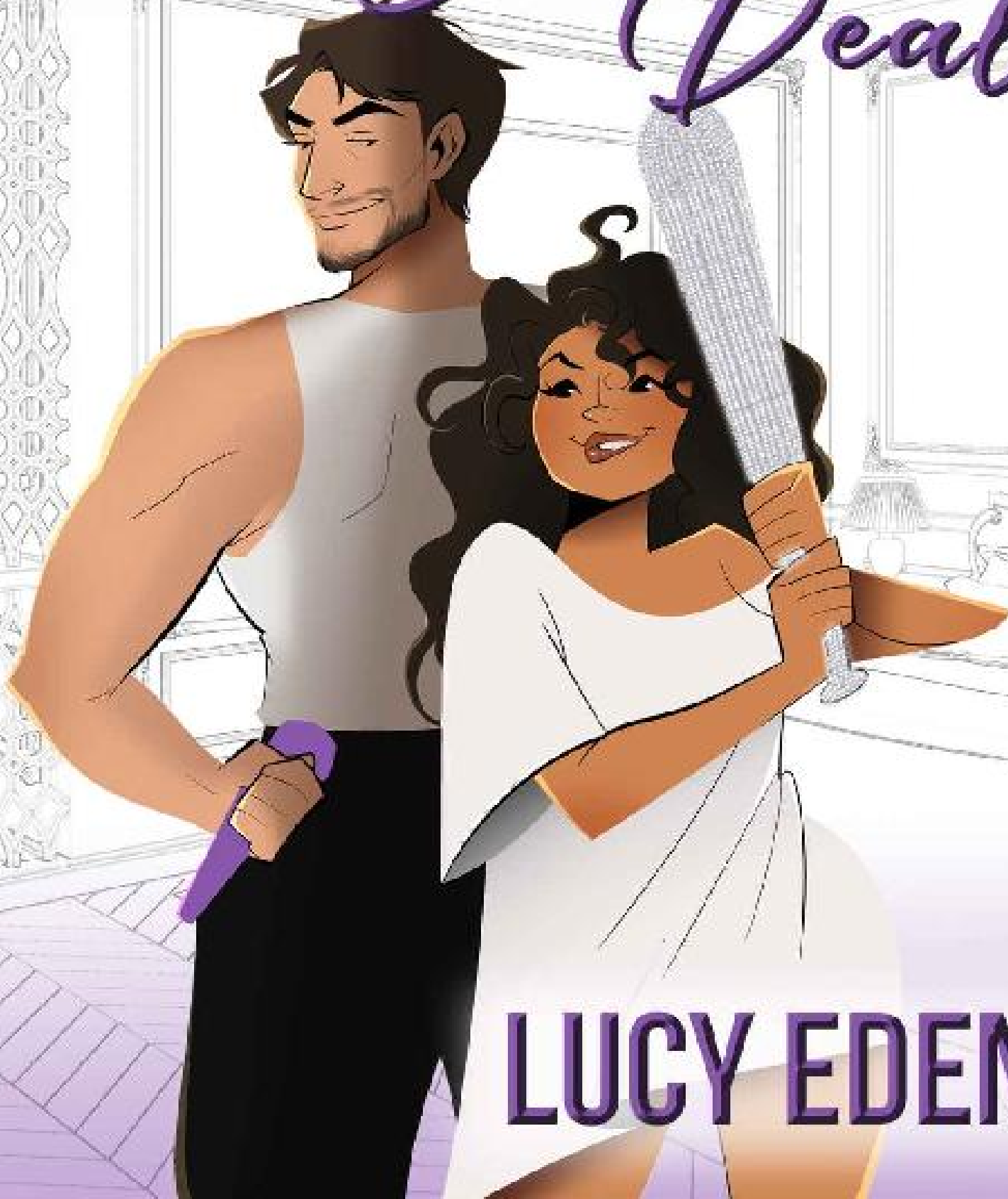


# One Scott Deal



LUCY EDEN

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This book is strictly intended for those over the age of 18.

All sexually active characters in this work are 18 years of age or older. All acts of a sexual nature are completely consensual.

*Every story is for my mom, who made me fall in love with reading & Ms. K, who made me fall in love with writing.*

# One Scott Deal

FOR CONTENT WARNINGS (WITH SPOILERS) FOR ALL MY BOOKS, PLEASE VISIT:

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Ex-Navy Seal turned private mercenary Sam Tyler is a man on a mission.

A mission to get as far away from New York and his tragic family history as he can.

A new gig with a private security firm is exactly what he needs, but there is one obstacle his military training couldn't prepare him for.

A spoiled, smart-mouth, and incredibly sexy starlet named Ella Scott.

Quadruple threat Ella Scott was born to be an entertainer. Seriously, she booked her first acting job before she could crawl. But, after nearly four decades dodging every curveball the industry and her mother could throw at her, there is one thing threatening to bring her carefully curated world crashing down around her.

And, no, it's not the unhinged stalker that wants her dead.

It's Sam Tyler, the overbearing, inflexible, and ridiculously attractive wall of muscle the studio sent to protect her.

When an imminent threat forces Sam & Ella into hiding, will they find the courage to defeat their most dangerous enemies, the ghosts of their pasts?

(They should also probably do something about the stalker, too.)

One Scott Deal is funny, dramatic & steamy short full of bodyguarding, opposites attract, enemies to lovers, forced proximity & steam.

# One Scott Deal



# Lucy Eden

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# Chapter One

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## Sam



“IF THIS IS such a good gig, why didn’t you take it?” I asked Michaels as I refused a third server offering me a tray of appetizers that was even more pretentious than the other two offerings.

“Believe me, Tyler, I would kill for this job, but the director wanted you.” His expression soured momentarily.

After leaving the military, I did odd jobs for different agencies. Whatever felt dangerous or exciting. Out of the blue, one of my old Navy Seal buddies got me a hook-up with The Sutherland Group, one of the oldest and most clandestine private military groups. I was clear with director Wright that I was only interested in working overseas and not interested in staying in one spot for too long. Still, I was standing in an overcrowded penthouse apartment in Manhattan, wearing a tuxedo, watching a party full of people with more money than sense gorge themselves on overpriced champagne and mindless gossip.

“So, who is this chick?” I whispered to Michaels as I scanned the room again. “Why is she such a big deal?”

“Seriously, dude?” he scoffed and jerked his head at me. “Did Wright tell you who the client was?”

“No,” I retorted. “He said to show up in a tuxedo and that you would brief me.”

“How that lazy prick got to be director of anything is a fucking mystery.” Michaels shook his head. “The client is Ella Scott.”

“Ella Scott, why does that name sound familiar?”

“How long have you been in the desert, man?” he laughed. “Ella Scott is one of the biggest stars in the world. She’s mostly a pop star, but lately, she’s been pivoting to movies. She’s had a couple of box office hits, and she hasn’t made an album in a few years, but her—”

“Are you the president of her fan club?” I furrowed my brow at him and chuckled.

“No, I’m a participating member of society. You’d learn something if you did anything except work and hide in that villain’s lair of a house.”

“Okay, so where is this, Ella Scott,” I asked impatiently. I was eager to change the subject from my personal life.

“Well, she’s gotta be around here somewhere. It’s her house.” He shrugged. “So you good? These bullshit industry parties aren’t really my scene.” I nodded and watched Michaels head towards the exit, expertly weaving his way through the crowd.

These parties weren’t my scene either, and I still hadn’t decided whether or not I would take this gig. I couldn’t be sure that Wright would keep his word to put me in the field, and babysitting pop stars wasn’t the way I wanted to spend my time. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, opened my browser, and typed in the name Ella Scott. My screen was flooded with images of a perfectly styled, photoshopped, and airbrushed woman with hair of varying lengths and colors posing in elaborate costumes. I scrolled through the pictures until one made me stop. Her hair was pulled back, and her makeup was minimal. I’d seen plenty of beautiful women, but that wasn’t what stopped me. It was her eyes. They were large and deep brown with flecks of gold, limned by thick dark lashes. Her gaze seemed to pierce my soul. I was momentarily distracted by Ella Scott’s photo and looked up in time to see a server backing up with a tray of canapés but too late to stop him from crashing into me.

I caught the crystal bowl full of dip that flew into the air before it hit the ground without spilling any. The server held on to the tray, but the canapés went airborne. A few landed on my shirt.

“Holy shit! Awesome reflexes, man!” The server said as I handed him the bowl. “Are you like a ninja or something?”

“Or something,” I muttered as I shoved my phone in my pocket and began wiping the smeared spread off my shirt.

“Awe, I’m sorry, man.” He said when he noticed my shirt. “Do you want me to get something for that? I wasn’t looking where I was going. I feel like an asshole. I can’t get fired from this job. I’m so—“

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” I patted him on the shoulder to prevent him from causing a scene. Unfortunately, a few heads were already beginning to turn, and I still hadn’t made contact with the client or her handlers. “Could you point me in the direction of the washroom?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, relief flooding his face. “It’s down the hall, third door on the left.” I nodded and made my way out of the crowded room.

