softly, endlessly, until she was melting against me. We undressed each other slowly until we were naked stretched out on the bed together, where I could kiss every inch of her. Go down on her until her body convulsed in orgasm. Move over her and push inside, lose myself in her soft sighs and the feel of her body tightening around me before it exploded in her release. Pull her into my arms afterwards and press a kiss to her hair as she drifted off to sleep.

I lay awake for a long time. Lucy was funny, sweet, smart, gorgeous and...*not mine*.

With each passing day, it was getting harder and harder to remember that.

CHAPTER 32

Lucy

I put my hand over my stomach, desperately willing it to settle down. We'd been in the restaurant less than five minutes and my body was violently opposed to being there. The nausea had been so well managed recently, that I'd forgotten how utterly shitty it could be when it got out of control.

Everyone was chatting and laughing around the big round table in the center of Alfredo's that we'd booked for Zara's birthday. Normally I loved the smell of Alfredo's. Not tonight. I probably should have bailed earlier, since I knew at home that I wasn't really up to it, but I hated to miss family get-togethers and thought I could just push through. Nope.

Dante rubbed my back. "I'll get you some sparkling water. Maybe a bread roll?"

I hadn't said a word, but he knew. He always knew. "Thanks." It made me feel ridiculously emotional.

"And if that doesn't do the trick, I'm taking you right home."

So sweet. "Okay." I watched him go over to the server, talking and pointing to me, his gestures a little urgent. It made me feel that rush of intense emotion that seemed to be hitting me harder and coming more frequently lately, sometimes so hard I had to blink back tears. Like right now.

"You okay, darling?"

"Yeah, just a bit of nausea, but I'm sure I'll be good once I've had something to eat. Thanks, Mom."

Dante came back and sat down, putting his arm around me and kissing my temple. I wanted to curl into him, close my eyes and just breathe him in.

The server came with my roll and water. I took a tentative bite, waiting to see if my body liked it or not. The nausea eased slightly, so I took another, then another, letting out a sigh of relief when my stomach finally settled. The water also helped. I thought there was a good chance I'd be able to stay and enjoy the night.

“Better?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Mom smiled at Dante. “You take such good care of her.”

“He does.” Fuck, now I wanted to cry again. To take my mind off my weird emotions, I said, “Hey, Zara, what’s the latest on the wedding plans?”

Zara looked at Matt, a sweet smile on her face. “I think we’re pretty much done.”

“What? You’ve still got, what, three months to go!”

“I know, but it’s all come together so easily. Ally’s parents are insisting on catering as their wedding gift to us, so that’s taken care of. Plus, having it in our backyard in the spring, the floral arrangements are just the garden. I’m going to make my own bouquet from whatever is growing there at the time. And a garden wedding for me means nothing over the top, so the dress was pretty easy to find.”

“She still looks amazing in it,” Ally reassured Matt.

“Of course she does,” Matt replied, winking at his fiancée affectionately.

“Aww, thanks, Ally. Emma’s doing hair and makeup, so we don’t need to book anyone for that either. And Chloe and Mila have chosen their dresses, haven’t you, girls?”

“Yup! First I was sad because I wanted to wear my Elsa dress, but Mommy said it had to have purple on it and Elsa’s doesn’t. Then Ally found a dress with a crown as well and I thought that was even better.”

I took a sip of water, enjoying the distraction of all the wedding talk. “You’ll look very pretty.”

“But not as pretty as Auntie Zara, even though she doesn’t get to wear a crown.”

“I mean, I could, if I really wanted to,” Zara said, laughing. “But I think I’ll leave the princessing to you and your sister, because you’re so good at it.”

“Have you got the music organized?”

“Yeah, Gabe knows someone, so that’s already taken care of, too.”

“You know him, Luce. He’s the cousin of Eric, from the music store.”

”Oh awesome! Yeah, he’ll be great.”

“The only other big job will be building the dance floor, which we obviously can’t do until the weather improves.”

“And organizing the bachelorette party,” Ally said.

“Well, that’s your job, not mine.”

“I’m on it, don’t you worry. And it’s pregnant-lady-friendly, Lucy, so don’t stress about that.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

“You’ll be what, seven months by then?”

I quickly did the math. “No, only six.” Wow, heading into the last trimester by then. Hopefully the nausea would be completely gone so I could enjoy being pregnant. The insurance question would definitely be resolved by then, too. Which meant no more family get-togethers that included Dante. Shit, why did I have to think of that? It would only ruin my mood.

Best just to focus on my brother, his lovely fiancée and how happy they were.

“I’m just going to go to the bathroom quickly before the food arrives.”

“I’ll come with you.” Ally jumped up, following me across the crowded restaurant. Checking that the stalls were all empty, she said, “Be as fast as you can.”

I laughed. “That’s not a problem. I feel like I pee every fifteen minutes these days.” I finished up came out, washing my hands at the sink, looking at Ally expectantly.

She leaned against the other sink, folding her arms across her middle. Her loose, high ponytail suited her face perfectly and she looked super-hot in tightly-fitting black jeans and a silver top. I’d noticed Gabe getting a good look at her cleavage when she sat down.

I’d thought she’d come with me so that she could talk about what surprises she had planned for Zara, but instead, she said, “What’s the latest with you and Dante?”

I shrugged. “No change. We’re still waiting for the insurance to be finalized.”

“Bullshit! You’ve clearly banged again.”

“Jesus, how can you tell just by looking at us?”

She chuckled. “I have a sixth sex sense when it comes to these things.”

I burst out laughing. “You do realize that sounds super weird, right?”

“I know. Seriously, though, it’s just the vibe between you. The way you touch each other. Or maybe it’s just the way you are with each other is less stilted now or something. I dunno, maybe I’m just a creep.” Her grin faded and concern glinted in her dark eyes. “But even so, you seem out of sorts. Is it the insurance stuff getting you down? Or is it something more?”

I shrugged, drying my hands on some paper towel and throwing it in the trash. “Just feeling down. Maybe it’s the hormones. I mean, I hate having the insurance question hanging over our heads, and I hate lying to everyone, obviously, but I don’t think that’s enough to make me feel like crying all the time.” Studying myself in the mirror, I saw the sadness sitting in my eyes, which only made me feel worse.

“How’s Dante?”

“He’s great, as usual. For someone who could lose his entire career, he’s surprisingly upbeat. It helps.”

“He’s good for you.”

“He is.”

“You’ve caught feelings for him?”

“A little.” Even that admission, small though it was, had my heart squeezing and the breath catching in my throat. “You know what really gets me, though?”

“What?”

“I can’t stop thinking how different it could have been... The day he came to my house, when I told him I was pregnant, he was coming to see me. He wasn’t content to leave things in Seattle. He wanted to start up again. Then...” I glanced at her, found only sympathy in her eyes and soldiered on. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m super happy about the baby and really excited to be a mom, even though I still feel like shit all the time. I just torture myself with what might have been, you know? What we might have been together, if we’d had a bit more time, or something. I don’t know.”

“Those are all really normal feelings, Lucy. Maybe you should tell him about them.”

I flinched. “But how can I? He’s made it very clear he doesn’t want to be a dad, I’ve made it very clear I want to be a mom. Whatever else we feel about each other, those two things are mutually exclusive. Total dealbreaker.”

She sighed, making me smile because it sounded exactly how I felt. “I guess, yeah. I feel so bad for you.”

“Thank you. It’s good to have someone to talk to about it.”

“Good. C’mere, gimme a hug.”

I took the comfort she gave me, swallowing around the lump in my throat, and we went back to the table. I didn’t even have it in me to be amused by how Ally flicked Gabe a glance when

she sat down, looking away quickly when she found him watching her.

Our dinner had arrived and Dante had already put a small slice of pizza on my plate. It was pretty much all I could tolerate right now. “You okay?”

“Sure. Just a bit sick, and sick of being sick, if you know what I mean.”

His eyes searched mine and I could tell he didn't quite believe me, but he didn't say anything, just picked up his pizza and started eating.

We sat around for a while after the table was cleared. A bit of food and an extra dose of my medication made me feel well enough to stick around for a bit, and since Dante didn't make any move to leave, I settled against him. Linking my fingers with his where they rested on the table, I enjoyed the feel of him absently playing with my hair while he chatted to Jake. This was something I was going to miss: the way that even when he wasn't really thinking about it, or focusing on me, he had to be touching me. It made me feel cherished in a way I never experienced with Richard.

Maybe I just had to make the most of our situation and not stress about what comes next. Our time together could be like a gift if I wanted to see it that way. At least I wouldn't feel so down all the time then. Yeah, that was a good plan, I could definitely do that. The new perspective going on like a light bulb made me feel so much better, so that when Dante finished talking to Jake and turned to check in with me, I smiled at him hugely. His eyes widened and he leaned in, asking, “What's made you so happy all of a sudden?”

Still smiling, I cupped his face and pressed a light kiss to his lips. “Nothing in particular. Just, you know, enjoying the moment.”

“I'm glad.” He kissed my forehead, pulling his chair a little closer so that I could snuggle right in.

I rested my head on his shoulder, starting to get a little tired, letting the family conversation flow around me without paying

too much attention. My gaze drifted around the restaurant, absently taking in the other diners, the laughing, happy faces, then I stiffened. “Fuck.” I said it so quietly that only Dante heard. He followed my gaze to the door of the restaurant.

Naomi Perkins had just walked in, and she was looking straight at us. “What the fuck is she doing here?” he murmured.

“Not spying on us, surely? That seems like a lot of effort.”

“Seriously.” Dante kept his arm around my shoulders when I went to move. “Just act natural.”

“I’m so bad at that, though.” We both watched her walk across to the takeout counter, pick up a small pizza, smile at the server, pay, and then turn back to us. For a heart-stopping moment, I thought she was going to approach us. Please, no. Not here, in front of my whole family. To my immense relief, she gave us a brief nod and went out. I let go of the breath I didn’t even realize I’d been holding. “It all makes me feel so weird.”

“Me too.”

Before I could say anything further, my dad said, “Thought I might go fishing tomorrow, if you boys want to come? You too, Dante.”

