

THE PARKER
SISTERS
BOOK THREE

REUNITING
WITH

Lucy



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REUNITING WITH LUCY

The Parker Sisters—Book Three

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First Edition published March 2023

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PROLOGUE

The University of North Carolina—Ten years ago

Little did Lucy Parker know that the Frisbee at her feet would change her life. While returning to her dorm after biology class, humming along to the song in her headphones, the damn thing nearly took her head off before landing next to her size-eight tennis shoe.

Startled, she paused, then bent to pick it up. As she stood, a tall, good-looking man appeared in front of her. Mocha-colored eyes locked onto hers, and the world stopped moving for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “Are you all right?” He had short brown hair and wore a T-shirt that showed off tanned, muscular arms.

In all her eighteen years, Lucy had never seen anyone so handsome. Her cheeks heated.

“I’m fine,” she said, pulling out one side of her wired earbuds to hear him better. A strange sensation washed over her, like she’d met him before. That was impossible though, because there was no way she would have forgotten him.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Lucy Parker.”

“My name’s Jack. Jack McAllister.”

He extended his hand. Unsure whether he wanted to shake hands or the Frisbee she still held, she thrust the red disk at him.

“Thanks,” he said. “You live in the dorms around here?”

“Yes,” Lucy said. “That one there.” She pointed to the closest building. “You?”

“Nah. I’m a senior. I’ve got an apartment off campus. We just came to play.”

“Oh.” She tucked her hair behind her ear.

He gripped the Frisbee with both hands and stood up straight. “This might seem forward or sudden, but do you want to go out with me?”

She nodded mutely.

“Tonight?” His buddies were impatient and yelled at him to come back to the game. He ignored them with a wave, not breaking eye contact with her.

“Uh-huh.” Okay, now she just sounded like an idiot. *Pull it together, Parker.* “Sure, yes. That would be fine.”

“Come on, man. You’re holding up the game,” one of Jack’s friends hollered.

Jack turned and threw the Frisbee at him. “Can’t you see I’m talking to the most beautiful girl on campus? Give me a second, will ya?”

Lucy blushed at the compliment, pushing her long blond hair behind her ear again. A nervous habit she was trying to break. After an awkward silence, he blinked hard and shook his head.

“Well, I guess I better get back to my friends. I’ll pick you up at seven? Which room?”

“Okay. I’m in room 212. See you later.”

She walked away, reeling over the encounter. Too impatient to wait for the elevator, she rushed up the stairs to the second-floor room she shared with her sister and burst through the door.

“Lizzie! I think I just met my future husband.” She fell onto the bed, her arms splayed wide, a massive smile on her face.

“Wow,” Lizzie said. “You were only gone an hour. That’s impressive.”

“Ha. Ha. And fifty minutes of that, I was in biology class. I met him in the quad. Two seconds ago.” Lucy sat. Talking to Lizzie was like talking to a mirror. They were identical twins, and on most days, not even their parents could tell them apart.

“He asked me out for tonight, and I said yes. It was so bizarre, but I immediately felt this connection to him. It was exactly like how Mom and Dad say they met. I looked into his eyes, and something inside me went wonky.”

“Did I just fall into a Disney movie?” Lizzie said, looking right, then left, feigning confusion. “You don’t really believe Mom and Dad fell in love the instant they saw each other, do you?”

“That’s the way they tell the story.”

“Well, sure. But don’t you think they dramatize it a little? You know, to spice it up?”

“No,” Lucy said. “I get that you don’t believe in love at first sight. I’m not positive I do either. I’m just saying things felt weird the second I laid eyes on him. His name’s Jack. Oh, Lizzie. I was so nervous I pulled out the finger gun when I said goodbye.”

“You didn’t?”

Lucy shrugged. “Still think he’ll show?”

“I don’t know.” Lizzie shook her head. “The finger gun could be a deal breaker. Tell me you didn’t make a clicking noise and pull a fake trigger.”

“Ugh. I don’t remember, but I can’t make any promises that didn’t happen.”

“Yikes.”

“What are you doing tonight? Will you be here to meet him?”

“I’ve got a date,” Lizzie said.

“Of course you do. You gonna make out with this one too?” Lucy teased. Her sister had been burning through boys since they arrived last fall.

“Hey, you gotta kiss a lot of frogs to find your prince,” Lizzie quipped, and they both laughed. “The boys don’t seem to mind.”

“Oh, I’m sure they don’t,” Lucy said.

After Lizzie left, Lucy curled her hair and applied her makeup meticulously. She dressed in her nicest, most flattering pair of jeans and a pretty pink blouse. Then she waited. And waited.

When Lizzie returned around midnight, Lucy was still dressed and sitting on the bed.

“Hey, how’d it go?” Lizzie asked, mistakenly assuming she’d gone and come back from her date. “Are you engaged?”

“He never showed,” Lucy said, swiping at her eyes, irritated at the tears. “I’m such an idiot. He was probably playing a joke on me. I’m sure he got a great laugh out of it with his friends.”

Lizzie wrapped her in her arms. “I’m sorry, sis. Boys can be so dumb.”

She’d known Jack McAllister for all of five minutes, but it had been a life-changing five minutes. She didn’t know if they would just be friends, date and break up, or get married and spend the rest of their lives together, but she’d felt certain he would be part of her life somehow.

Positive he’d felt it too, she worried something might have happened. What if he’d been hit by a bus? Or forgot about an important homework assignment due tomorrow? There were any number of things that could have kept him.

Or was her mind just playing tricks on her? He didn’t have her phone number, so if he had an excuse and still wanted to see her, he’d have to come by. She vowed to stay in her room as much as possible for the next few days.

“Well,” Lizzie said. “At least you weren’t in love with him.”

Lucy nodded but wasn’t so sure. Her heart ached a lot. A lot like maybe she *had* been in love with him.

CHAPTER ONE

“Lucy Parker. Will you marry me?”

Lucy sat at her parents’ dining room table. She’d been blissfully enjoying her mother’s homemade enchiladas when Curtis, her boyfriend of two months, announced that he wanted to ask Lucy something. Her family halted all conversation to give him their full attention, and all eyes turned to her. A trickle of sweat slid down her back. A proposal? Already?

She glanced around the room. Lizzie’s eyebrows shot up to her forehead. Her sister Emma sat beside her new boyfriend, Dirk, and smiled sweetly. Her oldest sister Kate and her newlywed husband, Adam, stared at her with faces devoid of emotion. Rounding out the table, and the dumbfounded looks, were her parents and her grandmother—everyone here to witness this, minus her baby sister Daisy.

Usually, it was a battle to get a word in, and the sudden disconcerting quiet made it hard for Lucy to think. Time had stopped, but Curtis was waiting for an answer. The expectant looks on her family’s faces said they were just as interested in her response.

Lucy looked down at the handsome man on one knee and the diamond engagement ring he offered. They’d only been dating for two months, but he was sweet and funny and treated her well. They liked a lot of the same things and had grown close in the short time they’d been together. He would make a fine husband, and she couldn’t think of any reason to say no.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.” Lucy smiled. The timing surprised her—it seemed so soon—but no matter. They could have a long engagement to continue to get to know each other. She relaxed a little at the thought.

“Ah. You’ve made me the happiest man alive,” Curtis said. He stood, slid the ring on her finger, and hugged her as her family clapped politely. She twisted her left-hand fingers around, getting used to the feel of it.

“Great. So, what’s for dessert?” Lucy’s grandma asked.

“Nana!” Emma said. “Don’t you want to congratulate them?”

“Oh, sure,” Nana said. “Congrats, Chris and Lucy. Is it pie? I smell pie.”

“Mother,” Lucy’s dad said. “His name is Curtis. Behave. Congratulations, you two.” He raised a glass in their direction. “Chalk up another man around here. Add Curtis to Adam and Dirk, and soon we’ll have an even playing field.”

Edward Parker had been blessed with five daughters and, until recently, lived in a haze of estrogen. Kate married Adam a little over a month ago, and Emma and Dirk had recently returned from Paris, announcing they were “together.”

“Let’s get some champagne all up in here,” Lizzie said. “We’ll have a toast.”

“Just water for me,” Curtis said.

“You can’t celebrate with water,” Lizzie said. Lizzie owned a bar, so Lucy could see how that would seem irreverent—borderline offensive—to her.

“You should if you’re an alcoholic,” Curtis said. “Which I am.”

For the second time in the history of the world, everyone at the table went silent. Well, crap. Lucy had hoped to disseminate that information subtly, telling each family member individually without Curtis around. Certainly not as a bold bombshell dropped on Sunday dinner.

Her mother finally broke the silence—bless her. “No problem. I think I have some sparkling cider. We’ll use that. Dear, it’s on the top shelf above the fridge. Could you help me reach it?”

Lucy knew this might put a damper on their weekly Sunday dinners. The family gathered to rehash their weeks and share good food, good wine, and great company. The wine usually flowed as effortlessly as the conversation.

Her parents left together for the kitchen, and conversation slowly resumed. Lucy understood their trepidation and couldn't blame them. When Curtis first told her, she'd been taken aback. What was an appropriate response to that kind of announcement? Congratulations on admitting it? Nice job on stopping? Man, what a bummer? Nothing seemed applicable.

"So, how many days sober?" Lizzie asked.

"Ninety-six," Curtis said proudly. "Coming up on one hundred."

Ninety-six? He'd only been sober for ninety-six days? That didn't seem like very long.

"Oh, well. Good for you," Lizzie muttered into her glass. Of wine.

"Wait. Does this mean we can't drink?" Nana said. Leave it to Nana to ask what everyone else was thinking. Even Lucy wasn't sure what the answer would be. She'd been abstaining to be supportive but had no idea how far her family would go to make him feel comfortable.

"No. No," Curtis said. "Go right ahead." Oblivious to her family's sighs of relief, he dug back into his enchiladas.

Lucy watched her parents whispering to each other in the kitchen before returning with a bottle of sparkling cider. Her mother, ever the hostess, probably had it stashed away for underaged guests, pregnant women, and teetotalers.

"Any idea when you guys want to do it?" Kate asked. "All my wedding research is super fresh, and I'm willing to help plan."

"It's a ways off," Lucy said at the same time Curtis said, "As soon as possible."

They looked at each other with matching quizzical looks.

"Guess we'll have to iron out some details," Lucy said with a nervous laugh.

As soon as possible? Maybe *he'd* been thinking about a wedding for a while, but she was still shell-shocked at his proposal and the timing of it. Not that she hadn't thought of

marriage. That had been on her mind since middle school. It was just happening a little fast, and she needed a minute to wrap her head around the idea.

“We gonna play Pictionary after dinner?” Lizzie asked.

Lucy found it odd her family was more or less glossing over the fact that she’d just gotten engaged! They’d been much more animated when Adam had proposed to Kate. Did they not like Curtis? They’d always treated him nicely, but now that she thought about it, they hadn’t embraced him like they had Adam and Dirk. She’d have to ask Lizzie. Lizzie wouldn’t pull any punches.

“So, Lucy,” Adam said, changing the subject. “You all set for tomorrow? Big day, huh?”

Adam had purchased a rundown strip mall with five storefronts. Lucy and three of her sisters were each going to lease a space and be neighbors. Since Adam intended to gut them all, they were free to do whatever they wanted design-wise to make it their own. Lucy owned a coffee shop downtown called The Drip and planned to use her space to add a second store. Her sisters’ leases weren’t up for a while, so she was first in line for a remodel.

“Yes, I’m so excited,” Lucy said. “I can’t wait to tell you my ideas.”

“You’ll meet the contractor at tomorrow’s meeting. He’ll be the main liaison for your project,” Adam said. “I haven’t worked with him, but he’s a good friend of my friend Spencer. His name’s Jack. Spencer’s wife is due any day now, so he called Jack to see if he could take over. They’ve been friends since college, and Spencer says he does great work.”

“Jack?” Lizzie said, giving Lucy a knowing glance and raising her eyebrows.

Lucy shot her a warning look. “Don’t,” she said to her sister.

Adam looked between the two of them. “You know I don’t speak your secret, mind-reading twin language. What’d I miss?”

“Nothing,” Lucy said.

“Lucy met a guy at UNC named Jack,” Lizzie said, ignoring Lucy. “He stood her up one night, and she’s never gotten over him.”

“Uh, obviously, I’ve gotten over him. I’m marrying Curtis,” Lucy said. Had everyone already forgotten? Criminy.

“Oh, yes. I mean, it took you *a while* to get over him,” Lizzie corrected, giving Curtis a sheepish smile. “She got a new hottie now.”

Lucy rolled her eyes at her sister’s tactlessness.

Jack. It couldn’t be. Not that it mattered. Lizzie was right. She’d moved past Jack years ago. She was ready to move on with a new man. A reliable one, who did what he said when he said it.

CHAPTER TWO

Jack McAllister sat in a downtown coffee shop and wondered again about his sanity. On a whim, he'd moved to New Bern from Wilmington to help an old college buddy with a construction project. Spencer had introduced him to a guy named Adam, who was starting a long-term venture renovating five commercial spaces. Initially, Jack was only supposed to be part of the crew, but Spencer had promptly bugged out—something about a baby coming any day—and put Jack in charge.

The soon-to-be occupants were all sisters, each of whom had a business in town. The first remodel would be a second edition of this coffee shop, and today, he would meet the owner. Hopefully, she wasn't a micromanaging freak that would be at the work site every day, telling him what to do. He preferred a thorough plan and then to be left alone.

“So, how do you know these ladies?” Jack asked Adam.

“My wife, Kate, is the oldest Parker sister. She owns a real estate firm. We'll move her to one of the suites once her current lease is up. Emma is an accountant and runs an office about a block away. Lucy leases this place and is on deck to move first. And Lizzie owns the bar across the street, The Drop. The youngest sister, Daisy, lives in Paris. We're saving the fifth spot for her in case she decides to come home and settle down.”

“That's a lot of women.” Jack thought back to a Lucy Parker he met briefly in college. It couldn't be the same woman. That would be too coincidental.

“Sure is. They're great though. It's not like Lucy to be late,” Adam said, checking his watch. “I hope nothing happened. She's usually very on top of things.”

Just as Adam spoke, Jack looked up to see a beautiful, dark-haired woman enter the store. He recognized her immediately as Lucy Parker—the girl from the quad. She'd dyed her hair black and had matured a bit, but was still heart-breakingly

gorgeous. Just one look on that college campus ten years ago, and he'd never forgotten her.

He'd been so excited about their date, even splurged on some flowers. But when he arrived to pick her up, he'd found her swapping spit with some guy in the dorm lobby. He ducked out before she could see him, chucked the flowers in the nearest trash can, and left.

They'd only talked for five minutes that day on the quad, but for some unknown reason, the betrayal had hurt. Even now, it stung. He'd written her off as one of those entitled, spoiled brats he'd spent his life trying to avoid. The encounter left a lasting impression on him, but she'd probably had a good laugh and then forgotten it.

As she approached, Jack heaved a sigh of relief. The intense feelings he'd had for her when they first met didn't register at all. His infatuation had withered, and thank goodness. Working with her would be awkward enough—no need to throw in an attraction to her.

When his gaze met hers, all he got in return was a blank stare. She didn't even remember him. Figures.

"Hey, Lizzie," Adam said. "Where's Lucy?"

"How should I know? Am I my sister's keeper?" the dark-haired Lucy said with a smirk. "Just kidding. She wanted me to come over and tell you she's on her way. Something about Mr. Snuggles and barf. I didn't ask for details."

"Mr. Snuggles," Adam said, rolling his eyes. "All right. Well, thanks for letting us know."

Jack's brows knit in confusion. This was clearly the woman he'd met on campus. "That's not Lucy?" he asked Adam.

"Oh, no. Sorry, Jack, this is Lucy's twin, Lizzie. Lizzie, this is Jack, the contractor for Lucy's remodel."

"How you doin'?" Lizzie said, giving Jack a slow up-and-down perusal.

Jack had to ask. "Did you go to UNC about ten years ago?"

"Yeah," Lizzie said, smiling. "Do I know you?"

“I think I’ve met your sister.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened, and her smile fell. “Holy crap.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Lizzie said quickly before mumbling, “This should be interesting.”

Jack’s world shifted when he realized the repercussions of what Lucy having a twin could mean. Was it possible she wasn’t the one he’d seen making out in the lobby?

As he began to wrap his mind around it, the coffee shop doors whooshed open again. There was no mistake this time. It was Lucy. The angel he remembered, and just as beautiful as before—blond hair flowing in the breeze, blue eyes that shined like the sun. And that smile. It lit up the entire room when she entered.

Oh shit, he thought. *I may have made a terrible mistake.*

She greeted the baristas behind the counter with a wave and said hello to a table of three old men before making her way to where they sat.

“Hey, guys. Sorry I’m late. I—” Her words stopped abruptly when she landed on him. They held each other’s gaze for a long pause, and everyone else faded into the walls. *Oh, yeah. I’m in trouble again.*

“You what?” Lizzie said, pushing Lucy and breaking the moment.

“I...I don’t remember,” Lucy stammered. She looked away, shook her head, and regained her composure. “I had a cat barf emergency. Mind if I grab a cup before we get started?”

“Nah, we’ll wait,” Adam said.

Jack was glad for the few extra minutes to compose himself. He wasn’t sure she remembered him, but he was determined to play it cool. When she returned, she took the seat as far away from him as possible.

“I think you know everyone but Jack,” Adam said, hitching a chin in Jack’s direction.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, verging on curt. Her smile was forced, and her eyes had lost the radiant glow. All he saw was pain and a dash of anger. What did she have to be upset about? He was the one who’d been wronged. At least, that’s what he’d been telling himself for the last decade. After finding out about Lizzie, it was looking more and more like maybe he’d stood Lucy up that night. And if that were the case, of course, she’d be bitter.

“Lizzie, you wanna sit in?” Adam asked. “These will probably be the same guys that handle your project.”

Lizzie looked at Lucy and crooked an eyebrow. Lucy gave a barely perceivable shake of her head.

“Nah. I’m good,” Lizzie said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Adam said to Jack.

“Used to what?” Jack said.

“The telepathy thing they’ve got going on. They can look at each other and have whole conversations without saying a word,” Adam said.

Jack would give his family’s fortune to be able to read Lucy’s mind right now. Each time he tried to catch her eye, she looked away.

Adam took the lead and started the meeting. They talked timelines, ideas, materials, and structural needs. Lucy relaxed a little and showed excitement over the prospect of a drive-thru. She’d made some crude drawings of her ideas for decor and had a good eye for design and traffic flow. Jack liked that she knew what she wanted. And he didn’t get the vibe that she’d be a real ballbuster either.

After an hour, they took a break, and she excused herself to get another cup of coffee.

When she was out of earshot, Jack leaned over to Adam.

“Lucy and Lizzie look so much alike,” he said. “I imagine if they both had blond hair, it would be impossible to tell them apart.”

“Oh, yeah,” Adam said. “I didn’t know Lizzie as a blond, but I do know the entire family was very relieved when she went dark. Otherwise, there’s no way to tell who’s who.”

Jack nodded. Question after question popped in rapid succession. What if it had been Lizzie he’d seen in the lobby? What if Lucy had been upstairs waiting for him, wondering why he never showed? That would explain the sour looks.

Was everything he thought he knew based on a simple misunderstanding? One he could have resolved had he not been a stubborn ass? Could the last ten years of his life been completely different? Would he have joined the military? Married Paige?

So many questions, most of which could never be answered. What to do now? Would she give him a second chance? Did he want one? As the thoughts raced, she returned and sat, her hand wrapped around a to-go cup. The glint from the diamond ring on her left hand was his answer. She was married. Game over.

He didn’t want to look at her but kept involuntarily sneaking glances. He finally caught her eye but couldn’t read the expression.

It seemed like she remembered him, and not fondly, but he couldn’t know for sure without asking her. He decided he’d follow her lead. If she didn’t say anything, neither would he. If she brought it up, he’d explain his side of the story. It was too late for a relationship, but perhaps they could salvage a friendship. That would be helpful since they had to work together.

“We heading over there now?” Lucy asked Adam, who nodded.

Jack stood and grabbed his notepad. This was an unexpected turn of events. He’d run to New Bern to escape his problems, only to find different, prettier ones.

CHAPTER THREE

Lucy hated being late. Especially to a meeting where she wanted to make a good first impression. Mr. Snuggles must have gotten into something that upset his stomach. Tiny puddles of vomit littered the floor—a minefield of puke. She hadn't factored cat vomit clean up into her timeline and was now behind schedule. Once she got out the door and into the sunlight, she realized her shoes didn't match.

"Close enough," she mumbled. "No one will notice."

She hurried into the coffee shop only five minutes late. Adam and his friends sat at one of the larger round tables. Two of them, she recognized. Adam's best friend, Spencer, and Spencer's brother, Garrett. The other had his back to her, so a set of broad shoulders and a crisp haircut was all she saw. Lizzie stood next to them, smiling at the unknown man.

After greeting her employees, and the Three Musketeers—a group of retirees that hung out at the shop every day—Lucy made her way to the table. While apologizing for her tardiness, a pair of caramel-colored eyes met hers. Midsentence, her mind went blank, and she completely derailed from whatever excuses had been coming out of her mouth. Jack.

She finally pulled it together enough to blurt out something about cat barf. *Smooth, real smooth.*

"Gross," Adam said, holding up a hand. "No details needed."

Her request to grab a coffee wasn't just to satisfy her caffeine addiction. She needed a minute to pull herself together and figure out how to handle this new situation. While she poured, she head-screamed for Lizzie to come over and talk to her. Normally, they were so in tune, she'd only have to think about needing Lizzie, and she'd have been there. Apparently, Lucy's mental message was drowned out by the sound of Jack's rippling muscles.

When she returned, and Adam introduced Jack, it was all she could do not to dump her scalding hot coffee in his lap.

She thought she'd gotten over him. Guess a tiny bit of animosity remained.

Jack had filled out. His chest was broader than she remembered, and his arms more muscular. She could see why Lizzie was distracted. When they made eye contact, her heart froze for a beat. His eyes were mesmerizing, like tiny black holes that would suck her in if she let them. Ten years had added a hint of wariness, which piqued her curiosity. What had he been doing all this time? No, she couldn't go down that road. The past was just that, and she'd let it go.

"Nice to meet you," she said, looking away quickly. Thank goodness the only available chair was across the table from him. She slid into it, disconcerted by how fast and intense all the same feelings rushed back. It was the UNC quad all over again.

Adam started the meeting, and they got down to business.

"I've been to the site and drawn up a tentative timeline of what needs to be done and when," Jack said. "We'll start the outside construction next week and do the roof and outside facade for the whole building at once. Then we'll get started on Lucy's space."

She tried to focus on what he was saying, even attempted to take notes, but hearing him say her name sent a tingling thrill up her spine. *Tamp it down, Parker*. He was a jerk, and she was engaged—end of story.

He seemed to know his stuff, which put her mind at ease about the remodel. She'd just have to get over the personal issues. Maybe have Adam be a liaison, so she wouldn't have to interact with Jack directly.

After the meeting, they agreed to head over to the site. Adam offered her a ride, and she accepted.

"So, you gonna be okay working with Jack?" he asked once they were in the car and on their way.

"Yeah. Why do you ask?" she said, wringing her hands in her lap.

“I don’t know. I sense tension between you two. Did I miss something? Do you know him?”

“Was it that obvious?” She sighed. “He’s the Jack Lizzie brought up last night. The guy I met at UNC?”

“What? Are you serious?” Adam said. “What are the odds of that? So, what happened? Did you guys date?”

“We talked for about five seconds,” Lucy said. “He asked me out and then never showed. That’s it.”

“I feel like that’s not it, but okay.”

“Don’t worry. It’s fine. He doesn’t even remember me. I’ll pretend I don’t know him, and he’ll never be the wiser.”

“He remembers you, Lucy,” Adam said, stopping for a red light and looking over at her. “And he looked very surprised to find out you had a twin. When you left to get coffee, he asked about Lizzie. Whether she used to have blond hair and if she went to UNC with you.”

“So I have a twin? Big whoop. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Beats me.”

“Well, not my concern anymore.” She shrugged it off, but had to admit it was curious Jack cared enough to ask. Could something have happened with Lizzie? She shot her a quick text, asking if she remembered what she’d done that night.

“You think you can still work with him?” Adam asked.

“Of course. Like I said, I only talked to him for a second.” She waved a hand dismissively to indicate she was fine. That Jack meant nothing to her. “It was a long time ago.”

“You know your shoes don’t match, right?”

“Not now, Adam.”

“Right. Sorry.”

They arrived at the site and got out. Graffiti covered the wood that covered the windows. And chunks of the facade had

either fallen off or been torn off, giving the building a splotchy, sickly look. The place had seen better days for sure.

Jack parked a few spots away and walked to meet them. He looked rugged and strong. She inadvertently licked her lips.

“Let’s do a quick walk-through,” he said, taking charge. Following him without staring at his ass tested her willpower. An image of him wearing a toolbelt and hard hat popped into her head, and the temperature in the room jumped a few degrees. She took off her jacket and tied it around her waist.

From the few stolen glances she’d allowed herself, she noticed he’d done more than simply “fill out.” He must spend hours at the gym, pumping weights to earn the biceps currently testing the capacity of his shirt sleeves. He had an edge to him, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. Cynical maybe? Wary for sure. Once again, she wondered what he’d been up to all these years. Was he married? Kids?

She shook her head to focus on the task at hand.

“So, I’m thinking most of the counter space and coffee machines here.” She made a sweeping gesture toward the side of the building where the drive-thru would be. She purposely used her left hand to point things out. The one with the diamond ring on it. “A long counter here with barstools. A big baked goods cabinet here and a cooler for snacks and water there. Bench seating all around the perimeter, and tables of varying sizes throughout. Since there’s so much space, I was hoping we could incorporate a few private, closed-off rooms. All glass walls and bigger tables. People try to have meetings, but it gets too loud to be productive. I love the look of the exposed ceiling with the big pipes showing and dark wood floors. Sort of rustic-meets-industrial? Storage room, bathrooms, and an office in the back.”

Jack watched her and jotted down notes as she spoke.

“Sorry, am I talking too much?” Lucy said.

“No,” Jack said. “That’s why we’re here. Since we’re more or less gutting the place, whatever you want, we can do. We need to keep functionality in mind, as well as aesthetics, but it

seems like you've done that. I'll take your ideas and draw up some tentative plans. We won't start anything until you sign off on it."

"Okay. I also want big framed pictures of inspirational quotes. You know, 'Make Each Day Count. Kindness Matters.' Things like that. I love that stuff and figured, why not surround everyone with it?"

"All right," Jack said. "I'll let you work out where to buy that from. Send me the link of what you want, and I'll get them ordered and hung. Decor will be one of the last things to go up, but the sooner we order, the better. We don't want to be waiting on anything."

"Adam, you cool with all that?" Lucy asked.

"I'm just the money bags," Adam said. "I told you we'd build to suit, so as long as it's structurally sound, go for it."

Lucy's phone vibrated, and she pulled it out of her pocket. It was a text from Lizzie. *We hung out in the lobby and played pool. We may have made out a little. You don't think...?* She ended with a surprised-faced emoji—the one with giant, shocked eyeballs.

Was it possible Jack had seen Lizzie making out with some guy and assumed it was her? Is that why he'd stood her up? Of all the reasons she'd imagined he hadn't shown—he'd been hit by a bus, kidnapped by aliens, or fallen down a well—this actually made more sense.

If that was the case, then all her previous thoughts and feelings were based on a misunderstanding. Maybe he really *had* wanted to take her out. Maybe he *did* show up that night. Maybe he saw Lizzie, thought it was her, and turned around and left. And who wouldn't? He'd probably spent the last decade thinking she was a tramp and a tease.

"You okay?" Adam said, coming up beside her.

She hit the button on her phone to turn the screen black and slipped it back into her pocket. "Yeah. Fine."

Was she though? All the what-ifs fell like a ton of bricks onto her shoulders. How drastically could a decade-old mix-up

affect her life? And what should she do now? Could they just keep pretending they didn't know each other? Pretend the earth didn't move every time they looked into each other's eyes? That would be easiest for everyone. Having a conversation about it would make things awkward, and they had to work together for the next few months.

Plus, that ship had sailed. She was engaged to Curtis—in love with Curtis. She twisted her engagement ring. It felt weird, but that was probably just because she wasn't used to wearing a ring on that finger.

CHAPTER FOUR

As soon as they finished the on-site tour, Lucy had Adam drop her back at The Drip. Instead of going inside, she ran across the street to The Drop.

“Lizzie!” Lucy yelled. The bar hadn’t opened yet, so it was empty. Lizzie was probably in the back doing inventory or billing. She emerged with a sheepish look on her face.

“What are the odds?” Lizzie said.

“I’m going to kill you.” Lucy stalked toward her sister, who threw up her hands in surrender.

“How was I supposed to know he’d see me and freak out?” she said. “Why didn’t he confront me?”

Lucy blew out a breath in frustration. It was no surprise they’d both come to the same conclusion—that Jack had seen Lizzie smooching some guy and mistaken her for Lucy. Getting mad at her sister wouldn’t help anything. What was done was done. She plopped down on a barstool.

“What am I gonna do?” she said, putting her chin in her hand.

“You mean about Curtis?”

“No,” Lucy said. “I mean the situation with Jack. I have to work with him almost every day. Honestly, Curtis did not even enter my mind. Ugh. What does that say about me?”

“It says maybe you’re still hung up on someone else. You want a drink?”

“Lizzie, it’s not even noon.”

“It’s five o’clock somewhere,” Lizzie said. “I texted Emma and Kate. We’ll make mimosas and help you figure it out.”

A second later, two more sisters burst through the door.

“We came as soon as we heard,” Kate said.

“Guys. It’s not like an *actual* emergency,” Lucy said. Although, was that true?

“Are you kidding me?” Emma said. “This is huge.”

“We were just discussing Curtis,” Lizzie said, raising her eyebrows.

“Whew. Good thing you’re not *married*,” Kate said. “Can you imagine?”

“What are you talking about?” Lucy said. “I’m still marrying Curtis.”

All three sisters stared blankly at her.

“What?” Lucy said. “You think I shouldn’t marry him?” Her head spun. She thought dealing with Jack was her only problem. Now her sisters were making her doubt marrying Curtis.

“What do *you* think?” Emma said. “That’s what’s important.” Emma was the most diplomatic of the bunch.

“You gotta drop that loser and take a shot with the hottie,” Lizzie said. She was the most tactless of the bunch.

“What? Does everyone hate Curtis?” Lucy asked.

Dead silence.

“So, I’m rereading *To Kill a Mockingbird*...,” Kate said. This was something they did to get out of awkward conversations with their parents—change the subject to a classic novel. They didn’t do it to each other!

“Don’t pull that crap with me,” Lucy said, pounding her fist on the bar.

“Hate’s a strong word...,” Lizzie said. “But I mean...”

“Poor Curtis,” Emma said.

“It’s not that we don’t like him,” Kate said. “We just don’t like him *for you*. He seems like a great guy, but will he make you happy?”

Lucy started to protest but stopped. If she dug deep and really analyzed it, they might have a point. She did love Curtis but couldn’t deny her doubts about the quick engagement.

Jack reentering her life certainly didn't help. He was distracting her from everything.

"I love you, sis," Emma said. "But you tend to put other people's needs and feelings before your own."

"Emma's right," Kate said. "You're a people-pleaser. Plus, you hate to be alone."

"Is it possible that you like the idea of being married so much, you've talked yourself into a life with Curtis simply because he asked?" Lizzie said.

"But I don't even know Jack," Lucy protested. "Yes, I'll admit, there's still a bit of an attraction. But he could be a serial killer for all I know. Or married. Or gay. I don't know anything about him!"