The hallway was deserted, and the music and chatter of the party became a distant buzzing when I found the third door and turned the handle. I found myself in a large, dimly room that wasn’t a washroom. It was obviously a closet. The closet was the size of a large studio apartment, but still not what I needed. The fact that the intel from a cater waiter who couldn’t walk in a straight line would be bad shouldn’t have been surprising.

I prepared to back out of the room when a noise stopped me. It was a faint, keening sound. At first, I thought it was a wounded animal, but intermittent sniffing sounds told me it was a person crying.

“Hello,” I called into the room. “Is everything alright?” The crying abruptly stopped.

“Who’s there?” a clearly annoyed but oddly melodic female voice called me from the closet’s recesses.

“I’m Sam, Sam Tyler. I was looking for the washroom and got lost.” I stammered and didn’t know why my heart was suddenly pounding.

The owner of the voice stepped out from behind a rack of evening gowns and glared at me with her hands on her hips. She was more beautiful in person than in any photo on the internet. Her fists were perched on her hips in a white floor-length gown with a slit so high up her leg that I knew there was no way she was wearing underwear underneath. I blinked, trying to push every unprofessional thought out of my mind, and forced myself to focus on her face, which didn't help. Her full pouty lips were pursed in annoyance were painted a deep red. Her dark brown eyes were rimmed with black makeup, making her irises glow. The remnants of the tears I'd interrupted reflected the lights of the spotlights in the closet.

“Well, Sam Sam Tyler,” she hissed. “Whether or not everything is *all right* is none of your business. But the real reason you're sneaking around my fucking closet is my business.”

# Chapter Two

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## Ella



“SNEAKING?” The handsome, suspicious stranger standing in my closet had the nerve to look offended after having been caught lurking around my house. “I wasn’t sneaking anywhere. Like I said, I was looking for the washroom and ended up here instead. I was leaving when I heard you crying.” He must have paused in reaction to my sudden change in expression. I was under the impression that I had been crying quietly. Despite being able to drum up a silent tear on demand for the camera, when I cried in real life, I sounded like someone was torturing a manatee playing the trumpet. “Are you all right?” In addition to being good-looking, he seemed sincere, but I’d been in this business too long to buy a word of this act.

“Look, Great Value James Bond,” I wiped my eyes with the back of my fingers to remove any dark smudges and replaced my hands on my hips. “I don’t know what news outlet you’re from, but based on that expensive tuxedo, it’s one of the big ones, so I would’ve expected them to send someone who could at least come up with a better story. I guess not everyone can be good-looking and smart.” He didn’t react to my words other than an almost imperceptible eyebrow quirk. For some reason, his lack of response pissed me off, so I kept going. “And I wasn’t crying, so if I see one word about this in the press, I’ll fucking sue you so bad that you’ll be buying your next suit from the back of a van on Canal Street. Now, tell me who you really are before I call security.”

The world’s worst and possibly sexiest investigative journalist didn’t respond. Instead, he simply stood a few feet away from

me in the closet, surveying me like a rare curiosity. I'd filmed sex scenes in front of massive film crews. I graced the cover of Sports Illustrated wearing a painted-on bikini. Still, for some reason, I'd never felt as exposed as I did standing in front of this stranger.

I was about to demand an answer from him when my assistant, Jo, burst into the closet.

"Jesus Christ, El! There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you. Were you in here the whole time because I was in here a few minutes ago, and I didn't see you?" They were holding a tablet and looking so frazzled that they hadn't even noticed the tall, tuxedo-clad marble statue come to life standing behind them.

I wasn't going to tell Jo they didn't see me when they looked earlier because I was hiding behind a rack of evening gowns. So instead, I shifted my eyes to my unwanted guest and pursed my lips. Jo looked over their shoulder, startled, but their reaction quickly turned to recognition, which confused me.

"Oh!" They exclaimed. "You've met."

"Excuse me?" I sputtered.

"This is the new security expert from The Sutherland group."

My intruder, wearing a smug smirk, stepped forward and extended his hand.

"Sam," he reintroduced himself unnecessarily and engulfed my small hand in his large one, making my breath catch in my throat and my belly tighten. His grip was firm but gentle, making my mind wonder what else he could do with those hands. At this distance, I was close enough to smell his intoxicating cologne. Whatever it was, it was expensive but so faint that I had to fight the physical urge to lean in closer to him to continue inhaling it. "Sam Tyler." He repeated. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Scott."



“No,” I GRITTED THROUGH MY TEETH AT MY SOON-TO-BE EX-  
assistant. We were standing in my study surrounded by the rest  
of my team. Until a minute ago, they’d all been standing in my  
living room attending a birthday party that I didn’t want to  
throw or attend, so it was easy to call an emergency meeting.

“Now, Ella, be reasonable,” Leo, my agent, interjected.

“Hell no!” I shot back, turning my anger on him. “How’s that  
for reasonable?” I glanced at the reason I was shouting in my  
home wearing a bespoke Versace gown on my thirty-seventh  
birthday. He casually ran a finger over the titles on one of my  
bookshelves, sometimes stopping to pull a volume off the  
shelf, leafing through it before replacing it. We were involved  
in a crucial conversation that would definitely impact his  
future. However, he was treating my home like his own  
personal Barnes and Noble. My attention was drawn back to  
Jo when they began to speak again.

“We hired him in light of the,” they dropped their voice.  
“Threats.” The word threats made the smug smirk  
momentarily fade from nosey 007’s face. He turned to pay  
attention to the conversation while holding an old, priceless  
copy of *Wuthering Heights*. I narrowed my eyes and focused  
on Jo. “He’s highly decorated. Ex-military. Tons of  
international security experience.”

“Are you kidding me?” I screeched and marched over to the  
highly decorated military expert in question. “This guy?” I  
snatched the book from his hands and replaced it on the shelf.  
“A sloppy eater,” I pointed to the stains on his shirt, “who  
can’t find a bathroom? This is who I’m supposed to trust with  
my life.” I glanced at Sam, hoping to see some indication of  
shock or hurt, but his face was expressionless. I was busy  
trying to think of another retort. However, I was pretty sure I’d  
spent my entire arsenal of insults when Jo wrapped a hand  
around my forearm and dragged me into the hallway.

“Jo, what the hell are—” I stammered when they cut me off  
mid-sentence.

“Stop it, Ella. Stop it. Cut the shit.” Their eyes were full of  
barely contained rage and I was struck silent.

“You are in real danger. Not only from whatever deranged asshole wants you dead,” the word *dead* made my heart stop momentarily. “But you’re in danger with the studio. The Silver Raven is a billion-dollar franchise. Billion. Sam Tyler doesn’t work for you. He works for the studio. They will replace you if they think you’re doing anything to jeopardize the rest of the movies. Let’s face it, the movie offers aren’t flooding in. You’ve delayed your next album for the third time. You haven’t toured in years. The Silver Raven keeps the lights on. Unless you and your ego want to be sitting in the dark, you’re gonna suck it up and let Mr. Tyler do his job.”

“That was brutal, Jo,” I said quietly, giving them a sarcastic, wounded puppy dog look. Then, finally, their angry facade broke, and they let out a laugh.

“I’m your best friend. I love you, and you pay me to always tell you the truth.” Jo and I had been peas in a pod since we fought over the same stuffed dog in preschool and had to share a time-out chair. Over the years, through every change in our lives, large or small, they were always the one person I could count on.

“Okay.” I let out a deep sigh. “I guess I needed that.”

“You did.” They agreed. “So why are you so opposed to working with this guy? You’ve only known him for five minutes?”

I couldn’t answer them because I didn’t have an answer. Sam Tyler confused and excited me in a way I couldn’t describe. Within a split second of meeting him, I knew he could see right through me, and he wasn’t a person I could charm or control. That was the most terrifying thing of all.

# Chapter Three

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## Sam



WHEN SHE MARCHED over to me and snatched Wuthering Heights out of my hands, I knew I would take the job. I knew from the inscription that it was one of her prized possessions. I also noticed how our fingertips brushed when she slid the book out of my hand and how she leaned into me and inhaled when she replaced it on the shelf.

That wasn't the only thing that convinced me. There was more than met the eye with Ella Scott. Underneath that take-charge powerful facade was a woman in danger who had no idea how fucked up this world was. Ella Scott reminded me why I don't get attached to people.



THREE MONTHS IN THE JOB FOUND ME REGRETTING MY decision at least once daily. Ella Scott's security was a joke. In my first three weeks, I fired her entire team and filled it with my own guys. Michaels was away on assignment in Tehran. I would have gladly traded places with him instead of spending countless hours shopping for shoes.



NO LESS THAN TWENTY-FIVE PEOPLE HAD ACCESS TO HER penthouse:

“It’s easier to give everyone an access code. Have you seen how huge this place is? Am I supposed to run to open the door every time someone comes over?”



IT TOOK SIX WEEKS TO CONVINCHE HER TO GIVE UP HER unsecured phone:

“No one wants to hack my phone. Anyone who wants to see my nudes can Google my Playboy spread. My tits were a lot better fifteen years ago anyway.” Though I disagreed with her sentiment, accessing nudes is one of the milder dangers of a phone hack.