Matt, Gabe and Jake all said they were in. Dante looked to me for confirmation. “Works for me. Mom and I can check out some baby furniture in Charlotte.” He turned back to my dad. “Sure, Bruce, that would be great. I haven’t been fishing for years, thanks.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up at seven. Since that’s a pretty early start, I think I might head home.”

We got the bill and headed out together. It was too cold to stand outside for long, and before I knew it, Dante was hustling me into the car. I smiled when he got in next to me, holding on to my resolution to just enjoy the moment and not think too much about how I would feel when this was all over.

CHAPTER 33

Dante

Lazy fingers of mist reached down to trace the surface of the slow-moving river. The height of a North Carolina winter might not seem like the perfect time to go fishing, but there was something about how quiet it was, with the snow settled on the riverbanks and the shallow water crystal clear in the cold, pale light that calmed me. Bruce, Matt, Gabe and Jake seemed to feel the same: we'd been at it for more than hour, with barely more than three words spoken between us.

There was a sudden burst of activity when Jake's line went taut. We all watched him expertly reel it in, grabbing a net and scooping it out of the water to show us a decent-sized trout. "Fuck, that's awesome!" He was grinning widely, and I realized with a pang it was the happiest I'd seen him since I'd gotten back to Esperance. Something was clearly up with him, and I hated to see it. But for today, at least, he seemed happy.

"Good one, man."

We grew quiet again, and after half an hour or so, Gabe said, "Not much biting for me. I think I might try somewhere else. You coming, Matt?"

"Yeah, why not." The two of them ambled a little further upriver, settling just around a slight bend out of earshot of where I was standing with Bruce. That left Jake by himself thirty feet from us, but he didn't seem to mind. I noted his relaxed stance and concentration on the water, and thought it was better just to leave him alone.

Keeping my voice low, to make sure I wasn't overheard, I said to Bruce, "Tell me about Jake."

He took his time answering, pulling his line out of the water and recasting it. When he finally spoke, it wasn't to say what I was expecting to hear. "How's your mom?"

"My mom?"

"Yeah."

I wasn't sure where he was going with this conversation and why he wasn't answering me about Jake, but I didn't know how to redirect him, so I just went with it. "She's doing okay."

"You saw her for Christmas?"

"I did. With Lucy and Stef."

"Where's she living these days?"

"In Raleigh."

"With your dad?"

"He still comes and goes as he pleases, apparently. He wasn't there when we were."

"Did you give her money?"

"Yeah." Where the fuck was he going with this? Did he think I shouldn't make sure my own mother had what she needed? Even though, let's be honest, she wasn't exactly high stakes in the mothering department. I felt a pang of guilt at the acknowledgement. It was meant more for Stef than for me because I'd always been her golden child. The curse of being the carbon copy of Angelo Moretti, I guess. She'd always cut me a lot more slack than she ever had Stef. When she could be bothered paying attention to Stef at all, of course.

"Oof, I think I've got one." Bruce let the line run for a bit, then reeled it in. I grabbed the net and scooped it out for him. "Heck yes, that's a good one." After he'd dropped the fish in the bucket and we'd both recast our line, I waited for him to pick up where he'd left off, talking about my mom. But he surprised me again. "He wasn't the same after you left, you know. After the accident."

That hurt. “No, I guess not.”

“You weren’t good for each other, though. You brought out the worst in each other, I think, sometimes. All your wild impulses.”

“That’s true.”

“There were nights I’d wait up until I heard you both pull into his driveway. Only then could I get some sleep, without worrying that I’d get that knock on the door from the cops telling me you were dead. Jake was our responsibility from the moment his mother died, and I couldn’t have dealt with letting her down like that.”

His somber words twisted in my gut like a knife. When we were so young and wild and stupid, we never gave a thought to who we might hurt. It was always only about chasing the next high, getting the next rush of adrenaline, anything to drown out the gnawing restlessness. That’s how it was for me, and I knew it had been the same for Jake, too. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you are, son.”

His simple acknowledgment meant more to me than I could put into words. I realized then, like I never had before, exactly what he had done for me. He’d saved me. That awful night, when I had nowhere else to turn, when I was so eaten up by guilt, fear and remorse that I could barely see straight, this man had saved me. “How did you know?”

He shot me a questioning look.

“That the air force was what I needed,” I clarified.

He grinned. “Simple. It would give you all the adventure you craved, but never let you get out of line.”

Oh my god. I’d said as much to Lucy in Seattle. “Very wise,” I said wryly, smiling when he chuckled.

“It’s been good for you.”

“It has.” I looked up the river, to where Jake was standing. “Maybe Jake should have signed up too, once he got well enough.”

“No. He’s not one for wandering too far from home.”

I gave that some thought. “Guess not.”

A comfortable silence settled over us and I let my thoughts wander, imagining what it might have been like to have a more stable, dependable father. Like Bruce. Close on the heels of that thought was a stab of guilt, edged with a little shame. After everything he’d done for me, I was lying to him. He believed that my marriage to his daughter was totally legit, a forever thing, till death do us part, like his own marriage. Fuck. I couldn’t seem to escape the influence of my old man, doomed to repeat his bullshit my whole life.

“You are very different from your father.”

Could the man read my mind? “Nah. The apple falls very close to the tree, I’m afraid.” I heard the bitterness in my voice, and it seemed Bruce did too, because he shot me a surprised look.

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, you know...” As I stood there, the cool mist on my skin, memories of the past came drifting back. My mother, “*You’re just like your father,*” or, “*Aah, Dante, so like my Angelo,*” patting my cheek and looking at me with dotting affection. I’d loved it at first, thrived on it, because he was the man I most looked up to. I was proud to be like him, with his devil-may-care attitude. Until that attitude had almost cost Jake his life.

“I only met your father a handful of times, but in my opinion, you could hardly be more different to him.”

I shrugged. “It’s genetics, though, isn’t it? There’s no competing with or overcoming that.” I could feel him watching me, but I kept my eyes on the water, feeling hot prickles of discomfort at his close scrutiny.

“I’d have thought genetics was more about eye color than attitude, but if you say so.”

Relief washed through me when he didn’t say anything more, just stood next to me, patiently waiting for the next fish to bite. I wasn’t sure how many minutes passed like that, but the fish

weren't cooperating anymore. I was just about to suggest we move upriver to join Matt and Gabe. Then Bruce spoke. "I want you to know, I'm proud of you, Dante."

The words floored me. So simple, yet so significant. I felt like a little kid who'd just been given a piece of his favorite candy. It was ridiculous how much it meant to me to know that Bruce thought that way about me. Barely able to speak past the emotions clogging my throat, I forced the words out in a low voice. "Ah, thanks, Bruce." I cleared my throat. "That means a lot."

Reeling in his line, he clapped me on the back in acknowledgement. "I'm gonna move up there." He pointed with his chin, indicating Gabe and Matt. "You coming?"

"Sure."

We spent the rest of the morning pretty much in silence, which left me to my own thoughts. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. There was a lot to think about. I had so much respect for Bruce Cooper and no reason to think he'd lie to me. *You are very different from your father.* Trying to figure out how he came to that conclusion, I started drawing comparisons between myself and my father. It was an enormous knot for me to untangle. Still, Bruce had planted the idea and I couldn't let it go now, despite the confusion and uncertainty it left churning in my gut.



When Bruce dropped me back at Lucy's, she hadn't returned from her shopping in Charlotte yet, which left me alone with my thoughts. Unable to sit still, I moved into the kitchen to empty the dishwasher, my mind humming, refusing to be quiet.

Acknowledging the idea that Bruce had planted was the easy part. The little seed of hope that was mixed in there almost made me feel sick, because it opened up a whole new world of possibilities.

What if? The million-dollar question.

Restless and irritated with myself, I finished cleaning up the kitchen, tying up the trash bag, ready to take it outside. *May as well do the rest of them while I'm at it*, I thought. The bathroom one was nearly full so I grabbed it as well, then headed into Lucy's office.

Her sketchbook was on the desk, closed and pushed to the side, like she'd been drawing something before forcing herself to get back to work. I was fully aware that she was careful about making sure I didn't see her sketches. I wasn't sure if it was because she thought they would upset me, or annoy me. We'd never actually talked about it. She never talked to me about anything baby-related, and I realized I hated that she felt she couldn't.

I blew out a breath, half-tempted to open the book and have a look, then decided against it. It wasn't fair to her, and I'd only be torturing myself, not to mention prying. Giving myself a shake, I bent to pick up the trash can which was almost overflowing with piles of scrunched up pages she'd torn from the sketchbook. I emptied the can into a bag and went to put it back under her desk, freezing when a lone piece of paper still at the bottom of the can caught my eye.

A flat piece of paper, not hastily scrunched up like the others, but torn decisively in half. One half face up, with a sketch on it, the other face down. Frowning, I dropped the bag of trash and reached into the can, taking out the torn paper. Was that... me? Lucy was drawing pictures of me? And tearing them up?

Laying the paper on the desk, I pulled out the other half, turning it over and placing it next to the first. I swear, my heart stopped beating. Lucy had drawn a picture of me holding a baby. A tiny, sweet baby, my head bowed over it in a gesture of pure love.

A riot of emotions burst through me. A spurt of anger at myself for not being capable of what this drawing represented. Sadness for Lucy that there was a chance she wanted this and I couldn't give it to her. It was so deeply unfair on her. Underneath all of that was a bone-deep yearning that took my breath away.

I hadn't allowed myself to think too much about the reality of the baby. Any time I was forced to, it was only in relation to Lucy and what she needed. But *this*...this was all about me, and it brought home the reality of my impending fatherhood in a way I couldn't ignore.

Even though I knew I should throw the sketch away, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead, I lined up the torn halves and carefully taped them together. Then I placed my hands flat on the desk either side of the picture and stared at it for the longest time as the emotions rolled through me.

Not even thinking through my actions or what it all meant, I gently folded up the paper and put it in my back pocket, stepping away from the desk and picking up the trash bag as I did so.

The sound of a car pulling into the drive caught my attention and I looked out the window. Lucy was back from Charlotte. I stayed in the office for a few moments, trying to calm my suddenly thudding heart. I watched as Lucy got out of Ellen's car and held the door open to lean in and say something before stepping back, closing the door, watching and waving while her mom backed out of the drive.

