



CODY

REED HAWTHORNE SECURITY

DANIELLE PAYS

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CHAPTER 1



CODY

DRIVING into Fallwell Cove was hard enough, but to walk through the campus of Havenwood University was torture.

I swallow back my emotions. I have a job to do. The faster I can get it done, the faster I can leave this privileged hellhole and all the memories I should have had here.

“You must be from Reed Hawthorne Security.”

I turn to see what appears to be a real-life Ken doll. The man has slicked-back blond hair, blue eyes, and is wearing a fitted suit.

“Yes, Cody Anthony.” I offer my hand, and he shakes it. “Joseph Taylor?”

“Yes, my boss told me to wait for you. We’re running a couple of minutes late, so we need to get going.” The man straightens his tie as he walks toward the exit.

I follow. “Yeah, sorry about that. The guard at the gate didn’t want to let me in.”

Mr. Taylor laughs. “The guards do take their jobs very seriously. They can’t just let anyone park in a visitor space. I’ll make sure you get a pass card, so you don’t have to deal with them again.”

His sarcastic tone has me liking him already.

As we walk out of the building, the sun nearly blinds us. Regardless, it's a welcome sight in the Pacific Northwest in mid-October. We continue through the main part of campus; I'm struck by all the fall colors and the way they frame the walkway.

Mr. Taylor must notice where I'm staring, because he says, "Cherry trees. They really brighten the campus in the spring when they blossom and, in the fall, when the leaves change color. They're a bitch in the summer, though."

I turn to see him staring at the trees too. "Why's that?"

"Birds. They eat the cherries and leave bird shit all over the walkway and lawn. Fortunately, we don't have too many students here that time of year."

We continue our trek through campus, passing several students. Many of the female students smile and wave, and the man leading me waves back.

All I know about why I'm here is what my boss, Hawthorne, told me over the phone. Joseph Taylor, an administrator at Havenwood University, received a threatening letter. And it's my job to protect him. I was chosen for this assignment because I was already in the area working on an assignment that just finished.

This assignment should be a cinch compared to what I've been through; after ten years in the Navy, most of those as a SEAL, I've had my share of adventures. Now I'm thankful to be a part of Reed Hawthorne Security and I'll be honest, the timing of this job couldn't be better.

Havenwood University sits in the middle of Fallwell Cove, the town where I went to high school and was supposed to go to college. But the real issue is the next town over, Pine Valley. It's my hometown that I left when I was eighteen. I haven't been back since.

Today, I was going to go back and surprise my mom. But then I got this call from Hawthorne, which provides me a valid excuse to further postpone my visit home.

There's a good reason I haven't been back to Pine Valley in all these years, and her name is Lucy.

"Where are we headed?" I ask.

"The new science building ribbon cutting ceremony. I'm supposed to say a few words."

That sounds like it's out in the open. I better assess the situation fast.

"I understand you received a threatening letter, Mr. Taylor. Do you know who sent it?" I ask as we hurry through the campus.

"Joseph please." He shoots me a smile. "No, I don't. I came into work two days ago and found the letter on my desk."

"How did it threaten you?"

We descend a flight of stairs and round a large fountain. Ahead, a small crowd is gathered. There is a man in a dark gray suit standing at a podium situated next to a large red ribbon that is fastened across the entrance to what appears to be a new building.

Joseph stops and turns to me, his brow creased. "First, I should tell you I made a rather unpopular decision that caused the hockey team to lose some funding. A week later, I got the letter telling me to watch my back." As he says the last part, his right eyebrow twitches slightly.

Most people would miss it, but not me; I'm trained to look for ticks or any signs that someone is lying. And right now, my gut says this man is lying.

"Do you know who threatened you?" I ask again.

"No." Another twitch.

"But you think it's a student?"

"I do." Another twitch.

"Why?"

“Because the hockey team and their coach will stop at nothing to protect their program.”

No twitch. Interesting.

“Havenwood University is known for having one of the top college hockey teams in the country,” he explains. “We’ve won the NCAA Division One men’s ice hockey championship three years in a row.” He nods his head forward to indicate we need to keep moving.

“Then why would you cut their funding?”

He leans closer. “It’s a long story. But some money was being diverted for questionable activities. I cut it off.”

“What questionable activities?” I press.

Before he can respond, an older man smiles at us as he speaks into a microphone at the podium.

“Mr. Taylor, perfect timing.”

Joseph steps to the podium, shakes the man’s hand, then launches into a speech about the new building and he thanks alumni for their donations several times. While he does that, I scan the crowd. Thankfully, the sun is now at our backs and I’m able to clearly see everyone. It’s mostly young students.

I don’t believe for a minute that it’s a student Joseph fears. No, he’s lying. But why?

Taking a closer look at those that are gathered here, I catalog that no one seems to be focused on Joseph. There are just over twenty people standing around. Most are staring at the large poster board next to him that lays out the floor plan of the building behind us. I take one step away from Joseph in order to hear a conversation between three boys gathered near the front. It consists entirely of how cool the new labs will be.

From this angle, I see a row of people standing in the back that, based on their lack of jeans, are likely faculty. My eyes catch on a woman in profile, talking to a man beside her. Something about her is familiar. Then she turns her head, and I swear everything stops; I can no longer see or hear anything around me except the thump of my heart beating in my chest.

My instinct is to go to her. Is it really her? No, it couldn't be her, could it?

Her brown hair is lighter and hangs longer than I remember, but there is no doubt it's Lucy. She's wearing a long red coat. Red must still be her favorite color. I smile at the thought.

Why is she here, and in this crowd? Then her eyes catch mine. At first, I wonder if she'll recognize me. I've changed over the years. But the moment her eyes widen, I know.

She turns to leave, and I panic. I need to go after her, yet I have a job to do—I can't leave this man here unprotected.

She ducks into the building next door.

All these years, I've never looked her up. I couldn't. I knew she must have moved on, and I didn't want to know the name of the bastard she was likely married to.

A few minutes later, the students applaud, and Joseph steps away from the podium.

"Cody, let's go back to my office." He's by my side now, and the crowd is dispersing. "Did you see anyone suspicious?"

"No."

Thank God since all I can think about now is Lucy.

He nods. "Let's walk and talk. I have another meeting in a few minutes."

We head back the way we came. I stare at every face we pass, hoping to see her again. My heart is still racing, and my stomach is rolling. What if that was my only chance? No, she has to work here. My gut says she must. It's a small school. Maybe this guy knows her. I shove my hands into the pockets of my suit jacket, hoping I appear casual.

"I saw a woman I used to know in the crowd."

"Oh yeah? What's her name?"

"Lucy Gardiner. You wouldn't by chance know her, would you?"

He stops walking, and his eyebrows shoot up. “Lucy?”

“Yeah.”

He stares at me for a beat, then he grins. “Is this a test? You already ran some kind of background check on me, didn’t you?”

“No, why?”

He laughs as he begins walking again. “Because Lucy Gardiner is my ex-wife.”

I don’t follow. I’m stuck to the ground as if cemented in place. Ex-wife. She *has* moved on, and this is the bastard she married. Do they have kids? Why did they divorce?

I have so many questions rolling around in my head, but bigger than them is the realization that she was able to move on. She was it for me. No one even came close.

Joseph spins around to face me. “How do you know Lucy?”

“We went to high school together.” My voice cracks on my last word. If Joseph noticed, he’s kind enough not to point it out.

I leave out that she was the love of my life. The one I was supposed to go to college with and marry... before life threw a few punches my way and I lost it all.

“Interesting.” Joseph resumes walking again. I catch up and fall in stride beside him. “Was she cold and detached back then, too?”

Joseph opens the door to the administration building, and I follow.

Cold and detached? Those are the last two words I would use to describe her. Fortunately, I don’t have to respond. Joseph is too busy smiling and saying hi to everyone he passes. This doesn’t look like a threatened man. He shows no fear.

“Do you still have the letter? I’d like to see it,” I say.

Joseph grins. “Yes, in my office.”

We step into his office, and he walks behind his desk and opens a drawer. The space is bare of any personal items, no photos, art, or personal coffee mugs. The coffee mug currently on his desk has the Havenwood emblem. It sits beside a laptop and two basic black pens.

If he hadn't said this was his office, I would think this was a community desk used by anyone needing to plug in their laptop.

"How long have you worked here?"

He laughs. "Too long. It's been years. Here's the letter."

I turn back to him, and he's still grinning as he hands me the letter.

I skim it, and at first, I think he must be joking; it looks like a child put it together. A piece of white copy paper with letters glued on, which were clearly cut out of a magazine, to spell out, "Give back the funding or die!"

I've seen a lot of threats over the years, but the only time I've seen anything like this was on television.

"Is this it?" I run my hand down my face, trying to school my features. "What I mean is, is this the only threat you received?"

"No, I've received several calls telling me to return the funding."

No twitch. That's a good sign.

"Did the caller say what would happen if you didn't return the funding?"

Joseph finally drops his grin. "It was implied that they would hurt me."

Twitch. Fuck. "Any idea who did this?" I ask.

"No." Twitch.

Why is this guy lying to me? How the hell am I supposed to protect him when I don't have a clue what's really going on?

“You don’t seem worried.”

I’m really trying to remain calm, but between seeing Lucy and then Joseph lying to me more than telling the truth, I’m at the end of my rope right now.

He laughs, not picking up on my tension. “I’m not. I mean, look at the letter. But when I showed Chip this letter, he insisted on hiring protection.”

“Chip?”

“My boss, the president of the university.”

I nod. “You showed this to him?” I hold the letter up. At this point, I’m certain Joseph made this himself. The question now is why? And the president of the university took this seriously?

“He followed me into my office the day I found it on my desk. He saw it when I did.”

I stare at the note again. There’s glue overflowing from under the letters. This isn’t something this person does regularly. It’s messy.

“Did you tell him about the phone calls?”

“I did.”

“When?”

“The same time he saw the letter.”

Okay, so that likely explains why I’m here. Clearly, Chip hasn’t figured out Joseph lies.

“Does your boss have any idea who might want to threaten you?”

“It could be anybody. It’s clearly related to the team’s funding, and people in this school—hell, this entire town—take hockey very seriously.”

“Any other threats?”

“No.” Twitch.

Dammit. I throw the letter down on the desk and then step closer to the man. “Joseph, if I’m going to protect you, you

have to be honest with me.”

He smiles. “Of course. But right now, I need to get to a meeting. It’s just down the hall. If you want to wait here, take a look around, I’ll be fine.”

You better believe I want to look around. I nod. Maybe I can figure out what this guy is really hiding. He doesn’t feel the need for security while in this building, and he expects me to believe this preschool version of a threat.

“That sounds good,” I tell him. “Oh, by the way, does your ex-wife work here?”

Joseph frowns. “Yes, she’s a professor.”

A professor? She always said she wanted to be a doctor.

He scoffs. “Why? You want to catch up?”

I don’t miss his accusatory tone. “No, I’m wondering how things ended between you two. Could she be behind this threat?” I know this likely has nothing to do with Lucy, but my response satisfies Joseph.

“Anything is possible,” he says as he walks to the door. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

I nod. I have one hour to figure out why my new client is not only lying to me, but possibly trying to push me in the wrong direction.

There’s no way Lucy could have anything to do with the threats against Joseph Taylor. But then again, I hadn’t seen her or talked to her in thirteen years. People change.

I certainly have.

CHAPTER 2



Lucy

WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED? Because there is no way I saw Cody Anthony for the first time in thirteen years, standing next to my ex-husband. I mean, seriously, what are the odds of a woman's two exes even meeting, much less being friends?

Are they friends? No, Joseph doesn't have true friends. But why else would Cody be standing there next to him?

By the time I get back to my office, my heart is racing, and my hands are shaking. I've always wondered how I'd react if I saw him again. I've had fantasies that he would see me out with my wonderful husband and family... I'd be happy, and then I'd see the regret on his face. But no, instead, I see him when I'm divorced and barely making ends meet.

Damn, he looked good, too. He's not the skinny high school boy I fell in love with. No, he's all muscle, filling out his suit in a way I thought could only exist in my fantasies. Thirteen years, and with one look, the man has left me a jumbled mess.

I have an hour to get myself together before my next class. I wipe under my eyes. I'm crying? Why the hell am I crying? I've already dealt with the pain he caused years ago, haven't I? Dammit! Why is he here?

"Professor Taylor!"

Oh no. I forgot to lock my office door. I don't even have to look up to know who's standing in the doorway. It's Randy.

I know I'm supposed to like all of my students, but let's be honest, Randy is an asshole. He comes from a rich family, as do most of the students here, but his attitude is more entitled than most. Even his clothes scream money. The kid only wears designer clothes and just in case anyone wasn't sure, the buckle of his Gucci belt would settle the matter. Frankly, I can't deal with him today.

He manages to have some issue requiring him to visit me during most of my office hours. He's not as subtle as he thinks. His questions might be about my class, but his eyes rarely leave my chest.

I want to tell Randy to go to hell, but after an incident my colleague had last year, if I broach the subject, this kid could report me for sexual harassment. And something tells me he knows that.

"Sorry, Randy. I'm running late." Thankfully, I forgot to take my coat off, so I gather up my laptop and place it in my bag to support my lie.

"Oh, so no office hours today?"

Not glancing up, I bite my cheek to calm my impatience. "No, not today. I'll see you in class later."

Not taking the hint, Randy asks, "Did you go to the opening of the new building?"

"Only briefly." More like, '*Yes, but then I ran away when I saw my ex*'.

I already knew Joseph had been tasked with giving a speech. Why him? No idea. He has nothing to do with the sciences. Maybe that's why I went... To watch the sonofabitch fail. But of course, he didn't. He never does.

Randy hasn't budged. "Let me walk you to your appointment."

Shit. No way am I going to be seen walking *anywhere* with Randy.

“Sorry, Randy, but I’m late for a phone meeting.” I pull out my cell phone and hold it up.

Please take the hint and leave.

He smirks. “A phone call meeting?” His eyes take in my bag with my now packed up laptop and then they slowly move to my coat. Then he winks. “Okay, see you later.” He leaves, closing the door behind him.

I breathe a sigh of relief that he left. I don’t really care if he believes me. I lock the office door to avoid any more interruptions. As soon as I sink back in my chair, my mind wanders back to Cody. He towered over Joseph at the podium. I’d forgotten how tall he was.

“Damn you!”

Cody was my first love, and he broke my heart. Left me so numb that I fell for Joseph’s lines. No one can compete with what I had with Cody. Or so I thought. Apparently, it was all in my head. Fiction. Because that man left the first chance he got, right after graduation. He didn’t even stick around for Suzie’s party after the ceremony.

I grab the tension ball I keep on my desk and squeeze. Who knows if it works, nonetheless I need to do something, or I’ll scream. I don’t know why he’s here. I should let it go. Odds are I won’t see him again.

But the universe is clearly laughing at me, because there’s a knock on my door. I don’t move, hoping whoever it is will go away.

“Lucy, it’s Cody. Please open the door.”

He’s here? Now? How did he find my office? I squeeze the tension ball so hard I’m shocked it doesn’t break into a million pieces. I stand on shaky legs and walk to the door.

“What do you want?” I ask through the door.

“Please, Lucy. Let me in.”

My stomach rolls at the idea of being in this tiny office alone with him.

“I can talk to you through the door if you’d like. I’m getting funny looks.”

The last thing I want is for my students to hear my business. I take a deep breath to steady myself, then swing the door open.

At a distance he looked good but up close, he’s just wow. Time has been his friend. He hasn’t just filled out. No, this man is pure muscle. And right now, his hazel eyes hit me like a punch to the gut, and my breath comes whooshing out.

The last time I really stared into his eyes, he told me he loved me and always would. That was right after high school graduation. I didn’t know at the time he’d be gone by that night. All the anger I’ve bottled up returns.

From his perch leaning against the door frame, he glances down the hall then back to me. “Can I come in?”

I don’t feel I have a choice, so I step aside, allowing him in. He pushes off the door frame, standing to his full height, towering over me. He brushes past me, and all my nerve endings light up for the first time in years.

His scent is a mix of clean laundry and man. Something I haven’t been close enough to smell on anyone in a long time.

His bulky frame makes my office seem smaller than it is. The space barely contains a desk, my chair, and two chairs for students on the other side. I’m one of the lucky few who has a window, but even it isn’t helping the trapped sensation.

Instead of talking, Cody stares at me. There’s an electric current buzzing between us. Even after all these years, it’s still there. But the longer he stares, the angrier I feel. Angry and hurt. The pain tries to overtake my fury as tears well in my eyes. I turn away before he can see.

This was a bad idea. I need to get him out of here now.

Trying to keep my voice steady, I tell him, “I don’t see how we have anything to say. I only let you in to prevent a scene my students would see. But I think you should leave.”

“I disagree. I think we have a lot to talk about, Lucy.”

The way he says my name has me turning back to face him. Mistake. He's grinning, and it lights up his face. He has lines around his eyes he didn't used to. And dammit, it's sexy as hell.

"No, we don't. It's been thirteen years. Anything you needed to say could have been accomplished with a phone call at any point in that time."

He runs his hand through his hair. It's still dark and wavy. I wonder if it's still as silky as it used to— No, don't go there. I need to focus on getting him to leave.

"I couldn't call," he whispers.

"Bullshit. You left a voicemail then never accepted my calls. I tried until you had your phone shut off."

He closes his eyes, but I press on.

"I was in love with you, and all I got was a voicemail saying you were enlisting instead of going to Havenwood. This was a few hours after you told me you loved me. We could have discussed it, but no! You made that choice without me. That was the moment we no longer had anything to discuss."

"You're angry."

"Damn right I'm pissed! I don't see you for thirteen years, and then you show up, standing next to my ex-husband? Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"No, I'm providing him protection."

I growl as I turn away. So matter of fact. He shows no sign of feeling anything, and I'm a mix of nerves, fury, and hell, I don't know what else, but it's all mixing inside, and I might explode.

"I'm sorry."

I spin back around. "You're *sorry*? We were supposed to graduate college and get married! You made so many promises, and I believed you. Then you bailed on me. On us."

Tears threaten to fall again, so I tilt my head up and stare at the ceiling, willing them not to.

“Luce—”

“No.” I step forward, my finger is in his face. “No, you don’t get to call me that anymore. I was over you. I moved on. I don’t understand why seeing you now... affects me this way.”

He visibly swallows as he nods. Maybe there is some emotion under there after all. His large hand engulfs my finger, and it sends tingles over my entire body. The memory of him touching me, holding me, it’s right there. I yank my hand back. It’s too much.

His eyes are glassy. “I’m sorry. I was young, and I didn’t see any other option.”

His voice is deep with regret. But that’s not enough. Not for how he devastated me.

“Don’t blame being young. Your option was to go to college like we planned. If you were having doubts, you should have talked to me. No, instead you decided and *told* me how it was going to be. I had no say. You know what? Let me return the favor. I don’t want to see you; I don’t want to talk to you. Get out!”

“Lucy, please. What are the odds we would run into each other like this? Leaving you has always been my biggest regret.”

It is in this moment I see the pain in his eyes. His hair is standing up more than it was when I first saw him. Does he still pull on it when he’s stressed? He doesn’t break our gaze as I let what he said sink in. He looks sincere.

But no, he could have found me before now. And even now, he wasn’t looking for me.

I can’t stop the tears from falling. “No, you can’t say things like that. You can’t come in here and disrupt my life. Go.”

“Lucy.” He takes a step closer.

“Please,” I beg.

A vein bulges on his forehead. Finally, he gives me a small nod and leaves.

The moment the door closes, I collapse into my chair and let the tears flow. Damn him for everything! I’m a sobbing mess, and the pain in my chest is as strong as it was the night he left. I take several deep breaths to calm myself.

No other man has ever been able to measure up to my memory of him. I’ve tried dating, I really have. But after making the mistake of marrying Joseph, I’ve finally had to acknowledge to myself that I have bad luck when it comes to my love life. I’m better off being alone.

CHAPTER 3



CODY

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd see Lucy again, but now that I have, I realize how much I've missed her. I miss the freckles on her nose. I miss the way her hair waves and frames her large, light brown eyes. I miss the way she rubs her fingers together when she's nervous. But what I miss the most of all is the heat in her gaze when she looks at me. I got a glimpse of all that, and fuck... I want her. I've always wanted her.

But damn, I didn't handle any of this well. I should have come up with a plan before heading to her office. I always have a plan.

I make my way back across campus to Joseph's office, where I take a seat and wait. When footsteps approach the door, I stand up straight.

"Joseph—Oh, I'm sorry, I thought Joseph would be in his office." A man in an expensive suit stands in the doorway; he's wearing diamond cufflinks and a very nice watch. He has an air of importance about him.

"I'm Cody Anthony. I'm working with Joseph today."

The man frowned. "I'm Charles Ziff, president of the university. Exactly how are you working with Joseph?"

"Ziff, I understand you are the one that hired protection from Reed Hawthorne Security." I pull my business card out of my wallet. "I was sent here to protect him."

The man reads my information and then smiles with what appears to be relief. “Cody, I’m glad you’re here. Call me Chip. Everyone does.”

I give him a nod. “Chip, do you have a moment? I’d like to ask a couple of questions.”

“Sure.”

I sit back down, and Chip takes the chair next to me.

“Any idea why Joseph doesn’t believe my services are necessary?”

The man chuckles. “Well, he likes to handle things himself, and he thought I was making too big a deal out of the situation. But I explained that, as his superior, I have the duty of hiring protection for him if there is cause for concern.”

“And why do you think he needs protection?”

The man’s smile falls. “He showed you the letter he received, didn’t he?”

I nod and pull it out of the drawer. I gave it a cursory glance when Joseph first showed it to me. There was no evidence to glean from it, as I was certain Joseph created it himself.

Chip’s eyes widen. “Yes, that’s it.”

“Anything else happen?”

Chip straightens his tie. A tie that at first appears conservative, but upon a second glance, I notice it’s covered in many tiny zebras. “Nothing that I know of, but Joseph is responsible for the funding of a very popular program getting cut. I suspected he’d receive pushback on that.”

“How’s he responsible?”

He frowns. “Joseph is our Chief Audit Executive; he has the final say on many financial matters. He said he found something during his usual audit that could cause liability for the university—something about money not being funneled through the right channels. He could explain it better. But he

asked for changes to be made, and when nothing changed, he ordered the funding to be cut.”

I lean back. “I’m guessing that pissed someone off.”

Chip laughs. “You have no idea. My phone was ringing off the hook for a week, parents and faculty demanding the money be reinstated, and that he be fired.”

“And you chose not to fire him?”

Chip smiled. “Not a chance. Joseph is good at his job and, aside from a few exceptions in the hockey program, he’s very well-liked by everyone here. He didn’t do anything wrong, other than make an unpopular decision.”

“I’m curious about something. There is a security company in this town. Morgan Thompson Security. Why did you reach out to a company in New York?”

Chip leans forward. “David Hawthorne is my cousin. I know him and trust him.”

I’m surprised I wasn’t told about this. But it likely isn’t pertinent to the assignment.

“Chip? I see you’ve met Cody.” Joseph is all smiles as he enters his office.

“Yes, he seems like a good guy. I’m glad someone will be keeping an eye on you.”

Interesting phrasing. Perhaps Chip is more perceptive than he looks.

Joseph shakes his head as he passes me and rounds his desk. “Chip, you’re wasting your money. No one is going to hurt me.”

Chip huffs. “Someone already *has* threatened you. It’s not a chance I’m willing to take.”

Joseph flops down in his chair. “Oh yes, the letter. I’m trying to forget about that.”

Chip arches a brow. “Well then, it’s good you have Cody here to help you remember. Anyway, I have to get to a

meeting. It was nice to meet you, Cody. If you need anything, just ask. My office is at the end of the hall.”

“Thank you. Good to meet you, too.”

Once Chip leaves, Joseph turns to me. There are lines around his eyes I hadn't noticed before. Instead of the polished Ken doll from earlier, the man appears worn out.

“How does this work? I'm done for the day, and normally I'd go home. Do you come with me? Do you sit outside in your car?”

“I go home with you. If someone is threatening you, you need protection at home and at work.”

Joseph grins. “Okay, let's go.”

“I'll follow you in my car.”

Joseph gets up with a little extra pep in his step.

I frown. Giddy Joseph might be more annoying than regular Joseph. “Did you get good news in your last meeting? You seem happier than before.”

He turns to me as we walk down the hall. “The meeting was boring. No, I'm excited to have a houseguest.”

That should have been my first clue as to what I was in for.

We drive to the edge of Fallwell Cove. It's a nice area, but nothing like the rich north part of town where I expected Joseph to live. He pulls into the driveway of a gray two-story, craftsman-style home that seems large for a single man.

Then a pit forms in my stomach. Did Lucy live here with him once? There are red flowers along the driveway, but nothing about this house really screams a woman's touch. But do I even know what Lucy's touch would look like?

“Big house for one guy,” I venture as we walk up the porch steps.

He shrugs. “My dad owns it and lets me stay here.”

“That's nice, since it's so close to the university.”

He unlocks the door. “It is, but it’s also his way of keeping me close to him.”

Once inside, Joseph offers to cook dinner.

“Sure, that would be great. I can’t remember the last time I had a home-cooked meal.”

I sit at the dining room table, trying to remember. It was a few months ago when Thunder invited all of us guys to his place. He smoked ribs and whipped up a few sides. I smile at the memory. It was damn good.

“I hope you like cheese,” Joseph says.

“Love it.”

“White or yellow?” Joseph asks.

“What?” I must have missed something he said.

“White or yellow cheese?”

I’ve never been asked that. “I guess yellow is my favorite. I’m a big fan of cheddar.”

Joseph grins. “Me too.”

He returns to the kitchen, and I take in the home. The dining room opens to the living room. Both are fully furnished with high-end items. Even the chair I’m sitting in feels like something from a nice restaurant with all its fancy fabric.

“Did you decorate this place?” I know I shouldn’t ask, but I’m curious. Is this Lucy’s style?

Joseph laughs from the kitchen. “No, my mom did. The place came furnished.”

Oh. Okay. Well, now I didn’t feel so bad for hating it. A few minutes later, Joseph walks to the dining room table carrying two bowls and two spoons. Then he sets the bowl down in front of me. I stare at it for a beat.

“Is this mac and cheese?”

Joseph smiles. “Yes, it is. I’m so happy you said yellow cheese. I like that one best.”

He scoops a spoonful into his mouth, leaving a smear of yellow across his lips.

Had I known this was what he meant when he said he'd cook for me, I'd have insisted on ordering us a pizza. Or two. I'm a big guy and a little bowl of mac and cheese isn't going to do it.

After dinner, Joseph is still talking. The man doesn't shut up—and one thing I've learned, he *loves* to talk about himself. Brags about everything and anything. At least it covers the sound of my growling stomach.

I now understand why he was excited to have a houseguest. Part of me wonders if Joseph created the letter to have someone here to brag to all night. Because of his tick, I know most of it is lies.

Two hours after dinner, I'm ready for bed, but this man has endless energy. And words. He says so many words.

Thankfully, his phone rings.

“Oh, I'll be right back.”

He steps out the back sliding door, and all I can think is *Hallelujah, silence!* But I need to take advantage of this opportunity.

When I used his bathroom upon our arrival, I spotted what appeared to be a home office across the hall. So that's where I head.

I turn on the hall light and hope it illuminates the room enough for me to see inside. Almost immediately, I spot a trash can under the desk; when I pull it out, pieces of cut-up magazines fill it. I ball my hands into fists. I knew it. I knew the man was lying. He didn't even try to hide the evidence. But then, if it were for show at work, why would anyone come to his house?

I hear the back door open, and quickly make my way across the hall to the bathroom where I flush the toilet and turn on the faucet.

“Cody?”

I pop out of the bathroom. “Yes?” I manage to keep the anger from my voice.

“I’m tired. I’m going to bed. I hope you don’t mind.”

Yes! Finally, some peace and quiet. “Not at all. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Joseph goes to his bedroom and closes the door. I’ll be sleeping in the guest room down the hall from him.

As I walk into the room, I look closer for signs of Lucy. There’s artwork hanging over the dresser. It is all pastels and spring flowers. Glancing around the room, all the touches are a pastel blue. Doesn’t look like something Joseph would choose.

But I have to push away the possibility that Lucy lived here. The idea of them having sex on the table where I just ate dinner, or on the couch where her ex-husband and I relaxed after our meal is just too much.

A car door slams outside. Curious, I’m up and at the window just in time to see Joseph’s black Acura pulling out of the driveway with the lights off.

I rush to his bedroom; the window is wide open, and he’s gone. What the fuck? He ditched his hired security? Something is really wrong with this guy.

I run outside and get in my car. Fortunately, he lives on a long road, so I’m able to see him until he turns right. I turn on my headlights just before I turn to follow him, keeping a good distance.

Where would Joseph go that he doesn’t want me to know about?

Not long later, he pulls into a food bank parking lot. I continue down the street a short way, then park and turn in my seat to watch him go inside.

A food bank?

He’s one of the highest-ranking administrators at the college. There’s no reason he should need to go to a food bank. Is there?

CHAPTER 4



Lucy

YESTERDAY, I managed to get through my last class on autopilot. Then I sent an SOS text to Connie, and like the best friend she is, she came over with two bottles of wine and listened to me bawl my eyes out as I told her about my encounter with Cody.

The moment she walked in, I knew she canceled a date for me. Her hair was hanging in blonde waves, and she was wearing her blue dress, the one she reserves for driving a guy nuts. It fits her like a glove and accentuates all her curves. She assured me that I saved her. Her date was trying to talk her into going to his mother's place to have sex... since he lived there. According to the guy, his mom would wear headphones so it would be okay.

After we were done being grossed out over her date, she suggested I call Joseph and ask why Cody was here, pointing out that he'd said he works security and speculating he was probably offering some sort of service to Joseph.

With that man's habits, I'm not surprised he needs security.

But I didn't call. The odds of Joseph telling me the truth were slim. Instead, I spent the rest of the night drinking and crying while Connie tried to console me.

Today, I'm rocking swollen, red eyes and a nasty hangover. I need to stop thinking about Cody; sexy, hot, protective Cody

has invaded all my thoughts since I saw him yesterday. It's not healthy. What I need to do is prepare for my next lecture. One foot in front of the other. That's how I'll get through today. That, and some aspirin. And makeup to cover up the redness.

By the time I'm wrapping up my last lecture of the day, I'm finally feeling better. I spin around as I give the class their homework.

"For class tomorrow, read chapters ten through twelve and do..."

Then I spot Cody in the back of the classroom. Why the hell is he here? And how the hell does he keep finding me?

He's leaning against the wall, giving me a sexy smirk. His arms are crossed, which makes his biceps pop.

The man is hot as hell. Probably didn't take more than one look from him for the women in admissions to give him a copy of my schedule. Ugh, the thought of him flirting with another woman—

"Professor Taylor?" Randy asks.

I realize I've stopped talking and have been staring at Cody. He gives me a quick nod, then leaves.

I clear my throat, trying yet again to banish him from my thoughts. "Okay, yes, read those chapters and do the exercises at the end of each one. That's all for today."

My students murmur. I never end class early. Still, they gather their belongings and make their way out the door.

I'm packing up my own things when I hear Randy behind me.

"Professor Taylor, is everything all right?"

I turn, putting on my professional face. "Yes."

As I move to step away, Randy steps in front of me. The smell of strong cologne pervades my space. Like other college kids, he seems to believe more is better. My nose begs to differ. I step back to get fresher air.

"If you ever need to talk, I'm here."

“Thank you, Randy, but that wouldn’t be appropriate.”

He reaches for my hand. “Lucy.”

I startle and jerk my hand away. “*Professor Taylor.*”

Why can’t this kid ever take a hint?

His pupils dilate. “I can get into that. Let’s stop playing this game we’ve been playing all semester.”

Gross. Is this some kind of sick joke?

I sidestep around him, needing to get out of this room. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Randy.”

I’m halfway up the stairs to the doors when he steps in front of me, cutting me off.

“Don’t lie, Lucy. You’ve been flirting with me all semester. I see the way you look at me.”

I’ve sensed that Randy is a self-entitled ass, but I never would have suspected he was delusional. But no matter how wrong he is, he now stands between me and the door.

For the first time in my career as a professor, I’m scared; the room is empty except for the two of us. If I run down the stairs toward the back door, he’ll easily catch up. I have to talk my way out of this.

Dammit, now I want Cody to come back. “Randy, I have only ever looked at you as a student. Please move. I have an appointment I can’t be late for.”

His thin lips turn up in a smile. “You don’t have an appointment. This is your last class, then you usually work in your office for an hour. I know your schedule.”

Has he been stalking me? I stand a little straighter and try to remain calm. “How would you know that?” My voice cracks, giving away my fear.

Randy smirks as he leans in too close and runs his icy fingers along my chin. I wince.

“I know everything about you. Which means I know you’re lying when you say you have an appointment.”

The door bursts open. “She’s not lying. Take your hands off my girlfriend.”

Cody stands at the top of the stairs, looking like he’s ready to charge a bull, and wearing a green short-sleeve T-shirt that appears to be straining to contain all his muscles. Between that and the way he’s glaring at Randy, he’s an intimidating man.

“Who are you? I’ve never seen you around.” Randy turns to me, scowling. “Why haven’t I seen him?” His tone is accusatory, as if it is my fault his stalking is less than stellar.

“I try to keep my personal life and professional life separate. Usually.” I arch a brow at Cody.

While part of me can’t stand that he’s here wreaking havoc, he is saving me, and I appreciate it.

“Sorry, babe, I couldn’t wait till tonight to see you.”

Babe.

That’s what he used to call me. Just hearing him say it again pulls at my heartstrings and stirs memories long buried.

The next thing I know, he’s standing beside me, looking like he is going to kiss me. He must see the way my eyes widen in fear, because he bends down and pecks my cheek. “Ready to go?”

“Yes.”

He extends his hand, and I take it like a lifeline, ignoring the way a simple touch from him lights up my body as we exit the lecture hall and walk toward my office.

Neither one of us says a word until we’re inside and the door is closed. And locked. He’s still holding my hand, and the current that flows between us is all-consuming. I yank my hand out of his.

“Nice timing, but how the hell did you hear what he said?”

“The door was ajar. When he went up to you, I thought you might have something going on with him, but then I saw the fear in your eyes. Why the hell did that punk have his hands on you?”

“Excuse me? Are you trying to blame this on me?”

He runs his hands through his hair, and I jealously follow their path. I used to run my hands through his hair every time we kissed. “No, I’m sorry. Seeing another man put his hands on you made me angry.”

I sit down in my chair and glare at him. “You have no right to be angry.”

“You’re right. I don’t. But I still was. Then when I realized you didn’t want the attention, I wanted to tear him to pieces.”

I suppress my smile. He isn’t as unaffected as he seemed yesterday. Knowing that makes me feel better.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I tell him. “He would just turn it around on me.”

“How do you mean?” Cody sits in the chair across from me. As he leans back, I notice the fabric of his shirt straining across his broad chest. I wonder if he ever rips out of shirts like the Hulk.

“Lucy?”

I glance up. Cody’s staring intently at me. And that damn green shirt really brings out his eyes. I squeeze mine shut. I need to focus. What was I talking about? Oh yes, Randy.

“Last year, a student accused a professor of unwanted advances. There was no proof, but the student made sure that all the parents found out. And since those parents have money and power, they were able to force the professor out of her job.”

“Do you think the professor did it?”

“Absolutely not. There’s even footage of the student who accused her going on and on at some frat party about how he got a professor fired for no reason.”

Cody leans forward. “Was the professor reinstated?”

I shake my head. “She couldn’t get a job at any other university, either, due to the rumors that followed her.”

“That’s why you fear Randy?”

“It’s not unreasonable. He’s in the same fraternity as the other accuser, so he knows how to get what he wants. And based on what Randy said today, he apparently wants me.”

“I’ll kill him,” Cody says as he jumps up.

Something tells me he could.

“Cody, while I appreciate you wanting to go all caveman, I’ll deal with him.”

I almost expect him to put up more of a fight, but his gaze is locked on my business cards.

“You took his last name,” he says.

The change of subject startles me. “What?”

He picks up a card. “Lucy Taylor.”

“That’s what happens when you get married.”

He jerks his head up and stares into my eyes. “You said you would never take a man’s name. You would never take my name.”

Oh shit. I did say that. Pain radiates from him, and I almost feel bad.

“That was before. By the time I married Joseph, I didn’t want anything to do with the Gardiner name.”

“Why?”

“No.” I point at him. My momentary sympathy gone. “You lost the right to ask questions when you left.”

He winces. Damn, why did I bring that up? Seeing him opens old wounds. Wounds I thought were buried.

I’ve always wondered why he left. Did he want the chance to live his life not tied down to one woman? We were so young when we promised each other we’d be together forever.

The idea of him with anyone else made me nauseous for months—hell, for over a year, if I’m being honest. Until Connie helped me get my head out of my ass and move on with my life.

If I hadn't shared a dorm room with her our freshman year, I might have dropped out of school completely.

"I'm sorry about that." He swallows, and his eyes shift to take in the walls of my office.

I've hung a couple pieces of art I picked up online. I missed the ones hanging in my old bedroom at my parents' house, but there was no way I could afford anything like those.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

My eyes snap to his. Why is he asking this? "That's none of your business."

He nods. "You're right. I'm sorry."

I glance to his left hand. It's tan, but there's no ring. "Are you married?"

He shakes his head. "No. Never been."

"How long are you going to be here?"

He stares into my eyes. "As long as it takes."

And now I'm not sure if he's talking about the security job or me. I shiver.

Can I give Cody another chance? I dismiss the thought. He left me. If he wanted me, he would have come back long before this. And it's only a coincidence I'm seeing him now.

I can't forget that.

"Who is coming after Joseph?" I ask. "Another bookie?"

Cody straightens. "A bookie? Joseph has a gambling problem?"

I laugh. "You have no idea. He ruined my life with it. I found out about it around the same time I found out he'd used up his monthly trust fund payment and dove into our savings."

"He has a trust fund? And his dad lets him stay in a house?"

"The house was a gift from his father last year. The trust fund pays him one hundred thousand dollars a month. It made

him quite the catch, as far as my own father was concerned. He hates Joseph now.”

“One hundred thousand a month, and that wasn’t enough to cover his gambling debt?” Cody whistles. “Do you have any idea who his bookie might be?”

“No, he kept that part of his life secret from me.”

“Do you think he might meet his bookie at the food bank?”

“The food bank? No. My uncle Vince runs that place. Remember him? He doesn’t agree with Joseph’s gambling, so he certainly wouldn’t allow it to happen there.”

Cody crosses his arms while staring at me intently.

It makes me uncomfortable, and I squirm in my seat. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Sorry.” He doesn’t stop staring. “How do you know Vince doesn’t agree?”

I can’t help the smile on my face; Vince has been there for me every time I need him. Really, he’s the only one in my family that has, if I’m being honest.

“Because he hates what Joseph did to me. If it weren’t for Vince, I would have been homeless after Joseph stole all our money.”

My smile falls as I remember the night I discovered how serious Joseph’s gambling problem was. I was at the university bookstore and my credit card was declined. I went home and looked up all my accounts online. He’d managed to spend all of his trust fund, all of our savings, and max out our joint credit card. I was left with nothing. And I had no way to pay for food or gasoline or what I really needed, a new place to stay. That had been the final straw in our marriage.

I was about to ask my dad for help when Vince showed up on my doorstep. Thank god for that. Owing my dad was not something I ever wanted to do.

A vein in Cody’s forehead bulges. “Joseph stole your money?”

“Yes. That was the end of our marriage. But Vince was great. He let me stay in one of his apartments for free until I was able to get back on my feet. Joseph must have felt bad about his part in it all, because he helped me get a job at the university.”

“I don’t understand. Your family has plenty of money. Why wouldn’t your dad give you an advance on your trust fund?”

I look away from Cody. Grabbing my stress ball, I give it a few squeezes. Might as well tell him. It isn’t a huge secret.

I purse my lips. “My dad revoked my trust fund when I was twenty-two. Now I refuse to ask him for help. He would hold it over me, and I couldn’t live that way.”

“Revoked it? What happened?”

“Let’s just say we had a falling out. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Diving into how my parents cut me off because I pursued my dream and not theirs will only make me more emotional. The fact they want a puppet more than a daughter is something I came to terms with long ago, even if I still don’t understand. If they want someone to always say yes, they should hire someone for that role.

Fortunately, Cody takes my hint and simply nods. “And that is why you didn’t want to keep the Gardiner name?”

“Yes.”

Please don’t ask anymore.

Cody is silent for a moment. As much as I hope he’ll leave the subject alone, I can’t say I’m saddened by his scowl. He used to be protective of me; it’s something I’ve missed.

Stop it. No, I can’t miss him. He’s here for a job, and then I’ll never see him again.

“Vince has apartments?” he asks.

I’m relieved at the change of topic. I could discuss Vince all day. He really saved me and is one of my favorite people.

“Yes, he owns several apartment buildings in town.”

“He’s a landlord?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re *sure* Vince isn’t a bookie?”

Okay, I have to put a stop to this before Cody tarnishes Vince’s good name. “I’m positive. Vince is a good man. He does a lot for this town. He started the food bank and makes sure it’s well-stocked.”

Cody arches a brow.

“What?” I ask.

“I drove by there last night. I’m surprised there’s need for one in this town.”

“Well, there must be if he put it here.”

Cody stands up and paces behind the chair. “Why would you establish a food bank in one of the richest towns in the state?”

I shrug. “But anytime I drive by the parking lot is full.”

Cody stops pacing and places his hands on the back of the chair. “There’s a need for it in Pine Valley.”

Pine Valley is where we both grew up—though we were very much from different areas. Most of Pine Valley was comprised of families, like Cody’s, that struggled to make ends meet. I grew up in the hills which bordered Fallwell Cove; both were made up of more affluent families.

Both towns funneled into one high school; that’s where we met. The memory of that day has never faded.

Billy Burmark had me cornered at my locker. It was my junior year, and he insisted we go to the homecoming dance together. He wasn’t taking no for an answer. When Cody leaned up against the lockers and asked if I was all right, Billy backed off. Cody smiled, and I was smitten. We were always together after that.

Until he left.

“You will have to ask Vince about why he chose to have the food bank here,” I snap.

His jaw ticks as he runs his hand through his dark hair. Why the hell does it still have to be so thick?

My eyes travel down to his T-shirt again. I swear I could see a six-pack through the tight fabric. But what really catches my eye is a tattoo peeking out of one short sleeve. When I make my way back to his face, he’s smiling. He knows I was checking him out.

Damn him for being better looking now than he was at eighteen.

He moves to my side of the desk and leans down on it. He’s within inches. His scent wafts around me, turning me on. I squeeze my legs together. Then I feel the heat emanating from his body. I want to reach out and touch him, but instead, I cross my arms.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I got us off-topic. What are we going to do about that student?”

I’m glad he isn’t going to harass Vince, but I don’t want to talk about Randy either.

“*We?* Nothing. I’ll just be sure I’m not the last one leaving a class again.”

He pins me with a stare. “I don’t like it.”

Before I can respond, there’s a knock on my door. The doorknob jiggles and Cody is up and at the door in a flash. He throws the door open.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t realize you had someone in here. Are we still on?” Ted Barton looks at me between giving Cody side glances.

I forgot I agreed to discuss our joint class after I was finished today. Ted teaches classes in computer science and the lab portion of my Neuroethology and Programming for Psychology class. I’ve enjoyed working with him, and right now, I’m actually happy to be working tonight.

“Yes, we are. Cody was just leaving.” I grab my purse and stand.

Ted shifts uncomfortably in the hallway outside my door. Cody is clenching his fists. I realize this might look like a date, but frankly, I don’t care. Let Cody stew on that. To see that it bothers him after all these years feels good.

I probably shouldn’t feel that way, but dammit, I do.

“Be careful around Randy. I don’t trust him.” Cody finally storms out the door.

Ted gives me a strange look. “Is that your boyfriend?” he asks.

“Ex.” I grab my keys and head for the door. Ted follows as we walk down the empty hallway.

“Oh, I guess that explains why he looked at me like that.” Ted opens the door to the computer lab.

“He’s probably just worried about me. I had an incident with a student today, and he helped me out of it.”

“Is that what he means by ‘be careful around Randy’?”

“Yes, one of my students was, uh, I’m not even sure. Flirting or coming onto me? Anyway, he wasn’t taking no for an answer. Fortunately, Cody walked into the classroom at the right time.”

Ted stops. I turn to see his face flushed.

“What’s Randy’s last name?” Ted’s voice is tight.

“Sinclair.”

He blows out a breath. “Yeah, I know that rich prick.”

“It’s okay,” I assure him. “Cody told him he was my boyfriend and intimidated him enough that he’ll leave me alone now.”

Ted nods. “Are you sure?”

“Totally.” I flash Ted a smile and hope like hell I’m right.

CHAPTER 5



CODY

A FEW DAYS with Joseph turns into a long week. If I have to hear him tell me how great he is one more time, I might harm the man myself. I stare out over the campus as I stand outside the administration building. I haven't seen Lucy since the confrontation with that Randy kid.

That fucking self-entitled asshole.

Yeah, I know his type. I went to high school with many like him. I want to track him down and teach him a lesson, but I know he'll just find some way to take it out on Lucy.

And then her douche bag date. At least that's what it looked like. The man looked like another rich asshole with his button-down, dress pants, and Rolex watch. But yeah, I might be a little biased.

I run my hand through my hair, trying to forget that guy. Maybe it wasn't a date.

I have other problems anyway. Over the course of the week, Joseph has become jumpier, and I'm not sure why. He doesn't know that I followed him that night to the food bank. He pulled the same thing last night and, sure enough, ended up there again.

I need to know what is going on at the food bank, but I can't leave Joseph.

Maybe Hawthorne will agree to send someone to relieve me so I can look into it.

When I call him, I'm surprised he answers on the first ring.

"Cody! How's it going?" Hawthorne asks.

I fill him in on Joseph ditching me two nights this past week, and something not being right about a food bank in a rich town.

"What do you need?" he asks.

"Another guy. Someone who can stay with Joseph in the evenings so I can check out the food bank."

Yeah, I should ask for someone to investigate the food bank, but damn it, I need a break from this guy. In the evenings, he won't shut up. Every. Damn. Night. Apparently, he never tires of talking about himself.

"Did you ask Trip to run a background check on the food bank?" Hawthorne asks.

Trip is our go-to guy for anytime we need to learn more about someone. He has resources that can find just about anything. I've never met the guy but from what I understand he only communicates with a phone call or text. He doesn't do in person meetings. No one seems to know why.

"I did." When it comes to the food bank, I'm certain Vince has done his best to keep any records clean. "I doubt it will turn anything up. But my gut says something is going on there."

Hawthorne clears his throat. "Do you think someone at this food bank is the one threatening Joseph?"

I sigh. "No."

"Okay, then you have to let it go. We were hired to protect this guy, not investigate him."

I knew he would say that. "Your cousin hired us, right?"

"I'm not sure why that matters."

“Because Joseph has lied to me many times. I don’t know why, but I want to be sure he isn’t hurting the university.”

Hawthorne is silent for a moment, then finally lets out a breath. “You’re right. You should at least check it out. But I can’t send anyone to help you because everyone is out on assignments.”

Well, shit.

“Thunder is working with Morgan Thompson Security out in that area. When he’s done, I can send him to help you. It might be a week though.”

