

VALENTINES & HOLIDATES

My Accidental
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NARI KNOX

MY ACCIDENTAL HOLIDATE

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Cover Design: Last Chapter Press LLC

Editing: Last Chapter Press LLC

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MY ACCIDENTAL HOLIDATE INFO

She's having a hard time faking a lot of things. He's taking a chance on a future that's completely unscripted. Can they turn a faux pas filled romance into reality?

Lucy

After weeks of feeling stuck in a dating rut, I'm ready for something new.

There's only one problem.

I can't break up with the guy I'm dating because it's Valentine's day.

When my date bails and there's a mix-up in the kitchen, chaos ensues, and I find myself accidentally engaged.

My fake fiancé ends up being more delicious than the meal I've almost choked on.

Can I play along, or will my feelings for this handsome vet be deeper than the secret we share?

Kurt

After a long day at the vet clinic, I end up bartending at my family's restaurant on one of the busiest nights of the year.

The night's almost over, and I'm looking forward to spending time with Lulu, the latest pet rescue who's stolen my heart.

I may have started the evening as a single bachelor, but I accidentally propose to a sexy redhead who's completely captured my attention from across the room.

Can I convince her to continue this charade until after my parent's anniversary party?

Moreover, can I convince myself to let her go?

The romance and twinkle of Valentine's Day leads twelve passionate women to take a chance on a man who will make their Valentine wish come true. These blind date holidays are filled with roses and chocolates and are as unique as the valentines hidden in their mailbox. You won't want to miss out on these heartwarming, instalove stories, perfect for celebrating all the feels this Valentine's Day.

Go on a date with your next book boyfriend!

No cheating. No cliffhangers. Always a happily ever after.

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Epilogue

LUCY

I didn't answer the phone on the first ring. I was expecting it, but also secretly wished it wouldn't come. The one that told me my boyfriend of three weeks had forgotten about the date. I decided we weren't compatible and wanted to end things with him, but it seemed cruel to do it so close to Valentine's Day.

Now that Valentine's Day is here... well, I wish I ripped that bandage off before. I let the call roll to voicemail and finish entering the day's numbers for Scribble & Scribe, the stationary store my parents thought I was crazy to open, into the computer.

I sigh when the phone starts to ring again, knowing Mike won't give up, I answer.

"Hi," I plaster on a grin trying to sound somewhat happy.

"Hey, made reservations for eight. I'll pick you up in twenty," Mike says and disconnects the call. He never asks, just assumes.

"Yeah, okay. I'll head home and get ready," I say to the room, rolling my eyes and adding this to the mental list of reasons for dumping him. With that, I grab my tote to lock up the shop and head home to my cozy apartment just down the street and get ready. That means wearing my red dress, shoes that hurt but are sexy as hell and totally worth it, and a clutch instead of my tote.

Mike might be a complete asshat, but I'll be damned if I'm not going to look smokin' hot tonight.

TRUE TO HIS WORD, HE HONKS THE HORN OF HIS FANCY NEW car exactly twenty minutes later and I walk out the door to greet him. I just want to get through tonight. I don't want to be the girl who dumps her boyfriend on the most romantic day of the year.

As we walk into Oak Paradise, local steakhouse, Mike slips his cold clammy hand into mine. It's everything I can do not to pull away from his grasp. Instead, I focus on the surroundings. Admiring the large selection of wines and warm atmosphere. I'm actually surprised that he remembered I wanted to come here, I didn't think he was listening when I mentioned it.

Maybe he isn't so bad after all.

I'll just play nice tonight and see if this Valentine's Day meal turns things around. I frown slightly as the host ushers us to our table, thinking over our dates. He does control every aspect of our time together. And is considerably egotistical. Everything's on my schedule and time, and I'm tired of dropping what I'm doing—things I love like reading—to do what he wants.

But still, I could be over thinking it and he's just dedicated to his job.

A young waiter smiles in passing and Mike snags his sleeve, not caring that the waiter was clearly on his way to do something.

"We'll have the chicken dish for two, and bring a bottle of house red." He flutters his fingers dismissively before looking at me.

I try to rearrange my face after grimacing at his treatment of the waitstaff. Yet another tick in the "cons" column.

Was he always this dismissive and impatient? Probably.

I take a deep breath and gulp the wine someone slid in front of me, wishing I spoke up for white instead and

reminding myself once again that I only have to get through tonight.

“I heard about this place from a client,” Mike says while flicking through whatever on his phone.

The last of my hesitation on ending this evaporates with those words, and I glance around the room while sipping my wine. He’s talking at me, not to me or asking for engagement. It’s about his latest mastery of business that I still know nothing about. I don’t know him and now I’m just disappointed in myself.

My eyes land on the bartender, shaking a shiny silver cocktail shaker. A quick jolt of something different and new flashes through my core. He’s tall and dark haired with a five o’clock shadow that defines his chiseled jaw. I watch him pour a drink absolutely captivated by his tan, muscular forearms. My cheeks heat and I rest the cool glass of my wine against the curve of my cheek. When our eyes meet, I quickly returning my focus to Mike.

You’re on a date. Just focus.

The Mike Show is still in full swing with him droning on and on about himself. I smile and nod like I’m genuinely interested but from prior dates I know there won’t be a Q&A afterwards. He’s never cared about what I thought and cuts me off whenever I try to add to the conversation— not that you can call it that.

My attention wanders back to the bartender and when my gaze lock with his, a flood of desire dances through me. My nipples peak beneath the thin fabric of my dress. Holy hell.

If I ever consider having a fling, that would be the man. I don’t know if it’s the saucy grin he gives me or his fuck-me eyes, but something within me says... this man is mine.

Mike’s phone chirps and I turn back to him. His fake grin is replaced with one that looks excited, but sinister at the same time.

Finally, he looks to me. “Listen, I wasn’t going to break your heart on Valentine’s Day, but we’re through. You just

aren't doing anything for me. I need someone on my arm who is socially on par with me, and let's face it sweetheart, you aren't."

"Did you just dump me?" I ask, my eyebrows scrunching together in surprised disgust. I suck in a breath to give him a piece of my mind. "Fir—"

"Shh, Babe. You'll only make yourself sound desperate." Mike reaches a damp hand across the table to pat mine.

I snatch my hand off the table and take another sip of wine, annoyed he beat me to the punch, but knowing all the time that it's for the best.

"And here," he says digging out his wallet, "I'll cover my half of the meal."

Okay, so that's at least decent.

He stands and moves around the table, grasping my shoulder and pausing at my side to look down at me. "It'll take time, but you'll move on."

You have no idea.

I relax into my chair once he's gone and pour myself another glass of wine, still wishing it were white instead of red. If only I called it off last week, I could be in bed watching reruns of my favorite K-drama instead of being embarrassed about having a jerk dump me on Valentine's Day in a fancy restaurant. I contemplate leaving, but before I can, the waiter sets the beautiful golden roasted chicken on a platter, surrounded by mushroom risotto and broccoli florets in front of me.

I briefly consider having the meal boxed up for takeaway, but the aroma makes my mouth water and I remember how I worked through lunch. Before I know it, I'm reaching for my fork and placing a helping of all onto my plate. The chicken is tender and cooked to perfection. The taste, something out of this world. I take another bite trying to pick out the flavors. Just salty enough with a hint of garlic and...I eat another forkful, concentrating on the flavors. Something I just can't place.

I swallow, clear my throat politely, and swallow again. I'm about to try the risotto but my fork hovers over it as panic slowly spreads through my body. I pick up my goblet of wine and take a sip, which does nothing to subside the itching in my mouth and throat. Oh crap. I know what this is.