SHE THREW A FIT EVERY TIME SHE COULDN’T TREAT ME LIKE one of her minions:

“Isn’t the whole reason you’re here to keep me safe? Dehydration is a serious condition. I think fetching me a room temperature mineral water in an aluminum cup with a pinch of Himalayan salt and a fresh lime wedge would be part of your job description.”



THE NUMBER OF TIMES I THOUGHT ABOUT QUITTING WAS nothing compared to the number of times she tried to fire me. Too bad she wasn’t signing my checks, and her threats were harmless, unlike those I was protecting her from.

They started a year ago with untraceable fan letters that got increasingly violent. Then the penthouse break-ins began, always when she was away filming or touring. Finally, the Sutherland Group got involved four months ago after an incident following an appearance on The Tonight Show.

Ella was handed a large bouquet of roses by a stranger who managed to surpass the studio's security and evade all cameras. When she leaned down to smell the flowers, she was pricked by a spring-loaded needle. After being rushed to the hospital and finding that there was no evidence of poison. Her team found a card that read, "Next time, it will kill you, bitch."

Ella dismissed it as a fluke. "Crazy fans are part of this business." I wasn't so sure about that. I wasn't sure that Ella understood the full scope of the danger she was in.



"ARE YOU GOING TO STAND THERE STARING AT ME ALL NIGHT, or are you going to eat something?" She glared at me over a large bowl of fruit salad, wearing a tank top that was a little too tight and shorts that were a little too short. "Do you eat or go into your room at night and plug yourself in to charge when I go to bed?"

She wasn't far off. I'd been assigned a small bedroom next to hers. My evenings were usually spent poring over the evidence trying to track down the threats on her life, and fighting the urge to jack off to the sound of her moaning while she used her vibrator at night. It was a fight I usually lost, and I was almost a hundred percent sure she knew she was torturing me like she was doing in those tiny ass pajamas.

"I eat, ma'am," I replied, not moving from my post at the kitchen door.

"Oh, really," she dropped her voice an octave and leaned forward, putting her ample breasts on full display. She took a strawberry from the bowl and rubbed it across her bottom lip. "What sort of things does Sam Tyler like to eat?"

Ella Scott was hot as fuck, and I would have loved to lift her onto that counter, rip those little shorts at the seams and show her exactly what I liked to eat. But she was a client, and I'm a professional. Plus, I wasn't sure that all this flirty behavior wasn't another scheme to get me fired.



“Food, ma’am,” I replied. That wasn’t the response she was hoping for because he narrowed her eyes at me, snatched the bowl off the counter, and exited the kitchen.

“I’m going to bed,” she announced annoyedly. My eyes followed her down the long corridor until I heard the door to her bedroom click shut. I began my nightly patrol around the penthouse, checking every point of entry, and noticed the door to the service elevator wasn’t flush with the door frame. I tugged on the handle to make sure it was locked. Then I opened it and felt around the door panel in an attempt to discover what could be preventing the door from closing properly. It was an old building, and there had been a TV crew filming an interview earlier. Someone could have bumped or nudged the door, accidentally throwing it out of whack. Still, to be sure, I checked the security camera and found nothing out of the ordinary. I secured the door and added an extra lock before I went to my room, feeling uneasy.

I sat down at my desk to examine the letters for the fiftieth time, hoping to find something new, when a low buzzing sound pierced the silence of my bedroom. I gritted my teeth and tried to shift my focus back to my work when the buzzing was accompanied by faint moaning punctuated by a word.

“Sam.”

My dick stood at attention, and my heart pounded. I was sure my mind was playing tricks on me after months of frustration when she repeated it.

My name.

Loud, clear, and unmistakable.

I wasn’t getting shit done tonight. I closed my laptop and crept closer to the wall.

“Fuck me, Sam.”

My dick was so hard that I couldn’t waste time unzipping. I gripped my erection through my pants and squeezed, giving myself short, tight strokes as I imagined feeding my dick into her pretty little smart mouth. A few strokes away from exploding, I heard a faint noise that didn’t come from Ella’s

room. She must not have heard because her moaning never ceased, but my brain had already shifted.

# Chapter Four

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## Ella



SAM TYLER.

Sam fucking Tyler.

That man had made the last ninety-seven days of my life a living hell. Now, he was ruining my nights.

He swooped in, completely turned my life upside down, and disrupted the carefully curated routines that kept me sane in this hellscape of a business that I never chose but was all I knew.

He cut my household staff in half, limited my access to the internet, and refused to let me leave my home without looming over me like an ever-present gargoyle. I tried my best to get him fired, but Jo was right. As long as Sam Tyler kept some deranged psycho from decapitating me, I was stuck with him.

My next strategy was trying to get him to quit. But no matter how demanding I was, how much I complained, and how many high-end couture shops I dragged him to, he never complained.

The most frustrating thing was that I felt better when Sam was around, and I hated feeling confused and out of control. I'd never confided this to anyone on my team, not even Jo, but the attack after the Tonight Show rattled me. I spent hours sitting in my private hospital suite surrounded by doctors, nurses, lawyers, and agents, feeling more alone than I'd ever had. I was almost forty. I'd never had a relationship that wasn't scripted and lasted more than a year. No children. Though with my grueling schedule, I couldn't keep a houseplant alive.

I couldn't share the collective relief when the test results were returned.

As I left the hospital, I passed a family in the waiting room. An elderly man sat in the middle of what I presumed to be his adult children and grandchildren. He was hunched over, clutching a bright scarf. He perked up every time a hospital staff member walked by, possibly hoping for news about the owner of the scarf he was cherishing. I found myself transfixed, wondering what it would feel like to love someone that much or to be loved that much until I was recognized and had to be whisked away.

I couldn't stop thinking that if I'd died that night, who would mourn me beside Jo? The studio would find a new Silver Raven. My fans would move on to the next pop star shaking her ass to overproduced, underwritten club songs. I also couldn't fathom that someone would actually hate me enough to want to hurt me.

The weeks following the attack felt like I was slowly walking through a fog threatening to suffocate me. Crowds terrified me. I postponed my recording sessions because I couldn't focus. I made excuses not to leave the penthouse, insisting all meetings, interviews, and events be held in the only place I felt safe.

Then Sam Tyler walked into my life or my closet.

Birthdays were always a sore subject for me. The more I accumulated, the more they ached. Add that to the idea of being forced into a crowded room full of people who didn't know me or care about me, and I was driven over the edge. Closets had always been a safe haven for me. Over the years, the closets got bigger and more expensive, but they served the same purpose.

Sam Tyler looked at my designer gown and saw the terrified little girl hiding in a closet beneath the layers of makeup and hair extensions. He hadn't stopped seeing me.

A few weeks ago, a promotional photoshoot had gone three hours overtime. I had a reputation for always being on time and never complaining. Still, after fourteen hours in five-inch

heels and numerous wardrobe changes, I was exhausted. Without warning, Sam declared that set was no longer safe, whisked me out of the studio and into a waiting SUV. After chewing him out for interfering with my career, I promptly fell asleep. I woke up forty-five minutes later, in front of my building, with my head on his shoulder and his jacket draped across my body. I'd also drooled on his shoulder.

He never mentioned the events of that day, and neither did I.

I wasn't naive. I know what he did for me, but I didn't understand why he did it. Surely there wasn't a class on handling sleepy starlets in mercenary school. It definitely wasn't physical attraction. I'd resorted to throwing myself at him, hoping to lure him into a sex scandal so I could be rid of him, and my life would begin to make sense again. The stoic Sam Tyler didn't bat an eye at my skimpy outfits or overt innuendo.

My plan backfired spectacularly. The more Sam denied me, the more I wanted him. I'd resorted to extended nighttime solo sessions with my high-powered mechanical boyfriend to be able to fall asleep. During one such session, Sam burst into my bedroom.

"Sam, what the hell are you—" I squealed and rushed to cover myself. He didn't seem to notice or care that I was naked from the waist down when he put a finger to his lips to shush me.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

"I was better until you—" the serious look on his face made my words die on my lips. He moved stealthily through my bedroom, checking all the doors and windows before shining a flashlight under my bed. "Sam, what's wrong? What happened?"

"Stay in this room." He said in a low stern voice. "Lock this door when I leave, and don't open it for anyone but me. If anyone but me tries to enter this room, lock yourself in the closet and call 911. Do you understand?" His intense eyes drilled into me as he waited for a response that I couldn't make my mouth work to provide. "Ella," was the first time he'd called me anything but ma'am. "Do. You. Understand?"

My heart was pounding in my ears when I felt myself nod. He backed out of the room. As soon as I heard the lock's click, I leaped into action. After locking the door, I shimmied into a pair of yoga pants, tucked my cell phone into my pocket, and searched my bedroom for a weapon. Finally, I settled on a Swarovski crystal-encrusted baseball bat, a gift from a famous baseball-playing ex, and tucked myself into my favorite closet corner.