I opened the front door, stepping out onto the porch, waiting for the moment when she turned and saw me standing there. Looking in her bag for her keys, she took two steps up the driveway, glancing up when I cleared my throat. Then she smiled and her whole face lit up. Fuck, I felt that smile right down to my soul.

"Hey. Fish not biting today?" She walked towards me, still smiling. I was transfixed. "Dante?"

"Huh?"

"I wasn't expecting you back so early. I thought maybe the fishing was shitty." Stopping in front of me, she looked up at me with a perplexed frown. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine." I dropped the trash bag, grabbed the lapels of her coat, and pulled her against me. Surprise flared in her eyes briefly before I lowered my lips to hers in a searing hot kiss

that held all the emotions I couldn't seem to articulate or control. When I finally raised my head, I watched her eyes flutter open, dreamy and soft. Christ, she was so incredibly beautiful.

“What was that for?”

“A man can't kiss his wife without getting the third degree?” I tapped her nose, trying to lighten the mood a little.

“Sure, but, you know, if you're gonna kiss me like that and not follow through, I'll be disappointed.”

I chuckled. “Fair enough. Prepare not to be disappointed.” I held the door open for her to walk in ahead of me, my blood already humming, completely forgetting the trash bag on the porch.

CHAPTER 34

Lucy

So far, the promise I'd made to myself to live in the moment was going pretty well. We knew the insurance investigation was still ongoing, since my mom had received a call, but we had no idea for how much longer. Apparently, there'd been a delay with processing over the Christmas break and now there was a backlog. So our living together in limbo continued. Honestly? I didn't mind.

Dante and I settled into a beautiful rhythm that felt a lot like really being married. We took turns cooking, unless I felt too sick. Household chores ended up being fairly equally divided without us really planning it, unless again I felt too unwell, when Dante just jumped in and covered for me. We spent time with my family, went to the movies with Stef, and had dinner out at Alfredo's a few times, because I suddenly couldn't get enough of their risotto. If we were home together in the evening, we hung out on the couch watching tv. I was surprised at how similar our tastes were. And then there was the sex. So much amazing sex. It was all perfect, as long as I tried not to think about the future too much.

There were only two things that marred our domestic bliss. One, extreme fatigue seemed to have replaced the nausea for me. Two, Dante was behaving a little strangely. Nothing I could really put my finger on, but sometimes I'd find him staring at me really intently, but when I'd ask him if anything was wrong, he'd say no, everything was fine. Twice, I'd walked into the kitchen to find him staring down at a piece of paper, hurriedly stuffing it into his pocket when he heard me

come in. So no big drama, really. Just my fake husband being weird.

One Saturday afternoon the fatigue was dragging me out so badly I'd spent the day on the couch, just staring glumly out the window. Although we were still in the depths of winter, the sun was shining, teasing us with a little promise of spring. I was looking forward to spring, because I'd be well and truly into my second trimester by then and I'd stupidly convinced myself that the pregnancy would somehow miraculously be better by then. But today I felt way too shitty to enjoy the sun, which made me feel even shittier. It was a stupid mood, but I just didn't seem to be able to shake it.

Dante stepped into the room, clearly about to say something, but then stopped, tilting his head to one side and narrowing his eyes as he looked at me. "Sick?"

"Hmm. Not really."

"Tired?"

"Yeah. And bored. And maybe a bit sad, but for no real reason. I dunno."

He stared at me for another long moment, then without a word, turned and walked out of the room again. Weirdo. I turned my gaze back to the window.

"Alright, Eeyore, I've got an idea." Dante walked in, grinning at me and holding out the boots we'd bought in Seattle.

"What the fuck? I'm not going hiking."

"Yes, you are. Well, not heavy-duty hiking, obviously." He sat down on the couch next to me and pulled my feet into his lap, loosening the laces of one boot and sliding it onto my foot. "You're feeling crappy, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Annoyed that you don't feel up to doing the stuff you normally do because you're too tired?"

I stared at him. "Yes. I hate being this tired."

“Okay. So we’re gonna go for a little walk, so you can see that you can still do what you love to do.” Sliding the second boot on my other foot, he tied the laces, then reached out, cupping my cheek in his hand. “Once this pregnancy is done and our baby is born, you’ll be able to do everything just like you used to. You’ll be back to being Superwoman. But for today, we’ll settle for a little walk in the park.” He pushed my feet gently from his lap and stood up, reaching down to help me to my feet.

Holy fuck. Did he even realize what he’d just said? *Our baby*. Wordlessly, I let him pull me up, following him out to the entrance hall and taking my coat when he handed it to me. *Our baby*. He’d never, not once, referred to the baby as *ours*. I watched him carefully as he opened the car door for me, going around to the driver’s side, smiling at me as he started the engine. “River or lake?”

Had he not even noticed? Was it some unconscious thought, just a meaningless slip of the tongue? Oh fuck, was I just reading way too much into it, the way I always read too much into things? Projecting a ridiculous, futile hope onto one tiny word?

“Um, the riverside park might be a bit slippery, with the paths the way they are.”

“Okay, we’ll go to the lake.”

We got to the park that edged Esperance Lake, parking at the top so the first part of our walk was downhill. Dante linked his fingers through mine and we headed down the trail. My mind was whirling. I couldn’t order my thoughts enough to make conversation, and since Dante didn’t seem inclined to chat either we walked in silence. It was eerily quiet, the only sound the creaking of the trees under the weight of the heavy January snow.

The track ended at a kiosk that come summer would sell tickets for paddle boats and kayaks. Our breath misted in the cold, crisp air and I found it surprisingly invigorating. Dante had been right: the walk was doing me wonders.

Our baby. Should I bring it up? Ask him if he'd meant it? Or assume it was a slip of the tongue? I felt like I had to know one way or the other, but if I asked him outright and it *had* just been a slip of the tongue, that would make things weird. Just the fact that I'd noticed it and mentioned it would mean I'd thought something of it when it was nothing. Hoo boy, I was absolutely overthinking it. As usual.

Maybe I could try and get him to say it again by working the baby back into the conversation. Hmm, yeah, that could work. How to do it and make it sound natural, though? "So, I've, uh, been thinking..."

"Yeah?"

Shit. "Yeah, um, I've been thinking about...taking up knitting." *What the fuck?*

"Okay, that's random."

Damn straight! It's random to me, too. "Yeah, I was thinking it might be nice to make some things myself for...our baby. What do you think?" I flicked him a look, only to find him frowning at me, a little bewildered.

"Sounds great."

"Yeah, I thought so."

"Cool. You wanna cross here, or head back?" he asked, gesturing to the wooden footbridge that crossed the lake.

I bit my lip. Did I want to drag out this bizarre conversation, in agonies over the meaning of one simple word? No, it was too fucking exhausting. "Head back. Thanks for the walk, though. You were right, I do feel better."

Smiling, he pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Good."

When we pulled into the drive at my place a few minutes later, we saw Stef standing on the porch, a shopping bag in one hand and her phone in the other. "Oh, good. I've tried your phone three times. I was just about to give up."

"Sorry, we went for a walk and I left it in the car, then forgot to check it."

“No problem. I thought I’d make you guys dinner.” She held up the grocery bag.

“Nice!” I smiled, stepping onto the porch.

“Let’s hope so!” She moved out of the way so I could put the key in the door. “I was watching this cooking channel at the hotel last night, ’cos I was bored out of my mind, and this chick was making pulled pork sandwiches with coleslaw. I thought, fuck, that looks good, I need to try it. I figured asking the hotel to use their kitchen wasn’t an option, so here I am.”

I laughed, indicated for her to go inside ahead of me and followed her in, taking my coat off and hanging it up in the hall. “You know you don’t have to stay at the hotel. If you’re bored there, you’re always more than welcome here.”

“That’s sweet and I super appreciate it.” She handed Dante her coat. “But there’s no way I’m cramping your newlywed style. This is a slow roasted kind of deal, you don’t mind if I start it now?”

“Of course not.”

“Great. Dante, you can make me coffee while I get it going.”

“Yes, chef.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” She grinned at him over her shoulder before disappearing into the kitchen.

“You don’t mind?” Dante asked, his voice a murmur as he followed me into the bedroom.

Sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed, I started to take my boots off. “Of course not. I love your sister— Fuck, how tight did you tie these?” I couldn’t loosen the knot for the life of me.

“Here, let me.” He knelt in front of me, his dark head bowed, and undid the laces, taking my boots off and placing them neatly next to the bed. As I watched him, I felt such a profound rush of feeling for him that it clogged my throat and had butterflies dancing in my stomach. Fuck, where had that come from? “Okay, I’d better get Stef’s coffee started.”

“Yeah, you’d better.” I was surprised at how normal my voice sounded.

“You want some tea?”

“That would be great, thanks.”

He walked out and I took a moment to calm myself, laying my hand over my chest, trying to still the uncomfortable pattering of my heart. By the time I’d gotten myself under control enough to join Dante and Stef in the kitchen, they’d already settled into their usual sibling banter. I took a seat at the table, ready to enjoy the show.

“Well, since you’re the one who taught me how to cook, it’s your fault if it sucks,” Stef remarked idly, standing in front of my open pantry, pulling out various bottles and jars of spices.

“I didn’t say it would suck, I just said I wasn’t sure if you wanted to put those two flavors together.”

“What do you think, Luce?”

“About what, Stef?”

“To lemon juice or not to lemon juice?”

“Lemon juice? On roast pork?”

“Yeah, with garlic.”

“Sounds weird, but it could be good, I guess?”

“Ha! See?” Stef shot Dante a triumphant look, which had him turning to me and rolling his eyes.

“Please don’t encourage her.”

“Hey, just make me my coffee and quit your grumbling. It’s gonna be great.” Their affectionate bickering continued while Dante made the coffee and my tea, and Stef put all the marinade ingredients into a zip-loc bag, added the meat, and rolled it all around. It was after she’d transferred the meat to a baking tray, ready to slide into the oven, that she inadvertently did what I’d been trying so desperately to do at the lake with no success. “I have to say, when the baby comes, Dante, you’re gonna have to be more flexible with your food choices, otherwise it’s gonna be very bored.”