I gently squeeze and rub my neck with one hand and down the rest of the wine, my face getting hotter by the second. I'm certain that my face is as red as my dress. I take a slow and deep breath trying not to freak out more as my lips feel like they're on fire and I feel like my throat is constricting.

Someone hands me a glass of water and I accept it, tossing it back like I'm doing shots at girl's night. I turn to thank whoever it is, and Sexy Forearm Bartender stands there, concern etched on his face. The same one I'd just been eye-fucking not too long ago.

Unconsciously I start to scratch the top of my chest, my eyes widening in horror, when I realize that I'm starting to break-out in hives.

"Are you okay?" Sexy Forearms asks, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Wha... whas in the chimken?" I squeak pitifully, before breaking eye contact with him to examine my arms. Definitely hives. I look back at him, wishing it were anyone but him seeing me like this.

His eyes travel down my body and back up, eyes showing more concern if that's even possible.

"The chicken? I don't know..." He shoves a hand through his hair frantically. "Hey Peter! What's in the chicken dish?" he asks the waiter Mike snagged when we sat down.

"Tonight's special is roasted chicken glazed with chamomile and honey, with fingerling potatoes and accompanied by a side dish of baby roasted carrots with chamomile flowers for a—"

It's going to kill me.

He finishes, "Romantic Valentine's meal for lovers."

“Oh shhit!” I squeak the curse and reach for my clutch, rooting around for a stray antihistamine. “I lergic to namomile.” Every word is stunted as my body concentrates on fighting off the invader instead of putting together full words.

Sexy Forearms’ face pales and Peter rushes into an apology, “I’m so sorry. Your husband didn’t mention any allergies.”

“No marries,” I say picking up the bottle of wine and taking a slug straight from it, chasing down the pill. “Don worry. Be find soon.”

Peter looks from me to Sexy Forearms, a worried and questioning expression on his cherubic face. Forearms nods and assures Peter that he’ll handle it. I don’t see how my face could be any redder, but it gets hotter from being referred to as “It”. Like I’m the evil clown from Stephen King’s novel.

In seconds, Sexy Forearms is sitting across from me, his deep brown eyes full of concern locked on mine. “What can I do? Can I bring you something? More water? Wine, what about Medicine? A tampon? Chocolate? Do you need a hug or —” he cringes and glances away before meeting my gaze again. “Sorry, I’m sorry. I’m in crisis mode.”

A smile breaks across my face and I let out a small laugh. “I’m fine, really. I’ve got my wine and I’ve taken an antihistamine.” My voice starts to return. “I’ll just let the medicine do its job and try to leave as gracefully as I can after all this.”

With every eye in the place on me, no doubt.

Forearms leans forward and bites his lower lip and I find myself wishing I could nip it for him. “Is your boyfriend coming back?” he asks quietly so as not to be overheard.

“Oh no, that man is completely out of my life. And frankly, I’m thankful for that,” I say holding up the wine bottle in a toast.

Something flashes across his face, but it’s gone too quick for me to guess what it is.

He leans back in his chair, tilting his head a little and giving me a smile. “My name’s Kurt, by the way.”

“I’m Lucy. I wish we’d met under better circumstances. Tonight. Not my best night,” I respond not wanting to look away from him.

His smile... so sexy. So sincere. So inviting.

And his eyes never leave me once. It’s like the rest of the room doesn’t exist.

Kurt stands. “I’ll be back in a moment,” he promises and heads toward the bar.

I pick up the empty water glass and set it back down. Like a knight in sexy armor, Kurt drops off another glass of water and heads toward the kitchen. I hide my smile with the glass and take a drink. My body has come down off Mount Vesuvius. But the tickling lava at the apex of my thighs says the volcano isn’t dead.

And here’s Kurt again. Grinning at me with the most decadent dessert in his hand. He places it in front of me with a wink and walks away quickly.

The man brought me chocolate.

Chocolate!

I pick up the tiny truffle next to the three-tiered slice of Black Forest cake and place it in my mouth, savoring the way it delicately starts melting on my tongue. After a moment, something sharp hits the roof of my mouth.

Bang! comes from behind me.

I jump in my seat, startled by the sound of a balloon popping behind me and I inhale sharply, and something hard goes down with the gasp.

And when I thought tonight couldn’t get worse...

I was wrong.

My heart pounds quick and my head only says one thing, “You’re gonna die on Valentine’s Day!”

I stand and wave my hands trying to get someone's attention, but everyone is focus on their lovers. I try to gasp for a breath that doesn't come.

Kurt rushes to my side. "Do you have an EpiPen?" he asks, and I mime that I'm choking. "Oh, shit!"

He thumps me on the back between my shoulder blades, once, twice, and with his help, the lodged object shoots out, glittering brilliantly in the light before rolling under a nearby table.

I turn to Kurt to thank him for saving me, but he curses and dives to the ground, crawling under the table and drawing the attention of several patrons.

"Oh my God, he just proposed!" An elderly lady shouts to the room and everyone around us starts to clap and cheer.

I blink as lights from cellphone cameras start flashing around us in confusion, I look back to Kurt for an answer.

Holy shit, it's a diamond ring!

My face burns with embarrassment and I'm about to deny it when I notice Kurt. Still on one knee in front of me, presenting me with a beautiful diamond ring and a look of pleading in his eyes. He covertly points in the direction of the only bystander who seems dismayed.

I bite my bottom lip in understanding and hesitantly smile and only say, "Yes?"

KURT*Thirty minutes before...*

I absentmindedly wipe the bar with a towel, removing the evidence of a spilled drink from an overly exuberant customer. My gaze wanders around the room, taking in the crowded tables. *Guess I won't be heading home any time soon.*

Not that I'm surprised. It *is* Valentine's Day. It was more of a lingering hope though. I prefer my long hours at the clinic with patients who meow and bark over helping at the family restaurant. But you do what you need to for family and tonight, they needed a bartender.

The door whooshes open and I glance at the couple as they walk in. I turn to make the next order, a salted caramel, white Russian, but I'm frozen in place. My eyes glued to the gorgeous lady in red. Not too tall but long legs, a captivating smile, and curves in all the right places to make me feel a little wrong for eyeing them up. My brother Peter leads them to their table, and I return to my task a little more preoccupied than before.

I place the drink on the counter and check the order again. Peter eventually walks up, carrying a tray with him and leans against the bar waiting for me to finish the order.

"Sorry, some douche made me take his order even though it's not my table. So, who's this Lulu grandma has been going on about?" he asks, brushing crumbs off his black vest.

I chuckle and slow the pour allowing only an inch of foam to settle on the amber liquid.

“I was telling Grandma about her this afternoon,” I say breaking into a huge smile and looking at him. “She’s been in the hospital and just got cleared to leave. She’s absolutely beautiful. A little bit wild, which suits me just fine. She has a gentle soul though. I don’t think I can live without her, Peter.”

My brother frowns as though he’s considering what I’ve said carefully. “You’ve never mentioned her, but it sounds like you’re really in love.”

“Yeah, I am. I didn’t want to get the family’s hopes up. You all know I’ve been looking for so long. I needed to know it’s a sure thing before I said anything.”

Peter loads the glasses and bottles onto the tray, and I find my gaze drifting back to the first woman to make my cock twitch in quite a while.

He turns with the tray but looks back. “I’m happy for you, man. You shouldn’t keep your girlfriend a secret much longer though. Mom and Dad were just talking about wishing you’d meet someone. Mom’s even talking about blind dates.”

That’s not happening.

“Okay,” I say focused on the sullen beauty as I watch her date pay more attention to his phone than her.

Dude, it’s Valentine’s Day, show some respect.

“Wait, what?” I ask, just registering what Peter had actually said. But he is gone. Drinks in tow, dropping them off at various tables.