More blank stares. Lucy sighed. "You don't think I should marry Curtis, regardless of what happens with Jack." It wasn't a question, and their silence confirmed her statement.

"What if I break up with Curtis and nothing happens with Jack?" Lucy asked. "Or what if something does happen, but then it ends horribly, and I'll have given up a chance at a stable relationship with Curtis?"

"That's a chance you take with any relationship," Emma said. "Don't think with your head. What is your heart telling you?"

"Emma, why do you have to be so reasonable? If I think with my heart..." Lucy closed her eyes, put her palms up like she was meditating, and took a deep breath. She meant it as a joke to mock her sister, but while pretending to take a dramatic moment to search her soul, something strange happened—her soul answered.

The second she tuned in to her heart, she realized it stood at odds with her head. Her heart, not to mention her lady parts, were voting for Jack. More like screaming for him. Declaring anarchy if he wasn't chosen. But she loved Curtis too. There was some definite turmoil goin' on. Lucy opened her eyes.

"I don't know, you guys," Lucy said. "It sucks that you don't like Curtis. *And* that you think I'm marrying him just to

spare his feelings, but I really do love him.”

“Then don’t worry about what we think,” Emma said.

“I have to think about it,” Lucy said. “I’ve only known Jack for about ten minutes. Literally. Just because we have an attraction doesn’t mean we’re meant for happily ever after. Plus, you’re assuming Jack wants a relationship with me. It’s very possible that he doesn’t.”

“It has been ten years,” Kate said. “You have a point.”

“You don’t have to decide anything right now,” Lizzie said. “We’ve said our piece, but it’s ultimately up to you. It’s your life.”

Should she throw away a great relationship with Curtis to risk a potential one with Jack? Was he even interested in that? Were you truly in love with one person if you had thoughts of another? Could she be happy with Curtis for the rest of her life? It was too much.

“Didn’t you promise mimosas?” Lucy asked. “After conversing with you three, I could use one now.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Another week passed, and Lucy once again sat at her parents' dining room table, surrounded by crazy people. Nana had lime green hair this week and wore a T-shirt that said, "Sometimes I talk to myself. Then we both laugh and laugh." Lucy noticed she was using a spoon that looked an awful lot like the ones at the coffee shop.

"Nana," Lucy said. "Did you take that spoon from The Drip?"

Nana's eyes shot to her son.

"Mother," Lucy's dad said. "We've talked about this. You can't keep taking things that aren't yours." He held up a hand to stop her from making excuses. "Even if you think Lucy wouldn't mind, what's hers is not necessarily yours. Stop stealing stuff."

When he looked away, Nana stuck her tongue out at him, and Lucy chuckled.

In a lengthy family group chat, one that didn't include Nana, they'd discussed the possibility that Nana had lost it, was in the process of losing it, or had become a kleptomaniac. Lucy texted that a geriatric onset of kleptomania seemed improbable and suggested that maybe Nana just wanted attention.

Their dad said he'd talk to her, but in the meantime, asked everyone to keep an eye on her. Lucy's other theory was that she was just being mischievous. That was more plausible and lined up better with Nana's personality.

"All right, everybody," Lucy's mother said. "It's that time of year again. We're a couple of months out, but we need to plan to get a family photo taken for the Christmas card."

Everyone groaned and mumbled excuses, which her mother ignored.

"Since everyone's schedules are so busy, I thought I'd just make the appointment with the photographer, and you all

could figure out a way to make it happen. Daisy will only be in town for ten days around Thanksgiving, which narrows our window drastically. I'll let you know when I decide on this year's color scheme."

Between dinner and dessert, they all beelined to the living room to check their phones. Sophie Parker had a strict no-cell-phones-at-the-dinner-table policy, so it had been almost an hour since anyone had had contact with the outside world.

Adam and Lucy both had texts and voicemails from Jack, saying something was wrong at the site and asking that they call right away. "You call," Lucy said needlessly to Adam. He was already dialing.

"Hey, man. What's up?" Adam listened for a second and then swore. "That sounds expensive."

Lucy inched closer, trying to hear what Jack was saying. After another pause, Adam said, "I'll be right over."

He hung up and turned to Lucy. "A water pipe broke at the site. Luckily, the water's turned off, but there was still enough in the pipes to cause some damage. I'm gonna head over there. You wanna go?"

"Yeah," Lucy said. "Let's go."

"What?" Curtis said. "Why do you have to go?" It came out sort of whiny and rubbed Lucy the wrong way. She'd given some thought to what her sisters had said but was still on the fence about whether or not to break up with Curtis. He didn't realize it, but everything he did and said was factoring into her decision.

"It's my store," she said. "Well, my future store. Of course I want to see what happened."

"I'm coming," Kate said.

"Let's all go," Lizzie chimed in. "I haven't been there in a while and want to check it out again anyway."

Ultimately, the entire family piled into several cars and headed over. All Lucy could think was, poor Jack.

Sure enough, the look on Jack's face was priceless when the whole brood tumbled out of multiple vehicles, everyone talking at once. Adam and Lucy got to him first.

"Sorry, man," Adam said. "This turned into a family field trip."

"Well, hello, handsome," Nana said, sidling up to Jack and putting her hand on his arm. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure."

Jack shot Adam a look of panic, and Adam laughed. "Nana, go easy on him, okay? Jack, this is Audrey Parker. Audrey, behave." He turned to Jack and stage whispered, "This family should probably come with a warning label."

"No worries," Jack said with a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Audrey."

Nana linked her arm in his and gazed up at him, batting her eyelashes like a lovestruck teenager. Jack took it all in stride and crooked his arm to accommodate Nana.

"Looks like a pipe in the ceiling burst," Jack said. "There'll be clean up and re-piping to do. It'll set us back a week or two, depending on when I can get someone to do it. We should also check the piping for the rest of the structure. If there's a problem here, there may be more."

"Yep. I agree," Adam said. "I should have known this wouldn't go smoothly. Flipping never does."

"Is this going to cost me money?" Lucy asked. Emma had worked out the financial details of this venture, and Lucy could afford it, but barely.

Jack slapped Adam on the back. "Well, it's gonna cost your landlord plenty for sure. Whether he passes the cost on to you is up to him."

Lucy looked expectantly at Adam.

"It's the cost of doing business," he said. "Our deal stays the same."

Lucy smiled and breathed a sigh of relief.

While her family was there, Lucy explained the plan and her ideas for how the new place would look. In the last week, Jack's team had punched a hole in the wall for the drive-thru window, stripped the floors, and removed all the old sheetrock, so it took some imagination to see the potential of what was now studs and dust.

They peppered her with questions and suggestions. Curtis didn't seem all that interested and hung back, giving Jack the side eye. Lucy ignored it. Jealousy wasn't a good look on anyone.

"We heading back for dessert?" Lizzie asked. That was met with a chorus of "hell, yeahs."

As everyone returned to their cars, Jack cornered Lucy. "Can we schedule a time to meet?" he asked. "We need to talk about flooring, tiles, light fixtures, countertops, all that stuff. We should get everything ordered as soon as possible, so we'll have it when we're ready."

"When?" Lucy asked.

"Sooner the better. We probably should have done it last week."

"Okay," she said. "How about the coffee shop tomorrow morning?"

"It'd be better if you came here," he said, waving to the skinny mobile home that was serving as an on-site office. "There are a lot of catalogs to look through. I emailed you some links so you can research online too, but seeing and feeling real samples is always best. Daytime is pretty busy, especially with this pipe issue to deal with. Could we do it after six?"

Adam came over to say goodbye. "We'll talk tomorrow?"

"Sounds good. I'll be here all day," Jack said. "I was just working out a time with Lucy to meet about choosing the interior supplies." He turned back to her. "So, tomorrow after six, here?"

"All right," Lucy said. "That'll work."

CHAPTER SIX

Lucy had been dreading six o'clock all day. Being trapped in that little trailer with Jack sounded like a recipe for an awkward sandwich. Should she bring up the past? Confront him about what happened? Or just keep acting as though they'd never met? She'd begged Adam to come with her, but he'd promised Kate he'd help at an open house that evening, so she was on her own.

After working a few hours at The Drip in the morning, she'd gone home, taken a nap, and then perused some of the websites Jack had emailed her. There were so many choices. It seemed impossible to decide on anything. The options for flooring alone made her head ache. There were hundreds of wallpaper and paint samples, different types of wood for the bar, and light fixtures—so many light fixtures.

A little before six, she arrived and parked next to Jack's pickup. She took a deep breath and braced herself for being cooped up alone in a small room with him. She could do this. She had to do this.

Jack was just finishing his takeout dinner when she entered. He threw away his trash and tipped his head at the chair next to his as an invitation to sit. At least a dozen massive binders of samples sat stacked on a long fold-out table.

"Oh my gosh. I can't possibly go through all that," she said.

"You shouldn't have to," he said. "Since you've got a pretty good idea of what you want, we can narrow the search considerably. Wanna start with flooring?" He grabbed a binder near her and opened it.

"Sure." She sat in the chair he offered and scooted it away from him an inch. Every little bit of distance would help. He smelled like sawdust and Kung Pao chicken, and heat emanated from him. She was already having trouble focusing.

"I was looking at this for the main floor," he said, pointing to one of the wood samples. "We can do something similar but

cheaper for the back rooms to save some money. They don't need to be as durable since they won't see as much traffic."

"I thought Adam was paying for everything," she said.

"Oh, he is. And he gave me a pretty nice budget, but if we save a little here, you could spend more on something else if you wanted."

She didn't make it ten minutes before the elephant in the room became too big to think around. Not knowing exactly what happened that night was killing her. It was time to put it out there, deal with it, so they could move on.

"You may not remember this," she said. "But we've met. In college?"

"I know."

Her head snapped up, eyes meeting his. "Why didn't you say anything?" she asked.

"I couldn't very well bring it up in front of everyone," he said. "Plus, I wasn't sure you remembered me. When you acted like you didn't know me, I took your lead and played along."

"Oh."

"I think I owe you an apology," Jack said, pushing the book away and turning toward her. "I was so excited about our date, but when I showed up and saw you kissing some guy in the lobby, I turned around, left, and never came back."

"Lizzie," she said simply.

"Yeah. I put two and two together on that. I didn't know you had a twin."

"How could you? We barely talked for five minutes. It sucks you just assumed the worst and left though."

"I was young and dumb. Stubborn and proud. I thought you'd played me and was embarrassed. I didn't want to be that desperate guy that came after you when it was obvious you wanted nothing to do with me."

“Except I did want something to do with you,” she said. “I felt something so bizarre the moment we met. A connection. I guess you didn’t feel it.”

“I felt it, Lucy,” he said, looking at her so earnestly she had to fight back tears. “It’s haunted me all this time, and now that I know the truth about what happened, that it was all a misunderstanding, I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around what could have been. What we potentially missed out on all these years because I was stupid.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” She sighed. “I’m sure I would have done the same thing had I been in your shoes.”

“You’ve spent the last ten years thinking I stood you up.” He ran a hand through his hair. “In reality, I was counting the seconds to see you again. I told my friends I’d found my future wife. When they laughed at me, I let them think I was joking, but I wasn’t. I’ve never felt anything so strong. Before or since that day.”

“I waited for you, Jack. I waited all night and all the next week, hoping you’d find me and have a reasonable explanation for why you never showed.” A tear slid down her cheek, and he used his thumb to catch it.

“Oh, Lucy. Please don’t cry.”

“I thought maybe I’d see you around campus, but I never saw you again.”

“I was a senior and graduated not long after meeting you. After...what happened, I made it a point not to hang out near your dorm. I lived off campus, and it was weird I was there that day anyway. I’m not surprised our paths never crossed again. God gave us one chance, and I blew it.”

“Technically, He’s giving us two. I guess I’m blowing this one.”

“I wish I could go back. Knock on your door. Wait for you in the quad. Something. I was an idiot.”

“I’m sorry too,” she said.

“You’re married?” He pointed at her left hand.

“Engaged. Just recently,” she said, twisting the diamond band around her finger.

“Oh. What’s he like?” Jack asked.

“You’ve seen him. He was the blond, wearing a black sweater yesterday when we all came to see the pipe damage. He’s nice. Dependable. Does what he says he’s going to do.”

“Got it.”

She blew out a deep breath. “Look,” she said. “It might be awkward, but we have to work together, so we need to get past this and move on.”

“Is that really what you want?” he asked softly. “I feel the same pull to you as I did ten years ago. I don’t know what it means, but I’d like to find out. Is there any hope of another chance?”

Wasn’t that the million-dollar question? It would be so unfair to Curtis to dump him just for what might be. Plus, she couldn’t endure the pain of losing Jack a second time. Better to play it safe.

She shook her head. “No. Even though I hardly knew you, it took me awhile to get over you. But I did. I’ve moved on and learned a few lessons. One being, it’s not all about how you feel. It’s not as easy as love at first sight.”

There was more she could say, but she didn’t want him to know just how deeply he’d hurt her. Or how much that day had affected her life and all her relationships since.

“I understand,” he said. “Friends then?”

She nodded and swiped at one final tear. When she finally braved a look, he was staring intently at her. They were inches apart, and it would be very easy to close the gap and kiss him. Without conscious thought, her body leaned in, seemingly planning to do just that. He inched closer and closer. At the last second, right before their lips touched, she came to her senses. She was engaged for God’s sake. To another man.

She stood abruptly. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry. I have to go.” She gathered her things and left without another word. Damn,

that was close. She'd have to be on guard from now on. Jack's pheromones were nothing to mess around with.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jack sat at The Drip, working on order forms for materials they would need soon. It had been a few days since he and Lucy had talked. And almost kissed. Even after hours of reflection, he wasn't sure what to make of that. The attraction between them was still alive and well. At least on his end. And while he was glad they'd cleared the air, now that he knew the truth, he couldn't help but curse himself for being such a dumbass all those years ago.

Lucy was doing her best to avoid him. Except for introducing him to three old coots at the shop—she called them the Three Musketeers—she'd hardly said two words to him.

The trailer slash office he was supposed to work in stunk like a dead cat. It was cluttered and cramped, and gave off a coffin-esque vibe. On the second day, the coffee maker broke, which was the last straw. Now, he started his days at The Drip, getting paperwork done before heading to the site.

The coffee was better here anyway. And when Lucy was around, so was the view. She usually came in about seven or eight. Sometimes she helped at the counter, but mostly, she worked in her back office. She was avoiding him, but that would have to end soon. He still needed her input on what supplies to order. Today or tomorrow, he'd pin down a time to meet again.

"Hey, Jack," the Musketeer named Archie greeted. "How's it going this morning?"

"Can't complain," Jack said. "How are you three?"

"Another day above ground is always a good one," Walter said, and Jack chuckled.

"It sounds like I might have to challenge you to a duel," Gene said. "I hear you been makin' moves on Audrey Parker."

"Oh, well. She is a beautiful lady, but she's more woman than I could handle," Jack said with a wink. "She's all yours."

Gene grinned and gave him a thumbs-up.

Jack had set up his laptop at one of the tables out of the way and was engrossed in a spreadsheet when a man's raised voice caught his attention.

Lucy was talking to some guy wearing a beret and a yellow scarf. He looked like an idiot and soon proved himself one.

"I burnt my tongue," the man complained.

"I'm sorry about that," Lucy said. "Would you like a piece of ice?"

"No, I want my money back."

"Is something wrong with your order?" she asked.

"It's too hot," the man said, getting more agitated and louder with each word.

"Did you order it iced?"

"No. I ordered it hot. I just didn't think it would be this hot."

Lucy stared at him, her mouth slightly agape, probably wondering if he was for real.

Then she laughed. "Did Lizzie send you over here to mess with me?"

The man stood stone-faced, glaring at her. "Who's Lizzie?"

Lucy's smile fell as the guy continued his tirade.

"Also, I can tell there's regular sugar in it, not stevia," he said.

"I made it myself, and I know I put stevia in it, but we can remake it if you're not happy." She reached out a hand, indicating he give her his cup. He held it tight.

"Are you saying I can't tell the difference between sugar and stevia?" His face reddened.

Jack noticed the three old men in the corner, talking hurriedly in hushed voices and putting five-dollar bills in the middle of the table. Adam had warned him about how they bet on anything and everything going on around town.

By now, the shop was quiet, and all eyes had turned to the counter. Lucy's fiancé had come in about twenty minutes ago, but he sat and stared with the rest of them, not doing a damn thing. Well, Jack had seen enough.

"You heard the lady," Jack said, coming up behind the man. "You can have it remade or suck it up and drink what you ordered. Berating her and making an ass of yourself isn't necessary."

"Wha...?" he sputtered. "Who are you?"

"Just a customer who doesn't appreciate his peaceful morning coffee interrupted with crybabies whining about their sweetener."

"Well, I never..." He looked at Lucy as if he wanted her to defend him. She pressed her lips together, trying to stifle a laugh.

"Yeah. I'm sure you haven't." Jack plucked the cup from the man's hand and read aloud. "Pumpkin spice latte, half almond milk, half soy milk, one stevia, two pumps vanilla. What kind of man orders a coffee like this? Take your prissy, foo-foo drink and beat it, eh?"

"It's not foo-foo," the man whined. "Lots of guys drink coffee like this."

"Ordering coffee this way is just a fancy way of admitting you're a virgin."

The man looked up at Jack. Way up. Jack stood almost six inches taller and probably outweighed him by forty pounds. Pounds of muscle. It was times like these he was glad he put so much time in at the gym. Jack wouldn't actually harm the scrawny little dude, but he didn't know that.

"Last chance," Jack said without looking away.

The man froze with his mouth open for a few seconds before snapping it shut, turning on his heels, and stalking out.

The Three Musketeers clapped. "Here, here," Walter said, raising his coffee in a toast.

“Hopefully, we’ve seen the last of that pansy,” Archie added.

Curtis walked over and stood next to Lucy, putting a possessive arm around her waist. “I was just about to jump in too, but I thought you had it handled, babe,” he said, looking at Jack when he said it, clearly insinuating he’d butted in unnecessarily.

“Thanks, Curtis,” Lucy said. “I know you would have helped.”

Jack ignored them and returned to his seat. He was fairly certain Lucy’s fiancé ordered the same type of prissy coffee that other guy had, and having inadvertently insulted him made him feel a little better. Petty? Perhaps, but oh well. What kind of man doesn’t stand up for his woman?

“Fancy way of admitting you’re a virgin... Good one, Jack,” Gene said, still chuckling. “Mind if I use that sometime?”

Jack snuck a glance at Lucy. She was staring at him and mouthed, “Thanks,” before turning back to Curtis. His heart warmed a little.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jack finished work for the day, locked up the trailer slash office, and was walking to his pickup when his cell phone rang. After checking caller ID, he reluctantly answered. If he didn't, she'd just keep calling.

"Hey, Mom," he said, throwing his bag onto the passenger seat and climbing into the truck.

"Honey, I'm glad I got a hold of you. How's New Bern?"

"It's great. What's up?" Jack loved his mother dearly, but her constant meddling in his life was one reason he'd left Wilmington. Well, one of many. He stuck the phone between his shoulder and ear and started the engine.

"Not much. Dad wanted me to find out if you plan to come back for the annual meeting. It's next month. Also, your birthday's coming up. Do you have plans?"

"Mom, I'm thirty-three years old. I don't really celebrate anymore." He turned onto the main road.

"That's ridiculous. It doesn't matter how old you are, you should always celebrate. We could come to New Bern and take you to dinner."

"Let's play that by ear. It's still a ways out. Things are pretty busy here, so you can tell Dad I can't make the meeting." Jack's father owned and ran a multimillion-dollar hotel chain and had been after Jack and his brother to start the process of taking over for some time now. That was another reason he'd bailed on Wilmington. He wasn't ready to make that transition yet. If ever.

Jack earned his MBA, intending to work with his dad, but after only a few months in the stuffy corporate environment, he knew he wasn't cut out for office life.

After a long talk with his father, he'd been put in charge of overseeing the building of new hotels and renovations of the old ones. He'd jumped in with both feet, learned the construction trade from the very best, and now had the

knowledge, experience, and license to call himself a contractor.

Once his marriage fell apart, he traveled the country, helping build and renovate hotels for the company. Watching something go from a pile of dirt to a magnificent hotel was a satisfying rush he'd never get from a corner office. Suits, ties, and weekly meetings weren't his thing, which explained his reluctance to take over.

When Spencer, his old college roommate, called to ask for help, Jack jumped at the chance. It was not only an excuse to get out of Wilmington for a while, but an opportunity to take some time to think about his life and what he wanted to do with it. Between his father pressuring him to take over the business and his mother pressuring him to marry again and have kids, he'd grabbed onto the New Bern project like a drowning man would a life vest. He just needed a little more time to figure things out.

Seeing Lucy Parker again had thrown a major wrench into everything. There was a flash in time when he thought she was the one. In the space of a heartbeat, he'd felt something intense and rare. He was pretty sure she'd felt it too, which was why it was so hard to understand why she'd been kissing someone else that night. Why it had cut him so deeply. He burned through a lot of women after that painful night. One after the other doing something to make him doubt that true love really existed.

And now, after ten years, he finds out it was all a misunderstanding. That he'd blown it by not following up with her. That he was paying the price for his stubbornness and immaturity.

Well, he had enough on his plate without worrying about something he couldn't do anything about. He asked for a second chance, and she'd shut him down. Not much he could do about it now.

He said goodbye to his mother and pocketed the phone as he parked and headed into the gym. It had been several days since he'd had a workout, and he wasn't used to missing so many.

He adhered to a strict workout regimen and got crabby when he didn't stick to it. It had taken him a few days to move and settle in New Bern and another to find a gym worth joining. This one was near his place and had a ton of free weights. It didn't seem too crowded, was clean, and had a sauna. It would do for the time he was here.

Midway through his second set of curls, he saw two guys approach another kid working out on a bench near him. All three looked to be in their late teens, and Jack got the feeling that maybe they went to school together.

One of the two was giving the teen on the bench a hard time and basically being a douchebag. The kid ignored him, but that only made the jerk amp up the douchebaggery. This was the second time today he'd witnessed someone picking on somebody. Had he moved to a town full of assholes?

"You just lifting the bar?" a tall, muscular teen said. "You know most people put weights on the end?" The kid was handsome and knew it, but obviously had a confidence problem. Why else would he pick on someone smaller than him? After a few more jabs, Jack walked over to the group and put himself between the lone teen and the bullies.

"Hey, champ," Jack said to the skinny kid on the bench. "How's the cancer treatment going? Been fighting it for a year now, huh?"

The bully's eyes widened. "He has cancer?" he asked. His friend hadn't said anything in the first place but now looked thoroughly chagrined.

"I have no idea," Jack said, turning to the bully. "But neither do you. You don't know anything about him, yet here you stand, judging him."

"He's not sick," the boy stammered defensively. "He's just weak."

"Maybe, maybe not. Does it matter? He's here trying to work out, just like the rest of us. Why don't you take your tea party somewhere else? My friend and I have work to do."

“Fine,” the bully said. “We were leaving anyway.” He stalked off, assuming his buddy would follow, but the friend stayed behind to apologize.

“Sorry, man. My friend can be an asshole.”

“He’s a bully. And if you don’t stand up to him, so are you,” Jack said matter-of-factly.

The friend nodded. “You’re right. Good luck, dude,” he said to the kid on the bench before jogging away to catch up with his friend.

Jack turned to go back to his bench, but a light touch on his arm stopped him. When he looked down, the boy had tears in his eyes.

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me,” he said. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Jack said.

“I don’t have cancer,” the kid said meekly. “I *am* just weak.”

“Doesn’t matter. That guy had no right to talk to you like that. Bullies bug me. What’s your name, kid?”

“Kenny. What’s yours?”

“Jack.” He stuck out a hand to shake. “Nice to meet you, Kenny. I’ll let you get back to it.”

“Were you serious about working out together?” Kenny said, standing. “I really could use some help. I’m pretty new at this.”

Jack didn’t remember saying anything about working out together. The kid must have inferred that from Jack calling him a friend and saying they had work to do.

“Uh,” Jack hemmed. “I usually like to do my own thing. Gym time is kind of my me time, ya know?”

“Could I just watch what you do and copy it? With lighter weights, of course.” Kenny chuckled. He had a nerdy laugh and wore short shorts and a Scout camp T-shirt. Easy target for a bully.

“You a Scout?”

“Eagle Scout. Just earned it.”

“Nice,” Jack said.

“So, what d’ya say? I won’t be any trouble. I promise.”

“I guess that would be okay. I like a little space though.”

So much for that warning. Kenny followed him around like a puppy, peppering him with a million questions. Where you from? Why are you in New Bern? How’d you get so ripped? How long did it take to get so ripped? Do you have lots of girlfriends?

He was relentless, but endearing. Jack patiently answered the questions while helping Kenny with his form.

Between all the inquiries, Kenny told Jack his life story. He lived with his mother, who struggled to make ends meet. His dad wasn’t in the picture and never sent them the money he was supposed to. He’d just turned seventeen and wanted to get a job so he wouldn’t have to rely on his mom for spending cash.

He seemed like a good kid. Maybe Jack would ask Lucy if she had any openings at the coffee shop.

CHAPTER NINE

Friday morning, Lucy showed up for work, still thinking about the day before. How Jack had stood up for her while Curtis looked on, sipping his almond milk pumpkin spice latte with stevia—more or less the same drink Jack had ridiculed the jerk over.

The whole situation had moved the needle on her should-I-break-up-with-Curtis meter. She'd been waffling but was quickly coming to the conclusion that she should save them both and break the engagement. She texted her sisters and asked for an emergency lunch meeting. There were all there by eleven thirty.

They got coffee and crammed into her tiny back office. This was a conversation she didn't need the Three Amigos overhearing. She recounted the story from the day before and explained how her doubts were mounting up.

"I don't know what to do," Lucy said.

"I hate to say it," Kate said. "But I think you know the answer, and you're avoiding it. At this stage, you shouldn't have any hesitation. Sure, there are ups and downs in every relationship, but you gotta be one hundred percent sure you want to take that roller coaster ride with one particular person."

"You're right. I know you're right," Lucy said. "I just don't know if I can do it."

"Curtis will understand," Emma said. "It was a very quick proposal. Just tell him you're not ready."

"Be nice, but don't leave any room for doubt or hope," Lizzie added. "Be direct enough that he won't walk away thinking you might reconsider later."

"How do I do it? I can't do it," Lucy said. "It's too mean. I *just* agreed to marry him. Lizzie, this is all your fault. You have to pretend to be me and do it."

“If I had a nickel for every boy you made me break up with, do you know how much money I’d have?”

“A dollar thirty-five?” Lucy guessed. “You’re so good at it though. Use the emergency wig.”

They’d purchased it as a joke, but the blond wig, the exact shade of Lucy’s hair, had come in handy on a number of occasions since. When Lizzie wore it, they were once again indistinguishable.

“Breaking up with someone you’ve been dating is one thing,” Lizzie said. “Ending an engagement is a whole other ball game. What if he wants to knock one off for old time’s sake?”

“Gross,” Kate and Emma said together.

Even after Lucy begged, pleaded, and pouted, Lizzie refused. Her sisters gave her advice and wouldn’t leave until she’d texted him to say she “needed to talk.”

“By using that phrase, he should already know what’s coming,” Lizzie said. “Half the work’s already done now.”

“I hope you’re right,” Lucy said, putting her phone away after telling him she’d stop by his place that evening.

Lucy had never actually broken up with a man before. She and her boyfriends had either parted ways by mutual, friendly agreement, or she’d had Lizzie do the dirty work. It was too hard, especially for a people-pleaser like Lucy.

She liked Curtis. He was a nice guy, and they’d had some fun times, but as hard as she’d tried to convince herself, she wasn’t *in love* with Curtis. Not the way she should be anyway. And staying engaged to him, especially now that she was having thoughts about Jack, wasn’t fair to either of them.

Later that evening, after rehearsing over and over again what she’d say, she told Curtis how she felt and laid the ring on the coffee table. She didn’t mention Jack. That would be cruel, and it wasn’t the only reason for the split. She stuck to the truth—she didn’t love him enough to marry him. He’d tried to talk her into a long engagement and, when that didn’t work, into breaking the engagement but continuing to date.

She was tempted to give in to the latter to spare his feelings, but Lizzie's pep talk beforehand gave her the gumption to just end it altogether.

"I knew you were way out of my league," he said with a sigh. "I suppose I should be grateful you gave me a shot at all."

All in all, he'd taken it pretty well. There was no yelling or screaming or anything. After finally accepting it was over, he choked up and, with tears in his eyes, asked her to go. Which worked out fine, because by then, she'd been dying to get the heck out of there, but didn't know how to say that final goodbye and leave.

Driving away, she was relieved but nervous. Her next stop was to tell Jack, and she had no idea what he'd say. Or even what she wanted him to say. He'd mentioned a second chance, but what exactly did that mean?

The rain came in droves, making it seem like midnight. The wipers on full blast still weren't enough to keep the windshield clear. She pulled into the construction site parking lot and parked next to Jack's pickup. She cut the engine but didn't get out. What was she going to say? Had she come all this way just to tell him she was single? It had seemed like a good idea after leaving Curtis's, but now she wasn't so sure.

Her headlights must have caught Jack's attention because the porch light came on, and the door opened. A gorgeous, frowning man filled the doorway.

No turning back now. She got out of the car and stood next to it in the pouring rain. Soaked within seconds, she didn't care.

He looked at her as if she were crazy. "What are you doing?" he yelled.

She held up her left hand and wiggled her bare ring finger.

"You broke the engagement?" he asked, stepping out into the rain, his gaze locked on hers. They stood, staring at each other, oblivious to the fact they were getting soaked in the downpour.

Lucy nodded.

“Because of me?”

She shrugged.

He blinked twice and shook his head in disbelief before grabbing both sides of her face and kissing her hard. She threw her arms around his neck and met the kiss with equal desperation. He grabbed her around the waist and hauled her inside. He shut the door and backed her against it, never breaking the kiss.

“Lucy, we can’t do this here. Come back to my place with me? Or we could go to yours.”

She didn’t give it a second thought. She’d waited ten years for him and wasn’t about to wait one second longer. “My place,” she said.

“Get in the truck,” he said gruffly, opening the door. He pulled his keys out of his pocket and used the key fob to unlock the truck from where they stood.

She made a dash for the truck, climbed into the cab, and waited while he locked the office door. Everything was happening both too fast and not fast enough.

He climbed into the driver’s seat and leaned over to kiss her. They held hands while he drove to her house in record time. As soon as they crossed the threshold of her condo, he stopped and kissed her again.

“Lucy, we can wait, if you want.”

In response, she unzipped his dripping wet coat and pulled on the sleeves, letting it slide to the floor. Then she peeled her damp hoodie over her head and threw it on top. While he kissed her, she unbuttoned his flannel shirt and added it to the pile. They took off their own shoes and socks. Within seconds, most of their clothing lay in a soggy heap.

She grabbed him by the hand and led him to her bedroom. Sex on a first date was generally off the table for Lucy. In fact, she was very picky about who she slept with. Jack hadn’t even taken her on a date, yet here she was, ready and willing to

bend and break all the rules for him. The original pull she felt that day in the quad had only intensified.

After a quick detour to the bathroom to grab a towel and take a few swipes at her hair, she reentered the bedroom and sat on the bed. He sat next to her and took her hand in his.

“You sure about this?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, looking him square in the eyes. He needed no more encouragement than that, and she squealed when he flipped her onto her back.