The time dragged on when I felt a low vibrating motion. I thought it was my phone before I realized how my hands were shaking as I gripped the bat. The silence was cut by the sounds of muffled bumps and broken glass. Tears were rolling down my face when I heard three muffled firecrackers, more broken glass, then silence. I couldn't tell if minutes or years had passed when I heard footsteps approaching the closet door. Whoever was out there had gotten into my bedroom. I took a deep breath, gripped the bat, and crouched in the corner, ready to put decades of yoga and pilates classes to good use. The lock on the door beeped, and I held my breath. An instant later, the rack full of designer frocks was pushed aside. I sprung into action, leaping out of my corner and swinging the bat as hard as possible, a split second too late after realizing who it was.

Sam expertly caught the bat with one hand and wrapped his other arm around my waist to keep me steady.

"Hey. Hey. Hey," he whispered in a soothing tone directly into my ear. "It's me. It's okay. You're safe."

Upon hearing the words, you're safe, I stopped struggling. He slowly released me from his grip, but I wasn't sure I wanted to leave it.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I squealed and hit him in the chest.

"I did, but you must not have heard me." He was looking through my closet for something.

"I was hiding where you told me," I retorted before he shoved a green wool hat onto my head. "Hey!" I squealed.

“I told you to hide in the closet *if* anyone tried to get into the bedroom.” He said before pulling a sweatshirt over my head and wrapping a scarf around my neck.

“So, I was supposed to wait for the killer to try to get into my bedroom before I hid? You need to watch more ID network.” He grabbed a pair of hot pink Ugg boots and a blue wool coat before tossing me onto one shoulder and carrying me out of the bedroom. “What are you doing?” I shouted, barely registering that my apartment looked like someone had picked it up and shaken it. I definitely noticed the large red stain on my white living room rug.

“Taking you someplace safe. Your apartment has been compromised.”

Shock and bewilderment could have been the only excuse for my response.

“But I can’t go anywhere dressed like this. None of this matches.”



# Chapter Five

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## Sam



“IS THAT BLOOD ON YOUR SHIRT?” Ella asked as I made my way up north on I-95.

“Yes.”

“Is it yours?”

“Some of it.”

“Were those gunshots I heard?”

“Yes.”

“From your gun?”

“Yes.”

“Did you kill the, um, intruder?”

“I tried, but they got away.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere safe.”

“But where exactly? I need to tell Jo, my agent, and my manager. I have a hair appointment with Serge, and he’s booked a year in advance—”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be safe. So you won’t be in contact with anyone until I know who’s behind this.”

“Well, how long will that take? I don’t have any clothes. My medication, my makeup bag. My skincare routine. I have a schedule, appointments, obligations—”

I growled in frustration before swerving off the road, putting the car in park, and glaring at her.

“Listen, someone gained access to your apartment with the intent to kill you. It wasn’t some obsessed stalker or deranged fan. This person was highly skilled and organized. A professional. And if they could get in the penthouse under my nose, they had help.”

“Help?” she whispered as the realization dawned. “You think someone I know,” she paused, and her eyes welled with tears, “is trying to kill me?”

“It looks that way.”

She turned her head to face the window, and I could see the tears flowing down her cheeks in the reflection. As big as a pain in my ass that Ella Scott had been for the past three months, seeing her in the smallest amount of pain killed me. But at least she was finally taking this threat seriously, and she was quiet for the rest of the ride, so that was an added bonus.



SHE WAS SILENT AS I LIFTED THE TWO OVERSTUFFED DUFFLE bags out of the trunk and guided her into the house.

“What is this place?” she whispered as we entered the foyer.

“This is my house.”

“This is huge. You live here by yourself?”

“I don’t live anywhere, really.” I began to flip on the lights.

“But I grew up in the house.”

“You grew up in this house?”

“Yeah,” I responded. “Are you hungry? I’ll go into town and get fresh groceries tomorrow, but everything to eat will come out of a can until then.”

“I’m not hungry.” She whispered. “I’m just...tired.” I grabbed the two duffle bags and guided her up the stairs to the largest bedroom in the house.

“This will be your room.” I dropped the bags on the bed. “There are extra blankets in the closet. There’s an en suite with a shower and a bathtub. My room is right next door if you need me.” She didn’t say a word but stared at the bed’s luggage.

“What’s in those bags?” she said in a low voice.

“I had some go bags packed for you.”

She gave me a bemused look, unzipped the first bag, and inspected its contents. After she rifled through the second bag, she turned to me with tears, clutching an old and familiar book to her chest.

“How long have you had this?”

“Tonight.” I reached up to grab the back of my neck, which had become suddenly hot. “I knew it was important to you, and if you were going to have to be away for a while...” Tears fell from her eyes, and she didn’t bother to wipe them away.

“Thank you.” She held the worn copy of *Wuthering Heights* away from her body to look at it before clutching it to her chest again.

I wanted to respond but had no words. So instead, I nodded and left the room. I stood outside her door until I heard the shower hiss to life.



“So, DID YOU KILL THE FUCKER?” MICHAELS HISSED IN between crackles.

“I wish,” I gritted. My sat phone was balanced between my ear and shoulder while I cleaned and bandaged the deep gash an inch below my ribs, made by a hunting knife intended for Ella. The realization made my chest tighten. “I hit him, though. So, at least, they’ll be a DNA sample.”

“Are the cops checking the hospitals?”

“Yeah, but this guy’s smarter than that.”

“So you’re sure it’s a dude?”

“Pretty sure. I need you to use your connections at the FBI to ID that sample. I think someone close to her is involved, but I need to figure out who this fucker is so I can connect them. Can you do that?”

“For you, man, of course. Let me make a few calls.”

“Thanks, man. How’s Tehran?”

“It’s the desert, dude. It’s hot.” He chuckled. A noise behind me made me turn.

“Hold on,” I whispered. Ella stood in the doorway of my bathroom, wringing her hands. She was no longer trying to taunt me with nightwear that might as well be lingerie. Instead, she wore a matching set of baggy silk purple pajamas with long pants and sleeves. She’d even buttoned every button. “Let me call you back,” I whispered and dropped the phone onto the bathroom counter.

“Are you okay?” She walked into the bathroom. Her eyes were glued to the bandages on my torso.

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“Alive because of you.”

“My job is to protect you.”

Ella was silent for a moment. Then without warning, she stepped into my arms and hugged me. My knife wound was screaming from the pressure, but I willed myself not to move because I didn’t want to do anything to scare her off. Plus, let’s face it. The feeling of Ella Scott in my arms was worth a couple of busted stitches.

I froze when I felt her press a kiss to my chest.

“Ella,” I whispered. “We can’t—“

“Sam, I almost died tonight at the hands of an assassin that could have been sent by someone I trust. I’m scared, confused, and exhausted. I just want to be held. Please.”

“Ella,” I protested but did nothing to extricate her from my torso. “I’m not—” I wanted to tell her that I wasn’t the kind of

guy who holds or comforts people. As the thought wound around my brain, my arms wrapped around her back and pulled her into me.

“I know I’ve been a real bitch to you, and I’m sorry. You’re the only person who made me feel safe through all this, and I treated you like shit. I feel like I’m going insane. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. I don’t even know who I am anymore.” She dissolved into sobs.

“Shh...I’ll never let anyone hurt you,” I whispered as I stroked her hair. I winced in pain as I reached down, slid one of my arms under her knees, and lifted her into my arms. She let out a contented sigh when I lowered her onto the mattress and covered her with a duvet. I leaned away to leave the room and let her rest when I felt her clutch my forearm.

“Don’t leave me.” She whispered.

I didn’t.

# Chapter Six

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## Ella



MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN to find the intense green eyes of Sam Tyler staring back at me.

“Hi,” I whispered. His look had the usual effect of making me feel exposed despite knowing I was still wearing my silk pajamas.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Better,” I said, sighing before pulling back the duvet to expose his blood-stained bandage. “Did I do this? I’m sorry.” I tried to climb out of bed to grab the first aid kit when Sam gently took me by the wrists and lowered me onto his chest.

“It’s fine.” He said and surprised me by pressing a kiss to my scalp and smoothing a palm over my back. “Shit.” He froze and tried to sit up. “I apologize. I don’t know why I did that. I should leave and—“

“Sam,” I smiled and used the palm of my hand to push him back onto the mattress. “It’s about damn time.”

I pressed our lips together before he had a chance to argue and slid my tongue over his. He kissed me back with intensity, and I wondered how long it had been since he’d been with someone. I could never remember a kiss feeling like this. It set every nerve ending in my body on fire and ignited my insatiable craving for this man. After a few minutes of making out like the world’s horniest virgins, Sam broke our kiss.

“Ella, I don’t know what you want from me, but I’m not the kind of guy who sticks around. Never have been. My life



doesn't have any room for attachments. I made a promise to keep you safe. That includes keeping you safe from me."

Now wasn't the time to tell Sam Tyler I'd given some variation of that speech to every man I'd ever slept with. Instead, all I could focus on was how much I wanted him and how much we needed each other at this moment.

"You," I carefully straddled his waist, taking care to avoid his bandage, and leaned down to press a kiss to his lips, "really need to work on your dirty talk. That was terrible." Sam Tyler laughed for the first time in the three months I'd known him before grimacing in pain. "Sorry."