Thunder is a good friend and damn good at his job. But I can’t wait a week. He’s worked with most of the guys at Morgan Thompson Security, or as we call them— the MTS guys. I wonder if any of them could help out.

“Any chance one of the MTS guys could step in?” I ask.

Both Reed and Hawthorne are friends with Stormy so I can only hope they can talk him into sparing someone. But I know I’m pushing here so I brace myself to hear him say no. Hawthorne swallows, and I imagine him drinking his fifth cup of coffee of the day by now.

“Look, I can call Stormy and see if any of his guys are available. He owes me a favor.”

“Thank you. I would really appreciate that.”

“No promises.”

“I understand.” I end the call.

As much as I want to stay out here and try to catch a glimpse of Lucy, I have to get back to Joseph, so I head back inside to his office.

“Hey, I’m glad I caught you,” he says as I walk through the door.

Joseph is wearing another expensive Italian suit. This one is blue and even though I dislike the guy, I can see why Lucy might have fallen for him. I glanced in his closet while he was at the food bank one night. The man’s closet is amazing. It’s

bigger than his damn bedroom and filled with at least twenty suits along with an assortment of other nice items. Not my style, but clearly he cares about his appearance.

“I got called into a meeting that will go the rest of the afternoon. Why don’t you meet me back here at four?” Joseph says as he fiddles with a cufflink.

“Where’s your meeting?”

He buttons his suit jacket and smiles. “Just down the hall. I’ll be fine.”

Of course, you will.

I’ve concluded there is no real threat against him, but the fact he’s gone through the trouble of making his boss think there is one is concerning. I need to figure out his end game.

“Let me check out the room first,” I suggest, “then I’ll see you after your meeting.”

Joseph’s smile falters for a moment.

One thing I’ve figured out about this man, he’s all about his image. And while he wants to appear threatened to his boss, he hasn’t wanted me in any of his meetings with his colleagues.

Finally, he huffs out, “Sure. Follow me.”

I hide my smile.

After making a show of checking out a closet in the room and then introducing myself to all the suits, or meeting attendees, as Joseph’s security, I leave. I plan to use this time to see if I can learn more about Vince and his food bank.

An online search of the food bank doesn’t provide much information. I’m not surprised. Honestly, I have no concrete reason to suspect anything is wrong with it; I’m only going on a hunch. But generally, my hunches are never wrong. So, I decide to scope out the place.

On the way to the food bank, I detour by Vince’s house. He’s still living in the same place he was when I was in high school. The house has been repainted and the bushes in front

are all larger. The white car in the driveway matches one that has been at the food bank each night. It must be Vince's.

I park down the block and wait. Twenty minutes later, he comes out the door, staring at his phone. Once he hits the road, I follow at a distance.

Vince stops at an apartment building and goes inside. I stay in the car, frustrated that I have no idea what he's doing. He could be collecting rent or collecting payments from bets.

He's out within ten minutes, and we're on the road again. Next stop, the food bank. I pull up to the curb nearby.

Vince smiles at a man in dark jeans and a black sweatshirt who was waiting for him in front of the door. The man crosses his arms and says something. Vince shakes his head and points inside. The man throws his hands in the air and then both go inside.

I've seen nothing that should cause suspicion, but I can't let it go. The argument I just witnessed could have been about anything. However, until I have more time to go inside, I'm not going to learn anything.

Might as well let it lie for now. I check the clock and see I can at least grab a late lunch before I have to endure another afternoon with Joseph.



AS I APPROACH Joseph's office, I hear yelling.

"No! I said no. I don't have the money. You have to give me more time!"

I race down the hall and stop outside the door where I can't be seen. I arrive in time to hear a man reply to Joseph's plea.

"I already gave you more time. Nearly a week. But there's one more thing I can do before I tell my boss."

I know that voice...

"Yes, anything. Please," Joseph begs.

“I’ll give you today to ask Lucy for the money.”

“Lucy?” Joseph repeats. “The woman loathes me. She would never give me money! Besides, she doesn’t have any.”

“Her father does. And she would help you if she thought you were in danger.”

“And how am I going to convince her I’m in danger?”

A sudden, sharp *crack* is followed by Joseph crying out, “What the fuck?”

I lean in to see what the hell is going on. Vince is standing over Joseph, his hand still balled in a fist. Joseph is on the ground rubbing his left temple.

I knew it! Vince is his bookie. Why the hell does he want to drag Lucy into this?

“One more,” Vince says.

Joseph holds up his arm. “No!” But he’s too late and Vince’s fist connects with his nose,

I know I should go in there and stop Vince from pummeling Joseph, but I want to see how Joseph responds to this Lucy plan of Vince’s.

“There, that will convince her. You’d better find a way, Joseph. No more extensions.”

Footsteps approach the door, and I jump into the next office over and hide behind the door.

Vince must have left the food bank shortly after I did. Now I’m kicking myself for that late lunch. What if he met with his boss before coming here, and I missed it?

Once Vince is gone, I re-approach Joseph’s office.

“Shit,” I hear him shout.

I knock on the open door as he rounds his desk.

Joseph jumps. “Cody. Good to see you. You are a little late, I’m afraid.” He motions to his face. His nose is bleeding, and the bruising around his left eye is already coming in.

“Maybe you shouldn’t send me away from your meetings?”

Joseph glares at me. I cross my arms and stare back.

“Touché.” He grabs a tissue and dabs the blood from his nose.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask.

“I just received a friendly reminder. I owe someone some money.”

“Who?”

Joseph waves his hand. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. You hired me to protect you, so I need to know who is after you. And why do you owe him money?”

He flops in his chair. “My boss, Mr. Ziff, hired you. I can take care of myself. But it wouldn’t hurt to have you by my side more often.”

“Is this related to the funding cut?” I ask.

Joseph laughs. “No. I’m afraid not. I borrowed money from someone that doesn’t accept late payments, if you know what I mean.”

I sit in the chair across from him and lean back. This man gets a hefty monthly trust fund payment, likely a generous salary, and he still has to borrow from someone like Vince? I’m wondering if he’s into something more than gambling.

“How much?” I press.

He frowns. “Don’t worry about it. The best thing I can do now is get him his money.”

“What if you can’t pay him? Will he go after Lucy?”

Joseph frowns. “Why would you bring her up?”

“I heard the guy mention her name.”

Joseph stares at me. “Then you heard him hit me too?”

“I did.”

“And you didn’t think coming in here to stop him was a good idea?”

“No.”

Vince doesn’t need to know about me until I figure out what is going on.

Joseph shuts his eyes. “He won’t hurt Lucy. He wants me to play the sympathy card to get her to pay. But that won’t work.” No twitch.

As much as I need to focus on Joseph and his safety right now, the thought that Lucy won’t be sympathetic to him makes me smile.

“You don’t think she’ll give you money?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. But don’t worry. Lucy will be fine. I have a plan. I’ll get the money later today, and this will all be over.” His eyebrow twitches.

Motherfucker.

Vince might not hurt Lucy, but his boss might. Whoever the hell that is. Lucy isn’t safe, and I’m stuck protecting this asshole. I hope like hell Hawthorne finds someone who can relieve me soon.

I didn’t learn anything following Vince, but it’s clear I need to figure out who his boss is.

“Why did Vince hit you?” I know damn well why, but it’s time to see if Joseph can tell the truth about anything.

His eyes widen. “How did you—” He closes his eyes. “You know Vince?”

“Met him when I was in high school. Do you know who his boss is?”

Joseph sighs. “No, I only ever deal with Vince.” He drops his bloody tissue in the trash can. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get cleaned up. I’ve got one more meeting to get to.” He walks past me and exits his office.

The man clearly needs protection—apparently from his bookie, though, not a student—yet he sends me away

whenever he can. What was the point of the false letter if he doesn't want me around?

My phone rings, and I answer, hopeful. "Hey, Hawthorne."

"I spoke to Stormy. He can spare a guy. His name is Dax Adams. He goes by Rover and he's driving your way now. I gave him the address to the administration building."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that. Also, I need someone to do some digging on a man named Vince Gardiner."

"Where did his name come from?"

"Joseph Taylor lied about his threat."

"It's not coming from a student?"

"No. He changed his story and now he says he owes some money to Vince's boss, but he really doesn't want my help and isn't telling me much."

"Shit. How much does he owe?"

"He wouldn't tell me. But Vince is tired of waiting."

"All right. I'll ask Trip to run a full check on him and see what we can find."

"Thanks."



ROVER MUST NOT HAVE BEEN TOO FAR away, because he calls me from the parking lot twenty minutes later. I walk over and spot him immediately; he's standing next to a motorcycle, wearing a leather jacket. His nearly black hair is cut short in the back but is a little long in front.

The moment he sees me, he waves. "You must be Cody. Rover." He extends his hand.

I give him a firm shake. "That's me. Thank you for coming out here."

He shrugs. "Stormy said it was for Hawthorne. I've worked with him. Great guy."

“You did? I’m surprised we haven’t met yet.”

He shrugs. “He was in Seattle and the assignment came up unexpectedly. Now tell me, what do you need me to do?”

I fill him in on everything that has gone on with Joseph, including his lies and not wanting protection. I also warn Rover that Joseph occasionally sneaks out his bedroom window at night to go to the food bank.

Rover crosses his arms. “Does he know you know that?”

“No, I follow him. He’s in there for a while and then when he steps out, empty-handed, I race back to his house. Beat him home every time. But the problem is I don’t know what he’s doing inside the food bank.”

“Want me to find out?” Rover grins.

I sigh. “No, not yet. One of our guys, Trip, is running a background check on the owner. I actually know the guy, so I thought I’d pay him a visit. But since he threatened Joseph’s ex-wife, I’d like to go warn her first. Will you be good here after I introduce you?”

I cringe at calling Lucy his ex-wife, but if I tell Rover the truth before he gets to know me, he’ll think this is all personal. It’s not. It really isn’t. I keep telling myself that.

“Wait. Trip? That sounds like the guy we use to run all our searches and financial checks. Cowboy, my other boss, served with him and they’re good friends.”

“Huh, small world I guess.”

“Yes, it is. And to answer your question, yes, I’ll be good. Now I’m ready to meet this wonderful man you’ve been protecting. He sounds delightful.” Rover flashes a huge smile while he rubs his hands together.

I laugh. “You two will get along well. Let’s head to his office and wait for him.”

Despite telling me he had another meeting, guess who’s sitting in his office?

“Joseph?” I frown as I enter.

He jumps.

Yeah, he wasn't expecting to be caught in a lie. "I'd like you to meet Rover. He and I will be rotating your security detail."

Joseph's mouth drops open. "What? I have two of you now?"

Rover doesn't miss a beat. He plops down in the chair across from Joseph and puts his boots up on the desk which Joseph stares at with disgust. "Yes, sir. You are important to this university, and they want to ensure your safety. To do that, you need two of us."

"Great," he mutters.

"Good! I'm glad you're looking forward to it," Rover says. "Now, normally, Cody will take the days and I'll take the nights, but for today, Cody is going to leave a little early. That will give us plenty of time to get acquainted."

Joseph looks at me like I'll save him, but I'm trying really hard not to laugh.

I can tell right away that Rover won't take any of Joseph's shit. Hell, I'd love to be a fly on the wall when he tries to escape tonight.

I'm biting my cheek, trying not to smile. For added measure, Rover pulls a piece of bubble gum from his pocket.

"Want some?" he offers Joseph, who frowns.

"It's pretty tasty." Rover plops a piece in his mouth and starts smacking it loudly.

"Thank you for introducing me, Cody," Rover continues. "Feel free to go. We'll be just fine. Won't we, Joseph?"

Joseph stares at me, then turns back to him. "Sure." He gives him a fake smile.

My smile is much less fake. "Thanks, Rover. Joseph, I'll see you in the morning."

As soon as I'm out of the office, I let the laughter loose. I already really like Rover.

It's getting late, and Lucy's last class will end soon. Hopefully, Ted won't be there. I haven't been able to get him out of my mind since he stopped by to take her to lunch last week.

Is he her boyfriend? He seemed too stuffy for her, with the top button of his button-up cinched tight. But then, I never would have guessed Joseph was her type either. Maybe it's me who is no longer her type.

It doesn't matter; she needs protection. My face will be the one she sees at the end of her last class.

CHAPTER 6



Lucy

“PROFESSOR TAYLOR?”

I turn to see one of my students staring at me, confused. I have no recollection of what I said, but I know my thoughts drifted back to Cody.

It’s been days since I’ve seen him. For all I know, I might not see him again. Yet I can’t stop thinking about him. It isn’t helping that Randy is in class today, and I’m also thinking about how to ensure I’m not the last one here.

“Yes?” I respond.

“I didn’t understand that last concept. Can you repeat it?” she asks.

I glance at my notes, thankful I write out every lecture, and repeat what I believe I just said. Only two minutes left. I can do this.

The door to the lecture hall opens, and the sound of laughter and voices in the hallway carries in. Everyone glances to see who’s entered the room.

Cody. Despite the chill in the fall air, he’s only wearing a blue T-shirt and jeans—another very fitted T-shirt that stretches across his chest. He gives me a sexy grin, and I swear, I can *hear* all the ovaries in the room swoon.

“Okay, let’s end there,” I tell my class. “I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Cody makes his way down the stairs as the students collect their things and file out. Once the room is empty, he steps in front of me.

“Hi,” he says. “We need to talk.”

“Cody, we have talked plenty. You need to stop interrupting my classes.”

I grab my bag and try to move past him. He grabs my arm, and the jolt I feel from his touch has me jerking back.

“Let me walk you to your car,” he presses.

I stare up at him. He’s so damn handsome it takes my breath away.

For the first time, I notice a scar just above his left eyebrow. I reach out to touch it, but then pull back.

What the hell am I doing? The desire to touch this man is too strong. I need to get some distance from him.

I step away. “If you’re worried about Randy, he already left. I’m sure your presence helped. Thank you for that.”

“He could still be waiting for you. Let me do this.” His eyes are pleading.

I know he isn’t going to let this go, and frankly, I *am* nervous Randy might be waiting. I’ve been lucky so far in getting out of here quickly.

Cody’s expression softens. “Don’t be stubborn, Luce. I protect people for a living. I can keep you safe.”

Safe from others, I’m certain. But he can’t keep my heart safe from him.

“Will you tell me why you left?” I ask.

That’s one question I’ve never gotten an answer to. After he left all those years ago, I tried to call him, but his phone was disconnected. I sent him an email that he didn’t respond to. Even his mom and sister were shocked he’d enlisted;

especially considering his mom had still been in the hospital. None of it made any sense.

He visibly swallows then nods.

“Okay, then,” I agree. “Let’s go.”

We are in the hallway when I see Connie walking my way.

“Lucy!”

Oh no. I forgot we are supposed to go for a drink.

With Cody standing next to me, I’m more aware than ever of how beautiful she is. Her long, blonde hair is falling in waves, and her eyes are the bluest I’ve ever seen. But the way she sways her hips would likely have any man hypnotized.

I glance at Cody, but he’s staring at me. “Connie, this is Cody. Cody, this is my best friend Connie.”

Connie’s hands move to her hips. “So, you’re the asshole, huh?”

I grimace slightly as I explain, “I met Connie my freshman year of college.”

Cody grins. “I understand. Connie, it’s nice to meet you. I assure you I’m not the boy I was then.”

She looks him up and down. “You hurt her, and they’ll never find your body. Got it?”

Cody’s eyebrows shoot up. “Got it.”

“Are you ditching me for this guy?” she asks me.

I shake my head. “Cody is walking me to my car. We’re going to talk, and then I’ll meet you at the bar. Drinks on me, okay?”

She scoffs. “Talk?”

I plead with my eyes, and Connie finally gets the message.

“Okay. But don’t keep me waiting too long.” She turns to Cody. “And I meant what I said.”

Then she spins on her heels and sways out of the building as at least a couple of students stare after her.

“So... that was Connie,” I say.

Cody laughs. “She’s tough. But she has your back, and that’s good.”

Usually, I agree with that. But I already know I’m going to catch hell for spending time with Cody, and frankly, I’m not in the mood. A night out with Connie was supposed to be fun and relaxing.

Hopefully, she’ll let me off easy. I laugh to myself. When has she ever done that?

“Let’s go.” I lead him down the hallway, and he places his hand on my lower back, sending heat radiating from his hand throughout my body.

I shouldn’t like it as much as I do. As we move, I take in how he scans the area, and I feel safe. Protected.

“How long were you married?”

His question startles me.

When I recover, I answer, “Two years. But I knew it was a mistake that first year. I hoped I could fix things, but I couldn’t.”

Damn, Lucy, he asked you one question, not the history of your marriage.

He nods. “What went wrong?”

I laugh. “I married a narcissistic asshole who also had a major gambling problem and is a compulsive liar.”

He stops to open the door. “I’m sorry.”

I cock my head. “I shouldn’t have rushed into the marriage. When we met, he was charming and said all the right things. I fell for it.”

“How long have you been divorced?”

“Also, two years. But enough about me, you said you would tell me why you left.”

We walk the rest of the way to my car in silence, and I’m wondering if he’s going to say anything. Rain begins to fall.

Most of the other professors have left for the day, so we are alone in the parking lot.

“Do you mind if we sit in your car and talk?” he asks.

“Sure.”

I unlock it and we get in; he looks like a giant in the passenger seat of my Audi. He’s always been tall, but he has filled out since he left.

The moment I close my door, his scent hits me. It must be his cologne. Woodsy. Tempting.

Then he turns and pins me with his gaze. Those hazel eyes are filled with so much pain. But I can’t stop mine from falling to his lips. Those full lips I remember I could never get enough of. I’ve never met a man with such nice lips.

“Luce,” he murmurs, and I startle as I move my gaze back to his eyes. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Tell me why you left. After the graduation ceremony, you were supposed to meet me at Suzie’s party. When you didn’t show, I went home, thinking you’d be waiting there for me, but you weren’t. Then I got your voicemail. All it said was you’d decided to enlist instead of going to Havenwood. We had plans, and you threw them away without any explanation.”

I close my eyes as I relive that night. His voicemail was short, no explanation. No ‘I love you’.

“Was it all a lie?” I ask. “Did you ever love me? Is that why you left?”

Damn traitorous tears. I swore I’d never cry in front of him, but the memories are too much. I can’t hold them off.

Cody reaches for my hand. I stare as he engulfs it in his own huge grip. “Don’t you think for one moment that I didn’t love you. You are the only woman I’ve ever loved,” he admits.

I dare to look into his eyes. They’re glassy as he implores me to believe him.

“Then why would you leave?” I press. “We were supposed to go to Havenwood together, and then after college, we were

going to get married. We had everything planned out. I thought you wanted that?”

He turns away from me and leans back in his seat. “I did.”

“Then help me understand what happened.”

He lets out a breath. “Remember when my mom was in that car accident shortly before graduation?”

“Yes.”

“I was at home when I got the call. My last final was scheduled for that morning. But when the hospital called and said my mom was there... ” He swallows. “I went to the hospital instead. My mom was in surgery, it was touch and go, and I missed the final.”

I squeeze his hand. “You had a very good reason for missing it.”

He laughs. “I thought so. I even had a note from the emergency room doctor who worked on my mom. But Mr. Hackle wouldn’t let me take the test. He refused. I spent that last week before graduation doing everything I could. I went to the principal, but he said he must abide by Mr. Hackle’s decision.”

I furrow my brows, dumbfounded. “You didn’t get to take the test? But your mom was in surgery. What were you supposed to do?”

Everyone knew Mr. Hackle was an asshole, but surely, he wouldn’t have condemned a student for this?

“He gave me an F for the final exam which put my final class grade at a D.” He shrugs. “That meant I didn’t meet the requirements for the football scholarship. The coach had been very clear, I had to get a B or better in each class.”

Cody couldn’t afford Havenwood without that scholarship; we both knew it. That was why he’d worked his ass off to get it.

“Did you try to explain to the university what happened?”

His thumb traces circles on the back of my hand. “I tried. I tried everything. But the university said they had strict rules regarding the scholarships, and if they made an exception for me, they’d have to make an exception for everyone.”

“Bullshit.”

“Yeah, that’s how I felt too. But once I knew I couldn’t go to Havenwood... I didn’t have any options. I couldn’t even afford community college. I hadn’t applied for any financial aid because I thought I had the scholarship.”

I yank my hand away. “And you never told me what was going on. Why?”

“At first, I thought I’d get to take the test, so there was no point worrying you with that. Plus, you knew how talking about things stressed me out back then.”

I nod.

Getting him to open up had been hard. He’d kept everything close to his chest, until one day, I found him on his porch nearly hyperventilating. That was when he finally told me everything about his mom. She’d be gone for days at a time on some binge, so Cody worked odd jobs to earn enough money to feed him and his sister and keep the rent paid.

I held him that day as he told me how exhausted he was. How he was happy that his sister was able to spend most of her time at her best friend’s house, because it took away the guilt he felt about going away to college.

“I had no options, and I knew if I stayed in town, working those odds jobs to stay afloat, I’d never get anywhere. I’d never be good enough for you. When I lost that scholarship, I knew I’d lost you too.” A tear falls down his cheek. He quickly wipes it away.

“What? Cody, no. I wanted you with or without a college education. I loved you.”

He looks into my eyes. “You said you wanted to be a doctor. I wasn’t going to stand in your way.”

I clench the steering wheel. “Let me get this straight. Because *you* couldn’t go to college, you decided *I* deserved better?”

“Yes.”

“And it never occurred to you to tell me what was going on? That maybe I could have helped, or maybe I’d want some say in what happened to us?”

He closes his eyes. “I was afraid if I told you, I’d chicken out of doing what I knew had to be done. You should be with someone better than a broke and dumb guy like me.”

I jerk back.

Cody struggled in school; he always joked it was because he was dumb. But despite that, he had a B average and always knew the answers to any trivia game we ever played. All that time, I thought he was kidding.

“Dumb? Cody Anthony, you better not have just said that.”

He looks away. “School was always hard. I was able to maintain my grades, but it took a lot of work. Then I lost my chance at college, and I realized I had nothing to offer you. I enlisted, figuring it was my only shot at a future. And I was right, I found something I was good at.”

“I know school wasn’t easy. I was right there with you, remember? We studied together because we were in it together. But then you left, and I realized we weren’t in it together at all. I trusted you, and you broke my heart.”

He reaches for my hand again, but this time, I pull it back.

“No, don’t. I was devastated. I would have failed freshman year if it weren’t for Connie. She got me through. But after college... ” I shake my head at the memory, wishing I could rewrite history. “I met Joseph, and I was so desperate to feel loved again, I fell for his lies. All of them.”

Tears well in my eyes as all the hurt, and frustration comes back. “I married that narcissist because I was so desperate for what *we* had.” The tears fall, and I don’t try to stop them.

“I’m so sorry, Luce. If I could change it, I would. I’ve missed you every day since then. I’ve never loved another woman. You are the only woman I want.”

Want? As in present tense?

I wipe my eyes and turn toward him. “What did you just say?”

“I want you. I want us. Can we try again?”

Is he serious?

I can’t stop the laugh that breaks out of me, and I don’t miss his wince. But it doesn’t stop what I have to say. “You have got to be *kidding*. You gutted me and left me with no explanation, and now you want a second chance?”

“I know I have to earn your trust again. And I will do whatever it takes because yes, that’s what I want.”

This is too much. I feel like I’m suffocating. All I can smell is his scent, and my desire to lean in and kiss this man is too strong. I have to stop myself before I make the biggest mistake of my life.

I clutch the steering wheel and take a deep breath. “I don’t know. I need time to think.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “Okay. Can I have your phone?”

I frown.

“Trust me,” he says.

Against my better judgment, I pull my phone from my bag and hand it to him.

He types something, and then I hear another phone ring—his. Then he hands my phone back. “There. You have my number when you’re ready to talk.”

I stare at the screen. Then at Cody. All these years, he’s been inaccessible, a giant question mark. Now I can call him anytime?

“I’ll talk to you soon,” he says, and then exits my car.

I watch as he walks back toward the building. Cody wants a second chance.

Do I want to give him one?

CHAPTER 7



CODY

“How’d it go?” I ask Rover the next morning when I go to Joseph’s to relieve him.

Rover yawns as he leans against my car, shaking his head. His dark hair falls over his forehead and he pushes it back with his hand. “He managed to lose me for two hours last night. He claims he met up with a woman and wanted privacy, but I don’t buy it.”

“The twitch?”

Rover laughs. “Yeah, he’s a horrible liar. But not only that, his suit still looked pressed, and not a hair on his head was out of place.”

I lean against my car. “He didn’t go to the food bank?”

“No, I thought that’s where he was going, and I let him get too far of a lead. By the time I got to the food bank, there were no cars in the lot, and all the lights were shut off.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“I don’t know, but you mentioned yesterday that he was going to solve the money problem?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, he was humming to himself this morning, so I thought he got the money last night. But then he answered a phone call and the color drained from his face. I asked him

what was wrong, he said ‘nothing’. Something was definitely wrong.”

I exhale through my nose. *What are you up to, Joseph?*

“Oh, he tried to fire me, too.” Rover laughs again. “I reminded him that his boss hired the protection, not him. I swear, the man *growled*. I’ve never had an assignment quite like this one.”

“I’ll tell him we will no longer be protecting him,” I say.

He frowns. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I’m going to follow him today and see if I can figure out what is going on.”

I realize what I’m saying isn’t ethical. We are hired to protect clients, not investigate them. But if Joseph is bringing danger to the university, it could hurt the students and Lucy. I can’t let it go until I know it won’t affect her.

And we do owe a duty to his boss, after all.

“You are walking a dangerous line,” Rover says after a minute.

“I know.”

He claps his hand on my shoulder. “Call me if you need me.”

“Will do.”

As Rover drives away, Joseph opens the front door and steps out.

“Good morning, Cody. I’m heading to my office, so I’ll meet you at the university.”

Well, here goes nothing. “Actually, it looks like I’m no longer working on your case.”

Joseph frowns. “Oh?”

“I wanted to come by and tell you in person.”

Joseph looks around his yard. “Is someone else taking your place?”

“No.” I give him a big smile.

Joseph closes and locks his front door. “Okay. Well, thank you for your service.” The man salutes me and walks to his car.

I suppress a laugh as I return to my car, then get in and pretend to stare at my phone as Joseph pulls out in a hurry.

I wait a few seconds before I follow. He makes a left turn at the light instead of a right, which would take him toward the university. I’m pretty sure I know where he’s going.

I continue to follow, but at a distance. When he parks in the food bank’s parking lot, I pull up at the curb where I previously watched Vince. Joseph exits his car and enters the building.

Shit.

I need to know what is being said, so I get out of my car and make my way around the back of the building. There’s a box truck, and the garage door is open. Vince must be getting a delivery.

I catch a whiff of old bread. It reminds me of the bread Patty from the supermarket would give me. She knew my mom and understood my situation. It was going to be thrown out anyway, and I didn’t care if it was stale. I was so hungry back then, I’d have eaten just about anything.

I tuck myself behind the dumpster and wait to see if anyone comes out. I’m soon rewarded with voices, and the appearance of two men.

“Vince, I need my money back.” Joseph follows Vince out the garage door to the truck. Vince is carrying a box.

That’s odd. I guess it isn’t a delivery.

Vince hands the box off to a third guy waiting at the back of the truck and turns to Joseph, laughing. “Let me get this straight. You finally paid me your debt yesterday, which was *very* overdue, and now you are asking for it back? No.” He walks past him, inside the building.

“You don’t understand, Vince. He will kill me if I don’t pay him back.”

Kill him? I thought it was Vince I was protecting him from. Who the hell is he talking about?

Vince walks out with another box and hands it to the guy at the truck. “Not my problem. You should have thought about that before you went dipping into that fund. Even I know better than to piss off those people.”

Joseph reaches out to him. “Okay, how about another loan?”

Vince’s hands go to his hips. “Well, considering you’re a credit risk now, the interest will be double.”

“That’s robbery.” Joseph protests.

“Little hypocritical there,” Vince replies.

“I only need it for a few days. My trust fund payment is coming Tuesday.”

“A few days? That’s nearly a week away.” Vince shakes his head.

“My point is, it’s soon.”

“Keep talking, and the interest will be triple,” Vince warns.

“Fine. I accept,” Joseph loosens his tie. His hair is sticking up for some reason.

His usual kempt appearance has withered in the last twenty-four hours.

“Help me with these last few boxes, then I’ll get you half of what you borrowed last time,” Vince says.

“Half? I need all of it. Didn’t you hear what I said? He will kill me.”

“Again, not my problem.”

They walk back into the building, and each come out carrying a box.

“What’s in here? It’s heavy.”

“None of your business,”

Joseph stops. “Then why should I carry it?”

“You don’t need to carry it anymore. The guys already saw you. If you don’t pay me back this time, I’ll tell my boss you took some of what’s inside for yourself.”

Joseph drops the box. “You son of a bitch. There’s fucking drugs in there. I knew it.”

Drugs?

That’s an interesting assumption for Joseph to make. That means Vince deals drugs, or he has at some point. But why set up a food bank in an area where it stands out to commit a crime? That doesn’t make any sense.

They hand the boxes off to the driver and walk back inside. The driver gets in the truck and starts it up, facing my direction.

I quickly duck behind the dumpster and hope Joseph and Vince don’t decide to come back out, because they could see me in my current position. After the truck leaves, I make my way back to my car.

A few minutes later, Joseph exits the building. I follow him as he drives straight to the university.

Who did he take the money from and who will kill him? I’m not going to figure it out sitting in the parking lot of the university. I exit my car intending to go straight to Joseph, but it’s as if I can’t stop myself when I know Lucy is near. I’m halfway to her office when I stop myself. She asked for space. I need to give it to her. But I need to warn her, too. As a brisk wind cuts through me, I zip up my jacket. I’ve forgotten how cold it can be here in October. After living through a few New York winters, I convinced myself this place was warm. Funny how your memory can be selective like that.

Everything in me says I should go to her, tell her she might be in danger and then show her how I feel, but Lucy can be stubborn. She needs time. And my gut tells me this isn’t the best plan.

I spin on my heel and head to Joseph's office, thinking I'll sit outside on a bench and wait to see if Joseph pops out. When another brisk wind hits, I rethink that idea.

Before I make it back to the administration building, I spot Joseph walking through the quad. Thankful I didn't have to sit around and wait for him, I turn to follow.

Leaves rain down from the big cherry trees that line the walkway, and there are some bright red bushes nearer to the buildings. It really is a beautiful campus.

Joseph picks up his pace. He enters a building, and I follow not too far behind. But once inside, I stop. There are three hallways: one in front of me, one to my right, and one to my left. All empty.

I've lost him. And he picked up his pace, as if he knew I was following him. How? I'm good at my job.

I turn around and make my way back to Joseph's office, but I go slowly, going over what I plan to say in my head. I tour a few of the buildings and wonder what it would have been like if I had been able to go to school here. Would Lucy and I be married now?

By the time I make it to Joseph's office, he's sitting at his desk.

"Cody? What are you doing here?"

"There's been a change in plans."

Joseph leans back in his chair and clasps his hands. "All right. What's going on?"

"In order to protect you, I need to know who's really threatening you. You told me it was a student. We both know that's a lie. This is your one chance to tell me the truth."

"You are protecting me?"

"Yes."

"But you said you weren't."

I huff out a breath and try to hide my impatience at his questions. "I am now. Turns out your boss wants us to stay

on.”

Joseph stares at me for a moment, then nods. He walks around his desk, and I think he’s going to sit in the chair beside me, but instead, he closes his office door.

When he gets back behind his desk, he sits down, straightens his tie, and reclasps his hands. “For reasons I don’t want to get into, I had to borrow some money from one of the university’s funds. However, I paid it back, and everything is fine now. I’d really rather not discuss this with Chip. It’s a personal matter.”

I scrape my hand over my scruff as I study Joseph. No twitch. The jackass is actually telling the truth. Or some version of it.

“You’re embezzling from the university?”

“What? No.” He crosses his arms. “I simply borrowed some funds, but I have repaid them.” Again, no twitch.

Maybe he’s actually taking me seriously now. “Were those funds from the hockey team?”

Joseph closes his eyes. “Yes. And I know that was stupid for many reasons, but I was desperate.”

“I heard you get a trust fund payment every month. Is that true?”

He jumps up. “Jesus. Have you been investigating me? Yes, I get a payment. But something came up, and I needed more. It was a one-time thing and won’t happen again.” Twitch.

Dammit.

While I might be protecting Joseph, the president of the university is the one who hired my services. I can’t lie to Chip; not if Joseph is embezzling funds.

Joseph seems to read my thoughts. “Look, I know my boss hired you, and I’m sure you’re concerned about my actions, but I swear I’ve made everything right. You have nothing to worry about.” No twitch.

Either he's actually telling the truth, or he believes his own lies so completely, he's fooling himself.

I throw my hands in the air. "If you're embezzling, I'm compelled to tell Chip. He's the one that hired us to protect you."

"I assure you, I did not embezzle, and everything is fine now." Joseph stands and walks to the door. "You don't want to make false accusations. I'm sure that wouldn't reflect well on your company." Joseph smiles as he opens the door.

Son of a bitch. He's fucking right, I can't accuse him without proof. And if he truly covered his tracks, there won't be any proof to find. And now the asshole is dismissing me.

I think I've underestimated Joseph Taylor.

CHAPTER 8



CODY

THE FAMILIAR HOUSE comes into view as I pull up to the curb. It's been thirteen years since I've been here; it looks a lot better than it used to. The lawn is mowed, and there is a fresh coat of paint on the exterior. Hopefully, these are signs that my mom has stayed sober.

I take the porch steps two at a time. There's a fake spider web up above the front door, and several carved pumpkins line the porch.

Right, Halloween. How the hell did I forget it's almost Halloween? Because my mind has been on Joseph. And Lucy. Will she be going to Halloween parties? Will she be going with Ted? I push the thought away. I can't let myself go there. It's bad enough I asked her for a second chance.

I hadn't planned on blurting that out but sitting that close to her in the car was too much. I couldn't think straight. And the pain in her eyes when I told her why I left, it almost broke me.

I knock on my mother's front door, both ashamed and nervous. Ashamed for leaving the way I did and then waiting so long to come back. Nervous about what condition my mother will be in. It's been a few years since I've seen her. Anything is possible.

My sister thinks I'm an asshole for never coming back home after I enlisted. She's right, I am. But I couldn't come back here and face everything I'd lost.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't go thirteen years without seeing my mom—I could never do that. No, I flew my mom and sister out to Virginia Beach a couple of times when I was stationed there.

But I haven't seen them since then. After I left the Navy, I moved to Brooklyn, New York and began work for Reed Hawthorne Security. I kept busy. There never seemed to be a good time for their visit.

But when my sister found out I'd been in the area on an assignment? Let's just say I've never heard her that angry.

I'd been three hours away in Fisher Springs and never called. I explained that I was working, and once I told her I was doing a favor for my friend Nick Moore, her anger soothed. Until she found out Nick wasn't single anymore.

My sister has a thing for servicemen. Believe me, it wasn't easy when she came to visit me in Virginia.

We both met Nick years ago when my sister accompanied me to an appointment at the VA. She was enamored. From the moment we met, I knew he was a good guy, but there was no way in hell I was going to help my sister hook up with him.

Being in Fisher Springs with Nick was the first time in all these years I've felt homesick. That town is a lot nicer than Pine Valley, with its picturesque mountains as a backdrop. Otherwise, it's like the rest of the western part of the state: green with the freshest air. Certainly, greener than New York City.

Being that close to home, I knew it was just a matter of time before I would find myself here, on my mom's doorstep.

“Cody? Is that really you?” My mom stands in her doorway, tears welling in her eyes.

“Hi, Mom.”

“You're really here?”

“I am.” I close the distance and wrap my arms around her.

“Come inside. You need to see what’s changed in here.”

I follow her in. Her limp is less pronounced than it used to be. I’m happy she’s been able to move on after that terrible accident.

But as I turn my attention to our surroundings, I’m surprised at what I see. *Nothing* looks the same. The house looks like it was flipped—new wood flooring, and I walk in to see a state-of-the-art kitchen.

“How?”

My mom struggled during the years she raised me and my sister. She was always drinking and lost more jobs than she could keep.

“Well, you know I was doing the books for CC Construction. They liked my work and hired me on full-time. Between that regular income and the hands-on help that Bob has provided, I’m renovating the entire house.”

“Bob? Who is that?” My defenses immediately go up. Mom hasn’t exactly been known for her good taste in men. Most tried to take advantage of free rent back when I lived here. I had to kick them to the curb.

I walk down the hallway to the bedrooms. The master has been repainted, and it looks nice. I move on to my old bedroom, surprised when I open the door and see nothing has changed.

“A friend,” Mom replies. “Well, I guess he’s more than that now.”

“What do you mean more?” I sound defensive, I know. But she can’t blame me.

“He’s my boyfriend. He’s a good man.”

I enter my old bedroom. “Why are you renovating?”

Trophies still sit on top of my old dresser. I loved sports in high school; it was my skills in football that got me a scholarship to Havenwood.

I open the top drawer of my dresser, where I find the photo of Lucy and the business card of a jeweler I put there years ago. I had planned to buy her a ring and marry her.

When she doesn't answer, I turn. She's wringing her hands. "I'm selling the house and then moving in with Bob."

Then she holds out her left hand.

My eyebrows shoot up. "Is that an engagement ring? He's more than a boyfriend then?"

She smiles. "It is and yes he is. You'll love him."

I cross my arms. "Are you in love with him?"

"I am."

My mom looks good. Content and healthy.

I drop my arms and pull her into a hug. "I'm happy for you. I can't wait to meet him."

She hugs me back then steps back. "Soon. Now tell me, what brings you back after all these years?"

"A job at Havenwood University." I close the drawer and step out of the room.

My mom follows me and sits at the kitchen table. She motions for me to sit across from her. "Havenwood?"

"Yes."

Mom shifts uncomfortably. "Have you seen her yet?"

She doesn't have to say her name. We both know she's asking about Lucy.

Leaving Lucy was the hardest thing I've ever done. But I *had* to. Once I lost the scholarship, I knew we'd never make it. Lucy was going to be a doctor. She wanted to work with cancer patients. I smile as some of our conversations come back to me.

Of course, the fact that she's a professor means something in her life changed. I bet it was Joseph. That selfish prick.

"I have seen her," I admit.

“She got married you know.”

That gets my attention. “You *knew* she got married? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Before she answers, a whistle erupts from the kitchen. She jumps up. “Let’s have tea.”

Mom retrieves the tea bags while I grab the mugs. We had this routine the few times my mom was sober while I was growing up. I realize now how much I’ve missed it. She places a tea bag in each mug, and I pour the hot water, then carry the mugs to the table.

Once we’ve sat down again, I stare at her, waiting for her to answer my question. I’m certain she’s going to change the subject, but instead she clears her throat. “I didn’t tell you because by the time I heard about it, you were deployed. Then you were missing. When they found you, and I knew you were safe, the last thing I could do was break your heart with that news.”

I close my eyes. I remember that visit; my mom couldn’t stop crying. I thought it was because of the close call I had, but maybe it was this.

“She’s divorced,” I say.

Mom sets her mug down and reaches across the table to take hold of my hand. “Cody, don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“You should leave her alone. I know you think you loved her, but—”

“Lucy is the only woman I’ve ever been in love with. I want to leave it alone, but I can’t.”

She squeezes my hand. “You have to. You know her father doesn’t like you, and he doesn’t want you two together.”

I sit up taller at that. “You said doesn’t. Present tense. What do you mean by that?”

My mom sighs. “Did you forget? He wasn’t kind to you.”

That's true, but that's because he's a prick. "He may not have liked me then, but Lucy and I are adults now."

"And she wants to be with you?"

I sink back in my chair. "I think she has a boyfriend."

Mom nods. "Probably for the best."

"Because of her father?"

"Cody, you never really knew him, but he has always been a powerful man. He's more so now. If he doesn't want you with his daughter, he'll make it happen."

I laugh. "Mom, I was a SEAL. He's not going to intimidate me."

She sighs as she stares at her tea. There are fine lines around her eyes I don't recall noticing last time I saw her. When she glances back to me, I see fear in her eyes. "He intimidates me," she says quietly.

That's odd. Not many intimidate my mom. My defenses go up. "Why? Did he do something to you?"

"Oh, my god!" my sister yells as she bursts through the door. "You really *are* here."

I may have texted her to let her know I was on my way to Mom's, but I'm regretting that now, because Mom was about to tell me something, and now she's hugging my sister.

"Emelia. I can't believe I have both my kids under the roof at the same time. I'm so happy."

And now they're both crying. Have I mentioned I can't stand to see women cry? I sigh. "Okay, you two, we're all here. Now let's relax."

Emelia laughs. "I forgot what a jerk you are. Come here." She pulls me into a hug. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. I'm sorry I stayed away so long."

When she steps back, I take in what she's wearing.

"Were you painting?" I ask. She's wearing coveralls that are covered in all shades of dry paint. At least I hope it's dry. I

look down to make sure I'm not wearing wet paint.

"Yes, repainting my kitchen. Now, what brings you back?" she asks.

"A job."

She laughs. "That's it? Can't say any more?"

"Nope." I grin.

"It's at Havenwood University," my mom supplies.

My sister's smile drops. "Are you here to see Lucy?"

Jesus. I've gone thirteen years with no one saying her name, and now everyone is bringing her up. "I'm here on a job. I happened to see her. Coincidence."

Emelia nods slowly, her blonde ponytail swaying behind her.

I can tell she wants to say something.

"Spit it out," I prod.

"Are you going to try to win her back?"

"No, don't encourage that," Mom scolds. "Lucy is his past."

Emelia rolls her eyes. "The man has had no other relationships that we know of. He left town and hasn't returned for thirteen years. Why would he do that? Because of a girl. And we both know that girl is Lucy. He never got over her."

I swallow. This isn't a conversation I want to have.

"Why did you two break up?" my sister presses. "You never told us."

"Emelia let's not pry. You know he's a private person."

I turn to my mom with a scowl. She's one of the nosiest people I know, but now she's telling *Emelia* not to pry? And telling me not to pursue Lucy?

"Mom, what's going on?"

Her eyes widen. “Nothing. I just don’t think Lucy is the one for you. But I do hope you find someone soon, because I want grandbabies.”

And that’s my cue to go. “Okay, thanks for the tea, Mom. It was good seeing you, Emelia. I have to get back to work.”

“So soon?” Mom asks, disappointment laces her voice.

“Yeah, I have a meeting.” I hate lying to her, but I need to get out of this house. I stand, but Emelia grabs my arm.

“Wait,” she protests. “I just got here. Can’t you visit for a bit?”

I pull her in and give her a hug. “No, I really need to get back. I only had a few minutes.”

My mom watches us with a soft smile. “Please stop by again before you leave town.”

I nod. “I’ll try.” And I mean it. I will try.

CHAPTER 9



Lucy

YOU HAVE GOT to be shitting me. Joseph screwed me over again? How the hell?

When I first got the call from the bank this morning, I thought they were going to try to sell me on a new product. I was surprised to find out they were concerned because automatic payments were still attached to the account that had recently been closed out.

The problem? I didn't close it out. Joseph did. How? We aren't even married anymore. Thankfully, I found this out *after* my last class. There is no way I could have focused on teaching, knowing he'd done it again.

All I want to do now is to go to my apartment and cry. No, I'll call Connie. Dammit. I can't call Connie. When I met her for drinks, she told me she'd be in eastern Washington all week for a trial. Of all the weeks for her to go out of town, this has been a rough one.

I need to figure out what to do. Without my trust fund, things are tight as it is. I have some cash in my drawer for emergencies. I'll take that to the bank tomorrow and open a new account before I find and kill Joseph.

By the time I get to my apartment, I feel a little better. Until I find my front door is ajar. I live alone, and only Connie has a key—and I *know* she's not around to use it.

I slowly push the door open, and from the hallway, I can see one of my dining room chairs has been knocked over. My place was ransacked? But why? It had to be Joseph.

I call him, but of course he isn't answering his phone. Why would he? He knows exactly why I'm calling.

I scroll through my contacts. Most don't know about my history with Joseph, and frankly, I'm too embarrassed to share that particular knowledge.

I stop scrolling when I see the entry for Cody. I should call him; he's likely with Joseph. My finger hovers above his name.

Cody.

When he put his number in my phone, I never thought I'd actually use it. Finally, I push call.

"Hello?"

Damn, I should have braced myself for his voice. So smooth and sexy. Unlike me. "Cody? It's Lucy." My voice cracks.

"I'm happy you called. Are you ready to talk?"

"No."

"What's wrong?" he demands.

I laugh. "How did you know?"

"Because that's the only other reason you would call me."

After a deep breath, I begin. "I came home, and my apartment door was open, and I can see a dining room chair knocked over. This is after I found out Joseph cleaned out my bank account. I need to talk to him. Are you with him?"

"Wait. Are you in your apartment?"

"No, I'm in the hallway."

"Good, don't go in. I'm on my way. Text me your address."

He hangs up before I can argue. Though, I don't really want to. I text him my address and sink down to the thin gray

carpet that covers the floor in the hallway to wait.

God, the last thing I want to do is discuss my ex with Cody. And I'm sure Joseph is the last person he wants to hear about. But when he arrives ten minutes later, I'm thankful. And maybe momentarily distracted. Why does every T-shirt he owns have to strain to contain his muscles? I can't stop staring. Fortunately, when I stand, he's busy scanning me, the door, and the hallway.

"Wait here," he says. "I'll check out the apartment."

I nod, but then I follow him anyway. He should remember I don't take directions well.

He walks in and frowns.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I told you to wait in the hall," he growls.

I arch a brow.

He chuckles. "Forgot how stubborn you are."

After checking the bedroom, he walks back into the living room. "It's not what I expected," he admits.

"What? The damage?"

He glances around. "No, the apartment."

"What did you expect?"

He shrugs. "Something bigger, more expensive."

I know what he's trying to say. I grew up in a large house—some might call it a mansion. He assumed I'd want to continue to live that lavish lifestyle.

"I guess you don't really know me, then."

"I don't know about that," he says. His eyes are slowly moving up my body. His perusal turns me on more than it should. When he finally meets my eyes, he gives me a wolfish grin. "I suspect I still know what's important."

There is no doubt in my mind his thoughts are sexual. And he'd be right. That man, even at eighteen, knew me and how to please me.

Sadly, Joseph didn't even compare in that department; he only thought about himself. I realize that now. But Cody always put me first. Until he left.

I still. *That's why he left.* In his crazy way of thinking, he was putting me first.

The realization that he wasn't acting selfishly hits me hard. I knew he wasn't selfish, so why had I let my mind go there? Before I can rehash my old thoughts, Cody snaps his fingers in front of me.

“What?”

He arches a brow. “Did you hear what I said?”

I shake my head.

“Someone went through your apartment. Any idea what they might be looking for?”

“Shit. Please, no.”

I rush to the bedroom and see my dresser drawers are all pulled out. “When I was married to Joseph, I used to keep some cash in my underwear drawer. I still do—well, I did. Looks like he found it. It was all I had left.”

Cody leans down and picks up a pair of lacy underwear. Staring at it, he asks, “You think this was Joseph?”

I grab the panties from his hand and shove them back into the pile. “Who else would it have been? He drained my bank account.”

He growls again, and while my life is falling apart, all I can think about is how sexy that sounds. “Let me help you pack up and we can talk about it.”

“Pack up? Why would I do that?”

He steps close to me. “Someone broke in and went through your apartment. We don't know if it was Joseph, but I'm not willing to take the risk that whoever it was won't come back. You can stay with me.”