After what could only be described as the best sex of her life, she slipped out of bed to get a drink of water. He’d asked about birth control, and she’d told him not to worry. The heat of the moment didn’t seem like the right time to mention that she never bothered with the stuff because, for her, it was moot. She would have to tell him about her infertility soon though. It was something any potential boyfriend would want to know. A family was probably important to him, and she wouldn’t mislead him about her inability to produce one.

She threw on a robe and tiptoed to the kitchen. A vibrating noise on the tile floor next to the lump of wet clothes in the entryway caught her attention. Her cell phone must have fallen out of her pocket. Lizzie was calling.

CHAPTER TEN

“Hey, sis. What’s up?” Lucy whispered. She tucked the phone between her ear and shoulder, picked up the jumble of wet clothes, and took them to the dryer.

“What’d you do to Curtis?” Lizzie asked.

“What do you mean?” Lucy said. “I broke up with him, just like we talked about.”

“Well, he’s at the bar right now.”

“Drinking?” Lucy said, alarmed. She set the timer on the dryer and returned to the kitchen. She was dying to tell Lizzie about Jack, but figured that should wait a minute. Curtis relapsing was more important.

“Not exactly,” Lizzie said. “He’s sitting at a table, staring at a hundred-day bronze AA chip, and literally, like out loud, talking himself down from ordering something. Every time I get near him, he starts crying and tells me to stay away. That it’s too soon to see you.”

“What? He knows you look exactly like me. Why would he go to your bar?”

“Cry for help?” Lizzie guessed.

“Crap. What should I do?”

“I don’t know. I’d kick him out, but I’m afraid he’d just go do something stupid somewhere else. At least here, I can keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t drink. I told the servers to let me know if he orders anything alcoholic, but I think you should come down here.”

“Man, this is the worst possible time.”

“Why?” Lizzie said. “What are you doing?”

“Jack.”

Lizzie laughed. “That was quick. Good for you.”

“Maybe you could date Curtis. Lessen the blow a little?”

“What? No! That would only make things worse. He’d end up getting dumped by the same woman twice. Cuz you know I wouldn’t stay for long.”

Jack came up behind her, putting his arms around her waist. “Is everything all right?” he whispered into the ear not holding the phone.

“Just sec, Lizzie,” Lucy said, covering the mouthpiece and turning to Jack. “Curtis is at the bar.”

Jack raised an eyebrow as if to say, so what?

“He’s an alcoholic,” Lucy explained. “He’s been sober for over a hundred days, and now Lizzie says he’s staring at an AA chip, thinking about drinking.”

“You want me to go talk to him?”

“What? You’d do that? *Why* would you do that?”

“To help him out,” Jack said. “I feel sorry for him. I know how it feels to have your heart broken by a Parker.” He smiled and kissed her briefly. Mr. Snuggles had followed Jack out of the bedroom and was rubbing against his legs. Jack picked up the cat and stroked its head.

“He might think I broke up with him just to start up with you. I don’t think that information would help the situation.”

“I won’t tell him then,” he said. “Where are my pants?”

“You really plan to leave me?” she said incredulously. She was looking forward to climbing back into a warm bed with an even warmer man.

“It’s the least I can do. Even if you didn’t break up with him solely because of me, I feel a little responsible.”

Dumbfounded, Lucy put the phone back to her ear. “Lizzie? You still there?”

“Yeah. What should I do?”

“Um, apparently, Jack’s going to come down there and talk to him.”

“Are you serious?” Lizzie said. “Wouldn’t that be rubbing salt in the wound?”

“Curtis doesn’t know the break up has anything to do with Jack, and Jack says he won’t tell him. I guess he just plans to buddy up to him and be a sounding board. Befriend him and then tell him to go home? Honestly, I have no idea what he intends to say.”

“All right. I’ll keep him out of trouble till then. Gotta go.”

Lucy hung up and led Jack to the laundry room. “Why does my cat seem to like you more than me?”

“I’m a likable guy,” Jack quipped before setting the cat on the floor. Mr. Snuggles meowed his complaint. “Don’t you ever pet him? He seems pretty needy.”

“Pft. I *try*. He’s very finicky. Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked, handing him his clothes from the dryer. “These didn’t get very dry.”

“I see that,” he said, as he struggled into his still-damp jeans. “And why not? I promise I won’t say anything about us getting together. I’ll let him vent and then make sure he goes home. I’ll drive him if I have to.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” She handed him his shirt and socks.

“I’ll tell him you aren’t worth ending his sobriety over.”

“Ouch.”

“I mean, you’re worth a lot, but getting drunk over you won’t do any good. He just needs someone to remind him of that.”

“Okay. Well, good luck.”

He gave her a lingering kiss at the door. “After I take care of him, should I go home? Or come back here?”

“I’ll be here, waiting,” she said.

He smiled and turned to leave.

“Hey,” she said. “This is really cool of you. I appreciate it.”

He put his hand on her cheek. "I'm not conceited enough to think I'm the only reason you broke up with Curtis, but whatever the cause, I plan to take advantage of it. We're going to start over and do it right this time."

"I want that too," Lucy said.

"His loss is my gain. The least I can do is help him through the rough patch. I'll be back."

While Jack was gone, Lucy took a quick shower. It was close to midnight and way past her bedtime, but she was determined to wait up for Jack's return.

She still didn't know him very well, but so far, he appeared to be perfect. Going to console her ex? That was above and beyond. Curled up on the couch, trying to cuddle with Mr. Snuggles, who was having none of it, she replayed the evening and lingered on the thought of being in Jack's arms. The intensity she'd felt ten years ago hadn't waned. She and Jack were like two fierce magnets. When they got too close, they involuntarily clicked together hard and fast.

She'd never felt that way with Curtis. Or anyone else, for that matter. Passion might be overrated for some, but now that she'd had a taste, she was hooked and wouldn't consent to another relationship without it.

Maybe that wouldn't be necessary though. Maybe Jack would be her final attempt at dating. She consciously hit the brakes on her thoughts, worried they would get away from her. Yes, she and Jack seemed great together, but they had a long way to go before she could start thinking of forever.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Hey, slutty McSlut slut,” Lizzie greeted with a laugh.

“Not funny,” Lucy hissed. “And keep your voice down.” She was at her parents’ house for Sunday dinner, which meant the whole family was potentially within earshot. She didn’t need everyone knowing what she’d done.

“You know I’m joking,” Lizzie said, putting an arm around Lucy. “You’re the least slutty person I know.”

“Eh, you have a point,” Lucy said. “*I* can’t believe I had sex with him.”

“Me either.” Lizzie made an exploding noise and a motion with her hand, indicating her mind had blown. “He must be pretty special.”

“Don’t tell anyone, okay?” Lucy whispered as Kate and Adam sat across from them.

“Um...,” Lizzie said.

“Hey, Lucy,” Kate said. “Heard you did the wild thing with Jack already. Damn, girl.”

“Liz-zie!” Lucy said, whipping her head around to Lizzie, who looked away sheepishly.

Emma and Dirk came in, and Emma sat next to Lucy. “So... you and Jack, huh?” She nudged Lucy with her elbow and waggled her eyebrows.

“You suck,” Lucy said to Lizzie without answering Emma.

“In my defense,” Lizzie started. “You didn’t say not to tell anyone until ten seconds ago.”

“It was implied.” Lucy rolled her eyes.

Nana glided in, wearing a strapless gown so puffy that she had no choice but to sit at the end of the table.

“Wow, Nana, great dress,” Kate said. “What’s the occasion?”

“This old thing,” Nana said with a flick of her wrist and a coy smile. “I’ve taken up ballroom dancing. I wanted to try exotic, but your father put the kibosh on that pretty quickly.”

“You mean Dad doesn’t want a stripper pole in the living room?” Lizzie said, faking confusion. “Huh. That’s surprising.”

“I told him it could go in the garage,” Nana mumbled. “Anyway, now I have to get used to the feel of so much extra material around my legs, so I plan to wear this until I’m acclimated.”

“Seems reasonable,” Adam said.

“I also wanted to make a good impression on Jack if he came to dinner, but I hear Lucy’s already got dibs. And by dibs, I mean she’s already—”

“That’s enough,” Lucy said, holding up a hand. “Does *anyone* not know I had sex with Jack?”

Her parents walked in behind her. “We do now,” her mother said.

“Coulda done without hearing that,” her father said.

Lucy shook her head. Thank goodness she hadn’t invited Jack. Her family could be a lot to handle. They took some getting used to, and Lucy wasn’t sure Jack was up for it yet.

They’d had sex but hadn’t talked about what that meant, so she was floundering around in relationship limbo. Were they dating? Boyfriend/girlfriend? She didn’t *think* it was just a onetime thing, but she supposed that was a possibility. He said he would call tonight. Maybe she’d get some clarifying information then.

“I take it that’s why Curtis isn’t here?” her mother said, loading salad onto her plate and then passing the bowl.

“Oh, yeah,” Lucy said. She held up an empty ring finger. “That’s...um...over.”

“Does that mean we can go back to guilt-free drinking?” Lizzie asked, picking up the wine bottle.

“Not everything’s centered around booze, Lizzie,” their father said. “But, yes. I’d say so. Fill ’er up, eh?” He held his glass out to Lizzie, who poured generously.

Nobody seemed too torn up about Curtis, and Lucy wondered how she’d gone so long without realizing no one in her family really liked him. Luckily, conversation at the Parker dinner table moved at the speed of light, and they hurdled over Lucy’s love life in a matter of seconds.

Cell phones weren’t allowed at dinner, but not wanting to miss Jack’s call, Lucy had tucked hers into her bra. She startled when it vibrated, then discreetly slipped a hand under her sweater to retrieve it. Holding it under the table, she saw it was Jack and jumped up. “Gotta pee,” she said, running out of the room.

“Don’t think I don’t know you’re taking a call,” her mother called after her. “There will be consequences.”

Penance would probably be dishwashing duty, but talking to Jack would be worth it. She ducked into her father’s den and closed the door. “Hey, Jack.”

“Hey. I want to take you out,” Jack said, skipping any small talk. “On a date. A specific date, actually.”

“Oh, you mean like October 29th as opposed to October 30th?” Lucy accidentally snort-laughed at her own joke and slapped a hand over her mouth in embarrassment. He chuckled.

“Do you remember what you wore the night we were supposed to go out?” he said.

She paused for a moment before answering. “Yes.” The blouse hung in her closet, still brand new. She hadn’t worn it since, but she also couldn’t bring herself to give it away.

“Will you wear it?”

“October’s a little colder than May, so I’ll need a sweater this time, but sure.”

“Great. Can you miss work tomorrow?”

“I suppose,” Lucy said. “I am the boss...”

“I’ll pick you up in fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen?” she cried. “Impossible. I’m not even at home.”

“Thirty?”

“Fine. But I’m hanging up now,” she said, hitting the end button on her phone. She returned to the table just long enough to grab a roll and say goodbye.

After speeding home, she ran to her closet to fish out the shirt. Her body hadn’t changed much in the last decade, but she still threw up a desperate prayer that it would fit.

The jeans she wore weren’t the same as before, but they were close enough. She stripped off her T-shirt and pulled the blouse over her head, heaving a sigh of relief. It was snug, but not bursting at the seams. Damn all those leftover scones she’d eaten from the coffee shop.

She applied her makeup quickly but carefully, brushed her hair, and spritzed a bit of perfume. Precisely thirty minutes later, she heard a knock. An involuntary smile spread across her face as she opened the door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He wore jeans and a Carolina blue UNC sweatshirt. Her cheeks flushed at his handsome grin. Dang, he was a looker.

“You hung up on me before I could tell you to pack an overnight bag,” he said.

She held up a black backpack. “I read between the lines when you asked if I could miss work tomorrow.”

He smiled.

“I left Mr. Snuggles some extra food and emailed the morning supervisor to say I won’t be in. I’m ready.”

“Great,” he said, taking her backpack so she could lock up. “I thought about blindfolding you, but the trip will take about an hour, so that might get old.”

“Where are we going?”

“Chapel Hill.”

“Oh, yeah?” she said with a smile, sensing where this was heading.

“I owe you a date,” he said. “I intend to pay up.”

“Better late than never, I suppose,” she said, and he laughed.

The New Bern airport wasn’t far, and within fifteen minutes, he pulled into a part of the airport she’d never been to. They parked inside a hangar next to a small Cessna.

They boarded and buckled up. It was only the two of them and the pilot. “I’ve never flown in such a dinky plane,” Lucy said. “Is it safe?” She whispered so as not to offend the pilot.

“Hope so,” he said. “It’s faster than driving anyway.”

After a slightly bumpy takeoff, they were in the air and moving along nicely. The plane was so small that every tiny dip or turn seemed exaggerated, and she was queasy in no time.

It must have shown on her face, because Jack grabbed a barf bag and handed it to her. “Damn it,” he said. “I meant to offer

you a Dramamine. A lot of people get airsick in these little planes. Especially if it's your first time. Are you okay?"

"I think so," she said, clinging to the barf bag while praying she wouldn't need it. "How much farther?"

"Not much. Hang in there." He dug around in a small cooler at his feet and opened a can of Sprite. "Here, sip on this. I know it's dark, but try to focus on a fixed point in the sky. Like a big star or something. Or close your eyes if that helps."

"Distract me," she said. "You never told me what happened with Curtis the other night. How'd it go?" Jack had returned to her condo, slipped into bed, and made her promptly forget why he'd left in the first place.

"I took him to the Dairy Queen to get ice cream."

"Ice cream?" She laughed.

He shrugged. "I asked if he had any vices other than alcohol, and he said ice cream. I also helped him score a date with a single mother who was there with her kid. That seemed to lift his spirits."

"I'll bet." Lucy had a sneaky suspicion there was more to the story but dropped the subject.

She made it to Raleigh without losing her cookies, but just barely. If they were flying back, she would definitely need some medicine first.

A car was waiting for them, but Jack suggested she let her stomach settle for a minute. The little office inside the hangar wasn't all that comfortable, but at least the ground wasn't moving. Once the nausea subsided, he helped her into the waiting town car.

She figured he was trying to recreate their first date but was still surprised when they pulled up to her old freshman dorm. He handed her a key. "Go to room 212 and wait for me."

"You remembered my dorm room number?" she asked in disbelief.

"I did."

“That’s sweet.” She smiled. “Um, what about the girls that probably live there now?”

“I took care of that. Just go.”

“Okay,” she said, getting out of the car.

Still leery, she knocked first, but when no one answered, she used the key he’d given her to open the door. It was the middle of October, so it didn’t surprise her to see unmade beds, clothes on the floor, and schoolwork strewn about on the desks. The room was empty, but she was nervous the occupants would return any second and call the police. Just as she was about to chicken out and leave, there was a knock at the door. She smoothed her hair and opened it.

Jack stood with a bouquet of flowers—who knew where they’d come from—and a big smile.

“Lucy Parker?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“You ready?” he asked, offering a hand. She slid her hand into his and closed the door behind her.

“Whose room is that? And how’d you know they wouldn’t be there? I didn’t just break and enter, did I?”

“Not sure what you’re talking about,” he said. “I thought that was your room. That’s what you told me this afternoon.”

Oh. He wanted to pretend the last ten years hadn’t happened.

“So, what year are you?” she asked.

“I’m a senior. You?” He smiled.

“Freshman. So you graduating soon?”

“Yes, in a couple of weeks. What are you studying?”

“Business. You?”

He gave her a mock shocked look. “Me too.”

He took her to a Thai restaurant on Franklin Street, and they shared a ginormous portion of pad thai.

“So, tell me about your family,” he said before shoving a forkful of noodles into his mouth.

She used a napkin to wipe her lips and sipped her Pepsi. “Well, I grew up in New Bern with my four sisters and my parents.”

He mouthed the word “four” around wide eyes, and she chuckled.

“I think my dad kept hoping the next one would be a boy but decided to cut his losses after Daisy was born.”

“Those are some bumner odds for sure,” Jack said.

“Yes, well, he’s very excited to have some men join the family. My oldest sister Kate just got married a month and a half ago. And my sister Emma is dating a guy named Dirk. They haven’t known each other long, but it seems pretty serious. Then there’s Lizzie and me. Lizzie’s my twin.” She gave him a side-eyed glance. “And Daisy’s the baby. Oops. Slipped into current events. Sorry.”

“No worries,” he said. “The teenage years in your house must have been crazy.”

“With a capital C. I’m surprised my parents didn’t ship us all off to boarding school or run away themselves. How about you? What’s your family like?”

“Born and raised in Wilmington with my brother, Nick. Unfortunately, he ended up at Duke, so now I have to hate him on principle. It’s sad, really. He was such a good person.”

She laughed.

“You about done?” He nodded to the near-empty plate of noodles.

“Oh, yeah. I’m stuffed. That was delicious.”

He threw two twenties on the table and put his hand on the small of her back to guide her out. His touch was soft and warm. And for the millionth time, she pondered what might have been. How would their lives have been different had he knocked on her door ten years ago, instead of ten minutes ago? Then, as she always did, she pushed the thoughts aside. She

couldn't change the past, so there was no sense in dwelling on it. She refocused on the future and the handsome man beside her.

Jack asked the driver to stop at a gas station mini-mart, and she waited in the car while he ran inside. Five minutes later, he returned with a brown paper bag, from which he pulled a strawberry wine cooler and a bottle of Corona.

“You seem like a wine cooler type of gal,” he said. “If I’m wrong, I have another beer in the bag.”

“Good thing I’m not *actually* eighteen,” she said, grabbing the wine and taking a sip. The sickening, sugary sweetness melted like candy on her tongue.

“True. Supplying liquor to a minor would not look good on my record.”

“You realize we’ll have to stop this ruse if we want to find out anything about each other from the last decade,” she said, taking another sip.

He cracked open his beer and took a swig. “I know. I want to hear everything about you. But first, I have to do this.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He pushed his fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head, and kissed her, the bitterness of his beer mixing with the sweetness of her wine. His kiss was more intoxicating than the alcohol. It made her want to curl up on his lap and stay there forever.

She broke the kiss to whisper in his ear, “Can the driver see us?”

“Hopefully, he’s watching the road,” Jack said, looking out the tinted window. “We’re not far from our next stop though.”

A minute later, the driver slowed to a stop and cracked the window between them to announce they’d arrived. Jack opened the grocery bag, stuck an unopened wine cooler in one pocket, and another beer in the other.

“Sneaking alcohol into somewhere?” she asked with a giggle.

“It’s what I would have done ten years ago.” He shrugged. “I haven’t changed too much.”

They got out and followed a path to the ticket booth. She recognized right away where they were.

“The Morehead Planetarium. I love this place.”

He bought tickets for the last showing and, probably because it was late Sunday, they were two of only a handful of patrons. The theater was a circle, and the seats reclined so you could watch the ceiling, which was where they projected the show. The center was empty to accommodate people who wanted to watch from the floor. They grabbed seats in the front row.

“This way, we can switch to the floor if you want,” he said.

When the lights dimmed, he cracked open the bottles. After they finished their drinks, they moved to the floor. He held her hand, and together they watched a show of celestial glory—the story of stars, solar systems, and the general magic of space.

He slipped his arm under her head, and she settled in next to him while still looking up. He smelled like beer and something woody. Between his warmth, the buzz from the wine, and the romantic, starry setting, she felt safe, happy, and complete.

After the show, they took a long route back to the parking lot, holding hands and catching up.

“So, tell me what you’ve been up to since I last saw you,” he said.

“Well, I finished school in three years. I started with a lot of AP credit, so I skipped most of the hundred-level classes.”

“A smarty pants,” he teased. “Good to know. Did Lizzie do the same?”

“Yes. She and I came to UNC together and shared a dorm room freshman year, then an apartment for the next two.”

“Have you always lived with Lizzie?”

“Until a few years ago, yes. We finally realized it was time to grow up and that we needed some independence from each other. So she moved into the condo across the hall.”

He laughed. “That must have been traumatic.”

She nodded. “You mock, but it actually was a huge adjustment. I’m close with all my sisters, but Lizzie especially.”

“And what about your business? Did you always want to own a coffee shop?” he asked, leading them down the path toward the parking lot.

“That happened by chance,” she said. “The original plan was for Lizzie and me to open a restaurant together. Starting in high school, I worked as a barista during summer breaks and have always loved coffee. Lizzie started bartending when she turned twenty-one and has always loved alcohol.” She chuckled. “One day at dinner, my dad mentioned that some of the businesses downtown weren’t doing very well. He was worried they might move or close and didn’t want Main Street to fall apart. As the mayor, that would reflect poorly, you know?”

“I can imagine.”

“Anyway, over dinner one Sunday, we hatched the whole idea. Lizzie would open a bar, and I’d open a coffee shop. Once I decided on The Drip for a name, Lizzie came up with The Drop after her love of lemon drops. It was sheer coincidence that two spots opened up just across the street from each other. Now, we’re rarely more than a couple hundred yards apart.”

“That’s great you and your family get along so well.”

“So what about you?” she said. “What have you been doing since graduation?”

“Well, I had to nurse my broken heart for a few months after I thought a pretty girl played me for a sucker.” He smiled to show he was teasing. “But eventually, I joined the military.”

“What? I had no idea! What’s that got to do with business?”

“Nothing. It was short-lived, but I don’t regret it. I was having some issues with my parents, and it seemed like an easy way out.”

“What kind of issues? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“My dad wanted me to work for him, and I wasn’t ready. I needed to live a little before settling down, and he didn’t understand that. It was either the military or a backpacking trip through Europe. Over a few beers, my buddy dared me to go with him to a recruitment center, and I couldn’t turn down a dare. The military paid, backpacking didn’t, so I became a Marine. Turns out that wasn’t for me either. I like to make the rules, not be told what to do with every second of my day. I did two years active and my reserve time but didn’t recommit.”

“Did you ever have to fight?”

“Yes. I lost one of my best friends in Afghanistan. Same guy that took me to the recruitment center, actually. That messed me up for a while and contributed to why I didn’t re-up.”

“I’m so sorry, Jack.” She laid a hand on his arm.

“Thanks.” He laid his hand over hers and was silent for a moment, probably thinking of his friend.

“Anyway, after that, I drank a lot and made a lot of dumb decisions. The dumbest being to get married.”

“You’ve been married?” she asked, eyes widening. “You’re not still married, are you?”

“No. Of course not. I realized my mistake pretty quickly, and we divorced before our second anniversary. She taught me a few more life lessons I apparently needed to learn.” He sighed.

They came to a park bench on the trail, and he tipped his head toward it, silently asking if she wanted to sit. She did, and he sat next to her, grabbing her hand before continuing.

“For the last several years, I’ve been working construction and avoiding my parents’ attempts to run my life. My mom wants to marry me off to someone of her choosing, and my dad’s increasingly adamant that I come to work for him. Spencer calling was a great excuse to get out of town, and I jumped on it.”

“So, coming to New Bern is just a way of running away from your problems?” she said. “You don’t intend to stay?”

“Damn, when you say it like that, it makes me sound like a big pansy. I prefer to think of it as a chance to clear my head, figure out what I really want, and make some life decisions.”

“You’re right. That does sound nobler,” she said with a grin. “So, you’re not close with your parents? What about your brother?”

“Yes, and no. We all get along fine. We’re just not super tight. My parents still think they need to tell us what to do, which irks Nick and me. Now that we’re in our thirties, we think it’s time to cut the apron strings.”

“Where’s Nick now? And is he older or younger?”

“He’s two years older and preparing to take over for my dad. My dad wants both of us to do it, but I’m not sure working so closely with Nick would be good for our

relationship. We both like to be the boss. Plus, I really like contracting and construction.”

“Hm.”

“I plan to finish the remodels for you and your sisters and then see where I’m at.”

It wasn’t a long-term commitment, but he’d be around for at least a year or so. Maybe in that time, he’d decide to stay. She couldn’t see herself ever leaving New Bern, but for the right man, she might be persuaded.

She didn’t want to put too much pressure on their brand-new relationship, but she couldn’t help feeling this was right—and long-lasting.

They stood and resumed walking. “I was going to take you back to the dorms and walk you to your room, but it’s getting late. You wanna head to the hotel?”

“Sure,” she said. “It *is* way past my bedtime. In college, I could party half the night, but nowadays, I wake up so early, I’m usually in bed by ten.”

The driver took them to the Stargaze Hotel. “One room or two?” he asked before going to the front desk.

“I think that shipped has sailed,” she said. “One’s fine.”

“Yes.” He pumped a fist in victory, then leaned in to whisper. “Would you have slept with me on our first date ten years ago?”

“I would say no, but if you’d have asked me two days ago if I’d have slept with you after no dates, I would have said no to that too. And we both know how that ended up.” She laughed.

“I like how that ended up,” he said, waggling his eyebrows.

“Just go book the room before I change my mind.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He returned with a key card and led her to a massive suite on the top floor.

“Dang,” she said. “Between the plane, the town car, and now the suite, this must be costing you a small fortune. Construction must be pretty lucrative.”

“I do all right,” he said with a wink.

The floor-to-ceiling windows offered a magnificent view of downtown Chapel Hill. As she stood, admiring it, he approached her from behind and put his arms around her waist.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said.

“Not half as beautiful as you.” He turned her in his arms to look into her eyes. “When I think about how much time we’ve missed out on, it makes me sick.”

“Me too. So, let’s not think about it. We both had other things to do, other lessons to learn. Now is our time.”

“I’m glad I found you again, Lucy Parker.”

In response, she kissed him and shoved all of her pent-up feelings into it, hoping he would feel what she couldn’t yet say. She was already falling in love with him, but after a date and a half, it was too soon to tell him that.

“Best first date ever,” she whispered.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jack had been hard at work all morning, and his stomach let him know it was time for a break. He picked up his phone, hoping Lucy was free for lunch.

“Hey, Lucy. How—”

“Ah,” she interrupted. “I’m so glad you called. Can you come over? Right now? It’s an emergency!”

He was already on his feet and grabbing his keys. “What’s wrong?” he asked, striding toward the door.

“There’s a gigantic spider in my living room.”

Jack slowed, leaving his hand on the doorknob. “What?”

“I tried my dad, but he’s in a meeting, and his secretary won’t bother him,” she said, exasperated.

“Understandable. You do realize *I’m* working?”

“Oh, I didn’t even think of that. You’re probably surrounded by weapons. Good thinking. Bring a hammer,” she said before hanging up.

He chuckled and took his time getting into his truck. When he arrived at Lucy’s, he wasn’t sure what to expect. He heard a cry of relief at his knock, and the door flew open. “What took you so long?” she screamed.

She had an oven mitt on each hand and held a spatula. Her hair was bunched up under a baseball hat, and she wore a raincoat zipped to her neck. A foot-high pile of shoes lay next to the wall under a nickel-sized spider.

“What’s with the shoes?” he asked.

“I was throwing them at it but kept missing. It only made it run up higher. I tried to take care of it myself, but thank God you’re here. Can you kill it?”

“I can, but why would I?”

“Uh. Because it’s a vile, uninvited, unwanted guest,” she said.

“I’ll just take it outside,” he said, walking toward it.

“With your bare hands?” she screeched. “No. If you only take him outside, I’ll forever suspect he’s looking for a way back in. Plus, then you give him a chance to multiply. Death is the only acceptable option.”

“So violent. Fine, give me that.” He took the spatula, walked over to the spider, and with one whack, squished it.

“Oooh. Gross.”

Mr. Snuggles had been hot on his heels ever since he walked in and now rubbed himself shamelessly on Jack’s leg. “You couldn’t have taken care of that?” Jack asked the cat.

“Pft. He’s more scared than I am,” Lucy said. “I still can’t believe he likes you so much. You sure you don’t have catnip in your pocket?”

“I don’t even know what catnip is.” He grabbed a paper towel to clean up the body and spotted the spatula in the garbage can when he went to throw it away.

“Just put that in the dishwasher,” he said, removing it from the trash.

“No way,” she said. The oven mitts, coat, and hat lay in a pile on the floor. “You’re lucky I don’t burn the place to the ground. I’m calling the pest people to give them a piece of my mind. They promised me no spiders.”

“You must really be afraid of spiders.”

“Not scared so much as completely grossed out. They seem unnatural—wicked somehow. I can’t explain it.”

“Well, that one won’t bother you anymore.”

“My hero,” she sang. “Thank you for taking care of that. After you scrub your hands with soap and scalding hot water, I’ll show you just how much I appreciate it.” The look in her eyes had him rushing to the sink, pumping soap into his hand.

He was still starving, but not so much that he’d turn down some afternoon delight. He scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom. “I have to fulfill my role of Neanderthal,” he

said, tossing her onto the bed and diving on next to her as she giggled.

Mid-make-out, his stomach let out a loud growl.

“Sounds like you could use some lunch,” she said.

“Yeah. That’s why I called earlier. To see if you wanted to grab a bite. I didn’t know I’d be drafted into mortal combat.”

“Thanks again for helping me,” she said, sitting up and smoothing her hair. “Come on. I’ll buy you lunch.”

“I prefer this type of payment.” He smiled and flashed her a lecherous grin. “I do need food though. Damn it.”

It had barely been two weeks since they’d reunited, and only one that they’d been “together,” but so far, things were going great. They’d clicked instantaneously, and the desire he’d felt from day one was still as strong as ever. To make up for lost time, he wanted to spend every spare minute with her.

Hand in hand, they walked to a little café near her condo. After his immediate need for sustenance was satisfied, they sipped their drinks and lingered.

“I meant to ask you,” he said. “Do you have any job openings?”

“Construction thing not working out?”

“Not for me,” he said with a smirk. “I met a kid at the gym that could use a job. Seems like he’d be a hard worker, and if not, I’ll kick his ass into being one.”

“Yes, actually. I’m hiring for the new place right now. I plan to train them at Drip One so that they’ll be ready to go when Drip Two opens.”

“Is that what you’re going to call it? What about Drippier? And then, when you open a third one, you can call it Drippiest.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I don’t think so. I’ll stick with the original plan to call it The Drip 2.0.”

“That’s good, because the outside sign came in yesterday. We’ll probably get it up this week. So, can I send Kenny by

for an interview?”

“Sure, just let me know when.”

* * *

The following day, Lucy was in her office, searching the internet for the inspirational signs she wanted to order for the new shop. Rachel, one of her baristas, popped her head in to say Kenny had arrived for an interview.

Kenny was a tall, scrawny teenager. He wore slacks that were too short and a tie that was too long. His hair was wet and slicked back. He'd dressed to impress. Nice.

“Hello,” she said.

“Ma'am,” he said formally, sticking out his hand to shake. “My name is Kenneth James Perkins. My friend Jack McAllister sent me to inquire about a position in your fine establishment.”

Lucy smiled. “Yes, Jack mentioned you'd be coming by. Come on, we can talk at one of the back tables. Would you like coffee? It's on the house.”

“No, thank you,” Kenny said. “My stomach couldn't take that right now. I'm nervous enough as it is.”

“Don't be.” She patted his arm. “Just think of this as a conversation between friends.”

He relaxed a little and followed her to a small table for two.

“I'll be honest with you,” she said. “I do almost all of my hiring off recommendations, and since Jack recommended you, you're pretty much golden.”

“I am a very hard worker,” he said earnestly. “And I'm an Eagle Scout.”

“That's great.”

“Um, there's just one thing,” he said slowly, wiping his hands on his pant legs.

“Yes?” she prompted.

“I don't drink coffee.”

She laughed out loud. “So, what makes you want to work in a coffee shop?”

“Oh, well, I want to make some spending money. Jack also said a job would teach me about life and give me confidence. It was his idea for me to work here.”

His honesty was sweet and sincere, and Lucy’s heart melted over the fact that Jack seemed to have taken this gangly nervous wreck under his wing.

“How ‘bout you start out busing tables and doing dishes, and we’ll work you up to a spot helping customers.”