He didn't answer at first, flicking a glance at me then away, and I saw Stef shoot him a look. "When the baby comes, it's hardly likely to want lemon and garlic roast pork, so I can't see it being a problem, Stef."

And there it was. *The baby*. Not our baby. I tried to ignore how ridiculously deflated it made me feel.

CHAPTER 35

Dante

I drifted awake with Lucy Cooper in my arms. It was fast becoming my favorite way to wake up. As I lay there, perfectly still, I thought about what that might mean. The clock was counting down to when this was all going to be over, and fuck, I was going to miss so much of it. Don't go there, Dante. What difference did it make what I would miss? It was for the best, and that was all there was to it.

Swallowing down a sigh, I eased carefully out of bed, reaching for yesterday's clothes because I didn't want to disturb Lucy hunting in the wardrobe for fresh ones. Fully dressed, I stood there, gazing at Lucy while she slept, feeling the squeezing of my heart and the hollow feeling in my belly. She was so beautiful and sweet and again...not mine.

Fuck.

I left the room on the thought, going to the kitchen to switch the coffee machine on. *Could I be any more pathetic?* Leaning against the counter, I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the paper I always kept there. Lucy's sketch. Me with a baby. Her baby. Our baby. Fuck. It was ridiculous how that sketch tugged at my heart. Every morning, I'd take it from the previous day's pants and slip it into the pocket of the new ones. I tried my best not to spend all day mooning over it, but I couldn't resist. The paper was already starting to show signs of wear, the fold lines starting to fray and little tears appearing around the edges. I knew I should have thrown it out the day I found it, but I just couldn't let it go.

Desperate to distract myself, I carefully refolded the sketch, slipped it back into my pocket, and started pulling breakfast things out of the fridge. It was just past nine o'clock and while I had no idea how much longer Lucy would sleep, I wanted to make sure she'd be able to eat as soon as possible after she got up. I'd learned that was the best way to fend off the morning sickness. It also gave her enough energy to start the day.

I'd nearly finished chopping all the vegetables to add to some beaten eggs when I heard a knock at the door. Suppressing a flash of irritation, I went to answer it. Naomi Perkins, in a dull brown suit, briefcase in hand, gave me an impassive look when I opened the door. My irritation didn't stay suppressed. "Yes?" I asked curtly. The last thing I wanted to do was drag Lucy out of bed to speak to this woman.

"Good morning, Mr. Moretti. May I come in?"

"Lucy's asleep. She's very fatigued with the pregnancy and I don't really want to wake her."

"I see. Well, my investigation is almost complete. I just have a few more questions. I can come back another day, or we can get this resolved more quickly if you submit to a brief interview now."

"Okay. I'll check with her." I closed the door in her face, gritting my teeth in annoyance. I stepped into the bedroom; Lucy was exactly how I'd left her, on her side, her hand tucked under her cheek, sound asleep. "Lucia," I said softly. She didn't stir and I seriously considered telling Naomi to piss off, but it didn't seem right not to give Lucy the option to talk to her and get this over with. I sat on the bed, leaning over and brushing my fingers against her temple. "*Cara.*"

"Mmm?"

"Naomi Perkins is here."

There was some mumbling I couldn't understand.

"Naomi Perkins is here," I said again. "She says she can finalize the investigation if we agree to an interview today. But I can tell her to fuck off if you don't want to see her right now."

She stirred, forcing her eyes open, looking at me sleepily.
“She’s here *now*?”

“Yeah, on the porch. You want me to tell her to go to hell, or let her in?”

“Let her in, I guess. There’s no point dragging it out.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” I pressed a kiss to her naked shoulder and left the room, stopping in the kitchen to switch on the front burner on the stove before returning to the front door. “She’ll be out in a minute.” I stood back to let her in, closing the door with an unnecessarily loud snap behind her.

“Great.”

Deciding that grumpiness was unlikely to help me and that courtesy might in fact be the way to go, I asked her if she’d like a coffee.

“Yes, please. Just through to the kitchen again?”

“Yeah, I guess.” The coffee machine was ready, but I started making Lucy’s omelet first. Naomi could just fucking wait.

Lucy shuffled sleepily in a few minutes later, looking downright adorable in leggings and a baggy sweater, her hair pulled into a low ponytail. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

“That’s no problem. Your...*husband*...said you were feeling very tired.”

“Yeah, it’s a real bitch. It doesn’t seem to matter how much sleep I get, I never feel rested.”

I wasn’t sure if Lucy had noticed the hesitation and emphasis on the word husband, but I sure had. It pissed me off. Mostly because it was warranted. That’s exactly what I was, her... *husband*.

“That sounds awful.”

“It’ll be worth it, in the end.” Lucy smiled at me when I placed her omelet on the table. The sweetness of it had my heart doing a slow roll in my chest. “Thanks. This smells amazing. Oh, you put paprika in it!”

“Stef suggested it.”

Her eyes dancing at me, she took the vitamins and glass of juice I handed her. “So much for her being a terrible cook. Does she know you’re taking tips?”

I tapped her on the nose. “No, and don’t you dare tell her. I’ll never hear the end of it.” I’d almost forgotten Naomi was there, but then she reminded me by clearing her throat. “Oh. Yes. I’ll just get your coffee,” I said, my tone short.

“Thank you.” She started writing, her pen moving across the page rapidly. I couldn’t imagine what she’d just seen that she deemed noteworthy. “Now, Lucy, I’ve spoken to your mother.”

“Okay.”

“She tells me that you and Dante used to be good friends, when you were teenagers.”

Lucy hesitated. “Yeah, that’s right.”

It wasn’t entirely accurate. We knew each other, of course, and I’d spent a lot of time at her parent’s house. And there was the jerking off while I imagined her, but that really wasn’t an indication of friendship, was it? We’d never caught up separately, outside of the family. She was always too busy studying or hanging out with Fuckface.

“And when would you say the romance began?”

Lucy frowned, taking a bite of omelet and seeming to think carefully about her answer. “Certainly not when we were teenagers. I already had a boyfriend, who, as you know, went on to be my husband. I’m not the cheating type.” Her tone was defensive, and she shot me a panicked look when I brought Naomi’s coffee to the table.

“It was when we met again in Seattle and I found out Lucy was divorced that....” I inclined my head eloquently. If Naomi wanted to infer from that unfinished comment that I’d harbored feelings for Lucy back in the day, great.

“Was it a planned pregnancy?”

“No, but we don’t regret it one bit.” I sat down, laid my arm on the back of Lucy’s chair, giving her a comforting squeeze as I handed over my coffee mug. She took it gratefully,

wrapping her fingers around it, bringing it to her nose and inhaling deeply. The look of pleasure on her face was almost erotic, and it made me shift in my seat uncomfortably.

Lucy handed the mug back to me and turned back to Naomi, to find her watching us both closely, her lips pursed. Blushing self-consciously, Lucy said, “Sorry. I can’t stomach the taste of coffee anymore, but I still love the smell.”

“I see.” More notes in the file.

What a fucking strange situation to be in, to have someone making notes on you like that. I was starting to feel like an animal in a zoo.

“Have you made plans regarding the baby?”

“What sort of plans?” Lucy asked.

“Work, childcare, division of labor between the two of you.”

“Um, we aren’t really thinking that far ahead. Right now, I’m feeling so lousy I’m just taking each day as it comes.” Lucy flashed me another nervous look as Naomi continued to take notes. All I could do was shrug slightly in reply. I had no idea if that was the right answer or not. I didn’t think it was that common for couples still in the first trimester of pregnancy to start planning who would do nighttime feeds and stuff like that. “But Dante works four days on, four days off and my mom works part time as a social worker. Dad is self-employed, and my brother is too. One of my sisters is a stay-at-home mom. All of them are nearby and will help whenever we need it. Honestly, we have so much support, it’s amazing.”

“And what about your mother, Dante? I’ve been unable to reach her.”

“She lives in Raleigh,” I bit out. “Her involvement in the baby’s life will be...minimal.” I gritted my teeth on that statement, knowing it would be true even if Lucy and I were legitimately married and I was going to be a real father to the baby.

More scribbled notes, then she closed the file. “Thank you. As I said, I’m very close to finalizing the investigation. If there

are any last loose ends I feel I haven't covered, I'll be in touch. May I use your bathroom before I go?"

"Of course." Lucy told Naomi where it was and when she was gone, sagged against me, letting her head drop on my shoulder. "Fuck, I hate these interviews."

"I know. Me too." I caressed her temple, smiling when she yawned and some of the tension left her body. She stayed perfectly still, her breathing deepening as she relaxed even more. "Are you asleep?"

Giggling, she said, "No, but you're pretty comfy. I could stay here all day."

Tension slammed into her, though, when Naomi came back in, collecting her briefcase and handbag. "No need to get up," she said. "I'll see myself out." She didn't leave right away though: she just stood there, looking at us. It seemed like she was going to say something because she opened her lips, closed them, opened them again, closed them again. Finally, she just said, "Goodbye," and went out.

"Okay, that was fucking odd behavior."

"It was," I agreed.

CHAPTER 36

Lucy

On *tenterhooks*. What a weird expression. “To wait nervously for something.” I didn’t know exactly what a tenterhook was, but I sure did feel like I was hanging on a hook of some kind, anxious, wound so tight that I could snap at any moment. And this was just half an hour after Naomi Perkins left, holding our fate in her hands.

I couldn’t help but think about how close we were to the end. One way or the other, very soon, Dante would leave and I’d be alone. The only question was whether or not I would be alone with a pile of medical debt. Although I didn’t really want the stress of that financial pressure, it was barely a blip on my radar. Dante leaving. That’s all I could think of.

We cleaned up the breakfast dishes in silence, then I said, “I might go and lie down for a bit.” *Cry into my pillow so you can’t hear me.*

“Okay.”

I was already feeling lost and more than a little desperate. “Will you do something for me?” I asked tentatively, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Name it.”

“Will you come with me? Just, you know, hold me?”

“Of course.”

He followed me into the bedroom, curling up behind me when I lay down, his arm wrapped around my waist. I let out a sigh,

trying to force my body to relax, but it just wasn't happening, even though I felt so tired and raw.

"Can't get comfy?"

"Something like that." I rolled over to face him, searching his face for...I didn't really know what. He brushed my hair back from my forehead, then lay his hand on my cheek in a gesture of such tenderness that I could have cried. "Kiss me."