“Stay with you?”

There is no way he is serious. He's probably staying at some hotel. With one bed. My eyes scan down his body. No. I can't let my mind go there. Not with Cody. The man will only crush my heart. Again.

"Pack up enough to get you through the week," he says.

A week? With Cody? "I-I can't—"

"Stop overthinking. Maybe I can help you get some of your money back."

He's right. I do need help.

There's a knock on the door. "Are you expecting someone?" he asks.

"No."

He peeks out the peephole, then leans his forehead on the door. "It's your dad."

Shit. Why would my dad be here? He never stops by.

Cody must remember my dad not being his biggest fan, because he stands up straight, as if bracing himself for what is about to come. Then he steps back and opens the door, gesturing for my dad to come in.

The way my dad looks at Cody is a mix of seeing a ghost and a pile of garbage at the same time. "Cody Anthony? What are you doing here?"

I push between them. "Dad, someone broke into my apartment. I'm sure it was Joseph because he also closed out my bank account. He's taken all my money. Again."

My dad's face flushes as he takes in the condition of my apartment. "That's why I'm here. The bank called me. How the hell did you let this happen again?"

"I didn't *let* it happen." How dare he try to blame this on me.

"Did you change your passwords like I told you to?" he tosses back.

Shit. No. I didn't.

“Jesus, Lucy. The man knew them all. You can’t reuse any of them.”

“This isn’t her fault,” Cody says as he steps between us. “This is all Joseph.”

I furrow my brow. “Why did the bank call you?” That little nugget just sank in.

Dad scoffs. “My friend Jack was alerted the account was overdrawn, so he reached out to me to make sure everything was all right.”

“That’s an invasion of my privacy.”

He ignores me and turns to Cody. “And why the hell are you back in town? You broke my daughter’s heart. How dare you come back—”

“Dad, stop. He was working for Joseph, and we ran into each other on campus.”

He steps closer to Cody. “You were working for that son of a bitch?”

Cody crosses his arms, which only makes his biceps bulge. “I was providing protection. I work in security now.”

Dad frowns. “You’re a security guard?”

“No.”

My dad turns to me. “Dammit. If Joseph has bookies coming after him again, you might not be safe.”

“His bookies came after you last time?” Cody asks.

“Yes—”

“That damn ex-husband of hers is a piece of shit. His bookie threatened Lucy, thinking it would get Joseph to pay. It didn’t. Thank god I intervened in time.”

Cody raises an eyebrow at me, and I know he’ll want to know more. He tells my dad, “For now, Lucy will stay with me. I’ll keep her safe.”

“No, I’ll hire someone to protect her. She shouldn’t be around you.” He snarls, “You’ve done enough damage.”

“With all due respect, no one can protect her better than I can.”

My dad steps into Cody’s space. He is normally a very intimidating man, but Cody stares back at him, more annoyed than fearful. “It’s that cocky attitude that could get her hurt—or worse, killed.”

“I served as a SEAL for ten years. I don’t doubt my skills.”

“Dad, I’m staying with Cody,” I interject firmly.

Well, no backing out now. But the truth is, I feel safest with him.

My dad takes a step back. “I can’t stop you but watch yourself. Don’t forget he left you once.”

I can hear what my dad isn’t saying. *He’ll leave you again.*

He continues, “I’m going to go see that piece of shit, Joseph. I need to make sure he doesn’t bring you into his business ever again.”

As much as I usually hate my dad for being overly protective, this is one time I appreciate it. I need all the help I can get, forcing Joseph to stop.

“Thank you.”

“Cody, can you walk me out?” he asks.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” I say.

I know my dad. He’s going to threaten Cody in some way—it’s what he does. But Cody is only trying to help, so I won’t let my dad try to scare him off.

“Luce, it’s fine,” Cody says.

I turn toward the kitchen as they walk out the door, but as soon as they’re through, I run to the door. It’s been left ajar, and I can hear my dad’s hushed voice in the hallway.

“Watch yourself. I got you out of her hair once, and I’ll do it again if I have to.”

“What are you talking about?” Cody asks.

Dad laughs. “Doesn’t matter. Just keep your hands off my daughter.”

But I have the same question. What the hell does he mean he did it once?

CHAPTER 10



CODY

THAT SON OF A BITCH. Part of me always wondered why Mr. Hackle dug in so hard on not giving me a second chance. Even the principal backed him up. It seemed so cruel.

Lucy's dad has always made his feelings about me clear: I'm not good enough for his daughter. He knew my dad, too, and the only time I was alone with Mr. Gardiner as a teen, he'd had no problem filling me in on all of my father's misdeeds. As if I didn't know he was screwing around on my mom before he left.

Well, so much for trying to protect Lucy. She ended up with just the kind of man her father was trying to keep her away from. What I really want to know, *need* to know, is how far he went to keep me from being with Lucy. Did he only interfere with Mr. Hackle? Or was he also behind my mother's accident?

It's all I can think about as Lucy packs up. Once she has her bag, she follows me in her own car to the house I'm staying at, and parks beside me in the driveway.

Her amber eyes are wide as she exits the car. "You're staying here? I assumed you would be at a hotel."

I stare at the house. It's small with two bedrooms. It suits me fine, but it might not look inviting to Lucy. But then, she isn't exactly living the life of luxury I figured she'd be.

“A friend of my boss owns it. It was vacant and he’s letting me stay here until he can hire a property management company to take over renting it out.”

“It’s so cute,” she says. “But you should get some decorations.”

“Decorations?” I snort. “Like, flowers?”

She laughs. “No, I mean pumpkins. You know, something for Halloween.”

I glance around the neighborhood. I’ll bet a lot of kids will knock that night; maybe I can talk Lucy into staying until then and helping me pass out candy.

“Can we go inside and eat?” she asks and is up on the porch before I can respond.

I hold our takeout dinner in one hand and unlock the door with the other. Thank goodness I spotted the taco truck; I almost forgot I didn’t have enough food here for a meal.

“I’ve always wanted a bungalow like this,” Lucy tells me as she walks in.

“You have?” I set the food on the kitchen table, then turn to her.

Her hair had been pulled back in a bun, but now it was down and a bit messy. I can’t stop myself and I reach out and move a few hairs off her face. Every time we touch, I want more. But I need to go slow and not scare her off, so I take a step back.

She swallows. “Yes. What did you think I’d want, a mansion like the one I was raised in?”

“Well, kind of, yeah.”

She pulls the containers of food out of the bag and sets one in front of me as she scoffs. “No, never. Yes, it was big, but it was so cold. I wasn’t allowed to touch anything because everything was breakable and expensive. It was all for show. I want a home like this, so when I walk in, I feel comfort and love.”

I take in the surroundings, trying to see them through her eyes. There are several plants that certainly add a homey feeling to the place. The couch is probably the most comfortable I'd ever been on. Plus, it's royal blue, which I just find cool. There's nothing expensive or breakable in the room.

"What kind of home do you want?" she asks.

Home. I haven't had a home in years. After I got out of the service, I stayed with my friend Thunder. We'd served on some missions together and became good friends. He introduced me to his boss, Hawthorne, and we hit it off right away. Hawthorne introduced me to his partner Reed, and the next thing I knew, I was hired on as the newest member of Reed Hawthorne Security. The guys were welcoming and even though I love that job, my apartment in Brooklyn only has a couch, a TV, a bed, and enough kitchenware to get me by. I've certainly never considered it permanent or made it into a home.

"I don't know. I guess I haven't really thought about it," I admit. "But I do like this place. It's comfortable." I take a bite of my taco.

Damn, these are good.

"Thank you for bringing me here, I really appreciate your help. I'll try not to overstay my welcome."

"Please, take all the time you need." The longer she stays, the better my odds are of talking her into a date. "But I'm curious, will it bother your boyfriend that you are staying with me?"

Please say that guy in the button-down is not your boyfriend. It's been bothering me since I saw him.

She sets down her taco. "My boyfriend?"

"Yeah, the guy who came to your office last week."

Her lips curve up. "Ted? He's not my boyfriend. I'm pretty sure he's way more into you than me."

"Oh."

He's not her boyfriend? *Hell yeah.*

“You’re single, then?” I can’t hide my grin.

“I am.” She eyes me skeptically. “Shouldn’t you have asked that before you asked for a second chance?”

I shrug. “Probably. But I was nervous and blurted out what I want.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink, but I’m not sure what to read into it.

I hope I have enough time here in Washington to convince her we should be together again. If she says yes, I’ll move back up here in a heartbeat. I see a glimmer of hope, and I’m not letting it go.

“Do you have plans for Halloween?” I ask.

She glances away and shifts uncomfortably.

When she says nothing, I continue, “I mean, I figured you might go to a party or something.”

She’s still avoiding my eyes. “No plans.” She rubs her fingers together, and now I *know* she’s nervous.

“We could do something together,” I suggest.

“I’ll think about it.”

She’ll think about it. That’s what she said to me in her car when I told her I wanted to be together again. I’m pushing too hard. I need to back off, but damn, it’s hard to do.

“I need to ask you something,” Lucy says.

She moves her rice and beans around in the container, not really eating. I’m curious what has her so nervous.

I reach over and still her hand. “Luce, you can ask me anything.”

She glances up at me through her long eyelashes, then nods. “I overheard you and my dad in the hallway earlier.” She leans back in the chair and meets my gaze. “What did he mean when he said he got you out of my hair once?”

I frown. “I’ve been wondering the same thing. Would you mind going somewhere with me after we finish eating?”

Her brows shoot up. “Where?”

“To see my mom.”



FOR THE SECOND time in thirteen years, I’m on my mother’s doorstep. But tonight, I’m more angry than nervous. Is there any chance she knows what Mr. Gardiner did?

I knock, and a moment later, my mom is at the door. She looks good. Happy. Until she spots Lucy.

“Cody? And is that you, Lucy?” She gives me a wary look.

“Yes, it is, Mrs. Anthony.”

“Oh, stop that. Call me Kathy. Well, come in, you two.”

We make our way into the house, and Lucy takes a seat on the couch. I sit next to her.

Lucy is fidgeting with her fingers again and my mom is sitting across from us in a chair chewing on her bottom lip. I hate seeing two women I love feel so awkward around each other. Hopefully, we can get some answers. Although, at this point, I’m not sure I’ll like those answers.

“Mom, I have some questions about what happened back in high school. Lucy’s dad said something to me that didn’t sit right. He said he got me out of Lucy’s life before and he’d do it again. Do you have any idea what he did?”

My mom’s eyes well with tears. “I’m sorry, Lucy. I know that man is your father, but Lawrence is a horrible man.” She grabs a tissue from a box on the coffee table and wipes under her eyes.

I reach for Lucy’s hand and squeeze it. I glance over and her eyes are filling with tears too.

My mom continues. “And if he sees you two together, it won’t be good. I’m afraid for you, Cody.”

I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen my mom cry. That’s real fear in her eyes. But what strikes me is

that she called Mr. Gardiner by his first name.

“Do you know him well?” I ask.

“What? No. Of course not.” She dabs at her eyes, avoiding my gaze.

My gut says there is more to it, but I’ll save those questions for when I’m alone with her.

“Why are you afraid?” Lucy asks, leaning forward. “What has he done?”

My mom closes her eyes. “So much.” She takes a deep breath, then opens them. “Just before my accident, he asked me to meet him at Leonard’s.”

“The bar in town?” Lucy asks.

“Yes. He bought me a couple of drinks and said he wanted me to help him get you two apart. Then he went on about Lucy having a bright future, and said he was certain my boy would get her pregnant and bring her down. The man was so condescending. He assumed I’d do what he asked, but I told him to go to hell.”

She wipes under her eyes again. “I was so angry, I left. I must not have realized how strong those drinks were, because I got in my car, and a few minutes later, I got into that accident.”

Simultaneously Lucy gasps and I stand abruptly, unable to sit after what she just said. “You had drinks with Mr. Gardiner just before your accident?”

“Yes. I’m so ashamed for my poor judgment, but I swear I only had two cocktails. And you know how I was back then. Two wouldn’t have affected me. But as I drove, I felt the effects of the alcohol getting stronger, and before I could pull over, it was too late.”

“And all of this happened hours before my last final.”

I hear Lucy sniffle, but before I can turn to her, my mom grabs my hand. “I’ve always felt so terrible for causing you to miss that final. I called the principal as soon as the doctor would let me, but by then, a week had passed, and you had

your graduation ceremony. I expected a return call telling me everything had worked out. Instead, I found out from Emelia you'd left, and then the principal called to say you hadn't been allowed to retake the test. I'm so sorry I took your future from you."

My mom is sobbing now, and guilt washes over me for leaving them all the way I did. I lied to all of them at graduation when I told them I'd see them that night; I knew if I told them my actual plans, they would have tried to stop me. None of them would have wanted me to enlist.

I pace the room. "I'm sorry. I hated lying to all of you, but I didn't want anyone to stop me." I stop and put my hand over my mom's and give a squeeze. "I didn't see any other option but to enlist. Emelia only had one year left of high school, and she spent all her time at her best friend's house."

My mom nods. "She found your note."

I had everything I needed packed up. I left town right after graduation and stayed with a friend until I had to report. Sitting in his room day in and day out was harder than boot camp. I struggled to not call Lucy. I knew she'd talk me out of my decision, and I couldn't let her.

"I thought you and Lucy broke up," Mom says. "I couldn't think of any other reason why you'd change your course so abruptly."

"Mr. Hackle refused to let me take the final. I got a D in his class and lost the scholarship."

My mom's hand goes to her mouth. "Hackle refused? That doesn't make sense."

I huff. "It makes sense to me. By ensuring I didn't get the scholarship, he kept me from going to Havenwood, and made it so I couldn't be with Lucy." I glance at her; she's been very quiet.

She's staring straight ahead.

"Luce?"

Her watery eyes meet mine. “I think I’m going to be sick.” She races past me, down the hall to the bathroom.

I’ve always known her father is a controlling asshole, but I can’t believe he’d break his daughter’s heart and try to ruin my life.

“What else has he done?” I demand, “How many other lives has he ruined?”

My mom shrugs. “I’ve only heard rumors.”

I stare at her as I ask my next question. “You call him Lawrence. Do you know him well?”

“Not really, no.”

“Tell me everything you’ve heard about him,” I say. “I need to know how far he’ll go.”

My mom quickly fills me in on what she’s heard about Lucy’s dad, and I have to say I’m surprised. He sounds more like a mob boss than a controlling businessman.

“You really think he’s had people killed?” I ask.

“I do. Remember Mr. Milton, Lawrence’s business partner? He disappeared. Lawrence told everyone he retired to Hawaii.”

I sit back down on the couch. “Maybe he did.”

My mom looks down the hall toward the bathroom, then back at me. “Mr. Milton’s sister went to Lawrence, asking about her brother. She said she hadn’t heard from him in weeks and that wasn’t like him. My friend Dolores heard the whole conversation. According to the sister, Mr. Milton would never leave his cats, but according to concerned neighbors who had called her, he did.”

Well, well. Mr. Gardiner might be a murderer. Why am I not surprised?

I hear the bathroom door open, and I stand.

“Thanks Mom. I think we’d better go.” I give her a hug.

“Be careful. Don’t underestimate that man.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

I’m hoping he underestimates me.

CHAPTER 11



Lucy

AFTER WE GOT BACK from his mom's house last night, Cody excused himself and spent the rest of the evening in his bedroom. I went to the guest room and tried to sleep, but my mind wouldn't shut off. I finally gave up at six a.m., and now I'm making way too much coffee to get through the day.

My dad knows no limits in trying to control my life. I had no idea he'd go this far, though. He saw how heartbroken I was, and all he's ever said is I was better off. How does someone do that to their own daughter? How do they ruin someone else's life?

He knew Cody didn't have any money and that the scholarship was everything to him. Yet he purposely took away an eighteen-year-old's future. For what? So, I would later find a man he deemed worthy?

Yes, Joseph came from money, he had his own trust fund and all the manners, but in the end, he'd been the worst decision of my life. And what about my mom? Does she know what Dad did? Does she agree with his choices?

I'm thankful Cody was able to go on with his life and not wallow in his losses. But we should have been together at college; we'd be together now, married.

But would he be happy? He said he struggled in school, but after enlisting, he found something he was good at. My

thoughts evaporate when Cody walks into the kitchen.

Holy hell.

He's shirtless and wearing pajama pants that hang low beneath more abdominal muscles than I've ever seen on a man.

Is that an eight-pack? Is there such a thing?

My eyes work their way up to his chest. Dear lord, this man is chiseled. A tattoo above his heart catches my eye.

"What is that?" I ask as I step closer. When I realize what I'm looking at, I almost drop my cup of coffee. "Lucy from *Peanuts*?"

I scan his other tattoos; he has a couple more on his chest and several on his arm. No other comic strip characters.

"Yes. To remind me of you always."

This man. I can't. It's too much. My chest aches, and I want to reach out to him, but he continues.

"It worked, too. And because of this tattoo, I got the call sign Pig Pen."

"Pig Pen?"

"You know, the dirty kid From *Peanuts*. I had just gone through a muddy obstacle course for training, and when I hit the showers, one of the guys saw the tattoo and the mud, and I became Pig Pen."

I try not to laugh. "That's an awful call sign, Cody."

His lips twitch. "Is not. It always reminded me of you."

I squeeze my eyes shut but cannot stop the tears from falling.

"Luce, I'm sorry." He takes my coffee cup from me, and I open my eyes. He wipes a tear from my cheek. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

I shake my head. "We lost all that time together. You should have been with me at college."

He pulls me into his arms, and I let him. We hold each other tight for a few minutes; the whole time, I feel his heart beating fast.

“I’m sorry I hid in my room last night,” he says. “I needed space to process everything.”

I nod into his chest. “I’m so sorry about my father.”

He pulls back. “No. Don’t apologize for that man. You didn’t have anything to do with his actions.”

I let out a sigh. “You know, I shouldn’t be surprised that you ended up in the military and are now working security. You always were a protector. I always felt safe with you.”

It’s true. From the moment we became a couple, I knew he always had my back. That was why it hurt so much when he left with no explanation.

He moves a few stray strands of hair from my face. I revel in his touch. “Can I take you out to dinner tonight?” he asks.

“Dinner? You mean like a date?”

He nods.

I grin. “Yes, I’d like that.”

He smiles and his hazel eyes light up. “Good.” He then releases me and pulls out two pans, a carton of eggs, and a jug of milk.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m making breakfast.”

“Why?”

He chuckles. “Still not a morning person?”

I yawn. “Remember that time you insisted I meet you to watch the sunrise?”

“I do. You were such a grump, I thought you were mad at me.”

“I was. I wanted to sleep in.”

He laughs and cracks eggs into one pan. “But you met me anyway.”

“I did.”

I grab another mug from the cupboard and pour him some coffee. Once he finishes cooking, he plates the food, then we sit at the table and begin to eat in silence. But I have to get something off my chest. I’ve been turning it over and over in my mind.

“Cody, I’m still mad. I think what you did was wrong. But I think I understand a little bit now.”

He nods. “Okay.”

We continue to eat in silence, which is actually nice. After I put my fork down, he leans back and looks at me like he’s trying to figure me out.

“You planned on becoming a doctor. When did that change?”

I shift in my chair. “I never wanted to be a doctor. My father wanted me to be.”

“Huh. I just assumed, since you often talked about your goal and how Havenwood University had one of the best pre-med programs.”

I nod and consider my answer. My parents fed me that dream daily, to the point I almost started to believe it. Thank god I found my passion before it was too late.

“Well, back when I was eighteen, I wanted to please my dad. But when I took some pre-med science courses, I was bored out of my mind. It wasn’t until my sophomore year when I took a psychology class that I found my passion.”

I let out a breath before I continue. “When I told my parents I was considering changing my major to psychology, my dad of course tried to pressure me to pursue psychiatry, since that requires medical school. I waited until after my last semester at college before I told him I was graduating with a degree in psychology and not going to medical school. He responded by cutting off my access to my trust fund.”

Cody sits up straight. “He cut you off from your trust fund because you didn’t want to be a doctor?”

“Well, that and a few other things. He tried to control me, and I wouldn’t allow it. I got a taste of freedom at college, and I wasn’t going to give that up.”

“Good for you. But what about your mother? Did she agree with cutting you off?”

“Well, she didn’t fight for me, if that’s what you are asking. She said it would be good for me to learn how to make it on my own. And yes, the freedom was good. But paying for graduate school myself wasn’t.”

“But you must have found a way, you’re a professor now.”

I smile. “Yes, I did. I got a job and worked every chance I could. I also took out some loans. It was worth it. But you know the funny part?”

“What?”

“I heard my dad tells people I’m a doctor of psychology because I got my PhD.”

His eyes glimmer as he stares at me.

I can’t help but smile. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You have a PhD? That’s huge. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you. Now tell me something about you. Why the Navy and not another branch?”

He leans back and crosses his arms. “When I was younger, I dreamed about becoming a SEAL.”

“You never mentioned that.”

He shrugs. “By the time I met you, I was really into football and then when I got the scholarship to play at Havenwood, I figured I’d pursue that instead.”

I grin. “Well, if you made it to becoming a SEAL, clearly you were good at it. Why did you leave?”

His smile fades. “I was taken captive briefly. It shook me, and after I got back stateside, I decided it was time to do something else.”

My hand goes to my mouth. Cody was held captive, and I never knew. He could have been killed. I might not have ever seen him again.

I blink back the tears that threaten to fall. “Were you tortured?”

“No. I was lucky, and a team rescued me before it got bad.”

I nod.

“Let’s clean up,” he says gently. He stands and takes our empty plates to the kitchen counter, and I carry our coffee mugs.

“Did you know what you wanted to do next?” I ask.

“Sort of. A good friend of mine, Thunder, works for Reed Hawthorne Security. I visited him on a couple of leaves, and he made it sound like the best of both worlds.”

I rinse the mugs, and he takes them from me, placing them in the dishwasher.

“And it is,” he admits.

“Where do you normally live?”

My throat is thick with the question. Because really, what are we doing here? Even if we have a connection, he probably has a life set up somewhere else.

“Brooklyn.”

His answer almost knocks the breath from my lungs. *That’s the other side of the country.*

I know some people can do long-distance relationships, but I couldn’t bear to have him leave me every weekend, or however often we’d actually get to see each other.

He spins me around and pulls me into his arms. “I’m willing to make this work. I don’t know how yet, but I’ll

figure it out.”

I step back and look into his eyes. I believe he wants this. I’m just not sure we can make it happen.

CHAPTER 12



CODY

DESPITE THE YEARS that have passed since high school, most of my and Lucy's favorite places in Pine Valley are still around. I've spent the morning planning our date.

I can't wait to see the look on her face when she sees where I'm taking her. Then my nerves kick in. I really hope she likes it. The second half of the day, I spend waiting for Joseph—that son of a bitch. As much as I want to pummel his ass, I won't. I can't.

I've already explained to Hawthorne why I can't be Joseph's protection any longer, though it was a hard conversation. I hate that a personal matter is interfering with work. Thankfully, Hawthorne said he'll talk to the university about transferring this assignment to Stormy's company. I know he's pissed at me—and rightfully so. But I had no way of knowing when I took this assignment that my ex would be involved.

With my work obligation out of the way, though, it's time I make it very clear to Joseph that he's never to come near Lucy again. I still don't know who Vince's boss is or if Vince was serious about his threat against Lucy, so my plan is to stick as close to her as possible.

I'm sitting in Joseph's office when I hear another man address him in the hall.

“Joseph, I told you not to mess with that fund. One cut was enough. Now you want to enforce a second one? You need to fix it, fast.”

“I’m trying. Believe me, I’m trying. It’s my number one priority.”

“All right. I’ll see you at the fundraiser tonight.”

Joseph jumps when he enters his own office and sees me. “Cody? You scared me.”

Good. Starting off on the right foot. But I remain silent.

“What are you doing here?” he asks. “I thought Rover was babysitting today.” He laughs at his own joke.

“I know what you did to Lucy. Twice. Do it again, and I’ll take care of you myself,” I threaten.

Joseph flops in his chair and straightens his tie. “Wait, you were protecting me, then you weren’t, then you were protecting me again, and now you’re threatening me? How do you keep up with a job like yours?” He grins.

The man has the nerve to *grin*.

“I’ve heard you’ve been spotted with Lucy a few times,” he continues. “Any chance you’re the high school sweetheart she never got over?”

I narrow my eyes at the asshole.

“Ah, so you are. Lucy told me about you when we first met. Don’t worry, I never won her heart. Didn’t want it, really.”

That son of a bitch. “Then why did you marry her?” I swear if he says it was for her family’s money.

“My parents wanted me to marry someone similarly situated, and she and I got along. It worked. But it wasn’t true love, I don’t believe in that.”

Not surprising. He only loves himself. But that’s not my concern.

I stand. “Just so we’re clear, don’t come near Lucy or steal from her ever again.”

“I got your message loud and clear.” He clasps his fingers together in front of him and smiles as if we are ending some sort of business meeting. “Oh, and if you see Rover, tell him he has the night off. I’ll be at a university fundraiser this evening.”

He actually thinks I’m going to take messages from him? Wait. Fundraiser. I need to know who he was talking to.

“Why don’t you tell him?” I ask. “Wasn’t that who you were talking with in the hall?”

Joseph frowns. “No, I was talking to Chip.”

“Mm. He sounded upset with you.”

I’m digging, but one thing I know about Joseph, he likes to talk about himself.

“Yes, I made another cut in funding that didn’t go over well. All in a day’s work,” he grumbled.

“Joseph, are you ready to go?”

I spin around to see a man in the doorway.

He smiles at me. “We have a meeting.”

“Yes, I’m ready to go.” Joseph stands and walks past me, then turns back. “Have a good weekend. Oh, and good luck with Lucy. You’ll need it.”

Great, now I need to go for a run. Burn off some of my anger toward this man before my date tonight. My date with Lucy. I never thought I’d get a second chance, but I’m damn sure going to make the most of it.



I PACE the living room as I wait for Lucy to get ready. I’m so fucking nervous that I’ll screw this up. Or that she’ll hate what I planned. But then she steps out of the guest room and takes my breath away.

I can't help but stare. She's wearing a fitted, green, V-neck sweater and black jeans with boots that come to her knees. The outfit is sexy as hell, and I'm loving that she's showing a little cleavage. Her hair falls in waves, with the highlighted pieces framing her face. And her legs, they look so long in those snug jeans. I can imagine them wrapped around me.

"You're so fucking sexy," I say.

She blushes. "Thank you."

I step up to her and run my thumb from her jawline up to move a few stray hairs off her face. I can't be near this woman and not touch her. But the desire to pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless is strong, so I shove my hands in my pockets instead.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Yes. Are you going to tell me where you're taking me?"

I grin. "No."

With my heart pounding so loud I don't know how she doesn't hear it, I hold out my hand, and she takes it. Knowing I need to take this slow in order to convince her is the only thing keeping me from trying to kiss her right now.

Neither one of us speaks until we're on the road and halfway to our destination.

She looks around, then gives me a smile. "Are we heading to Pine Valley?"

"Maybe."

When I pull up at the old pizza place, she turns in her seat.

Then she arches a brow. "Are we going to Picnic Point with a pizza?"

Well, shit. Now I'm second guessing my choices. I thought it would be great to recreate our first date, but now I'm worried it might be cheesy.

I hesitate. "Yes, is that okay?" My palms begin to sweat as I hold on tight to the steering wheel.

“Cody, it’s perfect.” She leans over and kisses my cheek.

The contact surprises me, but that’s all it takes to set my body on fire; memories of holding and kissing Lucy are burned into my brain. We’ve always had great chemistry. I glance over and she’s smiling. I mean *really* smiling all the way to her eyes. I haven’t seen her smile like that since I’ve been back. I grin in return, because hell yeah, I’m going to win my girl back.

We go inside the pizza place, and the smell is heavenly. I called ahead while she was getting dressed, so ours is ready by the time we make it up to the counter.

After a short drive up to Picnic Point, we park. It’s a little chilly this evening, but fortunately, I packed blankets. I set it all out on our old spot. From here, you can see the lights of our little town.

So that it isn’t too dark, I line the edge of the blanket with several small flameless candles. Then I pull out a bottle of champagne.

“Now, I don’t recall that on our first date.”

I laugh. “No, if I remember right, we split a bottle of diet soda. God, that was gross.”

“You should have gotten your own drink at the pizza place,” she teases.

After I pour two plastic glasses of champagne, I hand her one. “I figured we could upgrade from the diet soda. Here’s to second chances.”

“Second chances,” she repeats. Then we clink glasses. “Mmm, this is good.”

Her moan definitely brings back other memories. I shift under the blanket, hoping she doesn’t notice.

“Do you know your champagne, or did you get lucky?” she asks.

I set my glass down, careful to not let it topple. “I know champagne and wine. It’s helpful to know in my line of work.”

“There’s a lot about you I don’t know, isn’t there?”

I wink. “I’d love for you to learn it all.”

“Now, why did that sound sexual?”

I bark out a laugh. “Because you obviously have sex on your mind. My Luce, a dirty girl.”

“With you, I always was.”

And just like that, I’m hard as stone. “We should eat, because if you keep looking at me like that, it won’t be the pizza I’m eating,” I warn.

Her mouth falls open. “I think you may have gotten dirtier over the years.”

Only when it comes to you. “I guess you’ll have to find out.” *Hopefully soon.*

I hand her a napkin and paper plate with a slice of pizza.

She watches me while she eats. “You mentioned you never married, but did you ever fall in love again?”

I don’t hesitate. “No. It was always you.”

She nods and turns her gaze to the stars.

Quietly, I ask, “Did you love Joseph?”

Please say no. That guy is a prick.

After setting down her plate, she leans back on her hands. “I loved him, but I wasn’t in love with him. Does that make sense? I mean, I cared about him, but there were no sparks.”

“No sparks? So, he sucked at sex?”

She tosses her napkin at me, then sighs. “Yeah, he did.”

“It’s because he’s too self-centered.”

She seems to think on that for a moment. “You’re right, he is self-centered. He hid that well. He hid a lot at first. But let’s not talk about my ex-husband tonight.”

“Fine by me.” I move the pizza box and scoot closer. “I wanted to kiss you so bad on our first date. But I was too nervous,” I admit.

She turns to me. “It’s hard to imagine you ever nervous. Then or now. You always seem so calm.”

I take one of her hands and place it on my chest. “Feel that?”

“It’s beating fast.”

“I’m nervous again.”

“Why?” she whispers.

“I want you. I want us. I don’t want to lose you again.”

She bites her lip. “I want to believe that.”

“Then do,” I say as I lean closer, capturing her lips with mine.

At first, she’s still and I’m certain I’ve made a huge mistake, moved too fast. But then she melts into me, opening her mouth to deepen the kiss. It’s everything I remember and miss all rolled into one. My entire body lights up, and I pull her onto my lap, needing to be closer.

When she begins to grind on me, I’m pretty sure I’m going to lose my shit.

I break our kiss. “We should go back to the house before this becomes indecent.”

“Okay,” she says, but then she dives back in for my lips. Her hand is in my hair, pulling gently as she kisses me hard.

I ease onto my back as her hands move to my chest, then up and under my shirt. The touch of her hands on my bare skin has me all ablaze, and the memories of us flash in my mind.

We always went from innocent kiss to red-hot in seconds. That’s something I’ve never found with anyone else. Not like what we had. I flip her on her back and settle in between her thighs.

“Cody.”

I kiss her neck and move up to her earlobe. “Yes, Luce?”

I grind into her, eliciting a deep moan from her. Hungry, I do it again.

“We need to go now,” she pants.

I grin as I move back to her mouth with my kisses. “Is that so?”

Her hand moves down my chest, to my stomach, and then begins its descent under my waistband.

I grab her wrist. There is no way in hell I’ll make it if she touches me. “Okay, let’s pack up and go.”

I toss everything into the basket I brought—hell, I’m pretty sure the flameless candles are all still on. When she tries but fails to recork the champagne bottle, I grab it and wedge it within the basket, then grab the blanket, creating a barrier that will hopefully keep it upright. Finally, I put it all in the trunk.

It’s a short drive back to the house, but the whole way, I’m cursing myself; I swore I’d take things slow, and I practically had my way with her up there at Picnic Point. No, I need to slow this down until she is certain of us. I can’t risk scaring her off.

CHAPTER 13



Lucy

THE MOMENT we are inside the house, I drop everything I'm holding, turn to Cody, and kiss him hard. I could kiss those full lips forever. It takes him by surprise, and he stumbles back into the wall, but we pick up right where we left off.

I forgot how good he makes me feel. Well, more like I've pushed it down. No one else has ever compared to Cody—no one ever will. I want this man more than I want to take my next breath.

Which is why I'm so shocked when he unhooks my arms from around his neck and pushes me away.

"What's wrong?" I demand.

He winces, and a pit forms in my stomach as he backs away. Did I read this all wrong?

"You don't want this?" I ask. My voice cracks as I swallow back the emotion.

I shouldn't be so affected by his rejection, but memories flood me. He never turned me away when we were younger.

"Oh, Luce." He steps up and wipes the tear that falls. "I want you more than you know. But we need to take this slow, I don't want to risk anything going wrong. I'm in this for the long haul, and I want you to be certain you are too."

I nod, because what he says makes sense, but my body wants more. As I let his words sink in I realize he's right. My body is starved for good sex, but I need to be certain about us before we go there.

His large arms encompass me. "If you think you can keep your hands to yourself, I'd love to hold you tonight while we sleep."

I laugh. "I'll try."

He kisses my forehead while interlinking our fingers. "That's all I can ask. Now, let's get some sleep."

I nod again, and he leads me back to his bedroom.

The moment I step in, my eyes are drawn to a large painting on the wall. I stare at it for a moment before I realize what it is.

"That's not mine," Cody protests before I can say anything. "It belongs to Stormy, the friend of my boss I mentioned. This really doesn't seem like his style but here it is."

I glance at him. He's wearing a serious expression. "It's... lovely?"

The painting is of two llamas having sex.

Cody laughs.

I turn to him. "It is yours, isn't it?"

His eyebrows shoot up. "Fuck no. I just love how you try so hard to be polite, even though you clearly don't like it."

"Any idea why he has it?"

"I asked my boss, and he said an ex gave it to Stormy, and he couldn't bring himself to throw it out."

"So, he hung it up in his bedroom?"

"Not his bedroom. The bedroom of a rental." I laugh. "Come on, let's get some sleep."

He is already in bed by the time I'm done getting ready. He moves the covers back, and I lie down. Then he wraps his

arms around me, and I snuggle in.

I want this every night. There is no doubt in my mind. I hope Cody wants it enough too.



MY EYES POP OPEN, and for a moment, I don't know where I am. Then the events of last night slowly filter through the fog.

I reach for Cody but am met with cold, empty space, so I sit up. I have no idea what his routine is or if he had to be somewhere this morning. Fortunately, I don't have to be anywhere on Saturdays, so I fall back in the bed and let his scent surround me.

Memories of being in his arms last night make me smile. One date, one night, and I'm already a goner.

Eventually, I hop in the shower and get ready for the day. I'm in the kitchen brewing coffee when Cody walks in the door.

"Good morning," he says. He's wearing a T-shirt that stretches over his chest, and a pair of shorts. Sweat beads on his forehead. "I went for a run. I wasn't sure how long you'd sleep."

"That's fine. I made coffee."

He breaks into a grin. "I'd love some, but I'm going to hop in the shower first." He stalks over and kisses me before turning down the hall.

He pulls his shirt up over his head, and I watch as his muscles ripple with each move. I'm wondering why we are going slow, when my phone beeps and I jump. I pick it up to see that Connie has sent several messages asking about my date.

Instead of texting back, I call her.

"Lucy, it's nearly nine a.m.."

"I wasn't aware I called for the time," I laugh.

“You were supposed to call last night and tell me about your date. Since you didn’t, I can only draw one conclusion. Please tell me you’re not falling for him again. I’m worried about you.”

I can’t blame her. She saw how destroyed I was after Cody left. “Don’t worry. I’m much older and wiser now,” I assure her.

I’m met with silence. Pulling the phone from my ear, I make sure the call is still connected. “Hello?” I ask.

“You didn’t deny falling for him.”

I sip my coffee. “I can’t. I’m falling for him again.”

“Oh, Lucy. Be careful.”

“Connie, things are different now. We are both adults who know what we’re getting into.”

“But isn’t he only here temporarily? What happens when his job ends?”

Connie is not someone who can live spontaneously. I blame that on her being an attorney. She always needs to know where things are going, what the plans are, and who all is involved. It’s great when planning events or a night out, but I’m realizing it may not be so great when it comes to whatever is going on with me and Cody.

“He’s said he’ll figure it out.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I do.”

A sigh escapes her lips. “Remind him that if he hurts you again, I’ll make sure his body is never found. And make sure you tell him I’m a lawyer and know how to get away with it.”

I laugh. “Thanks, but I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“If it is, give me a call.”

I hear the bedroom door open down the hall.

“Hey, I need to go,” I whisper. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Cody walks into the kitchen wearing jeans, an unbuttoned shirt, and bare feet. The man looks like every woman's wet dream.

My gaze moves to his face, and his smirk.

"You know, it's going to be hard for me to take this slow if you keep looking at me like that."

I smirk. "Slow is overrated."

He steps close to me, and I trace the ridges of his muscles with my fingers.

"Really overrated," I murmur as I move my hands up and wrap my arms around his neck.

His phone rings, and he pulls it out of his pocket to check the screen.

He sighs. "I'm sorry. I have to take this." He steps away and I immediately miss his warmth.

"Hello?" His brows furrow. "What? Weren't you watching him?"

I try to listen, but I can't make out the other side of the conversation.

"Uh huh," he says as he sits in a chair. "Was he alone?" He pinches the phone to his shoulder and puts on his socks. "He wanted to lose you? Why not just ask you to leave?" Cody sighs. "All right. Yeah, he might go there, but I'll check out his house."

Cody stands up and slides his phone into his pocket, then buttons up his shirt. "I'm so sorry, I have to go."

"What's going on?"

He puts on his shoes and a jacket. "Rover met up with Joseph last night after a fundraiser, and apparently, Joseph was pretty freaked out but wouldn't say why. Then this morning, he purposely ditched Rover. It makes no sense." He sighs. "Rover says Joseph got a call, and he thinks he was threatened. He's checking one location, and I'm going to Joseph's house."

"Why, if you aren't protecting him anymore?"

“Because I told Rover if he ever needed help to call me. I thought it would be good to get on solid terms with the guys working at Morgan Thompson Security. You know, for when I look for work up here.” He winks, then leans down and gives me a kiss. “I’ll see you tonight, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

And then he’s out the door, and I’m standing there stunned. He didn’t say *if* he will look for work up here, but *when*, as if it is a foregone conclusion. The man really is ready to uproot his life and move to Washington state for me? For us?

The thought causes another crack in the armor I have built up to protect my heart. Can I really imagine a future with him? Who am I kidding? The guy has been back in town for a couple of weeks, and I’m already thinking of a future with him.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I should back off, protect myself. But can I? I’m already in so deep it scares me.



“OKAY, I WANT ALL THE DETAILS,” Connie says as we sit down next to each other at a table in the corner of Kelly’s. It’s our usual restaurant and our usual table so we can people watch.

I agreed to meet her for coffee instead of sitting around Cody’s place. But as I look around, I’m wondering if this was a good idea. There are at least three guys staring at Connie.

Today, her blonde hair is straight, and her makeup is light, but it doesn’t matter what she does, the woman is gorgeous. And it doesn’t hurt that she’s wearing tight jeans that show off her curves. And she’s wearing heels.

“Wait, are you going on a date after this?”

She smiles. “I’m still looking for Mr. Right, you know.”

I take a sip of my coffee, savoring the dark roast they serve here. “Want to tell me about him?”

“I don’t want to jinx anything. Besides, we are here to talk about you. Like I said, tell me all the details.” She leans forward, smiling.

“I hate to disappoint you, but there aren’t many. We had a date and went back to his place.”

She leans back and crosses her arms. “I knew it. You had sex. That’s how he got you, isn’t it?”

“No, we didn’t. We slept. And that isn’t code for anything. We actually slept.”

“Then why are you glowing?”

How do I describe getting the one thing I’ve always wanted, a second shot at the love of my life? Finally, I explain, “He’s my one. And he’s back.”

Connie sighs, saying nothing.

“What? You still don’t trust him?”

She takes my hand in hers. “Lucy, you’ve been on one date with the man, and you are ready to open your heart again. I’m worried about you. Do you remember our freshman year in college? I had to *drag* you to parties so you wouldn’t just hide in the dorm all the time. His leaving destroyed you.”

“I haven’t forgotten. That’s why I’m a little scared.”

“Are you afraid he’ll do it again?”

I take another sip of my coffee. “I was. Until this morning. Now my heart is telling me to grab on to this second chance. I never thought I’d see him again, and now here he is.”

Connie scans the crowd. The men who have been watching her are trying to make eye contact, but I know Connie, and these men aren’t her type. She passes on men in suits. She says she sees enough of those in court.

She turns back to me. “Why don’t you take a few days apart and process everything?” She takes her own sip.

Oops. I forgot to tell her about Joseph and my apartment being ransacked. “Well, kind of hard to do since I’m staying at his place.”

She starts coughing.

I pat her on the back. “Are you all right?”

She coughs a few more times. “No! You can’t drop that bomb while I’m taking a drink. Why the hell are you staying at his place?”

“Because Joseph struck again.”

“He didn’t! He got your money? *How?*”

I glance away, embarrassed. “I forgot to change my passwords.”

She lets out a long sigh. “You know that threat about hiding a body? I can apply it to Joseph instead.”

“No, thank you. As much as I wish Joseph would disappear, I’m not going to be the one to take him out.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t already been taken out. Isn’t he always in debt to some bookie?”

“He is, but then he gets his trust fund payment, and he starts over.”

“What a waste. He could do so much good with that money.” Connie’s gaze moves to a man standing in line.

I take another sip and lean back, enjoying the hum of conversation in the coffee shop. Even though we are discussing my ex-husband, I can’t stop smiling. “Money isn’t everything,” I tell her.

Connie turns her stare to me, then shakes her head. “I’m not sure I’m fond of sappy Lucy. Hey, wait. You distracted me. I need to know why you’re staying with Cody. And what do you mean by his place? He has a place here?”

I fill her in.

“Huh. Well, that was nice of him to offer you somewhere to stay, but that doesn’t make up for what he did to you.”

I lean over and give her a hug. She has always been on my side. She’s the best friend I could ever have. “No, it doesn’t.

Thank you for looking out for me. But he opened up about what really happened, why he left.”

She sits up straight. “He did? I’ve missed a lot. Damn, Lucy, I’m sorry I’ve been so busy. That trial took over the last several weeks of my life, and it sounds like I haven’t been there for you.”

I squeeze her arm. “He told me the night he walked me to my car.”

“Wait, we met for drinks that night. You said he didn’t say much.”

I shrug and take another sip of coffee, but my friend’s stare is unwavering. “I’m sorry, I had a lot to process. He told me why, and then he asked for a second chance.”

“Holy shit, Lucy. Why didn’t you call me before now?”

I scan the other patrons in line for coffee. “You were busy with the trial, I didn’t want to bother you. And that night at drinks, I just wanted to hear your dating stories.” I mean that. Connie has had some crazy experiences.

She leans back. “Next time bother me. I could have talked to you in the evenings after court. Now, tell me, what was his reason for leaving?”

I bite my lip. I’ve never told Connie how controlling my dad is. She has some idea since he cut off my trust fund when I refused to let him control me any longer. But she doesn’t know the way he held it over me long before that, threatening to take it away anytime I didn’t do what he wanted. I had feared losing it, too. But now, I feel lighter. Freer than ever. Well, until I heard my dad tried to get Cody’s mom to break us up.

“My dad,” I finally admit.

Connie’s brows furrow. “You are going to have to explain.”

“My dad got Cody’s mom drunk, ensuring she would get in a car accident on the morning of his last final. He missed his final when he went to the hospital, and he wasn’t allowed to take it at a later time. It lowered his grade, so he didn’t meet

the requirements of the scholarship, and therefore couldn't go to Havenwood with me. And yes, before you ask, my dad interfered every step of the way."

"Holy shit." Connie's eyes are wide. "You said he was controlling, but that is next level shit."

I nod. "He went too far."

"Have you thought about how far he'll go if he finds out you're together now?"

"He gave up control of me when he cut off my trust fund. If I want to be with Cody, he gets no say."

Connie stares at me.

"What?"

"Are you so sure of that?"

No, I'm not sure at all.

CHAPTER 14



CODY

I SEE smoke as I approach Joseph's house. The damn attached garage is on fire.

I run from my car to the front door. It's locked. Of course, it is.

Joseph's car is parked on the street in front of his house and I'm certain he's inside. I walk around the back and find the glass patio door is locked too, but I don't see any fire or smoke on this side of the house. I grab a patio chair and bust through the glass, breaking enough away to unlock then I open the sliding door.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

I jerk back to see a man standing on the other side of the fence. "The garage is on fire, call 911," I yell to him before making my way inside. "Joseph!"

No response. As I go deeper into the house, the smoke thickens. I find Joseph on the floor in the master bedroom; he's alive but unconscious. I cough the smoke out of my lungs as I heave him over my shoulder and get the hell out of the house as fast as I can. By the time I make it to the front yard, a firetruck has arrived.

"Were you in the house?" a fireman asks as he helps pry Joseph off my shoulders.

“I just went in. This man’s unconscious, and I’m sure needs oxygen.” I lower Joseph onto the stretcher and turn to cough.

“Hey, it sounds like you might need some oxygen too,” a medic says. The name Todd is on his shirt.

“No thanks. I’ll be fine.” I pull out my phone and call Rover. “Found Joseph.”

“Where the hell is he?”

“His house. It was on fire when I got here, and Joseph was inside. I got him out, and an ambulance is here now. All the doors were locked.”

“Do you think this was a suicide attempt?”

That’s actually the last thing I’d consider. I frown. “Why would you think that?”

“You said he was inside, doors were locked.”

“But only the garage was on fire, so I’m betting someone knocked him out, then started the fire from the outside.”

“Why would he purposely ditch protection if the threat against him was heating up, no pun intended?”

I bark out a laugh. This guy. But that was a good question. Joseph had made it clear he wasn’t entirely on board with having security. But why put himself at risk?

“Do you have any idea why he went to his house?” I ask.

“To ditch me is my guess. He invited me to the sandwich shop on Third, Kelly’s. He said they had the best coffee and he wanted to treat me to one. But then, after we got there, his phone rang. After taking the call, he said he had to use the bathroom. Instead, he ditched me.”

“He likely trusted whoever he thought he was meeting, since he agreed to meet at his house,” I said.

“Or the person caught him by surprise before he could leave to go wherever he thought they were meeting,” Rover says.

“That’s possible too.” I sigh. We don’t know enough. And considering one of us has been with the guy constantly, Joseph’s done a great job of hiding the ball. “Anything odd going on at the food bank?”

“No. No one’s here. I’m on my way to you.”

“Sounds good.” I pocket my phone.

“Sir?” someone says behind me.

I turn to find a police officer.

“I’m Officer Williams. I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course.”

“What is your name?”

“Cody Anthony, I work for Reed Hawthorne Security. I have a card in my wallet.”

The officer nods, so I pull out a card and hand it to him.

I explain, “I was on assignment protecting Joseph Taylor, the man I pulled out of that burning house.”