“Are you saying I’m hired?” His eyes widened in surprise.

“Yep. We’ll do a trial basis first—that’s what I do with all my employees. After four weeks, we’ll re-evaluate and go from there. When can you start?”

“Oh, wow,” he said. “This is so great. Wait till I tell Jack. I can start whenever you want me to.”

“I understand you’re still in school. Could you come in at three o’clock on Friday?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be here early. Jack says it’s best to be early to things. That if you’re only on time, you’re late.”

“Jack’s a pretty smart guy,” she said, chuckling at Kenny’s enthusiasm.

After Kenny left, Lucy returned to her office, thinking about Jack. He came off as a tough guy but clearly had a soft spot. Smart, sweet, good-looking. She knew there was always a honeymoon period when you first met someone, but so far, she couldn’t find any flaws.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Adam had warned Jack that the holidays around the Parker household were no joke. And that Halloween was no exception. Apparently, every year, Edward and Sophie threw the party of all parties and invited the who's who of New Bern. Lucy and her sisters had come early to help with decorations and food, so Jack had arrived solo. He prayed Lucy hadn't been messing with him about the seriousness of a stellar costume because he felt ridiculous in the tights he wore. After parking his truck in the designated area, he let himself in through the open front door, taking care not to bang his shield into anything.

Graveyard markers lined the front walkway, and a giant furry spider hovered above the drink table in the living room. Jack-o'-lanterns covered tables, and bats hung from the ceiling. A life-sized skeleton sat at the dining room table, fork in hand, preparing to eat.

He was relieved to see that Lucy had been serious about the superhero theme. Lucy and Lizzie were dressed as the Wonder Twins—fitting. Both were the girl one, both wore matching wigs, and without the hair color difference, damned if he could tell who was who. Her parents were Mr. and Mrs. Incredible. Adam and Kate were Batman and Catwoman. Dirk and Emma were Clark Kent and Lois Lane.

Jack was heading toward who he thought was Lucy, when her grandmother came down the stairs, and all heads turned.

“Mom!” Edward said. “What are you wearing? Or should I say, not wearing?”

Nana wore a skimpy Wonder Woman costume—a low-cut leotard and knee-high, high-heeled boots. A black wig covered her hair, and a golden lasso hung at her hip.

Lucy and her sisters snickered.

“Rockin' it, Nana,” Lizzie said.

“Yep. Lookin' good,” Adam chimed in.

“Mom, you can’t wear that,” Edward said, shooting Lizzie and Adam a dirty look.

“Why not?” Nana gave an exaggerated hair flip and raised her chin in a nod to an old coot who was checking her out.

“It’s...it’s...I don’t know...risqué. I wouldn’t let the girls wear something like that. Why would it be okay for my mother? You’re setting a terrible example.”

“Edward,” Nana said, patting her son on the arm. “I appreciate your fatherly concern, but you’re not *my* father. I’m almost seventy-five years old and perfectly capable of making these types of decisions for myself.”

Edward shook his head, defeated. “Sophie, have you seen what my mother is wearing? Put an end to my misery and shoot me now?”

“Oh, honey,” Sophie said. “She looks fantastic. I hope I look that good in a leotard in twenty years.”

“Thank you, dear,” Nana said before sashaying to the drink table. “Hello, handsome. Have we met?” A man dressed as Mr. Peanut smiled broadly at her introduction.

Jack laughed as he slid up next to Lucy. Once he’d gotten close enough to the twins, he could tell who was who. “Your grandma is hilarious.”

“We all think so, but try to convince my dad,” Lucy said with a smile. “Damn, you make that look good.”

At her suggestion, he’d dressed as Captain America. He felt all sorts of foolish but wanted to make her happy.

“Thanks. You look pretty great yourself. It’s crazy how much you and Lizzie look alike. I couldn’t tell you apart when I walked in.”

“Don’t worry. You aren’t the only one. My whole family’s been calling me Lizzie ever since I put the dark wig on.”

“Girls, can you help me with the charcuterie board?” Sophie called from the kitchen.

“Duty calls. Be right back,” Lucy said. “Make yourself at home.”

Jack helped himself to a cup of black punch and wandered over to where Adam and Dirk stood. Two other men he didn't know were with them.

“Hey, Jack,” Adam said. “This is Sam and Javier. They're friends of the family. Of course, who isn't?”

They all chuckled as Jack shook hands with the two strangers.

“I hear you're dating Lucy?” Sam said. “Tell her I want the money she owes me. It's been two years, and I haven't seen a penny she promised to pay me. I could do a lot with that cash.”

“Sure,” Jack said, not knowing what else to say. Had Lucy taken a loan from this guy? Was she in debt then? Just because she owned the coffee shop didn't mean it was profitable. Lots of restaurants worked in the red. He hadn't stopped to think about her financial situation, but because of who his family was, he probably should. Though it was tactless of Sam to bring up such a topic at a party, it was out there now, and Jack mentally filed away the information.

Commotion outside by the pool caught his attention. The French doors opened to a large patio where eight-foot-high heaters radiated warmth. A small group had gathered around Nana, and Jack headed out to see what the fuss was about.

“You stole my wallet!” a man dressed as Jack Sparrow said, pointing at Nana, who had an indignant look on her face.

“I did no such thing,” she said.

“It's sticking out of your...cleavage,” he said, waving a circle in the vicinity of her breasts.

Sure enough, the ends of a leather billfold protruded from Nana's bra.

“This?” Nana said, taking the wallet out of her leotard. “I found this on the couch and was just holding onto it until I could find the owner. Here.” She thrust it at him before storming off.

The perplexed pirate returned the wallet to his pocket and turned away, muttering, “I suppose that’s possible.”

Lucy came up behind Jack and slid her arm around his waist. “What was all that about?”

“The pirate accused Nana of stealing his wallet. Nana explained she found it on the couch, was holding it to find the owner, and gave it back. No harm done.”

“Oh, dear,” Lucy said. “I should probably tell my dad.”

Jack raised his eyebrows, questioning why she’d need to involve her father.

“Nana’s had a little issue with collecting things that aren’t hers lately,” Lucy explained, putting the word “collecting” in air quotes. “At first, it was small things—spoons from the coffee shop, a wine stopper from The Drop, stuff like that. Mom would find the evidence in Nana’s pockets while doing the laundry. I just hope she hasn’t moved on to non-familial victims and more valuable items.”

“Yeah, I guess your dad would want to know about that.”

“I think she’s doing it for attention, but if she ramps up her game too far, she’s gonna get attention she doesn’t want. In jail!”

He huffed out a laugh. “Well, if it helps, I’ll keep an eye on her. Probably stick my wallet in my front pocket too,” he said with a wink.

“Not funny,” Lucy said, but smiled despite her words.

Her smile gave him a warm, gushy feeling. He’d built a fortress of rock around his heart after his divorce, but Lucy was quickly chipping away at the barrier. He’d have to tread carefully. Both to avoid getting hurt and to ensure he didn’t hurt her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the couple of weeks since Halloween, Lucy and Jack had spent as much free time together as possible. Days were busy with her remodel, but they dedicated the nights to getting to know one another. And the more time they shared together, the harder Lucy fell for him.

Today was her twenty-ninth birthday. She and Lizzie sat, surrounded by family at their parents' dining room table to celebrate. Their mother had fixed two dinners, as she always did on their birthday—enchiladas for Lizzie and homemade pizza for Lucy.

Per usual, dinner was loud and long. Everyone was a couple glasses of wine into celebrating.

“Have you ever celebrated your birthday without Lizzie?” Jack leaned over to ask Lucy.

“No,” Lucy said. “Why would I?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. Seems like it'd be nice to get some special attention. Just for you.”

“You're talking crazy right now. That would be too weird.”

“All right, well, keep that in mind when you open my present later.”

Someone dimmed the lights, and her parents entered the dining room, each holding a different cake—cheesecake for Lucy and ice cream cake for Lizzie—both ablaze with candles. Lucy and Lizzie sat side-by-side in the middle of the table and smiled as everyone joined in to sing “Happy Birthday.” They made a wish—Lucy's was easy. He was sitting right beside her—and blew out the candles.

“Dang, that's a lot of fire,” Lizzie said. “Maybe one of us should hook up with a firefighter. Just in case one of these parties gets out of control.”

“I'm game,” Nana said with a coy laugh.

“That's all you, Lizzie,” Emma said.

“Ha. Can you imagine?” Lizzie asked.

Everyone nodded. “Why not? You’ve dated every other profession,” Kate said.

Lizzie mulled it over. “Actually, yeah. And they’re known for being hot. I’m surprised I’ve never tapped that resource.”

“Hey,” their dad said. “You’re twenty-nine now. It’s time to think about settling down.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Dad,” Lizzie said.

“Lucy, when is The Drip 2.0 opening?” Emma asked.

“Ask Jack,” Lucy said.

“We’re about two months out,” Jack said. “Should be around Christmas. Maybe the first of the year.”

When it came time to open presents, Lucy and Lizzie each took a seat of honor on the living room couch. They opened gifts that were, as always, something identical, but in different colors or styles. Nana gave them each a set of hand towels. One set had funny sayings about coffee, and the other, jokes about alcohol. Lizzie held up one that said, “Shut up, Liver. You’re fine,” and everyone laughed.

Kate gave them matching scarf/hat/mitten sets—Lucy’s in red, Lizzie’s in black. And so it went. Matching pairs of this and that. Only Jack’s gift was unique.

Lucy opened the envelope he’d handed her to find a “coupon” for a weekend away to an undisclosed location. “Starting now,” it read. This must have been why he’d asked her to pack an overnight bag and clear her weekend schedule.

After all the hullabaloo at her folks, they said their goodbyes and left.

“Where are we going?” she asked from the passenger seat of his pickup.

“Somewhere to celebrate.”

“What? My parents don’t throw a good enough party for you?” she teased.

“Do you ever get tired of doing and sharing everything with Lizzie?” he asked, taking his eyes off the road for a second to look at her.

“Huh. I never really thought about it,” she said. “We’re just always together. Doing something without Lizzie would be like doing it without an arm. I’m fine with it.” And she was—most of the time.

“Well,” he said. “I’m doing something special, just for you.”

“Oh, okay. That does sound nice,” she said with a smile. He offered her his free hand, and she reached over to take it, letting it warm her skin.

They drove to the Outer Banks, which she recognized immediately, even in the dark. Her family had vacationed here on numerous occasions.

The address in his GPS took them to an out-of-the-way home on stilts. By the moonlight, she could see a boardwalk that extended out into the sea.

He parked, entered the code to open the door, grabbed their bags, and led the way in. The house was small—meant to be a vacation home, no doubt—but modern and decorated with a nautical theme. A wall of windows faced the ocean.

It was late, and she was exhausted. When he asked if she wanted anything to eat or drink, she said no, kissed him tenderly, and took him to the bedroom. Laying in his arms, warm and safe, she thought about how fortunate she was that he’d come back into her life. She drifted off, thinking about how even the timing had worked out perfectly. Imagine if she’d already been married.

At six the next morning, an alarm blasted her out of a deep sleep. She was annoyed and desperate to stay in bed, but Jack insisted she get up and put on the hoodie and coat he’d laid out for her.

“I thought you were an early riser,” he said. “That you loved mornings.”

“Normally, I am,” she said around a jaw-cracking yawn. “But lately, I’ve been so tired. I don’t know what’s wrong with

me.”

“Well, I promise this will be worth it. You can take a nap when we get back.”

He grabbed two thick, cozy blankets and a thermos, and they trudged out to the end of their private pier. At the end was a covered deck with two Adirondack chairs facing east. Jack wrapped her in a blanket, pulled two mugs out of his pocket, and poured them each a cup of coffee from the thermos. He settled into the chair next to her just as the sun broke the horizon.

The orange sliver of sun slowly crawled out of the ocean, and the effect was breathtaking.

“You were right,” Lucy said. “Totally worth it. This is what I imagine the sunrise view from my dream home is like. And I picture sitting in chairs exactly like these to enjoy it every day.”

“You have a dream home?” he asked.

“Yeah. It’s near my parents’ house. I’ll show it to you sometime. Wow,” she said. “You’ve set the bar pretty high. Now I have to pull out all the stops for your birthday next week, huh?”

“Please don’t,” he said. “Actually, I found out earlier today that my parents are coming to town for my birthday. Are you up for meeting them?”

“Ooh, big step,” she said, smiling. “Sure, I can do that.”

“Good, because I already told them you’d be there.”

She huffed out a laugh, then they settled into the quiet, holding hands and watching the sun climb confidently into the sky.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he said, stroking her fingers with his.

She wasn’t sure he really wanted to know. She was thinking about how badly she’d fallen for him and how she was, quite possibly, in love with him. It seemed too early in the relationship for that though, so she fudged the facts a little.

“I was thinking how nice this is. How nice you are,” she said. “I really like you, Jack. I might even be falling for you.”

He stared mutely.

“I’m sorry if that’s too much too soon,” she said, instantly regretting the words.

“No. No,” he said. “That’s not why I’m quiet.” He turned to face her fully. “I really like you too, Lucy. I’m glad we’re getting a second chance at this.”

She breathed a sigh of relief and leaned in to kiss him.

As much as she didn’t want to break the moment, she had to tell him. She’d postponed it too long already.

“Jack, there’s something I should tell you.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” he said, leaning back in his chair, but still holding her hand.

“It might seem kind of early to talk about this, but I need to put it out there, in case it’s a deal breaker for you.”

“Okay.”

“I can’t have children,” she said quietly. She looked at her lap and picked at the edging on her blanket, awaiting his response. Was this it? Would he break up with her now?

“Lucy,” he said. “Look at me.” She did. “It’s fine. Honestly, I’ve never really wanted them, and I’m not sure I’d be a very good dad anyway.”

“What?” she exclaimed. “You’d be a terrific father. I’m not saying I don’t want them. There are other ways to have babies. I’m just saying I can’t birth one.”

“Seriously, it’s all right. Is that why you’ve been so cavalier with the birth control?”

“Yes. I’m clean. I figure you are too?”

He nodded.

“Wait,” she said. “Are you saying you don’t want kids at all?” Now she had something else entirely to worry about. She couldn’t have kids, but she still wanted them.

“I mean, I guess. Maybe, someday,” he stammered. “I’m just not dying for any right now and would be fine if I never had any.”

“We don’t have to decide anything right this second,” she said. “This is all still pretty new. I just thought you should know.”

“I’m sorry if that’s not the answer you want.”

She stayed quiet. She’d always imagined herself with kids. Multiple kids. And he didn’t even want one. Could she get past this?

“How ’bout we put it on the back burner for now and just focus on us?” he said, pulling her onto his lap and wrapping her in his arms. “What do you say?”

She laid her head on his shoulder and sighed. “Okay.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lucy had been in business for over five years, and most of her customers were regulars who came in every day or close to it. Summer brought a lot of tourist traffic, but that died off significantly in the fall. The instant the distinguished older couple entered the coffee shop, she knew they weren't from New Bern. They wore matching Patagonia jackets, and the woman carried a Hermes handbag that probably cost more than Lucy's yearly rent. Lucy couldn't tell if their commanding presence result from confidence or haughtiness.

While they studied the overhead menu board to decide what they wanted, she made out bits of their conversation.

"I don't know what Jack sees in this town," the woman said. "It's sort of quaint, I suppose, but it's so small."

Were they talking about *her* Jack? Lucy scooted closer to the counter, aggressively trying to eavesdrop. Could these be Jack's parents? They were supposed to have arrived late yesterday, so it was possible.

The man huffed a noncommittal response as they finally stepped up to order. Lucy was filling in for Margie, who'd called out with a cold. She side-eyed them while making their drinks. The man ordered plain black coffee, and the woman an oat milk latte with nonfat whip.

"Are you folks visiting New Bern?" Lucy said to the man, handing him his coffee.

"Yes," he said. "Our son moved here recently, and it's his birthday. He recommended we come here."

"You don't mean Jack, do you?" Lucy asked, slipping the woman's drink into a sleeve. At the man's nod, she introduced herself. "I'm Lucy. I think we're all having dinner together later."

The mother did a double take and gave Lucy a not-so-subtle up-and-down perusal. Lucy subconsciously swiped at her ponytail, then realized she was wearing a baseball cap to cover

her unwashed hair. She'd planned to do that after work. Not her best first impression but too late to fix it now.

"You're Jack's Lucy?" the woman asked.

"Well, I don't actually belong to him or anything," Lucy said. "But we're dating, if that's what you mean."

"So, you're a barista?" Her tone and the condescending way she asked instantly put Lucy on edge. What if she was "just a barista"? What would be wrong with that?

"Yep. I love making coffee," she said. Jack obviously hadn't mentioned that she owned the place, and if he hadn't said anything, maybe he had a reason. Let them assume she was an almost thirty-year-old barista.

Jack's mother tried to hide a sour look, but not very hard and not successfully. She took her cup and didn't say another word. The dad seemed apologetic and dropped a twenty for a tip, which made Lucy chuckle. How often did he overtip to make up for his wife's rudeness?

"Have a great day. See you later," Lucy called after them, adding extra pep.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched them sit at a table in the back and huddle together, whispering about something. Or, more likely, *someone*. She was curious why Jack hadn't told them she was a business owner. Was it inadvertent, or had he omitted the information on purpose?

One of the Three Musketeers hollered at Lucy, asking for a refill. She grabbed a pot and went to them. A table away, Jack's parents watched with interest.

"You do realize this coffee shop doesn't supply waitressing service, right?" she said with a smile, filling Gene's cup and topping off the other two.

"You're so good to us," Archie said.

"Put it on my tab," Walter said.

Lucy chuckled. "Nor do we have a 'tab' system."

"Good thing we're friends with the owner." Archie smiled.

“What’s going on this week? You betting on anything juicy?”

“Not really. The bet is whether old Mrs. Turnpike finds out her son came to town but left before stopping by to say hello. She’ll be mad as hell if she finds out.”

“How do you know stuff like that?”

Gene used two fingers to point at his eyes, then at Lucy, then at the whole room. “We see everything.”

“That’s creepy.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Walter said, rolling his eyes. “The ungrateful little bugger told us flat out he was avoiding his momma.” Lucy nodded. She could feel Jack’s mother boring a hole into her back, but ignored it.

“All right. You boys good?”

“Oh, Lucy,” Archie said. “You know what would really hit the spot right now? One of those little pink cake balls on a stick. Could I trouble you for one?”

“I’ll bring it in a minute,” Lucy said with an over-the-shoulder wave.

By the time she returned with the cake pop, Jack’s parents had picked up to-go lids, taken their coffee, and left.

“What was that all about?” Gene said, pursing his lips at the table Jack’s parents had just vacated.

“Whatever do you mean?” Lucy said sweetly. “Those were Jack’s parents. They’re in town for his birthday. The four of us are having dinner tonight. I can’t wait.”

Archie laughed out loud. “His mom thinks you’re a barista and not nearly good enough for her son.”

“We may have overheard a bit of their conversation,” Walter said with a sheepish smile.

“Of course you did. Nothing gets past you three,” Lucy said. “That does confirm the overall vibe I got from her though.”

“Why didn’t you just tell them you own the joint and are a respected business owner?” Gene said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Lucy winked.

“You’re testing them?” Archie said. “I love it. We need to place some odds about what will happen this evening. Boys?”

“Oh, geez,” Lucy said. “I’m out. Don’t let anyone find out about this, okay?”

Lucy finished the shift and went home to take a quick nap and get ready for dinner with Jack’s parents. They never did introduce themselves, so she had no idea what their names were.

After she washed and blow-dried her hair, she added some loose, wavy curls. Then picked out something nice to wear, but not too nice. Heaven forbid they think she was trying overly hard to impress them. She settled on dark jeans, a loose-fitting three-quarter sleeve blouse, and riding boots. Normally, she didn’t bother with much makeup but dabbed on just enough to look good but not garish.

Ready with a few minutes to spare, she debated a pre-dinner cocktail but thought showing up with alcohol on her breath might be pushing things a little too far. She only wanted to mess with them, not totally alienate them.

Jack texted to say he was running late and asked that she meet him at the Stargaze Hotel, which housed the nicest restaurant in New Bern. That was fine with her. It would make escaping easier if the need arose. She caught some light traffic but still arrived right on time, which, according to Jack, was late, but she lived by her own set of time rules. She rolled her shoulders, took a deep breath, and walked tall into the restaurant, determined not to let Jack’s fancy parents rattle her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jack met his parents in the hotel lobby and walked with them to the restaurant, where they were seated immediately. He'd intended to pick Lucy up, but the day had gotten away from him, and he'd finally run out of time altogether. Now, he wouldn't have a chance to issue the warning he thought might be necessary—that his parents could be a little pretentious. He hoped she wouldn't be offended by their more-often-than-not judgyness.

And where the hell was she anyway? His parents hated it when people were late. Not that he cared what they thought, but he didn't want them to have any excuse not to like her.

As soon as they sat, his mother started in. "We met Lucy this morning," she said cryptically. "You didn't tell us she worked in a coffee shop."

"Oh," Jack said. "I could've sworn I mentioned that. Does it matter?"

His mother dropped all pretense. "Jack, of course it matters. She's a thirty-year-old barista, who's giving away the farm to a few old men. At the owner's expense, I'm sure."

"First of all, she's only twenty-nine. Second—" Jack started to set the record straight about Lucy's occupation, but his dad jumped to her defense.

"Meredith, it's fine. Now's not the time for one of your 'all women want to trap rich men' speeches."

"Of course it is," his mom said. "This is the perfect time. Just don't knock her up, Jack. That's the oldest trick in the book," she whispered. At least she had the decency to lower her voice.

Jack's blood was heating. He sucked in a deep breath to tamp down his irritation. So what if Lucy *was* only a barista? And as for her getting pregnant on purpose? Apparently, not a problem. He'd been secretly relieved when she told him about her infertility. Perhaps that would put his mother at ease too.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Mom. Lucy can’t have kids.”

“Is that what she said?” His mother’s voice raised an octave and was no longer quiet. “That’s what they all say! You need to be very careful, son. Men in your situation are big targets.”

“Oh, believe me. I know,” Jack said. His first marriage had taught him that lesson.

“What about the Crabtree’s daughter? She’s still available and pretty as ever. You took her out once, didn’t you? You should ask her out again.”

“She’s not my type,” Jack said. She was actually gay but hadn’t come out to her parents. Jack wouldn’t snitch, but he also wasn’t about to reconnect.

“Okay. How about the Wallace’s daughter then?” she said. “She’s pretty too and just graduated from Duke with an art degree.”

“Seems a little young for me. And Duke? Gag. You know I’d never date a Blue Devil.”

“All right, well, let me work on it. I’m sure I can find someone suitable.”

“And by ‘suitable,’ you mean rich,” Jack mumbled, losing patience. “Mom, you’re here to meet the woman I am *currently* dating. The woman I like *right now*. Why would I want you to set me up with someone else?”

“You’re a catch, Jack. You should keep your options open. It was just a thought,” she said, smoothing her hair and sticking up her nose.

He loved his mother, but she could be insufferable at times.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” Jack said as Lucy entered the restaurant. He waved until she spotted him and waved back. “She’s here. Just be nice. Please.”

“Hey, Lucy,” Jack said, standing to give her a peck on the cheek. “You look amazing,” he whispered before pulling away.

“Hello, everyone. Sorry if I’m late.” Jack pulled her chair out, and she thanked him before sitting next to him.

“Just glad you’re here,” Jack said. “These are my parents, Phillip and Meredith McAllister. Mom, Dad, this is Lucy, my girlfriend. And my boss. It’s her coffee shop I’m remodeling. She also owns The Drip. I think you met her this morning?”

His mother’s mouth fell open, and she glared at Jack, knowing he’d played her. His father held back a laugh, and a twinge of sweet satisfaction made Jack smile.

“Yes,” his mom said, recovering quickly. “How nice to see you again.” She held out a hand, and Lucy shook it with a smile.

After some small talk about the drive and the weather, the waiter came to take their order. Dinner progressed without insult or injury. Lucy was sweet and charming and appeared to be winning over his parents. Well, at least his dad. His mother was polite, which was all he could hope for.

Every time the waiter checked on them, which seemed overly frequent, he referred to Jack’s dad as “Mr. McAllister.” Jack began to wish they’d gone to some other restaurant. He didn’t want this to be the time or place Lucy found out about his family’s business.

“Wow, they sure are polite here,” Lucy said. “They treat you like they know you. That’s good service.”

“They’re treating the boss right,” his mother said.

Lucy was a bright woman and quickly put two and two together. “Wait a second. Are you the Phillip McAllister of the Stargaze Hotels? Do you own this hotel?”

“I own all the Stargaze Hotels,” his father said, and Jack groaned.

Lucy turned to Jack, mouth agape. “Stargaze Hotels is the family business you’ve been talking about?”

Jack shrugged. His mother narrowed her eyes at Lucy. “You didn’t know?”

“I had absolutely no idea,” Lucy said, genuinely stunned. “Jack, that’s crazy. Why wouldn’t you say something?”

“I would have soon,” Jack said. “I don’t tell many people.”

She dipped her head and appeared to be biting her tongue. Great, she probably thought he either didn’t trust her with the information or didn’t plan to stick around long enough to make it worth his while to tell her. He grabbed her hand under the table, but she pulled it back and avoided his gaze.

Things got awkward after that. Lucy became reserved, his mother even smugger, and his father oblivious to it all. Everyone skipped dessert and decided to call it a night early. His parents were leaving in the morning, and Jack and Lucy had to work. He asked her to wait for him while he said good night to his parents.

She found a leather chair in the lobby and plopped down into it, saying she’d wait for a minute.

He walked his parents to the elevator bay. His mom couldn’t resist some parting advice.

“Just because she may have some money doesn’t make what I warned you about any less applicable,” she said. “Especially now that she knows.”

What Lucy now “knew” was implied—Jack’s family was stinking rich.

Jack ignored the insinuation that Lucy might be a gold digger. “You guys have a safe trip back,” he said, giving them each a quick hug.

Perhaps introducing Lucy to his parents hadn’t been the best idea, but if their relationship continued to go so well, they would have met eventually. At least now, he wouldn’t have to keep tiptoeing around what his family business was. And he could gauge Lucy’s reaction to the knowledge of his wealth. He didn’t think anything would change, but he’d also seen money make people do stupid things.

Lucy was still sitting where he’d left her. Time to face the music.

* * *

Lucy had taken the second half of dinner to process the fact that Jack's dad was a billionaire. When Jack brought up his "family business," she always pictured a local restaurant or a tire shop, not a vast, popular hotel chain. There were easily hundreds of Stargaze Hotels around the country.

Jack wasn't gone long before he returned and sat in a chair next to hers.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry about all that. My parents can be a tad much sometimes. I should have warned you."

"You mean warned me that your family 'business' is actually a family 'empire'?" she said, lifting a brow.

"Yeah, about that." He shoved a hand through his hair. "Money can make people weird sometimes, so I usually wait a while until I tell anyone. In fact, I normally don't tell people at all."

She understood his leeriness. Her family wasn't rolling in billions, but they did all right, and she knew money could bring out the worst in people. The money wasn't the issue.

"I don't care about the money," she said. "I care that you didn't think you could *trust* me to know about the money."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," he said. "I do trust you."

It stung, but when she thought about it, decided it wasn't that big a deal. If she put herself in his shoes, she probably would have done the same thing. The whole situation was actually a lot like what she'd just done to Jack's parents by not telling them outright she was the owner of The Drip—a small lie of omission to see how they would react. Jack's family was no doubt constantly on watch for those looking to take advantage.

"It's fine," she said. "So you're freaking loaded. Doesn't change anything for me. Except I won't feel bad about ordering the steak from now on." She smiled.

“Technically, I’m only rich on paper,” he said. “I don’t get a salary from the business or anything. Everything I spend is what I make contracting. So, you know, maybe just the six-ounce steak?”

She laughed. “We can go Dutch for all I care. I’m not dating you for your money, lack of money, or potential to inherit a shit ton of money. I’m dating you because I like you.”

He picked up her hand and leaned in to kiss her. “I know. And I like you too.”

“Wanna come to my place for dessert?”

“Sure. Got any chocolate ice cream?” he said.

“I didn’t mean that kind of dessert. It was a euphemism for something else.” She wagged her eyebrows, and he shot out of his chair.

“In that case, hell, yes.”

He stood, grabbed her hand, and pulled her out of the chair. They drove separately to her house, and he spent the night. It was becoming her new normal, and she liked it. She wondered if or when he’d ever ask about moving in or maybe even getting married. It seemed both too soon and not soon enough. Even though she’d only known him a few weeks, she was ready to commit. She didn’t want to come on too strong, so she decided to just enjoy the journey while waiting for him to catch up.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving, and Lucy had invited Jack to her parents' house for Sunday dinner. He'd celebrated the holiday and most of the weekend with his family in Wilmington, so this was the first time he'd seen her in days. She sat in the passenger side of his truck, excitedly recounting the story of how Emma's boyfriend, Dirk, had proposed after Thanksgiving dinner.

"They want to get married as soon as possible," she said. "Like, as in, my mom is helping them plan the wedding right now. We're so excited."

"That's nuts," he said. "Why the hurry?"

He caught her shrug out of the corner of his eye but kept his eyes on the road. "I guess when you know it's right, there's really no reason to wait," she said, bordering on defensive.

He felt like this was some sort of test. One he hadn't studied for and was likely to fail. Marriage wasn't a topic he wanted to discuss. Now or ever. He'd been there, done that, and was in no hurry to try again.

"This is a nice neighborhood," Jack said, hoping she'd let him change the subject.

"Yeah, I've always loved it. All the houses on the left overlook the river. My dream home is just up the street. Wanna see it?"

They passed a couple of driveways before she pointed to a large brick Victorian home with a towering turret on one side. He turned into the driveway.

"Why this house?" he asked. "As opposed to all the others in the neighborhood?"

"Well, I haven't seen the views from *every* house on the street, but this one is spectacular. Kate had an open house here about two years ago and thought it was so awesome, she texted all of us to come and check it out. The moment I walked in, I fell in love. Kate wanted to include sunrise

pictures in the listing photos, and I came with her to take them. It was spectacular.”

“Wow, you’re serious about this,” he said, backing out of the driveway.

“I swore to myself if it ever came on the market again, I would buy it,” she said. “Don’t ask me how, but I’d do it.”

“You’d be okay living practically next door to your parents?”

“Oh, yes. We’re a tight-knit group. Some would say too close,” she said. “We do dinners every Sunday and see each other sporadically during the week. Add in birthdays and holidays, and we girls might as well move home.”

“That sounds nice. For you, I mean. I don’t think I could live so close to my family.”

“You haven’t said much about your time at home. How was it?”

“The usual. It was fun catching up with my brother and my uncle’s family. Conversations with my parents tend to go in circles nowadays, plus we just saw them last week, so I avoided being alone with them.”

“Your dad talk to you about taking over?”

“Yeah. He looks tired. I think Nick and I will have to address it soon.”

She nodded. “Families. What are ya gonna do? This is your first Sunday dinner with mine. I know you’ve hung out with them before, but things can get crazy. Maybe we should pick a safe word in case you get overwhelmed and need to escape.”

He laughed. “I can handle your family.” He pulled into the driveway and parked.

“Suit yourself,” she said, getting out of the car. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Seated around the dinner table, Jack did his best to keep up with all the conversations and side chatter.

“Oh, I just saw Dad yesterday,” Emma said.

“Spider?” Kate asked.

“A *huge* one.” Emma spread her hands a foot apart. “Dirk was in Raleigh.”

“I didn’t realize I’d be leaving you in such peril,” Dirk said with an eye roll.