He did. Sweetly, gently, softly. Maybe it was only meant to be comforting, but I needed more. I shifted closer, hooking my leg over his hip, opening my lips for him. Our tongues tangled and he ran his hand down my back, cupping my ass, pressing his erection to my center.

I whimpered as the heat gathered in my belly. "I think you should get naked," I said, trying to lighten the intensity of our mood.

He smiled, pulling back from me just enough to pull his shirt off. "I will if you will." He helped me out of my sweater, his eyes flashing when he saw I wasn't wearing a bra. I pushed at the waistband of his sweats and he shifted so I could push them down over his hips. He did the same for me, until we were both naked, skin to skin, facing each other.

I closed my eyes when Dante rolled me onto my back, kissing his way down my body, settling between my legs. Giving myself up to the pleasure of his tongue on my clit, I finally was able to let go of the tension that had been bubbling under the surface. He lapped at me with his tongue until a different kind of tension filled me, one that begged for release. I chased that release, burying my fingers in his hair, arching my back, coming with a low moan before collapsing back onto the bed.

I welcomed him when he crawled up my body, wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his hips. With his eyes dark and intense on mine, he pushed his cock into me, filling me, kissing me, pushing me to the edge again.

The mid-morning winter sunlight filtered into the room, carrying our soft sighs on its shimmering light. Our

lovemaking was slow and gentle, and I knew it for what it was. It was goodbye.

I buried my face in his neck as I came a second time. I didn't want him to see the devastation in my eyes.

CHAPTER 37

Dante

“**W**hat are you doing here?”

“What? I can’t visit my brother at his base one last time before I head home?”

“You’re heading home?”

“Yeah, I can’t sit around waiting for you to get your shit together forever, you know.”

“I have no idea what you mean by that.”

“I guess you don’t. I looked it up, there’s a bowling alley here. Let’s do that.”

“You want to go bowling?”

“You know it. I wanna whoop your ass.”

“You have never, ever, whooped my ass at bowling.”

“Today’s the day, bro. I feel it in my waters. We can walk to the rec center, if you like. It’s not far from here, right?” Stef headed out of the reception center on the words and, with a heavy frown of confusion on my face, I followed her. She was her usual whirlwind self, stirring up chaotic energy everywhere she went. You’d think I’d be used to it by now, though to be fair, I was more than a little shaken up lately.

“I’m assuming you’ve got time?”

“I figured you’d gotten in touch with one of my superiors and wheedled my schedule out of them, because it just so happens I do have time. I can give you two hours. Then I have a meeting.”

“Perfect!” We stepped into the rec center and headed straight for the bowling alley. “It’s one of my favorite things to do, you know.”

“What is?” I selected a pair of bowling shoes I thought might be her size and grabbed a pair for myself.

“Visiting you on base. All this cool, fun stuff to do and I don’t have to pay a thing.” She sat down on a plastic chair, hauling her heavy doc martens off her feet and bending over to lace up the flat bowling shoes.

“It has its perks, for sure.”

“Mmm. Fuck these are ugly, aren’t they?”

“The shoes?”

“Yeah.”

“I think they’re a mild improvement on the ones you wore in here.” Grinning and poking her tongue out at me, she moved to the scoring computer and typed in our names. I could tell by her demeanor that she was deliberately being a brat, and burst out laughing when I saw our names flash up on the screen. *Ass Whooper* and *Loser*. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Stef. You might not lose.”

“Hardy har har. I’ll go first.” Her first bowl was pretty good. She knocked seven pins down, but the last three were split, so it was going to be hard to score a spare. Sure enough, she only managed to knock down one of them.

“Watch this.” A strike right away had her glaring at me.

She took her turn and knocked nine pins down with her first ball, but the second one ended up in the gutter. Just as I was lining up my shot, moving my arm back ready to swing forward, she said, “I caught up with Lucy before I came here.”

The mention of Lucy’s name had me stumbling and my ball went straight into the gutter, rolling limply along before it dropped at the end of the line. “Did you?” I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral.

“Yeah.”

I turned back to look at her, sitting on the plastic chair, her feet crossed at the ankles, examining her lime green fingernails.

Blowing out a breath of impatience, I said, “And?”

Standing, she picked up a ball, hefting it in her hands thoughtfully before deciding it was too heavy and choosing another one. “She seemed...I dunno...out of sorts.” I had no idea what to say to that, so I just watched her take her turn, score a strike and turn back to me with zero celebration. “I like her. A lot. And I feel bad for her.”

“Do you?” My turn. It was a half-assed effort, because by now I was one hundred per cent concentrating on our conversation instead of the game, but I still knocked down nine pins. Waiting for my ball to roll back up, I didn’t look at my sister.

“Yeah. It must be hard for her, all the nausea, then being tired. You being away for half of every week can’t help.”

“True.” My second shot rolled straight down the center, just kissing the remaining pin as it sailed through, but didn’t knock it over.

“Next time I come by, the nursery will probably all be set up, huh?”

“Probably.” I swallowed hard. That was the last thing I wanted to think about. Lucy, setting up the nursery for our baby, by herself.

“I can’t wait to see that. Are you guys going to find out what you’re having?”

“I’m not sure. We haven’t really discussed it.”

She shot me a look under her blue bangs. “Don’t you find out these things at, like, the half-way mark? That’s coming up pretty soon. You might want to have a chat about it.” Rolling her ball, she barely glanced at it cruising down the lane before turning back to me. “I know I shouldn’t say this, but I’m kinda hoping for a girl. Like, imagine a little baby with your hair and Lucy’s eyes. Soooo cute.”

“You got a strike, Stef.” The effort it took to squash the flare of longing her words caused made me feel sick.

“Yay me. The ass-whooping is imminent.”

She didn't say anything when I took my turn, or when she took her next one.

“I seriously cannot wait to be an auntie. I'll be down here the second I get the news. I'm gonna give your baby so many smooches and squeezes it'll be unreal. And oh, I meant to ask you, I was thinking of getting one of those star chart things done, when the time comes. It's really cool, it shows you how the stars were aligned at the exact moment of the baby's birth. They're really neat. Do you think Lucy would like one? If it's not her thing, I can easily do something else, I don't want to step on anyone's toes. Oh! I've also been looking at gender neutral clothes. They're super boring, so I think I'll wait to see what you have before I go shopping for that stuff. Unless, of course, you do find out earlier. That would be amazing, actually, because then I can start buying stuff and putting it aside until the time comes.”

On and on and on she went. It was relentless. The fact that I actually managed to squeak out a win was no consolation for the hollow feeling in my gut.

“Good game. I'll get you next time, though, look out. Man, I'm starving. Can we grab hot dogs and fries?”

“Yeah, sure.”

We put our food onto a tray and moved to the table area to eat. Although the food tasted like ash in my mouth, I forced myself to eat a few fries while Stef wolfed down half her hot dog. When she finally slowed down enough to talk, her words sent a chill down my spine.

“You know, for someone who's supposedly so madly in love and so thrilled to be having a baby, you're amazingly disinterested.”

“I am not.”

“Umm, fuck *yes*, you are. What gives?”

“Nothing.” I forced down a miniscule bite of hot dog, chasing it with some soda when it got stuck in my throat.

Dropping her hot dog onto her plate and wiping her fingers on a napkin, Stef watched me closely. “Just so you know, I’ve never bought this bullshit charade. I’ve known from the start that it wasn’t legit.”

“You don’t know shit.” I heard the desperation in my voice and barely kept from wincing at how pathetic it sounded.

“You’re my brother. I’ve known you my whole life. I know that if you’d just had a casual hookup or whatever, you wouldn’t have mentioned it. But if you really felt that you had met the love of your life in Seattle that weekend, you would have told me. But you never said a word about it that whole week. So, imagine my surprise when you call to say you’d gotten married. To Lucy fucking Cooper, no less.” She picked up a fry and popped it into her mouth, watching me meditatively. I squirmed under the scrutiny. But she wasn’t done yet. “And you were so vague about the details that I just couldn’t make sense of it, and that’s when I thought, *Hmm, best I get my ass down there and find out what the fuck is actually going on.*”

“No need to do that.”

“On the contrary, there’s every fucking need, because I’m barely in the door five minutes when I find out you’re being investigated. For *insurance fraud!*”

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed desperately.

“Aaah, I’m thinking, now it’s starting to make sense. Because this is peak Dante Moretti, if I know my brother. Which I do. You accidentally knock up your weekend fling and being the man of complete honor but zero sense that you are, you decide that the best course of action is to marry her, post haste—Man, I love that term. *Post haste*. It means superfast, if you’re wondering.”

“I got that. Or should I say, *surmised*, if we’re getting all fancy.”

“Anyway, where was I?”

“Talking completely out of your ass, from what I could tell.”

“Bullshit. You and Lucy get married for your insurance coverage. On one hand, it’s a smart move, considering that she’s been so unwell. But on the other, really dumb, because, you know, investigation.” She stopped to take a breath and a sip of soda. “So. You make a marriage of convenience that you no doubt plan to end once the baby is safely born. How am I doing so far?”

I dropped my gaze to my uneaten food. There was no way I could deny it, because then that would be outright lying to my sister, and I couldn’t ever do that. “You’ve...got the gist of it.”

“Of course I have. There’s just one part I can’t figure out, no matter how hard I try.”

“What’s that?”

“If you’re as madly in love with her as I think you are, why haven’t you told her? Why are you sticking with the sham marriage bullshit?”

I went completely still, staring at my baby sister in utter shock.

“Oh, you didn’t know you were in love with her? Sorry to drop that bombshell on you, but you are.”

She said it so simply, and her tone was so matter of fact, that there was no possible way for me to deny it. I was deeply and profoundly in love with Lucy.

“Well, this has been a lot of fun.” She glanced at her watch. “But I guess I should hit the road and let you get to your meeting before you head home to break the good news to Lucy. I can’t quite get a read on her, but I really hope she’s open to a huge declaration, that she feels the same, and that you sail off into the sunset, with my baby niece in tow. Or nephew.”

Still reeling from finally acknowledging what my heart had known for a long time, I flinched at her words.