That’s not a total lie. Even though Morgan Thompson took over, I agreed to help Rover out today.

The officer glances to the ambulance where a medic is inserting an IV into Joseph’s arm. “Doesn’t look like you were doing a good job.”

I bite my tongue. No need to tell him Joseph ditched his security; not yet. Not until I know why.

Seemingly unbothered by my lack of response, he asks, “Why are you protecting him? Someone after him?”

“Yeah. I think it’s Vince Gardiner, but I can’t be certain. That man,” I point in Joseph’s direction, “has lied to me about everything. Protecting him has been a challenge.”

With a nod, the officer pockets my card. “I’ll likely be in touch, Mr. Anthony.” Then he walks away.

I make my way to the ambulance. “How’s he doing?”

Joseph tries to sit up. “He’s awake,” a medic says.

“Good. Who tried to kill you?” I ask, stepping up beside the gurney.

“Sir, you can’t be in here,” one of the medics says, but he stops short of pushing me out. I have at least six inches on the man.

Joseph removes the oxygen mask. His voice is hoarse. “Some guy called and told me to be at my house alone this morning.” He begins to wheeze.

“Who told you this?” I press.

One of the monitors he’s attached to starts beeping rapidly.

“Sir, you need to leave now.” The medic gives me a push this time.

I jump out of the ambulance.

“We need to get to the hospital *now*.” Todd, the medic says.

“Which hospital?” I ask.

“Quincy’s.”

Then they close the back door, and the ambulance speeds away.

“Cody,” Rover shouts from behind the police line.

I must have been in the ambulance when they put that up. I walk over to him. “Joseph is on his way to Quincy.”

“Do you think it was Vince?”

I chew on that. “No. Vince loaned him more money a few days ago.”

He puffs up his cheeks and blows out a breath. “You know, I’m still wondering where Joseph got the money to pay Vince back the first time.”

“Me too. It could be his trust fund. I was told he gets one hundred thousand dollars every month.”

“No shit?”

I nod.

Rover laughs. “If he’s blowing through that kind of cash, he’s a bigger idiot than I thought.” Then he grows serious. “If he’s gambling at that level and borrowing from guys like Vince, he’s in deep. And if he’s in deep, he probably isn’t smart about who he takes money from.”

I run my hand over my scruff and recall my conversation with Joseph about his borrowing habits. “I have an idea where he may have gotten the money.”

“Where?”

“Some of the university’s funds.”

Rover’s eyes widen. “You mean embezzlement?”

“He practically admitted it to me. I told him that was embezzlement. He said no and that I misunderstood. And when I told him I had to tell his boss, he made it clear that any accusation without proof would reflect poorly on my company. I have no proof.”

“Fuck. If someone doesn’t kill him, I just might. The balls on that guy.”

“Tell me about it.”

“But if he is messing with the university’s funds, we could get pulled into an investigation,” Rover points out.

He’s right. This could bring unwanted publicity to both of our companies.

“Hey, I need to check in with Stormy about all of this,” he says. “Mind if I meet you at the hospital?”

“Yeah. I’ll see you there.”



JOSEPH IS STAYING OVERNIGHT and sedated so I can’t get any answers from him. I stand guard outside his hospital door until Rover comes to relieve me.

Apparently, Stormy isn’t happy with the situation, but he’s cleared Rover to stay on it for now, which means I need to call

Hawthorne sooner rather than later. No doubt Stormy will call him to compare notes.

Joseph said some guy called him. The question is, does he know who this guy is? He must have. Why else would he have gone to his house, alone?

Once more, I go over everything in my mind, see what I'm missing.

Someone wants Joseph dead. Did he fail to pay someone or borrow from the wrong person? Did that person threaten him at the fundraiser?

There is too much I don't know. One big piece is if there is still a threat out against Lucy. And that is why I must find Vince. His words have been bothering me. He said even he wouldn't touch that fund and 'piss off those people'. What fund and what people?

And I still need to know why he wanted Joseph to go to Lucy for money. None of it sits right with me.

I drive to the food bank and am happy when I see Vince's car in the lot. There's only one other car here, which is good. It means I have a chance of getting him alone to answer my questions.

The door is unlocked, so I walk in. "Hello?" I shout, "Vince?"

"Hello? I'm sorry, but we aren't open yet." Vince comes out from the back, but stutters to a stop when he sees me. "Cody Anthony? Is that you?" He smiles. "Well, you've certainly grown up."

"You remember me?"

Vince laughs. "Yeah. Lawrence bitched about you a lot back in the day. But don't worry, no one would have been good enough for his Lucy."

"Yeah. I'm here to ask about Joseph Taylor."

He grins. "What, are you seeking out all of Lucy's suitors now?"

“No.”

He finally takes in my serious tone. With a nod, he asks, “Let me guess, he owes you money too?”

“No.”

Vince licks his lips as he studies me. He’s trying to get a read on me. That is one thing he won’t get.

He nods. “Follow me. We can talk in my office.”

He leads me down the hall to an office, and motions for me to take a seat. Then he closes the door.

“Someone tried to kill Joseph,” I say. “I need to know who else he borrowed from. I know he’s scared of someone.”

Vince stalls at my words, then drops his head back and stares at the ceiling. “That idiot. I told him to not touch that money.” His gaze meets mine. “Tell me, Cody, why do you care about Joseph?”

“The university hired me to protect him.”

Vince’s brows shoot up, and he laughs. “I wasn’t expecting that. I’m curious how he got the university to pay for his protection.” He waves his hand in dismissal. “It doesn’t matter. That man can talk anyone into anything. I’ve never seen anything like it. He had Lawrence fooled for years.”

“I’m not here to be sold on the man. He’s an ass. What I need to know is who else he borrowed from.”

“Who *else*?” Vince frowns. “Ah, I see. Well, I don’t know how he does it, but somehow, he has access to some of the university’s funds. He shuffles money around to hide the fact he’s borrowing some for himself. It was never a problem when it was a few thousand from the arts, or a little more from the engineering department. He always managed to pay them back before anyone noticed.”

“Embezzlement?”

His eyes widen. “No, he only *borrow*s the money.”

Apparently, Vince isn’t up to date on the meaning of embezzlement. I leave it alone.

“What fund do you believe he borrowed from this time?” I ask.

He pulls a lighter and a pack of cigarettes out of his desk and lights one, then takes a drag. “You have to understand something. Joseph went from gambling away a few thousand a week to tens of thousands. At first, it wasn’t a problem because he had enough to cover it.”

He smokes the cigarette in record time; he’s either nervous to give up the information, nervous for Joseph, or somehow in on the entire scheme.

“Well, recently, he’s been gambling more than he can cover. I told him he needed to slow down, but he didn’t listen.”

Whatever is causing Vince to be nervous, I’m glad it has him talking. “He needed a fund that he could borrow more than just a few thousand dollars from?” I ask.

Vince points his cigarette at me. “Exactly. There are a couple at the university that are big enough it might go unnoticed. But the president is so focused on the pre-med and science programs, Joseph didn’t dare touch those.”

“What does that leave?”

“The hockey program fund.”

Holy shit. Joseph originally said he needed protection because he caused a problem with some of the team’s funds. Was he sort of telling the truth in his backward way?

“Isn’t the school known for its hockey team?” I ask.

“That they are.”

“They might notice money missing.”

“They likely would.”

“But then, why not call the police?”

Vince laughs. “There is a lot of money in the hockey program, and with money comes privilege. With privilege comes a group that doesn’t always like to follow the rules.”

I watch for any signs that he’s lying; I see none.

“Tell me, Vince, how are you so knowledgeable on the university’s funding?”

He grins. “Joseph, of course. He wanted to borrow money, and I wanted collateral. He educated me in how the funding works.”

I clasp my hands as I stare at Vince. “You admit you’re his bookie?”

He shifts uncomfortably. “No. I simply loaned my niece’s ex-husband some money.”

“And why would you care how the university funding works?”

Vince leans back and lights a second cigarette. “I didn’t. You know Joseph, he likes to talk about himself. The guy doesn’t know when to shut up.”

He stares at me as he sucks down his cigarette.

“Well, then tell me why you punched Joseph and told him to get the money from Lucy.”

Vince smiles, his teeth yellow from the nicotine. “I had my reasons.”

I stand and lean over the desk. “She’s your niece, and you’re trying to extort money from her? Do you know that Joseph took you seriously? He wiped out her bank account and credit cards and even ransacked her apartment,” I shout.

Vince stood up. “He *what?*”

“You heard me.”

“Fucking Joseph. No, I wasn’t trying to extort money from her. I was trying to mend her relationship with her father.”

I sit back down and cross my arms. “Explain.”

Vince also resumes his seat. “I thought if she saw Joseph in real danger, she’d feel sympathetic and go to her dad for money. If she goes to her dad for help, then they might get back to where they were.”

“You mean when he controlled her?”

Vince puts the cigarette out in a bright red ashtray sitting on his desk. He clasps his hands and leans forward. “Lawrence isn’t a bad guy. He’s just misguided sometimes.”

“We can agree to disagree. Now, why did you try to kill Joseph?”

The surprise on his face can’t be faked.

Damn.

He’s my only lead.

“No, he still owes me money. I need him alive. Is he okay?”

“He’s in the hospital.”

CHAPTER 15



Lucy

I CATCH myself staring at the clock throughout class. I've never rushed through a lecture before, but ever since my date with Cody the other night, all I want to do is spend any free time with him. The faster this class ends, the faster I can drive to his place and see him.

Four minutes. Almost there.

But then a man in a suit walks through the doors and stands just inside the room, distracting me. The way he's watching me, with his serious expression and hands on his hips, he has a purpose.

I finish my lecture, glancing his way several times. The man never smiles. I wonder if something has happened to Joseph. Or Cody. Tears prick the back of my eyes at the thought of Cody in danger. Well, that's one thought I'd better get used to. The man seeks out danger.

"Have a good day, everyone," I say, then walk to the desk to the right of the podium.

My students clear out quickly, and soon it's just me and Mr. Serious in the room.

"Professor Taylor?" the man asks.

"Yes."

“My name is Detective Beyers.” He hands me a card. County Sheriff’s department. “Can you tell me about the last time you saw Randy Sinclair?”

Randy? My throat goes dry. *Did he actually report me?*

I figure after he saw Cody, he’s simply backed off.

“The last time I saw Randy?” I echo.

“Yes, when was that?”

I think back. Fortunately, since Cody claimed to be my boyfriend, I haven’t seen much of Randy, but I do remember his friends laughing about something he said.

That was... a week ago?

“Uh, the last time I remember seeing him was last Monday.”

The detective types on his phone. “Did Randy seem distraught to you?”

“Distraught?”

Shit, Randy, what did you do?

“You know, depressed, stressed, was he anxious about his grades?”

Randy, anxious? *Hardly.* I snort.

The detective cocks his head.

I offer an apologetic smile. “Sorry, it’s just Randy is a very confident student. He never appears worried about anything.”

The detective nods. “Often, kids will mask their true feelings.”

I frown. “What is this about?”

Beyers shoves his phone in his pocket. “Randy has been missing for a week. It appears no one has seen or heard from him since last Monday night.”

A week? How have I not noticed Randy missing from class?

Actually, I've been so relieved he hasn't waited for me before or after a lecture, and my mind has been so wrapped up in losing all my money and what's going on with Cody.

I clear my throat. "As you probably know, Randy Sinclair comes from a very affluent family. Perhaps he decided to travel?"

"Travel?"

I shrug. "I don't know Randy well, but I've heard other students talking about occasionally taking a week off to fly to Hawaii for some sun."

His jaw ticks. "Must be nice. You know, to take off for a week."

I think of my college years. *It was nice.*

Returning to the present conversation, I tell him, "Well, most of the students here come from money."

"I understand. And then there are the scholarship kids."

I blink. He's been thorough in his investigation. "Yes, that's right."

"And how do the rich kids treat the scholarship kids?" he asks.

I look away. I noticed that unpleasantness right after I got to campus my freshman year. I always wondered if they would have treated Cody like that too; he'd been popular in high school and would have been on the football team here. He got along with everyone, so I could never imagine anyone treating him the way I saw others being treated.

"Not good," I admit finally.

His eyebrows shoot up. "You've witnessed this?"

I nod. "Not as a professor, but when I was a student here."

He arches a brow. "Were *you* here on scholarship?"

"No."

"I see." He lets out a sigh. "Is it possible Randy didn't treat some of these scholarship kids well?"

I meet his gaze. “Look, Randy isn’t the nicest person. I’ve seen it, I’m sure other professors have seen it. Unfortunately, there isn’t much we can do about it. Not without risking our jobs, anyway.”

He crosses his arms. “And how did Randy treat you?”

I can’t hide the surprise on my face as my eyebrows shoot up. I wasn’t expecting that. The last time I saw him, he was disrupting my class by talking to his friends. I don’t think I’ll be doing myself any favors if I speak so candidly, though.

“He attended class and asked questions. I’m sure he treated me like his other professors,” I say instead, hoping he can’t tell I’m lying.

Beyers watches me for a moment. “Are you sure last Monday was the last time you saw Randy?”

I swallow. “Yes. I gave a pop quiz, and Randy made a snide comment about it.”

He smiles. “And you don’t recall seeing him since?”

I shake my head.

“Do you take attendance, Professor Taylor?”

“No. Everyone here is an adult. It’s their choice to attend class.”

“Can you tell me who Randy normally sits with in class? I’d like to talk to those students.”

“Of course, I’ll write down their names.”

I retrieve a pen and pad of paper from the desk drawer. After scribbling the names of the three students I usually see Randy chatting with before class.

“I’m sure he has other friends, but these are the students he talks to in this class.”

I hand him the paper, and he folds it and places it in his pocket.

“Do you find it odd that Randy has missed over a week of class?”

I shrug. “No. Like I said before, some students take trips and miss a week of school every so often. Sadly, it isn’t unusual here.”

He stares at me for a moment, then gives a brief nod. “Thank you for your time. If you think of anything else, please call me.”

Once the detective leaves, I breathe a sigh of relief. I don’t wish any ill will on Randy, but I’m happy to have one less person to deal with at the moment.

I check my phone and see a text from Cody saying he will be home late. That means I’m on my own for dinner. Suddenly craving some more of those tacos from the truck we stopped at the other night, I grab my purse and exit the building.

“Lucy.”

I turn to see Liz, the head of the psychology department.

She’s smiling as she approaches. “Do you have a minute?” she asks.

The woman always looks like she belongs in a magazine, and today is no exception. She is wearing a blue cashmere sweater that matches her eyes, with a brown skirt, and brown heels. She is the epitome of elegance.

“Sure.”

A couple of students laugh in the distance, and Liz turns her head toward them.

When her eyes meet mine, they’re troubled. “I’m not sure if you heard, but Professor Olson had a stroke.”

“Oh, no.”

Professor Olson is our newest addition to the psychology department and a favorite among freshmen.

“Look, I hate to ask this, but could you fill in for his psych 101 course? Only for a month. If he isn’t recovered by then, I’ll find a more permanent solution.”

“101?” I bite my tongue.

I have always taught three-hundred-level courses to juniors and seniors; the idea of teaching a basic course to kids who have no interest in psychology gives me a headache.

“I know it’s below your usual caliber, but I checked with the other professors, and many already have classes on Mondays at ten a.m. Plus, you’re currently teaching the least class hours.”

She’s kidding, right?

Yes, I might have the least class hours, but that’s because I’m working on a research paper for the department as well. I need to stand up for myself, here.

“I might have fewer class hours, but getting through Neuroethology, and Programming for Psychology and Neuroscience are not easy.”

Liz purses her lips. “You’re right. They aren’t. And if I could find anyone else to take this on, I would. But look on the bright side, it will be easy for you.” She gives a fake grin.

Dammit.

There is no way I can say no to Liz. Not only is she a nice person, but she’s the head of the department. I want to stay on her good side.

I let out a resigned sigh. “Okay, send me his class schedule.”

“Already in your inbox.” Liz smiles for real this time. “By the way, how is the programming class coming? Do the students enjoy the computer science lab component Professor Barton is teaching?”

I smile as I remember the excitement in our students’ eyes.

When Ted first approached me to teach this joint class, I was hesitant, but he’s right—this is a vibrant direction for psychology to take, and a great opportunity for those students who combine it with the computer sciences.

“They love it,” I tell her.

She pats my shoulder. “Great. That’s what I love to hear. Anyway, I won’t keep you any longer. Have a good night.”

As Liz walks back into the building, it hits me that an additional class is going to take a lot of my time. Time away from Cody. Time I need to convince him that he does want to move up here. Permanently.

CHAPTER 16



CODY

“WHEN I CONTRACTED for protection services for Joseph, I thought he had received a threat from a student. I had no idea he had a gambling problem,” Chip says as he stares out his window.

I’ve been studying Chip since the moment I sat down in his office to give him the news about Joseph; he’s given no sign that he’s being dishonest, but how the hell could the man not know about Joseph’s gambling? It seems obvious to me that those cuts to the hockey team weren’t real cuts but Joseph ‘borrowing’ the money.

Is that why I was really brought in? To solve their embezzlement problem? I shift uncomfortably in my seat. “You didn’t know about his gambling?”

Chip shakes his head. Again, no tells.

“I’m sure he didn’t want you to know,” I reason. “And it sounds like he had it under control until recently.”

The man nods his head. “Yeah, that’s how it goes, isn’t it?”

I frown. “It?”

“Addictions. It’s under control until it isn’t. As much as you think you have control, you unfortunately learn you are the one being controlled.”

“You sound like you speak from experience.”

Chip smiles. “I do.” He opens his drawer and pulls out a small medallion. “Ten-year coin.”

“Congratulations.”

I mean it. I haven’t personally battled those demons, but I know enough from watching my mom all those years. When addiction gets hold of someone, it doesn’t want to let go. Not without taking everyone out first.

“So, you think he ‘borrowed’,” Chip makes finger quotes, “money from the hockey fund?” He sighs. “You must be mistaken. Joseph was moving funds around as part of his job. And I warned him about dipping into the hockey fund, I told him he needed to have all the paperwork in place first. I knew the coach would lodge a complaint otherwise.”

“Can you explain how the funding for the hockey program works?”

Chip leans back and steeples his hands as he stares me down. “It isn’t something I’m very familiar with. I relied on Joseph and Sam to work all that out.”

“Sam?”

“The men’s hockey coach. The athletic department usually oversees all the funds, but Joseph and Sam worked out a way to keep the money flowing. You know, less bureaucratic red tape.”

“And the head of the athletic department is okay with this arrangement?”

He gives me a level stare. “Of course.”

“Can I talk with Sam?”

That brings a smile back to his face. “Of course. I’ll call him and let him know to expect you.”

“Thank you.” I stand and make my exit. It’s clear I’m not getting any more information here today. Once I’m outside, I call Rover.

“Rover here.”

“Hey, thanks for sitting guard while I talked to Joseph’s boss.”

It’s been two days since the house fire, and Joseph is still being sedated. I can’t get any answers from the doctors about why they are sedating him because they claim due to HIPAA regulations they cannot say.

“It’s part of the job, right?” Rover laughs. “Besides, I need the distraction right now anyway.”

“Oh yeah? Anything you want to talk about?” I ask as I walk toward the athletic building.

He sighs. “Not really. Just family stuff. Did you learn anything?”

“Chip says he doesn’t know much. I’m on my way to talk to the men’s’ hockey coach now.”

“Hockey coach? Shouldn’t you be talking to someone in finance?”

That would make more sense, yes. “It sounds like Joseph and this man, Sam, have some sort of special arrangement.”

“I get the impression Joseph has a lot of *special arrangements*,” Rover grumbles.

“I think you’re right. I’ll let you know what I find out. Call me if Joseph wakes up and tells you who called him to his house.”

“Will do. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I pocket my phone and walk the rest of the way to the athletic building. It’s off-campus and a bit of a trek. When I round the corner and it comes into view, I’m awestruck.

The building is attached to an arena which, from the outside at least, looks like a professional-level arena a person would see in a large city, not at some college. I know this is a private school for the wealthy, but even that fact didn’t prepare me for this.

I don't recall any of this being here when I toured this school thirteen years ago with Lucy. And since I was offered a sports scholarship, I was given a tour of the athletic facilities.

I would remember this. As I reach for the door, I see a plaque mounted beside it.

Gardiner Athletic Center.

Gardiner? As in Lucy's father? I walk inside and take in how modern everything appears. I know Lucy's family has money, but Lawrence couldn't have been the only contributor.

"Mr. Anthony?"

I turn to see a tall, broad man in his forties smiling as he walks toward me. He's wearing athletic pants and a jacket and has a whistle around his neck. His very appearance screams *coach*.

"I'm Sam Morrey, the men's hockey coach. Chip said you were coming here to talk to me."

"Yes, thank you for meeting with me."

The man extends his hand and gives me a firm shake. "Nice to meet you."

"I, uh, don't recall this building being here the last time I was here."

"Oh, did you go here?" Sam asks.

"No, but I took a tour."

He nods. "The athletic facility was built a few years ago, thanks to some very generous donations."

I jerk my thumb over my shoulder, toward the door. "I saw the building is named Gardiner. Is that after the donor?"

"Yes, Mr. Gardiner was our largest donor. Do you know him? He's done so much for this town, and his daughter teaches here too."

"I've met him a time or two." I don't add any compliments; I have nothing nice to say about that man.

"What did you want to discuss?" Sam asks.

“Joseph Taylor.”

Sam frowns. “I don’t know him very well. We’ve worked together on some accounting matters, but that’s about it.”

“That’s what I would like to talk to you about.”

Four students walk into the building wearing jerseys and track pants. They’re laughing and talking loudly.

“Oh, hey, coach,” one of them says.

“Hi, coach,” the rest chime in.

They walk past us through a door.

“Let’s go to my office,” Sam suggests. “It will be quieter. I’m expecting the rest of the team to come in soon, practice is in ten minutes.”

I nod then follow him through the same door the students went through, then down a hall and into an elevator. He presses the button for the top floor.

When we arrive, the elevator opens to a long hallway where several of the doors are open. I peer into some of the rooms as we go. They are offices—very nice offices.

“Right in here,” Sam says as he unlocks his door.

I try to hide my surprise. I know the hockey team here is important, but I’ve seen CEOs of major corporations with less lavish spaces than this. The coach has a large corner office that overlooks the campus to the right, and Mount Rainier to the left.

“Wow. That’s a great view.”

“Thank you. Why don’t you have a seat?”

I sit and notice the furnishings are all high end. The place is so big, I wonder if he ever calls the entire team up here. There are photographs on the walls; several are of him with his team, holding a trophy.

“We’ve won the NCAA Division One men’s ice hockey championship three years in a row,” he boasts. “I’m quite proud of our players.”

I nod and purse my lips. Joseph said the same thing to me the moment I met him.

When I don't speak, Sam prompts, "You said you had questions? I'm afraid I only have about seven minutes." He stares at his watch.

Either this man is obsessed with time, or he's counting down the minutes until he can be rid of me.

I save that information for later and ask, "Can you explain what arrangement you have with Joseph Taylor regarding the hockey team's finances?"

Sam frowns. "That's a private university matter, Mr. Anthony."

"Please, call me Cody. Maybe Chip didn't explain. I've been hired by the university to protect Joseph Taylor. We think he might be in danger for taking money that wasn't his."

Sam leans back. "And how does this have anything to do with me?"

"My understanding is he borrowed some funds from the hockey team."

Sam's lips quirk up. "No, I assure you, he could not do that without my consent."

I smirk. "I think he found a way."

Sam frowns as he madly types on his keyboard. "Let me check our records."

More frantic typing, and then his eyes widen. "The money's gone. This can't be right. We had over three hundred thousand dollars in that fund."

Over three hundred thousand? For hockey? I quickly school my features. I'm not here to judge, only to find out what's going on.

"And what do you have now?" I ask.

Sam stares at the screen. "Five dollars and fourteen cents."

Jesus. He took three hundred thousand dollars? I run my hand through my hair. “Who has access to the account?”

Sam falls back in his chair. “That’s just it. I have access for daily expenses, but any withdrawal above fifty thousand requires both our signatures.”

“Yours and Joseph’s?”

He nods.

“Then how would Joseph get that much money?”

His face has grown pale.

“Sam, are you all right?”

He looks up at me but is staring through me.

I recognize the look. He’s in shock.

“Sam,” I say more firmly.

He blinks several times. “I don’t know how he did it, but we need that money to travel to our games. It covers lodging, meals, transportation, whatever comes up.”

“Does anyone else have access to that account?”

Sam frowns. “My assistant can see the numbers—she helps keep the books straight. But that’s it.”

“What is your assistant’s name?”

“Margaret Deluth.”

“How long has she worked for you?”

Sam stands and paces. “What does it matter? Like I said, she can see the numbers, but she can’t get the money.”

“I’m being thorough.”

“Are you a private investigator?”

“No, I’m hired to protect Joseph. I work in security. You can call Chip to verify.”

He nods, grabs his phone, and talks to, I presume, Chip. As he shoves his phone back in his pocket, he turns to me. “Sorry, just wanted to be sure. It isn’t every day I find all our money is

gone.” He shakes his head. “Margaret started in August. She took over for my last assistant, who retired in June.”

“Do you run background checks on your employees?”

“What are you implying? Margaret is a good woman. Trustworthy.”

I arch a brow. He jumped to her defense quickly. “Is she more than your assistant?”

As if on cue, there’s a knock at the door. “Sorry to bother you, Sam,” a woman’s voice says as the door opens. Then she spots me, and I get a good look at her.

I’d bet my life savings this is Margaret. The woman is wearing a red skintight dress that leaves little to the imagination; the neckline even scoops low enough to show off all her cleavage. She’s dressed more for a nightclub than a day job. Though she barely looks old enough to get into a club.

Her eyes sweep over me, and she smiles. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you had anyone in here.”

“That’s all right, Margaret. We were just wrapping up. I have to get to practice.” His cheeks are flushed red.

He knows exactly what I’m thinking: the middle-aged coach and the sexy assistant. Too cliché.

I stand and extend my hand. “Yes, thank you for talking with me.”

He shakes it. I turn and walk to the door. Margaret is not subtle as she checks me out and then licks her lips. I turn back to glance at Sam, but he doesn’t notice her watching me.

Once I’m out the door, she follows. “Do you need validation for parking?” she asks.

“No, I’m good.”

“Well, here. Take this, just in case.” She jots down something on a card and hands it to me.

“*Call me, M.*” Followed by her number.

Well, I guess the coach isn't quite enough for her. I give her a nod and head to the elevator, then make my way out of the massive building. On my way out the door, I toss her card in the trash.

There might have been a time when a woman like that would have tempted me back before I thought I had a chance with Lucy again. But now, she's just someone I need to request a background check on.

Something tells me Margaret Deluth is getting more from the coach than he realizes.

CHAPTER 17



Lucy

“LUCE?” Cody shouts from the door.

“In the kitchen.”

I’ve been staying with him for a few days now, and since our dinner date the other night, we’ve almost fallen into a routine. We take turns cooking dinner and then we sit on the couch and tell each other stories of our lives over the last thirteen years.

It’s bittersweet. I love learning more about him, and everything I hear makes me want him more. But I also wish I’d been a part of all those experiences.

He walks in as I’m draining the pasta.

“Hope you like spaghetti.”

“I love it.”

He moves to the refrigerator and grabs salad dressing for the salad and the parmesan. I carry the bowls of pasta and sauce to the kitchen table.

“Thunder sent another photo. Want to see it?” Cody asks.

Thunder has been texting photos of Cody along with stories.

“You mentioned Thunder was on an assignment. Does this mean you can still keep in touch when you’re gone?”

He sets his phone down on the table. “No, I’m afraid we can’t. Thunder’s assignment ended, and he’s stuck there overnight until the plane is ready to bring them back. Which means he can use his phone.”

He picks up his phone and pulls up the photo Thunder sent to show me. I stare at a young Cody standing up on a bar with a big smile on his face when his phone rings.

“Hey, Thunder, we were just looking at the photo. I’m putting you on speakerphone.”

“Is Lucy with you?”

Cody waggles his brows. “She is.”

“Hi, Thunder. Nice to meet you.”

Thunder laughs. “You too. I hope to meet you in person someday. I’d like to see who has my friend’s balls wrapped up so tight.”

Now I’m laughing.

“Okay, what do you want?” Cody asks impatiently.

“Just making sure that photo went through. Hey, Cody, tell her about our stupid dare game we used to do and why you got up on that bar.”

“Oh yeah, those dares got us in trouble.”

“Yes, they did. Hey, Lightning just walked in. I have to go.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you later.” Cody ends the call and plates his food.

“Did he say Lightning walked in? And he’s Thunder?”

Cody chuckles. “He did. Those two were always together and because of it they now have to live with those call names. Lightning loves it and tells everyone. Thunder isn’t as amused.”

I really want to meet Thunder. He knew a different Cody and something about that has me curious. But so does something else. “So why were you up on the bar?” I ask.

He chuckles. "Because Thunder dared me."

He tells me all about the night and how they took turns daring each other to do stupid stuff. It ended with Cody dancing on a bar in Virginia. But now all I can think about is who he went home with that night. Or any other night.

I try not to let my mind go there, but I can't help it. He was supposed to be mine. Only mine. We lost our virginity to each other. His hand on my cheek pulls me from my thoughts.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" he asks.

It's stupid and I should drop it, but I can't. "It sounds like you spent a lot of time in bars," I say.

He chuckles. "It was a way to let off some steam, you know."

I nod, then look him in the eyes. "Was being with women a common way to 'let off steam'?"

He squirms in his seat, then takes my hand. "Luce, I'm not going to lie and say I haven't been with anyone. I have. But I was never serious with anyone. I couldn't be. You are the only woman who has ever had my heart."

Tears well in my eyes. I know I should be comforted by his words, but I'm not. "You were it for me. When I met Joseph, we got along, and it felt easy enough at first."

I stand to get some distance, but he follows me. I cross my arms, keeping my back to him. "After Joseph, I gave up on love. I've had a few dates, but I kept it light."

"Luce, I'm so sorry."

I turn to face him. "Is that why you really left? To be with other women?"

There, I said it. I've always wondered. At the time, I didn't have any other experience, so I didn't know if what we had was typical. It was amazing to me.

His eyes become glassy as he takes my face in his hands. "Is that what you thought? No, Luce. I never wanted anyone else." He leans his forehead against mine. "I only wanted you."

Always wanted you. And when I thought that wasn't possible anymore, I ran."

"Why didn't you ever come back? The only reason we're here now is because of some accidental meeting."

He releases me and takes a step back. "If I thought for one moment I ever deserved you, I would have been back, but Luce, for several years, I didn't think I was worthy of you or love. Then I figured you'd probably met someone in college. Someone better suited for you. I didn't come back because I couldn't have handled seeing you happy with some other man."

I close the gap between us. "And now? Now do you feel worthy?"

His brow furrows as he continues to stare at the ground. "I don't know if I'm worthy, but I want to be." He looks up, and his eyes meet mine. I'm struck by the pain he's emanating. "I so fucking want to be. Leaving you was a mistake, but I think I had to go off to the Navy in order to find myself. Now I'm just hoping I'm not too late, and you will really give us a chance."

I swallow, trying to quell the wave of emotion threatening to burst out in sobs. "I want to," I whisper. "But I have a really hard time trusting."

His callused thumb goes to my cheek to wipe away a tear. "I get that. I do. Just promise me you won't give up on me. All right?"

I nod, my throat too thick to speak.

His corded arms wrap around me as he pulls me close. It feels so right. I wish I could block out all the pain and go back to what we had. But we aren't the same people. Thirteen years is a long time. So much has changed for me and, based on the stories I've heard so far, a lot has happened to him.

But I can't worry about that. I need to focus on the here and now. That is all we have. We aren't promised any more.

The phrase 'carpe diem' enters my mind. Not only do I want to seize the day, but I also want to seize this man. Never have I wanted a man more than I want Cody now.

When I pull back, those hazel eyes look back at me confused until I push up on my toes and kiss him.

The kiss is sweet and gentle at first. But then my hand finds its way underneath his T-shirt, and the moment skin touches skin, it's like an inferno. Our kiss deepens, and my hands roam his back. His fingers play at the waistband of my yoga pants, dipping further down with each stroke of our tongues.

I step back and tug up the hem of his shirt. He takes over and yanks it over his head and tosses it to the floor.

My hands go to his chest, tracing the muscles down. "I want you right now, Cody."

His hand cups my breast, and his thumb swipes my nipple through my shirt.

I moan. Everything this man does feels so good.

"I want you too—so bad, Luce."

He lifts my shirt, and we break the kiss while I pull it off. Then he unhooks my bra, and it falls to the floor.

"Fuck, Luce, you're so sexy."

His mouth descends upon mine, tongues tangling as he walks me backward to his bedroom. The back of my knees hit the bed as he kisses down my neck until he has one nipple in his mouth. When he gives it a gentle bite, I squeeze my legs together.

I swear I could get off on him just doing this.

"Don't stop," I beg.

He moves to the other side and does the same.

My hands are in his hair. God, I've always loved his hair. So soft and thick.

I give it a pull. He groans, and my hands find their way to the button of his jeans. I unbutton and unzip in record time and push them down.

He quickly shucks them off, then peels my pants down and off me. Then he gets on his knees and tugs my underwear down.

“I’ve missed the taste of you,” he murmurs before he sweeps his tongue over my center.

My legs tremble, and his hands go to my hips, holding me steady. Then he devours me.

His tongue flattens as it circles my clit. He removes his hands from my hips and inserts two fingers inside me.

I whimper. I’m so close.

His other hand moves up and pinches my nipple.

“Mmm. You are so wet for me.” He licks and sucks. “Tell me, Luce, are you close?”

That deep, velvety voice almost has me over the edge.

“I am. Keep talking.”

He chuckles, and the vibration feels fantastic.

“Come for me, Luce. I want to feel you come on my tongue.”

God, I love dirty talk. He stops circling his tongue and sucks. Hard.

“Now, Luce.”

He continues to suck on my clit and his fingers curve inside, hitting just the right spot. My orgasm crashes through me, wave after wave, and he won’t let up.

“Cody. Oh, my god.”

Finally, he stops as my body begins to come down. He lowers me to the mattress, spent.

He climbs above me. “That was good, then?” His cocky smile makes me laugh.

“Good? It was fucking fantastic.”

His brows shoot up. “Well, if I made you swear, then it must be.”

I laugh. Cody would try anything to get me to swear in high school, but I wouldn't give in. It was a stupid game we played.

“I hate to take away from this moment, but I do swear now.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “Good, because I plan to elicit a lot more dirty words out of you. Are you ready?”

“Yes, I want you.”

He reaches over and opens the drawer of the nightstand. By the time he's back over me, he's grown serious.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

He settles between my legs. “I'm so sorry for leaving the way I did.”

I smile up at him. “I know.” I kiss him as he lines up at my entrance.

He breaks the kiss and looks into my eyes. “You're sure about this?”

I wrap my legs around him and give him a nudge. “If you don't fuck me right now, I'll scream.”

“But, Luce, I want you to scream.”

Before I can say anything more, he pushes all the way in. I can't stop the tears that wet my eyes. He feels so familiar and different all at once. But one thing that hasn't changed is that being here with him like this feels like coming home. It just feels right.

He buries his head in my neck as he moves in and out.

“Cody?”

He lifts his head, and I see his eyes are glassy. “I'm so sorry for leaving,” he rasps. “I'll never leave you again.” Then he kisses me hard.

I kiss back with all I have.

He picks up the pace, and his fingers find my clit and rub in circles. “Fuck, Luce. I could do this all night.”

He swivels his hips as he enters. It feels so good. I lightly bite down on his shoulder.

“Come again for me,” he grunts out.

His fingers move faster on my clit, and I scream out when my orgasm hits me. He thrusts two more times, then groans as he has his own release. Then he falls to his side, taking me with him.

“That was better than I remember,” he says.

“Yeah, me too.”

“You’d better rest up, because I think we’re going to have to try that again. I’ll be right back.”

He jumps up and takes care of the condom, then comes back to bed and snuggles with me. I’m all for doing that again and again.

CHAPTER 18



CODY

THE LAST THING I want to do this morning is leave Lucy, but Rover is expecting me to relieve him at the hospital. His last message said Joseph finally woke up an hour ago. I need to question that man.

Walking down the hospital hall, I'm assaulted with the smell of antiseptic and the sound of machines. A memory of my mom in the ICU flashes in my mind, and I stop moving. It's a memory I pushed out of my mind a long time ago.

When I first arrived at the hospital after her accident, I had no idea how serious it was. Then I saw her bruised body hooked up to all sorts of monitors. I nearly lost it.

Mom is fine. There's no need to dwell on any of that now.

As I approach Joseph's room, I spot Rover sitting in a chair.

"Good morning," he says as he stands to stretch.

The bed is empty. He must see me check it. "Shortly after he woke up, they took him to get some kind of scan. The nurse was chatty and I found out Joseph has four broken ribs. I asked why they've kept him sedated and she said it was due to the location of the fractures. Then another nurse came in and she stopped talking. They told me to wait here."

I know the hospital needs to do its job, but I don't like Joseph being without protection.

“Let’s go find him,” I say.

Rover falls in line beside me as we approach the nurse’s station.

A woman who appears to be in her twenties glances up, her lips turned up in a smile. Her eyes scan Rover from head to toe. The man is dressed in a black leather jacket and dark jeans. Some of his ink shows above the collar of his T-shirt. Her eyes seem to stall there.

“What can I do for you two?”

Her words might be aimed at both of us, but her gaze is trained right on Rover.

Rover takes over. I can tell he’s used to the attention, so I move to the edge of the counter to watch.

“Hi, I’m Rover and I’m here with Joseph Taylor. They took him for a scan. Can you tell me where I might find him, Kaitlyn?” He winks at her.

Her fingers go to her badge as her cheeks flush.

I have to hand it to him; he’s laying it on a bit thick, but it seems to be working.

“He’ll be in the radiology department,” she stammers. “They probably won’t let you in, but it’s on the third floor. Take those elevators, then take a right, and go to the end of the hall.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

He raps his knuckles on the counter and pushes off of it, and I slowly follow. By the way Kaitlyn is staring at him, it looks like she expected his phone number.

“Not your type?” I ask as we get on the elevator.

He shakes his head. “I’m tired of the women who fall for my every word. It gets old, you know?”

I laugh. It sounds arrogant, but I get it. “I do.”

“I meant to ask you, how’s it going with your ex?”

Rover and I have had the chance to talk here and there, and I needed advice, so I told him all about Luce.

“It’s going well. Really well, actually.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, if it keeps going this well, I might be talking to your boss to see if he has any openings.”

Rover chuckles. “No shit? You’d give up sunny California to move here?”

“I’m from here. I know what I’m getting into.”

The elevator opens, and we walk down the hall.

“Good for you. She wouldn’t happen to have a sister, would she?” He grins.

Now I laugh. “No, but she has a friend you might like.”

“I might take you up on that. Assuming she isn’t like that nurse.”

At the end of the hall is a restricted access door and a window. I press the buzzer next to the window.

“She busted my balls the first time she met me,” I tell him. “Trust me, she’s nothing like that nurse.”

“Can I help you?” a male voice asks through an intercom.

I glance through the window, but I don’t see anyone. “Yes, we’re here for Joseph Taylor.”

There is a pause before the voice returns. “He had an x-ray, but he should be back in his room by now.”

I look at Rover, and he shrugs.

“He could have been in the other elevator, and we missed him,” Rover says.

“Let’s go check.”

We go back to Joseph’s room. It’s still empty.

Kaitlyn walks into the room, all smiles. “Did you find your friend?”

“No, did you see him return?” I demand.

Her smile fades. “No, he hasn’t returned yet.”

“Shit.”

I race back to the elevator and up to radiology with Rover on my heels. I press the buzzer.

“Can I help you?” the same voice asks.

I use my *‘I’m not fucking around’* voice. “Yes, Joseph Taylor isn’t in his room. I need to speak to whoever saw him last.”

My tone must work, because a man in blue scrubs comes out the door. “Hi, I was with Mr. Taylor. You said he isn’t in his room?”

He has dark circles under his eyes, and I have to wonder if he’s at the end of a long shift.

“No, did you wheel him back yourself?”

The man scratches the back of his neck. “No, after the scan, he said he needed to use the bathroom, so I showed him where it was. A few minutes later, when I checked the bathroom, it was empty. I assumed he made his way back to his room on his own.”

I have to step away to remain calm. “Were you aware that Joseph Taylor has us here in shifts protecting him? That he was here because someone tried to kill him?”

The man pales. “No, I didn’t know.”

I turn to Rover, “Let’s split up and search. I’ll take the stairs down to the lobby.”

He nods. “I’ll check the exterior perimeter of the building.”

If Joseph did leave on his own, he’s in a hospital gown and has no transportation. He won’t get far.

By the time I hit the lobby, I’ve passed two doctors and three nurses but haven’t spotted Joseph. I run to the reception

desk by the front door. “Excuse me, did you happen to see a patient leaving in only a hospital gown?”

The older man at the desk glances up at me and bursts out laughing. “Is that some kind of joke, son?”

I close my eyes, willing away my impatience. “No, a patient has gone missing.” My eyes scan the lobby. “Is there another way out of the hospital?”

“Yes, there’s an exit on the second floor, on the south side.”

Shit.

I run for the stairs and take them two at a time until I’m on the second floor and running to the south. I find another lobby, but this one doesn’t have a reception desk.

I run outside. To my right is a wall; I run to the left, scanning the parking lot as I go.

Nothing. Then Rover turns the corner in front of me.

“Fuck. There’s no trace of him,” he says.

Movement in the parking lot catches my eye. “There he is.” I point.

Rover turns, and Joseph waves at us. Then he slowly gets into the passenger side of a car which drives away, honking the horn in quick succession as it goes.

“What the fuck? Did he just ditch us?” Rover demands.

“Yeah, he did.”

“You know, most people accept protection, but this guy has tried to shake me every chance he gets. I am officially pissed off. I’m going to find that guy and handcuff him to his damn desk,” Rover growls.

“Did you get a good look at the driver?”

“No. You?”

“No.”

“I got the plate, though. Maybe we can track down the car that way,” Rover says.

Who the hell is helping him? I scratch at my scruff, thinking it through. “We still don’t know who called him to his house.”

“No, but I have an idea how we can figure out who helped him break out of here,” Rover says. “He made a call on his cell phone this morning. He didn’t say much, but he kept saying, ‘I’ll owe you one’.”

“I thought he’d just woken up when you got hold of me.”

“He did. Then he asked me for his phone. I handed it to him. After the call I asked him what that was about. He said his sister was helping him with the insurance claim on his house.”

“It isn’t his house. It’s his father’s. I’ll see if Trip can get his cell phone records.” I pull out my own phone to call him.

“I have a better idea. He wasn’t allowed to bring anything with him for the x-ray, so I bet his phone is still in his room,” Rover says.

We get back to the third floor and into his room without Kaitlyn spotting us.

“Yep, here it is.” Rover grabs the phone off the table.

I look over his shoulder as he opens it and pulls up a list of recent calls. The last call was made to a contact named G. Rover hits call and puts it on speakerphone.

It rings three times.

“Joseph, what the hell do you want now?” a man demands.

I know that voice. I quickly press end.

“Do you know who G is?” Rover asks, frowning at me.

“I do. My ex’s father. Joseph’s ex-father-in-law, Lawrence Gardiner.”

“Gardiner? You mean the man that owns half this town?”

I frown. “How do you know that?”

“Well, our office is at the end of this town. I’ve seen his name all over several businesses here..”

I nod. “Why would Joseph call his ex-father-in-law, though? And why would Lawrence Gardiner help him? He hates the guy,” I say.

“Maybe he’s paying Joseph to leave town.”

Paying. Wait, Joseph would have received his trust fund by now. “What day is it?” I demand.

“Wednesday.”

“I overheard him telling Vince he would get a trust fund payment Tuesday. That would have been yesterday.”

Rover crosses his arms. “You think it’s related?”

“It could be. We know someone wants Joseph dead, and that he owes someone or many people money. Maybe he called Lawrence because he wanted to pay him back.”

Rover grimaces. “If that’s true—”

“Then Lawrence is his biggest threat,” I finish.

After what Joseph did to Lucy, *again*, I’m not sure there’s enough money in this world to save him from *G*.

“That asshole is in real danger, isn’t he?” Rover asks.

“It looks like it.”

“Damn. This job just won’t end.”

“Wait.” I scroll through the phone. “Let’s see who called him before the fire.” I find only one incoming call that morning. It only shows a phone number, no name. “It wasn’t someone in his contacts,” I frown.

Rover takes the phone and calls the number. When it goes to a generic voicemail, he ends the call. “I’ll have someone at the office run a check on this. We’ll find out who it belongs to.”

“Whoever it is, let’s hope they don’t find him to finish the job.”

CHAPTER 19



Lucy

“OH MY GOD, you had sex with him, didn’t you? If I thought you were glowing before, you really are now,” Connie practically yells the moment I open the door and see her on the porch.

I grab her and pull her into Cody’s house. “Jesus, Connie. What if Cody was home, and he heard you?”

Connie’s hands go to her hips. Her hair is in a ponytail, and she’s wearing jeans and a T-shirt—a more casual look than I’m used to seeing on her. “Did you or did you not have sex?”

I close my eyes and allow the smile spreading across my face. “We did.”

“Then I’m just stating the obvious.” She settles in on the couch and pats the seat next to her. “Now, come over here and tell me all about it. While I’m still not sure I’m on team Cody, I want to hear all the details.”

I laugh as I sit down. “Well, hello, Connie. Yes, I’m doing well, and you?”

She shakes her head, and her pony hits me in the face. “No, I’m sorry, I have to live vicariously through you. I haven’t had sex in months and I’m dying.”

“Months?”

She rolls her eyes. “Months. I can’t find a decent guy and I’m not settling. So, sit and talk.” She pats the seat again.

I take the seat and can’t help my grin. I’m not usually one to kiss and share—well, considering my lack of experience with men, that’s not hard to accomplish—but with Cody, I want to talk about it.

“We had sex.”

She grins. “Is he still the best you’ve ever had?”

I sink back into the couch. “Better. He’s better. I don’t know why I stayed with Joseph. Whatever I felt for him wasn’t love.”

Connie rubs my arm. “You were heartbroken.”

“Connie, I met Joseph *years* after things ended with Cody.”

She shrugs. “Doesn’t mean you weren’t still hurting.”

I swallow and glance away. And what if I end up even more hurt this time?

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“I’m scared,” I admit. “I feel too much for him.”

“Have you guys talked more about the future?”

I nod. “Sort of. He said he would try to get a job up here.”

Connie frowned. “Try? What if he can’t get one?”

I bite my cheek.

“Something else is bothering you.”

I take a deep breath, then just say it. “Like you said, what if he can’t find a job up here? Last time, he left without saying anything. What if he does that again?” He said he wouldn’t leave me again. Can I trust that?

She pulls me into a side hug. “Then I’ll kill him. I told you I would.”

I chuckle.

“Seriously, am I making a mistake?”

Connie sighs. “Look, I get why you’re scared. And he hasn’t won me over just yet. But I will say I’ve never seen you as happy as I have lately. If you trust this will last, then I’ll support you. I’ll support you no matter what happens.”

She gives me a hug.

“I know you will. Thank you.”

The door swings open, and in walks Cody. Connie glares at him.

“Not a word,” I whisper to her.