"It's fine," he said, still smiling. He smoothed a large rough palm over my cheek.

"Sam, I don't want to marry you; squirt out a couple kids and watch them run around a backyard with a white picket fence. Can we agree that the last twenty-four hours have been shitty for the both of us, and we deserve a little release?" I raised my eyebrows at him, waiting for a response that didn't come. "Don't you even think about lying to me because I'm sitting on the evidence." I wiggled my hips to grind myself on the massive erection pressing on my clit through our layers of clothes.

"Ella," he whispered. I shimmied backward on his thighs and unbuckled his pants to free him from his boxers. "Oh god, Ella." He moaned my name as I began to stroke him.

"If you want me to stop, I will," I whispered as I slid my body further down his legs until I was sitting below his knees. I leaned forward and gently kissed the flared tip of his cock. "Do you want me to stop, Sam?" I slid the entire head of his dick into my mouth and pressed the tip of my tongue into the opening.

"Fuck, Ella," he gritted through clenched teeth. "Don't. Don't stop." That was all I needed to hear. I climbed off of his legs and tugged off his pants and boxers. After positioning myself between his legs, I gripped the base of his shaft with one hand, cradled his balls with the other, and proceeded to give Sam Tyler the blow job of his life. If he wasn't the type of man to

stick around before, he'd definitely consider it after I was done with him. Not that I'd ever wanted that sort of thing with anyone.

Definitely not with Sam Tyler, the man who'd spent the last three months keeping me safe, risked his life to ensure I had my grandmother's copy of *Wuthering Heights*, and let me drool on his shoulder. A man like Sam Tyler wouldn't want a woman like me. I was far too broken. No one would want a woman like me.

"Fuck, I want you, Ella," Sam groaned as the opening of my throat closed around the head of his cock. "I want you so fucking bad." Then, in one fluid motion, he sat up, grabbed a handful of my hair, and yanked me onto his mouth while simultaneously rolling me underneath him. I could barely catch my breath before I felt him tugging at my pajama pants and panties.

"Sam," I panted, still breathless from his kiss and so turned on that I thought I might spontaneously combust from the anticipation. "Your stitches."

"Fuck my stitches," he growled as he positioned himself on his belly between my legs. He must have been in incredible pain, but you wouldn't know it by the way he was devouring me like a starving man. He'd wrung three orgasms out of me before he climbed on top of me, teasing my still-sensitive clit with the head of his dick. "Ella, I want to fuck you so badly that I can't think straight. I don't have any STIs, but I don't have any condoms, and I don't want to do anything you don't want to or will regret."

"I don't have any STIs, and I'm on the pill. So make love to me, Sam. Let's forget about everything else. It's just us." I flexed my hips upward, pushing him further into my body, eliciting a strained grunt.

"Fuck, you feel like heaven," he breathed as he sheathed himself in my heat in one slow stroke. My back arched in response, and a loud moan of pleasure tore itself from my chest. He started to fuck me slowly at first. Then, his strokes ramped up in speed and intensity, grinding our bodies together

and causing more full-body spasms triggered by the overloaded bundle of nerves Sam had been worshipping with his mouth.

“God! Oh my god,” I screamed as Sam leaned down and sucked one of my nipples in his mouth after viciously tugging my pajama top open with one hand, sending buttons flying around the bed. He sunk his teeth in my areola before immediately soothing the bite with gentle licks and kisses. I fought the urge to wrap my legs around his waist and squeeze my thighs together as he pounded into me, driving me to the edge of ecstasy and sanity. My legs were shaking, and my chest was heaving when I felt Sam’s entire body clench and relax before he pressed his full weight onto mine, crushing me into the plush bedding. I wrapped my arms around his neck and raked my fingernails through his hair as his warm breath caressed my neck. His heartbeat slowly returned to normal, and he leaned up to face me, planting gentle kisses on my neck and chin.

“How are you feeling, beautiful.” He stroked my cheek. “Did I get carried away?” His eyes were full of concern.

“You did, but I loved it.” I leaned up and planted a kiss on his lips. “But you owe me a new pair of pajamas.”

He threw back his head and laughed before wincing in pain and kissing me again.

“You keep fucking me like that, and I will buy you a fucking pajama factory.”

# Chapter Seven

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## Sam



ELLA SCOTT SPENT the following weeks waking me up with her sweet mouth wrapped around my dick. She fell asleep every night wrapped in my arms, naked and glowing with sweat, with my nose pressed into her hair.

Against my better judgment, she convinced me to let her accompany me into town to purchase supplies. When she wasn't wearing expertly tailored designer gowns, false eyelashes, and multicolored hair extensions, she wasn't recognizable as Ella Scott, an international superstar. She was Ella.

Ella was a woman who laughed easily, stopped to pet dogs or talk to babies in town, and was a surprisingly good cook. I also discovered that the extensive library in her penthouse wasn't for show. Our weekly trips into town weren't complete without a stop at the local library. She'd procure a stack of books that she would spend the week reading while resting her feet in my lap in front of the fireplace or sipping a mug of hot tea while I chopped firewood.

The weeks spent in my childhood home felt like a dream filled with the type of happy memories that deserted these walls decades ago. Ella's wit and laughter breathed life into the house. It was a life that I couldn't allow myself to be fooled by during the afternoons getting my ass kicked in Scrabble and nights watching her come apart in my arms while I was buried deep inside her. She'd even introduced me to her mechanical friend. I enjoyed using it to play her body like an instrument and push the boundaries of pleasure. As idyllic as our life was

in this house that had previously brought me so much misery, there was real danger looming outside the place that I was no closer to uncovering.

The cops were nowhere near solving the break-in, which didn't surprise me. Michaels exhausted every contact he had to ID the DNA I shot out of the man trying to kill the woman I was falling in love with.

Fuck.

I fell in love with Ella. There was no denying it. I probably started falling in love with her the moment I saw her step out of that closet. Ella deserved better than a man like me. Knowing that her smart-mouth diva act was bullshit was one thing, but spending the last twenty-three days with the kindest, most intelligent, and sexiest woman I'd ever met was an entirely different ballgame. My feelings about Ella didn't matter. We'd been forced together by a mutual threat. Once that threat was neutralized, she'd go back to the glamorous life of a superstar, and I go back to living out of a rucksack. A life devoid of complications. She'd even said that she wasn't interested in a relationship.

*“Sam, I don't want to marry you; squirt out a couple kids and watch them run around a backyard with a white picket fence.”*

We were spending the last few weeks comforting each other and killing time. So why is it that the more time I spend with Ella Scott, the more those words feel like a knife in the chest?



“SO WE'VE BEEN HERE FOR THREE WEEKS, AND YOU'VE NEVER told me anything about this house.” Ella tilted her head up on my chest to look at me with her giant brown eyes and sex-mussed dark hair. “Or told me anything about your childhood. I bet you were an adorable little boy.”

“I was,” I chuckled and kissed her, “a very adorable little boy.”

“I knew it,” she giggled and brushed her fingertips over the scar on my abdomen. “So why aren't there any pictures of you

or your parents?”

I inhaled a deep breath and blew it out. To call my past, my least favorite subject would be the understatement of the century. Ella made me feel safe despite my role as her protector. Plus, when she blinked those big chestnut-hued eyes at me and raised her eyebrows in anticipation of my response, it was impossible to deny her any request.

Yeah. I was fucked.

“My childhood wasn’t a happy one,” I began. Ella turned her nude body towards mine and squeezed her arms around my chest. “My father died when I was young, and my mother remarried a man named Sterling Winchester.”

“Wait, Sterling Winchester, the real estate billionaire?” Her head perked up.

“Yeah. He was a monster and made my life hell until I joined the military to escape him.”

“I’m so sorry. What about your mother? Where is she?” My chest tightened, and Ella soothed me with a kiss.

“She died fifteen years ago. Her official cause of death was an accidental fall, but....” I trailed off, feeling my eyes sting with guilty tears.

“You think he was responsible?” she asked.

“I know he was, but we could never prove it. His first wife also died as the result of an ‘accidental fall,’” he sketched air quotes. “He played the part of the grieving husband well. He shocked the hell out of me when he left me everything when he dropped dead ten years ago.”

“Wait, he left you everything?” She picked her head up.

“I sold and donated most of his assets, but I kept this house as a reminder of what happens when you let down the people who depend on you to protect them.”

“Sam.” She sat up to face me and wrapped the sheet around her breasts. “You know your mother’s death wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have been here, Ella,” I gritted. She shook her head at me. “I knew he had a temper and could say some cruel shit when angry, but I never imagined he would hurt her like that. I should have known.”

She left the bed, letting the sheet slip off her nude body as she crossed the bedroom. The battered copy of *Wuthering Heights* was in her hand when she returned.

“Do you know why this book was important to me?”

I shook my head.

“My mother was an addict. She indulged in many vices, but her drug of choice was attention. She wanted to be famous, and it didn’t work out for her. So when I came along, she saw me as her second chance. I booked my first job at nine months old, and I’ve been working nearly every day since.” She gave me a watery smile and clutched the book harder.