Catching my reaction, she frowned. “What the fuck? You aren’t even gonna tell her? You’re that chicken shit, you’re too scared to put it all on the line for—”

“I can’t, Stef!” I blurted out.

“Of course you can! It’s easy. You just go home, waltz in the door, say, Hey, Luce, I’ve got some news. I love you to pieces and want to spend the rest of my life with you, be an amazing dad to our bab—” She cut herself off, staring at me, her brown eyes wide. I tried to make my face blank, expressionless, but she knew. “*No!* Fuck that! No, Dante.”

“Come on, Stef. How can I possibly be a dad to Lucy’s baby? I don’t know the first thing about it and I’m going to fuck it up completely. The baby and Lucy are both much better off without me. I’m not father material, that’s all there is to it.”

“Holy fucking dog’s balls, you’re a real dumbass.”

“Don’t start that.”

“Don’t start what? I should slap you upside the head for being so stupid. *Not father material*. Jesus fucking Christ.” In a fury, she scooped the remains of our lunch onto the tray, stomped to the garbage, dumped the contents of the tray into it, then marched over to the serving counter and dropped the tray onto it. A couple of people playing pool shot her some worried looks, possibly wondering if they needed to intervene. One of them looked at me and I held up my hand, letting him know it was okay.

Stef came back, dropped into the chair, still muttering under her breath. “Right, just so I’m clear. You can’t tell Lucy that you’re madly in love with her because you can’t stay with her, because you’ll be a shitty dad, because you’re too much like Angelo Moretti and there’s nothing you can do about that, the end.”

“Yes.” It seemed glaringly obvious to me, but I could tell by the look on Stef’s face she didn’t agree.

“I don’t really know what to say to you other than you’re utterly, completely wrong. You’re nothing *like* our father. Nothing at all. You’ll be such a great dad, Dante. Ask me how I know.”

I hesitated, not sure I could deal with even the tiniest spark of hope.

“Ask me!”

“Fine. How do you know?”

She leaned forward, placed her palms flat on the table and looked me straight in the eye. “Because for my entire life, you’ve always been there for me. Looking after me when Mom had to work before I was old enough to stay home by myself. Helping me with my schoolwork, listening to me practicing my reading, patiently working on my times tables with me. So. Patiently. Looking after me when I started getting sick, taking me to all the different doctors, insisting that it wasn’t all in my head. Fostering my love of music to the point that you paid for my guitar lessons, even though you complained about how shit I sounded.” She paused, swallowing, her eyes vibrant with emotion. “All my life, for as long as I can remember, you’ve been the one I can count on. The only one. I know in my fucking bones, Dante, that if ever I need you, you’ll be there. You’ve always done everything in your power to take care of me, and I know you always will.” Reaching out, she gripped my hand. “And *that* is what it means to be a dad and you can totally do it, because you’ve had years of practice looking after me.”

Her words, her sincerity, her intensity rolled over and through me, hitting me in my solar plexus so hard I could barely breathe. “You really think so?” I asked, my voice low.

“Fuck yes. Absolutely. Definitely. No question about it.” She slumped back in the chair, pushing her fingers through her hair before crossing her arms, thinking for a minute before speaking again. “I had no idea you felt this way, Dante.”

“Well, it’s not really something you talk about, is it?”

“Guess not.” She surveyed me critically. “I’m not sure I’ve convinced you, which is fair enough, because you’ve felt this way for a very long time, I guess, and I can imagine that it feels like an absolute truth to you. All I ask is that you think it over, turn the idea around in your head for a bit and see how it feels then. Do you think you can do that?”

I nodded.

“Good.” She stood up, grabbed her coat from the back of the chair, and pulled it on. “And now I really do have to go. Walk

me to my car?”

“Of course.” Outside, I shoved my hands in my pockets against the chill wind, walking next to my little sister, my mind whirling. Reaching out, I tugged her hair. “I have no idea how you got so smart.”

She smiled. “Years of therapy, I guess.” We arrived at her rental car and she pulled the keys from her bag, pressing the unlock button on the remote. “It’s enough to make me a bit wiser, but not any less angry.”

Her sigh twisted my heart, because it sounded like it should come from a much older person. “Now I’ve got even more to be angry about.”

“You know what they say about anger?”

She squinted at me, skepticism all over her face. “What?”

“It’s like eating poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

“Oohhh, when did you get so wise?”

I chuckled, pulling her in for a hug. “I hope you can let it go,” I said quietly.

“Same. And I hope the same for you,” she replied, her words muffled against my chest as she hugged me back. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I kissed the top of her head before stepping back and pulling open her car door. “Let me know when you get home safe.”

She got in the car, pulling her seatbelt on before looking up at me and smiling impishly. “See? That’s some serious dad energy right there.”

I laughed, even though my chest tightened uncomfortably. “Get out of here.”

“I’m gone.”

Shutting the door, I tapped the roof to let her know she was good to go, then watched as she reversed and eased the car towards the main gates. She honked the horn, gave me a wave, and then she was driving away, leaving me to my

overwhelming, confusing jumble of thoughts. Lucy's sketch burned a hole in my back pocket and I took it out, carefully unfolded it. Light snow fell and I bowed my head over it, holding the paper close so it wouldn't get wet. *Maybe*, I thought. Then I shied away from the idea, because it was way too much to think about, way too much to put on the line.

CHAPTER 38

Lucy

I huffed out a breath of frustration. This was the third time I'd drafted this same email, but I just couldn't seem to organize my thoughts to get them to come out right. Maybe I needed a break, which was ridiculous: I'd only been at my desk an hour. Still, maybe a cup of tea and a bit of thinking time would help clear my head.

I moved into the kitchen, painfully aware of the metaphorical axe hanging above my head. We hadn't heard anything in the three days since Naomi Perkin's visit, but since she'd said she was close to wrapping up the investigation, I knew the end was imminent. The possibility of the insurance not being approved was huge, of course, but the idea of losing Dante for good was worse. I missed him so much when he was away for work, and that was just four days. How the fuck was I supposed to cope when he left for good and I knew he was never coming back?

I stood in the kitchen, staring at the Keurig for a ridiculously long time, sorely tempted to switch it on and make a coffee just so I could smell it, then tip it down the sink. It seemed like a heartbreaking symbol of everything I would lose once Dante left and I felt my throat clog up and tears prick my eyes. "Just make a cup of tea, you weird psycho," I said aloud to the machine. Then I flicked on the kettle.

As I stood staring out the window, watching snowflakes fluttering lazily down, I forced myself to picture what it would be like when Dante was gone. I needed to start wrapping my head around the reality of how lonely and empty the house

would feel without him and accept it, and the sooner the better. The kettle switched off. Heaving a sigh, I made the tea and took it back to my office.

My phone was on the desk, a missed call notification beeping at me as I stepped through the door. Unknown number. I pressed the buttons to retrieve the voice mail.

“Hi, Mrs. Moretti. This is Mindy from CYT Insurance. Please call me back as soon as you can. Have a great day.”

Wow, she sounded super fucking perky for someone who was most likely an agent of doom. I noted down the number she reeled off, then called her straight back, getting her voice mail in return. Fuck. Phone tag? Right now? I left a message, dropped my phone to the desk and pushed my fingers into my hair, tension growing in my stomach. Christ, I felt like I was going to vomit.

The beep of my phone ringing made me jump. I saw the number. This was it. I took a few moments to try and calm myself, drawing in a few deep breaths before I finally answered. “Hello?”

“Lucy Moretti?”

Not for much longer. I swallowed around the heavy lump in my throat. “Yes.”

“Hi! This is Mindy, from CYT Insurance. How are you doing today?”

“Fine, thank you. And you?”

“Very good, thanks for asking.”

She was waaaaay too perky. A bubble of irritation formed in my gut.

“I’ve been asked to follow up on your claim today, because Naomi has been called out of town for a family emergency.”

“That’s not good, I hope she’s okay.”

“I’m sure she will be. Her daughter has gone into labor. It’s a little premature, so we’ve all got our fingers crossed for a good outcome.”

Get to the point already, Mindy. “I’ll have my fingers crossed for her, too.”

“That’s so lovely of you to say so!”

There was a long, drawn-out silence. “Um, anyway,” I finally said, “you said you were following up on the claim. Is there something I can help you with today?”

“Oh yes, of course. Silly me! I’m calling to let you know that Naomi has finalized the investigation and she finds in your favor. Your claim has been approved.”

I fell back in the chair, my hand covering my mouth. *Thank God*, was all I could think. Mindy was chattering on and I forced myself to pay attention.

“I am sorry we’ve had to put you through all of this, but you know, we have to be so careful about fraud, since the coverage we offer is very comprehensive and exclusive to serving members and their families. Honestly, you’d be surprised how much deception goes on. Terrible. But obviously, you guys aren’t like that. You must have impressed Naomi, she left a note on your file. I’ve never seen her do that before.”

“What did it say?”

“Let me read it to you, word for word. *It is my recommendation that this claim be granted.*” She broke off, giggling at her solemn tone, before clearing her throat and continuing. “*After a thorough investigation, I find no evidence of fraud. It is clear to me that the relationship is genuine, and that the husband dotes on his wife.* So there you go! You’re all set and you can go ahead and have this baby with no stress. I’m super happy for you!”

“Thank you. That’s nice of you to say.” I didn’t know how I managed to squeeze the words past the huge lump that had formed in my throat.

“You’re so welcome. I’ll let you get on with your day, and I hope it’s a good one.”

“Thank you, same to you.”

I put the phone down, the words playing over and over in my head on a loop. *The relationship is genuine...the husband dotes on his wife.* I was so incredibly desperate for that to be true, that the fact that it wasn't made me burst into tears. Covering my face with my hands, I just sat at my desk and sobbed it out, overwhelmed by the strength of my feelings.

It was time for me to acknowledge the truth. I loved Dante. Totally and completely. I loved him. That made me cry even harder, because there was no way I could have him. I was a package deal now and he'd made it perfectly clear how he felt about that.

I sat there for a long time, my elbows on the desk, my face buried in my hands, letting the feelings wash over me, the agony of it all. It was the only way I could cope with it, just to feel it. Because it was absolutely necessary that I get all the grief out of my system before Dante got home. The only possible way I could tell him the insurance had been approved and that he could move out now was to be completely unemotional in front of him. He could never know how much me letting him go and him leaving was tearing me up, because then he'd try and look after me, and that would make it one hundred times harder.