“Hi, Connie.” Cody walks over to me and pulls me into his arms for a hello kiss.

“Don’t mind me.” She arches a brow.

Cody glances at her, then at me. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just my friend being rude.”

“She’s protective of you. I like it,” Cody says. Then he yawns. “Sorry, it’s been a long day.”

“Oh? What happened?” I ask.

“Well, first, Joseph escaped the hospital, and then the police wanted to talk to me for a while.” He pulls a beer out of the fridge and opens it.

“I’m going to go,” Connie says. “Call me with those details soon.”

I laugh. “Not going to happen but I will call you.” I walk her to the door and say goodbye, then return to Cody in the kitchen.

I lean against the wall and cross my arms. “Joseph escaped?”

“He was getting an x-ray where Rover and I couldn’t follow, and he told the tech he had to use the bathroom. Then he left.” Cody sits in one of the kitchen chairs and stretches his long legs out in front of him.

I laugh.

“What’s so funny?” His brows are knitted in a v, and I step between his legs and kiss his forehead.

“I’m picturing Joseph making a run for it in a hospital gown. He didn’t have regular clothes on, did he?”

“No, he didn’t.” He takes a pull of his beer. “He left his clothes and phone in his room.”

“That makes no sense. That man is always glued to his phone.”

“I saw him in the parking lot,” he tells me. “He got into a car, and it drove away.”

“Someone helped him?”

Cody nods and meets my eyes. “Any idea who would do that?”

I don’t care for the way he’s staring at me. “You can’t seriously think *I* would help him? After all the hell he’s put me through?”

He shakes his head. “No, but I think your father would.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes my lips. “Now I *know* you’re kidding. The only thing my father would help Joseph with is leaving town.”

Cody continues to stare. He’s serious?

“Why do you think that?” I ask.

“Before Joseph went to get his scan, he called your father.”

“What did they talk about?”

“I don’t know. Rover says Joseph kept repeating one line. ‘I’ll owe you one’.”

I walk into the living room and flop down on the couch. “Wow. Maybe my dad finally convinced him to leave town.”

Cody gets up and follows me. As he sits next to me, he asks, “But why now? It doesn’t make sense. Your father should be out for revenge, not just getting the guy gone.”

“Revenge? I don’t think you remember my father well. My financial loss wouldn’t be a concern to him. If anything, my

dad hoped I'd go running back to him, willing to do anything to get my trust fund back."

"Is that what you want? Your trust fund?"

I turn to him. "No. I'm happier without it."

Cody takes my hand, stroking the back of it with his thumb. "I'm happy to hear that."

"Enough about money. I'm hungry. Let's order delivery from the sandwich shop and watch a movie."

He nods. "That sounds good. I'll order. Can you open a bottle of wine?"

"Wine? Getting fancy."

Cody leans down and kisses me. "Anything for you. Still like Reubens?"

Warmth spreads in my chest. "You remembered?"

"How could I forget something that offensive? Sauerkraut on a sandwich? Gross." He grins. "I'll meet you back here in five." He stands and practically runs away to dodge the pillow I throw at him. His laughter follows him into the kitchen.

By the time I get there, he's calling for delivery. There are three bottles of wine on the counter. I open one and fill two glasses. When I turn to hand him his, Cody's gone. I walk into the living room, surprised he's not there. I set the glasses on the coffee table and walk toward the office.

"Yeah, I hope to be done with Joseph by the end of the week," I hear Cody say.

I can't blame him for that; Joseph is a pain in anyone's ass.

"Afghanistan? How long will I be there?"

I squeeze my eyes shut.

I know Cody travels for his security work, but I didn't realize he would leave the country or go somewhere so dangerous. I guess I didn't really ask.

"A month? Yeah, I can do that."

My stomach drops. A month? He just agreed to be gone for a month like it was nothing? A wave of nausea swoops over me, and I run to the bathroom. Once I lock the door, I splash my face with cold water.

I don't understand. The idea of leaving him for one month makes me feel physically ill, but when asked to do the same, he sounded like it was no big deal. Shit. I've gotten too attached. Okay, deep breath. There must be more to this than I know. I'll just act normal and let him tell me what is going on.

By the time I dry my face and step out of the bathroom, Cody is sitting on the couch.

"Dinner should be here in about twenty minutes," he says. "Want to start the movie? I picked out one I know you'll love." He winks.

"Sure." I sit down and take a healthy sip of wine. "Is it okay that you're here?"

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you need to look for Joseph?"

"Rover is tracking down the car he drove off in. We got the license plate. Until then, there isn't much we can do. You can't protect someone who ran away. Besides, I'm happy to be here with you tonight."

Thinking of him tracking Joseph down reminds me of something he said earlier. "You mentioned you were at the police station for a while. Did something more happen?"

I feel him tense next to me. "Yes. I wasn't going to say anything until after dinner, but Randy, your student, was found dead."

What? How can that be? I may think he's a punk, but he seems popular. I turn to face Cody. "Dead? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

He rubs his eyes. "He was found in Joseph's garage. The medical examiner determined he died of smoke inhalation, but

there was evidence that something hit him in the back of the head.”

“But the fire was Saturday. Has he been dead since then? How would the detective not have known that?”

Cody cocks his head. “What detective?”

I tell him about Detective Beyers coming to my class on Monday.

His mouth drops open. “And you are just now telling me this?”

“Sorry, I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

Cody sighs. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Getting questioned by the detective probably wasn’t pleasant.”

“No, it wasn’t. But seriously, why wouldn’t the detective have known Randy was found at Joseph’s?”

“Well, the officer Rover spoke with mentioned that Randy didn’t have any identification on him. One of his fraternity brothers had to identify him earlier this morning.”

“Not a parent?”

Cody shrugs.

“Why did an officer tell Rover all of this?”

“Rover has worked with Morgan Thompson Security for a while. He knows most of the cops in the area.”

Randy is dead and his parents may not even know. It sounds like Randy had it rougher than I thought. I almost feel bad for him.

“Do they know what hit him? Did he start the fire and then a beam hit him? Or did someone hit him and put him in the garage?”

“It’s all still under investigation.”

“But why was he in Joseph’s garage? Did Randy and Joseph know each other? That doesn’t make any sense. Joseph has never had an interest in the students.”

Cody frowns. “Are you sure? When I first met him, we were walking to the sciences building for the opening, and he was smiling and saying hello to many students.”

I cross my arms. “Yeah? How many were male?”

He grins. “You know, I did notice at the time it was mostly female students.”

“I’m sure it was *all* female students. Joseph always loved women’s attention. But he knew Randy?”

Cody takes a sip of his wine, then rubs my upper arm with his hand. “Or they didn’t know each other at all.”

“Then why would Randy be in his garage?”

“I’m not sure, but one thing I’ve learned is to never assume anything. We don’t know if Randy knew Joseph. We don’t know why Randy was there.”

My hand goes to his chest. “You think Randy was murdered?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. But the police are investigating. Now, let’s relax until the food comes. I want to cherish every minute I get to spend with you.”

“You say that like we won’t have much time together.” I’m fishing, I know it, but I need him to say something.

His jaw ticks as he pushes a lock of hair behind my ear. “If I have it my way, we’ll be spending a lot of time together.”

Why isn’t he telling me about the call?

I sink into his side as he turns on the movie, but I’m wondering what else he’s keeping from me.

“Halloween is in a few days,” he says. “What do you want to do?”

“Would you mind if we stayed in?”

He stretches an arm out behind me and pulls me close. “I wouldn’t mind that at all.”

CHAPTER 20



CODY

I CAN'T SHAKE the feeling that something is off with Lucy. Last night, she said she wasn't feeling well, so we went to bed early. But it felt like there was more to it than that.

As for me, I'm having a hell of a time not rushing this. I want to call Rover's boss, Stormy, and say I'm ready to move today. But I can't do that to Hawthorne. I've already promised him one more assignment.

It's an important one; I know the contact well. But damn, I'll be away from Lucy for a month. I thought about telling her last night, but when I sensed the distance, I didn't want to make it worse.

I'll tell her tonight. But first, I'm going to surprise her after her last lecture and take her out. Bowling and dinner. It's what we used to do in high school. Well, that, and make out behind the bowling alley. Maybe she'll want to give that a try again, too.

As I walk through the main quad on campus, I'm so caught up in staring at the damn trees, I almost miss Vince exiting Lucy's building. I stop about fifty feet from the entrance. *What the hell is he doing here?* He's focused on his phone as he takes a right, and doesn't notice me, so I follow.

He puts the phone to his ear. "Joseph, so nice of you to finally fucking call me." He stops, and I move toward a tree in

case he turns. “I don’t care if you had to get a new phone. Where the fuck are you?”

When Vince picks up his pace. I continue to follow.

“Jesus, Joseph, I don’t care. My money was due yesterday. Get back to town with my money. *Now!*” After a beat, he laughs. “You really think you’re the one in control? Well, you should know that Lucy took me up on my offer to stay in one of my apartments. Again. Now she’ll be close.”

Why the hell is he mentioning Lucy? And what the hell? In his apartment? Why would she do that when she’s staying with me? Plus, she has her own apartment.

“Pay me by tomorrow,” Vince demands, then he pockets his phone.

Why would Vince tell Joseph that Lucy is close? Was that a veiled threat? Against his own niece? If it was, she’s in danger; I know enough about Joseph to know I don’t trust him to pay anyone back on time.

I mull over everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours as I reverse course and walk to Lucy’s office. When I arrive, her door is open, and I step in. She’s standing by the window, already wearing her red coat, and holding her bag. I watch her for a moment, wondering what’s going through her head that would cause her to accept Vince’s offer.

I tap on the door to get her attention. “Hi, you about done for today?” I ask.

“Yes. Did you locate Joseph?”

“Not yet.”

She nods. “I have good news.”

I’m not sure I believe that, since I know she’s about to tell me she doesn’t want to stay with me.

“What?” I manage to smile when I ask. Maybe this isn’t what I think.

“Well, first the bad news. My landlord has asked that I move out. Apparently, one of the neighbors found out my place got broken into, and the landlord decided I violated the lease by allowing criminal activity into the building.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. They’re blaming the victim?”

She puts her hand up. “It’s fine. I didn’t really like that place anyway. And now the good news. Vince is letting me stay in one of his apartments again. I mean, I hate that I need his help, but thank goodness it’s there when I need it.”

I take a step back. “You should stay with me,” I say almost on reflex.

She cocks her head. “Stay with you? Cody, it’s going to be several months before I can afford to pay rent. I’m now behind on all my payments thanks to Joseph.”

“So?”

“You said Stormy wants to rent his house out.”

Shit. I did say that. And it wouldn’t be fair to ask her to stay in that house all alone while I’m gone.

I want to talk to her about a more permanent option, but not until I have a solid plan. I don’t want to get her hopes up—or mine—then find out Josh doesn’t want to hire me.

If he doesn’t, I’m not sure what I’ll do.

But I still want her with me. She can’t stay in Vince’s apartment. Especially not after what I just overheard.

“Why don’t you stay with me for now, and we’ll figure out the rest?” I suggest.

She crosses her arms. “Or I can move into the apartment Vince was so kind to offer me and have my own place again.”

“You can’t.”

“Yes, I can.”

I growl. “Why are you being so damn stubborn?”

“Because Vince is being very kind in offering me an apartment. Something I really need right now.”

“Luce, do you know Vince well? I mean *really* well?”

She frowns. “He’s my uncle, so yes, I think I know him well.”

“He’s Joseph’s bookie.”

Her eyes widen. “Not this again. I already told you, he’s a businessman. He doesn’t even like Joseph. Why the hell do you keep thinking he’s a bookie?”

“Because I heard him on the phone with Joseph—”

“And you probably misunderstood. I’m sure Vince was just bailing Joseph out of whatever mess he got himself into. Vince is good like that. He helps people.”

“No, that food bank is a front for something. I’m not sure what yet but trust me Vince is involved in illegal activity. You can’t stay in his apartment.”

I step out of her office and stand in the hallway, hopefully ending this conversation. Lucy glares at me, then follows. She locks her door, and we walk down the hall and outside.

“I can’t stay in his apartment?” She’s staring straight ahead.

Damn it. The conversation apparently isn’t over. “It wouldn’t be safe.”

She laughs. “Staying in Vince’s apartment is a lot safer than staying with you.”

What the hell does that mean? I open my mouth, but before I get any words out, she continues.

“I’m sorry you’re suspicious of Vince, but trust me, he’s a good man. And I don’t like you throwing around your suspicions in an attempt to control me.”

I stop walking in the middle of the quad. “*Control* you?” I yell because, god dammit, this woman is infuriating.

She stops and spins around, pinning me with her stare. “Yes, control. I wouldn’t let my dad control me. So, what makes you think I will let you? Now please let me go. I need to think.”

What? I came here to take her out on a date. “Wait, I’m sorry,” I say. “Can we go back to my place and talk?”

She turns away. “No. I’ll stay at Connie’s tonight, then move into Vince’s apartment tomorrow.”

A sense of panic seeps in. *What the hell just happened?*

“Just like that?” I press. “I worry about you, and just like that, you’re shutting me out?”

When she turns to face me again, I’m not ready for the hurt in her eyes.

“What the hell are we doing?” she demands. “You live in California, I live here. We have been playing with fire by getting close again. And I heard you on the phone.” She squeezes her eyes shut, and when they open, a tear falls to her cheek.

“You heard me? What do you mean you heard me?” *What is she talking about?*

“You’re going to Afghanistan for a month. I heard you agree to that. You tell me you want us to be together, yet you aren’t even planning to be here. I can’t take you breaking my heart again.” Her voice cracks. “Cody, we need to slow this down. Let’s just keep our distance until you get back. It will make it easier.”

“Easier?” I choke out. “You think being apart is easier? I’ve spent the last thirteen years missing you, wondering how things could have been different. I haven’t loved another woman. Not one, Luce.” I take a breath. “As for Afghanistan, I *have* to go. I know the contact for this mission personally. It’s my contact. But after that, I’m working on getting myself back to Washington state permanently. Just give us a little time to figure this out.”

“We can figure it out when you get back. Please, just give me some space right now.” She sniffles then walks away,

leaving me standing there like the asshole I am.

Why didn't I tell her about the trip last night? I wanted to, but after I told her about Randy, she wasn't herself. I didn't want to pile more on. But now look where we are: I'm likely leaving in a week, and she's going to move right into danger.

Well, she may not want to accept help from me, but she needs some kind of protection. I pull out my phone and stare at the text from Thunder. He got back from his assignment last night and Hawthorne told him to stay in the area until he spoke with me. The guy slept at Rover's place, so I definitely owe him one. I can imagine Rover living in some bare-bones apartment. Well, hell, just because I do doesn't mean the other guys do.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that Thunder is in town right now. I call him.

"Thunder," he answers.

"Thunder, I need your help."

CHAPTER 21



Lucy

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” Connie asks as she sets a box down on the kitchen counter.

“I’m sure.” I take the box I’m carrying into the bedroom and work to hide the fact that, no, I’m not sure at all. But I need some space in order to think clearly.

Connie follows me into the bedroom and takes a seat on the bed. “What if he’s telling the truth, and he comes back ready to be with you?”

“Then we’ll date like normal people. I shouldn’t be living with him, it’s too much too fast. Besides, was he even going to tell me about his mission? He leaves in less than a week.”

I open the box I brought in and begin unpacking its contents into my dresser. Fortunately, I don’t have too much stuff, so we were able to move everything to the new apartment in only a few hours.

“Look, I’d never tell you what to do, but I’m happy you’re not staying with him anymore. You’re right. It was too much, too fast.”

I stop unpacking. “You still don’t trust him, do you?”

Connie takes a deep breath. “It’s not that. I’m just worried about you getting hurt again. Has he called since you walked away from him yesterday?”

“No. I know I asked for space, but I thought he’d at least text me.” I sink down to the ground.

Connie sits next to me and places her arm around my shoulders. “You want him to text you?”

I nod. “I want him to be open with me and tell me what is going on, but that’s not him. It never has been. Keeping things close to the chest is what he does. And the last time he did that, it nearly destroyed me. I can’t be left in the dark again.” That’s when the tears fall. I can’t hold any of it in any longer.

Connie gives me a squeeze. “Let’s go unpack a couple of wine glasses and open the bottle of wine Vince left you. Then after that, we will redo what you just did here.” She stands up and reaches for my hand.

Once she’s pulled me up so I’m standing, I glance into the drawer to see what she’s talking about. I unpacked my dish towels into my underwear drawer. Great. And I hadn’t even noticed.

I burst out laughing. “I’m a mess.”

“Yes, you are. But that’s okay.”

“Go ahead and open the wine. There’s one box left in my car I want to grab.”

Connie heads to the kitchen, and I go outside. There’s a chill in the air that makes me rub my arms as I run to my car. I grab the box and start my way back when I see a familiar man standing near my door.

My heart is racing. I take several deep breaths. “What are you doing here?” I ask.

Cody shoves his hands in his pockets. “I know you want space, and I’m trying to give that to you, but I don’t trust Vince. Remember my friend Thunder? You’ll get to meet him, if you want to. He’s going to watch your place during the nights. That way you won’t have to see me.”

I’m not sure what I’m the most upset about, finding Cody outside my door, or knowing he will leave soon.

“Oh. Someone is just going to stand out here?” That seems a little creepy.

“No, he’ll watch from a place where others won’t see him. But please, don’t let Vince inside. Okay?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. *Not this again.* “If Vince were going to hurt me, he would have done it years ago. He’s had many opportunities, you know, since he’s my uncle and all.”

Cody steps into my space. “Tell me this, does he know you were cut off from your trust fund?”

I step back. “I’m pretty sure everyone in my family knows. If he didn’t, don’t you think he’d question why I need to live somewhere rent-free?”

He continues to stare at me. The longer it goes on, the angrier I get.

“You know, I lived thirteen years without you just fine,” I snap. “I’ve been through this before, with Vince and Joseph. I can take care of myself.”

His gaze drops to the ground. “I know you can. But you don’t have to.” He glances back up and the light catches his scar.

I want to know how he got it. Fighting back the emotions I’m feeling, I take a deep breath. I want him and I’m so angry with him at the same time.

“Good luck in Afghanistan,” I retort before I go back into my apartment and close and lock the door behind me.

I set the box down in the living room. Connie is sitting on the couch Vince provided me.

The man insisted on renting me a partially furnished apartment. I was surprised when Vince called to let me know two men would move some of my things into storage. Well, his storage. I was too tired to argue, and now I’m glad I didn’t. Vince’s furniture is a lot nicer than mine.

“Your uncle has nice taste. I love this couch,” she says, holding out a glass of wine for me.

“He does.” I take the drink from her and have a sip while I look around. The décor is nice.

“Are you going to leave your couch and coffee table in storage?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, for now.”

We sit in silence for a moment. But then Connie scoots to the edge of the couch.

“Who were you talking to outside?”

I take another sip of wine. “Cody.”

“He’s here?” She stands and goes to the door.

“No, he was. He was waiting for his friend Thunder.”

“Who’s Thunder?”

“Apparently, my babysitter.”

Connie cocks a brow. “Is he single?”

That earns a laugh from me. “I have no idea.”

“Hmm. Well, I looked up where Cody works, Reed Hawthorne Security—”

“Why would you do that?”

She sets her wine down. “Because I’m your best friend and I wanted to check up on why your ex was here.”

“And what did you find?”

“About Cody and why he’s here? Nothing. But I learned that anyone working for RHS, as they call it, is former military, specifically former Navy SEALs. Which means Thunder is probably built like Cody.”

“I didn’t know you were looking for a guy like that. If I had, I’d have made sure you met Rover.”

“Wait, who?”

I fill her in on Cody’s sort of partner and give in to her request for a very detailed description.

Connie pours herself another glass of wine, then turns to me. “What I want to know is why in the hell you didn’t call me the moment you met him. You know I’m single. And he rides a motorcycle? Dammit Lucy.”

My mouth falls open. “I’m sorry, but I was still in shock over the fact that the man who crushed my heart showed up out of *nowhere*. Oh, and then there was the fact my ex-husband stole all of my money.” I arch a brow.

Connie sets her glass down. “I’m sorry. You’re right. But now that I know about him, tell me, when can I meet him?”

“I have no idea.”

She marches to the front door and throws it open. “Cody?”

A moment later, I hear his gravelly voice. “Yeah?”

“Is Rover single?”

“What?”

“Is. Rover. Single?”

I move closer so I can hear better, covering my mouth to stop from laughing. But this is Connie. When she sets her mind to something, nothing gets in her way.

“I think so,” Cody replies hesitantly. “Maybe?”

“Can you find out? Based on Lucy’s description, I need to meet this man.”

“Lucy’s description?” He huffs. “How exactly did she describe him?”

“In great detail.” I see Connie smile. “But don’t worry, it was only because I insisted. She only has eyes for you.”

I lean my head back on the wall and sink to the floor. *What the hell is she doing?*

“Okay, I gotta get back to my friend,” she says, “but let Rover know about me, all right?”

“Okay,” Cody laughs.

Connie shuts the door, and I drop my head into my hands.

“What the hell was that about?” I demand.

“What? I want to meet the guy. Now let’s talk about your job. You texted the other day that you have to pick up another class. Why?”

Work. That makes me think of Randy; I had managed to go without thinking about him for a few hours. My eyes well, and before I can brush away the tears, Connie notices.

“Oh no. You aren’t on probation, are you?”

I laugh through my cries. “Probation? No, a student died. The crazy thing is, he threatened me, so I don’t know why I’m crying. I’m being stupid.”

Connie slumps down next to me. “Threatened you? Was it that prick you told me about? Ronald or whatever?”

“Randy. Yeah.”

“He’s dead? How? It wasn’t in your classroom, was it? Damn, your work is like a soap opera.”

I try not to laugh but fail. “It has been a bit dramatic lately. But no, it wasn’t in my class. He was found in Joseph’s garage. Before you ask, I don’t know anything else.”

“In Joseph’s garage? How strange.”

I shrug. “Who knows? Maybe Joseph’s family knew Randy’s.”

Connie chuckles. “All those rich pricks ban together, don’t they?”

That’s one thing I love about Connie. She’s never held back her opinions of the ‘snooty upper class’ as she called it. She attended Havenwood on scholarship, but she wasn’t treated as badly as most scholarship kids—probably because she wouldn’t hesitate to stand up for herself. According to her, I wasn’t like the rest of them, so it was okay we were friends.

I have to agree with her. Even back then, Havenwood was full of students who thought way too highly of themselves simply because of their family name. I never realized how much special treatment I received because of my name until I

changed it, taking on Joseph's when we married. But I'm happy I did.

Although, the last name I really want is Anthony. I close my eyes. I can't let my mind go there. Not yet.

"Why are you taking on an extra class?" Connie asks, breaking me from my thoughts.

"The head of the department asked me to. The original instructor had a medical emergency, and Liz said I'm the only one who is free at the time the class is scheduled. It's a basic 101 course." I cringe even saying it.

Don't get me wrong, I love psychology. But I love the science behind it; that's why I teach the upper-level courses. To go back to the basic level just sounds boring.

Many students only take the course because it's rumored to be easy. I have to hope I can share enough excitement on the subject to encourage those who want to continue in the field.

I remember when I took the class; my dad was still pressuring me to become a doctor. But then psychology became my favorite class, so I took another. Then another. It was my calling.

"Well, that's a bummer," Connie sympathizes.

I nod. "She said it would only be for a month."

Connie stands, saying brightly, "Well, that's nothing, then."

A month. Nothing. It certainly doesn't feel like nothing when I think of Cody traveling to Afghanistan.

"Before I forget," she continues, "I'm going to a party on Halloween. Want to join me?"

I break into a fresh round of sobs.

"Lucy, what's wrong?" Connie crouches down in front of me, pulling me into a hug.

"I was supposed to be with Cody on Halloween," I wail. "This is going to sound stupid, but I was looking forward to our first holiday back together."

“Oh, sweetie. You know it might be okay to spend time with him before he leaves.”

I shake my head. “That will just make it harder.”

She gives me a squeeze, then pulls back. “Then you should definitely come to the party with me. It’s better than sitting around here all night.”

Forcing myself to smile at strangers does *not* sound better than watching movies and eating ice cream. But I know Connie will keep pestering me, so I say the only thing I can right now.

“I’ll think about it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

CHAPTER 22



CODY

I'M SUPPOSED to leave in a few days for a month, and Lucy won't return my calls. I didn't realize wanting space meant no communication at all. I had hoped she'd agree to see me on Halloween, but that came and went. Joseph is still missing, and no one knows who killed Randy. Basically, the whole thing is a clusterfuck.

I scrub my hand over my face, then grab the two coffees from the center console cup holders. I'm met with a brisk wind when I get out of my car. Fortunately, I only have a few steps before I'm inside Thunder's rental.

Thunder is one of my best friends. I met him while serving and we just clicked. And I thank God for that every day. He's like the brother I never had. And for him to use his personal time to help me means a lot. He knows I'd do anything for him, and he feels the same way about me.

That's how he talked Hawthorne into letting him stay here and save my sorry ass. Well, really, he's here making sure Lucy is safe. Technically, no one is getting paid for this since this is personal.

"Hey. I brought coffee."

"Thanks," he says, taking it from me.

"I really appreciate you helping me out here."

"I know. You said so many times yesterday." He grins.

I CALLED THUNDER YESTERDAY, and he agreed to help me. We ended up talking for several hours in my car outside Lucy's apartment before I left to get a few hours of sleep.

"I hope I'm not keeping you away from someone," I say.

He leans back in his seat. "Only person upset by my absence is Lightning, and he'll get over it."

I laugh. "Want to send him a selfie of us?" Lightning is a great guy, but he can be a little obnoxious at times for my taste. It's probably why I like to mess with him at work.

Thunder chuckles. "That would piss him off. But seriously, you're not keeping me from anything. I'll always be there if you need me, got it?"

"Got it. Thanks." I stare at Lucy's place grateful to have a friend like Thunder. "How'd it go last night after I left?"

"Uneventful. No one has come or gone the entire time I've been here." He takes a sip of coffee without taking his eyes off me. "Something wrong? You've shifted in that seat about five times in the last two minutes. You got hemorrhoids or something?"

I bark out a laugh. "Would you really want to know if that was my problem?"

Thunder frowns. "You're right. I don't."

I let out a breath and decide if anyone can understand, he can. "I leave in three days. Joseph's still missing. Lucy won't talk to me. She has no plans to leave this place. And I have no idea if she's still in danger from Vince. How the fuck am I supposed to leave her with no protection?"

I huff in exasperation, then realize I need air. The space in here is too small. I feel too confined. As if sensing my dilemma, Thunder rolls down my window. I take a deep breath.

"I reread everything you sent me," he says quietly. "Vince is her uncle, right?"

“Right.”

“You think he’d hurt her?”

I nod. “Vince is into shady business. I don’t know the full scope, but I don’t doubt that he would use her to get his money back. If Lawrence thought his daughter was in danger, I’m sure he’d pay.”

“But your email said Vince and Lawrence are brothers. Why doesn’t Vince just ask for some money?”

I take a drink of my coffee. “Lawrence and Vince had some sort of falling out when I was in high school. I don’t know the details, but one day Lucy mentioned her dad said Vince wasn’t allowed in their home ever again.”

Thunder drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “You didn’t ask what happened?”

I laugh. “I was eighteen and much more interested in making out with Lucy than talking about her family.”

Thunder grins. “I get that. You think Vince’s goal is to get to her dad?”

“That’s where the money’s at. So yeah.”

“Look, I don’t know this family, but if someone was really using my kid to extort money from me, they wouldn’t be long for this world.”

I turn to Thunder. “You think Vince made an empty threat?”

He shrugs. “I can’t say for sure. Some families are pretty fucked up.”

“That they are.”

I take another sip of coffee as I process the situation.

I need to know if Vince poses a real danger to Lucy, or if it’s like Thunder thinks, an empty threat.

“Is she the one?” he asks.

“The one what?”

Thunder chuckles. “*The one*. The reason I’ve never seen you with a woman?”

I scoff. He’s never seen me with a woman because I’m a private person. I’m not one of those guys that goes to the bar and makes a big show of picking someone up. But hell, before I came here, it had been a long time. But I know what my friend means.

“Yeah, she is.”

“Then tell me why you’re planning to watch her from afar rather than try to work things out with her?” He makes a point of glancing over at my attire.

I’m dressed for the cold, in a thick parka, hat, and gloves. There’s no doubt I plan to sit in my car. “She’s unhappy with me at the moment.”

Thunder barks out a laugh. “Why does that not surprise me?”

I sigh. “She overheard me talking with Hawthorne about going back to Afghanistan. She doesn’t think I’ll stick around.”

Thunder turns in his seat to face me. “Wait, you’re gonna stick around? Here? Are you leaving the team?”

I swallow. “I was thinking about it if things work out with her. And if Stormy can find a place for me on his crew.”

Thunder grins.

“What?” I grumble.

“Good for you, going after what you want. And Stormy would be lucky to have you. He’s a great guy. You’ll love his team.” He takes another sip of his coffee. “If you decide that’s what you want, let me know. I’ll put in a good word for you with Stormy.”

“Stormy? That’s Rover’s boss.”

“His real name is Poseidon Thompson, and he’s the other half of Morgan Thompson Security. He’s a cool guy. I’ve worked on several assignments with the guys here, so I’ve

gotten to know him a little. You'll like him. He's a bit uptight, but a good guy."

"His name's really Poseidon?"

"Yep. Hence, Stormy."

I snort. "Thank you for the offer. I'd appreciate that."

Thunder continues to drum the steering wheel. "It won't be the same without you, Pig Pen."

"Aw, thanks. I love you too."

I make kissy faces at him, but he pushes my face away with a large hand.

Then his eyes widen. "Oh, shit."

"What?" I ask.

"If you're not there to keep Lightning in check, it will be madness."

I laugh.

"No, seriously, the rest of us don't want anything to do with your food pranks and the weird things you do to each other."

I shrug. "Then tell him no."

Thunder's mouth falls open. "Tell him no? Did you forget who we are talking about?"

I laugh. "You're right. Well, I guess you better be ready to step up. One tip, he never checks his creamer before dumping it into his coffee. You'd think after the fourth time I messed with it he would." I shake my head. "But he doesn't."

"That's because he's half asleep until he has his first cup of coffee in the office."

I open the door but turn back to him, smiling. "Well, there's your opportunity then. I'm going to let you go so you can get some sleep."

He nods. "Thanks for letting me crash at your place."

"It's the least I can do."

“Oh wait,” he says. “If you get on with Stormy’s team, don’t mess with those guys. They take their pranks to a whole other level. Trust me, you don’t want to open that door.”

I laugh. “Thanks for the advice.” I grab my coffee and make my way back to my car. Then I spend the day doing what I’ve done the last few days: following Lucy from a distance.

There has been no sign of Vince, but there have been several unfortunate sightings of Ted Barton; he and Lucy have had lunch together every day. He’s certainly been there for her. Enough so that I decide I need to check up on him.



THE MOMENT THUNDER takes over for me at the end of the day, I drive to the other side of town. A quick database search gave me Ted’s address, and I pull up to a two-story, well-manicured home.

Nothing surprising. Ted seems meticulous about appearances based on his clothing and hair choices.

There’s no car in the driveway. It could be in the garage, but there are also no lights on in the house. I park just down the street and wait.

I don’t have to wait too long. About thirty minutes later, a car pulls into the driveway. It’s dark, but I see Ted get out the driver’s side and go to the passenger side, where he helps a woman get out. While I can see the woman is wearing a tight, low-cut dress, I can’t see her face because it’s blocked by Ted’s as they kiss up against the door of the car.

This is not an innocent kiss, and Ted is not pulling away. Instead, Ted presses her against the car, and the two of them are almost obscene in the middle of what appears to be a family neighborhood. Finally, they break apart, and he leads her into his house.

Move your fat head Ted so I can see her face. No luck. They go inside and I’m left stewing. Lucy dismissed my

concerns about Ted being a boyfriend by telling me he would be more into me than her. Does she believe that? Or was she simply trying to appease my insecurity?

I pull away from the curb and drive back to her place. I'm halfway to her door when Thunder comes out of nowhere and stops me.

"What the hell? Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" he growls.

I run my hand through my hair. "Sorry, I have to talk to Lucy."

"She called you?"

"No. But I have to—"

"You said to stop you if you tried this. You're supposed to be giving her space. Remember?" Thunder steps between me and her building.

I sigh. "I know. But I just learned something that I have to tell her. It can't wait."

"You're sure about this?"

"I am."

Thunder shakes his head. "All right. I'll be in the car. If you end up staying here, give me a heads up, and I'll take off."

As much as I would love to stay here, I doubt very much that will happen. I knock on her door and wait.

"Who's there?" she asks hesitantly.

I smile. At least she didn't just open the door. That makes me feel a little better about her situation.

"Cody," I reply.

She sighs. "Why are you here?"

"Please, Luce, there's something you need to know. It will just take a minute."

I hear the deadbolt release, and the door opens, framing a glaring Lucy. Yep, she's still angry. My hands itch to reach out and pull her to me. I miss everything about her.

“You have five minutes,” she says, stepping aside so I can enter.

I walk in and spot a couch and coffee table that weren’t the ones in her old apartment. These look new. Why would she buy new furniture when she said she had to save? She must see me staring at it.

“The furniture belongs to Vince. He insisted I use it.”

I nod. I’m too antsy to sit, so I pace while I try to organize my thoughts.

“Four minutes,” she says.

“Your friend Ted Barton isn’t gay.”

Her brows furrow. “What? You come barging in here to make that claim again? You already told me that’s what you think.”

I stop pacing. “I don’t ‘think,’ I *know*. He was making out with a woman.”

“Where?”

“Outside his house. Then they went inside.”

Her brows shoot up. “You followed him?”

Shit. I really didn’t think this through. I go for honesty. “Yes, I was. I don’t trust him.”

Lucy crosses her arms. “You also don’t trust Vince. And I know you don’t trust Joseph or my dad. From what I can see, you don’t trust any of the men in my life. Or you don’t trust my judgment of men—aside from you, right?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“No? Then why do you have someone watching me twenty-four-seven? And why were you spying on Ted?”

Is she being serious?

“Have you never had someone really look out for you?”

She laughed. “‘Look out for me’? No, this is *controlling*. Your time is up. Please leave.”

I walk to the door in shock. Then I turn back. “I’m leaving for Afghanistan on Friday. I’d hate to leave things like this.”

She turns away, and all I want to do is pull her into my arms. But I can’t. I’ll just have to prove to her that I’m coming back to stay.

“Please be careful,” I implore. “Thunder won’t be able to sit outside your place after Friday either so no one will be watching you. But here’s Rover’s number. If you need anything, give him a call. Anytime. Oh, and he said you can give the number to Connie too.”

She doesn’t turn around or say goodbye. I place the card on a table next to the door. “Luce, this conversation isn’t over. I’m coming back—”

She turns her head to the side, so I see her in profile. “*If* you come back, we can talk.”

“There’s no ‘if’ about it, Luce. I’m not leaving you again.”

She walks away in silence, and I hear a door close. I guess that’s my cue to leave. Leaving is the last thing I want to do, but I made a promise.

CHAPTER 23



Lucy

THE PAST MONTH has gone by quicker than I expected. I glance at the clock. Only five minutes left in my 101 class, then I'll be handing it off to another professor.

“All right, everyone. I've graded your papers, and I posted them just before class. Remember, your score counts for twenty-five percent of your grade.”

Several students groan.

“And, as I mentioned before, this is my last day with you. Monday, you will have Professor Button.” I try not to giggle at the name. “I want to let you know that I've really enjoyed teaching this course, and I hope to see some of you in my upper-level courses in the future.”

“Yeah, only some, you losers,” calls out one of the guys toward the back, pulling a few laughs.

I shake my head. “Okay, you're all free to go.”

I turn back to the table at the front of the room and gather my belongings, watching as the students filter out. It was crazy that I was dreading this class. It has turned out to be my most fun course and has reminded me why I fell in love with psychology in the first place.

It also helps that a couple of my students seem to have the psychology bug too.

“Professor Taylor?”

Speaking of...

I turn to find Sebastian Doyle. He’s wearing a hockey jersey and a big grin.

“I just wanted to say thank you. You’ve made this class much more interesting.”

“Thank you, Sebastian. I’m happy to hear that. I could tell that you enjoy psychology.”

His backpack slides off his arm, and he hikes it back up onto his shoulder. “Yeah, I was planning on majoring in biology, but now I’m thinking of neuropsychology.”

I smile. “It sounds like I’ll see you next year, then.”

“For sure. I just have to hope I can keep my grades up and still play.”

I point to his jersey. “You’re on the hockey team?”

“Sure am. I hope to go pro.”

I’m not surprised. Most students who come to Havenwood for the hockey team all hope to go pro. Because of the university winning the last three national championships, they are near the top of the draft.

“Well, when you’re playing and famous, I’ll be able to say I knew you when.”

He grins. “I’ll save some seats for you, professor.”

“I’d like that.”

“Hey, Seb? You coming?” another player shouts from the doorway.

“I gotta go. Thanks again,” he says as he turns to go.

“Thank you.”

I go to my office and type up some notes for Professor Button and send them over. It takes me longer than expected, but I still have time for a quick lunch before my next class.

Without looking around, I exit my building and head straight for the sandwich shop. I'm stopped in my tracks. Outside the new sciences building, someone has revived the memorial for Randy. It was placed there shortly after news of his death hit campus. The cards and flowers had faded, but today, there are fresh flowers and even a teddy bear.

While he wasn't a favorite of mine, he was someone's son, someone's friend, and whoever killed him is still out there. If the police have any ideas on motive, they aren't sharing.

"Hey, Lucy, wait up."

I turn to see Ted marching toward me. I smile despite the fact I really want to eat lunch alone today. Don't get me wrong, Ted has been nothing but a kind friend, especially this past month while Cody has been gone. But lately, he's almost too clingy.

"Heading to lunch?" he asks once he catches up.

He's wearing his usual outfit comprising a blue button-up shirt buttoned up to his chin and a pair of gray dress pants. While he looks professional, I don't see how that shirt is comfortable.

"Yeah, I was thinking of just grabbing a sandwich and then going back to my office. I've fallen behind on my research project since I've been teaching an extra class."

"I still can't believe they asked you to teach that. It's such an insult."

I stop, startled by his anger.

"Sorry, I get defensive about my friends."

I give him another smile. "Actually, the class wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

"No? That's good."

We walk in silence until we reach Kelly's.

When he holds the door open for me, I notice he's scowling. "How are you doing today? Everything all right?" I ask.

He blows out a breath. “No, it’s not. But I don’t want to discuss my department’s funding problems.”

The moment we enter, the smell of freshly baked bread and soup hits me, and my stomach growls. “Funding problems? I thought the school had plenty of alma mater donors.”

Ted laughs. “They do, but apparently, they’re more excited about sports than computer science.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m sure if you talk to Charles Ziff, he’ll figure something out. He seems nice.”

Ted’s brows shoot up. “Just go and talk to the university’s president? That would be ballsy, going over the head of academics.” He chews on his lip. “I’m sure it will work out.”

We make our way into the long line.

“Have you heard from Cody?” he asks. “He’s due back anytime, right?”

“I’m not sure when he’s coming back.”

That’s a lie. I know exactly when he’s returning, because Cody has texted me every chance he’s gotten during the past month. At first, he would send some silly joke, but then a couple of weeks ago, he began texting memories. Memories of us all those years ago. And all of it makes me miss him more.

I finally gave in and texted back. I couldn’t help it. I miss him so much. Although, I should still be mad at him for trying to turn me against Ted.

I asked Ted if he brought a woman home, which led to an embarrassing conversation where I had to admit that my ex followed him. I also apologized profusely for the invasion of his privacy.

Ted actually found it funny, and to explain, he showed me a photo of his brother, who lives with him. The two look very much alike. It’s easy to see how Cody could have been mistaken, especially at night.

Once I learned that, my anger toward Cody softened. He really did think he was looking out for me; he’s protective by

nature, I know this.

Ted and I move up in line.

“Maybe if I show Cody a photo of your brother, it will resolve his concerns,” I tell him.

Ted places his hand on my shoulder, turning me slightly. “Why would you do that? You said you weren’t going to see him when he returns.”

I bite my lip. I did say that, but that was before I had a month to think and read all of Cody’s texts. Including the last one where he admitted he became too protective of me and understands why I found him controlling.

“What can I get you?” a boy on the other side of the counter asks.

Saved just in time. We place our orders, and I get mine to go.

As I leave the shop moments later, I think I’m in the clear and walk fast toward my office, but then Ted catches up to me.

“Hey, you didn’t answer my last question.”

“It was a question?” I dodge.

“Yes. You aren’t going to see Cody, right? When he returns? Please tell me you haven’t changed your mind. You were so upset.”

It’s true. I was upset when I talked to Ted the Monday after Cody left for Afghanistan. I was upset at how we left things. I was upset that I thought he tried to control me. But mostly, I was upset because I had fallen for him again. Or maybe my feelings were always there, lying dormant, waiting for the right moment. *But is now the right moment?*

“Okay, you don’t want to talk about it?” Ted says. “Fine. Instead, let me take you out tonight. We can go to a nice restaurant, and you can simply relax and enjoy yourself. You’ve been working hard lately. Let me take your mind off of it for a while.”

I stop at the steps to the psychology building. This is the first time Ted has asked me to do something off campus, and the request feels a little uncomfortable. It's Friday, and a Friday night dinner sounds like a date.

Stop it. How is this any different than if Connie suggested the same thing? I'd go in a heartbeat and enjoy myself. Why should it be any different with Ted?

"Sure. That sounds nice," I say finally.

"Great. I'll pick you up at seven." He spins and walks away before I can respond.

Pick me up? How can he do that without my address? I laugh to myself, knowing I'll be getting a text from him asking for it.



ON THE WAY to my car after my last class, my phone buzzes with a text from Cody. He's on his way home, and he wants to see me tomorrow.

I stop walking. *Tomorrow*. My mind is whirling. I know what he wants. He's made no secret of it. *But what do I want?*

I squeeze my eyes shut, and an unexpected smile spreads across my face. The possibility I'll see him tomorrow suddenly has my stomach full of butterflies, and I realize I've really missed him. There's no denying how I feel. I've tried—god, how I've tried to *not* want him.

I drive home on autopilot, thinking about what I'll wear tomorrow. Then I decide I need reinforcements. As soon as I walk inside my apartment, I call Connie.

"Lucy, I'm so glad you called. I was going to ask if you wanted to go to happy hour."

"Can you come to my place? Cody is coming back and wants to see me tomorrow."

"Oh shit. I'll be there in fifteen."

“Thank you.”

I toss my phone on the couch and go to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of wine. I pour a second glass for Connie, then I stare at the message from Cody. He hasn't sent any others.

I shoot off a quick reply to say okay, and I'm still lost in my thoughts when Connie knocks.

“Hey, I'm here,” she says through the door.

The moment she walks in, I hand her my phone. “That's all he sent.”

She reads it quickly, then scrolls up. “Uh, actually no, that is not *all* he sent. Holy shit, Lucy. This is romantic as hell.”

“I know.” I squeeze my hands together and begin pacing.

“I need wine for this,” she says.

I point to the coffee table, where I set the glass I poured for her. She takes a drink, then sits on the couch and continues to read my text messages.

She finally looks up. “Well, there's no doubt what he wants. What do you want?”

“I want him. But I'm scared.”

“Understandable,” she nods. “I've been thinking about your situation, and I've concluded. He was a boy when he made that stupid decision to leave. Now he's a man. And according to all this, he is willing to uproot his life and move here to be with you.”

I sit down on the other end of the couch, clutching my wine. “You were there for me before; you really think I should go for it?”

Connie smiles. “I can't tell you that. Only you know what's in your heart. Do you love him?”

My eyes well with tears, and I nod. “I always have.”

“Well, I can tell you that when you talk about him, your eyes light up in a way I've never seen before. They certainly didn't with Joseph.”

“You’re right. I never felt like this about Joseph.”

“I think you two have what all the rest of us want. As long as he makes you happy, I’m good. But if he does anything wrong—”

“I know. You’ve made your threats clear.”

“Good. Now, do you mind if I order a pizza?” she asks.

“Go ahead.”

I go to the kitchen and refill my wine as my mind continues to race. Deep down, I know Cody is the one for me. But I’m still scared. I return to the living room to find Connie frowning.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“This damn dating app only seems to match me with losers. I don’t understand.”

“Like who?” I scoot closer to see her phone. “Show me. I need a distraction.”

She laughs, then points to the screen. “Well, like this guy.”

“Oh, he’s cute.”

“Yeah, that’s about all he’s got going for him. I asked him what he enjoyed doing, and he said *breeding ferrets*.”

“Well, that’s not too weird, I guess. People breed dogs and cats. What’s wrong with ferrets?”

She scrolls and then clicks on a photo. When it comes up, I spit out the sip of wine I just took.

The photo shows a man on a bed, wearing only his underwear as he stares into the camera, trying to look—I suppose—sexy. But there are ferrets all over the bed with him.

“How many does he have?” I ask.

“Currently? Thirty. That’s because he sold the other eighteen.”

“Oh my god. Do they sleep on the bed?”

“From what I can tell, they have free rein.”

“But don’t they poop everywhere?” The thought makes me shudder.

“I asked about that. Do you know what he said?”

I shrug.

“That’s why I wear socks.”

“Oooh. That is so gross.”

“And he was the best one,” she declares.

I bark out a laugh. Then I remember what Cody said when he left Rover’s card. “Now I’m really sorry you didn’t meet Rover, but I have good news. Cody gave me his number and said to give it to you too.”

I walk over to the kitchen drawer where I tossed it that night.

“He did? Wait. You mean a *month* ago?”

I grimace. “Yeah. Sorry. I forgot.” I sit back down on the sofa and hand her the card.

“Did Rover want you to give me his number or Cody?”

“I’m not sure. Does it matter?”

Connie stares at the card and then takes her phone out and inputs the number. “It does. I’m not chasing after that man just to find out he’s like ferret boy.”

She hands back the card and I toss it on the coffee table. “Then why take his number? I’m confused.”

She shrugs. “In case I need it later. In the meantime, I know how you can make it up to me.”

“How?”

“After you make up with Cody, set up a double date.”

I open my mouth, but then realize that’s actually a great idea. “Done.”

There’s a knock at the door.

“Oh. Pizza is early.” Connie jumps up and opens the door.

Ted is standing on the other side, wearing a suit, and his hair has been styled. I've never seen his hair like that before. Then I see the flowers. A beautiful bouquet of pink and white flowers.

"Hi, is Lucy here?" he asked, confused.

I jump up. *Shit. Ted.* After reading Cody's text, I forgot about our dinner.

"Ted? I'm so sorry. When you didn't text for my address, I figured you had to cancel. Then I got some news, and Connie came over to comfort me. I'm so sorry," I explain.

He frowns and glances at Connie. She smiles.

Then he looks back to me, concerned, as he tosses the flowers on the coffee table and grips my shoulders. "Are you all right? Is there anything I can do?" He's standing close. Too close.

I step back. "I'm fine, thank you, but I'm afraid I'll have to take a raincheck on dinner."

Another knock on the still open door draws my attention.

"Pizza delivery," a guy calls.

Connie deals with him and then sets the pizza on the coffee table. She picks up the bunch of flowers and thrusts them into my hands.

"You bought me flowers?" I ask Ted.

His jaw ticks. "I did. You seemed like you needed cheering up."