“The more famous I got, the more power-hungry and abusive she became. Long hours on shoots, painfully restrictive diets, and being dragged to nightclubs before I was old enough to drive were commonplace. I learned to never complain because anything this industry could throw at me was nothing compared to my mother’s wrath. She would frequently throw wild parties filled with things no child should ever see, and I’d spent most of the night hiding in my closet waiting for the music and loud voices to stop.” She held up the book for emphasis.

” But, there was one bright spot. When I was about four, my mother suffered a cocaine overdose. She lost custody of me, and I was sent to live with my grandmother. For four years, I had a normal life. I went to school. I could eat whatever I wanted. I even had birthday parties attended by my actual friends, not the children of people my mother wanted to impress. I met Jo. They were called Josie back then, and they were my best friend.” More tears spilled, and I wiped them away with my thumb.

“My mother got clean and fought for custody. She won, and soon everything went back to the way it was before, auditions, photo shoots, and hiding in closets, but worse, somehow,



because I knew exactly what I was missing. My grandmother stayed in my life as much as my mother would allow her, which wasn't much, but she made sure Jo and I kept in touch and even paid for them to fly to visit me a few times. When Jo's family kicked them out of their house as a teenager, my grandmother took them in. As soon as Jo turned eighteen, I moved them out to LA, and they've been by my side ever since. Before I left her home, she gave me this book and told me to read it as a reminder of how easily hatred and vengeance can destroy a person. She could've told me to look at my mother to learn that lesson." Ella let out a mirthless chuckle.

"She made me promise her that I would never let the actions of others turn me into a person like my mother or Heathcliff." She opened the book and ran her fingertips over the title page inscription, scribbled in blue ink.

"I don't know if I've kept that promise. God knows I've tried, but it's been really fucking hard." She sniffled. "Over the years, I slowly gained control over my career until I could finally cut my mother out of my life completely. She wrote a tell-all book that bombed, and she died of liver disease the night I won my first Grammy."

"And your grandmother?"

"She lived with Jo and me in LA for a few years until she passed away. She was so proud of my success."

"Of course," I said. "You're pretty amazing."

"Yeah, you say that now." She chuckled and shook her head.

"I've always thought that," I smiled at her, and she rewarded me with a kiss.

"I didn't tell you that story so you could feel sorry for me. I told you that story because I finally understand what my grandmother was trying to tell me. Our pasts, as fucked up as they may be, don't define who we are as people or what kind of lives we can have. We do." She cupped my face in her hands. "Your stepfather and my mother were horrible humans, but they're not here, and we are. We can decide what kind of life we want."

“Ella, what are you saying?” I sat up to look her in the eye, and my heart pounded.

“I’m saying that—” A noise outside drew my attention, and I held up a finger, causing her to stop mid-sentence. “What, Sam? What’s going on?”

# Chapter Eight

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## Ella



“DID you tell anyone where you were?” he asked as he climbed out of bed and slid into the pair of pants discarded on the bedroom floor.

“Of course not.” I retorted.

“Did you call anyone?”

“Well, last week, I called Jo to let them know I was safe, but I didn’t tell them where I was.”

“Shit, Ella.” He groaned. “How did you call Jo?”

“I used a payphone in town, but I told them not to tell anyone and...wait! You think Jo is trying to kill me?!” I laughed incredulously and climbed out of bed. “Did you listen to the depressing fucking story I told you? Jo would never hurt me.”

“Well, someone is outside the house, and I doubt they’re here selling Girl Scout cookies.” He raised an eyebrow at me before pulling a gun out of the nightstand drawer.

“I’m glad you finally decided to develop a sense of humor,” I quipped and shrugged into one of his oversized t-shirts and stepped into a pair of panties, “but you’re wrong about Jo. Maybe it was your friend that *you’ve* called a million fucking times since we’ve been here.”

“Michaels is over six thousand miles away, and he’s been helping me figure out who wants you dead.” He checked the window locks before creeping towards the bedroom door.

“Well, he’s doing a bang-up job, isn’t he?” I crossed my arms over my chest and shouted across the room. Sam answered me

with a glare and a head shake before leaving the room.

I ran to the door and locked it before grabbing my crystal-encrusted bat and sitting on the bed. Sam was gone for a long time, but I reasoned that it was a big house, and it would take time to go outside to find out that a squirrel or a beaver made the noise he heard. Then he'd have to come back here and admit my best, and only friend in the world wasn't trying to have me killed.

I tried to push the thoughts of Jo's possible betrayal out of my mind and began pacing the room. It wasn't possible. As I pondered all of the possible reasons Jo would want me dead, including the time in the third grade when I told a boy they had a crush on that they had an extra butthole, I heard the door handle rattle.

For a split second, I was flooded with relief until I realized that the someone trying to enter that room couldn't have been Sam. Sam has a key to the bedroom. He always kept in on him.

"I have a gun, and I will shoot you," I shouted in a tone that made it obvious that I didn't have a gun, and if I did, I'd be more likely to accidentally shoot myself with it. I looked around the room for a decent hiding place and decided to use the option that had never failed me. As I sprinted toward the closet, the door crashed open, and I skidded to a stop. If I had kept running, I would have run right into them. Instead, I gripped the bat's handle and took a step back, trying to create distance.

I had never seen this man before in my life. He was tall and muscular. He had a military haircut like Sam's, though the weeks at the house had left Sam Tyler with a shaggy mess of curls and a beard. He was dressed in all black and holding a giant knife. Was it the same knife Sam had been stabbed with almost a month ago? My thoughts went to Sam, and I hoped he was okay. I stared at the intruder for a long moment before he spoke, startling me.

"Make this easy for me, and I'll make it quick," he said in a deep voice, taking a step towards me and I swear a little pee came. I tightened my grip on the bat, and my hands shook.

“Is this about money?” I squeaked, and tears filled my eyes. “Because I have money. Whatever Jo paid you, I can double it. Triple it. Please. Don’t do this.”

“Who the fuck is Jo?” he growled and furrowed his brow in confusion. “This isn’t about you. It’s fucked up that you have to become a casualty, but every war has collateral damage.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I screamed. “Why do you want me dead?”

“To punish the guilty.”

The guilty? War? The fuck?

“Okay,” I tried to keep my voice calm. I’d read enough shitty screenplays and seen enough true crime documentaries to know that villains loved to monologue. The crazier they were, the more they loved the sound of their insane ramblings. If I could keep him talking, I could buy myself time to think of a plan or give Sam time to rescue me, if he could rescue me. “Who is guilty?”

“Your thieving boyfriend and his whore of a mother.”

“Sam?” I whispered, slowly backing towards the window. “This is about Sam?” I was relieved when he didn’t take an advancing step. “Why is Sam a thief?”

“Because he stole my life.” He gritted through clenched teeth. “My mother worked for the Winchesters for years, scrubbing their floors and doing their laundry. Then Mr. Winchester fell in love with my mother. She told me that if he wasn’t married, he would marry her and be my new father. We would live in this giant house. Then, we could stop struggling.” Now wasn’t the time to time to tell Stabby McWarmonger that every married douchebag gives their mistress the same bullshit “if only I wasn’t married” speech. Instead, I focused on appearing interested in his batshit story while slowly creeping toward the window.

“So, one day, while my mother and Sterling were occupied, I crept upstairs and called for Mrs. Winchester. I pretended to have hurt myself. When she bent down to check on me, I gave her a quick shove down the stairs, and that was it.”

Holy shit. Blood rushed to my ears, and my heart felt like it was trying to escape my body through my throat. The window was so close. A little further. Focus, Ella.

“Sterling, my mother, and I were supposed to live happily ever after, but instead, he met Sam’s mother and fired my mother. He also forced her to sign an NDA in exchange for a payout and threatened to blackball her if she refused.”

Jesus Christ, Sam’s stepfather was a piece of shit, but I definitely didn’t want to die for his sins. The lump in my throat grew. The air behind me was chillier, and the distance between this intruder and me had grown considerably.

“My mother had enough money to never work again, but she never got over that miserable piece of shit. I found her body on the day of Sterling’s wedding. While everyone in the fucking world was celebrating the event of the year, I was burying the only person in this world who gave a damn about me. I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle in Pennsylvania. That fucking wedding was all over the news for weeks. Almost every damn day, I was bombarded with images of the piece of shit who’d stolen my life.”

“That was terrible,” I said in what I hoped was a calming voice. “What happened to you was terrible, but you don’t have to let the choices made by your mother and Sterling define who you are. You have the power to make new choices.” I doubted the same epiphany would affect this man who was clearly too far gone to listen to reason. It did give me the time I needed to take the final step toward the window. I took a deep breath, swung the bat into the large pane of glass as hard as possible, and said a silent prayer.

*Come get me, Sam.*

“You fucking bitch. You’re gonna regret that.” He lunged forward and began to charge across the room. The distance gave me a split-second advantage. I sprinted away from him, running across the bed and knocking over as many pieces of furniture as possible, sending drawers and their contents flying all over the room to make even more noise and buy myself time.