I shake my head and chuckle. Realization dawning on me that Grams thinks Lulu is a woman and not the mastiff puppy I’ve been nursing back to health. I lean against the back of the bar and look for my bewitcher again. The feeling of a puzzle piece sliding into place once I find her. I watch as she people watches, expecting her gaze to quickly scan over me like it has with the rest of the waitstaff.

But I wasn't prepared for it to settle on me. To lock with my own. For the world to muffle and fall away. To be completely consumed by her. It's instantaneous and it packs a powerful wallop to my gut.

I blink, and when I open my eyes, she's turned around facing her date as he full on smiles down at his phone.

What is wrong with me? She's on a date. Hell, that could be her husband!

Maybe it has been a while... like months, since I've had the company of a woman. But when I'm not taking care of animals at the clinic, I've got my own farm at home and they demand attention galore.

I pick up a water glass, pretending to examine it for water spots. Through the glass, I see the man stand up and place a hand on the beauty's shoulder. I can tell by the way her body goes ridged that his touch isn't welcome. He says something to her and almost skips to the door. Her shoulders fall and I practically see tension whisked away with him.

Curiosity in full force, I consider going over and finding out what happened. And as soon as the thought pops into my head, I can't get it out. I need to know for some reason. Is he a doctor and got called away for a surgery? Did he double park or need to feed the meter? Or is he gone gone? And what could that mean for her.

And for me. For us.

Peter drops the food off at her table and the man doesn't come back. Before I can question myself, I quickly fill the glass with some ice and water. A perfectly good reason to scope out the situation.

Taking a deep breath, I weave around tables and waiters. I'm barely at her side when she turns to me. My greeting dies on my lips when she practically rips the water glass out of my hands, her face splotchy. And I want to kill the douche for making her cry... except her face isn't wet and she's also got blotches and specks all over her neck and arms.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, concern and panic starting to flood my system. Sick or injured animals, no problem. Humans, not so much.

“Wha... wass in the chimken?” she says, motioning wildly to the dish.

How the hell can her voice sound like Mickey Mouse just sucked in a lungful of helium?

“The chicken? I don’t know—” I shove a hand through my hair trying to remember what they said in the kitchen, my eyes searching the room like it held the secret. It did though because Peter walked out of the kitchen on a mission.

“Hey Pete! What’s in the chicken dish?”

“Tonight’s special is roasted chicken glazed with chamomile and honey, with fingerling potatoes and accompanied by a side dish of baby roasted carrots with chamomile flowers for a—”

He’s apparently oblivious because he launches into his practiced speech of specials. Not seeming to give two shits about the panic in my voice or seeing the way she’s swelling before our eyes. I make a promise to myself to kick his ass later as she tells us she’s allergic to chamomile. I didn’t even know that was possible. But I guess people are allergic to all kinds of things.

I’m mentally running through my knowledge of CPR and tracheotomies, breaking out into a cold sweat at the thought of performing either of them on a human. Not just any human though, but on *her*. Black spots start dancing before my eyes, and I suck in a deep breath telling myself I will not pass the fuck out.

My thudding ears perk up hearing that the world will be righted with a simple antihistamine.

Okay. I got this.

“I can handle it,” I whisper while nodding my head like an idiot as I talk myself off a ledge.

Still not confident that I won't pass out, I sit down and focus on her. Is the swelling going down? Is she really going to be okay? Shit. Should I offer her something?

“What can I do? Can I bring you something? More water? Wine, what about medicine? A tampon? Chocolate? Do you need a hug—”

What the fuck did I just say? A tampon? I cringe in embarrassment and try to recover.

“Sorry, I'm sorry. I'm in crisis mode.”

The now returning to normal beauty assures me that everything is fine, and I can't help blurting out my next question.

“Is your boyfriend coming back?”

Smooth.

I'm about to kick myself for asking when she vehemently protests and I want to do a cartwheel or something equally as childish. I introduce myself and am rewarded with her name, her voice sounding a little less like Mickey than it had before.

We're going to be okay.

I smile at the simplistic beauty of it. Suddenly overcharged with adrenaline and too much energy, I stand and excuse myself. I head back to the bar and pour myself a shot of tequila to take the edge off then fill another glass of water for Lucy. I drop the water off at her table and make my way to the kitchen. The least we can do is feed her something that won't kill her.

I spot a slice of our black forest cake sitting by itself on the metal shelf reserved for pickups and snag it. Peter flags me from the bar on my way back to Lucy's table, and I set the cake down smiling at her, then make my way to see what Peter wants.

“Listen, don't be mad, but I told Dad about Lulu. He wants you to bring her to their anniversary party Saturday.”

Pop!

A balloon bursts next to me and I turn to scowl at the person to popped it, only to see Lucy flailing her arms.

“I don’t have time for this,” I tell Peter as panic floods me again and I hurry back to Lucy. “Do you need an EpiPen?”

A reddish-brown curl sticks to her flushed cheek and she looks at me making the universal gesture for choking. I’m practically a fucking doctor, highly capable of performing the Heimlich Maneuver, but I freak out and start thumping her on the back like she’s a toddler.

She gulps at the air as I watch a diamond ring fly out of her mouth and roll like a toy across the floor.

My panic turns to horror as I remember the engagement dessert that’s supposed to happen tonight, and I dive for the ring. I crawl under the table and pick up the ring between my thumb and pointer. I slowly back out from under the table and turn, effectively placing myself before Lucy on one knee.

“Oh my God, he just proposed!” I hear from my right.

My eyes move from Lucy to where my grandmother shouted just behind her. I barely notice her as my eyes flick to the annoyed customer and I correctly interpret that this was supposed to be his big moment.

I look back to Lucy and beg her silently for help. Pointing at the pissed man covertly.

“Yes?” Lucy says, plastering a smile on her face and in that moment she makes me ridiculously happy for reasons I can’t understand. I stand and pull her into a hug, spinning her around and whispering apologies into her ear.

But am I truly regretting what happened?

I don’t think so.

KURT

“Thank you for everything,” I say to Lucy, holding the door for her as we leave the restaurant. My family was insistent that they could carry on without me. “I’ll straighten things out with my family tomorrow.”

Lucy giggles, looping her arm through mine as we walk to my car and tilts her head back to look at me. “Are you kidding?” *Holy fuck, that smile.* “Aside from almost dying twice tonight, this has been the most fun I’ve had in a long time. Although,” she says biting on her lower lip and looking away. “I think Beth might actually be heartbroken when you tell her.” Beth being my mom.

Unease trickles over me like I just walked through a spiderweb, but I brush it off quickly because I hate spiders. Lucy isn’t wrong though. Mom hadn’t known her for more than a few seconds, but still swooped Lucy into a hug and welcomed her into the family. The joy on both their faces had made my heart trip over itself and all thoughts of explaining died on my lips.

“It didn’t help that Peter backed Grandma,” I say opening the car door for her.

“Speaking of that,” she picked up the conversation once I was behind the wheel. “Who’s this Lulu you’re madly in love with?” Her head tips waiting for something to burst her bubble.

I bark out a laugh and shoot her a wide grin before launching into how I met Lulu. How she was the runt in her litter and was pushed aside. How I spent my days at the vet clinic and nights at the hospital keeping a close eye on Lulu as she and I fought for her to survive.

“I wondered how the hospital played into things when your brother asked me if I was recovering now that I’m out,” Lucy comments and I wince. “Kinda thought he meant prison for a moment.”

I cringe at all the tangled webs. “Yeah, I’m really sorry about that.”

I clear my throat, anxious to switch topics and forget how Peter told the twins not to mention my mother that Lucy’s welts were because she’d been in the hospital. Seriously, the kid can’t whisper to save his life. “What about you though? Tell me all about you. If you want to.”

Lucy looks to me... *maybe into me...* and my grip on the wheel tightened under her gaze.