"Thank you." I take them to the kitchen as he waits near the door. Once I put the flowers and water in a vase, I set them on the counter.

"You're welcome."

"I'm curious, how did you know where I lived?"

Ted grimaces. "This might sound bad, but last month after we talked about Cody and my brother, you seemed upset, so I followed you home." He puts his hands up. "Only to make

sure you got home okay. I'm sorry. I realize now that sounds creepy."

I swallow. It does sound creepy, but Ted's a good friend. And I was upset that night. "Thank you for looking out for me. If you'd like to stay, we have pizza," I say as I walk back into the living room.

Please say no. I don't want to tell him about Cody returning tomorrow.

Ted glances at Connie, who is halfway through her first slice. "No, that's all right. How about dinner tomorrow night?"

"I'm sorry. I have plans." *Please don't ask about them...*

"Okay. Some other time, then. Goodnight, Lucy." Ted slowly leans down.

Holy shit, is he going to kiss me? I'm relieved when he only plants a kiss on my cheek, then leaves.

"Wow," Connie says around a mouthful of pizza. "You lucky bitch. Here I am, struggling to find a decent guy, and you have *two* guys after you."

"Ted isn't into me, he likes guys."

Connie swallows and stares at me with wide eyes. "You're being serious?"

"Yes."

She bursts out laughing.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"I'm sorry, but you should have seen the way he watched your ass sway when you walked into the kitchen."

"It didn't sway."

Connie arched a brow. "Did he tell you he was gay?"

I think back on all my conversations with Ted. *Has he ever actually told me that?*

Not that I can recall. He has commented on guys, though. Although, they were guys he thought I was into.

“I see those wheels turning. Let me save you time. Ted is into you.”

I fall back onto the couch and sigh. “I hope you’re wrong. He’s one of the few friends I have at work.”

“If you plan to be with Cody, then I suggest you get new friends and keep what you have with Ted limited to work. Stop inviting him over.”

“I didn’t. We were supposed to go for dinner,” I grumble.

I thought as friends.

CHAPTER 24



CODY

“WELCOME BACK TO THE STATES, CODY,” Hawthorne says, as he slaps me on the back.

“Yeah, thanks.”

I’m very happy to be back. But I’ll be happier when I’m back in Washington state later tonight.

“Thanks for briefing me yesterday,” he says. “I’m surprised to see you here—I thought you’d be on a direct flight to Seattle.”

“I wanted to be, but I have some things I have to take care of here before I can go.”

He walks around his desk and sits in his chair. “It’s final then? You really want to transfer to Morgan Thompson?”

I sit down in the chair opposite him. “If Lucy will have me, yes. And even if she doesn’t, I plan to show her I’ll wait for her until she’s ready.”

He nods. “I can respect that. When you find the one, you do everything you can to be with her. God knows I would give anything to have Kaitlyn back.”

“I thought your wife’s name is Stacy?”

He sighs. “It is. Kaitlyn was my first wife. She was the true love of my life but sadly she lost her battle with cancer. As for

Stacy, well, I'm learning she may not be who I thought she was."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugs. "Yeah, me too. But enough about me. I'm happy for you. I'll call Stormy later today and make sure the transition is smooth."

Transition?

"I haven't interviewed with him yet," I say.

Hawthorne grins. "You don't need to. When you first mentioned what you were thinking, I spoke to him about it—I wanted to let him know what a valuable team member you are. Apparently, one of his men, Rover, already talked his ear off about you. Stormy is just waiting for your call at this point."

I'm flabbergasted. "Hawthorne, thank you. I can't even tell you how much this means to me."

He nods. "Don't worry about it. But that means this might be one of the last times we see you around here."

I sigh. "It does."

I've been so focused on getting back to Lucy, I haven't processed leaving New York for good. This has been my home for the past three years. I've made some good friends. Friends I will miss. I can only hope that if Thunder works with the MTS guys again, I'll get to be a part of that assignment.

I go around the office, saying a quick goodbye to the guys that are there. As much as I'll miss them, I really hope my future is in Washington. If I have even the slightest chance with Lucy, I'm going to grab it. The guys want to take me out for a drink, but I have a flight to catch. Instead, I promise them a place to stay if they want to visit Seattle.

"Hey, you're really leaving?" Lightning asks as I walk by his office door.

I stop and turn to him. "Yeah, I really am."

"Who the hell am I going to mess with now? These guys don't have a sense of humor, you know."

I lean against the door. “I don’t know. Ozzie might tolerate you. But whatever you do, leave Durango alone. I swapped the sugar and salt right before he put some in his coffee one time. He threatened to kill whoever did it.”

Lightning laughs. “He had to have known it was you, though.”

I shrug. “I may have led him to believe it was you.”

Lightning stands up. “What?”

“You were out on assignment, so I knew you were safe.”

“Well, well, well. The truth comes out,” Durango says from behind me.

Lightning falls into his chair laughing. “Yes! It was him!”

I slowly turn to find Durango glaring at me with his arms crossed. The guy is bigger than the rest of us and intimidating as hell. I can’t say I’ve ever seen him smile.

“Sorry.” I offer. “But in my defense, I didn’t know you that well at the time and—”

His hand goes up. “Don’t worry about it. It’s in the past. I heard you are leaving, so I wanted to say goodbye.”

“What?” Lightning asks. “That’s not Durango!” he says, pointing at the man.

Durango rolls his eyes. “Maybe Lightning should be the one to transfer.”

Lightning stands and walks to Durango and gives him a hug. Durango doesn’t move but stands there awkwardly. “You love me, and you know it,” Lightning says.

Then he turns to me and holds out his hand. I shake it.

“Good luck with your woman. And make sure you come back and visit.”

“Thanks. I will.” I turn to Durango who is still standing there with his arms crossed. “It’s been great working with you. Hopefully, I’ll see you guys again soon.”

He nods and I walk down the hall toward Reed's office. Sadly, he's not in. It hits me right then. I really will miss these guys.

"Hey, you got a minute?"

I turn, surprised to see Thunder standing in the entryway of our building.

"Yeah, I thought you were gone on an assignment."

"Durango and I are leaving the country in a few hours. I'm just happy I could catch you while you're here. Can I walk you to your car?"

I nod and we step outside.

"That guy never bothered Lucy, right?"

I glance over at him. "Not that she ever mentioned. What exactly did you do to get Vince to back off?"

He smiles. "I paid him a visit. I can be persuasive, you know."

"I really can't thank you enough for taking personal time to help me."

"Hey, that's what friends are for. I got your back, and you got mine. Always."

Hours later, I land in Seattle and head straight back to Stormy's rental house. I want to be well-rested for my plans tomorrow. Before I see Lucy, I need to take care of a few things.



DRIVING into Fallwell Cove used to put me in a foul mood, with all the rich, entitled bastards that lived there, and the university that wouldn't have me. But knowing my future is here now, I see the place as it is—a quaint, small town on the edge of the water, with gorgeous views of the snow-capped mountains. It's the town where I hope to be living with Lucy someday soon.

Vince's car is parked at the food bank when I arrive; I'm happy to have found him so fast. The front door to the building is open, so I go in.

"Hello?" I call.

"Can I help you?" a voice calls from the back. Then Vince appears. "Ah, you again."

I hold back a laugh. I'm not thrilled to see him either. I'd much rather be on my way to Lucy's.

"I'm here to make sure you don't forget your promise," I say.

Vince rolls his eyes. "Let's go talk in my office."

I follow him down the hall. He sits in the chair behind his desk, and I take the one across from him. Nothing has changed since the last time I was here; the same coffee cup even sits on his desk in the same spot.

"If you are talking about what I told that thug who came in here last month, yes, I have kept my word. I would never hurt Lucy, she's my niece."

The man seems sincere, and as far as I know, Lucy's fine. I'm going to have to trust him on that. For now.

"Where is Joseph? Did he return?"

I heard from Rover while I was gone; he said he was never asked back to the university. That means either Joseph never turned up, or the president decided Joseph was no longer being threatened.

The only reason I give a rat's ass is because I don't want Joseph showing up and hurting Lucy again.

Vince smiled. "According to his latest correspondence, he's somewhere tropical." He points to something behind me.

I turn and see a bulletin board, and on it are several business cards and a postcard.

I stand and go to it. The picture is of a sandy beach with a palm tree. I flip it over.

“Now that my debt is paid, I’ll be retiring here. Good luck, my friend. Joseph.”

The postmark has been smudged, so I can’t make it out, and there is no description on the postcard telling me where the pictured location is. It’s as if someone wants me to believe this but not be able to confirm it.

“Is Joseph dead?” I ask with my back still turned.

Vince laughs. “On the contrary. From the looks of it, he’s living large.”

And he just happened to send you of all people a postcard. Bullshit. But I’ll play along.

“What does he mean by ‘good luck’?” I ask, turning to Vince.

Vince narrows his gaze. “He’s concerned because of who paid his debt to me.”

“And who was that?”

“Look, I’m only telling you this because I can tell you aren’t letting it go. My brother Lawrence paid with the promise Joseph never returns.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Lawrence Gardiner, as in Joseph’s ex-father-in-law?”

Vince leans back and crosses his arms. “That’s the one.”

“He hates Joseph.”

Vince holds up his hands. “You don’t have to tell me, I’m fully aware. But he hates what Joseph has done to his daughter even more.”

“He just paid you off?”

Vince leans forward. “Listen to me carefully. Lawrence paid Joseph’s debts. He didn’t pay me and he’s not aware of my involvement and I’d like to keep it that way.”

I laugh. “Are you asking me to keep family secrets, Vince?”

Vince stands up and walks around the desk. “No. I’m not asking.”

It takes all I have not to laugh. I know Vince thinks he comes across like a scary guy, but what he doesn’t realize is I’ve seen much worse. But I keep my expression serious. The last thing I want to do is piss him off. I still don’t fully trust him when it comes to Lucy.

“And Lawrence is fine with Joseph living large on some island?”

Vince smiles and shrugs. “At least now he knows he can’t hurt her anymore. That’s what Lawrence does, he sends his problems away.”

Yes, I know all too well. Well, shit. Maybe he really did send Joseph away.

“Enough about Joseph. Back to Lucy. Why did you use her to try to get your money back?”

“I didn’t.”

Anger boils inside me at his denial. “You punched Joseph so he could pray on Lucy’s sympathy.”

“I told you it wasn’t about money—that was about mending her relationship with her father.”

“I don’t buy that.”

“Look, you don’t have to believe me.”

“I’m with Lucy now,” at least, I’m hoping she’ll take me back, “and as far as I’m concerned, you have no reason to be around her.”

He chuckles. “I think you’re forgetting that she’s living in my apartment, and I’m family.”

“For now,” I say.

Without another word, I walk out of his office and don’t stop until I get to my car.

I’ll be happy if I never see that man again, but I know when I move up here, it will be inevitable. He’s just like

Lucy's father—he has a finger in everything.

I check the time as I pull out of the lot. Just one more meeting, and then I can go see my Lucy. My Lucy. I'm getting ahead of myself. First, I have to convince her to give us a chance. That's something I've been working on all month. When she began texting me back with memories of her own, I was the happiest man.

I turn my focus to my current situation as I nervously walk into the building that houses Morgan Thompson Security.

Just inside the door, I'm greeted by a very large man. He looks like he played pro football at one point, but now there's gray at the temples of his dark hair, making him look older.

“Cody?”

“Yes.”

“Stormy Thompson. I own half of this outfit.” He extends his hand.

I shake it. “Cody Anthony. Thank you for meeting with me today.”

“My pleasure. Follow me back.”

He leads me to a conference room, where we both sit down.

“My partner should be here any moment,” he says.

Another man walks into the office wearing a cowboy hat and boots.

“Speak of the devil,” Stormy smiles. “Cowboy, glad you could join us.”

The man extends a hand to me. “Cody, I presume?”

I stand and shake his hand too. “Yes.”

“Josh Morgan. But everyone here calls me Cowboy.” He grins. “You should know, even though my name is on the building, you won't see me around much.”

Cowboy takes the chair next to Stormy and I sit back down.

“Yeah,” Stormy chimes in. “Cowboy here is too busy being, well, a cowboy.”

Cowboy laughs. “It’s true. I inherited a horse ranch, and I spend most of my time running that now. And running after my two boys.”

“Is that how you got the call sign Cowboy?”

Stormy chuckles. “Hell no. We went out to a bar one night soon after we met, and this fucker had on pretty much what he does now plus a *huge* belt buckle.” He laughs. “I’m from New York, so I wasn’t used to seeing that shit outside of a movie.”

Cowboy grins. “He gave me shit about it every chance he got.”

“Yeah, I did. So, tell me, Cody. What’s *your* call sign?”

“It’s Pig Pen but everyone calls me Cody.”

Stormy bursts out laughing.

Cowboy’s eyes widen, then he laughs too. “You really messy or something? Because I’ll tell you right now, if you’re not into showers, you better change that. We share close quarters here.”

Stormy snorts.

“No, that’s not it. It’s because of this.” I pull up my shirt and show them the tattoo. I don’t normally pull up my shirt at an interview but it’s the quickest way to explain.

Cowboy stops laughing and stares. “Lucy from *Peanuts*? Then why don’t they call you Charlie?”

“We’d just gone through an obstacle course, and I was covered in mud. When I pulled my shirt off, the guys decided Pig Pen fit better.”

“Huh. Well, you could have a worse call sign,” Cowboy shrugs.

“Yeah, ask CT about his when you get a chance.” Stormy shakes his head. Then he crosses his arms. “I think you’ll fit in just fine here. And Hawthorne speaks highly of you, says we’d be lucky to have you.”

“Hawthorne also mentioned you took some time off to deal with a personal issue?” Josh cuts in.

I nod. “That’s right. It has to do with why I’m up here, actually. I’m moving back to Washington to get my girl back—I’m going to see her after I leave here.”

Cowboy leans back in his seat. “Get her back? So, you two aren’t together?”

I let out a breath. “Not yet.”

“And what happens if she says no?” Stormy presses. “Are you going back to New York?”

“No. My family is here too. I’m here to stay.”

Cowboy smiles. “Okay, good to hear. Then welcome aboard.”

I glance from Cowboy to Stormy. “Just like that?”

Stormy grins. “Just like that.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate this.”

“Can you start in a couple of weeks? I figure you’ll need time to win your girl back first,” Cowboy winks.

“Yes. That would be perfect.”

“Have you met the others yet?” Stormy asks.

“Actually, I met several of them. Rover introduced me last month.”

Stormy puts a meaty hand on my shoulder. “That’s good. Then I guess we’ll see you in two weeks. I have a phone meeting I have to get to.”

Cowboy gives a nod. “I’ll show Cody out.”

After a few more handshakes, I exit the building of my new employer, ready to finally prove myself to Lucy.

CHAPTER 25



Lucy

MY PHONE BUZZES, and I jump. Cody is supposed to be here in two minutes, and I'm a nervous wreck. I check my phone. The offending notification is alerting me to an email from Professor Button thanking me for my notes. I toss my phone aside.

After getting ready, all I've been able to do is pace and question if I made the right decision when I agreed to see him.

The way we left things before he went to Afghanistan wasn't good. I was so angry at him for questioning my judgment about Vince, Ted, and even my dad. Or at least, that was what I thought he was doing. But a month is a long time to mull everything over—over and over again.

There's a knock at the door. Taking a deep breath, I open it. My knees grow weak at the sight before me, and I place my hand on the wall for support.

Cody is wearing a suit. No, not just a suit, but a very *fitted* suit with a green tie that really brings out the green in his hazel eyes. His hair has grown out a bit, and I just want to run my hands through it.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi," I say back.

He grins. "Can I come in?"

I close my eyes. “Yes, of course. Sorry.”

I left the man standing outside while I ogled him. I can feel the warmth spreading to my cheeks.

“You’re in a suit. Did you have an interview?” I ask.

He knows what I’m asking. The last I knew, he was considering trying to get in with the other security team up here so he could be close to me. I need to know where that stands.

“As a matter of fact, I did, but I wasn’t wearing this. I changed into this suit for you. I want it to be clear that I’m serious about what I want. As for the interview, I officially start work for Morgan Thompson Security in two weeks. It’s based locally.”

“Is that the company Rover works for?”

“Yes.”

I nod and run my index finger over my thumbnail, back and forth.

Cody takes my hand. “You still do this when you’re nervous?”

I nod again.

“Can we sit on the couch?” he asks.

“Sure.”

He’s still holding my hand as he leads me to sit down, then he sits next to me.

I speak first. “You gave up your job and are moving up here without knowing where we stand?”

He nods. “It might sound a little risky, but you’re it for me, Lucy. You always have been. I hope to convince you of that tonight, but if I don’t, well, let’s just say I don’t give up easily.”

I can’t help but smile.

“I don’t mean that in a creepy, stalker-y way, I hope you know,” he adds.

“I know. I could tell you were persistent from your texts.”

He inhales. “I hope that wasn’t too much.”

I look down at our still joined hands. “It wasn’t. It helped me this last month. I had a lot to think about.”

“And what did you conclude?”

“I think we should date.” There. I said it.

His grin returns. “Yeah?”

“But please know I don’t like being told what to do.”

He scoots closer, and the scent of his cologne wafts in the air. I’m just about a goner.

“I’m very aware of that, Luce. I will try not to be so pushy. But I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

I search his eyes. It’s impossible to deny the sincerity I see there. Right now, in this suit, and with the way he’s looking at me, Cody is the sexiest man I’ve ever seen, and as much as I want to keep my walls up, he’s knocking them all down.

“I know you will,” I say as I find my gaze moving to his full, sexy lips.

We both lean in. Then he kisses my forehead. I pull back, frowning.

“We’re dating, remember? Taking it slow.” He winks. “Come on, we should get going. Date number one is tonight.”

He’s already standing near the door while I’m still sitting, dumbfounded, trying to figure out what just happened.

I turn with a confused expression. “Slow? What, for the third time?” The sarcasm is thick in my voice.

He barks out a laugh. “I have to keep you wanting more. We really should go now, though. I made reservations.”

My brows shoot up. “Reservations? Am I dressed too casually?” I glance down at my black jeans.

“You look great.” He walks back over to me and leans down, brushing his lips lightly against mine. Then he takes my hand and leads me to the door.

I sigh and follow. “Where are we going?”

He turns to face me and winks. “It’s a surprise.”



“WE’RE HERE.”

I reach for the fabric covering my eyes.

“*Uh uh uh*. Not yet.”

I huff out a sigh. “What do you mean ‘not yet’? You said we’re here.”

He chuckles. “How did I forget how impatient you can be? Hold on, I’m going to help you out of the car. Just wait.”

I listen as his door closes, then a moment later, mine opens.

“Okay, let me get you out of here.”

He undoes my seat belt and then scoops one hand under my legs and one behind my back. The next thing I know, I’m being cradled against his chest.

My arms reflexively wrap around his neck. “You’re carrying me?”

“It’s easier this way.”

I listen to rocks crunching under his feet. We only go a few feet, then he sets me down.

He removes the fabric. “Okay, you can open your eyes.”

“I can’t believe you made me wear a blindfold for the drive,” I grumble as I open my eyes.

I take in the view. He’s brought me to another place we used to drive to when we were in high school. Instead of a make out spot like Picnic Point, this one was where we would party. We all called it ‘Top of The World’ because from up here you can see so many stars.

“It’s gorgeous,” I say, staring up. It has been years since I’ve appreciated the night sky.

“Yes, it is.”

I turn to see him staring at me. I narrow my gaze. “You have a reservation here? For this hill?”

“I do.” He grins.

I arch a brow, causing him to chuckle.

“If the high school kids still come up here, we might be crowded out soon,” I say.

“Nah, it’s too early for them. They won’t show up until ten or later.” He rubs my back, and I shiver. “Wait here,” he says.

It’s dark, but I can see his shadow go to the car and open the trunk. He returns holding a couple of blankets and some other items I can’t quite make out.

“What are you holding?” I ask as I squint, as if that’ll help.

“Blankets, dinner, and a portable heater.”

He lays one blanket out, sets a soft-sided cooler down next to it, then the heater. He turns the heater on and motions for me to take a seat. Thankfully, the heater illuminates, because without its glow, we wouldn’t be able to see much—though the dim light only provides a little help.

“You are going to have to tell me what you brought because I’m afraid I won’t be able to see what I’m eating.”

“No worries.” He places a second blanket on our laps, then leans over and turns on a light that sits on top of the heater.

“It comes with a light too?”

“No, I taped a flashlight up there.”

I laugh. “How could I forget? I used to call you MacGyver for all the stuff you’d come up with.” I shake my head, remembering the time I complained about not being able to see in the dark when riding my bike down the backroads to meet him at night. Next thing I knew, he took some items out of his pocket, and a flashlight, and somehow attached it to my handlebars.

Every time I had a problem or needed something, he figured out how to fix it. He's still doing that. And that just makes me fall even deeper in love.

"You were always protecting me, weren't you?"

He smiles as he unzips the soft cooler and hands me a to-go container. "I always look out for you."

When I open the container, I'm pleasantly surprised. "Teriyaki? I love it."

"I hoped you would. It wasn't something we ever ate back then." He then hands me another container. "Your salad."

"Thank you."

Then he retrieves two plastic glasses and a bottle of wine.

I watch him thoughtfully as he pours our drinks. "I'm seeing a pattern with you."

"Yeah?"

"You like to eat outside?"

He laughs. "I do. I hope it isn't too cold for you."

"No. Between the blanket and the heater, I'm good."

"Well, you have me to keep you warm, too." He hands me my glass.

Now I laugh. "Is that a line?"

"No, it's the truth."

We eat and drink and stare at the stars.

"Were you in the Middle East before?" I ask. "I mean, aside from this last month."

"I was. Why do you ask?"

I take a sip of wine. "I was wondering if you can see more stars there."

"You can. It's amazing how much more you can see. We aren't even seeing a fraction of what's up there right now."

That's when it hits me—Cody has traveled the *world*. Seen things I can't even imagine. The farthest I've traveled is Hawaii. Don't get me wrong, I loved it. But it isn't the same.

I reach out and squeeze his arm. "Tell me about the places you've been."

He turns toward me, wearing a smile. "I'll do better than that. I'll take you to some of them someday."

"I'd like that."

After we finish our dinner and wine, I lean back and stare up to the sky.

He takes my hand in his. "I've missed you so much over the years. I'm sorry I never came back. But being here with you now means everything to me."

And in that one moment, I feel my heart cracking open even more.

I lean toward him at the same time he leans down to me. His lips lightly graze mine. My hand wraps around his neck, pulling him closer. His tongue sweeps across my lower lip. I open, granting him access as he deepens the kiss. Goosebumps run down my arms, and I shiver.

He pulls back. "You're cold?"

"A little, but I don't want to stop kissing you."

His thumb runs across my lips. "Let's go back to your place. We can kiss without fear of hypothermia."

I laugh. "It isn't that bad out here."

Cody shivers. "I swear the temperature dropped ten degrees in the last few minutes."

"I doubt that. You just want to get me back to my place, don't you?"

Just to prove me wrong, a few snowflakes fall. He arches an eyebrow. "Do you still doubt me?"

I laugh and roll my eyes. "Okay, fine, let's go. I wonder if it will stick to the roads. "

“Nah. I’m sure we’re only seeing it because we’re several hundred feet up. It won’t be snowing on the highway.”

After we stand, Cody takes his jacket off and puts it over my shoulders. His scent engulfs me, and I can’t wait to be wrapped in his arms, with his shirt off.

“Thank you.” My voice comes out husky.

Cody chuckles. “You’re very welcome.”

He then picks up all our stuff and packs it into the car.

“If you’d prefer, I can take you home then leave,” he offers as we settle in our seats. “I don’t mean to be presumptuous.”

I don’t want this night to end yet. “No, you can come in. I’d love to talk more.”

“I’d like that.”

When we reach my apartment, rain has started to fall.

“See? Only rain down here. It’s too warm for snow,” Cody says.

It might be too warm for snow, but we still run from the car to my front door. A breeze has picked up, causing the rain to pelt us in the face. We’re both laughing as we enter my apartment.

“Remember that time we hiked around the lake, and it started raining really hard when we were halfway around it?” I ask.

“I do. We were drenched by the time we finished. I literally had to wring out my shirt.”

“Thank goodness I had a sweatshirt on, or my outfit would have been obscene.”

His eyes darken as he takes me in. “I wouldn’t have minded that.” His voice has gone gravelly, like it always did when he was turned on.

My memories of him are coming back hard and fast. So many things I tried to forget, but now, I want to remember

everything. I grab his tie and pull him down, crashing my lips to his.

A knock at the door interrupts us.

“Ms. Taylor?” a voice calls. “Open up. It’s the police.”

I step back. “The police?”

Cody shrugs as he walks to the door and opens it.

“He was right, you are here,” the officer scowls.

“Who was right?” Cody asks, confused.

“Lawrence Gardiner.”

A knot forms in the pit of my stomach. How the hell would my father know Cody was here, and why are there police here now?

“What’s going on?” I demand.

The officer steps inside, and another one follows right behind him.

“I’m sorry Ms. Taylor,” the first officer says. “I’m Officer Williams, and this is Officer Simpson. I’m afraid there’s a warrant out for Cody Anthony.”

“A warrant? For what?” Cody questions.

“Murder,” Simpson says.

“*Murder?* Of who?” I ask, stunned.

“Randy Sinclair,” Williams tells me before turning back to Cody. “Please turn around.”

I watch in horror as the officer handcuffs him. Tears fall and I don’t even try to stop them.

I grab Cody’s arm. “What should I do?”

The officer removes my hand. I glare at him.

“Call Rover. Do you still have his card that I gave you?”

“Yes.”

“Call him. He’ll know what to do.”

I nod. "Okay."

"Let's go," Williams pulls Cody out of my apartment.

I watch as they help him into the back of a police car. He stares at me as they pull away.

Murder? Of Randy? Why the hell would they suspect Cody? I crumple to the floor in sobs. Dad, what did you do?

CHAPTER 26



CODY

How do they have evidence against me? What the hell do they have? I'm still reeling. Officer Williams told me I might as well plead guilty since they have so much evidence against me. For now, I'm in a cell. Waiting. And all I can do is think.

Lucy's dad told the officers where I was. How the hell did he know? Did he have someone following us?

Maybe it was Vince that told Lawrence. But all I told him was that I planned to be with Lucy. And I circle back to the thought that Lawrence had someone following either me or Lucy.

Would Lawrence go so far as to set me up for murder? I know the man never wanted me with his daughter, but I thought after all these years, he'd realize he can't control her. But he has apparently found a way to keep me away from her. Again. Just like he said he would.

I hope like hell Lucy doesn't think I could have done this. She has to trust me. It's clear I'm here for the night so I lie down on a bench and close my eyes.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I know, light is streaming in from the small window above me. I sit up and groan. The bench was about as comfortable as sleeping on the floor.

Why hasn't anyone come for me yet? Rover should have called Stormy by now. Unless Rover was at some woman's house last night. Then he likely wouldn't answer his phone.

Fuck. I'm probably stuck here for a while. It isn't bad compared to some of the shitholes I've been stuck in while in the service.

When a door slams shut nearby, I stand and go to the cell door.

"Cody Anthony."

A familiar FBI agent in a suit walks toward my cell, followed by an officer. The officer unlocks it, and Agent Carter waves for me to follow him.

Why is he here?

He leads me to a room and closes the door. "Please sit down," he says.

I oblige. "Agent Carter. To what do I owe this surprise?"

"Actually, it's Assistant Director in Charge." He gives me a cheeky grin.

I worked with Agent Carter and two other FBI agents on my last assignment in Fisher Springs.

"I was surprised to see you still in Washington state," he tells me. "But then I did a little research and discovered you're from here."

"I am."

Carter sets his briefcase on the table then pulls a file from it as he sits down. "It appears your case and my case have intersected."

"How so?"

"Look, I know you didn't kill Randy, but someone is trying to make it look like you did. And I think that someone is the same person I've been after for the last few months."

"Who is that?" I demand.

"Lawrence Gardiner."

I knew it. I lean back and wait for Carter to continue.

Instead, he stares at me and furrows his brow. “You’re not surprised.”

“Surprised? No. But I am curious what exactly your case is about. That man is the father of the woman I love, and he’s dead set against us being together.”

“You have a personal beef with him, then?”

I crack my neck, still stiff from sleeping on the bench. “He’s the one with beef. I just want him to leave us alone. Lucy has made it clear to her father that she doesn’t want him controlling her life.”

“And you’re involved with Lucy Gardiner.”

“It’s Lucy Taylor, and yes I am.”

“What do you think of her father?”

I laugh. “You said yourself he’s trying to frame me for murder. I think you can guess we’re not friends.”

I scan the walls of the room. There’s a video camera in the corner, but I’m certain it isn’t turned on. Something tells me Carter didn’t want this conversation recorded. You never know who is in Lawrence Gardiner’s back pocket, and I’m guessing a few officers on this force are.

“I’m surprised you’re here and not one of your agents,” I admit. “It’s rare for the Assistant Director to do fieldwork, isn’t it?”

Carter laughs. “You know how the FBI works?”

I shrug. “I’ve worked with a lot of agencies as a SEAL.”

“Fair enough. I came because you know me—you don’t know my team.”

“And you thought I would be more likely to trust you?”

Carter smiles. “I hope so. We seem to have the same interests here.”

I’m still trying to determine that. “What are you investigating him for?” I ask.

Carter shifts in his chair. “Money laundering.”

I sit up straighter. I wasn’t expecting that one. Mr. Gardiner doesn’t like to get his hands dirty. He’s more the type to give orders.

As I study Carter, his lips twitch into a smile. I cross my arms. “I can’t help you if you lie to me.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “What makes you think I’m lying?”

I lean back. “I’m trained in interrogation. You’re lying.”

Carter smiles again. “I was testing you.”

He’s still lying, but I’ll play along. After I’m silent for a moment, he continues.

“We’re pursuing RICO charges against him,” he informs me bluntly.

“You think Lawrence Gardiner is mixed up in organized crime?”

“We do, yes. Including money laundering.”

Now it’s my turn to be surprised. “He has legitimate businesses. Why would he risk those?”

Carter shrugs. “For the reward. His businesses are great covers, all of them. But have you ever wondered why he always seems to get his way in your town?”

Well, fuck. I just assumed he likely paid off Mr. Hackle, the principal, and the admissions director at Havenwood. But maybe there was more to it because in my current circumstances, it would take some well-placed connections—or threats—to pull off framing me for murder. And yes, he managed to pull it off.

But I’m not letting that asshole come between me and Lucy again.

“What do you need me to do?” I ask.

“Let’s get you out of here first. Then we’ll talk.”

I glance around the room. “I’m free to go?”

Carter chuckles. “Soon. You are being released into my custody.”

I groan. “So, not free.”

“Let me check on the paperwork. Then, like I said, after we leave, we’ll talk.”

After Carter leaves the room, I sit and wonder what the fuck I’ve gotten into. It’s no secret I don’t like Lucy’s father, but the idea of being the one to take him down doesn’t sit well with me either. Not if I’m going to have a future with Lucy and be part of her family. I’ll have to make my feelings clear to Carter.

An hour later, I’ve been released into his care, and we’re parking in front of the house I’m staying in.

“Stormy really fixed this place up,” Carter says.

“You’ve been here before?”

“Yeah, I have. That was a wild case. We should go inside and talk,” he says as he exits the vehicle.

“Sure,” I respond as if I have a choice.

We walk inside, and I hang my coat on the hook next to the door.

“Wow, this is amazing,” Carter says.

I glance around. I guess Stormy really has made some progress on remodeling. While I was gone for the month, he got new flooring throughout, new paint, and new appliances.

Nodding, I say, “Yeah, he was going to rent it out, but then he changed his mind. Now he’s fixing it up to sell.”

Carter frowns. “Looks ready. What’s holding him back?”

I lead him down the hall to show him the guest bathroom. It’s basically been gutted down to the studs. “Something was wrong with the plumbing, and he’s waiting on a permit. He says I can stay here until they finish up the bathroom.”

“How long do you anticipate that to be?”

I shrug. “A month, maybe? But after that I’ll continue to stay in the area.”

I’m hoping to convince Lucy to get a place together, but if that doesn’t work, I guess I’ll be looking for a spot on my own.

Carter nods. “That’s good.”

“Don’t worry, I have no plans to leave town. Anyway, we can talk in the dining room.” I point back the direction we came.

Carter leads the way, then sits at the table. I sit across from him.

“We’ve been watching Lawrence Gardiner for some time,” he begins. “Recently, he made a mistake.”

I lean back. “A mistake?”

He nods. “He accompanied one of his men to what was supposed to be a pickup. One of our agents was undercover and got photos and video of him there.”

“Why not arrest him, then?”

Carter shakes his head. “We need more, Lawrence Gardiner is well-connected. This is where you come in.”

I cross my arms. I don’t like the sound of this.

“He doesn’t want you with his daughter. So, you go to him and offer to prove yourself.”

I laugh. “Prove myself? This isn’t a fucking *Godfather* movie.”

Carter’s brows shoot up. “You don’t think he would take you up on it if he thought he could set you up again?”

“I think he’ll know something’s up. He set me up for murder. As far as he’s concerned, I’m going away.”

“He’ll find out soon enough that the police didn’t find sufficient evidence.”

Well, that’s good to know. “You can make that happen?”

Carter smirks. “There’s not enough evidence to convict—not unless Lawrence plans to plant some more.”

I run my hand through my hair. “You’re convinced Lawrence set me up for this?”

“I’m not one hundred percent certain, but it looks that way.”

Which means he *will* likely keep trying to get rid of me. If I offer myself up on a platter, he’ll probably take it.

I let out a breath. “Okay, but how am I going to explain why the charges were dropped for Randy’s murder?”

“Oh, they weren’t.”

Bile comes up in my throat. “But you said the police don’t have sufficient evidence.”

“Yes, that’s what they will find, eventually. I couldn’t demand the charges be dropped without providing some evidence.”

I jump up and pace the room. “So why am I out, then?”

Carter grins. “Because your employer is very generous and paid your bail.”

I stop and turn to him. “Cowboy and Stormy paid my bail?” Shit. I might lose my new job over this. Who wants to take on a guy charged with murder?

Carter reaches in his pocket and pulls out a piece of paper. “No, it was a Mr. Hawthorne from New York.”

Hawthorne? I wonder if Stormy refused. I can’t worry about that just yet. I run my hand through my hair again.

“I’m only out on bail?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus. Were you going to tell me that?” I snap.

“Of course.”

I close my eyes. “What’s the evidence against me?”

“Randy’s friends stated you threatened him at the university.”

My eyes pop back open as I stare at the man. He’s serious. “Fuck that. I simply walked in and told him I was Lucy’s boyfriend.”

“You asked for the evidence, I’m telling you.” He shrugs.

I put my hands up. “Okay, go on.”

“They found several of your hairs on the body, and an eyewitness states they saw you walking around Joseph’s place before the fire.”

I ball my fists. *The neighbor.* Anyone could see the garage was already on fire and I was running *into* the house, not out of it. Lawrence paid people off to lie. I’d bet on it.

I frown. “It’s my word against theirs?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“With all this evidence, how do you know I didn’t do it?”

“I met you before, remember? You struck me as someone who is always very much in control of their emotions, so the idea of you losing your temper on some kid, and at the house of the man you were hired to protect, well it didn’t sit right. And then I looked into those witnesses.”

Please say you found something.

“Randy’s friends posted some photos on social media. They were partying on a yacht two weeks after Randy died. You get one guess who the yacht belongs to.”

“No, Mr. Gardiner wouldn’t be that sloppy.”

Carter smirks. “Mrs. Gardiner.”

Lucy’s mother? “No, she never tried to get between me and Lucy.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Honestly, I haven’t seen her since high school. And thinking back, I can’t recall having a single conversation with her. At most, I got a smile here and there. I guess I took that as

acceptance. But maybe I was wrong. Does she disapprove of me as well? Lucy's never mentioned it. Does she know?

I swallow. "Are you saying that Mrs. Gardiner is the one who set me up?"

Carter shrugged. "I'm not sure how much she actually knows."

"What about the other witness? The neighbor?"

"Funny thing. His mortgage was paid off this morning. One hundred and ten thousand dollars was wired to the mortgage company on his behalf."

"Wired? You can trace that."

He nods. "Tried. Dead end."

Mr. Gardiner—or Mrs., who the fuck knows—is paying a lot of money to frame me. I'm trying really hard not to believe I'm completely fucked. At least I have Carter on my side.

After a minute, I tell him, "There's one big problem with your plan of having me prove myself to Lawrence Gardiner."

Carter leans forward. "What's that?"

"Lucy walked away from her father and the trust fund. It makes no sense that I would want to impress him for her."

He holds up a finger. "Ah, she walked away from her trust fund, but she didn't walk away from her family. And being with you would put a serious divide between them, wouldn't it?"

Maybe. But she hasn't mentioned it being an issue.

"Look," Carter presses, "I don't care what you tell the old man, as long as you get on his good side. And if you can get inside or learn anything about his businesses, that would be great."

"I don't know. Let me think about this."

Carter stands, pulls his wallet out of his pocket, and puts a business card on the table. "Don't think too long."

He lets himself out, and I lean back in the chair.

I know Lucy's dad doesn't like me, but to set me up for murder? That's straight up evil. But if I do this and help take him down, will Lucy be able to forgive me?

CHAPTER 27



Lucy

I WAKE up but don't recognize where I am. As I open my eyes wider, the bright light hurts, and I turn away from it with a grunt.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Connie says softly.

I sit up at the familiar voice, and pain slices through my head. I grab it and lay back down, groaning as I squeeze my eyes shut.

"I thought you might not feel so good. Here's water and an aspirin."

I crack one eye open and see water and a pill on the coffee table. Connie's coffee table. "I'm at your place?"

She chuckles. "Very good."

"On your couch."

"Two for two."

"Why?"

I sit up slowly this time and take the aspirin, then finish the water. Even after that, my mouth feels like I've sucked on mothballs.

"You don't remember?"

I eye the empty bottle of wine and two glasses on the coffee table, and the evening slowly comes back to me.

“I was on a date with Cody,” I murmur. “It went really well.”

“You mentioned that.”

I sigh. “Then he was arrested for murder.” I swing my legs to the floor. “*Murder*, Connie. Do you think he did it?”

She sits back in the chair across from me and quirks a brow.

“What?” I ask.

“Do *you* think he did it?”

I lean back, closing my eyes. Cody is many things, but he wouldn't kill Randy. *Well... the Cody I used to know wouldn't.* “He's a trained killer.” I realize how wrong that sounds as I say it.

Connie scoffs. “Yeah, of terrorists and in war.”

“You're right. I don't know why I said that.”

“Because you're scared. You're falling for him again, and then this happens.”

She's right. I am scared. I called Rover last night, and he assured me he'd take it from there. Not knowing what else to do, I drove straight to Connie's.

“Thank you for being here for me last night. I hope I didn't ruin your plans.”

She laughs. “You really don't remember?”

I think back and remember a half-dressed man. “Oh no. There was a man here. What happened to him?”

“I took a raincheck.” She smiles at me. “My friend comes first.”

“Thank you. You really are a lifesaver.”

“Yep. I am.”

“But wait, you finally found a man to bring back to your place? That's huge, Connie.”

She shrugs. “Honestly, he wasn’t that great. You did me a favor.”

I rub my temples. “He was half naked, so he must have done something right.”

She shakes her head. “It was a weak moment for me. It’s been a long time. But enough about that. Now, what are you going to do about Cody?”

That’s a good question. What am I going to do?

First, I should probably check on him, make sure he’s all right and that Rover followed through. Then I’ll find out how he could have been charged with the murder of my student.

One thing at a time. My cell phone rings.

I cringe and then glance around. “Where’s my purse?”

Connie leans over and grabs it from behind the potted plant next to her. “Here.”

I dig through it until I retrieve my phone and check the screen. My father. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping the ringing will stop. When it doesn’t, I know if I don’t answer, he’ll keep calling back.

I sigh heavily and then answer. “Hello?”

“Good morning, beautiful. I was hoping to take my daughter out for breakfast.”

His mood puts me on alert. My father is never this happy. “You sound awfully chipper. What’s going on?”

I drink down the rest of the second glass of water as he answers, “Oh, I got some good news and I want to celebrate.”

I swallow. “What news?” I know damn well it’s about Cody being arrested. The officer probably wasn’t supposed to tell us it was my father that told them where to find Cody.

“Oh, it’s business, I won’t bore you with that. Tell me, how’s teaching going?”

“Fine.”

My dad has never cared about my career; once I walked away from med school, it's like he checked out of that part of my life. His attempt to be nice now isn't working.

"What about breakfast?" he asks again. "Can you be at Kelly's in an hour?"

Part of me wants to scream at him about what he's done but another part knows it will do no good. No, I have to find another way to get my father to leave Cody alone.

"I'll have to take a raincheck. I'm not feeling too well," I groan. At least that's the truth.

"Oh no. I hope you aren't coming down with something. That school you work at is a petri dish of germs."

His voice is thick with disgust, as if I'm working around a bunch of little kids who lick everything.

I bite back my anger. "I'm sure I'll be fine. I just need some rest."

"Okay, I'll let you go, then. Don't forget to drink orange juice."

I roll my eyes. Orange juice is my parents' fix for everything. "I will. Bye." I end the call and toss the phone back into my purse.

Connie arches a brow. "What was that about?"

"My father wanted to have breakfast. He seems happy."

"You say that as if it's odd."

"My father is never in a good mood. And he was behind Cody's arrest last night. I know exactly why he's so chipper today."

"You mentioned last night that your father told the police where to find Cody. Why was your dad with the officers in the first place?"

I drop my head in my hands and run my fingers through my hair. "Because apparently stealing Cody's future once wasn't enough for him. He's trying it again."

“Yes, but framing Cody for murder? Do you think your dad is capable of going that far?”

My mind is fuzzy, but parts of last night are coming back. I cross my arms as I squirm in my seat. “Sadly, I do.”

“I’m sorry your dad sucks so much.”

“Me too. I wish you practiced criminal law,” I groan.

Connie moves to the sofa and gives me a hug. “I know. But I know the name of a good criminal attorney. If Cody’s employer doesn’t come through for him, call me.”

“Thanks. I will.”

I have to get to the jail. I have to see Cody. But then I stand too fast and get woozy.

Dammit. Why did I have to drink so much last night? I’m no use like this.

I reach for the couch to brace myself as I slowly sit back down with a groan. “Did you drink any wine last night, or did I finish that bottle by myself?”

Connie winces. “Actually, that’s the second bottle, and it was mostly you. Sorry. Can I get you anything else?”

“I think I need to eat something. Then I need to get to Cody.”

Connie chuckles. “Oh, honey. You need food and a shower first, otherwise they might put you in the drunk tank.”

I frown as I stare at my best friend. “The drunk tank?”

She stares right back. “You smell like you bathed in wine.”

I glance down at my clothes; I didn’t spill any that I can see.

Connie stands as she says, “Go take a shower, you can borrow some of my clothes. I’ll fix us some eggs.”

“Thank you,” I mumble as she turns to the kitchen.

I stand, slower this time, but as I walk past her front window, a black car catches my eye. It’s parked one house down, and I can see movement inside the vehicle.

I wait a moment, and the person doesn't get out. Dammit, Dad. A couple years ago, when Joseph's bookie threatened to come after me, my dad had someone following me twenty-four seven. It looks like my dad is doing it again. That would explain how he knew where Cody was.



AN HOUR LATER, I'm parked at the police station. So is the black car that followed me here. I'll be calling my dad about that. I enter the police station and glance around. There's a man sitting behind the front desk.

"Can I help you?" he asks without looking up.

"Yes, I'm here to see someone you have in custody."

He still doesn't look up. "Are you an attorney?"

I cross my arms. "No."

"Then I'm afraid I can't let you back. Only attorneys are allowed back."

Dammit. Maybe I should've asked Connie to come. This would've been a lot easier.

Undeterred, I say, "Please, I need to get a message to Cody Anthony. He was brought in last night."

The officer finally meets my eyes. "Cody Anthony was released this morning."

"Oh." What the hell, why didn't he call? "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he replies tersely. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No. Thank you." I swivel on my heel and get out of there.

Once outside, I check my phone and find one missed text from Cody letting me know he's been released. Well, at least I know that cop wasn't lying.

Instead of texting back, I dial Cody, and he answers right away. "I'm so glad you're out. I'm so sorry about my dad."

“Me too.”

“A black car has been following me—someone I’m sure my dad hired. That’s probably how he knew you were at my place last night. I’m so sorry, Cody. Being involved with me ruins your life.”

“Wait. What black car?”

“An SUV. I’m sure it’s someone working for my dad.”

I hear the jingle of keys in his hand. “Where are you?”

“The police station. I came to see you.”

“Don’t leave. Call your dad and ask if he knows who it is. Then call me right back. Okay?”

I roll my eyes. “Cody, I know you’re protective, but this is nothing new. After Joseph screwed me over the first time, my dad hired some bodyguard to stay near me for months.”

“Please, Luce, *call him*.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll do that now.” I hang up with Cody and call my dad as I’m getting in my car.

“Sweetheart. Did you change your mind on breakfast?” I hear cutlery on plates in the background.

“No. But, Dad, do you have someone following me?”

“Just a minute. Let me go somewhere private.” The phone sounds muffled, then I hear a door close. “Lucy, I don’t have anyone watching you. What’s going on?”

My eyes move to the black car still parked in the lot. It’s a row over behind a small car that is blocking its license plate. I swallow as I strain to see inside. The side windows are tinted enough that I can’t see anything.

“You don’t?”

If it isn’t someone working for my dad, then who is it? My heart is racing as I try to put the key in the ignition.

“No. Lucy, describe the car. Can you see the license plate?”

I glance back at the car, then I turn and take in the parking lot. There are only three rows of cars with the black one being the tallest. There's no way I can get out of here without whoever it is seeing me. "It's a black SUV. It looks newer and I can't see the license plate."

"Where are you? I'm coming to you."

"In the lot at the police station. I came to see Cody."

"Cody?" he growls.

"Yes."

He sighs. "Okay, it's good you're near the police. Now listen to me. I want you to go inside and wait for me."

"Okay."

He ends the call.

My hands tremble as I put my keys and phone in my bag, then exit the car. I take a deep breath and walk straight to the entrance of the police station without looking back. The guy at the desk again doesn't look up. I wait near the door and spot Cody running my way.

He enters the lobby.

"Cody? How did you get here so fast?"

"Come with me."

I hesitate.

"Please, Luce."

I nod and take his hand. He leads me to his car.

"I'll be right back," Cody says.

I call my dad as I watch Cody go up to the black car.

"Lucy, I'm almost there."

"Dad, it's okay. Cody picked me up."

"Cody? I thought he was in custody."

He knows he was arrested. I don't even try to stop the tears. I now have no doubt my dad was behind it.

Steeling my resolve, I ask, “Dad, how did you know Cody was at my place last night?”

I watch as Cody nods to the man and walks back to his car.

My father scoffs. “What are you talking about?”

“The officer who arrested Cody said you told him where to find him.”

“I’m sure you heard wrong,” he says, dismissively.

Of course, he wouldn’t admit to it. Why did I think he would? He thinks he can just tell me whatever he wants, and I’ll just believe it. Well, I’m done. He needs to know I don’t believe him. I take a deep breath.

“Did you frame Cody for murder?” My words come out in a rush.

I almost drop the phone because my hands are shaking so hard. I’ve never questioned my dad about anything.