My hard work paid off when my savior filled the doorway, his chest heaving and his eyes blazing with anger.

“Sam!” I screamed, and my shoulders sagged in relief. Unfortunately, the momentary distraction was enough for my assailant to grab me around the waist and hold his knife to my throat. A little more pee came out.

“Michaels!” Sam shouted. “Man, what the fuck are you doing?”

“Michaels,” I rasped in a strained whisper, feeling the serrated edge of the blade press into my throat. “You’re Michaels?” Now was not the time to mention that I was right, but if I managed to survive this, Sam had the biggest I told you so in history coming.

“I’m ruining your life,” he sneered, spraying my neck in spit, while not the worst of my problems, made my stomach lurch. “The way you ruined mine.”

“What the fuck?” Sam took a step forward, causing Michaels to step backward, making the knife bite into my skin. I whimpered, and Sam froze. “Look, man, we’re brothers. We can work this out, whatever this is. Let Ella go. It’s just us, man.”

“We were never brothers. You and your bitch mother stole my life. It’s time for revenge.”

“My mother?” Sam whispered. “What the fuck does my mother have to do with this?”

The realization of what Michaels was hinting at made my knees weaken. Sheer force of will and not wanting to get decapitated kept me on my feet.

*His first wife also died as the result of an “accidental fall.”*

I prayed Sam wouldn’t get to the realization as quickly as I did.

“At first, I was just going to frame you for her murder, but you actually care about this bitch, don’t you?” He hissed. “Now, I’m glad you get to watch her die.”



“Let her go, damn it,” Sam gritted. The pain in his expression filled my eyes with tears. As much as I didn’t want to die, the thought of Sam losing another woman he cared about at the hands of this psycho seemed a lot worse. “All this time. The letters. The break-ins. The needle.”

“You think I give a fuck about an old, washed-up actress?” he scoffed.

Okay. That was harsh and unnecessary.

“All that other shit was done by some whack job. After the needle incident, the studio contacted Sutherland for protection. Wright offered it to me, but I suggested you. It was fate. The opportunity I’d been waiting for since I was twelve years old fell into my lap. Didn’t I tell you I would kill for this job?”

“You don’t have to do this. Let her go. You want someone dead. Kill me.”

“I tried, motherfucker,” he hissed. “You shot me, remember? Which reminds me, give me your piece. Can’t have you shooting me before the cops show up to arrest you for the kidnap and murder of America’s Sweetheart.”

Sam locked eyes with me, and the hurt made my heart ache. I mouthed the words, “I’m sorry. I love you.” He continued to pierce me with his gaze.

“What the fuck are you waiting for?” Michaels screamed. “Gun now, or I gut her slowly, and you can listen to her scream.”

Sam nodded slowly, and I noticed that he furrowed his brow at something on the ground. Any person that hadn’t been memorizing every line and feature of Sam Tyler’s face for the last four months wouldn’t have noticed. Sam had a plan. I had no idea what it was, but I knew he intended to keep his promise not to let anyone hurt me.

“Okay,” He began to slowly crouch to the floor, keeping one hand in the air and slowly reaching the other behind his back. “Take it easy.”

“Safety on.” Michaels gritted.

“Safety on,” Sam repeated, followed by the faint sound of a click. He gently laid it on the floor.

“Slide it over.” He commanded. Sam’s gun went spinning across the floor. Michaels stopped it with his boot before slowly bending down to pick it up. His grip loosened, and I felt the knife pull away from my neck. I used the opportunity to yank his arm away as hard as I could and drop to the floor. The next thing I heard was a loud crack, followed by a grunt and something that sounded like a sack of potatoes hitting the floor behind me.

“Ella!” Sam screamed. I turned my head to see him sprinting towards me before kicking the gun and knife away from Michael’s prone body. He pulled me to my feet, and I turned to face the figure sprawled on the floor. He had landed flat on his back with his arms spread. There was a large red mark on his forehead. A trickle of blood trailed into his hairline. I thought Sam must have had a second gun stashed somewhere when I noticed a large, purple, and very familiar item lying on the floor a few feet away, the base covered in blood. I whipped around to face Sam.

“Is that what I think it is?” I asked him.

“I had to think fast,” he shrugged and knelt down to check Michaels for a pulse.

“Well, now you owe me new pajamas and a new vibrator.”

Sam laughed, pulled me into his arms, and squeezed me as if he was afraid I would disappear into thin air.

“Ella,” he whispered as he stroked my hair.

“Yeah?” I said, squeezing my arms around his body and holding on for dear life.

“I love you, too.”

# Chapter Nine

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## Epilogue: Sam



“I HATE YOU,” Ella gritted and squeezed my hand harder.

“I know,” I leaned down and brushed my lips across her knuckles. “But you’re doing great.”

“Fuck you,” she replied before letting out an ear-splitting squeal.

“El, you’re a fucking rockstar. You’re so close,” Jo patted my wife’s shoulder, and she rewarded them with a cross between a smile and grimace. I tried not to take it personally.

“Jo, are you sure it’s too late for an epidural?” she panted, clutching her best friend’s arm. “Did you tell them I was famous and my husband’s a billionaire?”

“They know, baby,” I said. She answered me with a glare.

Now wasn’t the time to remind my wife that, while I was still pretty wealthy, I’d given away enough of my stepfather’s wealth to lose my billionaire status, which suited me. Sterling Winchester’s greed had ruined too many lives. It was time for it to do some good.

Ethan Micheals was already en route to the hospital, handcuffed to a stretcher when Ella told me the truth about my mother’s death. I’m not sure what I would have done if I’d had that information while Ella and I waited with Michaels’s unconscious body for law enforcement. It’s probably why she waited to tell me and one of the many reasons why I love her. She didn’t want vengeance to turn me into a monster like the man I thought was my best friend.

In addition to murdering Sterling Winchester's first wife and my mother, he murdered Ella's real stalker to keep him from being apprehended and ruining his plan. He was a mentally ill fan that was angry that Ella kept postponing her album.

Sterling Winchester's body is scheduled to be exhumed to investigate the possibility that his death was also a result of Michaels' obsession. I tried to prevent it, preferring to let the past rest. Michaels suffered irreversible brain damage from the blow to the head from Ella's vibrator and was destined to live out his years in a state-run facility for the mentally impaired. That was until I paid to have him moved to someplace nicer. It was more than the man who murdered my mother deserved, but I did it for the twelve-year-old kid who also had the misfortune to cross paths with Sterling Winchester. He'd allowed his entire life to be dictated by getting revenge for his past instead of focusing on his future. I'd almost done the same thing until I walked into Ella Scott's closet, and she walked out with my heart.

"Okay, Ella, it's time to push." Katie, our midwife, crouched between my wife's open legs. "You can do this."

"No, I can't. I can't do this." She turned to me. The big brown eyes that made me look forward to every sunrise were filled with fear. "Sam, I can't." I leaned down and kissed her sweaty forehead.

"Sweetheart, you are the strongest and bravest person I know. You faced down a highly trained assassin."

"I did," she nodded, her chest rapidly rising and falling.

"You're a lot tougher than I am, and I went through navy seal training. I know you can do this. You can do anything."

"Okay," she took a deep breath and nodded. "I can do this... but I'm never having sex with you again."

"Does this mean I can finally get through a shower without being accosted by my horny wife?" She answered me with another glare before she tightened her grip on my hands, screwed up her face, and let out a loud grunt.

Five pushes later, our daughter was born.

We named her Virginia Rose Tyler, after my mother and Ella's grandmother.

# The Soundtrack

Here's the link to the spotify playlist for One Scott Deal!

Enjoy! [spoti.fi/3VWBh0V](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3VWBh0V)

1. Alien Superstar - Beyoncé
2. She's All I Got - J. Cozier
3. Open Your Eyes - Bobby Caldwell
4. Holding Out for a Hero - Bonnie Tyler
5. About Damn Time - Lizzo
6. Lady Lay Your Body - Carl Thomas
7. Cuff It - Beyoncé
8. Crazy He Calls Me - Billie Holiday
9. Wuthering Heights - Kate Bush
10. Don't Cry - Guns N' Roses
11. I Will Always Love You - Whitney Houston