“Hold on. Back up,” Adam said. “Edward. You went to Emma’s for the sole purpose of killing a spider? How long have you been doing that?”

Edward waved a hand. “Pretty much forever. I hardly ever see Katie and Emma anymore. You boys must be stealing my thunder.”

Adam looked at Kate. “You never told me you had your dad come to kill your spiders.”

Kate shrugged. “It’s never come up. You just slid naturally into the role, and you’re so good at it. All those rippling muscles, whacking away.” Kate smiled.

“Ooh. Kaaay,” Adam said. “No need to lay it on so thick. I’ll keep killing the damn spiders. I can’t believe your dad goes so far out of his way to help you wusses.”

“It’s nice to feel needed sometimes,” Edward said. “Ten years ago, they only called for money. Killing spiders doesn’t cost me a dime, and I usually end up with a free glass of lemonade and a hug out of it.”

Jack chuckled. Under all the bluster and bravado, Lucy’s dad was a big mush ball.

Everyone was involved in side conversations that Jack caught bits and pieces of. Daisy, who had come home for Thanksgiving, was telling Emma that she’d decided to take her advice and start a YouTube channel. Nana was asking Adam if he’d be okay coming to kill her spiders. And Dirk and Edward were debating the best place to fish on the river. Jack focused in on Lizzie and Lucy.

“I accidentally ordered triple the amount of paper towels I need,” Lizzie said. “You wanna buy some off me once they come in?”

“How’d you do that?” Lucy asked.

Lizzie raised a shoulder and let it drop. “No idea.”

“Your friend Jack have anything to do with it?” Lucy raised a brow.

“Are you talking about me?” Jack interrupted.

“Oh, no. I meant Lizzie’s friend Mr. Daniels. He sometimes gets her into trouble.”

“Sisters don’t let sisters drink and order inventory,” Lizzie said. “Where were you?”

“All right,” Sophie said, getting everyone’s attention. Topics changed in the blink of an eye, but no one was ever fazed. “Between Emma’s wedding and the holidays, we’ve got a lot going on the next four weeks.”

Lizzie and Nana moaned.

“Daisy has extended her plane ticket to stay through the new year. I’m hosting a bridal shower on Tuesday. We’re doing a family portrait on Friday. You girls are combining dress shopping and the bachelorette party on Saturday. Dad’s birthday is next Sunday, and Emma and Dirk’s wedding, the following Saturday.” She paused to take a breath, then continued. “Then we get into the holiday stuff. We’ll do our big annual Christmas party here with friends on the eighteenth, and then, of course, all the family events, cookie baking, decorating, etcetera. Times to be determined on those.”

“What day did you say the bachelorette party was?” Lizzie said, writing on her napkin.

“That was *five* events ago,” Sophie exclaimed. “Never mind. I’ll send an email and daily reminder texts in the family group chat.”

“You got the whiteboard out, didn’t you?” Kate said. “I love it.”

“Leave it to my mother and Kate to geek out over organizing family events,” Lucy whispered to Jack.

“If either of you breaks out anything color-coded, I’m leaving,” Lizzie said.

Sophie and Kate looked at each other and laughed, indicating some color coding had indeed occurred.

“Mom, I appreciate all the time and effort you’re putting into keeping us all on the same page,” Emma said.

Jack had only been around Emma a few times, but could tell she was “the sweet one.” The way she treated people didn’t even come off as ass-kissing because that’s how she was with everyone. Genuine and nice.

“Yes, honey,” Edward said. “Without you, the family would fall apart.”

“Lizzie, you bringing that handsome young man you introduced me to at the coffee shop to the wedding?” Nana asked.

“Oh, no. That one went on his way,” Lizzie said.

“What was wrong with him?” Kate asked. “Eyebrows too bushy, creepy laugh, small feet?”

From what Jack had learned from Lucy, Lizzie burned through men like a chain smoker used matches. Any minute flaw could spell the end of the relationship.

“Ha. Ha,” Lizzie said. “No. Making out with him was like dealing with an octopus trying to steal your wallet.”

Edward slapped his forehead. “Boundaries, people. We need to talk about boundaries.”

“Speaking of boundaries,” Nana said. “I need someone to help me wax before the wedding.”

After a chorus of “not its,” Edward agreed to pay for a salon visit. Conversation returned to Emma’s wedding.

Jack tuned out on the details but knew it would be a small ceremony followed by dinner, all in the backyard. Lucy’s level of excitement about the wedding concerned him. The vibe he caught wasn’t solely excitement for Emma, but for the wedding itself. He and Lucy hadn’t talked about marriage yet,

but he should let her know soon that he didn't plan to marry again. Commit to a relationship, sure. Live together, sure. But between the fiasco of his first nuptials and his mother's constant warnings, marriage for him was off the table. Like how she'd disclosed her infertility, marriage, and his aversion to it, was an important topic they should be on the same page about.

He hoped it wouldn't be a deal breaker, but if her reaction to Emma getting married was any indication, she probably *did* want to get married someday. Family seemed important to her. Still, she was a reasonable woman and would understand where he was coming from. He just had to be honest. Next chance he got, he'd tell her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Gene and Walter wanted me to tell you they miss you,” Lucy said, tucking a blanket around Archie’s feet. He’d missed coming into The Drip for the last two days, and Lucy was worried enough that she’d come to check on him.

“That’s a lie, and you know it,” Archie said. “They’re probably talking all kinds of crap about me.”

She smiled. “I’m sure they feel that way. They’re just too manly to say it. *I miss you.*”

“Lucy, I think I’m dying,” he said, dramatically putting his hand to his forehead like a southern belle about to faint.

“I hope that’s not true,” she said, biting back a laugh. “I brought soup. My mother’s famous recipe. Known to bring people back from the brink of death. Prepare yourself for a miracle recovery.”

She used his microwave to heat a bowl and put three more single-serving-sized containers in the refrigerator. “I’m leaving you extra for dinner later.”

He took a small sip and hummed. “Mm. This is delicious. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, returning to the kitchen to retrieve the bottle of ibuprofen and a couple of water bottles. She placed them on the end table next to him. “You can have more medicine in an hour and be sure to stay hydrated.”

“Lucy, you’re a godsend,” he said. “You’ll be a terrific mother someday.”

He couldn’t know how much that stung, and she wouldn’t let him. “Thanks,” she said, plastering on a fake smile.

She wanted to be a good mother someday. Wanted it more than anything. The comment made her think of Jack’s statement about not wanting kids. She’d been doing her best to avoid thinking about it, hoping he’d miraculously change his mind. Believing, perhaps, she’d be the one to change it. But, since it wasn’t something she could control, she once again

pushed it aside. If and when the time came, she'd deal with it then.

“Text me if you need anything, okay?”

He nodded, and she let herself out.

A day later, she woke sweating and shaking. Her temperature clocked in at 101. When she called work to let them know she wouldn't be in, she asked them to do an extra careful job of sanitizing everything—especially the booth where the Three Musketeers sat. The three of them spent so much time together, Gene and Walter would come down with it too. She'd have to ask one of her sisters to take care of them.

After spending the morning in bed, vacillating between burning up and freezing, she heard a knock at the door. Too weak to get up, she ignored it. Ten minutes later, Lizzie texted to say she'd given her key to Jack, and he was on his way to check on her. Five minutes after that, the deadbolt clicked.

“Lucy,” he called out softly. “It's Jack.” He tapped on her bedroom door before pushing it open.

She pulled the covers over her head. “Don't look at me,” she said, her voice muffled by the comforter. “I'm hideous.”

He chuckled and sat next to her on the bed. “I'm sure you look fine,” he said, laying a hand on her hip. “I didn't come for a beauty show. I came to see if you were all right and if you needed anything. How ya feeling?”

She peeked out from under the blanket, and he gasped and jumped back. “Ack!”

Despite her misery, she laughed. “I'm not only ugly, I'm probably super contagious. Don't breathe my air,” she said, waving her hand between them. “I'm serious. I was only with Archie for a second. Did the other two catch it?”

“Yes. Your mother's making a big batch of soup, and your sisters are working out who will deliver to who. I'm sure you're on the list.”

She smiled. Even as a grown-ass adult, the thought of her mother caring for her was a comfort.

“Can I get you something? You hungry?” Jack stroked her sweaty, messy hair. She was too sick to worry about how greasy it might be.

She plopped back down on the pillow. “No, but I could use another dose of Tylenol. Could you bring me the bottle and a glass of water? Might as well make use of you while you’re here,” she said.

“Do you have a fever?” he asked, putting his hand on her forehead.

“Last I checked, it was a hundred and one. I’ve been swinging between feeling like an iceberg and an inferno all morning. The medicine doesn’t seem to do anything. I also have a cough and a headache.”

“Sounds like what Gene and Walter were complaining about. The good news is, Archie feels better, so hopefully, this won’t last long.”

“Thank goodness. Emma’s bachelorette party is this weekend. I have to be better before that. You were at The Drip this morning?”

“Yeah. I went in to say hi, and they told me you were sick. I came over and knocked, but you didn’t answer, so I called Lizzie.”

“Sorry. I heard you, but was too tired to get up.”

“It’s okay. I’m going to get your medicine and then put you to sleep.”

After she took the pills, he laid down next to her and wrapped her in his arms. Even as miserable as she was, it soothed her.

He’d left her to go back to work for a few hours but returned at dinnertime with soup. Her mom’s magical chickeny elixir fixed her right up, and by the next morning, she was better. After a shower, she felt like a new woman, but came out of the bathroom to find Jack curled up into a ball, shivering.

“I warned you not to breathe my air,” she said.

“I’ll be fine,” he said, attempting to sit. He swayed and grabbed his head before laying back down. “Maybe I’ll stay here for a bit after all.”

“Oh, Jack. I’m sorry I got you sick.”

“Could have been one of the three,” he said. “Is it just me, or is it freezing in here?”

“It’s you.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re feeling better,” he said, closing his eyes.

“Just in time to take care of you. Lay down. I’ll get you some medicine and orange juice.”

“Do I have to turn in my man card if I ask for another blanket?”

She laughed. “Of course not. Stay there.” She piled up the extra blankets she’d used to keep warm, burying him under two feet of fleece.

“Thanks, Luce,” he mumbled before falling back to sleep.

Was it creepy that she wanted to sit and watch him breathe? Yeah, probably. Before turning out the light and leaving the room, one thought drifted through her mind—in sickness and in health.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The following week flew by in a blur. And between the pre-wedding activities, work, the remodel supervision, and spending time with Jack, the long days were taking their toll on Lucy. Every morning she woke exhausted, sometimes even queasy. She'd recovered from the flu but was still dealing with lingering fatigue and sporadic nauseousness.

Today was Emma's wedding, and, wanting to be at her best, Lucy had turned off her alarm and planned to sleep as long as needed to feel rested. She didn't get out of bed until ten o'clock, which seemed to have worked, because she felt great.

Lucy's parents—well, mostly her mother—had thrown a lot of parties and hosted a lot of gatherings, but Sophie Parker had gone all out for this particular shindig. A huge canvas tent encompassed the backyard. Tall metal heaters lined the perimeter and blasted hot air over a small wooden stage. Tables were draped in white linen and covered with Christmas-themed flower arrangements. The ceremony and dinner would both be here. It would be small, yet elegant.

Just like Emma, Lucy thought.

"Mom, I can't believe you arranged all this in just two weeks," Lucy said. "Everything looks amazing."

"Thanks, honey. Kate helped, but yes, it's pretty incredible it all came together so quickly."

"Where there's a will, there's a way," Lucy's father said, wrapping his arm around his wife and kissing her head. "You are so amazing."

They were so in love, even after thirty-something years. Lucy had heard the story of how they met a thousand times, but didn't really know what happened after that. What was the bridge from love at first sight to happily ever after? Now that she found herself in a similar situation, she decided to ask.

"Did you guys really fall in love the second you saw each other? Or is the 'how you met' story over-dramatized?"

Her mother looked at her father. “I did,” she said, smiling.

“Me too,” her father said, returning the smile and winking at her mother.

“So, what?” Lucy said. “You looked into each other’s eyes, knew it was forever, and everything’s been a bouquet of roses since?”

Her parents laughed at that. “Oh, no,” her mother said. “Love at first sight doesn’t mean no problems or issues to overcome. We’ve had to work at this thing every day.”

Her father nodded. “Marriage is never easy, but it helps to pick the right person to take the journey with.”

Lucy agreed. But was Jack that person? Sure, they’d snapped together like two strong magnets, both ten years ago and two months ago, but was it enough?

Her sisters sipped mimosas all morning, but Lucy’s stomach was still on edge, so she stuck to water.

After everyone had gone through hair and makeup, they started on photos. At the first-look pictures, where Dirk saw Emma in her dress for the first time, Dirk strode to her and kissed her thoroughly. “You’re so beautiful,” he said through teary eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment while the photographer clicked away, and Lucy’s heart warmed with excitement for them. It also gave her hope. Dirk and Emma had only dated for a few months, and it proved to Lucy that falling hard and ending up together was a conceivable notion.

After the family photos, the guests began to arrive. When Jack showed up, Lucy about lost her mind, he looked so good.

“Damn,” she said. “You look amazing.” The suit fit him perfectly, showing off his broad shoulders, lean torso, and long legs. She licked her lips.

“You look pretty good yourself,” he said, kissing her and waggling his eyebrows. “Think anyone would notice if we disappeared for a few minutes?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Later though. For sure.”

The ceremony was short and sweet. They were married by a friend of Dirk's, who did a fantastic job. Her mother somehow found the time and energy to bake and decorate a fabulous cake that no one could believe she'd done all by herself. It was as good or better than any professional could have made.

Nana looked beautiful in a long pink dress and danced all by herself, completely out of tune with the music. Lucy's mom had been happy to report that Nana hadn't had any "collection issues" since Halloween, which was a kind way of saying she hadn't stolen anything. Lucy thought it was probably because there'd been so much going on that Nana just wasn't bored.

Caught up in the wedding bliss, Lucy wondered if it would ever happen for her. Nana had attempted mind-reading last year. Too bad she wasn't any good at it, because Lucy would give a small fortune to find out what was going through Jack's head at that moment.

Lucy and Jack sat at a table with most of her sisters and Adam. They were discussing the beautiful ceremony, which morphed into a conversation about how they envisioned their own weddings. They'd discussed the topic many times amongst themselves, but it seemed appropriate, so they had it again.

"I'm going to elope," Daisy said.

"You wouldn't do that to Mom," Kate said. "She'd never forgive you."

"That's true," Daisy said, taking a bite of her second piece of cake. "Plus, I want her to make my cake. This is frickin' delicious. My other idea is a destination wedding. Somewhere out of the way. Like a mountaintop or the middle of a rain forest."

"How's mom gonna make the cake for that?" Lizzie said. "She supposed to strap it to her back and hike with it?"

"And promise me it won't be anything that takes too much physical exertion," Kate said. Daisy rolled her eyes, and Adam laughed.

"I've got plenty of time to iron out the details," Daisy said.

“What about you, Luce?” Lizzie asked.

“Oh, something simple and traditional. Probably a mix between Kate’s and Emma’s, but with a rustic feel. Maybe in a big barn.”

“How about you, Jack?” Adam said sarcastically, clearly mocking the girls. “What’s *your* dream wedding like?”

“Oh, I don’t plan on marrying again,” Jack said. “Been there, done that. Not happening.”

Conversation stopped. Along with Lucy’s heart. Her stomach was queasy before, but this made it fully revolt. She took a sip of water to disguise her surprise and hurt. He didn’t plan to marry again? What did that mean for her?

All at once, her sisters fled. Chairs scraped the floor, and after a barrage of “I’d better check on Nana,” “I need a refill on punch,” and “I’ve got to wash my hair,” they were gone.

Jack looked around the table, where only Lucy and Adam remained. “Was it something I said?” he quipped, utterly unaware that he’d just dropped a bomb.

“I think I hear Emma calling me,” Lucy said. Her sisters were right. Time to bail. “I’ll be right back.” And by that, she meant, “I need some time to process the dream-crushing news you’ve nonchalantly lobbed into my lap.”

She found her sisters huddled in the bathroom, waiting for her. When she entered, they turned as one and opened their arms to bring her into a group hug.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Daisy said. “I know you thought maybe he was the one.”

Tears filled Lucy’s eyes and threatened to escape at a high rate. “I don’t want to cry here,” she said. “Or ruin anything for Emma. Let’s just talk about it later, okay?”

They nodded and promised they would stick by her the rest of the night. It went unspoken that she and Jack had some serious issues. Could she stay with him now? Not if he couldn’t give her what she wanted.

She'd planned on marriage and kids ever since she could remember. Since she couldn't have her own kids naturally, she'd already have to make concessions for children. So substituting a husband wasn't something she would compromise on. A long-term boyfriend, or life partner, or whatever it was called nowadays, was of no interest to her. If Jack didn't want to put a ring on it, then she'd wait and find someone who would.

Jack's curveball threw a damper on the remainder of the evening. Lucy put on a happy face for Emma. She stuck close to her sisters to avoid being alone with Jack. When he finally pulled her aside to address the elephant, she assured him nothing was wrong. A lie he saw through at once.

"I'm sorry if what I said upset you," he said. "It wasn't the best way to tell you. I realize that now. But I wanted to be honest."

"Thank you for letting me know," she said, not trusting herself to say more. She refused to break down and be "that girl" at the wedding—the one with all the drama that made things about her on someone else's special day.

Finally, Emma and Dirk were ready to leave for their quicky honeymoon. With Christmas so close, they planned to just spend the weekend at a cabin in the Outer Banks and do something more elaborate next spring.

"You look so happy," Lucy said to Emma before they left. "I'm so thrilled for you, sweetie."

"Thanks, Lucy," Emma said. "Looks like you won't be far behind, huh? I have to say, Jack is a much better fit for you than Curtis. I'm glad you guys found each other again."

Lucy smiled through the pain. "Yep. We'll see. Come on, let's get you two out of here."

After the other guests had left, Jack asked if he could drive Lucy home. She told him she'd committed to help with the cleanup, and since it would be late when they finished, was going to spend the night here. The catering company was

actually in charge of all that, but the little white lie would buy her some time.

“Lucy, we need to talk,” he said. “You’re obviously upset, and I want to work things out.”

“I’m not sure what there is to say,” she said, leading him to the front door.

“This wasn’t the time or place to bring it up. I’m sorry about that. But I wanted to tell you before things got too far along. I thought you’d appreciate the honesty.”

“Kinda wish you would have led with it, actually. Would have saved me some heartache.”

“Wait, are you breaking up with me?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Was she? Should she? “I *do* want to get married, Jack. I want a husband and kids. I want a family, not a live-in lover.”

“You said you couldn’t have kids.” The accusation in his tone put her on edge. Did he think she’d lied?

“I can’t. But there’s more than one way to have a family. Lizzie’s already said she’d be a surrogate for me when I’m ready. My eggs are fine. It’s just the production equipment that’s wonky.” She made a hasty circular motion around her stomach.

“Lucy—”

She held up a hand to stop him. “I’m gonna need a minute. We should discuss it, but not tonight. Tomorrow?”

“If that’s what you want.” He reluctantly allowed her to push him out the door, saying he’d call in the morning. Lucy closed the door behind him, turned the deadbolt, and rested her forehead on it. She felt her sisters come up behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Bar?” Lizzie asked. “Or do it here?”

“What are you talking about?” Lucy asked, already knowing exactly what Lizzie meant. There was no way her sisters would let this thing with Jack go undiscussed.

“We’re gonna talk about it,” Daisy said. “Might as well do it over a drink.”

Lucy laughed. “If we stay here, you can drink for free. My stomach’s too messed up for alcohol anyway.”

“That’s too bad,” Lizzie said. “Cuz Jack’s bombshell screams ‘shots’!”

“I’ve switched to water too,” Kate said, holding up a bottle. “Plus, if we do it here, we don’t need shoes.”

In the end, they changed back into their pre-wedding sweats and got comfy on the couches. The caterers had packed up and left. There were people coming tomorrow to disassemble the tent and pack up the heaters. Their parents and Nana had gone to bed, and Emma was off on her weekend honeymoon, so it was just the four of them.

“So,” Lizzie said. “Whatcha gonna do?”

“What can I do?” Lucy said.

“Does he know you want to get married someday?” Lizzie asked.

“I told him two seconds ago,” Lucy said. “We hadn’t talked about it until today. I did tell him about the infertility, and, get this, he’s fine with it. He doesn’t want kids anyway.” She put the last sentence in air quotes.

“Doesn’t want kids *or* marriage?” Kate said. “So, this is actually strike two.”

“Yep,” Lucy said. “And I feel like strike three is that he doesn’t seem to care what I want. Just laid down the law that he’s never marrying again, and it doesn’t matter that I might have other ideas on the matter.”

“Hoo, boy,” Daisy said. “This is a tough one. Would you break up with him over it?”

“Well, that would be easier said than done.” Lucy sighed. “Even if I wanted to. I’m pretty sure I’m in love with him.”

“Oof,” Kate said.

“What should I do?” Lucy said. “Do I just go along with it?”

“No, you don’t,” Lizzie said. “You hold out for what you want. Don’t settle.”

“So, what? I either break up with him because, apparently, we’re on the road to nowhere, or I try to convince or coerce him into wanting it? That’s no way to start a marriage.”

“You can’t force him. That’s true,” Lizzie said. “But you can, and should, wait for what you want. And if Jack can’t give it to you, then maybe you move on.”

“How does that not come off as an ultimatum?” Lucy said. “Marry me, or at least consider marrying me, or I’m gone.”

“Well, you gotta be with someone that wants the same things you do,” Daisy said. “At least on the important stuff.”

“Maybe Curtis would take me back,” Lucy said with a chuckle. “I’m joking,” she clarified when her sisters glared matching looks of horror. “Geez, I had no idea everyone was so anti-Curtis. You guys like Jack, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Jack’s great,” Kate said. “Much better suited for you than Curtis was. Apparently, he has his own set of issues though. There is something we haven’t considered yet. He could change his mind.”

“That’s a good point,” Daisy said. “Just because he says he’s not ready right this second doesn’t mean six months from now he won’t be.”

“Adam didn’t want to get married either,” Kate said. “But look how that turned out.” She held up her left hand and wiggled her ring finger.

“Kate makes a solid argument,” Lizzie said. “If you dump him now, you may always wonder what could have been. People change their minds all the time.”

“I’ve spent ten years speculating what could have been with Jack,” Lucy said. “And you’re right. I don’t want to spend any more than that.”

“So his first go-round with marriage ended badly,” Kate said. “She obviously wasn’t the right girl for him and left him jaded. You just have to help him overcome that. Change his mind. If anyone can do it, you can.”

“We’re putting a lot of stock in my prowess to make him fall in love with me,” Lucy said, raising a dubious eyebrow.

“Oh. He’s already in love with you,” Lizzie said. “He might not realize it yet, but it’s clear to anyone with eyes.” Daisy and Kate nodded in agreement.

“All right, well, open to suggestions,” Lucy said, spreading her arms wide.

“I’m not sure I’d call it quits just yet,” Daisy said. “Not until you’re certain he’ll never change his mind.”

“I agree,” Kate said. “You’ve only been dating a couple of months. Give him a chance. I think he’ll come around.”

“Lizzie?” Lucy asked.

“I’m no expert in relationships,” Lizzie said. “But I do know they don’t come without challenges. I agree with these two. Give him a shot.”

“Mom and Dad said the same thing about challenges earlier, when I asked about their courtship. Even they had them.”

“Emma would agree with us,” Daisy said. “That makes it unanimous.”

Lucy chuckled. “Meanwhile, I keep falling deeper in love. That will make it hurt worse if I have to break it off.”

“It’s a risk,” Kate said. “The question is, are you willing to take it?”

Lucy already knew the answer. “It’s Jack. Of course, I’ll roll the dice.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Two days later, Lucy and her sisters were having lunch together to plan the design for the front of the strip mall. Adam had given them permission to pick whatever style they wanted. They'd already settled on a rustic, woodsy theme and had shown him pictures of similar buildings. They were supposed to be picking specific colors for the paint and brick styles, but the subject quickly changed to Lucy's love struggles.

"So, you still haven't talked to him?" Emma said, after being briefed on what had gone down at the wedding.

"No," Lucy said, swallowing a french fry. "I put it off on Sunday because I didn't feel well. Maybe tonight, I guess? It's not like I'm in a real rush to hear his thoughts on hating marriage."

They all mumbled their agreement.

"I can't believe I ate that entire basket of fries," Lucy said.

"Stress eating?" Daisy suggested.

Lucy shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm still hungry," she said. "Probably because I didn't eat breakfast. I'm gonna get a cookie to go."

"Easy there, little piggy," Lizzie said.

Lucy gave her the finger on her way to the counter. While waiting for the cashier to bag up her cookie, she noticed her sisters huddled together, talking about something. The "something" was probably her, but whatever.

When she returned to the table, they were back on paint and bricks. "Adam needs to know, like yesterday," Kate said.

"All in favor of letting Kate decide, say aye," Lizzie said. After a chorus of "ayes," she congratulated Kate. "We trust you."

"I'm picking purple," Kate said, rolling her eyes. No one believed that for a second. Kate had great taste and would save

them all tons of time fighting over slightly different hues of green.

After electing Kate paint-picker, Kate and Emma went back to work, and Daisy left to finish her Christmas shopping. As soon as they were gone, Lizzie narrowed her eyes and began drumming her fingernails on the table.

“What’s up with you?” Lizzie asked.

“What do you mean?” Lucy said, licking ranch dressing off her finger. She’d moved on to Kate’s leftover fries.

“Something’s different. Twin intuition thing. I just can’t put my finger on it.”

“Couldn’t tell you,” Lucy said.

“Why didn’t you eat breakfast this morning? And why have you been late coming into the shop so often lately?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t feel like eating. My stomach’s been iffy on and off ever since I had the flu. And I’m still exhausted in the mornings.”

Lizzie was quiet for a long moment before finally blurting out what she’d clearly been wanting to say all along. “I think you might be pregnant.”

Whatever Lucy thought her sister was going to pop off with, that was nowhere near the top of her radar. Usually, they were on the same page about everything, but Lizzie was way off on this one.

“You know that’s not possible,” Lucy bit out, thinking it was actually a mean thing for her to say.

“I know some rando college doctor told you that ages ago,” Lizzie said. “But how do we know for sure he was right?”

“Beats me. He’s the doctor!”

“I think you should get a second opinion. And a pregnancy test.”

Lucy’s eyes got wide. A pregnancy? Though the thought had never crossed her mind, it would explain a lot. The moodiness, the morning-only nauseousness, being so tired and

sooo hungry. She put a hand on her stomach. “You really think...”

“Let’s go find out. Right now.” Lizzie stood and dragged Lucy from the booth. “I’m driving.”

She drove straight to a drugstore, told Lucy to wait in the car, and ran in.

“Why’d you buy bean dip and an air freshener?” Lucy asked, peering into the bag Lizzie had dropped into her lap.

“So they wouldn’t think I was only there for the test.”

“Oh, yes,” Lucy said. “I’m sure you fooled them.”

“Shut up.”

“This is making me really nervous. What if I am pregnant?”

“Do you know whose it would be?” Lizzie stopped at a red light and turned to her sister. “Any chance it could be Curtis’s?”

“No. It would be Jack’s.”

“How can you be certain?”

“I never had sex with Curtis.”

“What? You were engaged to him!”

“I know.” Lucy sighed. “I liked him. I just wasn’t all that attracted to him. When he wanted to do it, I told him I was saving myself for marriage. That’s probably why he proposed so early. Looking back, that may have been a mistake.”

“Ya think?” Lizzie said. “Why would you agree to marry someone you don’t want to sleep with?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You’re a people pleaser. You hate being alone. And you want to be married. You gotta wait for the right person though, dingbat.”

“I know, I know. I’m sure I would’ve broken the engagement with Curtis eventually. With or without Jack reentering the picture. Jack did help make the decision easier and more time-sensitive though.”

They arrived at their condo building and ran up the stairs. Lizzie unpackaged the test and skimmed the directions. “Here, pee on this end and put the cap on when you’re done. I’ll figure out how to read the results while you’re gone.”

Lucy had never been so nervous in her life. A million things ran through her mind, but leading the pack was excitement. What if she *could* have kids? Then again, what if Lizzie had gotten her hopes up for nothing? What if it was just residual flu symptoms? Well, only one way to find out.

Luckily, all the pop she’d had at lunch made peeing quick and easy. She replaced the cap, wrapped the bottom half in a tissue, washed her hands, and returned to Lizzie, who was studying the box.

“Okay.” Lizzie looked at her watch. “In one minute, if there’s a pink plus, it’s a yes. A blue dash means no.”

Lucy grabbed a paper plate and set the stick on it, then put the plate on the kitchen island and stared at it. Mr. Snuggles had been complaining since they walked in the door.

“Does he need food or what?” Lizzie asked. “What’s his problem today?”

“He’s probably mad Jack’s not here. I think he has a man crush on him.”

“Mr. Snuggles likes Jack? I didn’t think he liked anyone. Including you.”

“I know. It’s weird. Lizzie, this might be the longest minute of my life. What if you’re right?” Too nervous to sit, she picked up Mr. Snuggles and paced the living room floor, hugging him close. He had been her baby for so long. What if an actual human baby was on the way?

Lizzie picked up the stick. “Uh, I don’t think we have to wait the full minute,” she said, holding it out to Lucy. “It’s pretty definitive.”

Lucy took a deep breath and stepped closer so she could see. Happy tears blurred the bright pink plus.

“Congrats, Momma.”

Lucy dropped the cat and threw her arms around Lizzie. “I’m going to have a baby? Ah, I’m going to have a baby!”

They hugged and danced and cried. “Lizzie, do me a favor? Don’t tell anyone, not even our sisters, until I tell Jack. Okay?”

“Of course. Your secret baby’s safe with me. Just remember who figured it out first. And keep that in mind when you name the little tyke. How do you think Jack’s gonna take this, by the way?”

“Honestly, I have no idea.” Now that the excitement was wearing down, she felt a twinge of panic. “What if this is a false alarm? What if I’m pregnant, but something goes wrong?”

“We’ll get you to a doctor asap,” Lizzie said. “He or she can confirm it and make sure everything will work out all right.”

“Yes, okay. Good idea.” Lucy thought for a second. “I’ll wait to tell Jack until I know for sure. Will you come with me?”

“I’m insulted you think you have to ask,” Lizzie said, pulling out her phone. “Let’s find a doctor and make an appointment now.”

Together they researched obstetricians, chose one, then called to ask for the first available time slot. The doctor had had a cancellation and could fit her in the very next morning.

After Lizzie left and Lucy had a chance to come to terms with the news on her own, she started to freak out. With a capital F. What *was* Jack going to say? He seemed pretty anti-kid. Would that change if it was his own? Man, she hoped so.

She was also terrified something would go wrong with the pregnancy. With or without Jack, she wanted this baby more than she’d ever wanted anything. She laid a hand on her flat stomach. “I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe. I already love you, little one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Later that same day, Jack called and asked to come over. As if Lucy didn't have enough to worry about. Emma's wedding felt like forever ago. So much had changed in the last three days—specifically the last three hours. But Jack didn't know about that, and wouldn't yet.

They sat on her couch, Mr. Snuggles in Jack's lap, nervously dancing around the topic. Finally, he brought up the subject he'd come to discuss—his aversion to marriage.

"I know my timing sucked, bringing it up at the wedding," he said. "I've been meaning to say something for a while. It just never seemed like the right time."

"It was a bit of a surprise. I mean, here I am, thinking things are going great. That we're getting to know each other, maybe even falling for each other, and then, boom."