“What? No. Is that what he’s telling you? No, listen to me, Lucy. There is a lot of evidence against him. I didn’t want to be the one to tell you, but you’re not safe with him. Please tell me where you are, and I’ll come get you.”

I press my lips together and end the call without a word as Cody gets in the driver’s seat.

“It’s okay,” Cody assures me. “Turns out it’s someone looking for your father. I told him he wouldn’t find him following you.”

“Thank you,” I say, then turn away and stare out the passenger window. Tears blur my vision.

I’m thirty-one years old, and my father is still trying to control me and destroy Cody. Will he ever stop? I wipe my eyes and then glance over at the man I love.

He reaches for my hand. “What did he say?” The concern and love I see in his eyes, I’ll never forget.

But I love him too, and that’s why I can’t be responsible for his ruin.

“Can you take me home, please?” I sniff.

He gives my hand a squeeze. “Sure.”

We ride in silence until he parks at my apartment building. Cody moves to exit the car, but I reach for his arm, stopping him.

I sigh, not knowing what to say next. I know the truth—as long as Cody stays with me, my dad will continue to ruin his life. But knowing the truth and understanding what I have to do is near impossible.

You know that saying ‘If you love someone, set them free’? Well, it’s bullshit. Because I have to set him free, knowing he won’t be coming back to me. He can’t. For his own good.

A few snowflakes fall, and I shiver.

“We should go inside. It’s cold,” he says.

I swallow, trying to hold back the sobs. “No. We can’t. I can’t keep ruining your life. I’m so sorry. I’ll tell my dad I cut it off for good, and he’ll leave you alone. Maybe he can get the charges dropped.”

Cody grabs both my hands. “Don’t do this, Luce.”

Tears stream down my face. “I have to. My dad won’t stop coming for you. I’m so sorry.”

“No. Being with you is exactly what I need. I can deal with your dad.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, realizing I’m more right than either of us wants to admit.

I give his hands a squeeze. “You’ll never be safe with me. I’m sorry.”

I pull away and exit the car before he can stop me. Then I run to my apartment. Once inside, I collapse to the ground, sobbing. I gave up my trust fund to get out from under my dad’s control. But now, I know I’ll always be his pawn.

CHAPTER 28



Lucy

IF I THOUGHT LOSING Cody the first time hurt, then I was clueless just how bad it could be. I didn't stop crying the rest of the day, and I got no sleep last night. My chest aches as if my heart has literally been ripped out.

Cody has texted, called, he's even stopped by, begging me to let him in. Ignoring him was the hardest thing. But when I told my dad I called it off and that he needs to leave Cody alone, he agreed. I knew then I'd done the right thing. For Cody.

It's Monday. I've gotten through all my classes for the day and have decided to contact Liz to let her know I have some free time. If she needs more help covering the 101 course—I can use the distraction. But before I can reach for my phone, there's a knock on my office door.

I freeze in panic, certain that Cody is on the other side. I can't face him. I'm not strong enough to keep saying no to us.

"Lucy? Are you in there?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. *Ted*. I can handle Ted.

I unlock and open the door. Ted stands in the doorway, beaming.

"Hey, I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he says.

"No, it's fine."

“Why was your door locked?”

I frown. He tried to walk in?

His smile falls. “I just meant that you often have your door open for your students.”

“Oh. Yeah, not today. I broke things off with Cody and I don’t want to face him.”

“Really?” Ted grins.

I turn away and grab my coat. “Look, I’m not in a good mood so it’s probably best I talk to you some other time.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to be insensitive, but I won’t lie, I’m glad to hear that’s over. You can do better.”

I don’t respond. I don’t want to discuss this, especially not with Ted.

“Let me take you to that dinner we missed,” he suggests. “We can either talk about it or not.”

Yeah, ‘or not’.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Ted nods. “It looks like you need a friend. And maybe a night out will take your mind off of everything.”

Talking and thinking about something else would be good. If I go home, I’ll replay everything over and over again.

I arch a brow. “You’re willing to try dinner again after what happened last week?”

I still feel bad, and I’ve apologized several times. He seemed distant for a few days, but then everything went back to normal for us.

He leans against the doorframe. “I’m willing. So, what do you say?”

Since I hid in my locked office during office hours, I already have tomorrow’s lessons ready to go.

“Sure. I’d like that.” I reach over and shut off my office lights. “Walk me to my car?” When I finally glance back to

him, he's still beaming. He was beaming before I told him about Cody. "You look radiant. What has you so happy?"

He holds the door open as I pass through. "Oh, nothing really. The sun was out when I woke up, and that was all I needed."

We exit the building and I glance up. It's already dark.

"I should have stepped outside today," I smile. "I'm afraid I missed it."

I love the longer days we have in the summer, so the shorter daylight hours of a Pacific Northwest winter can be brutal. It's still dark when I arrive on campus, and dark again when I leave.

"How about I pick you up at seven?" he asks.

"Sure."

"I'll see you then." He gives me a small wave after depositing me at my car.

Knowing Ted, he'll want to go to the bistro near the university. That works for me. They make the best cheese and spinach ravioli.

By the time he arrives to pick me up, I can almost taste those raviolis.

"Thank you for this," I say as we walk to his car.

"Anything for you, Lucy," he replies as he holds my door open.

Once he's inside the car, I notice he's wearing a suit. My mind has been so focused on Cody every minute that I didn't even notice how dressed up Ted is.

Surprised, I ask, "Wait, where are we going?"

"You'll see."

I glance at my tan pants and sweater. "I'm underdressed, aren't I?"

His eyes sweep over my body. "You look great." When they flicker back to mine, I swear I see heat in his stare.

For a moment, I wonder if I've made a mistake. But then he gives my shoulder a squeeze.

"I'm glad we're friends. It's great to have someone to talk to about university politics."

I exhale happy he said friends. I must have imagined the heat.

After a short drive in silence, he parks on the street near my dry cleaner and nowhere near the bistro. Damn it. I really wanted those raviolis.

I meet him at the back of the car, and he takes my hand, leading me down the sidewalk. Why is he holding my hand? I think how to take it back without simply jerking it back.

"There is this great new restaurant I've been wanting to try. And here it is."

I glance up.

'Steak Your Claim'

The sign is lit up in bright green neon. I'm not familiar with this restaurant, but the scent of grilled meat wafts through the air and I realize how hungry I am.

He holds open the door. This is my chance to get some distance. I pull my hand back as I step inside. Though, I have to squint to see where I'm going; the lighting is very dim.

"Two please," he tells the hostess after he follows me in.

She leads us to our table, toward the back, and gives us menus.

"I've never been here," I say.

The fare basically consists of twelve types of steak. I had no idea there were that many, but here we are. I flip the page and find they also have a couple of salads. The blue cheese steak salad actually looks great. I set the menu down as the server arrives.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asks.

Ted nods. "I think we are ready to order too."

“Okay, what would you like?”

Ted orders us each a steak, medium-rare, baked potato sides, and a bottle of merlot.

“Actually, Ted, I was going to have the—”

He takes my hand. “Trust me.”

I decide not to argue in front of the server. He’s never been pushy like this, so he’s probably just excited to share with me something he likes.

I give a small nod, and the server leaves.

“Why did you order for me?” I ask when we’re alone again.

He’s still holding my hand, and I’m getting uncomfortable.

“Because I know you will really love this. Trust me, Lucy.”

Feeling uneasy, I take a sip of water using my free hand.

“Do you think he did it?” Ted asks abruptly.

“What? Who?”

“Cody. I overheard Randy’s friends talking. They said your boyfriend was arrested for his murder. Is that true?”

I pull my hand from his. “He was arrested, but no, I don’t.”

“Are you sure?”

What the hell is this? I cross my arms. “I thought you said we don’t have to talk about it.”

He grins. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But I will say I’m happy you aren’t with him anymore. He sounds very dangerous. I mean, he was arrested for *murder*.”

My stomach churns. I’m fully aware of the charge and the last thing I want is another reminder or to have to discuss it with Ted. Fortunately, he drops it, and we sit in silence until our meals arrive. Grateful to have food to focus on, I cut into my steak. When it literally bleeds on the plate, I put my utensils down and look around for the server.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s too rare.”

“Let me see.” He grabs my plate and inspects the meat. “It looks perfect.”

“Yeah, to you, but I prefer my steak well done.”

His jaw ticks. “Lucy, the steak is perfect. Now eat it.”

I jerk my head back and blink, stunned he’s ordering me to eat something I don’t want. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I snap. “I’ve never seen this side of you.”

Ted smiles. “Well, I finally realized you like your men more alpha, after seeing your last one.”

“My men?”

Ted cuts a piece of steak and then chews it while considering me. “Well, let’s see. Joseph wasn’t particularly strong, and I still don’t see what you saw in him, but we have Cody, the former SEAL. Before that was Sean, the detective.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Sean? What the hell? I went on two dates with Sean before we decided there was no chemistry and parted ways. I was working at the university then, but I never told Ted about him.

“How do you know about Sean?”

My hand shakes as I force myself to take a sip of water. My mind is racing. Outside of Connie, did I tell anyone else?

He grins. “The university is like a small town. Everyone gossips.”

Sean met me on campus once. That created gossip?

“Lucy,” he laughs, but I don’t find any of this funny. “How can you not see what is in front of your eyes?” He takes my hand and rubs the back of it with his thumb.

I feel like I’m going to be sick. This isn’t right. This isn’t friendly.

“Ted, I thought you were gay. I’m really confused right now.”

I didn't want to believe Connie. Or Cody, when it came to Ted. My denial put me into this mess of a situation.

His brow furrows. "Why would you think that?"

Why would I think that? Because he never hit on me? I close my eyes. How arrogant does *that* sound? No, Ted has never talked about another woman—nor has he spoken of a man.

Ted takes my other hand, startling me. "Do you remember what happened when I first met you?"

I nod. I do. We laugh about it often.

"Well, after I watched Craig hit on you and you essentially told him to go to hell, I figured the only way to get close to you was through friendship."

He says this as if it isn't creepy.

I frown. "You didn't want to be my friend?"

I think back on all the conversations we've had, the class, and lab we collaborate on. He was faking it that whole time?

"I'm sorry. I never meant to mislead you, but everything is out in the open now, so we can be together."

"Together?" Please tell me I'm misunderstanding.

He intertwines our fingers. "As a couple, of course. We get along great, and you can't deny the chemistry." He releases one of my hands to skim my jawline with his knuckles.

He's seriously lost his mind. Clearly, I don't know this man at all. I have to get out of here.

"Excuse me. I need to use the bathroom." I stand and grab my purse.

A vein on Ted's forehead bulges, and I can sense something akin to anger brewing in him at my rejection.

I make my way to the back hallway where the bathrooms are. Fortunately, there is also a door open to the outside. I pick up my pace and run into a man coming back in.

“Miss, you can’t go this way. You need to go through the front door.”

“Please,” I whisper, “the man I’m with is dangerous. I need to go.”

He nods and allows me to pass.

The door shuts behind me, and I find myself in an alley lined with dumpsters. I run, thankful I wore flat boots and not heels.

Making it to the sidewalk, I run until I’m at the entrance to a local bar. Glancing back, I make sure no one is following me before going inside and heading straight for the bathroom.

The crowd breaks out in a cheer as I pass through, and I glance up at the big-screen television. The Havenwood hockey team is playing.

After I duck into the bathroom, I take a moment to calm down and go through my options. Pulling out my phone, I call Connie. The moment she answers, I tell her about my disaster of an evening.

“What a creep,” she says. “Where are you? I’ll come get you.”

“Barn Burner Pub in Pine Valley. Text me when you get here. I’m staying in the bathroom until then.”

“Good call. I’ll be there in ten.”

Ten minutes inside a stall is a long time to think, but while waiting for rescue, I do just that; I think back over every interaction I’ve ever had with Ted.

How did I not see it? Cody and Connie both saw it. I guess I didn’t want to see it. Which leads me to wonder what else do I not want to see?

CHAPTER 29



CODY

“DAMN, dude. This place looks worse than my buddy’s old frat house,” CT says from the doorway as he lets himself in.

“Yeah, it’s *bad*,” Rover adds, looking around.

CT is one of the guys from Morgan Thompson that Rover introduced me to. We clicked right away because he says what he means—like right now. His expression alone tells me this place looks like shit. And he’s right.

Since Lucy called everything off and ran from my car, she’s ignored all my texts and calls. She didn’t answer the door last night, either. I only left after a neighbor threatened to call the cops if I didn’t.

“Hey, I thought you said you were going to provide support.” I flop down on the couch, ready to ignore both of them.

I texted Rover last night, told him about what happened. Then this morning, Rover called to say he and CT were on their way over and bringing food, beer, and support. I have yet to see any of it.

Rover enters behind CT carrying two large bags. “Thanks for the help, asshole,” he says to him.

Please let that be food.

CT turns, feigning shock. “What? You couldn’t handle two little bags?”

“Dickhead.”

Rover continues past him, to the dining room. The smell of fried chicken wafts in the air, and my stomach growls.

“Let me get some plates,” I say, getting up.

“Holy shit, Cody. What the hell happened in here?”

I walk up beside Rover and look around. All right, so it looks bad. The sink is full of dirty dishes and cups I haven’t even bothered to rinse. On the counter are three empty liquor bottles.

“It looks like you’ve been drinking yourself to death.”

I scratch the back of my neck. “I’ve been better.”

“Damn, you stink too,” CT says, coming up behind me.

“Fuck you.”

Rover sets the two bags down on the little bit of open table that isn’t covered with delivery bags. I quickly try to clear it all off while Rover somehow finds three clean plates, spoons, and forks.

“I got fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and beans,” he says.

“What about coleslaw?” CT asks.

“I didn’t get no damn coleslaw.”

“Why the hell not? I asked for coleslaw.”

“Can you not? Cody is clearly dealing with enough shit,” Rover points to the kitchen as evidence, then passes around a bucket of chicken while CT grabs the mashed potatoes.

“Thank you for stopping by. I really appreciate the company and the food.”

I’m not just making nice because I’ll be working with these guys in less than two weeks; I really appreciate that they thought of me like this.

I take a bite of a chicken breast and realize how hungry I am. “*Mmm*. This is good.”

“It’s from Kelly’s. They make good food there,” Rover says.

CT laughs. “You’ll use any excuse to stop in there.” Turning to me, he says, “He has a thing for Kelly, the owner.”

Rover shrugs. “She’s hot.”

“And wants nothing to do with you,” CT adds. “But we all have to go in there sometime so Cody can enjoy the show.”

“Show?” I ask.

“The Rover getting shot down show.”

Rover grabs another piece of chicken. “Okay, enough of that. What I want to know is what happened to that Joseph guy. Stormy said our assignment to protect him ended?”

I finish chewing, trying not to moan—it’s seriously that good. “According to Vince, his debts were paid off and Joseph is living in paradise. He even has a postcard from Joseph to prove it. And the university says Joseph stopped showing up for work and they fired him.”

Rover stops mid-bite. “A postcard? Do you believe it?”

I shrug. “He’s either in paradise or someone killed him and covered it up.”

Rover stares at me. “I don’t know how you can do that. Not knowing would drive me nuts. I’d have to find out for closure.”

“And that right there is why we call him Rover. He’s like a dog with a bone. About everything.” CT shakes his head. “Drives me crazy.”

“Oh yeah? Well, if it weren’t for my persistence, we never would have wrapped up that last assignment so quickly, would we?”

CT stops chewing to consider his point. “Okay, I’ll concede it helped in that one case.”

Rover scoops the rest of the mashed potatoes onto his plate. “One case my ass. It’s helped a hell of a lot more than that. That’s why I get the primo assignments.”

“Yeah, like babysitting a college administrator?” CT jabs as he grabs the mashed potato container. “What the hell? You finished it?”

Rover throws a chicken bone at him, and CT jumps up with a scream.

“Did you just scream?” I ask.

CT’s eyebrows shoot up. “Did you see what he threw at me?”

“A small chicken bone.” I point to it on the ground.

“Yes, but he chewed on that. It has his saliva all over it!”

“And that makes you scream like a girl?” I ask.

“Sit your ass down, CT.” Rover grabs another drumstick and digs in.

“What does CT stand for?” I ask.

“Camel Toe,” Rover says, grinning.

I set my chicken down and turn to CT. “Is that your call sign?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Do I want to know why?” I ask.

“No,” CT says.

I turn to Rover, who is wearing a shit-eating grin. I know they served together, so I’m pretty sure he knows the story.

“A group of us were drinking one night. Everything was fine until CT here had too much, and we had to go.”

“I still think someone spiked my drinks,” CT grumbles.

“No, you’re a lightweight. Anyway, it was a short walk back to the barracks, but dumbass here decides to take a detour which included climbing over a fence.”

I glance at CT. He shrugs and continues to eat.

“He climbed up the fence,” Rover goes on, “but when he tried to get over it and back down the other side...” He laughs so hard, tears come to his eyes. “He got stuck. He... he...” He can’t breathe, he’s laughing so hard.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. My underwear got stuck up on the fence, and when I went over, it held me up there.”

“He had the biggest wedgie.” Rover wipes his eyes with a napkin.

“So why aren’t you called Wedgie, then?”

“Because one of the guys immediately said, ‘*Let’s help Camel Toe down,*’ and it stuck.” Rover dabs his eyes one more time. “Best call sign ever.”

“Can’t say I agree,” CT glowers.

I can’t help but laugh. These guys are exactly what I needed.

“Thank you for stopping by. I thought after getting arrested Stormy would fire my ass and you guys wouldn’t want anything to do with me.”

Rover puts his hand on my shoulder. “Hey, we know you were framed. So does Stormy. We’re all good.” Rover then pats my back then shares a couple more embarrassing stories about CT.

By the time they leave, I feel a lot better. They declined to help me clean up before they went, but I can’t blame them. I wouldn’t help either.

After a shower and a quick scouring of the place, I head out to see Sam Morrey, the coach of the hockey team. I told Carter I’d find information about Lawrence and Sam’s my only option right now.

But my good mood falters as I step onto the campus of Havenwood University. Being this close to Lucy and not being able to be with her is torture.

I hope it’s only temporary, but I really don’t know. If I help take Lawrence Gardiner down, I don’t know how that will go over when all is said and done. Of course, I hope once her

father is out of the way, Lucy won't fear him so much and we can be together. But I worry she might hate me for it too.

Before I make my way to the athletic building, I take a detour toward Lucy's office because I can't stay away from her. But I run right into someone.

I grab his arms to keep him from falling over. "I'm sorry, that was my bad, I wasn't... Ted?"

I recognize the man immediately, despite his injuries. He has two black eyes and a cut on his cheek.

He holds his hands up. "Hey, I said I would stay away from Lucy. You don't need to harass me too."

Before I can respond, he runs off toward another building. Harass him too? Wait. Stay away from Lucy? What is that about? Did my Lucy do that to him?

My Lucy. Fuck. I'll always think of her like that. I have to figure out how to convince her of that.

I pick up my pace until I'm at her office. Thankfully, her door is open, and she's sitting at her desk. Alone. My lucky day, no students. I knock on the door and step in as she glances up.

"No. You can't come here." She stands up and walks toward me.

"We need to talk."

"I told you no." Her hand goes to my chest to push me.

I don't move. Then she tries to close the door I'm standing in the way of, but I stop it.

"Why does Ted look like he got a beatdown?"

She shrugs and turns away from me.

"Did you do that to him?" I press.

"Not directly. My dad had someone do it."

What the hell? "What did Ted do to you?"

She turns to face me and raises her eyes, so they connect with mine. "Why do you think he did something to me?"

Her voice is distant; I don't like it. If Ted did something, I'll go finish him off myself.

"Someone gave him two black eyes as part of a message to leave you alone. I'll repeat, what did he do to you?"

"It turns out Ted isn't gay."

I frown. "No shit. I told you that. Wait... Did he touch you?"

I can hear the blood pumping through my ears. I take several deep breaths to calm myself before I do something rash.

"No, but I should have listened to you and Connie."

"Connie told you, too?"

"Yes, she said he looked at me like he was interested." She waves her hand. "That doesn't matter. I didn't listen. Then Ted offered to take me out to dinner, I thought as friends. But then he got all bossy and said it was because I like 'alpha men'. He knew my dating history. It was all very creepy."

She rubs her fingers together. There's something more she's not telling me.

"What else did he do?" I ask through clenched teeth.

"Nothing. We were at a restaurant, and I snuck out the back and called Connie to come get me."

She falls into her chair.

"So how did your dad get involved?" I shove my hands into my pockets, hoping to appear calmer than I feel.

"I was afraid Ted would harass me at work. I didn't know what to do, so I called my dad. He knows a lot of people at the university, I thought he could ensure I wouldn't have to work with Ted anymore."

She called her dad for help. Not me. "Let me get this straight. Ted got a little bossy, and you called your dad? For help?"

The more it sinks in, the angrier I am. “Your *dad*,” I press. “The man you do everything to stay away from? The one who set my mother up for an accident that could have killed her? The one who ruined my chance at college? The one who set me up for murder?” I realize I’m getting loud, so I slam the door shut.

She jumps, but I know she doesn’t want her students listening.

“Cody, I was scared.”

“You were scared? Did you even consider calling me?”

Her eyes become glassy. “I couldn’t.”

And there it is. When she needed someone, she turned to her dad. Not me. I’m not the one she wants protecting her and that knowledge guts me.

I know she thinks she’s protecting me by staying away, but I thought after a few days, she’d realize that she’s just letting her dad win. But instead of standing up to him, she gives in to his need to control everything. And as long as he has her in his grip, she’ll never be mine.

The walls begin to close in. I need to get out of here. “Now I see why your father thinks he can control you.”

I storm out of her office, leaving my heart behind.

CHAPTER 30



CODY

DESPITE THE FACT I feel like a walking zombie, I arrive in time for my appointment with Sam Morrey. Margaret is sitting at her desk outside his office. Today, she's wearing a different skintight dress; this one is purple, and it has a cutout to show off her cleavage.

I wonder who else around here she might have wound around her pinkie besides Sam. I take a deep breath, readying myself to deal with her. As I step forward, she spots me.

"Oh. It's you. It's good to see you again." She stands to greet me. "I was disappointed I never heard from you."

I scratch the back of my neck. "Yeah, about that. I was seeing someone else."

Her eyes widen, and she smiles. "Was? So, you're free—"

Sam's door swings open before she can finish.

"Mr. Anthony," he says. "Whatever you did, thank you. We got our money back just in time. Come on in. Let's talk."

I follow him into his office, closing the door behind me. "I'm afraid I had nothing to do with it."

Sam motions to the chair across his desk as he takes a seat himself. "Then what brings you by?"

"You mentioned last time I was here that Mr. Gardiner is a contributor to the athletics program here at the university."

He smiles. “Yes, to hockey specifically. He played back in his youth—at least, that’s what he always says. I’m not sure he’s really built for it, you know?”

Maybe not, but a few body hits wouldn’t have bothered him.

I nod. “Can you tell me, when someone gives a program that much money, do they get some sort of say in how things are run?”

Sam’s smile drops, and he leans back, crossing his arms. “No, that would be unethical. Mr. Gardiner’s donations don’t come with strings. Why do you ask?”

I’ve got the man defensive, and I need to remedy that fast. “I actually know Lawrence. I used to date his daughter, and I figured with how controlling he is with his family, he’d probably try to tell you what to do as well. He’s a stubborn man.”

Sam’s smile returns. “You used to date Lucy? Lucky dog. She’s a beauty.” Then he laughs. “I have to say, I wouldn’t want a father like him. I’m surprised you got out unscathed.”

I don’t dare admit I’m not unscathed. “I don’t know,” I say instead, “I think I can hold my own.”

“Then you don’t know Mr. Gardiner as well as you think. If he wants something, he gets it.” Sam’s grin is more like a grimace, and it doesn’t reach his eyes.

We both know Lawrence Gardiner is not charitable; whether Sam will tell me what is really going on is unclear.

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. Is there something he wants from you?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Look, this is all I’m going to say on the subject. Mr. Gardiner has been very good to the men’s hockey program here. Many of our boys have bright futures because of him. I’m sorry it didn’t work out with Lucy, but don’t go nosing around her father’s business. He won’t take kindly to it.”

I nod. “I understand. Thank you for the advice.”

Sam stands and walks to the door. I follow. Then he turns back to me.

“You seem like a good guy. I don’t want to see you get in over your head, that’s all.”

Over my head? Now I know Sam knows what kind of man Mr. Gardiner really is. The question is how deep in Lawrence’s pockets is he?

He leads me out the door to Margaret’s desk. “Have a good day.” Then he strolls down the hallway, leaving us.

“We didn’t get to finish our conversation,” she says, looking up through her lashes. I can tell she’s practiced this. It probably works on guys like Sam. Then she comes around the desk and reaches for my arm.

“I think we did.” I flash her a smile as I walk away.

Then it hits me: Sam might be close-lipped, but I bet Margaret is a talker. I turn around to find Margaret smiling as I approach.

“I knew you couldn’t stay away.” She puts a hand on my chest as she smiles up at me.

She’s quite touchy.

“You’re right. Can I take you out for a drink?”

She glances up at the clock on the wall. “Sure, it’s about quitting time. Let me grab my coat.”

Once she removes her hand from me, I step out into the hall and wait for her. Most people like to talk about themselves or their jobs, so I’m hoping after one drink, she’ll tell me more about Mr. Gardiner and his connection to Sam.

“I’m afraid my car isn’t close,” I tell her as she emerges from the office, and I notice her heels.

“That’s fine. There’s a place a block away that has a great happy hour.”

Over the next couple of minutes, she leads me to a small restaurant and walks straight to the bar. By the time we get

there, I already know all about the problems of walking on concrete in high heels.

I'm happy once we get inside. But not as happy as the bartender appears when he sees her, but his smile drops when he spots me. "What can I get you, Mags?"

I hold back a snort. He clearly knows her well.

"A cabernet, please."

He glares at me.

"A coke."

She spins to face me, astonished. "You're not going to have a drink?"

"Yes, a coke." I flash the grin that used to always work when I was trying to get a woman into bed.

She giggles. "Okay."

And it still works.

The bartender slides our drinks across the bar, and I toss down some cash. Then Margaret leads us to a private table near the back.

"How did you end up working for a college hockey coach?" I ask as we slide into our seats.

I might as well get right on the subject.

She takes a large sip of her wine. "You don't really want to talk about my work, do you?"

Oh, more than you know. "Actually, yes. I'd like to get to know you."

Part of me feels bad for lying, but then I remember why I'm doing this: I have a murder charge against me, and I want to keep my freedom. And I want Lucy back.

Shit. Even after learning she went to her father for help, I'm hoping that, with him out of the picture, things will work out. But I'm deluding myself. This isn't about her father, it's about trust and security.

Margaret sets her glass down with a *clunk*, pulling me from my thoughts. “I needed a job, and my sister knows Sam and said he had an opening.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

She slowly sweeps her tongue across her lower lip while looking up at me through her fake eyelashes. I give her points for trying, but this isn’t going anywhere besides drinks. “I do. Sam gives me a lot of control, and he respects my opinion.”

“Control? I thought you were his secretary. Don’t you just take notes at meetings?”

I lean back, hoping I’ve judged her right and she’ll correct me.

Her grip on her drink tightens as she takes another sip. “No, I’m more than a secretary. I handle the hockey team’s finances and all of their perks.”

I frown. “Perks?”

She glances around. “Yeah, you know how these top-college athletes are.”

My gaze follows hers around the room, ensuring no one is near enough to hear us. “I don’t, actually. I never hung out with that crowd.”

The lies keep coming; being on the varsity football team at Fallwell High put me right in with this kind of crowd. If the kids on the hockey team act half as entitled as the football team did, I shouldn’t be surprised there are perks of some kind.

Her eyes light up, and she leans forward, so I do the same.

“Our hockey players are young, sexy athletes, and I don’t know if this is because they grew up being told they were the best or what, but they all think they can demand anything, and it will be delivered to them. *Anything*. It doesn’t help that Sam gets them whatever they want. He says offering these perks is the only way to recruit players to our school.”

“Being a national championship winner isn’t enough?”

Margaret rolls her eyes. “Well, now that the team has won a few times, it helps, but no, it isn’t enough. Anything those boys want, they get if you know what I mean.” She winks at me.

“Actually, I don’t, but I’m guessing whatever these perks are, they are expensive?”

“They are,” she nods.

“How would you even pay for expensive perks? Selling T-shirts?”

I know damn well they aren’t selling T-shirts, but I’m hoping to keep her talking.

She finishes her wine as a server walks by. “Would you like another drink?”

Margaret glances at me as if checking to make sure I agree. I nod. “Yes, another cabernet please.”

“Sure.” The server takes her old glass and leaves.

Margaret scoffs. “There is no way they could make the kind of money they need selling T-shirts. No, it all started when Mr. Gardiner began contributing to the cause.”

“The cause?”

Her eyes widen. “Yes, Sam’s cause. It’s what I call it. His goal was to build the best college men’s hockey team, and he did just that. Do you know he turned the program around in five years?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, he did, and he tells me that every day at least once.”

“And what does Sam do with Mr. Gardiner’s money?”

She sucks in her bottom lip. “I probably shouldn’t say.”

I grin. “It’s okay. I’m just curious.”

“Okay, I’m not saying I agree with it, but Sam makes sure ___”

“Mags, I’m not serving you another drink.” The bartender is now standing next to her, his hands on his hips, glaring at

me.

“Skip, don’t do this.”

I stick out my hand. “Hello. I’m Cody.”

The guy stares at my hand. “I don’t care. I’m her brother, and I’m tired of seeing her bring men in here, get drunk, and then leave with them. It stops now.”

I put my hands up and lean back in my seat. “I think you have the wrong idea.”

Skip steps closer to me and leans down. “Oh yeah? You have no intention of having sex with my sister?”

I stand up, towering over the man by at least six inches. “No, I don’t.”

Margaret jumps up, knocking her chair down behind her. “You *don’t*?” she asks, glaring at me. “Then why the hell are we here?”

Before I can answer, her eyes widen. “You were pumping me for information. I can’t believe I was so dumb. I almost told you everything!” She grabs her purse and heads for the door.

“Margaret, wait.” I shout.

I step around Skip to go after her, but Skip gets a firm grip on my arm.

“Let her go,” he growls.

I sigh and relent. I really don’t have a choice here.

As I exit the bar in the waning afternoon light, I go over the facts. I might not have found out exactly what’s going on, but I know Lucy’s father is funding something—likely illegal—for the school’s hockey team. The question is why?

CHAPTER 31



Lucy

“WELL, that’s not the smile and happiness I hoped to see,” Connie says as she walks into my apartment.

I sigh. “Before we get into that, tell me how your love life is going.”

“It’s not,” she huffs. “I met a guy last night for drinks. Turned out the profile picture he used was a photo of his adult son.”

“That’s kind of creepy.”

“Right? When I asked him about it, he said his son looks exactly like he did twenty years ago.”

I laugh, I can’t help it. “I’m sorry, Connie, but that’s ridiculous. What did you do?”

“Well, I demanded he call his son and let me date him.”

I laugh even harder. “You didn’t.”

“I did. The man was all offended and said his son is married and that wouldn’t be appropriate, so I stood up and left. I’m so done with dating apps.” She walks into the kitchen and leans against the kitchen counter.

I follow her, laughing so hard, tears come to my eyes. “Thank you. I needed that.”

“Uh huh.” She rolls her eyes. “Okay, now tell me what is going on with you.”

“I saw Cody today.”

She pushes off the counter and steps up next to me. “I take it that didn’t go well?”

“Let’s sit down.” I pull out a chair at the kitchen table, and she does the same across from me. “He found out what happened with Ted.”

“Oh shit, is Cody going to kill Ted?”

“No. It wasn’t Ted’s behavior that bothered him as much.”

Connie frowns. “What else was there?”

I cover my face with my hands. I don’t want to see her reaction. “I called my dad for help with Ted.”

“What?” Her chair screeches as it scoots quickly across the floor. “You didn’t mention that.”

I drop my hands to see she’s now standing with her arms crossed.

I close my eyes. “I know.”

“It sounds like I’m going to need wine for this. Want some?” She is already pulling out two glasses and pouring from the open bottle sitting on my counter.

Yes, I may have already had a glass when I got home.

“Sure.”

Connie is almost more at home in this apartment than I am. There’s just something about the place that doesn’t feel comfortable. It’s probably the fact it’s meant to be temporary. I haven’t hung any photos or really unpacked anything except the essentials.

My eyes move to the stack of boxes in the corner as Connie hands me a glass, then sits down again.

“Okay, tell me what happened,” she orders, “and this time, don’t leave anything out.”

I take a sip of wine and try to enjoy the taste. But I can't. Not when I know how much I hurt Cody. The pain in his eyes when I told him I called on my dad for help was palpable.

"After you saved me from Ted and dropped me off at home, I thought about what would happen the next day. I realized I would still have to work with the guy. I mean, we teach a joint class and lab."

Connie frowns. "I thought he taught computer science."

"He does, but we share a class that is essentially basic programming for psychology and neuroscience. The students run their own experiments, which I oversee, while Ted teaches programming techniques so they can plot their results and do some analysis. It's an essential skill for anyone wanting to go into the research field." I glance back to Connie, whose eyes have glazed over.

She blinks a few times as she refocuses on me. "I can't believe I didn't know you shared a class, but okay, so you thought about that, and then called your dad, for some reason. And what did he do?"

"He called a friend."

"A friend?" She cocks a brow.

"Yes, a friend."

"*Mm-hmm*. And what happened to Ted? Is he still alive?"

I blow out an exasperated breath. "Yes, he's still alive."

"But someone roughed him up, right?"

I frown. "Yes. How did you know?"

She rolls her eyes. "Because that's what your dad does."

I stare at her. "How did you know that?"

She shrugs. "I've heard rumors. You hear something often enough, you figure there might be some truth to it."

Growing up, I heard the rumors about my father that he uses force to get what he wants. I also know that those rumors are why my younger brother, Ronan, chose to go to the East

Coast for college and never came back. But all these years, I thought they were just that, rumors. But now, seeing what he's done to Cody and Ted, I can't live in denial any longer.

But I don't want to talk about my father. It's Cody I'm worried about.

"Anyway, Cody saw Ted on campus, and apparently Ted said he was staying away from me. Between his words and his bruises, it was enough for Cody to question what happened."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I asked my dad for help. He totally lost it. I've never seen him so angry." I rub my temples to ward off the impending headache. "Basically, he thinks it's my fault my dad ruined his life."

"He said that?"

I shake my head. "He didn't have to. We were both thinking it."

Connie reaches for my hand. "Listen to me. You do not control your father. And you told me back then everything that had happened. Remember that night freshman year, when I gave you a bottle of whiskey and said 'spill'?"

I groan. "Yes. I'd never been so drunk in my life. Ugh. I was miserable."

"Yes, but you told me everything. You never asked your father to step into your relationship. Everything you said sounded more like you'd snuck around to avoid your father."

As the memories come back one by one, I see her point.

"That might have been true back then," I nod, "but I opened a door by asking my dad for help this time. Why would I ask him for help when his meddling is exactly what I want to stop?" I lay my head on my folded arms on the table and groan.

"I have a guess," Connie says.

"Are you going to share?" I ask, not looking up.

“Honey, you spent years doing what your father wanted, only for him to freak out the one time you diverged from his path and cut you off. And despite what you say about being independent and not needing him, I think you still want his love and approval. He’s your dad. It’s ingrained in you to want that. But I’m afraid you’re never going to get it from him.”

I lift my head and wordlessly raise my brows.

“Sorry. I know that sounds harsh, but it’s true. From what I’ve seen, he’s not one to give love so much as he grants favors with the understanding that people then owe him, and he has control over them.”

She’s right. I know she is. But I’m his daughter. He loves me. I know he does. “He wants to protect me.” My voice cracks.

Connie tilts her head. “Of course, he wants to protect his family. But the way he does it is more than messed up. Look, you know damn well your dad isn’t going to stay out of your life. But as long as you keep opening the door for him, he’ll think he has the right to control it. Because that’s who he is.”

“Keep opening? I only did it once.”

Her brows shoot up. “Once? I think you have a selective memory. You went to him after Joseph stole your money the first time and you went to him when you needed money for graduate school. Each time you reached out, it sent a message that you are open to his help.”

I take another sip of my wine. Shit. She’s right. While I didn’t ask my dad for money when Joseph cleaned me out, I still went to him. And damn it, I should never have asked him for money for graduate school, but I thought because I was pursuing a PhD, he might change his mind about my choices.

I drop my head onto the table. “You’re right. I created this mess.”

“Thank you. So now what are you going to do about it?”

I groan. “What can I do? I’ll stop asking him for help.”

She frowns. “Okay, that’s a start.”

“What?” I lift my head. “I can tell you want to say something.”

“Do you want to be with Cody?”

“We already discussed this. I can’t. My dad will ruin him.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Do you *want* to be with Cody?”

“I do.”

Connie leans back. “Then the only way to get away from your father’s meddling is to cut all ties.”

Cut all ties? Ronan cut all ties, and based on his social media, he’s pretty happy about it. But I can see it breaks my mom’s heart when he never visits on Christmas—or at all. And cutting all ties with my dad would mean losing my mom. I can’t do that.

But what if I don’t have to? My courage growing, I nod. “You’re right. I’m overdue with a talk with my dad.” I grab my phone.

“You’re going to talk to him right *now*?” she asks.

“No time better.” I hit call before I can change my mind.

My dad answers on the third ring. “Lucy. What a pleasant surprise. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, everything is fine. I need to see you to discuss some things.”

“Of course. Why don’t you stop by the house tomorrow evening?”

“No, now.”

I can tell from the rasp I hear through the phone that he’s rubbing his chin in thought. It’s a habit of his.

“I’m afraid I’m out of town,” he tells me. “But I’ll be back tomorrow. Let’s meet at five-thirty?”

I’m about to argue with him about being put off, but then I remember I’ve had a couple glasses of wine. I want to be clearheaded for this conversation.

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow,” I agree.

“Tomorrow. Bye.”

“Bye.”

“You’re really going to tell him to back off tomorrow?”
Connie asks when I hang up the phone.

I grab my wine glass and walk to the counter to refill it.
“Yes, I am. Because you’re right. If I keep asking for his help, this will never end. I’ll thank him for helping me with Ted, then tell him I need to stand on my own.”

“Then are you going to return to Cody?”

God, Cody. After everything my dad did to him, including framing him for Randy’s murder, I still ran to my father for help. No wonder he’s so upset with me. I owe him an apology.

Though he has every right not to speak to me again.

The thought of never seeing him again hurts so damn much.

“Lucy, here.” Connie hands me a tissue.

I’m crying. “I can’t lose him.”

“I hope you mean Cody.”

I scoff through my blubbering. “Of course, I mean Cody.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

As I clean up my face, I lay it all out. “After I talk to my dad tomorrow and tell him no more meddling in my life, I’ll find Cody. Then I’ll do whatever I have to in order to convince him we belong together.”

“Do you really think you can trust your dad not to meddle just because you ask him to?”

I take a deep breath. “I’ll make it clear if he doesn’t back off, I’ll cut him off like Ronan. I don’t think he’ll risk hurting my mother in that way again. Ronan’s absence crushes her every holiday.”

There’s a knock at my door, and the butterflies that form in my stomach hope it’s Cody.

Connie blinks in surprise. “Are you expecting someone?”

“No.” I jump up. “But it could be Cody.”

I open the door and see an enormous bouquet of flowers. The thought they might be from Cody has me smiling. But my smile falls when the flowers lower and I see Ted.

“You shouldn’t be here.” I go to close the door, and he puts his hand on it to stop it.

“Wait. Lucy, I’m so sorry about the other night. It was a huge misunderstanding. Just hear me out, and then if you don’t want to talk to me again, I’ll understand.”

“Oh, this should be good,” Connie says from behind me.

I turn and she’s glaring at Ted with her arms crossed.

“Let him in. I want to hear what he has to say.”

I open the door wider and motion him inside.

“Thank you,” he says.

Connie takes the flowers from him, and he sits on the couch, nervously running his hands up and down his thighs.

“I’m so sorry about dinner,” he begins. “I’m not good with women, and I completely misread you.”

He appears sincere, but that doesn’t explain everything.

“How did you know I dated Sean?”

Ted frowns. “I told you. People at the university gossip. He must have picked you up from your office at some point, because I overheard Professor Button telling someone you had dated the detective.”

“Why would they even be talking about that? It was brief and a while ago.”

“After Cody showed up, they were talking about how you get all the ‘hunky’ men. Their term, not mine.”

I don’t doubt Professor Button was talking about me. I’ve overheard her talking about other professors’ personal lives.

“I hope we can work together again. Think about it, all right?” His eyes are pleading.

Could he really be a nice guy who’s just inexperienced? I sigh. “I’ll think about it.”

He nods, then stands. “Thank you. I’ll see you on campus tomorrow.”

After he leaves, Connie laughs.

“What is so funny?” I demand.

“He really is clueless.”

“I hope that’s it.”

Connie puts her arm around me. “I wouldn’t worry about him. He’s harmless.”

I give her a small smile. What he said makes sense, but something still doesn’t feel right.

CHAPTER 32



CODY

“THANK YOU FOR COMING IN,” Detective Marin says as he sits across the table from me and Carter.

“Like I had a choice,” I grumble.

Carter called me last night, asking me to meet him at the police station this morning. Thankfully, he kept the conversation short. I was still reeling from seeing Lucy earlier in the afternoon. Every time I think about her calling her dad for help, another wave of anger rolls through me. I went for an extra long run this morning, but it didn’t help.

“Thank you for helping out on this, Sean. I really appreciate it,” Carter says.

“Sean?” I ask.

“Sorry, Detective Marin.”

Shit. This is the detective that Lucy dated?

Oblivious to the way my jaw ticks, Detective Marin says, “I believe Carter explained to you already that we know you didn’t kill Randy Sinclair. I’m sorry for the arrest, but when the neighbor came forward and then Randy’s friends, it was enough to get a judge to sign the arrest warrant. Then Agent Carter provided evidence to suggest those witnesses had been bribed into lying. Plus, while your hair was found on the defendant, it was woven together with another fabric the lab

later determined came from a car's seat, likely a headrest. I knew it was a setup."

"Does this mean the charges have been dropped?" Agent Carter asks.

The detective passes over a piece of paper. "Yes, they have. Here is the official paperwork for that."

"Good. Now, have you found anything to connect Lawrence Gardiner to this?" Carter asks.

The detective frowns. "Lawrence Gardiner? No, why do you suspect him?"

Carter leans forward. "I understand Mr. Gardiner told the officer where to find Mr. Anthony. Cody was with his daughter at the time."

The detective laughs. "Wow, you think Lawrence would set you up for murder to keep you away from Lucy?"

I stare at the man. "Yes, he would." And because I can't control myself. "Did you date Lucy?"

His eyes widen in surprise. "I did. We went out on a couple of dates a while back."

I take a deep breath. I know Lucy dated, but I never wanted to meet any of them. Now all I can wonder is if she slept with this guy.

"But that was short-lived, so I never had to deal with the wrath of her father. You must have seriously pissed him off. But to answer your question, no, he's not a suspect. We found evidence pointing to someone else. I have an officer searching for this other man to bring him in for questioning, but he seems to have disappeared."

"Who?" Carter asks.

Detective Marin opened the file he was holding. "His name is Ted Barton."

"Ted? From the university?"

Sean frowns and glances back down at the sheet. "He's a professor at Havenwood University, yes. Any idea why he'd

go to so much trouble to set you up?”

I nod. “He’s got a thing for Lucy.”

Carter clears his throat. “To be clear, all charges against Cody have been dropped and you are now looking at another man for the murder of Randy Sinclair, correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

Carter turns to me. “We should go.”

My mind is swirling. Ted tried to set me up? Not Lucy’s father? On top of that, as I stare at this detective, I’m trying to see what she saw in him.

“Why did you two stop dating?” I can’t help but ask.

Sean leans back. “There really wasn’t a connection. Good luck to you. She’s a nice woman.”

Carter stands up, and I follow. We walk out to the parking lot in silence.

“What do you think about Ted being the one that set you up?” Carter asks.

“I’m surprised. But if he is going to those lengths, I have to warn Lucy.”

“Before you do, tell me, did you make any more progress on Gardiner’s involvement with the hockey team?”

“No, and other than going straight to the man himself, I’m not sure who to ask next.”

Carter nods. “Sounds like you’re hitting the same walls I’ve been behind for a while now. If only I could get a warrant for the Gardiner residence; I know he keeps something at his house. Did you notice he never does business there?”

I frown. “Maybe he just wants to keep his family in the dark.”

Carter laughs. “You don’t believe that do you?”

I shrug. “I don’t know much about his business. Never had a reason to deal with him.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets and plays with his keys.

It took all of sixty seconds of knowing the man to know what this habit means. He's going to ask me to do something I won't like.

"I was thinking," he ventures. "You could go talk to Mr. Gardiner and take someone with you who could get a look at some of his files."

He wants me to bring a friend to search the place right under Lawrence's nose? I sigh. I've done crazier shit, but this is Lucy's father we are talking about. What if I get caught? But then again, what if I found something that would help?

"I could, but none of that would be admissible in court."

Carter nods. "I know. You're right. Forget I suggested it. I'm not one to bend the rules, but this guy has got me so tied up in knots."

"Why?"

He stares at me for a beat, and I think he's going to tell me, but then he pulls his phone out of his pocket. "I need to go, I'm late for a meeting. Let me know if you learn anything new."

He turns and walks to his car without another word, leaving me wondering what he's not saying.

Carter has never deviated from the rules that I'm aware of. I've even heard some of the guys at MTS complain about it. So why would he be willing to in this case?

I shake off the curiosity gnawing at me. I've got enough to sort out. Like the fact it wasn't Lucy's dad who set me up, it was Ted.

How the hell did he get my hair to plant it on Randy's body? I blow out a breath. That's one question among dozens. Although I do have an answer to another question: Lawrence didn't set me up.

But my gut tells me it's only a matter of time before he tries something to get rid of me, especially if I'm with Lucy.

But I'm not with Lucy.

The reality guts me all over again. I thought after the way she hurt me, I could walk away, but damn, if I thought it was hard thirteen years ago, it's impossible now. She's on my mind every waking moment; if it weren't for the distraction of the murder charge and the riddle of what the hell Lawrence is doing with the Havenwood hockey team, I'd probably still be at home, drinking too much.

Luckily, that's not the case. I'd never get her back that way. No, if I want a future with Lucy, I have to be better than that, I have to deserve her—and I have to make sure her father doesn't interfere. I'm still pissed that she went to her father for help. But if she would be willing to agree to never do that again, if we could come to an understanding, then maybe we could have a chance.

I have to help Carter nail Gardiner. I don't care for his suggestion on how we're going to do that, but hell, I don't have any better ideas.

First, I have to warn Lucy about Ted. Since she won't answer my calls or see me, I shoot off a text telling her what the detective told me. Hopefully, she reads it.

CHAPTER 33



CODY

“YOU SURE YOU want to do this?” Rover asks as we pull up to the curb near the front gate of Lawrence Gardiner’s house.

“No, but I need answers.”

Rover shakes his head. “I still don’t understand why the FBI isn’t doing this.”

I sigh. “No probable cause. Besides, Gardiner would spot an FBI agent a mile away.”

Rover finishes his coffee and sets it in the cupholder. “Yeah, but what happens if Lucy finds out? What if we find something that helps the FBI? She might never forgive you, no matter how big of an asshole he is. This is her dad we’re talking about.”