A FUNNY DRAMATIC & STEAMY NOVEL BY

# LUCY EDEN

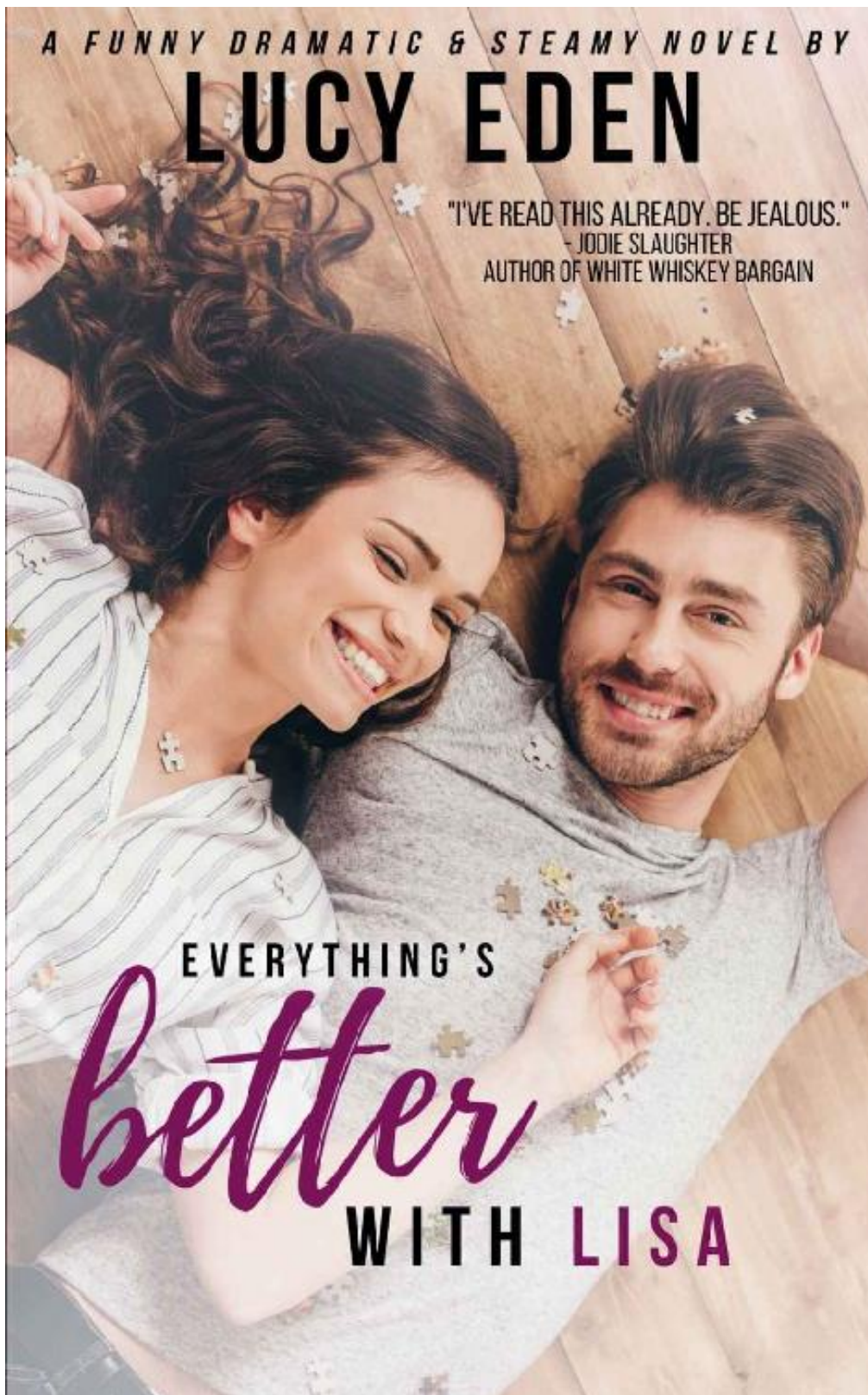
"I'VE READ THIS ALREADY. BE JEALOUS."

- JODIE SLAUGHTER  
AUTHOR OF WHITE WHISKEY BARGAIN

EVERYTHING'S

*better*

WITH LISA





# Bonus Excerpt

one: cole

2-6-5-3. Red X.

“Fuck!”

2-6-5-3. Red X.

“Shit!”

I typed my code into the keypad a third time with no success.

“Goddammit!” I kicked the wood doorframe of the hundred-year-old Harlem brownstone I’d called home for the past six years.

“Hey, asshole! Shut the fuck up!” a female voice shouted from the ground-level apartment.

I looked over the banister to see a short woman with waist-length, chestnut-colored hair staring up at me, holding a baseball bat.

“Crystal?” It was too dark to see her clearly. I was definitely more than a little buzzed, and my biological mother was the only short woman with long dark brown hair I knew. But why was she holding a baseball bat, and why was her voice different?

With a little difficulty, I walked down the stairs to get a closer look. The woman took a step back as I approached and held the bat higher, tightening her grip on the neck.

“My name is not Crystal, and I live here.”

Upon closer inspection—as close as I could get without getting clocked in the head, anyway—I could tell she

definitely wasn't Crystal. She was younger, way more beautiful, with pale golden brown skin and she didn't have my birth mother's bright blue eyes. Crystal also moved back to Missouri four years ago. Most importantly, tiny Babe Ruth definitely didn't live in my house. I was drunk, but not that drunk.

"You live in here?" That wasn't exactly how I meant to phrase that, but my brain and my mouth weren't cooperating. Also, I'd become aware that I was leaning against the brick wall of the stoop to support my weight.

"Yes," gorgeous, not-Crystal hissed. "I live here." She was so sincere that I was hit with a wave of confusion, and when it ebbed, realization slapped me in the face. I took a step back and looked up at the door I had been kicking a moment ago, then I looked to the right at the door I should've been kicking.

"Shit." I did it again. I went to the wrong fucking house.

*Why did these brownstones all look the same?*

I turned to head to the brownstone where my code would work, and I guess I turned too fast because I stumbled and had to grab the railing to keep from crashing to the ground.

"Are you okay?" She lowered her bat, but she didn't take a step forward. I was drunk. I tried to enter the wrong house, and almost busted my ass in front of my sexy neighbor.

"I'm fine, *Crystal*. Mind your business." This ordeal was embarrassing enough without Batgirl, suddenly concerned for my welfare.

*Hadn't she just called me an asshole?*

I didn't need her help. I was a grown-ass man who needed to walk twenty feet to his front door.

"Excuse me?" she said. "Again, dickhead, my name is not Crystal, and you screaming in the middle of the night woke me up from my much-needed sleep, so it is my business."

I turned to face her and felt myself sway as I tried to stabilize. Her outburst was sexy as fuck and I felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her.

*Nope. Nope.*

*That was definitely the alcohol talking.*

*I can't kiss her.*

*I have to get home.*

The word *home* floated to my consciousness, but instead of focusing on that goal, I decided to speak.

“You kind of look like my mother, but not really. Her name is Crystal. I’m fine. Just got confused. My house looks exactly like my sister’s house.” I pointed at the brownstone next door before pointing at Kimmy’s.

“Your sister?” She gave me the look, the skeptical look I get when people found out about my adopted family. One would think I’d gotten used to it after all these years. Maybe it was all the tequila shots, but tonight it pissed me off. She continued, “The woman that owns this brownstone is not your sister, and I’m not your mother, so you need to take your drunk ass home, to your actual house, before I call the cops.”

“Kimberly Shimmins is my shishter!” I yelled as I backed away from her towards my house. I could hear myself slurring my words and considered the possibility that trying to walk and talk at the same time wasn’t the best idea. I turned toward my house, continuing to amble forward. “And I’m glad you’re not my mom because my mom is awesome, and you’d be a shitty mom with your baseball bat and your potty mouth.”

Even though I was sure I just used the words “potty mouth,” I knew I’d said something profound because I was met with silence.

I turned to look at her and found her expression blank. A loud and expletive-filled response was what I expected, but she just stood there, frozen and a little sad. A feeling like regret crept over me, but I couldn’t figure out what I should have felt regretful about. I tried to replay the last thing I said, but I couldn’t fucking remember, something about Kimberly and a shitty potty?

That look... I couldn’t stand seeing it, so I turned away from her and climbed the steps to my door, where I typed in the

four-digit code.

Green checkmark.



*THANK YOU FOR READING THIS BONUS EXCERPT OF EVERYTHING'S  
Better with Lisa. For purchase information please visit [geni.  
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## Author's Note

Dearest Reader,

Thank you for reading One Scott Deal.

If you want to read another Loathe at First Sight starring two adorable goofballs who are meant for each other, please read [Everything's Better with Lisa](#), Book 3 in the Everything's Better Series! Check out an excerpt on the next page!

THANK YOU:

To my mother for badgering me into reading Wuthering Heights. I still don't get the appeal, but it definitely came in handy when writing this story.

To Read Me Romance for inviting me to participate in your podcast and giving me the opportunity to create this little story that I love so much!

The LLC Twitter crew. Thank you for inspiring me to improve simply by being better at writing than I am & thank you for not so lovingly dragging me back to my keyboard when I try to sneak onto Beyoncé's internet when I was writing this story.

My ARC team for giving their time and energy to read my work and help spread the word.

Thank you so much, dear reader, for reading One Scott Deal!

I hope you liked it. Please consider leaving a review wherever you share your good news!

October 2022

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# About the Author

Lucy Eden is the *nom de plume* of a romance obsessed author who writes the kind of funny, dramatic & steamy romance she loves to read. She's a sucker for alphas with a soft gooey center, over the top romantic gestures, strong & smart MCs, humor, love at first sight (or pretty damn close), happily ever afters & of course, steamy love scenes.

When Lucy isn't writing, she's busy reading—or listening to—every book she can get her hands on—romance or otherwise.

She lives in New York with her husband, two children, a turtle & a Yorkshire Terrier.