"I should have brought it up during our conversation about kids."

"Was that a plus for you? Finding out I couldn't have kids?"

He shrugged. "It wasn't *bad* news..."

She'd planned to give him time and a chance to change his mind about marriage and kids, but the pregnancy robbed her of that luxury. She had to decide now, and his continued reluctance toward a family made the outcome seem inevitable.

"Is marriage really that important?" he asked. "I tried it once, and it didn't go well. I swore I'd never do it again."

Well, that sealed the deal. He didn't want marriage, and she did. He didn't want a baby, and, like it or not, one was on the way. Her spine stiffened. She knew what she had to do. And she felt like she could do it. No, she knew she could do it.

"So you've said. I'm in love with you, Jack. But sometimes love's not enough. We seem to be on different paths."

"Lucy—"

“For the record, I think you’d be a great father.” She blinked hard to make sure no tears fell. “Thank you for sharing your feelings with me. I wish I’d known them sooner. I think it would have saved us both some time and heartache.” She stood. “This will probably be harder for me than for you, so I’d appreciate it if we could minimize contact to only what’s necessary. I think we can do most of our business by email.”

“We don’t have to break up over this.”

“Jack, you didn’t even ask me what I wanted,” she said. It must have been the roller coaster pregnancy hormones, but she’d gone from sad to irritated in an instant. “You just threw out what you don’t want and what you refuse to do, like I’m supposed to just accept it. Well, I don’t. This *is* a deal breaker for me. Both marriage and kids. If you don’t want that stuff, that’s fine. But I do. So if you can’t give it to me, I need to move on and find someone who will.”

She dug deep, summoned the strength she needed, and walked to the door. “Please, just go,” she whispered, opening the door and standing next to it. She kept a death grip on the knob, trying to keep the tears at bay until he left.

“I’m sorry, Lucy.”

“Yeah, me too. Goodbye, Jack.”

As soon as he was over the threshold, she shut and locked the door.

She plopped down on the couch. Now what? Possibly pregnant and probably alone. She’d thought Jack coming back into her life was a sign. That they would fall madly in love and live happily ever after. So much for that fairytale.

“You in there?” she asked, rubbing her belly. “Don’t you worry. If your dad doesn’t want you, I’ll love you enough for both of us. Aunt Lizzie thinks I can’t be alone, but I can. I will. For you. I’ll take care of everything.”

With so much on her mind, sleep was hard to come by that night. The breakup had upset her, but the possibility of a baby had her shedding grateful tears on and off all night. She also worried that the pregnancy test had given her a false positive,

or that even if it hadn't, she still wouldn't be able to carry the baby to term. What if the UNC doctor was wrong about her ability to get pregnant, but right about her inability to carry the child? While that weighed heavily on her mind, the Jack issue wasn't far behind.

Imagining what he'd say and how he'd feel about being a dad stole another hour of sleep. She didn't *think* he'd walk away from a child, but then again, he'd walked away from her tonight. Clearly, she'd been viewing their relationship through rose-colored glasses. Well, she'd taken those off and would deal with the unveiled reality that Jack might not be her knight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next morning, Lucy sat in the waiting room of the obstetrician's office, impatiently drumming her fingers on her thighs. Where the hell was Lizzie? It was already five minutes past her appointment time, and they would no doubt call her back soon. She'd resigned herself to doing this without Jack but didn't want to do it alone. The outside door opened, and Lucy glanced up hopefully, only to see the *wrong* sister entering. Kate glided in wearing a lip-slitting grin, followed by an equally exuberant Adam. Lucy grabbed the nearest magazine, opened it, and ducked behind it to cover her face. Holy crap. Was Kate pregnant too?

Kate and Adam sat, leaving one seat between them and her, too wrapped up in each other to notice her. They hadn't been seated for more than a minute when Lizzie finally showed. Of course. Lucy peeked over the magazine just in time to watch Lizzie's face as she saw Kate—confusion quickly replaced with horror.

Sometimes Lizzie and Lucy could communicate mentally. Or at least it seemed that way. Lucy closed her eyes and prayed Lizzie would hear her silent plea to cover for her. Make up an excuse. Something.

"Hi, Kate," Lizzie said, slowing her pace. Even though Lucy was hiding, Lizzie would know exactly where she was. Another twin thing. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Lizzie?" Kate said. "What are you doing here?" She turned to Adam. "Did you tell anyone?"

"No," Adam said, holding up a hand. "I swear."

"Wait," Lizzie said, putting two and two together. "Are you pregnant?"

Kate's face broke out into the huge grin again. "Yes," she said. "But no one knows yet. We were planning to announce it at Christmas. Can you keep the secret?"

"That's a great idea," Lizzie said. "Mom will be beside herself. Of course, I won't tell anyone."

There was an awkward pause as Lizzie made no move to sit. Kate finally asked, “What are *you* doing here?”

“Oh, um...,” Lizzie stammered. “I...um...you know, have a thing...” She cast a furtive glance at Adam, making it look like she didn’t want to say anything in front of him.

Lucy watched from the top of the magazine and had to stifle a laugh. Lizzie would make her pay for this. Big time. Just when she thought she might actually get away with not being found out, the nurse came out and called her name.

“Lucy Parker?”

Kate’s eyes narrowed at Lizzie, who shrugged. “I guess she means me,” Lizzie said, taking a slow step toward the nurse, obviously not knowing how to play this out.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Lucy said, slamming the magazine shut and setting it on the table.

“Ah, thank goodness,” Lizzie said with a sigh of relief. “I thought I was going to have to go back there. Nooo idea what I was gonna say.”

“Lucy!” Kate said. “What the hell? Is the whole family here?”

“I think it’s just us,” Lucy said.

Kate looked from Lucy to Lizzie. “What’s goin’ on?” she said.

Lizzie raised her eyebrows at Lucy. It was a simple gesture, but Lucy intuitively knew it meant, I’ll do whatever you want me to, just lead the way. Her sister would walk through fire for her. Or, in this case, admit to having some made-up gynecological issue. Lucy couldn’t let her take the fall.

“I’ll keep your secret if you keep mine,” Lucy said with a shy grin.

“You’re pregnant?” Kate said. “But I thought—”

“That’s what I was told,” Lucy said. “Guess I should have gotten a second opinion.”

“You never got a second opinion?” Kate asked.

“Not really,” Lucy said. “Since I found out, I’ve only been to the doctor a couple of times.”

“Lucy,” Kate said. “You’re supposed to go every year.”

“Well, sure. But, like, when you’re older, right? I mean, I’m young. I didn’t think I needed birth control, and I barely ever have periods, so I figured, what’s the point?”

“I’m just gonna...um...oh, I know. I’ll go tell the nurse Lucy’s on her way,” Adam said, all but running away from them.

Kate snickered before turning serious again. “Lizzie, did you know about this?” she asked.

“Uh, I don’t really go all that regularly either,” Lizzie said. “Not my favorite place.”

“You guys,” Kate said. “Sure, it’s no picnic, but you gotta do it.”

“Anyway,” Lucy said. “One time, the doctor said my infrequent periods probably meant I wasn’t ovulating. To me, that pretty much confirmed the original diagnosis. The second time, I only saw a nurse, and she just did the exam and left.”

“That’s nuts,” Kate said. “But also, fantastic. I’m so happy for you.” She stood and hugged her.

“Thanks,” Lucy said. “It’s not one hundred percent. That’s why I’m here. I want to be certain before I tell anyone, including Jack. So, when I say it’s a secret...”

“We won’t say a word—promise,” Kate said, speaking for Adam.

The nurse cleared her throat. “Lucy?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. I’m coming.” Lucy and Lizzie followed the nurse to the exam room.

“I’ve never been so nervous in all my life,” Lucy whispered to Lizzie, who put her arm around her and smiled.

“It’ll all work out. I just know it.”

Within ten minutes, Lucy had peed in a cup and had the nurse confirm she was pregnant. First hurdle cleared. A few minutes after that, the doctor came in.

“Hello, Lucy,” the doctor said. “I’m Dr. Anders. I hear you’re going to have a baby.” Dr. Anders was a pretty middle-aged woman. She was calm and confident, and her demeanor immediately put Lucy at ease.

Lucy answered all the doctor’s questions regarding her medical history and relayed her concerns about what the UNC doctor had said all those years ago.

“I don’t remember the specifics,” Lucy said. “Just that I’d never have kids. Something about endometriosis?”

“Well, let’s take a look, shall we? From everything you’ve told me, it sounds like he was very premature in telling you something so definitive.” If Lucy read her right, she seemed thoroughly irritated about the other doctor’s diagnosis.

Dr. Anders did a pelvic exam and an ultrasound scan. “You have some fibroids, but those aren’t serious and wouldn’t keep you from getting pregnant,” she said. “We’ll schedule a laparoscopy to make sure, but as far as I can tell, you shouldn’t have any issues carrying the baby. You’re about a month along. We should be able to hear the heartbeat next time you come in.”

Lucy’s shoulders relaxed in relief, and more tears came. She was going to have a baby. A perfectly healthy, wonderful little baby.

“Will I get used to all the tears?” Lucy said with a laugh, wiping her eyes. “I’ve cried more in the last two days than all of last year.”

“At least they’re tears of joy,” Lizzie said, swiping at a few of her own. “I told you everything would be fine.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Wednesday morning, Lucy came to work late. Again. If she were her employee, she'd fire herself for being so unreliable. Good thing she was the boss and could come in whenever she wanted. *If* she wanted. She figured the baby must be a night owl because early mornings were brutal. Getting out of bed was a real chore nowadays. Of course, now that she knew the cause—that she was making a tiny human—she was okay with it.

She adjusted her schedule to start later and told her employees she was switching to a “winter schedule.” After seeing the doctor, she was more confident in her ability to see this through, but still didn't plan to tell anyone but Jack until the three-month mark.

Midmorning, she came out of her office for a break and a snack. While pouring herself a cup of decaf, she suddenly felt light-headed. Kenny noticed, put down the dish he was drying, and approached her. “You okay, boss?”

“I'm fine, thanks,” she said. “Just got a little dizzy for a second.” As soon as she said it, the room seemed to heat up a hundred degrees, and her vision tunneled. “Maybe I'll sit—”

She woke on the floor, Kenny cradling her head in his lap and stroking her hair. “It's okay. You're going to be fine. The ambulance is on its way. Hang in there,” he was saying.

Her eyes fluttered open to see her employees gathered around, staring at her and wearing matching looks of terror.

“Ah, she's waking up,” Kenny said. “Someone get some water.”

“What happened?” Lucy asked.

“You fainted,” Kenny said. “One second, we were talking, and the next, you were taking a header to the floor.”

“Kenny caught you midfall, Lucy. It was awesome. He's an Eagle Scout, you know?” Margie said breathlessly, on the verge of swooning. Lucy held back a laugh.

“Yes. I know. Thank you, Kenny,” she said. “How long was I out?”

“A few minutes,” Kenny said, the worry in his voice coming through loud and clear. “We called 911 and kicked everyone out. Well, everyone except the Three Amigos. They wouldn’t leave until they knew you’d be okay.”

She chuckled and attempted to get up. Kenny helped her and guided her to the closest chair. Margie brought a glass of water and set it on the table in front of her. She took a gentle sip right as the paramedics came crashing through the door. Kenny waved. “Over here, guys.”

Lucy was amazed at how the fragile, self-conscious teenager she’d hired had become such a take-charge young man.

“What happened?” one of the paramedics asked.

“I guess I passed out?” Lucy said.

“She said she felt dizzy, then fell,” Kenny said in an assertive tone she’d never heard from him. Guess the scout training was coming in handy. “I caught her, so no head bump, but she lost consciousness for about five minutes.”

“I feel a lot better now,” Lucy said. “I think I’ll be fine.”

“Since we’re here, we might as well check you out,” the paramedic said, grabbing a blood pressure cuff out of his bag.

They took her vitals and peppered her with questions. Halfway through their interrogation, she asked Kenny for a bagel, suggesting maybe she just needed food. After he ran off to get it, she turned to the firefighters. “No one here knows, but I’m pregnant,” Lucy whispered. “You don’t think there’s anything wrong with the baby, do you?”

“We can’t say for sure, but I would definitely check in with your OB. Could just be fatigue or dehydration.”

“Okay. I’ll call soon.”

The EMTs began to pack their stuff. “All your vitals are fine. Doesn’t look like transport will be necessary. Just follow up with your doctor.”

They finished their paperwork and left. “Good luck with the baby,” the older of the two paramedics said on his way out.

Lucy shot him a hard look. Did he not understand that when she said no one knew, it was implied she wanted to keep it that way? Kenny stood right behind the EMT but was talking to a customer. His lack of reaction made her think he hadn’t overheard. Her secret remained safe.

The patrons who had been waiting outside returned to the warmth of the shop. Lucy apologized for the inconvenience and offered everyone a free cup of coffee. Most were regulars and didn’t care about the coffee. They’d only stayed nearby to make sure Lucy would be all right.

The Three Musketeers approached cautiously. “You okay?” Archie asked.

“Yes. I’m fine.”

“You scared the bejesus out of us, Lucy,” Gene said. “Don’t do that again.”

“Yeah,” Walter said, nodding in agreement. “Our hearts can’t take it. Gotta say though. Kenny was a real champ. I watched him catch you and then really take charge to get someone to call 911 and clear the place.”

“I agree,” Archie said. “He kept his head and did great handling the emergency.”

“So I hear,” Lucy said. “I’ll be sure to thank him. And thank you for your concern.”

Once the commotion died down, she returned to her office and called the doctor, who wanted to see her right away.

Then she texted her family to let them know she was okay. Knowing the town grapevine, they would find out within the hour, if they hadn’t already, and the last thing Lucy needed was every Parker in New Bern at her door. Lizzie, of course, was the exception.

“Got here as fast as I could,” Lizzie said, sliding into Lucy’s office. “What the hell happened?”

“I passed out,” Lucy said. “You come from home?” At Lizzie’s nod, Lucy looked at her watch and said, “Wow, you made good time.”

“One of your baristas came across the street to get me and, when I wasn’t there, texted to tell me. Luckily, I was on my way to the car. You okay?”

“I feel fine now, but the doctor wants me to come in.”

“I’ll drive. Let’s go,” Lizzie said.

The doctor checked her blood pressure and did another ultrasound before declaring everything was still fine. Lucy felt a burden lift. She had a feeling the next eight months would be nonstop worry.

“I don’t think bed rest is needed,” Dr. Anders said, “But you do need to take it easy. If possible, skip an alarm in the morning, and just wake up whenever your body is ready. Be sure to get enough food and water and take the vitamins I gave you. And, of course, let me know immediately if this happens again. We’ll revisit bed rest if it does.”

Lizzie drove Lucy back to her condo and told her she and Emma would bring her car later. Then Lizzie tucked her into bed and made sure there was a water bottle and a sleeve of crackers on the nightstand.

“It’s not that big a deal, Lizzie,” Lucy said. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know, I know. Just being cautious. Not only for your sake, but the little one’s too.”

Lucy smiled. “Thanks, sis.”

Lizzie hugged her hard. “Never scare me like that again,” she said in a rare show of emotion.

“Love you,” Lucy said.

“Ditto,” Lizzie said. “Call if you need anything. I’ll check on you later.”

Apparently, “later” meant every thirty minutes until Lucy finally told her to knock it off. Her mother had called, and her sisters texted, but she kept them all from coming over by

saying she planned to take a nap. The last couple of sleepless nights caught up to her, and she slept until awoken by a pounding at the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jack had driven to Fayetteville to pick up the outdoor signs for the new coffee shop. He could have easily sent someone else, probably should have, but he was grateful for the four-hour round-trip drive. It gave him time to think about what had gone down with Lucy the day before yesterday.

He'd been a jerk and felt terrible. She'd been right about how he hadn't given her feelings much consideration. She's been very straightforward about wanting kids. It made sense she'd want a husband too. He'd hoped he could talk her into just living together. In fact, he'd been thinking about taking that step soon.

Their fast and fierce attraction had scared him, and he'd wanted to take some time to be certain the intensity of their feelings was more than just physical. The more time they spent together, the more confident he was they'd be great long term. She was sweet and smart and didn't seem to care about his family's money. He was ready to talk about moving in together but hadn't factored in the importance of her life goals.

She'd broken up with him, but he held out hope they could get past that. Once she got over the shock of it, and wrapped her head around the idea that you didn't have to be married to commit to each other, he was sure she'd see reason. Then they could move in together and see where things led from there. Who knew? Maybe one day, he *would* be willing to tie the knot again. He wouldn't promise her anything. That wouldn't be fair—or honest—but he could keep an open mind. Just like he would ask her to do about living together.

The kids issue still loomed, but since she couldn't have any, he figured that would be a topic for much later. Adopting or surrogacy probably took years, if they worked out at all. It was possible he could dodge that bullet without ever having to put his foot down.

His cell phone rang. After seeing that it was Kenny, he almost didn't answer. The kid was nice, but could be a little overwhelming. Probably needed help deciding which protein

powder to buy. Then again, it would be better to get a call over with while he had nothing else to do. “Answer,” he said out loud, and Kenny’s voice filled the truck cab.

“Jack, it’s Kenny. Where are you?”

“Driving back from Fayetteville. What’s up?”

“Lucy passed out. The paramedics are here now. I thought you’d want to know.”

Broken up or not, hell yeah, he wanted to know.

“What?” Jack sat straight, instantly alert. “Shit. I’m still an hour and a half from New Bern. What happened?”

“She said she felt dizzy, then, bam, lights out,” Kenny said. “She was out for a few minutes, but it looks like she’s feeling better.”

“Okay. Thanks for calling. I’ll get there as soon as I can,” he said, honking at the left lane camper in front of him. He hung up with Kenny and then proceeded to cuss out any car that was moving slower than he was. He drove like the frog in the old Frogger video game he played as a kid, weaving in and out of traffic to get back as quickly as possible.

Finally, he pulled into a parking space right outside the coffee shop and ran in. Everything seemed normal. When he didn’t see Lucy, he made a beeline for Kenny.

“Hey, Jack,” Kenny said, walking out from behind the counter to talk to him. “You missed Lucy. She’s gone for the day.”

“Tell me what happened. Exactly,” Jack said.

“Well, she came out from her office and was pouring herself a cup of coffee. I noticed she didn’t look right and asked if she was okay. At first, she said yes, but then she put down her cup and said she needed to sit for a minute. She passed out before she made it to a chair. I caught her, so she didn’t hit her head or anything. I told someone to call 911 and then checked her breathing and pulse. All that was good.”

“Sounds like you did a great job,” Jack said. Kenny beamed at the praise. “So, she’s at home now?”

“I think she was going to stop by her doctor first. To make sure the baby’s okay.”

Jack froze. “Baby?”

Kenny’s eyes got wide. “Uh...well,” he stammered. “I could be wrong. But I thought I overheard the paramedics say something to that effect. I figured you knew.”

It had become common knowledge that Jack and Lucy were dating, so it was reasonable for Kenny to assume any baby would be his. The panic Jack felt must have been written all over his face, because Kenny instantly backpedaled.

“Forget it,” he said. “They probably meant something else.”

“Thanks, Kenny,” Jack said. “Later.”

Jack’s heart restarted, and his mind raced. Lucy was pregnant? She’d told him that was impossible. Had she lied? Did she do this on purpose? Had his mother been right? Would a baby even be his? So many questions.

He tried calling Lucy while en route to her apartment, but no one answered. He arrived in record time and climbed the stairs two at a time to reach her floor. Once outside her door, he stopped and took a few deep breaths. *Rational*, he thought. *Calm down, and be rational*. She’d passed out earlier, and he’d come to check on her. Going in guns blazing would solve nothing. He wasn’t even sure she was pregnant. He’d find out what he was dealing with and go from there.

He knocked softly at first, but when she didn’t answer, he became increasingly worried that something was wrong. What if she’d fainted again? Or worse. The knocking turned to pounding until she finally opened the door. Relief overwhelmed him, and in that moment, he realized how much he cared for her.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Did I wake you?”

“Yes.” She rubbed her eyes. “But it’s okay. Come in.” She walked to the living room and sat on the couch. He closed the door and followed her, sitting in a nearby chair.

“Sorry. Kenny told me you passed out this morning and got worried when you didn’t answer right away. I was down in Fayetteville and came as soon as I heard,” Jack said, brows knitting with concern. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “We need to talk.”

“Why do those words never mean anything good?” he asked dryly, removing his coat and laying it on the floor next to him.

“It could be a good thing,” she said. “I think it’s a good thing.”

“Okay.”

He picked up her hand and stroked it. “You seem nervous about whatever it is you have to say. Just spit it out, and we’ll deal with it.” He was pretty sure what was coming next and reminded himself to stay calm.

“I’m pregnant.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lucy was relieved to have it out, but the longer he went without saying anything, the more nervous she became. Jack stilled, dropped her hand, and stood. He walked to the kitchen and back. The silence dragged out to an abnormal length, and sweat trickled down her spine.

He was processing. That was fine. That was expected. She would just wait.

Over the last two days, she'd run through dozens of scenarios of how he would react. It would be a shock for sure, but then what? Would he be excited or annoyed? Dismayed or incredulous?

When he finally spoke, it was like a knife in the back. "Did you do this on purpose?" He said it quietly and calmly, as if that would take the sting out of the allegation. As if the question wasn't loaded with mistrust and accusation.

"What?"

"And how do you know it's mine? Could it be your ex-fiancé's?"

Now it was her turn to remain silent, afraid of what she might say if she opened her mouth. Anger and hurt vied for her top emotion. Clearly, this was not good news for him. She knew that had been a possibility—a probability actually—but didn't think he'd lash out with an indictment of deceit. Before she could fully process those insults, he came at her with more.

"You said you couldn't have kids," he said. "You lied to me then?"

A tear slipped down her cheek. This was not going at all how she'd imagined. He thought she would lie to him. What did that say about their relationship and his feelings toward her if he assumed she was that kind of woman?

She pulled it together long enough to spit out answers to his questions.

“Wow.” She stood and approached him. “Let’s see. No, I didn’t do it on purpose. Yes, I know it’s yours. And no, I didn’t lie.”

He sighed. “The timing seems rather convenient. You find out I’m a millionaire, just as you happen to need a loan.”

“Huh,” Lucy said. “I did not think it could get worse.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“It wasn’t a question. It was an accusation, and it’s one I can’t believe you’re making. In the last three minutes, you’ve accused me of lying, sleeping around, and getting pregnant to trap you for financial gain.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I’m not sure there’s much more you could say. This is what you think of me?” She took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down. She was fighting tears but also the urge to punch him in the face. “I didn’t lie to you, Jack. I really thought I couldn’t get pregnant. That’s what I’d been told by a doctor. And why do you think I need money? I’m fine, financially.”

“Some guy at the Halloween party said to tell you he wants the money you owe him. That you’ve owed him for two years. That doesn’t sound fine.”

Her brows knit in confusion, and she had to think for a second to figure out what he was talking about. She huffed out a sad laugh and shook her head. “You must mean Sam. Yes, I’m about to lose the farm over that. I owe him two dollars, Jack. *Two* dollars. It’s a joke between us. And you know what? Even if I were eyebrow deep in debt, I wouldn’t want one penny from you! You really think I give a shit about your money?”

He remained quiet, which was an answer in itself.

She froze, not trusting that she wouldn’t fall apart completely. “You should go.”

Instead of leaving, he kept up with the twenty questions. “How long have you known? When were you going to tell me?”

“For sure? Since yesterday. After your bombshell revelation of never wanting to marry again, I figured a baby ranked even farther down your list, so I planned to wait until I knew everything would work out.”

“What does that mean?”

“I was worried I wouldn’t be able to carry the baby to term.”

“Can you?”

“The doctor thinks so.” Lucy shrugged. “She said the UNC doctor gave me a premature and faulty diagnosis and doesn’t see any reason why I couldn’t.”

“What do you want from me?”

Her heart broke at the question, and another tear escaped. “Not one damn thing. Just thought you should know. I don’t need you or your money to have or raise this baby, Jack. In fact, if you’re going to be an asshole about it, I’d rather you walk away. No strings attached.”

“You say that now, but in a few years, when you realize how expensive kids are, or the kid gets sick or goes to college—something—you’ll need money then, and I’m sure you’ll come calling.”

She could not believe he was being such a jerk. Yes, it was a lot to take in, but if his gut reaction was any indication, she’d fallen in love with a cynical, selfish bastard. Even Mr. Snuggles had seen the light. He sat across the room, staring at Jack, giving him a cat’s version of the evil eye.

“If you want to abdicate all responsibility, fine. Have an attorney draw up whatever agreement you see fit, and I’ll sign it.”

“I’m not saying that.” He shoved a hand through his hair.

“Then what are you saying, Jack?”

“I don’t know. It’s a lot to process, okay? Can I have a minute?”

She walked to the door and opened it. “Take all the time you want.”

He grabbed his coat and stalked out. In the hallway, he looked back, but she turned away, closed the door, and locked the deadbolt. That had not gone well.

The tears wouldn't stop, but she didn't blame the hormones. No, she was certain these tears were from her breaking heart.

How could he think such awful things about her? They'd spent every spare second together for months, yet he didn't seem to know her at all. If he had, he'd know she would never do any of those things. Nor did she know him. She had no idea his cynicism ran so deep or that he could be so hurtful. Apparently, their initial fiery attraction didn't guarantee they were meant to go the distance.

She supposed questioning whether it could be Curtis's was fair. She and Curtis were the only two that knew there was no possibility the baby could be his. But the way Jack had asked it so quickly, like he wanted to avoid responsibility at all costs, rubbed her the wrong way.

Lizzie was at work and couldn't be bothered with this right now. Plus, Lucy needed to start handling things on her own. She relied on others, Lizzie in particular, for far too much. Advice, direction, opinions. As a single mother, she'd have to toughen up and make decisions for herself, and her baby, without taking a family poll on every little choice.

Lucy had returned to bed and cried herself to sleep, but woke at the sound of the front door. The bedside clock said one o'clock, which meant it was probably Lizzie coming from the bar. Sure enough, Lucy looked up to see a dark-haired version of herself peek in. “You awake?” Lizzie whispered.

“I am now,” Lucy muttered.

“Sorry,” Lizzie said, lying down next to her. “Heard it through the grapevine that Jack stopped by. Did you tell him? How'd it go?”

“Yes, and not so great,” she said as the tears started again.

“I’m sorry, honey.” Lizzie wrapped her in her arms and stroked her hair. “I thought he was different. I really did.”

Lucy had vowed to be more independent, but she needed one last thing from Lizzie—an unmistakable, decisive break from Jack.

“I can’t face him right now, Lizzie. I know I’ll have to eventually, but not yet. If he tries to contact me, will you do something for me?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Jack left Lucy's with his mind spinning. Pregnant. With his baby. Well, supposedly his. She'd lied to him about being infertile, and now here he was, in the exact spot his mother had warned him about. She'd been right. Damn it.

As he pulled out of Lucy's parking lot, he berated himself. Something his mom would surely do more of later. He couldn't believe he'd read Lucy so horribly wrong. The blinding attraction between them must have obscured her flaws. Did she even feel what he felt—the pull, the desire to be with her? Had this been a preplanned scheme? Or a spur-of-the-moment thing, made up after finding out about his family's fortune?

Ten years ago, she wouldn't have known who he was or anything about his financial situation, so the initial attraction must have been genuine. And she would have no way of knowing he'd ever show up in New Bern. So, not preplanned before that anyway.

She'd seemed genuinely surprised when she found out who his father was. That night after dinner, she claimed she didn't care about the money, but that could have been an act. Or she could've changed her mind. He'd seen people do worse things over less money.

He turned into the gym parking lot. A quick workout would blow off some steam.

One thing that bothered him was that he was usually pretty good at reading people. In fact, he would've bet good money that Lucy didn't have a deceitful bone in her body. And if that were true...

What if she hadn't lied and truly believed she couldn't have kids? He supposed it was possible some doctor had given her an incorrect diagnosis. And if that were the case, then maybe she wasn't after his money either. But could he take that chance?

Another possibility was that she didn't want money but did want a husband. Bad enough to trap him into becoming one, even against his will.

Either way, whether she lied or not, they couldn't very well continue a relationship now. Based on the first questions out of his mouth, and most of his thoughts since, he obviously didn't trust her. He'd also said some pretty unforgivable things.

As he entered the gym, he realized he hadn't even asked about the baby. Or how she felt. Or expressed how worried he was that she'd passed out. What a jerk.

Glad Kenny wasn't here, he put on his headphones and took out his frustration on a couple of sixty-pound dumbbells. When his muscles caught fire and could take no more, he drove home.

The workout had calmed him, and his thoughts turned to rational logistics.

The pregnancy had to be recent. If the baby really was his—and he wanted DNA confirmation on that—the earliest she could've conceived was seven or eight weeks ago. And from what he understood, things could go wrong in the early stages. Should he wait to tell his parents then? No, they'd need to get ahead of this as soon as possible.

He'd ask an attorney to set up a DNA test and something to protect the bulk of his business holdings. She'd agreed to sign whatever he put in front of her, so if she balked, it would be a testament to her true intentions. If the child was his, he wouldn't skip out entirely, but this wouldn't be a huge payday for Lucy either.

After a shower and a sandwich, he called his dad.

"What's wrong?" his father said in greeting.

"Can't a son just call to say hello?" Jack said.

His dad huffed out a laugh. "Your mother's right here. I'm putting you on speaker. Let's hear it."

"You might want to sit down," Jack said. He broke the news and waited for his mom to let him have it. When she didn't

immediately jump down his throat, he became suspicious.

“Mom, why aren’t you saying anything?”

“I’m biting my tongue,” she said.

“To avoid saying ‘I told you so’?” Jack said. “Go ahead and say it. You were right. I’m an idiot.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot, Jack.” His mother sighed. “I warn you two boys constantly because I worry. Not only about you being taken advantage of, but because I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Your mom’s right,” his father said. “You’re not an idiot. You just got caught up in your feelings and thought you could trust her.”

“Well, now what? I figured you’d want the lawyers involved asap.”

His dad was quiet for a moment. “Let’s wait until after the holidays,” he said. “No sense in getting into all this ugly stuff at Christmas time.”

Jack was stunned. They were taking the news much better than he imagined. A lot better than he had. No yelling. No lectures. Not even the “I told you so” he thought for sure he’d hear.

It was late, and while his mom didn’t give him the what-for, she did excuse herself to get ready for bed. The change in his father’s voice meant he’d taken Jack off speakerphone.

“You care about this woman, don’t you, son?”

“I thought I did,” Jack said. “We had such a strong connection.”

“Do you love her?”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. I would have sworn things were headed that way, but judging by my reaction to the baby announcement, I must have some subconscious doubts.”

“Hm.”

“Dad, how do you know when someone is the one? How’d you know about Mom?”

His dad chuckled. “Well, I’m no expert, but I think figuring that out is different for everyone. Your mother and I were friends before we ever started dating. Our families ran in the same circles, and I knew her for years before asking her out. We came from the same world and understood each other. I never had to doubt her intentions because her family had money.”

“Lucy’s family isn’t poor,” Jack said. “It’s not like she’s desperate for cash. I accused her of lying and getting pregnant on purpose. But if I know her at all, unless she’s totally bamboozled me, she wouldn’t do that.”

“We only met Lucy for a minute, but she seems like a nice gal. You should trust your instincts.”

“What about all the stuff mom says? What if she *is* after money? Or a husband?”

“Your mom worries because she’s seen some ugly things go down over money. Nasty divorces, children being disowned, reputations ruined over false allegations. Not to mention all the legal battles and family estrangements. You’ve said you don’t want to marry again, but if that’s on the table, you could always ask her to sign a prenup.”