“Everything okay?” I ask after a few heartbeats, glancing at her briefly. My cock twitches to life again at her intense stare. It’s like being caught in a melodic tractor beam of a siren.

I take a deep breath. If I can’t deflate the situation happening in my pants soon, it’s going to become an even more embarrassing evening.

She sighs. “Yes, sorry. It’s just been a while since anyone’s cared enough to ask.”

This brings a frown to my face and I chance another look at her. She’s back to staring out the window.

“Their loss. I think you’re amazing, kind, and funny.”

Lucy’s laugh fills the car and it’s everything I can do not to put it in park and pull her into my lap.

“You got all of that from the three hours we’ve spent together?” she asks with a tip of her head.

“Yes,” I say undeterred by her skepticism. “In those three hours you rescued me by becoming my fiancée, cracked jokes with my siblings, and reassured my parents and Grandma that you were after my money and *not* my body.”

The GPS announces our location is up ahead on the left, and I pull to the curb. Turning off the engine and turning to look at Lucy. The surprise on her face is adorable and I reach across the counsel, tucking a strand of auburn hair behind her ear.

The corners of her lips twitch into a smile, mischief lighting her eyes. “I believe that last one was the *other* way around.”

“Ah, yes. That’s right,” I sigh dramatically. “You told them that you’re after my body and *not* my money.”

Her chuckle turns into a yawn and I glance at my phone, cursing the late hour.

“How about a raincheck on getting to know each other?” I ask hopefully. “We can meet up for coffee or something and you can tell me all about yourself.”

“Coffee sounds great,” Lucy says, breaking into a soft grin. “I run a small business and it’s hard to step away. But what about early Saturday morning? Or does that not work for you?” she asks, the hesitation in her voice hanging in the air like a thick fog.

“Saturday’s perfect,” I assure her, mentally running through a list of bribes I can use to get Dr. Chase to cover my appointments. I snag my phone and punch in the number she gives me, hitting send on a text to her. “There, now you have my number too.”

I watch to make sure she gets into the building safely and smile when she turns to wave at me. I feel like a teenager again, but wave back enthusiastically, then ease the car back onto the street. I slow the car at the next intersection, turning the car around and heading toward the clinic.

Chase hates the overnight shifts and it’s never too early to start buttering him up about handling all the appointments on

Saturday. I'll be there after the date.

Coffee. Not a date.

But if things go well, and I plan on things going more than well, I might not make it in at all.

Across town, I pull into the clinic's parking lot and cut the engine. Grabbing my phone before heading to the door. I'm barely inside when the alarm switches from a beep to a screech. I curse under my breath and punch the code in as Chase rounds the corner.

"Shit, Kurt. I thought you were a robber."

Code off, I head to my office, lifting an eyebrow questioningly at him as I pass. "And you were going to do what? Watch me? You strolled in pretty casually. If I were a robber, I'd have asked you to help or at least show me where the good stuff was."

Chase follows slowly, leaning against the doorjamb once we got to my office. He smirks and whistles sharply between his teeth. Seconds later, Hercules appears at his side and sits obediently. Waiting for orders while wagging his tale. One command from Chase and the German Shepard would protect anything and everything. Instead though, Chase releases Hercules and he wags his way over to me, nosing my legs in way of greeting. I discard my keys, wallet, and phone before returning the greeting with a long scratch behind the ears.

"As long as you're here, you can help me. I tried giving Mister Muffins his antibiotics, but he's feeling a bit cranky that we took his balls. Little fella nearly took mine," Chase says, a wince crossing his face.

"Yeah, sure. No problem," I say, giving Hercules one last scratch. My phone lights up with a notification, catching my attention. "Give me a minute though."

"Take your time. I've got a snake with respiratory issues in need of fluids," he says pushing away from the door and leaving, Hercules close on his heels.

I drop into the chair and reach for the phone. A grin splits my face seeing Lucy's name on the screen and I quickly

navigate to the message.

Lucy: Thanks for the ride. Hope you get home safe.

I quickly type out a response.

Kurt: You're more than welcome. Safe at the clinic.

Lucy: Working at this hour?!

Kurt: Dr. Chase needed some help. Heading home soon.

Lucy: Ah, well I'm going to bed.

I'm about to respond when I see the typing bubble and wait anxiously for her message to come through.

Lucy: Good night, future husband. XOXO ;-)

My heart burns in my chest. For some reason, there's hope that I've never had.

Before I can stop myself, I quickly shoot back a response.

Kurt: Sweet dreams, future wife. Dream of me.

I set the phone down, leaning back in the chair to stare up at the ceiling. I know there's a stupid crazy grin plastered across my face, but I don't care.

I stuff my emotions back down and sit up, finding Hercules sitting in the doorway looking at me with his head cocked to one side. "I'm coming, you didn't have to sit there and judge me. Do you think your human will cover me Saturday?" I ask the dog hopefully, but he just huffs and walks away.

If a dog could roll his eyes, he just did.

"Well shit," I say but follow him down the hall, prepared to agree to any of Chase's requests.

This woman is worth going through hell for. I just know it.

LUCY

I stand on my tiptoes, reaching for a box on the top shelf when the bell above the door signals someone's arrival. I pause momentarily, listening for Rosie to welcome them, then proceed to brush my fingertips against the bottom of the box, willing it to move.

Finally, it tips into my waiting hands, and I make my way up front with the order.

"Lucy will be with you in a moment, she just went back to get your invitations," Rosie says as I walk into the bay.

Taking that as my cue, I walk toward them. "Good morning, ladies, are you here for the Reynolds's invitations?"

I stop in my tracks, surprised to see Kurt's mother and grandmother standing in my shop. From the look on their faces, they weren't expecting to run into me either. I set the invitations on the counter and make my way over to them.

"Oh, look at that. It's our sweet Lucy," Kurt's grandma says, pulling me to her side and patting my arm affectionately.

"Hi Stella," I reply, placing a hand over hers and rubbing my thumb back and forth. "Hello Beth, are you two out enjoying the morning?"

Stella tsks beside me and squeezes my arm gently. "Call me Grandma or Grams, sugar. We're practically family and I always did hate my name."

I look down at her slightly confused, but nod at her request.

“Hello Lucy,” Beth beams from ear to ear. “You aren’t *the* Lucy, are you? My friends told me about this shop and the wonderful owner who does *anything* for her clients.”

My cheeks heat a little from embarrassment, but I can’t help nodding enthusiastically in confirmation. I’m a proud business owner after all.

“Scribble & Scribe is my pride and joy. You must be here for the Reynolds invitations?”

“The girls are going to be surprised when I tell them we’re practically family now. You have an adorable shop and offer the best customer service and products in town as we hear and that’s not an easy feat here in this town.” Beth nods for emphasis before continuing, “And yes, the Reynolds initiations are mine. I ordered them ages ago. I hope they haven’t been in your way this whole time.”

“Not at all,” I assure her. “I had them tucked away in the office. I remember checking them when they came in and they’re stunning.” I guide Grams over to the counter, urging Beth to join us.

I open the box and pull out one of the cards. It’s thick stock in stark white. The edges have small silver hearts in two tones giving it a hint of dimension and the wording created in a silver metallic script. There are matching envelopes, the front being stark white while the outside has silver confetti hearts and the inside of the flap coated in silver metallic. I designed a silver seal to close the invitation as a thank you gift for the couple.

My face flushes thinking about this being a silly and maybe unwanted gesture, but Beth seems to love them. Pulling them out of their protective sleeve and holding them against the envelope for the full effect.

The bell above the door rings and I smile at the couple, momentarily distracted as they come in. Rosie hurries over to

assist them and I turn my attention back to Beth who's going through the rest of the items.