CHAPTER 39

Dante

I eased the car slowly down Lucy's street. The long drive from the base had done a lot to clear my head and given me the chance to process some of what Stef had said, and I was almost ready to talk to Lucy about it. Test the waters a little. Pulling into the driveway, I stared through the windshield at the house. The porch light was on and she must have been in the office, since strips of light edged the blind. It was very welcoming. It felt like home. More like home than anywhere I'd ever lived, I realized. That shocked me, but why should it? The love of my life was in there. Wherever she was, that was home.

Did I have the courage to tell her? To let go of all the b.s. from my childhood and my parents, and take a chance on us? Or was I too chicken shit? Imagining myself walking through the door, taking her in my arms and saying, "Lucia, I love you. I want us to be together forever, and I want to be the father our baby deserves" had my legs turning to jelly. Maybe it was better if I just stayed in the car—

Fuck, don't be a coward.

I made a deal with myself: I'd take my cue from her. If her face lit up in welcome, I'd tell her. If not, I wouldn't. For now, at least.

I got out of the car, walked up the drive to the porch, my hand shaking slightly as I opened the front door.

"Hey!" She opened her office door the moment I stepped into the front hall, looking heartbreakingly gorgeous in dark jeans

and a knitted top, her hair hanging loose in that way I loved.

“Hi.”

“Great news.” Her tone was unnaturally bright, with a brittle edge to it.

“Yeah?” I tamped down on the urge to pull her into my arms and kiss her.

“We got the approval.”

I stared at her, unable to process her words for a moment.

“Huh?”

“The insurance. They approved it. I got the call this afternoon. They were trying to get through to you, but I guess your phone was off.”

“Oh. Yeah. I was catching up with Stef before she headed home.”

“Right. Of course. She dropped in here to say goodbye, too.”

“She mentioned that.” “*She seemed out of sorts,*” and “*I can’t quite get a read on her.*” Me either, right now, Stef, but one thing was for damn sure: my wife was not open to a declaration of love right now. Her whole demeanor screamed *back off*, from what I could tell.

“So anyway, it’s all good. We’re in the clear. Such a relief, right?”

“Right.”

She lifted her chin, not quite looking at me when she said. “And, you know, thanks so much for everything. I’m sure you’ll be relieved to head back to base without this hanging over your head anymore.”

This as in the insurance, *or this* as in our marriage? I couldn’t tell, and I was way too much of a fucking coward to ask. So I just said, “Yeah, it is a relief, that’s for sure.” Did she flinch slightly? I wasn’t sure. We stood there for a moment that seemed to drag out for an eternity before I said, “Well, I guess I’ll pack up and get out of your hair.”

“Okay. I’ll leave you to it.” She moved by me into her office and closed the door with a resolute click. It seemed so final that the simple action had my heart screaming. I fought the urge to shove the door open and barge in. No. The deal I’d made with myself was I’d take my cue from her. Well, she was telling me loud and clear what she wanted. It would be the definition of pathetic for me to beg her to feel something she obviously didn’t.

I turned away, walking down the hall to our bedroom. *Lucy’s* bedroom, I corrected myself. It had never been mine. Going to the wardrobe, I pulled out all my belongings and my duffel bag and laid everything on the bed, swallowing around the lump in my throat.

I changed out of my uniform into jeans and a fitted sweater, packed my clothes and shoes into the bag, went into the bathroom, dumped my toiletries into a smaller bag, then dropped that into the duffel bag, zipping it closed. Done.

This was it. This was goodbye. It had taken me less than ten minutes to remove myself from Lucy’s life, which seemed ridiculous, considering that it would take me a lifetime to get over her.

As if she sensed my presence, she opened her office door when I reached it as I came back down the hallway. “Here.” Her tone was flat, and she still wasn’t looking me straight in the eye.

I held out my hand to take what she was giving me. My heart lurched and thudded painfully when I realized it was her wedding and engagement rings. “Thanks.” I couldn’t believe how normal, how calm, my voice sounded. I put them in my back pocket, along with the sketch I always kept there. It would probably be for the best if I just bit the bullet and threw that picture away. No more tormenting myself with what I could never have.

“Um...” She shot me a look from under her lashes, her gaze unreadable. “Did you want to go to Alfredo’s before you head off?”

The best and safest answer would have been no. Then I could get out of here now, before my heart shattered into a million pieces. “Sure, that’d be nice.”

“Great. I’ll just put my shoes on.”

“Okay. I’ll go start the car.”

CHAPTER 40

Lucy

Hooo boy, this had been a bad idea. An absolutely fucking *terrible* idea. I'd only said it because I just couldn't bear the idea of Dante leaving and I was trying to delay it. Shoving my feet into my boots, I swore inwardly again. Now I was going to have to eat a bowl of risotto around this massive lump in my throat, while making polite, stilted conversation with my soon-to-be ex-husband. Too devastatingly awful. I stood in my bedroom, in front of the wardrobe that was now half empty, pressing my fingers to my eyes, willing the tears away. One deep breath. Then another. I could do this. I was tough.

Plastering a bright smile onto my face, I went to the hall, grabbed my coat, and paused at the front door for yet another deep, supposedly calming breath. By the time I had walked down the drive and gotten into the car, I could barely speak. What would I say anyway? *Great weather we're having. I love you. Did you catch the end of last weekend's game? Nail biting stuff, hey? I'm going to miss you so much. I can already feel the emptiness consuming me.*

It was a short drive into the main square and Alfredo's. We took it in silence, which made me pull my head out of my ass enough to wonder how Dante was feeling about all this. Relieved? I flicked him a quick glance as he pulled into the curb. His face gave nothing away.

Suppressing a sigh, I got out of the car. My fingers tingled with the longing to feel his hand wrap around mine when he joined me on the cobbled sidewalk. Those days were gone,

though. I shoved my hands into my pockets and followed him into the restaurant.

We were quickly seated at a small booth in the corner, and since we already knew our order, because we always had the same thing, we gave it to the server. “So, uh, you said Stef came by to see you before she headed out?”

“Yeah. We went ten pin bowling and had hotdogs.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah.”

I leaned back in the padded booth, linking my fingers together tightly on the table. I couldn't for the life of me think of another topic of polite conversation, so I just sat there, staring at my hands. Dante didn't say anything either and when I shot him another look, he was staring out the window. Such a bizarre situation to be in, one with no etiquette manual to follow. *Maybe I'll write a magazine article*, I thought. “5 must-know tips for having dinner with your fake husband, who you're actually madly in love with, before he leaves you for good.” It was so ridiculous it made me want to burst into tears.

Our food came and I forced myself to smile in thanks at the server before picking up my fork. The chicken risotto had been my new favorite thing here for a while now, being pretty much the only one I could eat and still enjoy. Not tonight, though. I took a small bite, noting dully how much it tasted like cardboard and how it got stuck in my throat.

Still, I had to make the most of these last few precious hours with Dante, so I forced another bite. Everything was ruined. Everything was awful. I was filled with such overwhelming sadness and yearning that I could barely move.

“Lucia.”

Oh god, the way he said my name like that, with a tone that still skittered across my skin, brought tears to my eyes. “I don't want you to go.” Sweet Jesus. I hadn't meant to say the words out loud, but my heart had spoken before my brain had engaged. I glanced at him just in time to catch something in

his eyes, the barest flicker, before it was gone again. I put my fork down, feeling like I at least needed to say a little more of what was in my heart. “But I know I can’t ask you to stay.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a package deal, Dante. It’s not enough for you to only want half the package. I know you don’t want the baby and I accept that. It’s just...” So much meaning in that word, *just*.

It’s just that I’ll never get over you.

It’s just that I’ll never love anyone else the way I love you.

“It’s not that I don’t want the baby, *cara*. It was never that.”

Wait, what? “I don’t understand.”

“Look, I’m not sure I can even explain it, but I’ll try... You obviously know my dad’s a piece of shit.”

“Yes.”

“Well, he wasn’t a piece of shit to me, when I was younger. He was my idol. I wanted, so desperately, to be like him. He was just so much fun, so devil-may-care, such a visionary, you know? Or so I thought. My mom didn’t help, always telling me that I was just like him. It would make me feel super proud when she said that.” He paused, reaching out and turning his water glass on the table absently to give himself something to do while he gathered his thoughts. “But as I got older, maybe twelve or thirteen, I started noticing things.”

“What things?” I asked breathlessly when he paused again.

“Like, how hard mom had to work, even though he was always bragging about how much money he made, what a good businessman he was, how much everyone looked up to him. Meanwhile, his wife was working three jobs to keep a roof over our head. But she never questioned it, you know? She’d just gaze at him adoringly, nod and smile, and tell me I should listen to my father.” He took a sip of water. “I think it was Stef that really did it for me, though. Because he couldn’t have given two shits about her. To me, she was the cutest little

angel, so full of spirit and so loving, but he couldn't have cared less."

"I hate that for her. She didn't deserve that."

He gave me a small smile. "No, she didn't. Anyway, that's when I started to see him for what he really was. And I couldn't stop seeing him that way. It devastated me, because I saw how much my mom put up with and how much she loved him anyway, how completely devoted she was, and what that cost her. It also affected how I saw myself, because she always told me I was just like him. Which meant I was a useless good-for-nothing as well. Too wild, not to be trusted. That was the truth. And honestly, it never really bothered me before. I had a good life, a good job, I was happy. It never mattered. Until you came along."

"Me?" A spark of hope flared in my chest. I put a hand over my heart, willing the sudden rapid beating to slow down.

"Yes. Because for the first time in my life, being just like my dad meant I couldn't have this."

Dante reached into his back pocket, pulled out a scrap of paper, unfolded it carefully, and laid it on the table between us. I was utterly speechless as I stared at the sketch I'd done weeks ago, then torn up and thrown away in despair. "Where did you get this?"

"I was emptying the trash can in your office and found it. I couldn't bring myself to throw it away, even though at the time I didn't really understand why it made me feel the way it did. But I do now. I understand exactly what that feeling means."