“She said she’ll sign anything,” Jack said. “I don’t know about marriage. Oh, Dad. I said some horrible things. Now that I’ve cooled off, I realize what a jerk I was.”

“You’ll figure it out, son. We can talk more at the company Christmas party on Friday. You’re still coming, right?”

Jack had forgotten he’d committed to that, but he had no reason not to go. “Sure. I’ll be there.”

He hung up, his mind still reeling. He’d expected his parents to come unglued—at least be worried, but neither seemed all that upset by the news. He wished he could have taken it in stride like they had. Instead, he’d gone off half-cocked and made some terrible accusations.

He owed Lucy an apology for that. Some niggling thoughts remained that maybe she’d duped him, but overall, he couldn’t see her doing that. They hadn’t known each other all that long

—eight weeks was nothing in the grand scheme of things—but she seemed trustworthy. And if they were going to have a baby together, they should maintain a cordial relationship.

He'd call her and arrange a time to talk and smooth things over. Until the remodel was done, they still had to work together. And it looked as though another eighteen-year project was also in the making. They'd have to get along to finish that one too. He'd apologize and go from there.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The next day, Lucy was in her office paying invoices when Margie poked her head in after a light knock on the door.

“Hey, Lucy. There’s someone here to see you,” Margie said. “I didn’t know if you’d want to come out or if I should bring her back here.”

“Do you know who it is?” Lucy asked. If it were one of her sisters, they would’ve just barged in unannounced.

“Mrs. Meredith McAllister.” Margie threw her nose in the air and mimicked a prissy voice.

Jack’s mother. Great, just what Lucy needed. “I’ll come out there,” Lucy said. Better to have an audience for whatever was about to go down. She smoothed her hair, popped an Altoid, and waited a full minute before heading to the lobby. She didn’t want Meredith to think she was rushing right out to see her—as if she were at her beck and call. Seemed like a good power move to keep her waiting for a second.

Margie had seated Mrs. McAllister at a table out of the way. Fortunately, not within earshot of the Three Amigos. Lucy walked to the table and sat.

“Hello, Mrs. McAllister,” she said. “Nice to see you again. How can I help you?”

“Jack told us about the baby,” she said, dispensing with pleasantries. “I warned him, but he didn’t listen. I’m here to make a deal with you.”

“Oh,” Lucy said. “What kind of deal?” She had a feeling it wouldn’t be for babysitting. And it wouldn’t not be insulting.

Meredith slipped what looked to be a folded check across the table. “Take this and walk away. It’s all you’ll get from us.”

Lucy didn’t touch it. “So, super excited about a grandbaby, I see?”

She smirked, but remained silent.

“Did Jack send you?” Lucy asked, leaning back and crossing her arms. What kind of man would that make him? That he not only wanted to buy her off, but didn’t have the guts to do it himself. He had to send his mommy.

“Jack has no idea I’m here and would be furious if he knew. I’d rather keep this between us if you don’t mind,” she said, looking down her nose. Wow, she was snotty.

Lucy picked up the check and glanced at it, careful not to show any expression. Two million dollars?! Holy shit. She refolded it and laid it back on the table.

“Do you even realize how insulting this is? To both of us?” Lucy asked.

Jack’s mom’s eyes widened, clearly not used to being sassed or rejected.

“Jack had made it very clear he’s not interested in marriage or a baby,” Lucy said. “That’s fine. I told him, and I’ll tell you, I don’t want a single penny from him. I didn’t get pregnant on purpose to trap Jack or as some sort of money grab. So take your check, and if you can find room past the stick, shove it up your ass.”

Meredith was silent for a moment and then burst out laughing. “My, my. You’re a feisty one,” she said. “No wonder Jack likes you.”

She narrowed her eyes at Lucy, studying her as if trying to read her mind. Lucy sat stoned-faced, returning her stare and vowing not to break the silence.

“You really didn’t do this on purpose?” Meredith said, slipping the check back into her purse.

Lucy shook her head. “My sophomore year of college, I was told I couldn’t have kids. I cried for days. I grew up in a big family and always wanted one of my own. My twin sister agreed to be a surrogate when the time came, but it was devastating to know I’d never have my own. This pregnancy is a miracle to me, and I want this baby more than I’ve ever wanted anything. If Jack doesn’t want anything to do with it, if

you don't want anything to do with it, I don't care. My family and I will give it enough love for all of you put together.”

After a moment of silence, Meredith sighed. “I believe you,” she said. “I came here thinking you were a gold digger and that you were trying to trap Jack into marriage or at least monthly checks for ‘maintenance.’ I figured you’d take the money, and we’d never see you again. I think I misjudged you from the beginning.”

“You mean when you thought I was a thirty-year-old barista, giving away the farm behind my employer’s back?”

“Jack told you I said that?” She had the decency to be embarrassed.

“No,” Lucy said. “You’re not that hard to read though.” The Three Amigos had told her, but she wouldn’t sell them out.

Meredith chuckled. “I wasn’t always so cynical. When I first married Jack’s father, he had money, sure. But he’s grown the business so successfully, that now I worry about Jack and Nick being able to find women that love them for them, and not just the money.”

“So, you married Phillip because he was rich?” Lucy asked before adding, “I don’t want an answer. I’m just trying to show you how insulting it comes across.”

“Point taken,” Meredith said. “And I’m sure many people assume that, but no. I married Phillip because I loved him. Over the years, the money’s caused me to become a little jaded.”

Lucy raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, a lot jaded. Once you have children, you’ll understand. You’ll do anything to protect them.”

“I get that,” Lucy said. “But you don’t even know me. It also doesn’t say much for what you think of your son’s taste in women. Or ability to judge character.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love Jack. But he’s made some questionable life choices. Joining the military instead of the business. Marrying Paige.” She pursed her lips as if sucking

on a lemon. “He was in a rough place when he left the military. You know he lost his best friend overseas, right?”

Lucy nodded, and she continued. “Well, he’s never really gotten over that. He was vulnerable, and I suspect he married, attempting to fill a void, but she wasn’t right for him. I tried to tell him, but of course, Mom’s opinion doesn’t matter in situations like that.”

“Perhaps it was a mistake he needed to make,” Lucy said. “It certainly cured him of wanting to marry again. Seems like you’d be happy about that.”

“It’s not that I don’t want him to marry.” She paused, apparently collecting her thoughts. “In the circles I run in, I see a lot of women interested in just one thing. And I feel compelled to warn my boys and take care of things if needed.”

“Well, there’s nothing here that needs ‘taken care of,’” Lucy said. “Jack doesn’t want a wife or a baby, so I’m sure I’m off his radar. We’ll be civil to each other, but I don’t see any sort of future together.” A damn tear escaped, and she cursed it.

“You love him though.” It wasn’t a question.

More tears followed the first. “Sorry,” Lucy said, swiping at them. “Must be all the hormones.”

“Lucy,” Meredith said. “I owe you an apology. It was unfair of me to judge you so harshly.”

Lucy got the impression this woman didn’t offer many apologies and gracefully took the olive branch. “You love Jack and want to protect him. I get it.”

“I actually *am* excited to be a grandma,” she said with a genuine smile. “Whatever happens between you and Jack, I would like to be a part of the baby’s life. If that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Lucy said. Not the McAllister she was hoping would get involved, but she wouldn’t deny the woman a chance to know her grandbaby.

Not ten minutes after Meredith left, Jack texted, saying he wanted to talk as soon as possible.

Here goes nothing, Lucy thought. She set up a meeting with Jack for that evening and then texted Lizzie.

You're up, sis. Seven pm at the bar. Lizzie would know what she meant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Jack sat at the table, hands wrapped around a Jack and Coke. Lucy said seven o'clock. It was five past, and she still hadn't shown. He thought it was odd she wanted to meet at her sister's bar, considering she couldn't drink. At least, he hoped she wasn't drinking. That wouldn't be good for the baby.

The baby. He let out a breath and took a swig of his drink. He'd had some time to wrap his head around the idea, but still wasn't sure how he felt about it.

Finally, Lucy walked in. Except that he could tell right away it wasn't Lucy. She came and sat opposite him.

"Lizzie, what are you doing here?" he asked. "Where's Lucy?"

"I am Lucy," Lizzie said, faking a hurt look.

Jack stared at her and shook his head.

"Seriously, it's me."

She looked exactly like Lucy, had blond hair now, and wore a "Drip" baseball cap, but he instinctively knew it was Lizzie. He stared silently until she broke.

"How'd you know?" Lizzie finally said.

He shrugged. "You...feel different."

She studied him for an intense minute. "Our *parents* can't even tell us apart," she said.

"I don't know what to tell you. I knew the second you walked in. What's up? Why are you here?"

She raised a shoulder and gave him a chagrined smirk.

"Oh, so you're like the closer or something? Lucy sent you to do her dirty work?"

"It's not like that, Jack," Lizzie said. "She needs some time before you guys talk again. She's in a lot of pain."

He sat up straight, instantly worried. "Is the baby okay?"

“I don’t mean physical pain. The baby’s fine. I mean, you hurt her. Again.”

He relaxed a little. “I overreacted about the baby news. That’s the reason I wanted to meet. I owe her an apology.”

“You’ve done some damage that won’t easily be undone,” Lizzie said.

He sighed. “I know. I don’t know what to do. I think I might be in love with her.”

“Sometimes love’s not enough,” Lizzie said. “Not if you ultimately want different things out of life.”

“Like marriage?” he said. “I tried that once. It didn’t turn out so well.”

“So, you’re gonna base the rest of your life on what one woman did or said to you? That seems extreme.”

“Hm. Well, and now there’s a baby in the mix.”

“Lots of women are single mothers. Lucy will be fine without you.”

“Without me? What do you mean? She thinks I’m just gonna walk away, like some asshole?”

“That was her take on your conversation yesterday.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “I could see how she would think that. I was pretty upset. Said some things I shouldn’t have.”

“If you want to be a part of the baby’s life, she’ll work something out with you, for visitation and all that. If you want to wash your hands and walk away, she’ll deal with that too.”

“What about money?”

He’d seen the exact indignant expression on Lucy’s face yesterday. “Contrary to what you may believe, she doesn’t want money from you, Jack.”

“What *does* she want?”

“That’s something you’ll have to talk to her about. When she’s ready.”

“What if I still want a relationship with her?”

“You can’t have a relationship without trust.”

“I do trust her. I just...I don’t know. I let my mom get in my head, and I...I...” He plowed a hand through his hair. “What am I gonna do?”

The desperation must have dripped off of him. As a bartender, she probably saw this all the time. “You see a lot of desperate fools in here, huh?” he asked.

“Is that what you are?” She sat back and folded her arms.

He didn’t know what he was. He had a feeling he was letting the best thing that ever happened to him slip through his fingers because he was being an idiot. Did he trust Lucy? Yes. Did he love her? Maybe. Was that enough for her? Probably not. He stared into his drink, swirling the contents.

“I hear Mr. Snuggles likes you,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“I suppose. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Probably nothing.” She shook her head. “I like you, Jack. I really do. I’ve probably handled ninety percent of Lucy’s breakups, and not one guy has ever caught on. The simple fact that you can tell us apart makes me think you’re different. But you’ve broken her heart twice now, and I won’t let it happen again. You need to figure out how you feel and what you want. And you’d better be damn certain you can follow through on anything you offer Lucy. If you make amends only to hurt her again, it will not end well for you.”

“Are you threatening me?”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Fuck around and find out,” she said, standing and leaving without another word.

He fought a smile. He liked how fierce Lizzie could be. Especially when it came to protecting her sister. He wanted to protect Lucy too, but right now, he was the one she needed shielding from. That thought stung. He didn’t want to be the cause of any pain or sadness.

He'd only taken one sip of the drink but was done with it. He threw a twenty on the table and left. Lizzie was right. Before talking to Lucy again, he needed to do some soul-searching and figure out what he could offer her.

* * *

"So?" Lucy asked as soon as Lizzie opened the door. "How'd it go?"

"He knew I wasn't you," Lizzie said, taking off her coat. "From the second I walked in, from across the room, he could tell us apart."

Lucy's eyes widened. "That's impossible. Not when we're both blond."

"That's what I said. He said I 'felt' different."

"Huh," Lucy said. "Well, so what happened after that? Did you still talk to him?"

"For a minute. He was there to apologize. Said he overreacted and felt bad."

"That's an understatement," Lucy muttered. "But that's good, I guess."

"Yeah. Help me out of this wig, will ya? I gotta go back to work."

"Sure. Anything else?"

"I told him you didn't want money and that he could be as involved or not with the baby. He didn't commit to anything right then."

"Thank you, Lizzie."

"You'll have to face him eventually, you know?"

"I know, I know," Lucy said. "I'll be ready. I just need a minute to get over him, and then I'll be fine."

"You never got over him from ten years ago, when you barely knew him. How do you plan to get over him now?"

"I'm stronger than I was," Lucy said. "I have to be strong. For the baby."

At Lizzie's dubious look, she continued. "I plan to ask Kate about buying a house. And I'm going to have Adam remodel my remodel plans to put a nursery in the new Drip's office. That way, I can bring the baby to work with me."

"Wow. You've given this some thought," Lizzie said.

"I don't know how to explain it, but I feel stronger. I can do this. I know you'll be there to help, and so will the rest of the family, but I'm also confident we'll be fine." She patted her stomach. "With or without Jack."

Ever since Lizzie mentioned Lucy's need to please people and inability to be alone, she'd given it more than a passing thought. Lizzie was right. Lucy put too much stock in what other people said and thought. She was a grown-ass woman and needed to start acting like it. Especially now that she was going to raise a baby by herself.

"I know you will, sis." Lizzie hugged her. "You're tougher than you give yourself credit for."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The next day, Jack left work early and drove to Wilmington for the annual Stargaze Christmas party.

He'd hoped that a party meant no business talk, but that was too much to ask.

"Dad, we've been round and round on this," Jack said. "I'm fine being a partner and helping with decisions. And you can always count on my support with the board, but I don't want to be involved in the day-to-day operations."

"I don't trust anyone else to do it properly, Jack. You're leaving me in a real bind."

"What about Nick?" Jack's brother was just as qualified as he was to take over. More so, since he'd actually been working at company HQ since graduating college.

"He's good at what he does," his dad said. "He's great with numbers and making things make sense, but he doesn't have the street smarts or leadership skills needed to run the company."

"I don't know, Dad. How much longer till you really, truly plan to leave? Maybe we could revisit this in a year or two? I'm happy doing contracting and overseeing construction right now."

"You going to stay in New Bern for a while then?" his mother asked after being unusually quiet.

"Not sure about that." Jack sighed. "My project with Lucy is just about finished, and apparently, so are we. If I want to be a part of the baby's life, I'll have to get a place in town. But I don't know that I'd live there full time."

"What does Lucy say about it?" his mother asked.

"Lucy wants a husband and a family but is willing to do the family thing alone. She says she doesn't want money, and maybe she means it now. But that probably won't last long. One downturn in the coffee business, and she'll be knocking at the door."

“I don’t believe that would be the case,” his mom said.

“Huh?” Jack said. “You’re the one always warning me that’s what all women are after—money.”

“I went to see Lucy yesterday.”

“What?” Jack and his father said in unison. “Why?”

“To put it crassly, I tried to pay her off and make her go away.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “What did she say?”

“She took my two-million-dollar check and told me to shove it up my ass. If there was any room around the stick already up there. Or something like that.”

Jack huffed out a laugh. “She did not.”

“Oh yes, she did,” his mom said. “She’s gutsy, Jack. I like her.”

Jack couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Lucy telling his mom off. He didn’t know she had it in her and wished he could’ve been there. Lucy was such a people pleaser, that must have been a bold move for her.

“So, what?” Jack said. “You *don’t* think she’s after money now? You believe her?”

“I do believe her. I think she’s ready to raise this baby—my grandbaby—on her own if someone doesn’t step up and make an honest woman out of her.”

“Now you’re saying I should *marry* her?” Had he entered the Twilight Zone? “How many of those cranberry mojitos have you had?”

She ignored his insinuation. “Jack, what is your aversion to marrying again?” she said. “Paige wasn’t for you. That was obvious from the beginning. Your father and I have been married for over thirty years and are still very happy. Right, honey?”

His dad nodded with a smile. “Yes, dear.”

“I tried it,” Jack said. “It didn’t work out.”

“So, fail forward,” his mother said. “Learn from that mistake and move on. Don’t base the rest of your life, your happiness, on one woman’s idiocy. You gonna let her have that power over you?”

“I guess not. I thought you’d be overjoyed I didn’t want to marry again.”

“Why would that make me happy, Jack?” his mother asked. “I want *you* to be happy. If you truly don’t want to get married again, then by all means, don’t. But I have a feeling that if you look deep down, you’ll find you’re just scared. Scared to put yourself out there again. Scared to get hurt again. But that’s something you could overcome with the right woman. The question is, is Lucy the right woman?”

“You’re killing me, Mom.”

She smiled. “But am I right?”

“That’s a trick question, son,” his father warned. “Your mother’s always right.”

Jack chuckled but didn’t say anything. Was she right? Was he being overly cautious with his feelings and using his ex as an excuse to keep from getting burned again?

He didn’t care about the money. That was his mom’s big worry. And if the money meant nothing to him, then what was his aversion? His mother may have a point. Damn it.

“Follow your heart,” she said gently, picking up his hand and stroking it softly. “About Lucy and about the business. It won’t ever lead you astray.”

“She’s right, kiddo,” his dad said. “I can go another year or so with the business, so don’t worry about that right now. Sounds like you’re going to have your hands full for a bit.”

“With?” Jack asked.

“Trying to win a woman.” His dad winked. “Keep in mind, you could run things from New Bern. With all these fancy video meetings they have nowadays, you could have an office anywhere.”

Jack nodded. He spent the remainder of the evening recovering from the shock of his mom's about-face regarding Lucy and marriage.

He debated spending the night at his folks, but driving back to New Bern gave him a chance to think. And chastise himself. What had he done? Why was his first reaction to doubt Lucy?

Could be his past relationships. Could be his mom's constant gold digger warnings. Or just the knowledge that money could make people do things they normally wouldn't. None of that had anything to do with Lucy though.

She'd never given him any reason not to trust her. He'd hastily judged her while wearing the people-suck glasses he always wore. Maybe it was time to take those off and see her for what she really was. A sweet, trusting, beautiful woman. One that might be carrying his child. That complicated things, but was that a bad thing?

Analyzing his feelings was not something he had much practice with or patience for, but the current situation demanded it. But where to start?

What if he left the baby out of the equation for now and focused on his feelings for Lucy? The spark he'd felt when they first met had turned into a flame upon seeing her again. In the past two months, the flame had quickly ignited an inferno. The more he was around her, the more he wanted to be with her. If he didn't know better, he'd say he was in love with her. That seemed impossible after such a short time, but then again, what did he know about love?

One thing he knew was that his heart ached knowing he'd caused her pain. The terrible things he'd said and accused her of were way out of line, and whether or not they patched things up, he still owed her an apology.

Okay, so he really, really liked Lucy and cared for her. Throw in a baby, now what? That didn't change how he felt about Lucy. If anything, he found himself excited for her because he knew how much having a child meant to her. He'd treated the pregnancy as a manipulative threat, but to Lucy, it

was a miraculous, joyful surprise. When he took the time to see it through her eyes, he warmed to the idea himself.

He'd said he wouldn't be a good dad, but, when he got right down to it, couldn't think of a single reason to back up the assertion. Going to war, losing his best friend, and enduring a divorce had left him in a bad place—a cynical, sad, self-loathing place. It was at that point in his life when he'd decided he didn't want children.

Things had changed since then—especially after reuniting with Lucy. He was still cynical, clearly. But time and lately, Lucy's cheery, optimistic outlook had helped resolve the defeatist attitude and sadness that once ruled his life. He'd matured and now felt like maybe a baby wouldn't be the end of the world.

He pulled into the parking lot of his apartment complex a new man. In the last five hours, his perspective on the whole situation had done a one-eighty. If he looked deep and trusted his gut, he could see that Lucy hadn't been malicious in any way. She said the baby was his, and he believed her. She said she hadn't lied about being infertile, and he believed her. She said she was willing to raise the baby without him or his money, and he believed her!

She hadn't asked for money or a wedding ring, but as it turned out, Jack wanted to give her both. He *was* in love. He wanted Lucy. And the baby.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Jack popped into the gym, hoping that getting his blood flowing would do the same for ideas. He'd made up his mind to win Lucy back but had no idea how to go about it.

After talking with his parents, then coming to the realization that he loved Lucy, his heart had never felt lighter and happier. He hadn't realized the burden he'd been carrying about the death of his friend, the demise of his marriage, and the stress regarding the family business. He'd put all that aside, and now the thought of marrying Lucy excited him beyond belief.

"Well, I gotta get going. My bus will be here soon," Kenny said. He'd arrived midway through Jack's workout, and they'd been lifting side by side in the free weight section. Kenny copied his movements using much smaller dumbbells.

"You just got here," Jack said. "We're only halfway done. Where do you live? I'll give you a lift home."

"That'd be awesome," Kenny said. "I'm going to my grandparents tonight to celebrate my mom's birthday. They live up on the river bluff. Is there near you?"

"Nothing in New Bern is that far. I'll drive you. Let's finish the workout."

"Okay. Cool, man. Thanks."

They put in a few more rep sets and left about thirty minutes later. Kenny sat in the passenger seat, giving directions.

"Don't you have an address I could enter into my GPS?" Jack said. He hated taking play-by-play directions.

"Uh, I don't know the address. Turn left here," Kenny said, a hundred feet before the turn.

Jack hit the brakes and took the turn much too fast. "Little warning next time? I prefer to drive on all four wheels."

Kenny laughed. "Sorry."

Kenny gave directions until Jack recognized where they were—Lucy's parents' neighborhood.

“This one here?” Jack asked, turning into the driveway Kenny signaled to. “*This* is your grandparents’ house?”

“Yeah,” Kenny said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

It was the same house Lucy had pointed out as her dream home.

“Are you shittin’ me?” he asked. “Lucy loves this house.”

“Seriously?” Kenny said. “Has she seen it? Does she know my grandparents?”

“I have no idea whether she knows them. She saw it at an open house a few years ago. I thought you said your mom was broke?”

“She is. She’s also too proud to take anything from my grandparents. Although, they’re not exactly rich either. From what I’ve overheard, they pinched pennies for a long time in order to buy this house. Said it’s their forever home. Anyway, thanks for the ride. See ya.” He jumped out and dashed into the house with a wave.

Jack mulled over the odds of Lucy being in love with a house that he now had a connection to. It had to be a sign. But what to do with the information?

Christmas was a week away, and Jack couldn’t help but think this was the perfect time to win Lucy back. It was the season of miracles. Maybe Santa would help with one. Except that he didn’t believe in Santa, and he needed real help. Desperate, he swallowed his pride and picked up his phone.

“And why should I help you?” Kate said. He’d called her because he couldn’t risk Lizzie telling Lucy what he was up to. “You broke my sister’s heart.”

“I know,” Jack said. “I’ve seen the error of my ways and want to make amends. I want to make it up to her. I want to marry her,” he practically shouted. Kate must have felt the sincerity through the phone. “I just need some help,” he pleaded.

“In that case,” she said. “Be at my office in one hour. We’ll see how serious you are.” She hung up without waiting for an

answer.

Okay, this was good. One hour. Until then, he would start his own list. What did Lucy like? What would make her happy?

Sixty minutes later, he walked into Kate's office. It was fifty-five degrees outside, but he was sweating nonetheless. If she couldn't help him, or wouldn't, he didn't know what he'd do.

Kate and her fluffy little dog were waiting in the lobby when he arrived. They led him to a conference room where Lizzie, Daisy, Sophie, Nana, and Emma sat around the table. The chair at the head of the table was empty, and Kate gave a slight nod toward it.

"Welp," he said, sitting down and wiping his brow.

"State your case," Lizzie said with no other greeting.

All eyes had him pinned to his seat. He cleared his throat, but just as he was about to speak, Kate passed him a folded piece of paper, which he read quickly.

Only Lizzie and I know about the baby. Keep it that way!

He slid the note into his breast pocket, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "I'm an idiot," he said, quickly reorganizing his thoughts to avoid spilling the baby secret. "I've hurt Lucy twice and never want to do it again. Ten years ago, I judged her without giving her the benefit of the doubt and lost ten years with her because of it. Earlier this week, I accused her of being after my money." It didn't make much sense outside the context of a baby, but if Kate didn't want him to say anything about that, he wouldn't.

Everyone spoke at once. "Ooof." "Ouch." "Asshole." "How *much* money?"

He was actually grateful he didn't have to cop to what an ass he'd been about the baby news. If they thought it was only the marriage thing, maybe he'd have a better shot at winning them over and getting their help.

“After wasting those ten years,” he continued. “I don’t want to waste any more time. I told her I didn’t want to get married, but I do. I trust her, and I know she’s not just after my money.”

“Seriously,” Nana said. “How much money?” Emma hushed her.

They grilled him nine ways from Friday. Why the change of heart? Why should they believe he’d *really* changed? Why now? Why Lucy? On and on it went, but he answered every question honestly and sincerely. Finally, there were no more questions, and they all began some sort of silent, mental collaboration. A conversation without words, all looking at each other, slight nods, shoulder shrugs, small smiles, eye movements. He had no idea what was happening or how he was fairing.

Sophie cleared her throat. “A decision has been agreed upon,” she said solemnly, and Jack had to bite back a grin at her seriousness. “We will help.”

He heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank God. I need something big. Something she can’t say no to. Something that proves to her that I mean what I say when I tell her I love her and want to spend the rest of my life with her. Oh, and as soon as possible would be great.” He smiled.

Things were less formal after that. Kate got out a whiteboard and started a brainstorming list, which Lizzie promptly mocked.

“She likes sunrises,” Jack suggested. “We had a nice time watching the sunrise at the Outer Banks on her birthday.”

“She *used* to like sunrises,” Lizzie said. “Now, she hardly ever gets up before ten.” She gave Jack a pointed look. That was because of the baby, but since they weren’t talking about that...

“Uh, yeah,” Jack muttered. “I guess her schedule has changed a bit.”

“You could promise her sexual favors,” Nana said.

“Nana!” everyone screamed.

“What?” Nana threw up her hands. “Katie said there were no bad ideas. Plus, that would work on me.” She glanced at Jack and winked.

“Audrey,” Sophie said. “You’re going to scare him into thinking he’s made a horrible decision trying to gain access to this family. You’ll have him running away screaming if you’re not careful. Best behavior, please.”

“Why do I hear that so often?” Nana grumbled. “I’m too old to have to watch what I do and say.”

“Thank you for the suggestion, Audrey. I’ll keep it in mind. Anyone else?” Jack said, attempting to change the subject before he ended up refereeing a catfight.

They talked about fancy dinners, hot-air balloon rides, and trips to the Caribbean. Jack wondered if it was smart to fly anywhere. He’d have to do an internet search later to find out about pregnancy and flying.

“New Bern doesn’t exactly have the fanciest of restaurants,” Daisy said. “Maybe something on the waterfront? Outer Banks or Morehead City? That’s assuming you could get her into a car with you for that long without telling her what you were doing.”

“It’s got to be more than dinner,” Emma said. “That’s too cliché. We gotta work outside the box.”

“Yes, you’re right. I agree,” Daisy said. “Go big or go home.”

“You could just buy her a huge freakin’ rock,” Kate said with a smile.

“Shit,” Jack said. “I didn’t even think of that. I’ll need a ring.”

Kate added an action-item line for ring shopping and, amongst themselves, decided Daisy and Sophie would help him with it on Monday. She sectioned off part of the board to start a timeline. The goal was to have a plan by Christmas, which was in one week.

“We have a lot of family activities leading up to Christmas,” Sophie said. “Could we make something work there? Put a ring in the cookie dough?”

“What about the grand opening of the new coffee shop?” Daisy asked. “That seems ripe for some big gesture.”

“Oh, yes,” Emma said. “I like both of those.”

“I’m not sure I want it to be quite so public,” Jack said. “I may have to do some heavy-duty groveling.”

“Now we’re cookin’,” Kate said, writing furiously, trying to keep up with the ideas. Jack leaned back in his chair and looked around the table. He’d be part of this family soon. Hopefully. All these women, who cared so fiercely for one another. Lucy was right. She would be fine without him, but he didn’t want that.

Jack’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He took it out and found a text from Lizzie, telling him about a doctor’s appointment Lucy had the afternoon of the grand opening. Kate was also looking at her phone, and he realized it was a group chat between the three of them. Kate raised an eyebrow at Jack, questioning whether he liked the idea. He gave a subtle nod.

A stack of Kate’s real estate signs in the corner caught Jack’s eye and sparked an idea. “I think I’ve got it.” He stood. “I know what I can do.”

All eyes turned toward him, and he smiled. “Not that I don’t trust y’all...” He looked directly at Lizzie. “But could Kate and I have the room?”

They glanced at each other and finally acquiesced. “I wouldn’t say anything,” Lizzie said. “I can keep a secret from her.”

“Uh-huh. Name one,” Daisy said, putting on her coat. “You two read each other’s minds. In fact, maybe you should stay away from her for the next few days.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Lizzie mumbled.

He and Kate stayed and hashed out the do-ability of his plan. She loved his idea. “It’s Saturday, but since real estate agents don’t understand what weekends are, I’ll start right away.” She picked up the phone, dialed, and waited. “Voicemail,” she muttered.

“Brooke,” she said after waiting a second. “I’ve got some serious business to take care of. As soon as you get this, clear my schedule.”

The dramatic way in which she said it made Jack laugh. “Are you always this efficient?”

Adam entered the room and chuckled at Jack’s comment. “You have no idea,” he said, putting his arms around Kate’s waist from behind. “If you need something done though, you’ve found your gal.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Today was the grand opening of The Drip 2.0. Lucy couldn't believe what had become of the shabby, broken-down space. Two months ago, it was just studs and cement. Jack and his crew had worked hard to make her dream a reality. They'd debated waiting to open until after the new year, but the employees were ready, and the shop was beautiful, so they'd decided there was no reason to wait.

Too bad Jack wouldn't be here to soak up the compliments. He'd done a fantastic job. Everything turned out exactly as she'd pictured it. Long dark counters, rustic wood flooring, a soothing light green paint on the walls, and her framed quotes! They stole the show. One read "You've got this," and seemed apropos right now. She smiled and touched her stomach.

Ironically, the smell of coffee was making her queasy. She'd been fighting nausea all morning, and the mere thought of a sip had her stomach roiling.

"Hey, Lucy," Kenny said, coming up behind her with an ear-to-ear grin. "Doesn't everything look amazing?" He was always so positive and cheerful.

"Yes," she said. "Jack and his team did a wonderful job."

"Have you seen your office? Come on. I'll show you." He grabbed her arm and gave a gentle tug.

She had, but she let him drag her to the back. The office was twice the size of her old one. Because she planned to work mainly out of this location, and knew she'd be spending a lot of time in here, she'd designed it to be cozy and functional. Once the baby news came out, she'd move the furniture around to accommodate a crib.

After her conversation with Jack, she'd had a private talk with Kenny to tell him the baby thing was top secret until she told her family. He'd sworn himself to secrecy, and she trusted him. Since the fainting episode, he'd been treating her like a fragile China doll, which was sweet but unnecessary.

He escorted her back to the front of the shop and asked if he could pour her a coffee. Her stomach was still in no mood, so she politely declined, saying she'd get some later.

She checked on the Three Amigos, who sat in the booth she'd designed specifically for them. When she asked which Drip they intended to hang out in, they told her wherever she was going to be, they would be. Their spot was a circular booth in the corner, which gave them all a view of the entrance.