"These are perfect. They turned out even better than I imagined they would," Beth says, placing the lid back on the box and looking at me with delight. "You're coming to the party, aren't you?"

Grandma Stella roams over to the wax and seals section, opening a few of the little drawers, poking the different colors of wax pearls inside.

"I don't think I should," I say honestly, turning back to Beth. "I'm not family."

"Don't be silly, you must come. I ordered way too much food and wine. You'd be doing me a favor. Besides," she leans in and whispers to me conspiratorially, "The girls and I get a little competitive with our parties. If you come, it'll be like having a celebrity there."

I take a deep breath to respectfully decline, but Beth cuts me off before I can say anything. "Don't say no yet. It's not until next month, so you can think about it, okay?"

"Okay," I semi-agree, more to end the topic than promise my presence.

We leave Grandma Stella to her browsing, and I help Beth pick out different items. The two of us exchange stories, her about how she and James, Kurt's dad, met and fell in love. Me about how I started the business in a world growing with digital technology.

"I hate to ask this," Beth says taking her credit card back and smiling to where Stella's taking a cat nap. She cleared out a stack of journals I placed in the display chair with a fluffy blanket and fell asleep after getting settled. "Would it be okay to leave her here while I run down to the bakery? I shouldn't be more than ten to fifteen minutes, tops."

"Of course," I say immediately. "We'll be fine here and there's no sense waking her up since she's tired. I can also put your items behind the counter, so you don't have to carry them around with you, if you'd like."

Almost as soon as Beth is out the door, a young couple arrives for their appointment. Rosie shoots me an apologetic look, still assisting the first couple. I wave away her concerns and greet them, guiding them to a private table where we can discuss their ideas for their wedding invitations and go through examples.

“Tell me about the big day, have the two of you picked a date yet?” I ask pulling out a notebook to jot down their concepts.

“We were thinking about June,” the bride to be blushes and flicks her gaze to her fiancé.

“Oh, June is a wonderful month to get married,” Grandma Stella says, making her way to the table. “Everyone thinks April is the best month. And sure, if you want it to be cold and rainy with a chance of snow. And April showers don’t bring May flowers. May just brings cicadas and bugs. June is the best, don’t you think Lucy? It’s when I was married.”

“Eh, yes—” I get out before Grandma Stella continues.

“Good. It’s decided then. June. The magnolia and roses will be in bloom, so gorgeous.” She pauses and cocks her head slightly, reminding me of Kurt when he looked at me in the car the other night. “October or November could be okay though.”

“June is a wonderful month,” I say trying to take control of the conversation again. “What colors were you thinking?”

Stella looks at me, her eyes sparkling. “June it is. It doesn’t leave us much time for planning though.” She pulls the book of invitations toward her and begins flipping through. Pointing out her favorites while the couple agree with everything Stella says.

She takes the notebook from my hand and starts jotting down items. Reminding all of us that while we don’t typically have a lot of rain in June, we need to be prepared to move the wedding inside.

I notice that while Stella divides a page in the notebook and while she was jotting down notes from the couple, she was also tracking my comments.

No, I don't like pink.

My favorite color combination was canary yellow, salmon, and beige.

I love twinkle lights and greenery.

I smile at how she navigates the conversation and helps the couple understand their options, offering personal insight if they became stuck. I step away momentarily to help Rosie, who is equally impressed.

It isn't until I'm going through my bedtime routine that I realize Stella wasn't just planning their wedding today.

She was also planning mine. Kurt and mine's.

Crap.

Kurt and I definitely have things to discuss tomorrow.

LUCY

“To us,” Kurt holds up a glass of white wine and toasts, waiting for me to clink.

Today has been nothing short of a dream. First coffee, then walking in the park, then sitting in a library and reading to each other, and then finding a small bistro to have dinner. I didn't expect to spend the whole day with him, but Rosie insisted that the shop was slow and seeing as I never take a day off, she would make a scene if I even thought about stepping foot in the door.

So I didn't.

“What's something you dream of doing?” I ask him.

“Running my own rescue,” he says without hesitation. “It takes a lot of volunteers and money. I'm starting to save and while I do, I help other organizations.”

“A rescue for a specific breed of dog...cat? If there are those?”

“Just for animals. And maybe ones that probably would never get adopted at a traditional shelter. Ones with special needs.”

My heart soars. The man doesn't just like animals, he loves them to his soul.

“How about you?” He leans back and his dress shirt pulls tightly across his chest. We haven't been close enough for me

to feel it, but I know it's hard planes of muscle covered in the softest skin. He's just too God-like for it not to be.

"My business is my dream, but..." I swallow. "Having a family is something I dream of, but I'm not sure it's for me."

He leans forward, the glow of the flameless candle lighting up his face. "Why not?"

"I... I was the accidental child, after my parents thought they were done. They wanted to retire and travel, and I was the shackle that kept them tied down. I'm not sure I understand what true, unconditional love is."

"Do you still talk to them?"

"I do. Not often. It's amazing how close your family is."

"And in everyone's business."

I remember Grandma Stella and what she did. I start to open my mouth and the waiter interrupts with the check.

"Dutch, I offer."

"Not a chance. Our first date-date is mine to get."

I want to believe that this could be real. That all of this could go somewhere, and that June wedding could happen, but the way this started—with anaphylaxis and choking—doesn't scream longevity. It screams caution.

Kurt stands. "Shall we walk you home?"

We chose this bistro for location. He parked at my place and hand in hand we walked here. And hand in hand, we're walking back. It's a chilly night and he moves his arm around me to pull me under his careful grasp. The clear night has stars sparkling.

Maybe there are no accidents in life. Maybe it's all written in the stars.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

"Accidents and stars."

He smiles. "Deep."

“Kinda. I guess you bring that out in me. You’ve started me thinking about things that I haven’t in a while. Facing hard truths that maybe I’ve been attracting the wrong man because I thought I wasn’t right for anyone. I see in your family that people aren’t a burden. They’re... loved. Truly adored and cherished, that’s something that’s no accident in my mind.”

He stops us and looks into my eyes, like he can see into my soul. “You know, when I saw you across the room on Valentine’s Day, something in me snapped. I could feel your pain and I knew you needed me. I just didn’t know you needed my family, too. Will you come with me to the anniversary party?”

I nod and his hand slips behind my neck. My heart crashes against my ribcage.

“I see the stars in your eyes.”

I smirk. “Cheesy.”

“No, really, you have the power of the galaxy inside of you, Lucy. I just hope that I can help you see that.”

His head lowers and I slowly close my eyes. And time is truly boundless. It feels like the kiss goes on forever. His tongue darts to tease the split of my lips, tempting me to meet him. I do and my toes curl in my boots.

“Anniversary party?” he asks, pulling back.

I nod. “I’ll go.”

His lips split into a wide smile and we walk on to my place, hand in hand.

The dream can be a reality, right?

I GRIN SEEING A TEXT FROM KURT LETTING ME KNOW HE’S ON his way to pick me up. He ends the text letting me know he’d like a repeat performance of our kiss under the stars.

So do I, Kurt.

My cheeks flush recalling the way his lips captured mine, gently, but with an insistence that he was all in. Our tongues meeting briefly before he backed away, the heat in his eyes telling me just how much he didn't want to let go. He did though. Assuring me as he left that he'd see me soon.

I scroll up through our texts, reading the message he sent me that night for the hundredth time.

Kurt: Thinking of you. How your curls brush your nose in the wind. How your soft your lips are. And how much I want you to find your dream. I'm falling for you and I don't want to stop falling.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach and I close my eyes, placing a hand to my chest and biting my bottom lip.