I ran my finger over the drawing, my heart squeezing so hard I could barely breathe. "What does it mean?" I whispered, raising my eyes to his.

"It means I want this." He tapped a finger on the paper, without taking his eyes from mine. "I want this with you, Lucia. Because I love you."

I let out a sob.

"I want to spend the rest of my life proving to you and the world I'm nothing like my father. I want to be the husband to

you, and the father to this baby, that you both deserve. I want that more than anything...if you'll let me."

There was a note of uncertainty in those last words that tore at my heart. "Yes, god yes, I'll let you. I couldn't imagine anything better." I scooted around the booth to sit next to him and threw my arms around him, burying my face in his neck. "I love you, too," I said shakily around the tears I couldn't hold back anymore.

His arms went around me, squeezing me so hard I almost couldn't breathe. "Thank Christ."

We must have looked completely ridiculous to everyone in the restaurant, but I didn't care. My whole world had just done a 180, going from utter misery to indescribable joy. I was a little boat tossed about by huge waves of emotion, and Dante was my anchor.

"I love you so much, Lucia."

I let the words wash over me, fill me, chase away all the sadness and hopelessness I'd felt for so long. "I love you, too." I pulled back just enough to kiss him, smiling when he dropped his forehead to mine, clearly unwilling to let me go.

With one arm still around my waist, he reached into his back pocket with his other hand. "Lucia, will you do me the honor and make me the happiest man in the world by staying married to me?"

Laughing deliriously, I held out my shaking hand, my heart bursting when he slid the rings back on my finger. I cupped his gorgeous face, pressing a fierce kiss to his lips. "Yes. I will."

He kissed me back. It was a rather inappropriate kiss for a family restaurant, but I couldn't have cared less. It was only when my stomach growled so loudly that I'm surprised the couple at the next table didn't hear it, that he finally broke the kiss. "You'd better eat that risotto."

"I guess so." I stayed in the warm embrace of his arms, picking up my fork and taking a bite of risotto. Then another, and another, because suddenly it didn't taste like cardboard anymore and I was starving.

Dante pulled away just enough to give me room to eat and when I was done and he'd finished his dinner too, he pulled out his phone, holding it out to take a photo of us. "I need to send this to Stef."

"Oh, okay." I wrapped my arms around his neck again, pressing my cheek to his and smiling widely at the camera. There was a good chance I looked like a lunatic, but I was madly in love, so I guess it made sense. "Wait. Why do you have to send it to Stef?"

I watched him type the caption *She said yes* under the photo and send it to his sister. "Because she set me straight today, and if she hadn't, I'd be halfway back to base right now, nursing a broken heart."

That made me want to cry again. "Tell her I said thank you," I said thickly.

He shot Stef another quick text, then put his phone face down on the table. "Enough about her."

"Okay," I giggled.

"We've got some serious catching up to do."

"We do."

"I don't mean me and you. I mean..." He pressed his hand flat against my belly, the light in his eyes setting my soul on fire.

"Dante..." There were no words to describe all the feelings coursing through my system. Well, there were. Three little ones that said everything. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Lucia. And our baby."

Our baby. There it was.

Epilogue

L *ucy.*

“**A**ww, poor little thing, she misses her daddy so much.”

“Yeah,” I sighed at my mom. We were all gathered on the back deck at my parents’ place, waiting for Dante to turn up for Sunday dinner, but he was an hour late. He’d been away for a training program all week and little Sophie wasn’t coping. I could hardly say I blamed her. I felt pretty much the same.

“Did he say how much longer he’ll be?” Dad asked.

Juggling my three-month-old in one arm, I retrieved my phone from my back pocket to see if he’d replied to my text. “Ten more minutes, thank god.”

“You want me to take her for a bit? Maybe some Zia love will help.”

“Please, you’re welcome to try,” I replied, handing Sophie to Stef, hoping that might stop the fussing. It broke my heart to see my baby so upset, especially because she was so happy most of the time. Stef walked up and down the deck, jiggling her a little and humming gently. I thought it might work, but no dice. After the first minute, Sophie started crying again so I took her back, resuming the pacing myself. Nope. Only Daddy would do.

“Here he is!”

I turned at my mom's words to see my husband step onto the deck and stand there for a moment in the wash of bright summer sunshine, gazing at us, his eyes bright with all the love he felt for us. My heart did that delicious, familiar slow roll in my chest as he moved toward me and my breath caught in my throat. "Hey," I said softly, raising my lips to his for a kiss, relishing the heat that always curled in my belly when his lips touched mine.

"Hey yourself." He pulled back, keeping his arm around my waist as he ran his hand gently over Sophie's head. She settled instantly at his touch and the sound of his voice, just as I knew she would. "And you, my sweet baby girl. What have you been up to?"

I handed her to him, my heart almost bursting when Sophie smiled at him, making an adorable cooing sound. She was a complete daddy's girl. "Missing you a lot, that's what."

"She's been fussing?"

"Little bit. She had a good feed and a nap, and a new diaper thanks to Stef, so she's got no reason to fuss, except..." I looked at him significantly.

He held her close, cradling her head in his large hand, gazing at her lovingly. "Well, you can stop that now, little miss Sophie, because here I am."

She chirped again, her dark eyes on her daddy's face in rapt adoration.

"Take a seat, if you like, Dante. Lunch is still a little while away."

"Thanks, Bruce."

I followed Dante to a bench seat nestled at the edge of the deck, under the dappled shade of a giant elm.

D ante

settled our daughter so she was lying in my lap, her tiny feet pressed against my stomach. She loved lying this way the most and I think it was because she could see me more easily than if I cradled her. I cooed at her over and over, not even caring how stupid I looked, because my baby was loving it. Rocking my legs from side to side, delighting in the feel of her chubby hands wrapped around my thumbs, I almost reeled from the rush of feeling that hit me. So. Much. Love. I'd had no idea how much love it was possible to feel for one tiny person, but I felt it, every single day. And to think I'd almost been too stupid and full of my own bullshit to give myself this beautiful gift.

"There, that's better, isn't it?" Lucy sang, running the tip of her finger down Sophie's cheek, which made my baby girl smile and gurgle back. "It's funny to see you in baby form," Lucy said, the smile in her voice obvious.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"Please. She's your carbon copy."

"She'll thank you for your hair genes when she's older," Stef said, coming to sit with us on the bench seat nestled at the edge of the deck, flicking her long blue hair over her shoulder. She let out a sigh. "I miss her so much whenever I leave. These quick visits just aren't doing it for me, especially because she doesn't remember me between them."

"Well, there's a simple solution to that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Move back."

I waited for the instant refusal from Stef, but to my surprise, it never came. Reaching out, she ran her hand gently over Sophie's head. "Maybe."

I felt a flare of surprise. "You serious?"

Stef shrugged. "Maybe. Dunno. It would mean the band relocating, or I'd have to start over and join a new one. That would be weird. I mean, I could do it, it's not impossible, it would just feel...strange, you know?"

“Yeah, fair enough.” I shot Lucy a look and she smiled in return. She knew I’d love nothing more than having my sister nearby and this was the closest she’d ever come to agreeing to it.

“You know what I’m gonna do?”

“What’s that?” I turned my gaze back to Stef, my heart squeezing at the light in her eyes as she looked at her niece.

“Talk to Miriam. She’s been complaining a lot about Seattle lately. Maybe she’d be open to the idea of relocating.”

“Miriam is...?”

“Our drummer. Didn’t I ever tell you? The band is more hers and mine than the others’ because we recruited them. I’d feel a lot more confident if she was down with the idea because then it wouldn’t feel so much like starting over again.”

“Give me her number! I’m calling her right now.”

Stef giggled at Lucy. “I’ll get on it as soon as I get back and let you know.” She went quiet for a moment, an uncertain frown on her brow. “Are you sure you’d want me around all the time, though?”

“Fuck yes!” If I didn’t already love Lucy as much as I did, her emphatic response would have sealed the deal.

Blowing out a breath, Stef said, “Okay. I’ll really think about it.”

“Stef!”

“Yes, Chloe?”

“Will you come and color with me?”

“Sure, I’d love to!”

I watched Stef move to sit at the table with Chloe and Mila, pick up a colored pencil and get to work.

“I’d love to have her around all the time.”

“Same. I want all the babysitters I can get for the stack of kids we’re gonna have.”

“Stack? Like pancakes?” I was surprised that the idea didn’t even scare me.

“Well, maybe not a whole stack, but two more at least.” She bent forward to give Sophie a tender kiss. “Hmm. Maybe three.”

“Jesus, *cara*, I don’t think I can watch you go through that nausea three more times.”

“Pfft, I’d do it a thousand times, just to have one minute of this. And besides, it was better after the first trimester.” She smiled at me, her green eyes shining. “Plus, I know you’ll look after us.”

“Of course.” I’d do anything for this woman. Anything at all. I pictured what it would be like to have four kids with her and felt a soft glow in my heart, knowing how amazing it would be.

Sophie started moving restlessly, flailing her hands and making the funny noises she always made when she was getting sleepy. I picked her up and held her close, rubbing her back gently, and she quieted.

“I’ll grab her blanket.” Lucy got up, walked across the deck to where she’d dropped the baby bag and bent over, retrieving the pink fluffy blanket Ellen had made to celebrate Sophie’s birth. I admired the view, grinning at her when she turned back and caught me checking out her ass. “You’re insatiable,” she murmured when she came back, covering Sophie with the blanket.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you’re so hot.”

“Ha! You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Thanks. She asleep?” I turned slightly so Lucy could see Sophie’s face.

“Yep. You’ve got the magic touch.”

I shifted the tiny body in my arms so her head was resting more comfortably on my shoulder, freeing up my arm in the process. I draped it over Lucy’s shoulders, pulling her close to

me and pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I missed you while I was gone.”

“Ditto.” She let out a sigh, leaning into me and linking her fingers with mine. We sat like that for a while, our baby’s deep, relaxed breathing the only sound between us. Until Bruce announced that lunch was ready. “You wanna put her down in the cot?”

“Nope.”

Smiling softly, her eyes alight, she said, “Okay. I’ll get you a plate so you can stay right where you are. But before I do that...” Leaning in, she cupped my face and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I’d never, ever get sick of saying those words to her.

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