"All right," she said. "Now no one has to have their back to the door. So no more arguing over who sits where."

"This is perfect," Gene said. "Thanks for thinking of us."

"Here, here," Walter said, raising his mug.

"Yeah, you're the bes—" Archie started, then caught sight of Nana and forgot all about Lucy. "Audrey, over here." He waved frantically. "I saved you a seat."

Lucy laughed. "Oh, I see how it is," she said. "I thought I was your favorite Parker."

"Hello, sweetheart," Nana said. She side-hugged Lucy and then sat with the three. "Gentlemen."

"You're a very close second, Lucy," Walter said with a teasing grin and a wink.

"*Very* close," Gene said. Lucy shook her head and walked away, chuckling.

Kate and Adam entered, and Lucy went to greet them. "Hey, guys," she said. "Thanks for coming."

"Wouldn't have missed it." Kate had an excited, secretive glimmer about her. Probably the pregnancy glow.

"Never gonna turn down free coffee," Adam said.

"You've been getting free coffee since you and Kate got engaged," Lucy said.

"I know, and I thank you," Adam said. "If only Lizzie were as generous with the booze."

Kate rolled her eyes, and Lucy chuckled.

“Everything looks fantastic,” Adam said. “Jack did a great job. I’m gonna go check things out.”

“So, he’s really not coming?” Kate asked after Adam left. There was no need to clarify who “he” was.

“Guess not.” Lucy shrugged. “He cc’d me on an email to his crew saying he had some business in Wilmington and couldn’t make it.”

“I’m sorry, sis,” Kate said.

“No problem,” Lucy said. “Gotta get used to going it alone. I’m fine. Really,” she added at Kate’s dubious look.

Lizzie, Daisy, and her parents came in and did the same amount of oohing and aahing. Emma and Dirk weren’t far behind them.

“There’s so much space. This is fantastic, honey,” her mother said. “I see you’ve expanded the baked goods section.”

“Just waiting for someone awesome to open a bakery nearby and start making products for me,” Lucy said. She and her sisters were trying to talk their mother into opening a bakery in the fifth storefront of the complex. Then Parker women would occupy all five spaces.

“We’ll see,” she said.

Word must have spread about Jack not coming because, other than Kate, none of her family asked about him. Just as well. She needed to move on and adjust to life without him. He’d told Lizzie he wanted to apologize, but Lucy hadn’t heard from him since, so apparently, that wasn’t a priority.

Her employees called her over to cut the ribbon that ran from end to end of the service counter. Her father, ever the politician, took charge and said a few words. He welcomed everyone, talked about the importance of small businesses, thanked Adam for taking a chance on this rundown eyesore, and relayed his excitement over seeing this little corner of town revitalized.

Lucy cut the ribbon with a pair of huge ceremonial scissors borrowed from her dad's office at city hall. In a short speech, she thanked everyone for coming and announced that coffee was on the house for the rest of the day. There were several people she didn't recognize. Hopefully, people she could win over and turn into loyal customers.

Surrounded by family and friends, she said a prayer of thanks. They were her support network and would do anything for her. She would be okay without help, but it was nice to know there was a safety net.

Someone tapped on her shoulder, and she turned to find Curtis.

"Hi, Lucy," he said. "How's it going?"

"Good, good," she said, trying to hide her surprise. What was he doing here? "How about you?"

"Look," he said. "I'm too nervous to piddle around with small talk. I heard you and Jack broke up, and I just wanted to see if there was any chance of us getting back together. I know it's lame, but I still love you."

"Oh," she said. This was an unexpected turn of events. She thought about how easy it would be to say yes. To fall back onto something known and comfortable. Someone who loved her despite her flaws. Curtis would take care of her and treat her well. But being with Jack had changed her. She wanted more now—love *and* passion, someone strong that could also make her laugh, and a best friend she could say anything to. In short, she wanted it all. And Curtis wasn't that.

Since she couldn't very well get Lizzie to handle this for her—she was standing three feet from them—Lucy would have to woman up and do this on her own. His hopeful look was hard to resist, but she took a deep breath and mustered the courage.

She laid a hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry, Curtis, but I'm not in a place to get into a relationship right now. My life's kind of complicated, and I've got some things to work out. I appreciate you coming here and telling me your feelings, but I don't feel the same. I really am sorry."

“That’s okay,” he said, his voice cracking. “I should have known. I won’t bother you again.” His eyes welled with tears, and to save him the embarrassment of crying in front of her, she turned away and went to find Lizzie.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Jack sent a quick text before getting on the road. *Got the package. On the move.*

The reply came almost immediately. *Roger that. Plan's a go. Meet you at the rendezvous point at 1400.*

He laughed. You wouldn't think it when you first met her because she was so meticulous and business-like, but Kate was funny.

On the drive from Wilmington to New Bern, he thought about and rehearsed what he planned to say to Lucy.

His dad's advice to simply be sincere seemed easy enough to follow until he realized everything he came up with sounded corny. After multiple attempts to craft something poetic and profound, he finally decided just to wing it—lay it all on the line, tell her how he felt, and go from there.

This wasn't a sure thing by any means, but he knew Lucy loved him. If she could forgive him and believe that he'd changed his mind about marriage and a baby, he might have a shot.

He hadn't been lying when he told her he was missing the grand opening because he had business in Wilmington. His plan to woo her wasn't going to be cheap, and the trip was necessary to liquidate some of his company shares. His brother had offered to buy him out, but his dad wouldn't hear of it, so they'd worked out a loan for part of it. Now, he was sitting on a small fortune. Well, next to a small fortune. On the passenger seat sat a cashier's check for five million dollars and a ten-thousand-dollar diamond ring.

He came around a bend in the highway to a sea of brake lights. In a panic, he fiddled with the radio, trying to find a station that would tell him what had happened. After five excruciating minutes of dull commentary on the latest news, a chipper traffic reporter took over. "We've got a minor hiccup on Highway Seventeen. An overturned semi has three of four lanes blocked just south of Jacksonville. Looks like it'll be

awhile before they get it cleared, so if you're headed that way, might want to figure out an alternate route. Back to you, Samantha."

"Hiccup?" Jack yelled at the radio. "I don't have time for that." The milepost on his right showed he was two miles into the backup. Traffic crawled, and at this rate, it would take hours to get past it. After moving an inch in ten minutes, he became anxious. He'd already texted Kate to let her know he wouldn't be able to meet with her before the doctor's appointment, and they would have to switch to Plan B.

She'd responded in her matter-of-fact manner, telling him she'd handle it and not to worry. That was one relief. It bought him a little time, but not enough to sit through this backup.

While drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, he noticed a frontage road moving along nicely. There was only a fifty-foot gap between the highway and the side road, but in that fifty feet was a guardrail. The next exit wasn't for at least a mile. As he inched forward another half mile, he saw it—a break in the barrier. He glanced around and wondered what the penalty was for what he was about to do.

"Screw it," he muttered, throwing the truck into four-wheel drive and driving on the shoulder to where the gap was. He turned right into the grass and gunned it. The tires spun, and he thought he might get stuck in the slick wet grass, but the four-wheel drive saved him, and he made it to the other side. Just in time to notice a deputy, who'd seen what he'd done, waiting for him.

It wasn't like Jack could deny anything. He'd just have to suck up whatever was coming his way and keep moving. Surely, this wasn't a jailable offense. That would really put a damper on his day.

"Hello, Officer," Jack said politely. "Sorry about all that, but I'm on my way to my future wife's OB appointment. We're having a baby!"

The officer's expression said he did not believe for one second that was the case. "Do you know how often I hear that excuse? Not very creative."

“Well, I mean, she’s not in labor or anything,” Jack said. “She’s only two months along. I just mean I have to get to the appointment because that’s where I’m going to apologize and declare my love. I’ve been kind of an asshole, and... Oh, never mind. It’s a long story, and it doesn’t paint me in a very good light. I am in a real hurry though, so if you’re going to cite me, could we move on with it quickly?”

The officer chuckled. “That’s actually one I *haven’t* heard before. License and registration?”

Jack handed over the documents and tapped his hand impatiently on his knee while he waited for the officer to do his thing. Finally, he returned to Jack’s window.

“Consider this a warning,” he said, returning Jack’s paperwork. “And keep in mind, you want to arrive *safely*. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” Jack said. He put the truck in gear, preparing to get the heck out of there before the officer could change his mind. “I’ll drive safe. Promise.”

“Good luck, dude.”

Jack saluted as he pulled slowly onto the road. The GPS had already calculated the alternate route, and he arrived at the doctor’s office only five minutes late.

He popped a breath mint and smoothed his hair. Here went nothing. Only his whole life hinged on what was about to happen—no big deal.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lucy went home after the grand opening to rest before her doctor's appointment. She took a quick nap and woke feeling a little better. Lizzie was supposed to pick her up but called at the last minute to say she'd been delayed and would have to meet her there. Lucy grabbed a sleeve of Ritz crackers and a Sprite and headed to her car.

She choked down a few crackers and half the Sprite during the drive to the doctor's office. Women in various stages of pregnancy littered the waiting room. Lucy knew not all of them were pregnant, but a few were unmistakably so. They looked ready to pop at any moment. Lucy rubbed her still-slim stomach and eagerly anticipated the day she was that big.

When they called her name, Lizzie still hadn't arrived. Lucy let the receptionist know her sister was coming and asked her to bring Lizzie in when she got there.

Since the fainting scare, the doctor wanted Lucy to have a weekly ultrasound. At least for a month or so. The receptionist had parked her in an exam room, and while waiting for the nurse, she texted Lizzie. But the nurse came in before she got a reply.

"Lucy?" she asked.

"Yes."

"There's someone here to see you," the nurse said. "Says he's the father."

Lucy sat abruptly, which made her stomach flip. She swallowed hard to keep from throwing up. "What?"

Jack pushed his way past the nurse and went to Lucy's side. He picked up her hand. "Lucy, I'm sorry," he said. "I've been an idiot. I want to do this with you."

"Jack? What are you doing here? How'd you know I was here?" Lots of questions ran through her mind as it tried to catch up to what was happening. "Where's Lizzie?"

“Lizzie’s not coming,” he said. “She told me about the appointment and set it up so I would come with you today instead of her.”

Lucy shook her head, still confused. “So, what? You’re in cahoots with Lizzie now? I can’t believe she didn’t say anything.”

“Once I realized what an idiot I’d been, I called for some advice and help. I want to be a part of the baby’s life, Lucy. I want to be a good dad.”

The disposable white paper crinkled as she laid her head back. He was the father. It was his right to be involved. He hadn’t said anything about her, but they could be good parents without being a couple. People did it all the time.

“All right,” she finally said.

The nurse hadn’t left the room and seemed to be gauging whether or not Jack was welcome. She glanced at Lucy with a raised eyebrow, asking if she wanted her to throw him out. The look on Lucy’s face must have been unmistakable. The nurse rushed to a cupboard, grabbed a basin, and held it under Lucy’s chin just in time for her to puke up all the Ritz she’d finally been able to keep down.

Jack grabbed paper towels from the dispenser and handed them to Lucy. She wiped her mouth and smiled meekly. “You sure?”

He rubbed her back. “I’m sorry I haven’t been here for you. I’m sorry you’re sick, and I haven’t taken care of you. I’m sorry for a lot of things, Lucy.”

The nurse rinsed out the small pink basin, dried it, and set it next to Lucy on the bed. “Just in case,” she said. “You okay in here, then?” she asked, glancing at Jack.

“Yes. It’s fine,” Lucy answered.

“Holler if you need anything. The tech should be in soon.”

As soon as the nurse left, Jack got down to truly groveling.

“Lucy, I owe you an apology for all the horrible things I said to you. For what I accused you of.” He plowed a hand

through his hair. "I've been thinking of nothing else since I last saw you. It's no excuse, I know, but I think my past, my ex, and my mother were just all in my head and messed up my mind. I should have taken a minute to think through the situation before reacting the way I did."

Tears threatened to fall, but she held them in. "You hurt me, Jack."

"I know I did, and that's killing me." He grabbed her hand again and squeezed tight. "After I cooled off and thought about things using my heart, I realized, of course, I trust you. Of course, you didn't do this on purpose, and of course, I want to be involved with the baby."

Silent tears made their escape, and she couldn't stop them. He caught each one with his thumb and begged her not to cry. "I'm sorry I've caused you pain. Can you forgive me?"

The door opened, and the lab tech entered. "Good afternoon," she said, holding Lucy's chart under her arm. "Lucy Parker?"

"We'll finish this later," he whispered.

"That's me," Lucy said, wiping away the remaining tears. A crying woman was probably nothing new to the tech, and she took it all in stride, handing Lucy a tissue before washing her hands.

"Well, let's get to it, shall we? Just a quick peek to make sure everything's going smoothly."

The tech lifted Lucy's shirt so that her stomach was bare. "This might be a little cold," the tech warned before squirting goo on her stomach.

She turned on a monitor next to where Jack stood. "Okay, Dad, you come stand over here."

Jack's eyes widened at the word, but he walked to where she'd pointed and picked up Lucy's hand.

Lucy flinched slightly when the tech pressed the wand into the goo.

“We won’t be able to see the sex yet, but we’ll still take a photo or two.”

Jack and Lucy were glued to the monitor. This would be the first time he saw their baby. A rapid thumping noise came through the machine, and Jack swallowed hard before asking if that was the heartbeat.

“Yep, nice and strong,” the tech said. “Everything looks great. Shall I print a couple of pictures for you?”

“Oh, yes, please,” Lucy said, fresh tears streaming. “Does the crying ever stop?”

“I won’t lie. You’re in for a hormonal roller coaster ride, but eventually, you’ll be back to normal. Making babies is hard work.”

Lucy chuckled. Jack’s apology and expressed desire to help lifted a burden she hadn’t realized she’d been carrying. She would forgive him for what he said, and they would find a way to be friends. She’d meant what she said about going it alone and still would if she had to. But she had to admit, it would be nice to have him along for the ride.

“Let’s get you home to rest,” he said, helping her off the table. “Why don’t we leave your car here and come back for it later?”

Still feeling queasy and her eyes blurry from all the crying, she agreed. Jack helped her into the passenger seat, then ran around to the driver’s side. Climbing in, he asked, “Do you want to stop anywhere? Does anything sound good to eat?”

“I have a half a pack of crackers in my purse,” she said. “I’ll just keep nibbling on those. I usually don’t eat until later.”

“How long have you had morning sickness?”

“It comes and goes,” she said. “And it’s not that bad. Well, except the barfing. I really hate throwing up.”

“Understandable. Do you feel okay now?”

“Yes. Much better than earlier anyway.”

“Good,” he said, starting the engine. They drove in silence until he passed the street to her condo.

“Jack, you missed the turn,” she said. “I thought you were taking me home.”

“I just need to make one quick stop. Why don’t you lay your head back and close your eyes?”

Now that he mentioned it, resting her eyes did sound nice. “Fine,” she said, tipping her head back. She’d nodded off and came to once the truck stopped.

When she opened her eyes, she couldn’t tell where they were. It was a driveway, but one that wasn’t familiar to her. “Where are we?” she asked.

Instead of answering, Jack got out and jogged around to open her door. “I have a surprise for you. Will you close your eyes? I’ll help you.”

“Okaaay,” she said, grabbing his arm and closing her eyes.

He led her carefully along a walkway and helped her navigate a few stairs to the front door.

She heard him use a key to open a lock and allowed him to lead her into wherever they were. Finally, he stopped and told her to open her eyes. They stood in a big, beautiful home, but she still had no idea who it belonged to. “Um.”

“Come this way,” Jack said. “Maybe the view will jog your memory.”

She followed him to the rear of the house, which was almost entirely floor-to-ceiling windows. Before she even reached the sliding glass door, she could tell the view was spectacular. She did a double-take and finally realized where they were. She hadn’t seen the inside for a couple of years, but she’d looked at the pictures online enough to know.

“Is this my dream home?” she asked. “Why are we here? How do you have a key?”

“You were right. The view is spectacular.”

She opened the slider and stepped onto the huge wood deck. “Jack, you’re not answering me. What’s going on?”

“I bought it,” he said, taking her hands in his.

“You what?” she exclaimed. “Impossible. It wasn’t on the market. Kate would have told me.”

“That’s true. It never did go on the market.”

“Then how—”

From nowhere, her family started filing out of the house onto the deck with them. “Hey, what are you guys doing here?”

“Moral support,” Kate said.

“I appreciate that,” Lucy said. “But—”

“Not for you,” Lizzie said, shaking her head. “For that one.” She jerked her chin toward Jack.

“I made a deal with the devil for some help,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Well, several devils. They wouldn’t let me do this without them.”

“I am so confused,” Lucy said, still looking at her family. When she turned back to Jack, he was on one knee, holding up a little black box.

“Ah,” she screamed. Her mouth dropped open, and she slapped both hands to her cheeks. He was proposing?

“Lucy, I’ve been an idiot,” he said. “I’ve loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you in the quad senior year. I want to make up for lost time and spend the rest of my life with you. Starting now. I want to have a family with you. And I want to do it all from this house.”

“You bought the house for me?”

“Well, hopefully, for us.” He smiled and stood, approaching her. “Will you marry me?”

“Oh, Jack.” She put a hand on his cheek and looked into his eyes. “Of course I will. I knew the second your stupid Frisbee almost knocked me out that I loved you. And I always will.”

He slid the shiny two-carat princess-cut diamond onto her finger and hugged her. Cheers erupted from the crowd, and Lucy swiped at a tear. This was a much better reaction than her last engagement. But this one, she knew, would stick. She wasn't letting Jack get away again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“How’d you know I’d say yes?” Lucy asked her mom. After the proposal pandemonium had died down, they’d all returned to her folks’ house, where her mother had already laid out celebratory drinks and desserts.

“That was a no-brainer,” she said. “I could tell you were in love with him from day one.”

Lucy couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face. “Well, thanks for putting all this together.”

Jack came up behind her. “Yes, Sophie, thank you for everything,” he said. “I couldn’t have pulled this off without all of you.”

“Okay,” Lucy said to Jack. “I gotta know. How were you able to buy the house?”

“That was all Kate,” he said. “She really knows how to wheel and deal.”

Kate heard her name and walked over to where they stood. “Wheeling and dealing, my ass. It was your million dollars over the home’s value that made them sell,” Kate said dryly. “He had to make them an offer they couldn’t refuse.”

Lucy’s jaw dripped. “Do I want to know how much you paid for it?”

“No. No, you do not,” Jack said. “And if you decide you hate it and want to move, tough. We’re living there forever.”

“I guess it’s true that money talks?”

“At least in this case,” he said.

“What about the business?” she asked, turning serious. If Jack was committing to New Bern, what did that mean for his father’s desire for him to take over?

“I’m going to finish the strip mall remodels with Adam, and then we’ll revisit me taking over. My father says he’ll stay on until I’m ready to make the transition. Realistically, I can run it from anywhere. New Bern’s as good a place as any.”

“And your mom’s okay with all this?” Lucy asked, waving her ring finger.

Jack chuckled. “Yes. You won her over. She’s excited about *everything*.”

She took that to mean that “everything” included the baby.

“That reminds me,” she said. “Thank you for not mentioning, you know.” She patted her stomach.

“Lizzie threatened death if I did, so there was incentive to keep my mouth shut.”

Lucy laughed, picturing Lizzie threatening Jack. She needed to tell her family soon. Before someone let it slip. Kate and Adam planned on making their announcement on Christmas Eve. She’d wait a day or two after that and then spill her news.

* * *

Two days later, stuffed from Christmas Eve dinner, everyone filed into the living room for a game of Pictionary. It was a holiday tradition that usually descended into chaos. The last time they played, on Thanksgiving, Dirk had proposed to Emma.

“All right, who wants to start?” Edward asked.

“I’ll go,” Adam said, jumping up. Between Adam’s nervous look and Kate’s relocation to their mother’s side, Lucy figured this was it. They would start with a bang. There was no way they’d finish the game after Kate’s baby news dropped, but no one would care.

At the easel, Adam picked up the big black marker as Kate cheered him on. Lucy kept an eye on her mom. The whole family would be excited, but their mother, especially, had been waiting for this day for quite some time.

“Here goes nothing,” Adam muttered and then started to draw something that resembled a short bird.

“Bird,” Nana said. “Robin, blue jay, mockingbird.”

Adam kept drawing as his teammates guessed every type of bird they could think of.

“Heron,” Sophie guessed.

Adam shook his head and drew a sack in the bird’s beak. Lucy could only tell that though, because she knew what he was attempting to draw.

“Oh, oh. A penguin,” Sophie said. “No, not a penguin, a pelican!” So sure she was right, she stood to take her turn.

“Almost,” Adam said.

“Okay,” Sophie said. “Not a pelican. A stork?” Adam made a circular motion with his hands, indicating she was getting close, and Kate jumped up.

“Yes, Mom,” Kate said. “It’s a stork. And what do storks bring?”

Adam was drawing tiny arms and legs sticking out from the package in the stork’s mouth but gave up and went to Kate’s side, sliding his arm around her.

“Wait, what’s happening?” Sophie said. “Are you saying? What are you saying? Are you pregnant?” At Kate’s beaming smile, the room erupted into claps and cheers.

“Honey, I think it’s happening.” Edward stood and hugged his wife. “You’re finally going to be a grandma.”

Happy tears trickled down her face as she hugged Kate and Adam.

Everyone was on their feet now, giving hugs and high-fives. Jack and Lucy cheered right alongside them.

In the commotion, Kate looked over at Lucy. “Do it,” she mouthed. Lucy shook her head and mouthed back, “Later.”

Kate sidled over to her. “Can I do it for you then?” she whispered.

“This is your moment,” Lucy said. “We’ll do ours tomorrow or the next day. Seriously.”

“But I want Mom to know now,” Kate said. “Think how excited she’ll be. Plus, I don’t know how much longer I can keep the secret, Loo.”

Lucy looked at Jack. “It’s up to you, hon.”

“Fine,” Lucy said to Kate.

Sophie had gone to the kitchen to put a bottle of champagne in the refrigerator. When she returned, Kate cleared her throat dramatically, walked to the Pictionary easel, and wrote “x2” next to the stork.

It took Sophie a second, but then her eyes widened. “You’re having twins?” she asked.

“No,” Kate said, putting her arm around Lucy. “Someone else is also pregnant.”

Lucy smiled and shrugged. “Surprise.”

“You better not be messing with me,” Sophie said. “Are you serious? Lucy?”

Lucy nodded. “It was an accident, but yeah. Jack and I are having a baby.”

“But I thought...,” her mother said.

“I thought that too. That’s what I was told, but I guess the doctor was wrong. Either that or Jack resurrected my ovaries.”

Jack thrust out his chest and hitched up his pants, making everyone laugh. Dirk slapped him on the back. “Way to go, man.”

Lucy’s mom wrapped her in a hug, and their joyful tears fell together. “I’m so happy for you, honey,” she whispered.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Nana broke into a very off-key version of Frankie Valli’s “Can’t Take my Eyes off You.” “Oh, pret-ty ba-by. You’re just too good to be true, oh pretty baby.”

Dirk and Emma joined in, followed by Daisy and Edward. “And if it’s quite all right...”

Sophie and Adam came in on the next verse. Kate, who was just as tone-deaf as Nana, held back but eventually chimed in too. Lizzie rolled her eyes before finally succumbing.

Nana linked arms with Daisy and Emma and started a can-can kick. No one knew all the words, and the chorus was completely out of order, but that didn't matter. "I love you, baby," they all screamed, finally singing the same words at the same time.

Jack leaned over to Lucy. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"I tried to warn you," she said, grabbing his hand.

He laughed before starting in on the next verse.

Amid the lunacy, Lucy smiled, knowing she would soon have everything she ever wanted. Her dream home, her dream husband, and a dream baby she'd never thought possible. In short, her dream life.

The End

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed *Reuniting with Lucy*, please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#). As a new author, it would be oh-so-helpful.

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Fighting for Daisy

The Parker Sisters—Book Four

PROLOGUE

“Please be money. Please be money,” Daisy Parker whispered to herself, one hand sliding her card into the ATM, the other crossing her fingers. While waiting for her turn, she’d been mentally calculating what might be left in her account if the euros she’d transferred hadn’t come through. It had been years since she’d used her bank in New Bern.

Just as she pushed the button to see her balance, a rush of cold air hit her back as someone opened the outside door to the ATM vestibule. She thought nothing of it, until she heard a panicked gasp from the man who’d just used the machine and an impatient groan from someone behind her.

Daisy turned her head and bit back a scream. A man wearing a balaclava ski mask was pointing a gun at her and the two others. Panic shot through her. Then annoyance. She’d lived in some of the most dangerous cities in the world and never had this happen. Now, one week into her hometown visit, she’s being robbed? Unbelievable.

“All of you against that wall.” He used the gun to point at the wall behind Daisy.

The man who’d been ahead of her obeyed immediately and rushed to stand where instructed. He was about Daisy’s height, just as skinny, and wore a multicolored scarf and loafers. She’d been so busy praying her account would have money, she hadn’t noticed another man waiting behind her. He towered over both of them, was twice as thick, and wore a baseball hat and a black bomber jacket. Testosterone rolled off him. Daisy made eye contact, and he gave a subtle nod and a slow blink, indicating she should comply. She took a step back to the wall. He wasn’t so quick to acquiesce.

“Now!” the robber yelled.

“All right. Take it easy.” The guy in the baseball cap sauntered over and stood on Daisy’s right. He moved slowly, but she noted shrewd green eyes darting back and forth, keenly assessing the situation. They were in a glass booth outside the bank, and Daisy prayed someone walking or driving by would see them and call the police.

The man on Daisy’s left stood with his hands in the air. The only thing rolling off him was fear and meekness.

“Hand it over,” the robber said to Daisy, nodding to the purse slung over her shoulder. She hesitated. Having lived all over the world, she considered herself street-smart and capable but had never been the victim of a crime of this magnitude. Pick pocketed, sure, but never robbed at gunpoint.

Being a victim didn’t sit well, and she tried to recall if there was anything in her purse she could use as a weapon. Her dad had given her a canister of mace for Christmas last year, but she’d left it with a friend in Paris. If she could get her boot off, the three-inch heel might do some damage, but it wouldn’t stop bullets.

“I don’t really have anything of value,” she said. Unfortunately, that was true.

“You got a watch,” he said. “And a phone. I want both. And any money you have.”

“My watch isn’t worth much,” Daisy said. It was a gift from her host family in Japan, and while it didn’t have monetary value, it was special to her.

“Bitch, I ain’t asking,” the man said. One hand leveled the gun at her, and the other was outstretched to take her stuff.

“Lady, just give it to him,” scarf guy begged.

Staring down the barrel of a gun weakened her bravado and, deciding “stuff” wasn’t worth her life, she handed him her watch and phone. He paused to give her a lecherous top-to-bottom scan. “Nice stems.”

“Gross,” she muttered, looking away so he wouldn’t see her eye roll.

“You next,” the robber said, turning to the pansy on Daisy’s left, who still held his hands high. “Give me your wallet.”

“Hey, I don’t want any trouble. Take whatever you want,” he said, offering his wallet, phone, and watch.

The guy in the baseball cap did a double-take and shot him a disgusted look. “You oughta give up that scarf,” he mumbled.

Daisy barked out a laugh, then slapped her hand over her mouth. She must be going into shock.

“Now you,” the gunman said, swinging the gun to Daisy’s right.

“No,” the man in the baseball hat said. He looked like he could handle himself in a fight, but against a gun?

The robber approached him, gun inches from his chest. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

“Dude, just give him your wallet,” the wimpy guy said, on the verge of tears.

“I’ve got other plans.”

“Oh, yeah,” the bad guy said. “What are you gonna do?”

In a series of lightning-quick punches and jabs, grunts and groans, the robber was disarmed, on his knees, clutching his stomach, and whimpering. If Daisy had blinked, she would have missed it.

The ninja in the bomber jacket spun the gun on his finger and looked down at the writhing crook. “I’m gonna kick your ass and take your gun.”

“Holy crap,” Daisy said, mouth hanging open. “That. Was. Awe-some.” Tough as leather and good-looking as sin—Bomber Jacket was quite the combo.

“Apologize to the lady and return her stuff,” the man said, hitching his chin at Daisy. He pocketed the gun and pulled out his cell phone like he didn’t have a care in the world. Dang, add chivalrous, and you had the perfect-man trifecta.

“You knocked...the wind...out of me,” the robber wheezed. “I can’t...even stand.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” tough guy said, taking his eyes off the crook to dial. “Crawl on over there, and you’ll already be on your knees to beg forgiveness.”

“What about *my* things?” the guy in the loafers whined.

“You tripped all over yourself to give it to him. If you want it back, take it.”

Loafer guy started to object but shut up after green eyes shot him an icy glare.

The masked man threw Daisy’s stuff at her feet and muttered, “Sorry.”

Bomber Jacket had the phone to his ear, waiting for whoever he’d called to pick up. “Uh, no. Get off your ass, hand her, her belongings, and apologize like you mean it.”

Daisy thought he might be pushing it but wouldn’t say anything. The robber crawled over, picked up what he’d tossed, and offered a slightly more sincere apology.

“Hey,” hot guy said into the phone. “It’s Walsh. Can you send units to a 10-65 at Horizon Bank on Trent Boulevard?”

He listened for a second and then said, “Nah. I got his gun. I’m off duty and don’t have any cuffs though.”

“I robbed a cop?” the thief mumbled. “You gotta be kidding me.”

Walsh poked the thief with his well-worn boot. “You need an aid car, dude?”

The robber shook his head, and Walsh relayed the message to the dispatcher before hanging up.

“Did you still want to use the machine?” her hero asked.

“Oh, no. That’s okay,” Daisy said. “You go ahead.” Before the interruption, the screen had flashed her balance. Twelve dollars was useless when the machine dispensed in increments of twenty. And did it matter? Even when the euros came through, she would still be broke.

While they talked, the robber stood and was inching toward the door. The cop must have sensed it. Without turning around, he said, “Don’t even think about it.”

Not heeding the warning, the robber made a break for it. In another speed-of-light move, Walsh turned, grabbed the man’s hand, and twisted his wrist until he was once again on his knees and begging for mercy. “This will work out better for you if you stay still and do what I say. Got it?” The robber nodded and sagged to the floor.

Within minutes, blue and red flashing lights bounced around the ATM lobby’s glass. Officers took the man into custody and then took turns ribbing Walsh.

“Dude, leave it to you to get into the shit your last week of work,” one officer said.

“You got balls of steel, Noah,” another said, slapping him on the back. “I’m gonna miss you, bro.”

As the adrenaline wore off, Daisy found she was a little shaky. She closed her eyes and sucked in a breath. A warm hand grabbed her elbow, and a deep voice warmed her insides. “You okay?”

Intense, concerned eyes bored into hers. “Yeah,” she said, blinking stupidly. Was it shock or his next-level handsomeness that had her in a daze? “I’ll be fine.”

Another officer whisked her away to give a statement, and by the time they let her go, her green-eyed hero had disappeared.

Daisy had some pretty wild stories from living abroad for so many years, but she couldn’t wait to get home and tell her family this one.

Thanks again for reading!

If you enjoyed *Reuniting with Lucy*, please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#). As a new author, it would

be oh-so-helpful.

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About the Author

Jamie recently relocated to the beautiful state of Tennessee, where she lives with her husband of 24+ years and their dog, Bella. Their wonderful, brilliant children are all grown up and out of the nest. Jamie now spends her days traveling, gardening, writing, and waiting patiently (more or less) for some grandbabies.

She loves dark chocolate, dogs, and sitting on the back porch with a good book.