Kurt reminded me that he hadn't told his family about us. How he wanted to wait until after the anniversary party because they were so happy. He assured me that once the party was over, he would explain everything, and we could decide where we wanted to go from there. Remembering how Beth had pulled me into her arms and Grandma Stella planned out our wedding, it was easy to pretend just a little longer.

Although, for the last two days, I've wondered if it doesn't have to be pretend. I stop mid-step to my bedroom at the thought. Sure, I haven't known him for a long time, but being around him just feels right. Feels good. Feels comfortable. I could absolutely see myself growing old with him. We'd just have to take it a day at a time for now.

But will his family feel the same? They're protective. And maybe they'll think the ruse wasn't fair to them. I can see that. Hell, if we decide to go our separate ways now, I'll miss them. Granny and her meddling ways. Beth and her sweet smiles and insistence that I be part of the family event.

A knock at the door pulls me out of my thoughts and I go to answer it.

"Hello, Beautiful," Kurt greets me.

"Hello! Don't you look handsome," I respond, reaching a hand out and running my fingertips down the lapel of his blue

suit jacket. He captures my hand in his and brings it to his lips for a quick kiss, his eyes promising much more later.

“Are you ready to go, or do you need a few minutes?” he asks, not wanting to rush me.

“I was just on my way to my bedroom to grab my cardigan and then I’ll be ready,” I reply leaving him and heading to my bedroom, wishing I invited him to come with me.

I grab the cream cardigan and hesitate before rushing to my bedside table and grabbing a condom, tucking it into my purse for safe keeping. Better to be safe than sorry and don’t need an accident. *Lessons learned.*

Kurt helps me into the car and I reach over to open his door, trying not to let my mind wander to the little rubber friend tucked away. It’s difficult to do though because Kurt’s masculine scent envelopes me in the small space, making me think about his body wrapped around mine.

Intoxicated from the scent of him, I fiddle with the strap on my purse while Kurt navigates through town and onto the interstate. He reaches over and takes my hand in his, interlocking our fingers. I look to him and he smiles.

“You’re kind of amazing,” he says keeping his eyes on the road. “I couldn’t ask for a better fake fiancée.”

Fake. There’s the word that puts me in my place. It’s like a slap and a bucket of ice water to my hopes.

My chest tightens. He means only for tonight.

He sighs. “Tomorrow, you’ll be a free agent.” His smile tightens and he makes a noise in the back of his throat, his grip on my hand tightening slightly before letting it go and returning it to the wheel.

My fingers tingle, wanting the feeling of his interwoven with them. I was the one to say “Yes” in that crowded restaurant. I was the one who made the decision to take a chance. I’m just not sure I’m the one who will be okay if this doesn’t end up going past tonight.

We pull up to the house as other guests arrive and instead of waiting in line for the valet, Kurt rounds the house and pulls soothing into a two-story standalone garage.

“I don’t trust my cousins with the car,” he says as way of explanation, shifting into park and cutting the engine.

Outside the car, he offers me his arm, which I accept, and escorts me into the house. The space is filled with bouquets of various white flowers with ruby accents, tables are draped in white with ruby embellishments. Everything one would expect to see at a 40th wedding anniversary to the nth degree. It’s opulent, gorgeous, and reminds me of Beth’s warmth.

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet,” Kurt says guiding me through the main room to a tall man with curly blond hair. “Hey Dr. Chase, I’d like you to meet Lucy.”

The tall man turns and looks down at me, a lopsided grin in place. “Lucy, it’s good to finally meet you. I was beginning to think that our Kurt here had an imaginary girlfriend.”

Kurt punches him quickly in the side and Chase bursts out laughing, lifting his hands up in surrender.

A smile twitches at the corner of my mouth. “Nope, not a ghost or imaginary, here in the flesh. And it’s nice to meet you Dr. Chase. Do you have a girlfriend?” I say with a peaked eyebrow.

Kurt’s mouth drops open. “Burn.”

Chase laughs again, turning from me to Kurt, “If you fuck it up, I may take a shot with this one. She’s sassy.”

Kurt wraps his arm around me. “You have no idea. But she’s mine.”

The champagne in my stomach bubbles up and burns in my throat.

I wish.

Grandma Stella breezes into the room wearing a long periwinkle gown. “Don’t mind me, I’m just here to borrow Lucy.”

I allow myself to be tugged out of the room, needing a break.

“Lucy dear, do you need your hearing checked?” Stella asks sometime later.

“What?” I tear my gaze away from Kurt’s across the room, focusing on Stella.

We’ve been separated for most of the evening, Stella monopolizing my time by introducing me to everyone we encounter. Kurt and I watch each other throughout the evening from afar. He sends me winks and smiles and each time our gazes meet, a zing of electricity and longing courses through me.

Stella chuckles and shakes her head watching me staring at the man who has a way of looking comfortable in jeans and sneakers as equally as a three-piece suit.

Although I do prefer the suit.

“Excuse me Stella, I’m going to use the restroom,” I say looking up to find Kurt still watching me.

I make my way through the house, stepping outside for some cool air. The breeze stirs my hair and I lift my face to the sky closing my eyes in contentment. The door opens and closes behind me, footsteps making their way toward me.

“I’ve missed you,” Kurt says, stepping close behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist.

“I think Grandma Stella has been keeping us apart,” I reply leaning into his chest, comforted by his warmth.

“Absence does make the heart grow fonder,” he says whispering into my ear.

I groan as desire for him heats my blood. Turning in his arms, I run my hands up his chest and around his neck. He lowers his mouth to mine and drags me closer to him, letting me feel just how much he wants me. I moan into his mouth, lowering my hand to rub his cock through his pants. The bulge blossoms under my touch showing me what I do to him and a thrill courses through my veins.

“Come with me,” Kurt growls stepping back and grabbing my hand.

We almost run across the driveway to the garage. Once we’re inside he shuts the side door, and pushes me against it slowly, capturing my mouth again with his own and pinning me there with his body. His hands grip my ass and I wrap my legs around his waist as he lifts me, grinding my hips against him.

“Fuck,” he growls out. “I want to be inside you so bad. Every time I’d look at you, my cock hardened, and I had to turn away from people. My mother thought I was interested in learning about her Ficus tree. I was just hiding a boner!”

I giggle. His honesty is refreshing. He shares and that’s what I want in a partner.

“Then what are you waiting for,” I respond.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t bring protection.” The regret in his voice almost makes me smile, but right now, I needed his cock buried inside me.

“I have a condom in my purse I left in the car.”

“I love a prepared woman.”

Kurt carries me to the car kissing me every step. He sets me down and opens the passenger door. I grab my purse, fishing out the condom and grin up at him holding it between two fingers.

He grins down at me wickedly and we make our way upstairs, which turns out to be a small apartment. In long strides, my shorter ones double-timing to catch up, he leads me to the bedroom where he peels me out of my dress, urgency, and desire in every motion. Thank God for Spandex.

“Fucking magnificent,” Kurt says, stepping back to look at me in nothing but black lace panties and a matching bra. There’s nothing but worship in his eyes. He takes off his jacket, letting it fall to the ground and starts unbuttoning his shirt. “Touch yourself for me.”

My nipples harden at his demand, and I run my hands up my torso, cupping my breasts and squeezing them lightly. I watch greedily as his shirt lands on the ground with his jacket and I slip a hand beneath the band of my panties. I'm not surprised at finding myself soaking wet and rub my swollen bud.

The sound of Kurt's belt and pants dropping to the floor clinks on the wood. I stop touching myself to unhook my bra, letting it slide to the ground. Kurt closes his eyes briefly, as if in a silent prayer, and I take the opportunity to shimmy out of my panties.

He growls in appreciation and moves forward kissing me hard and backing me up to the edge of the bed where he lowers me down. I arch into him as he licks, sucks, and bites his way down my body. Kissing my neck before moving to my breasts.

"Oh, please," I beg as he stops to suck both nipples, before continuing his journey south.

Kurt kneels and hooks my legs over his shoulders, meeting my gaze before closing his mouth over my clit. Sucking me and licking me, driving me closer to that deep oblivion I desperately need. I roll my nipples, trying to sate a need to be touched and gasp as Kurt pushes two fingers inside me, thrusting in time with each expert flick of his tongue before adding a third finger and widening me for what I know will stretch me to my limits.

I'm unbelievably close to the edge and cry out in dismay when Kurt's mouth and fingers leave me. "What the—"

"I love how greedy you are," he breaths across my skin and shifts us up higher onto the bed.

"Shut up and fuck me already," I pant, kissing him and tasting myself.

He wastes no time stripping his boxers and freeing his cock. My eyes practically jump from my skull seeing his size. He's not super long, but he's girthy and that's all this girl wants.

Rolling the condom down his hard shaft, he moves between my parted thighs and lines the head of his cock up with my slick entrance and pushes in slowly, easing out and back in until I've taken him completely inside me. And we're united fully.

My breath catches in my throat at the completeness of him deep inside me, but it's not enough. I wrap my legs around his waist, lifting my hips.

Kurt rolls us so I'm straddling him and grips my hips as I start to move. The walls of my pussy tightening around him as I ride his shaft up and down.

"You're so fucking tight," he rumbles, moving a hand between us to rub my clit. He cups the back of my neck to pull me to him for a kiss, our tongues clashing with a need to claim one another. He flips us again and quickens the tempo and I meet him thrust for thrust, begging him to make me come.

"Kurt!" He pushes me over the edge, shooting stars burst behind my clamped eyes as my body shoots into the heavens.

"Fuck you're gorgeous when you come." He pushes up and gives two quick, deep pumps and plants, releasing his seed into the condom with shakes of his body.

I rub his back as we come down.

There's two realities in my life. The one that exists inside the room. And the one outside of it.

And I'm not sure which one he's living in.

LUCY

“What’s with the goofy grin?” Rosie asks, handing me a stack of botanical watercolor cards from a local artist.

I move a few items on the shelf, making room for the cards and thinking about how to respond. “It was a good weekend.”

“Oh no, Lucy. You’re holding out on me. Was it a good weekend, like we made-out good? Or was it a *good* weekend?” she asks, thrusting her hips back and forth to emphasize her meaning.

I laugh and roll my eyes, turning away from the cards and straightening the section of pens and notebooks.

“Fine, don’t tell me,” she sighs. “I’m just going to assume it was mind blowing sex.”

I mumble, “Well, you’d be right.”

“I knew it!” Rosie whacks my upper arm with the feather duster she picked up. “I want all the details.”

“Oh no...” I’m not willing to divulge more than I already have. “You’re lucky you got what you did.”

“Has he told his family yet?” she asks, turning to dust the next shelf.

And that’s just it. The one thing keeping me from complete happiness.

I don’t know.

After our bedsheet workout, we escaped the party and went back to my place for round two. And then three. He left me sleeping in bed on Sunday with a note about heading into work. We texted since, but I still didn't know if he told his family. And we hadn't really talked about what this is.

Are we dating?

Are we fuck buddies?

Are we nothing?

It's like another man is controlling my life and I'm not sure I'm loving it. But the sex... that's something I'm not hating, that's for sure. The man knows how to make my body sing like Mariah-freakin'-Carey. I hit all the high notes and then some that only dogs can hear.

"No clue," I say, shrugging. "I'm going to run and grab a frappé. You want anything?"

Rosie's lips tighten and she drops her gaze before I can see the pity I know is there. I've been here too many times. Not knowing what the relationship really is. It's like I'm a magnet for men with commitment issues. No, I'm the one who allows them not to commit.

She declines the offer and I grab my tote from the office and head out. The coffee shop is just close enough to walk, but just far enough away that it makes you have time to think. Today, I opt for walking even though my thoughts might be more bitter than a double-drip espresso.

I check my text messages, frowning when there isn't one from Kurt, even though I hadn't heard a notification. I'm just wishing. Before I can chicken out, I type out a message and hit send.

Lucy: Missing my future husband. XOXO

I stare at the screen, excitement and relief welling up at those three blissful dots of someone responding. And I wait while they disappear.

It's fine. It's probably just a long text. The crosswalk beeps at me to start walking, which I do. Frustrated, I shove my

phone into my pocket and open the door to do the shop. Striding up to the counter and placing my order.

No one is in here except for me and a couple baristas, so I lean against the pickup counter to wait. I pull my phone out to check my messages again. Nothing. Of course. Then punch the buttons to power it off and back on again. Just in case. Still nothing.

I'm don't want to be this way. I want to know, but maybe it's for the best.

I sigh and shove the phone back into my pocket. The female barista sets her own phone on the counter, helping the customer that walked in. I can't help but notice when *her's* lights up with a message notification.

Her background is her cheek to cheek with a man, smiling like idiots.

I clear my throat and attempt to look uninterested as Barista Girl picks her phone up. "You two make a cute couple." I say, gesturing to her screen

"We do, don't we?" she gushes.

"How long have you two been together?" I ask, needing more information to torture myself with. I should be happy for a fellow female.

"Dan and I go way back. We're getting married, just waiting for the timing to be right."

There it is. Maybe we're all just waiting for the timing to be right.

I look to my phone and there's still nothing. He's a busy guy, but I thought we had something. I thought maybe I fit into his life, his family, his world.

I turn off my phone. This isn't healthy. I know when I'm not wanted. I was born knowing.

I knew the chances were slim that it would be my fairy tale.

I accept my drink, sipping it and burning my mouth.

The timing just wasn't right.

KURT

I stretch my arms and roll my neck, exhausted after four hours of emergency surgery on a three-year-old beagle. He darted out of his yard and was tagged by a car. Thankfully he was rushed in, and surgery went well. I'm optimistic he'll pull through. He already licked my face, so that's saying a lot.

I groan remembering that I still owe Chase a couple more overnight shifts. He took a pound of flesh when I was gone for a whole day of dates with Lucy, and then he had to leave the party early, even though he was making moves on one of the caterer's wait staff.

Thoughts of inviting Lucy to sleep over evaporate. I head to my office, quickening my pace a little remembering that I'd gotten a message from Lucy.

Rereading her messages makes me regret having to work tonight even more. I'd ask Chase for another favor, but I'm sure he'd laugh in my face.

Kurt: Long day. Missing you too future wife.

Message sent, I start to tackle some paperwork before my next appointment. Our receptionist informs me of another appointment, and I check my phone, hoping to see that I missed a message from Lucy.

Nope, nothing.

I send another.

Kurt: How's your day been?

I push away from the desk and head to the exam room. I snag the chart on the outside of the door and scan it before knocking and entering the room. This one should go relatively fast as it's just a follow-up appointment. I flip the page, reading the past notes, the owner seemed to be following

instructions since the plump cat that lost a decent amount of weight.

Before and after each appointment, I check my messages. Disappointment turns to concern. Which turns to worry.

And now that everyone has gone home for the evening, I've convinced myself that something is wrong. She should've responded by now. Even if she forgot her phone or it died, by now it should be fine. Screw texting. I call her, waiting anxiously for her to answer as I listen to the rings. Each ring that goes unanswered, my concern only grows.

Maybe she's just in the shower.

What if someone gave her chamomile by accident? Could she have been in a car accident?

I shove a nervous hand through my hair and leave an awkward voicemail. Asking her to call or text me.

The night creeps by slowly. The beagle is resting well. Lulu continues to gain weight and has been given free reign of the enclosed receptionist area as well as my office, learning to balance on three legs with her amputation healing well. Her exploration ending in a nest of blankets where she settles down to sleep for the night. She'll be up for adoption in just days but needs the perfect person to take care of her. Someone who needs to build a family from the ground up.

In the morning, I brief the staff on the rest of the patients before rushing out of the clinic and heading toward Lucy's business.

Scribble & Scribe was a bust. The only thing I found there was a bristling Rosie, who told me that I need to make up my mind and be honest with people, before the bell on the door jingled and she was off to do her job.

And she's right. I do.

I drive over to Lucy's house. It's dark inside on this cloudy day.

I ring the doorbell, but nothing.

Kurt: I'm at your place. If you're in there, please let me in.

But there's nothing. And my stomach drops.

I messed up. I needed to tell her what I was feeling inside. She deserves that after being pulled into my ruse.

I'm driving away when I get a text.

Lucy: I think I need some space. With my past, I need an honest relationship, someone to love me unconditionally and to know that the person I'm with is all in. Since you haven't told your family, I feel like I'm living a lie. And I don't want to be that person. I could have fallen for you, Kurt, but falling for the dream and living in this harsh reality isn't safe for me. Thank you for understanding.

Part of me is destroyed. But part of me admires her for knowing her boundaries. For telling me what she needs. And if I can't be that man, that she will not change what she needs. It's something new in her.

I remember back at the restaurant that I could see her struggling with the guy who left. She needed to stand up for herself and that's exactly what she's doing.

I've messed up.

I want to make this right.

But I'm not sure how.

Grandma...

“WHAT'S UP, KURT?” GRANDMA ASKS WHILE MISTING MY mother's plants. They both have dark green thumbs and make the solarium look like a jungle.

“I think I messed up with Lucy.”

“You mean Lulu?” she looks out of the corner of her eye.

She knew all along?

“You knew?” I should ask with so much disbelief. I’m not an actor.

“I suspected. But when your mother and I went to her paper and stationery store, I knew. She looked like she was ready to vomit. It wasn’t real, right?”

I swallow. “That’s the problem. It’s real, and I didn’t tell her how real my feelings are.” I pace back and forth, finally falling into a rattan settee and Grandma joins me.

“That girl needs this family.”

“I need her.” I remember back to that night she asked about my dreams. “I started a non-profit for my rescue yesterday. I’m going ahead with it and she’s the one who made me see that I should go for my dreams. She’s so passionate about that store—it’s her dream. But I was blind to see that she’s really my biggest dream.”

“Cheesy.”

I laugh remembering Lucy saying the same.

“What should I do, Grams?”

She sighs. “Give her some space and time.”

“Really?”

“But not too much time.”

Great.

“You know you’re being less than helpful, right.”

“The universe knows when two people are meant to be together. Your meeting was no accident, my grandson. It was fate.”

Time. It’s going to kill me, but I set a date in my mind. Then I will go see her.

LUCY

I found the one. The one I've been looking for all my life. And she's snarky, playful, and has three legs.

This new rescue, *XOXO Adoptions*, has approved my adoption and I'm walking into the waiting area to take my sweet girl home.

It's been two weeks since I last texted Kurt and he's given me space. Part of me wishes he hadn't, but in that time, I've learned a lot about myself. I've learned that my business is not my life. I've let Rosie have free rein on the store more than a couple days, taking long walks to the coffeeshop and just sitting there and reading. I've visited the library and had dinners by myself.

"Table for one," I practiced it over and over in the mirror before heading into the first restaurant. I wanted it to sound natural, and it did. I thought I was okay with being... alone.

But then Rosie showed me this new rescue that's part of a non-profit organization.

And I saw Lulu. She just seemed familiar. And she had stars in her eyes. The filter they used made her look a little comical, but definitely distinctive.

I applied, I met her with the rescue manager, and I was called two days later to say that she's mine.

Longest two days... ever.

Maybe this is the family I'm meant to have and maybe she'll be enough.

But the pit in my stomach hasn't filled after that text to Kurt. It's deep. He was a part of me, and he filled the hole that my early years left inside of me.

I find my way inside and the rescue manager stands. "Miss Hart, hello! Lulu is so excited."

My heart rings. She's mine.

I follow to one of the meeting rooms and wait.

The door opens and my mouth drops. There's Lulu, but at the top of the leash is Kurt.

I swallow and wonder what's going on.

He bites his lip. "Is it okay if I come in?"

I nod without saying anything.

Sitting on the small bench next to me, he allows Lulu to jump up next to him.

"So, Lulu, this is Lucy and she's going to be your new mom. I know she's going to take great care of you, because she took great care with me. I just didn't do the same with her. And I regret that."

I stay quiet. I need to hear it.

He clears his throat. "And I'm sorry that I didn't tell her how much I need her. She's more than I've ever though I deserved, and she inspired me to start this rescue."

My mouth drops open. "Really?"

He nods. "Really."

Lulu climbs over him and sits between us.

Kurt turns to me. "Lucy, I don't know what's going through your mind, but I miss you. I miss your laugh, your heart, and... well, your ass."

I chuckle. "Ditto." My eyes start to burn. "I missed you so much."

“Can we start over?”

I still. Is that what I want? “Does your family know?”

“Yeah, they all gave me shit and they said you’re the smartest woman whose ever dumped me. They’re on your side, by the way.”

I look down at my hands, stuffed between my legs so I won’t grab for his hand. *Not yet.* “I miss them, too.”

His arm wraps around my shoulders and Lulu looks from him to me. “Will you go on a date with me?”

“I get to pick the restaurant.”

“Absolutely.”

“I know this little bistro around the corner from my—”

His lips claim mine and I’m never going back.

Lulu starts licking both of our chins and although it’s sweet, it’s also weird. We both back away laughing and Lulu’s tail bats the wall with happy thumps.

“Shall we go home?” I ask.

Kurt’s chest rises and falls. “All of us.”

“As a family.”

This was no accident. Fate and love collided in the middle of a restaurant and Valentine’s Day is now my favorite holiday.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER...

KURT

“There you go.” I straighten Lulu’s bowtie. I gave her the choice of a tutu or a bowtie— she chose the black bowtie. The girl’s got style.

“Now, just like we rehearsed, remember? She comes in, you stay by my side. Right?”

The door opens and Lulu rushes to her doggy mom.

Lucy gushes over her from the entry and I hear every word. “Look who got a pretty bowtie today! Did Daddy get that for you?”

“Thanks for that, Lulu,” I mumble.

I stand tall as both my girls come around the corner. Lucy stops dead when she sees me in my three-piece blue suit.

“Well, well, someone’s looking to get some action.” She smirks and sets down her coffee cup.

Probably should hold off on the sex talk, baby.

She told me what this suit did for her, and I remembered. I try to remember everything she likes, needs, wants. It’s all mine to deliver. And boy, do I deliver.

She nears and I drop to one knee. It’s only been six months, but I can’t wait anymore.

It's like our souls have known each other forever.

“Lucy Jane Hart, I want to be your love and your everything for the rest of our lives, just like you're mine. Please say you'll marry me?”

She looks down at Lulu. “He looks pretty good, right?”

Lulu pants and her tail beats on the wood floor fast.

“I love you, Kurt Reynolds and yes, I will marry you.”

I slip her own diamond on her hand and lift her into the air.

She examines it. “It's beautiful.”

“You're beautiful.”

We seal the moment with a kiss and my family runs out of kitchen to give hugs and congratulations.

Granny chuckles. “You're gonna get some action.”

Lucy turns six shades of red. “Oh, Grandma.”

They hug and Lucy returns to me.

We lift champagne flutes and I clear my voice.

“This woman was no accident, and we're meant to be. I can't wait to marry you.”

“I love you, Kurt.”

“I love you more.”

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