He isn’t telling me anything I haven’t considered. If Carter is right and we find evidence, Lawrence may go to prison. But while Lucy might be mad at me at first, I’m hoping she’ll see this is the only way we can be together.

“I’ve thought this through,” I assure him. “Now let’s go. Ready?”

Rover lets out a breath. “Ready.” Then he exits the car and runs around to the back fence where there are no cameras.

I drive up to the gate and find it’s already open. That’s unusual; Mr. Gardiner used to be very particular about

security. My gut says something is wrong. I call Rover. He doesn't answer so I send a quick message.

Slowly, I pull up the drive. Rover has probably already made it to the house by now. He's fast.

Instead of sneaking in, I need to get in that house in case Rover is in danger. I park next to the garage. There are a couple of other cars parked there too. Damn it. According to Carter, no one should have been home at this time. One car is Vince's. I guess things have changed since high school and he's allowed in the house again. The hood is cold. But the hood of the other car is warm. They didn't arrive at the same time.

I walk up the front porch and notice the front door is ajar. Now, I know something isn't right. I don't hear anything, so I push the door open. If I have to go in search of Rover, I won't have any issue navigating, I know this house well.

Mr. Gardiner never knew, but when he and his wife would go out of town, Lucy would invite me over. Those are some of my best memories.

"Lawrence!" a woman yells upstairs.

Then a door slams and footsteps head my way. I run to the back of the house as several sets of footsteps thunder down the stairs.

"Lawrence! Wait!" a male voice calls out.

They are coming closer. I duck into the pantry, but keep the door cracked open to see. Lawrence comes into view. I've never seen him like this; his face is contorted, though in pain or anger, I can't tell. Then I see his wife wearing a short, silky robe.

"Lawrence, I never meant for you to find out like this."

He spins around. That's definitely rage in his eyes.

"You mean you never meant for me to find out, period." he shouts. "How long, Valerie?"

"Not long," a man says as he comes into view.

Vince? He's only wearing his underwear. Of all the days I decide to come here. Fuck.

Now I have to wait this out. There is no way he can know I witnessed his humiliation.

"Shut up." Lawrence points at Vince. "How dare you sleep with my wife? My *wife*! I know you've always wanted everything I had, but I never thought you'd stoop this low."

Lawrence turns back to his wife. "How long?" he demands again.

"A f-few months," she stammers.

"A few months?" he yells. He turns away from her, but then spins back around, pulling a gun from his waistband. "I'll kill you both for this."

Shit, I have to stop him. I move to push open the pantry door but freeze when I hear Lucy's voice call from the front.

"Dad? Are you here?"

What the fuck is she doing here?

"Lucy, please leave. I need to reschedule," he says, his voice much calmer than a moment ago.

Reschedule? This is a planned meeting?

"Dad, don't be ridiculous." The smile I hear in Lucy's voice drops from her face as she steps into view. "Whoa, what is going on? Why are you pointing a gun at Mom?"

"Did you know?" Lawrence snarls at her.

"Know what?" she cries, then looks at her mother and Vince. Her brows furrow. "Why are you in your underwear?" I know the moment she puts it together, the way her eyes widen.

"You're cheating on Dad?" Lucy steps back, a hand to her mouth. "I can't believe it."

"Lucy don't be so shocked. It isn't like your dad has been faithful to me." Valerie crosses her arms. "Ask him where he was last night," she snaps.

Lawrence laughs. “Oh, that’s great. Air all our dirty laundry, why don’t you? I may have stepped out on occasion, but you know it never meant anything, Valerie. You slept with my brother! You know he’s always wanted what I have. How could you do this?”

“So now it’s brother?” Vince shouts. “All these years, you’ve reminded me I’m only your *step*brother, but you choose now, in hatred, to call me your brother?” Vince spits out.

Lawrence lowers the gun to his side and steps back.

In this moment, I actually feel sorry for the man. When the pain in his eyes gets to be too much, I glance back to Valerie.

“I’m sorry, but I love him.” She says it so quietly, I almost miss it.

“You love him?” Lawrence yells. He raises the gun again. “Lucy, I need you to leave now.”

Lucy shakes her head. “No, Dad, don’t do this.”

“Vince Gardiner?” a third male voice asks from the entry.

“You invited someone over?” Lawrence hisses as he puts his gun behind his back.

“No.” Vince retorts.

“Vince. There you are.”

I can’t see the man, but the voice is familiar.

“Ted? What the hell are you doing here?” Lucy demands.

The man steps forward, and yes, it’s Ted.

Why the hell is he looking for Vince? Or looking here? Shit, did Lucy read my text about him?

“Oh, Lucy, what a surprise. I’m sorry to interrupt, but I have to speak to Vince now.” Ted glances to him. “Why are you in your underwear?”

“Who the fuck are you?” Lawrence challenges.

Ted turns to Lawrence, looks him up and down, and frowns. “None of your concern. I have business with Vince.”

Ah shit. Lawrence is going to lose it.

“Business? What kind of business?” Lucy asks.

“That’s private,” Ted responds. The idiot is smiling, completely oblivious to what is playing out in front of him. “Why are you here, Lucy?”

“None of my concern? You’re in my fucking house!” Lawrence yells.

Almost simultaneously, Valerie puts her hand on Ted’s shoulder. “This is not a good time.”

What a complete clusterfuck and I’m stuck in the pantry.

“This is my family’s house. How do you know my uncle Vince?” Lucy asks.

“He’s your uncle? We’ve done some business together. Speaking of, Vince, I need that money now. I have to leave town tonight,” Ted says.

Vince sputters, “If you haven’t noticed, I’m a little busy here.”

“Ted, why do you have to leave town tonight?” Lucy asks.

“Wait. Ted? Is this the prick that harassed you?” Lawrence demands.

Ted turns his attention to Lawrence. “Are you Lawrence Gardiner?” He glances to Vince, who nods. “Two men broke my left hand and said it was a message from you. I need it for work.”

Mr. Gardiner sighs impatiently. “You’re whining over that? Come near my daughter again, and I’ll kill you.”

“You’re threatening to murder me?” Ted shrieks.

Lawrence moves the gun from behind his back to his front.

I push the door open a little wider hoping to stop Lawrence from whatever the hell he’s thinking, then everything happens too fast to stop.

Lawrence lifts his gun in Ted’s direction, but Ted reaches into his coat and pulls out a gun of his own. He fires before

Lawrence realizes what's happening, and Lawrence falls back.

I jump out of the pantry and run at Ted while Valerie, Vince, and Lucy all scream. I tackle Ted, who goes down with a thud and drops his gun as Rover and CT burst into the room.

When the hell did CT get here?

Both Ted and I lunge for the gun, but Ted beats me to it. I brace for what's coming and hear another gunshot.

Ted stills.

I glance down, relieved to find I'm not hit, then pivot to see CT's gun aimed at Ted.

"Thanks," I say.

"Dad!" Lucy screams.

I turn to her. She's putting pressure on Lawrence's wound, but he's lost a lot of blood.

Rover is on the phone, reporting, "Two men have been shot. We need ambulances now." He looks at me. "What's the address?"

Valerie shouts it out.

He relays the information, then tells us, "They're on their way." He then goes to Lucy. "Let me," he says gently.

She falls back on her bottom, tears streaming down her face. I go to her, pull her up into my arms, and stroke her back.

"Ted shot my dad." She's crying.

"I know, Luce. I know."

"Why? Why did he have a gun?" She falls against my chest, sobbing.

I continue to hold her, though I have no answers for her. I don't know how much time has passed when a trio of medics run in. One goes to Ted and immediately pronounces him dead. The other two take care of Lawrence.

As they carry his gurney away, Lucy moves to follow. "I need to go to my dad," she says.

But an officer walks into the room and stops her. “I’m afraid no one can leave.”

Rover comes forward. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

The two men step away, and then CT is by my side.

“When did you get here?” I ask.

“I was right behind you guys. Rover told me what you two were doing, and I had a bad feeling.”

I nod and feel Lucy turn to me.

“He can’t be alone,” she pleads. “I know he’s done some awful things, but he’s still my father, you know?” Tears stream down her face.

“I know.”

The officer returns. “Ms. Taylor?”

“Yes?”

“You can go to your dad, but I will be questioning you later.”

She nods.

As she walks away, I call, “Lucy.” Then Officer Williams steps in my path.

“Cody Anthony, can you tell me why, less than twenty-four hours after your release, I find you at the scene where the man trying to frame you for murder has been shot?”

Well, shit. This looks bad.

CHAPTER 34



Lucy

I RUN through the doors of the emergency room, tears blurring my vision.

I have no memory of the drive over. All I can think is that this isn't how it ends. We're supposed to have time to fix everything. I need to know if he loves me.

Please, don't let Ted take that away from me.

The nurse looks up as I approach the counter. "My dad, Lawrence Gardiner, was just brought in."

He types something on the computer. "Yes, he's here, but he's in surgery. You'll need to wait until the doctor can speak with you."

Tears well in my eyes. "I'd like to see him as soon as possible."

"I'll let the doctor know," the man says.

I nod and find an empty chair in the corner of the room. There's a box of tissues on the table next to me, and I grab a few and let the tears fall.

I'm crying for a man I've spent most of my life trying to get away from. This makes no sense at all. I'd always hoped for a better relationship with him, that he'd someday agree I'm his daughter and not a possession to control.

He can't die. Not now. Not yet.

“Lawrence Gardiner?” my mom asks.

I look up. My mother and Uncle Vince are standing at the same counter I was just at.

I jump up. “No, you can’t be here!” I shout.

My mom turns, mascara streaked below her eyes. “Lucy, I’m so sorry you had to find out like this.”

“You can’t be here,” I repeat, shaking my head as I approach them. “It will be too upsetting for him.”

“Honey, you’re shaking,” Vince says.

He rubs my arms to comfort me, but I step back.

“No. How could you do this to him?”

My mom closes her eyes. “Lucy, there’s a lot about your father you don’t know. He’s not the victim you think he is.”

“No.” My heart is pounding so hard; I can hear it in my ears. “The man found out his brother stole his wife, and then he got shot. You do not get to say anything bad about him right now.” I turn to Vince. “And you. Why the hell was Ted looking for you?”

“Lucy, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, or you’d rather not say? Your actions caused all this!” I wave my hands in the air.

I’m yelling and my head hurts. I must calm down. “You two need to stay away from me right now.” I go back to my chair in the corner and sit down, drawing my knees to my chest.

Maybe this will be the wake-up call my dad needs to change. Is he capable of change?

I really hope so.

I wipe my eyes and then pull out my phone. My first instinct is to call Cody. I have so many questions—the most prominent being why he was at my father’s house—but I can’t deal with him right now. He hates my dad; he wouldn’t

understand why I'm here. Instead, I send a text to Connie telling her what happened.

My mom and Vince are sitting on the other side of the waiting room. Holding hands. My dad could die, and they're holding hands.

To keep from screaming at them, I close my eyes and take several deep breaths. This isn't the mother I know. She always said family comes first. Always. I held her hand when she would cry because Ronan never came home. She was the one who always defended my dad and told me he loved me in his own way. The person I see sitting next to Vince now, that isn't the same woman.

I hear my mother murmur something to Vince, then she walks over to sit in the chair across from me.

"I know you're angry with me, and I understand. But there's a lot about our marriage you don't know. Your father has not been faithful. I've kept that from you because I didn't want to give you any further reason not to like him, but I refuse to be painted as the bad guy here. Yes, I fell in love with Vince, but I tried for years with your father. I really did. He's a hard man to love, honey. I know you know that."

I swallow, then turn to her. She's right. He is hard to love. And while I've never caught him with another woman, I've heard her accusations in their arguments.

My anger at her melts as I realize I've never thought about how it must be for her. Certainly, my dad must try to control her too. But growing up, I rarely saw him. Well, until high school. Then he was around. But I wasn't—or at least, I tried not to be. My parents rarely talked around me.

I wonder if my brother has any idea about this. My brother. "Have you called Ronan?"

My mom's eyes widen. "No, I've been so worried about Lawrence, I didn't think of anyone else. I'll call him now."

She jumps up, but before she can walk outside to make the call, a man in scrubs approaches us.

My mom turns to him. I stand as Vince comes to stand between us.

“Mrs. Gardiner?” He has a solemn look, and I know his news before the words are even out of his mouth. “I’m Doctor Nichon. I’m sorry. We did everything we could, but the bullet caused too much damage. We weren’t able to save him.”

I fall back, and Vince catches me and leads me to a chair. The doctor continues to explain what happened, but I’m not able to listen. All I can see is my dad lying on the floor, bleeding. There was so much blood.

Once the doctor steps away, we all sit in silence, no one knowing what to say.

“Lucy?” Connie appears in the waiting room.

“Connie?” I look up, dazed.

“I came as soon as I got your text.”

“Connie, thank you for coming. I’m afraid Lawrence didn’t make it.” My mom dabs her eyes.

Is she even upset? Her tone is sad, and her eyes are wet, but something is missing.

Vince snuffles behind her. “Dammit. I never got a chance to explain, to make him understand.”

All my anger returns as I pop up to my feet. “Understand that his wife and his brother were having an affair? I know my dad well enough to know he would never have forgiven you.”

“Lucy,” Mom scolds.

“Don’t. You know it’s true.” I turn to Connie. “Can I go with you?”

She reaches out and locks her arm with mine. “Of course.”

I grab my purse, which has somehow stayed with me, although I don’t remember carrying it.

“Lucy, wait.” Mom grabs my arm, and I stare at her hand. “I’m sorry how all this came out. I hope you can forgive me.”

She releases my arm after a moment when I don't look up. Then I let Connie lead me to her car.

Once we are on the road, she asks, "Where do you want to go?"

"Can we go to your place?"

"Of course."

The drive is quiet as I swallow back the sobs trying to escape.

"Lucy, it's all right to be upset. I know you had a difficult relationship, but he's still your father."

I nod, because if I speak, the sobs will break free.

Connie glances over at me. "Do you want to talk?"

I shake my head, causing the unshed tears to fall.

I roll down the window just enough for the frosty December air to numb my face. I want it to numb all of me, to take away the pain of never knowing if it could have been any different with my father. The pain of knowing I never tried.

My mind drifts to my brother Ronan. I need to tell him. I pull out my phone, but this isn't something I can send a text about.

"Hey, Lucy. We're here."

I glance up to see we are parked in the garage underneath Connie's condo.

"Do you want me to call someone for you?" she asks, pointing to my phone.

"I need to tell Ronan."

She nods. "Let's go upstairs. You can call from my bedroom if you want privacy."

I nod back, then follow her up the elevator and into her condo. I've walked this path too many times to count, but tonight it feels different. I touch the walls as we enter. Have they always been gray? Textured? Why are they textured?

"Lucy?"

Her voice startles me. I turn, realizing I was staring at the wall. The ball of grief in my chest tightens. It's too much.

"Damn him," I yell.

Connie's eyes widen, and she steps back.

"All those times my dad tried to control me, I let him. I never confronted him. Then when I said I wasn't going to medical school, he cut me off. Still, I never confronted him. Why didn't I confront him?" I sink back against the wall. "Even after I learned what he did to keep Cody and me apart, I never confronted him." I drop to the floor, my eyes once again welling with tears.

"Why do you think that was?" Connie asks quietly as she sits down next to me.

"The same reason I would go to him for help. Because as long as he thought he could do something for me, I felt loved."

"Oh, honey." Connie puts her arms around my shoulders.

"If I called him, he would ask, '*Sweetheart, what do you need?*' He wanted to do something for me. I knew deep down that if I confronted him, I'd lose him forever. I didn't have much of him, but I was scared to lose the little I had."

Connie rocks us back and forth. "That makes sense."

I pull away. "No, it doesn't. Cody abandoned me when I was eighteen. Then my mom and dad abandoned me when I refused to go to med school when I was twenty-two. I should have walked away and said fuck you to all of them. But I didn't."

"Lucy, you are one of the most loving people I know. You could never walk away from your family, no matter how misinformed they might be."

I laugh. "Misinformed?"

Connie's brow furrows. "Yes, misinformed. I don't understand why your dad was so intent on you becoming a doctor, but it was clear to me psychology was your calling. Remember when you told me you were changing your major?"

I remember the day clearly.

“You were so happy for me.”

“I was. I love you like a sister, Lucy. That’s why I know your parents were misinformed. If they’d seen the joy on your face that day, they never would have insisted you do anything else.”

I snort.

Connie pulls back. “You okay?”

I shake my head. “No, my parents weren’t interested in what brought me joy. My dad wanted a doctor he could control. That was all there was to it.”

“Why would he want to control a doctor? That’s kind of weird.”

I close my eyes. I’ve never shared my suspicions about my dad with anyone. Growing up, my mom used to tell me that I was never to talk about him with anyone. Ever. She said it could get him in trouble.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” I say brokenly. Because really, it doesn’t. “I missed my chance to make it right. I always thought I’d get a chance for things to be good between us—that he’d realize he was wrong to control me.”

I sob. There’s too much I want to say, too much I needed to say to him.

Connie’s arms grow tighter as she holds me while I cry.

“What if the same thing happens with Cody?” I whimper.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“What if I never get the chance to make things right? He was so angry with me.”

Connie rubs my back. “One thing at a time, Lucy. Tonight, you mourn your father. Tomorrow, we can talk about Cody. All right?”

I nod.

She's right. I can't think about Cody too. I can't think about everything I've lost, or I might not be able to pull myself up again.

CHAPTER 35



CODY

IT'S BEEN four days since Lawrence was shot. After extensive questioning, I was able to leave the police station that same night, and I went straight to the hospital, but I was too late.

I called Lucy after I learned her father died. Got her voicemail. I went to her apartment. She didn't answer the door. I even went to see her on campus this morning, but the note on her door says she's out for the week.

I wish I knew Connie's last name. I have no way to track Lucy down.

I scrub my hand down my face. If she isn't answering my calls, then I need to accept she needs space to grieve. Hell, she's not only grieving her father's death, but her mother's betrayal—and Ted's, too. Although I still haven't figured out what the hell he was even doing there.

The only way I'm going to be able to give Lucy space is if I keep busy. I decided it would be better to start at Morgan Thompson Security early rather than sit on my ass for another week, thinking too much. But thinking is exactly what I'm doing.

All the anger I had toward Lucy for going to her dad melted when I saw how upset she was when he got shot. She only wanted his love. I can see that now.

"Hey, got a minute?" Rover is at my door.

“Sure.”

He steps in wearing a leather jacket and motorcycle boots. He sits down in the other chair, smiling.

“You look like that guy from the show about motorcycle gangs.” The name of it is on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t think of it.

“Yeah? I know which one you mean. Does that mean you find me attractive, Pig Pen?” he smirks.

I snort. “Nobody calls me that.”

He shrugs. “Well, if you’re done talking about my good looks, I have some news. I spoke to the detective working on Ted’s case. They checked Ted’s phone, and it turns out it was a burner phone. But get this, Vince had called it fifteen minutes prior to Ted arriving at the house.”

I sit up straight. “Vince invited him over?”

“That’s what the detective thinks. Ted kept saying he needed the money from Vince. But money for what? The detective is convinced Vince hired Ted to take out Lawrence. But he doesn’t have any proof.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Please. If Vince wanted to have Lawrence killed, he wouldn’t hire the computer science professor to do it.”

Rover kicks his boots up on my desk. “It doesn’t seem plausible. But there’s more.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “What?”

“Remember the phone that called Joseph before the fire? We ran into a dead end trying to track it down because it was a burner phone.”

Could it be? “It was *Ted’s* burner phone?”

Rover nods.

I shake my head. “Did Ted not understand the purpose of a burner phone? Why did he hang on to it?”

“No idea, but the detective said they found enough evidence at Ted’s place to show he was planning to kill Randy, Joseph, and you.”

“Me? What the fuck for?”

“He wanted Lucy. That’s why the detective thinks he was open to killing Lawrence. But when I go over how it all went down, I don’t think that was a planned hit.”

I replay the events in my mind. “Ted pulled his gun only after Lawrence aimed his gun at him.”

“Exactly,” Rover says.

“Maybe Vince didn’t anticipate Lawrence pulling a gun on Ted.”

“Maybe.” His phone buzzes, and he checks it. “I gotta go. I’ll let you know if I hear anything else.”

“Thanks.”

To know Lucy was ever alone with Ted eats at me. I knew the man had a thing for her, but how did I not see any red flags?

Laughter in the hallway catches my attention, and I watch Stormy walk by, talking on his phone. I’m thankful he understood my need to start early. He was also understanding when Agent Carter stopped in; I had to explain it was to wrap up something I was doing with the FBI.

When I arrived for my first day earlier, I was pointed to an office and told to make myself comfortable. Since then, I’ve been reviewing a large list of files I’d been given on the laptop they provided.

For my first week, I have desk duty. Mostly, they want me to learn their systems. So far, it’s a lot like how Reed and Hawthorne run their company, so it’s easy learning.

I step out of my office to get a cup of coffee, but a familiar voice stops me. Hawthorne steps out of Stormy’s office.

“Hawthorne? What are you doing here?”

“Well, my wife heard me talking about Seattle and insisted we take a mini vacation. And I wanted to talk to Stormy in person about a few things, so here I am. Plus, I know some guys here and I have an opening now.”

“Don’t even think about poaching any of my men,” Stormy says as he walks up.

“Well, I don’t see why not. I figure you owe me one.” Hawthorne nods in my direction.

“I’m not sure Cody counts as a full man yet,” CT pipes up, grinning at me. “The jury is still out.”

Before I can retort, Hawthorne says, “Cody, I was hoping to speak to you for a minute. Privately.”

“Sure, we can go back to my office.”

I lead him down the hall.

Hawthorne steps into my office and looks around. “Guess the new guy gets the tuna can.”

I chuckle. “It’s a bit small.”

I close the door as he extends both his arms and can nearly touch the walls.

“A bit?”

“You know I won’t be in here much, so it’s fine.”

He lowers his arms so I can get around him, but damn, he’s right, this is small.

I sit behind the desk, and Hawthorne sits in the only other chair in the room. The one Rover vacated.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“You requested background checks on Vince Gardiner and Lawrence Gardiner. After reviewing those, I think you might have left something out of your report.”

I requested the background report on Lawrence to see if there was anything else I was unaware of that would tie him to the hockey program.

I lean back and sigh. “Lawrence was my ex’s father.”

“Was?”

“He died last week.”

Hawthorne frowns. “I’m sorry.”

“No need to be. He wasn’t a good man.”

“Does this mean you knew about his dealings?”

I grimace. “There were rumors growing up. I don’t think I believed them until this last month.” I run a hand down my face. Shaving fell off my priority list and my scruff is almost a full beard at this point.

The man stares at me and I know he’s not happy I kept any information from him. And I can’t blame him. “I’m really sorry I wasn’t more up front. Honestly, I never thought I’d see Lucy or her father again. Then when I saw her on campus while I was with Joseph, it threw me.” I hold up a hand. “And I know SEALs aren’t supposed to be thrown off their game. But—”

He leans forward. “I get it. I realize this is a special situation. A situation that won’t arise again. But if it does, you need to be honest and direct with Stormy about anything that’s going on. Understand?”

“Yes, I do.” Damn, I hate that I’m leaving RHS with this hanging over my head.

“Now, thank you for explaining everything. I want you to know we’re good. And I hope to work with you in the future at some point.”

“How? Are you moving to Seattle?”

He laughs. “Hell no. Don’t get me wrong. I’m sure it’s a fine city, but after seeing it through my wife’s eyes, I don’t want to come back.”

I lean forward. “Did something happen to her? Is she all right?”

“She’s fine. Nothing happened to her except her desire to shop and only at the most expensive boutiques she can find. That’s where she’s at now. I don’t even want to know how

much she's spending." He blows out a breath. "Sorry, that wasn't appropriate. I shouldn't vent to you."

"Why shouldn't you? I may not be your employee anymore, but I'd like to think we're friends."

His eyes move from his hands to my eyes. "You're right. We are friends. In fact, I need a friend who likes to skydive. Reed refuses to go with me. I don't suppose you'd want to go sometime?"

I laugh. "Sorry, but I like to save jumping out of planes for the job only."

He grins. "Yeah, I get that."

My mind goes back to the background reports. "Is there anything in the background checks I should know about? Can any of it come back to hurt Lucy?"

He doesn't respond right away. "I don't think she's in danger, but I'll send you the report to review."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"And how are things going with Lucy?"

I run my hand through my hair. "At the moment, not good."

I tell him everything, including how I left and how I reacted when she asked her father to help her with Ted.

"She's not interested in talking to me. I've tried everything I can think of. I'm hoping after she grieves, she'll talk to me."

"You tried *everything*?" Hawthorne asks, raising a brow.

"Yes."

"You called and texted her, and that is 'everything'? I guess she doesn't mean as much as I thought she did."

"Asshole, I'm not creative."

Hawthorne leans forward. "This isn't about being creative. This is about how bad you want her. How bad do you want a life with her? Because from her perspective, so far, she's only worth a text."

He's right. She needs more. She needs to know I'm here for good and I'll never leave her again. But if all she sees is some lame-ass effort, why would she give me a chance?

I purse my lips in thought. "I need to do something big."

"Yes," he agrees.

I stare down at my desk. The biggest thing I'd ever done was look at rings when I was eighteen. I never told Lucy. But we had discussed getting married after college. It was what I wanted.

I glance up, and Hawthorne is staring at me.

"What are you going to do?" he asks.

"I have no idea."

CHAPTER 36



Lucy

THE UNIVERSITY GAVE me a week off to deal with everything. Part of me wanted to go in and teach, but another part of me knew I might get emotional and breakdown in class.

It wasn't just my father's death I was processing. I couldn't wrap my head around what I'd learned about Ted.

When I went into the police station to answer questions, I had plenty of my own. The officer couldn't answer everything, but what he could still has me in disbelief. Even telling Connie, it sounds unreal.

"Ted was the one who tried to frame Cody for murder, not your dad? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, that's what the officer said. I think I'm still in shock about it though."

Connie sits across from me. She insisted we go out to a bar; I think she's tired of sitting on my couch and consoling me like she has every night this week.

"Ted knew your uncle," she muses. "Maybe he knew your dad, and they were working together."

"The officer said there was enough evidence in Ted's apartment to be certain it was him. There was also a letter addressed to me on his kitchen table."

Connie frowns. "Did you get to read it?"

“No, it’s in evidence, but the officer summed it up. Ted said he had to leave town, but he would come back for me someday. He signed it ‘your prince in shining armor.’”

Her face scrunches up. “Shining armor? What the hell? Was that some kind of personal joke you two had?”

I frown. I have no idea why he used that line. It’s become clear that I didn’t really know him.

One thing that has made me feel better is that no one suspected anything was off about Ted. The police have interviewed a few other computer science professors and his teacher’s assistant. Liz called and told me everyone is talking about it, and no one suspected he could do anything like this.

Everyone is talking about it. Ugh. Maybe it was for the best I haven’t been around this week. I glance around. The bar is a typical college-town pub.

“I don’t care if you see students you know, we are not leaving,” Connie says firmly.

I laugh. “It’s fine. I don’t plan to get drunk, so no worries.”

“I understand wanting to look professional, but you are on your own time now.”

I shrug. “Problems of living next to a college town.” I take a sip of the large margarita Connie ordered for me and focus on what’s really on my mind. “I know I keep saying I’m not ready to talk about Cody, but I think I finally am.”

“Did you decide what you want to do?” she asks.

I suck in my bottom lip, nervous to hear her opinion. “Well, I was going to tell my father to back off so that Cody and I could be together. Now that he’s gone, there’s really no reason we shouldn’t be together. I’ve worried that he’s controlling, but now that I’ve had time to think, I think I may have overreacted. I don’t think he’s controlling so much as he is trying to keep me safe. It was just the idea of another man trying to control me. I couldn’t take it.”

Connie grins.

“What?”

“I’m glad you reached that conclusion.”

“You are?”

She rubs my arm. “Sweetie, I’ll admit, when I first heard Cody was in town, I didn’t like it at all. I remember how you were freshman year. But when I saw how you were around him—and more importantly, how he was around you—I realized you two are meant to be together. I’m so sorry your father interfered. But there is still time to fix it and make things right.”

“I’m not so sure. You should have seen how hurt he looked when I told him I turned to my dad for help.”

Connie winces. “Yeah, I doubt that went over well.”

“It didn’t. And with everything that has happened, he has every reason to not want to pursue something.”

“Has he called?”

I nod. “He’s left a few messages. I haven’t responded yet. Honestly, I don’t know what to say.”

Connie grabs my hand. “You need to call him back. Say something that will sweep him off his feet.”

I laugh. “Yeah, no pressure there.”

She frowns. “I forgot for a moment you don’t watch romantic movies. You know, you should because they are full of ideas.”

I roll my eyes. “You know I don’t believe in that fairytale stuff.”

“Why don’t you invite him here so you two can talk?”

Invite Cody here? Now? I begin to sweat, imagining Cody here at this table. I take a gulp of my margarita as my mouth runs dry. I want to see him, but I’m afraid he’s going to say I’ve done too much damage to us. Connie is staring at me.

“I can’t, I’m out with you. Besides, did you forget the part where I’m not sure what to say?”

“It’s not that hard. You tell him you were wrong, you’re sorry, and that you still love him.”

Her last words cause me to choke on my drink.

As I cough, Connie pats my back. “Come on now, don’t deny it.”

I won’t. It’s true. I *do* still love Cody. I never really stopped. I tried—I tried really hard—but love like that doesn’t go away. It may lie dormant, but all it takes is one memory, or the man you love returning, for it all to come back to the surface.

“But what if he’s moved on?” I ask.

Connie laughs. “He’s been hung up on you for the last thirteen years. I highly doubt he’s moved on in the past week.”

I take another sip, but then suddenly I’m not feeling so good. As much as I want Cody the thought of calling him and clearing the air has me feeling nauseous. “I need to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

I get up and make my way to the back, finding the restroom. Fortunately, we’re early enough there isn’t a crowd in here. I close myself in a stall.

I know Connie. Once she gets an idea in her head, especially if she thinks it’s a good one, she won’t let it go. When I return to our table, she’ll insist on figuring out this big thing she wants me to do. Am I ready? No. But will I ever feel ready?

I want a life with Cody. That much I know. And if I don’t pursue it, I’ll always regret it.

A couple of women enter the restroom, laughing. Finished with my business, I flush, then exit the stall and wash my hands. As I approach our table, Connie is grinning.

I arch a brow as I sit down. “You look guilty. What did you do?”

She laughs. “What do you mean? You were gone a long time. What did you do?”

My hand goes to my chest, and I give her my best appalled voice. “You never ask that of a lady returning from the bathroom.”

“Ladies. Good to see you.”

I turn to see Rover grinning down at us. Why the hell is he here? I glance at Connie. She’s avoiding my gaze.

“Hello, Lucy. This must be your friend Connie.” He smiles at her. “I’m Rover, it’s lovely to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.” He holds out his hand.

Connie blushes. She never blushes. But even I can admit Rover is a very good-looking man. And with his leather jacket and boots, he is definitely Connie’s type.

She takes his hand. “Nice to meet you, too. I’d like to know what it is you’ve heard.”

No, I want to know why he’s here. “Rover, what are you doing here?”

The odds of Rover showing up at a college bar seem low. Unless he’s into college girls. But the way he’s staring at Connie, I don’t think that’s it.

Then I hear another familiar voice.

“Good to see you, Luce.”

His voice sends chills down my arms, and my stomach flutters. I turn slowly, bracing myself. But it does no good. The man looks good in a fitted Henley and snug blue jeans. Hell, he’d look good in anything.

“Hey, Rover, why don’t you buy me a drink at the bar?” Connie suggests.

“Good idea.”

They both leave, and then I’m alone with Cody.

“Mind if I sit down?” he motions to the chair Connie vacated.

“Go ahead,” I squeak out.

He sits at the tiny table, and suddenly, he feels too close. I can't think straight when he's this close.

"How have you been?" he asks.

"Not good. Connie insisted I come out tonight. I think she's tired of my couch."

He nods. "I'm sorry about your dad."

"Thanks."

We sit in silence for a few moments. The sound of familiar laughter draws my attention, and I see that Connie and Rover appear to be getting along well at the bar.

"What brings you to this place?" I ask. "Or do you two like hanging out at college bars?"

He laughs. "No, Connie clued me in where you would be tonight. Are you aware she's been trying to get you out of your apartment for a while?"

"You and Connie have been talking?"

"Little bit. It wasn't easy tracking her down without a last name."

"But you did."

He grins. "I did. She's a good friend, you know. She grilled me pretty good."

I finish my margarita. "Well, at least I got one friend right."

He frowns in question.

"Ted," I explain. "I misread him."

"Don't be hard on yourself. From what I understand, no one knew about his dark side."

"That's generous of you, since it was you he tried to set up. Do you have any idea how he did it?"

"I do. Detective Marin told me—"

"Detective Marin?" I ask.

Cody reaches for my hand. "Yes, the detective you dated."

My face warms. I don't know why I'm embarrassed, but I am.

"He told me that the hairs of mine they found on Randy were mixed with fabric from a car. I asked Stormy for access to the videos from his house security system. He has a couple of exterior cameras that are activated with motion sensors."

"Did you find anything?"

"I did, after two hours of watching videos. A lot of birds fly by those cameras and set them off." He shakes his head. "Anyway, on one video you can see a man break into my car. Once the door is open, he leans in a little. Then he closes the door and turns around. That was when I saw his face."

"Ted?"

He nods. "The police think he got the hair from the headrest of my car."

I lean back. "That's so..." I'm at a loss for words.

"Premeditated? Yes." His thumb strokes the back of my hand. "Can we not talk about Ted anymore?"

"Sure."

"I started at Morgan Thompson this week."

My body tingles at this news. He stayed, even though I was shutting him out.

"I thought you might go back to New York." I stare at the table, unable to meet his eyes.

Although if he already quit his job, he might not be able to go back.

His thumb stills over my hand. "Is that what you want? Do you want me to leave?"

"No. I want you here."

When he doesn't say anything for a moment, I glance up. His eyes are closed.

"Cody?"

He opens his eyes and smiles. "I want to be here too." He takes my other hand in his. "I overreacted about you calling your dad. I understand you did what you had to in order to keep yourself safe. It blindsided me, you know?"

I nod. "I know. I'm sorry."

When the music that had been playing in the background becomes louder, I glance at my phone.

"They turn the music up at nine," I shout to him.

He leans in and shouts back, "Can we go back to my place and talk? It's a lot quieter."

"Yes. Let me tell Connie."

We make our way to the bar where we find Connie and Rover arguing.

"Is everything all right?" Cody asks.

Connie rolls her eyes. "Does your friend know just how arrogant he is?" she asks.

Cody laughs. "Yeah, but please, tell him again."

Connie turns back to Rover, arms crossed. Amusement dances in Rover's eyes, and I can tell he's loving this.

"Connie, we were going to leave if that's all right," I say. "But if you rather we stay, we can."

Rover grins. "You two go. We'll be fine."

Connie turns to me. "I'll be fine. I don't know about him." She shoots a glance at Rover. "You two go and talk."

"Oh baby, you don't have to lie to them. I know you want them to leave so you can be alone with me."

Connie turns to Rover. And as if in slow motion, she pours what remains of her margarita over his head then turns to me, smiling. "Seriously, go. I'm fine."

Cody barks out a laugh. My hand goes to my mouth. I've never seen Connie assault someone with a drink before. Usually, she assaults with her words.

“I like you,” Rover says to Connie. He can’t stop grinning. “Let me buy you another one of those.”

Connie turns to him and looks him up and down. Then she smiles. “It really is the least you could do.”

“Let’s go while we can,” Cody whispers in my ear.

Snowflakes fall as we walk outside and toward Cody’s car. He is quiet on the drive. His distance has me nervous. Did I misread him at the bar?

Once we are on his front porch, he turns to me. “Lucy, when I told you before that I’ll do whatever I can to make this work, I meant it. I got a job up here and I’m here to stay. You’re it for me.”

I step toward him and wrap my arms around his waist. “Cody, you’re it for me too.”

I stare into his eyes. They’re glassy, but he’s smiling.

“Really? Does this mean we’re together now? I mean officially?” he asks.

I nod before I push up on my toes and kiss him. The kiss turns hot and heavy instantly.

He breaks our contact. “Wait,” he pants. “We should go inside.”

I laugh. “Don’t want to give the neighbors a show?”

“More like Stormy. Remember, he has security cameras.”

I blink. “I forgot.”

Cody opens the door. “Yeah, I have that effect.”

He walks in, and I smack his ass.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were into that.” He spins around and smacks my ass in return.

I run to the kitchen, giggling. Then I stop in my tracks. Lining the counters and lighting a path along the floor are dozens of small flameless candles. I follow the path to his bedroom. There are candles everywhere, and flowers. So many roses in vases throughout the room.

“Cody?” My hand goes to my heart. This is the most romantic thing I’ve ever seen.

He wraps his arms around my waist from behind. “I was really hoping you’d come home with me.”

I’m smiling hard. “This is beautiful.” It really is.

My eyes catch on something on the bed. I walk over and see a Manila folder.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Open it.”

I do and pull out a real estate listing for a house in Fallwell Cove.

“A house?” Is this what I think it is? My stomach flutters with hope.

“I told you I’m here to stay. I was going to buy a house, but since you’ll be living there with me, I thought you should have a say in it.”

I glance back at the listing. “But, Cody, this is a very nice property. I can’t afford anything like this.”

He takes the folder from my hands and tosses it down. “Let me do this for us.”

I snake my arms up around his neck and can’t stop my smile. “You can afford that? It’s on the water. In Fallwell Cove.”

He leans down and kisses my neck. “My work pays well, and I’ve been saving.” He meets my gaze. “I want to have this with you. I want to have it all with you.”

I bite my lower lip while I think it through. I want it all with Cody too, but him buying the house himself is too much.

“I want to contribute. This can’t be all you.”

“No problem.”

I jump up, wrapping my legs around his waist and placing my hands behind his neck. “Yes. Let’s do it. I can’t wait to move in with you, Cody.”

CHAPTER 37



CODY

I CAN'T BELIEVE she said yes. I was prepared to romance her and convince her for as long as it took.

“If I'd known you'd be this easy, I'd have suggested a smaller house.” I grin so she knows I'm kidding.

She smacks my chest. “I'm not easy, so you can get that idea out of your head. I just think we've spent enough time apart. It's time to be together.”

“I'm so happy you feel that way because I'm going to make sure we spend lots of time together.”

“I hope so.”

She tightens her arms around my neck and crashes her lips to mine before she moves them to the sensitive spot behind my ear.

“Yes, time in the bedroom.”

Her fingers move through my hair, pulling it slightly.

“Just the bedroom?” She moves her lips to the other side of my neck and kisses her way to my ear.

“Not just the bedroom. There will be time in the shower too.”

“Mmm.”

“Time on the kitchen counter together.”

She laughs. “The kitchen counter too?”

I pull back to stare into her eyes. “Yeah. You have a problem with that?”

“Not at all.”

I turn us around and lay her down on the bed.

“*Ouch!*” She jumps up and stares at the bed. “You have whole roses on the bed.”

“Yeah, it’s supposed to be romantic.”

She laughs. “Cody.” Then she laughs even harder.

I arch a brow at her. “What?”

“Rose petals. Not the whole rose. They have thorns.”

I glance down and see that she’s right. “Aside from the corsage for prom, I’ve never bought flowers before.”

She wraps her arms around my neck again. “I love that you did this. It’s very romantic. But I’m going to move a few of the flowers now.”

With one hand, I sweep all the roses to the floor. “Done.”

Then I pick her up and toss her onto the bed.

“Oh,” she squeaks.

I stalk over her. “Still laughing at me?” I kiss that sensitive spot under her chin, then she lets out a little moan.

“No. Take off your shirt.”

I grin. “Demanding. I like it.”

I pull my shirt over my head and toss it to the floor.

“What else do you want me to do?” I ask.

“Kiss me.”

I move my lips to hers. The kiss is soft at first. I want her to feel my love.

But when she runs her fingernails up my back, scraping every so lightly, I feel a tug at my control. I sit up and pull at

her sweater. She helps me take it off and I'm greeted by a lacy, black bra that is sexy as hell.

I growl. "Damn you're sexy."

I rub a thumb over the lace, and her nipples are already pebbled. She arches into me, and I can't help but grind into her.

I kiss a trail down her jaw to her chest. Then I take her nipple into my mouth through the lace.

"Cody, that feels so good." She arches into me again.

My mouth moves down her stomach, and I tug at her pants, slowly pulling them off. She's wearing matching black lace panties.

I stare at her, imprinting the image in my mind. "So hot."

I run my hands up her inner thighs, and she bucks, wanting more. I can smell her arousal as I rub her clit through the shred of fabric.

When she moans, I remove her panties and dive in. I flatten my tongue on her clit and lick until her hands are in my hair and her fingernails are scraping my scalp, driving me wild.

I love making my woman feel good. I insert two fingers inside and curl them, then suck on her clit.

"Oh god, Cody!"

Within seconds, her body is spasming around my fingers. I keep sucking until she's coming down. As she catches her breath, I remove my pants and boxer briefs, then grab a condom from the drawer.

I kiss her. "You ready?"

She wraps her legs around my waist. "Yes."

I thrust inside in one movement, then still as I'm slammed with the feeling of how right this is. Lucy has always felt right, like home.

I lean my forehead to hers. The emotion is overwhelming, but I can't go another minute without telling her how I feel. "I love you so much."

Her hand cups my cheek as her eyes grow glassy. "I love you too, Cody."

I move slowly at first not breaking eye contact. She smiles, her hands still on my cheeks, and my heart is hammering in my chest. She's everything.

We pick up the pace and I know I'm not going to last. I reach down and rub her sensitive clit.

"Cody!"

I feel her pulsating around me, and I can't hold out any longer. The sweat beading on my back, and the tingling in my lower spine confirm that. I thrust as I climax.

I kiss her cheeks and chin, then her lips as I come down from my release.

After a moment, I fall to my side. "I'll be right back."

I get up and take care of the condom. When I return to the bed, there are tears in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I ask, pulling her into my arms.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm so happy we finally found our way back to each other."

I give her a squeeze. "Me too, Luce. Me too."



THE DOORBELL RINGS, waking me. I try to ignore it, but it rings again and again.

I turn my head to see Lucy sleeping next to me. She looks so peaceful. I decide I better find out who the asshole is before he wakes her.

Carefully, I get out of bed and pull on my sweats, then I go open the door to find Carter on my doorstep.

“Sorry to drop by unannounced. I really need to talk to you.”

I step aside and let him in.

He speaks immediately. “It was wrong of me to ask you to go to Gardiner’s house. I’m sorry I did. Obviously, it didn’t end well. It’s been bothering me, and I had to say I’m sorry.”

I lean against the door. “Why did you ask?”

Carter paces the living room. “I let my personal feelings get in the way. A few years ago, my ex-wife met Lawrence at some fundraiser and was dazzled by his money. She shared a hotel room with him.”

“You’re mad on behalf of your ex-wife?”

He shoves his hands in his pockets and turns his gaze to the street. “We were married at the time. When she realized he didn’t see her as anything more than a one-night stand, she confessed to me how horrible she felt.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

Carter stops pacing. “It hurt my pride more than anything, we weren’t really in love. But that doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have put you in that position, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m actually glad I was there, so I understand what Lucy witnessed between her mom, dad, and Vince. And what went down with Ted.”

I glance down the hall, hoping Lucy doesn’t come out and hear us talking about her dad. I still haven’t explained why I was at her father’s house, and I’d like to do it in my own time.

“Well, I guess the case is closed, now that Lawrence is dead.” I take a step toward the door, hoping he catches the hint.

“Actually, it’s not. Lawrence might be gone, but you know as well as I do that someone will pick up his not-so-legitimate businesses.”

Not over? Shit. I hope he doesn’t still want my help.

Still, I ask, “Does this mean you’re going after whoever was second in charge? Would that be Vince?”

Carter laughs. “I don’t think Lawrence cared too much for Vince. No, the second in command was Louis Altero. But he died yesterday in a tragic accident.”

There’s a sinking feeling in my chest. “Altero? Why does that sound familiar?”

“He’s Valerie Gardiner’s brother.”

I sit on the couch. “Wait, Lawrence had his brother-in-law as second in command and not his own brother?”

“Yes.”

I sense I’ll regret asking this, but I ask anyway. “What happened to Altero?”

“The man was in an elevator that plummeted sixty floors. He was the only passenger.”

I wince. I’ve seen plenty of blood and gore, but I’ve always hated elevators, so Carter basically just confirmed my fear is real.

“Were there signs of foul play?”

Carter shakes his head. “No, according to the report, the elevator was old and overdue for service, there was no foul play.” He says this, but he stares out the window, off into the distance.

“You don’t believe that?”

He scoffs. “Please. What are the odds of this man dying days after Lawrence? I can’t prove it, but someone is trying to take over the business.”

“You think Lawrence’s death was a hit?”

He shrugs. “Evidence says no, but my gut says yes.” He pauses then turns to me. “You were there. What do you think?”

I told him the same thing Rover and I had determined. “Ted drew his gun only after Lawrence aimed his gun at him.”

Carter nods. “Did you know Ted carried a gun?”

That actually was surprising. “No, I didn’t. But he knew how to handle it.”

I run my hand down my face. *What am I missing?*

“Who’s third in charge?” I ask.

Carter shrugs. “That’s not clear. Rumor has it a man in Seattle is trying to assert himself, but no one can confirm that.”

“You’re still investigating?”

He nods. “Until I shut down the drugs these businesses bring into this area, my office will have someone investigating.”

“What about Vince? Any chance he could try to take over?”

“Anything is possible.” He claps a hand on my shoulder. “I wanted you to know I appreciate your help, and again, I’m sorry I put you in that situation. I’ll let you get back to your day.”

“Thanks for stopping by.”

“Yeah, and if you remember anything else that might help, give me a call.”

“Will do.”

CHAPTER 38



CODY

I DIDN'T EXPECT to be seeing the president of the university again, but here I am. He called me this morning to ask if I could stop by before lunch. I told him if he had another job, he needed to contact Reed Hawthorne Security and that I no longer worked with them. He assured me it wasn't for a job.

As soon as I step off the elevator, Chip is there to greet me.

"Cody, it's good to see you. Come in."

I follow him into his office, and he closes the door behind me.

"Please, have a seat."

I sit in the chair across from his desk.

"I'm concerned about something I've heard. I'm told that you were investigating the financing of our hockey program for the FBI. Is this true?"

"I was investigating Lawrence Gardiner. It turns out he donated funds to your hockey program."

Chip sits in his chair and turns to me. "Mm-hmm." He clasps his hands together on his desk. "The hockey program is very important to the university. How we incentivize our students is a private matter, and I'd like you to sign an NDA regarding anything you may have learned. My understanding

is the FBI is no longer investigating Mr. Gardiner due to his untimely death.”

An NDA? This confirms my suspicions that there’s more going on with the program than the university wants to admit.

“Chip, if I’m asked at any point to testify regarding my knowledge of the funding, I’ll have to do so.”

He smiles. “Not if you sign an NDA. You can use it as a defense.”

When I don’t respond, Chip stands and walks to a table near the window. “You are probably wondering why you would want to sign this. I thought the same thing.” He turns, holding some papers in his hand. “If you sign the NDA, I’ll answer any questions you might have.”

I lean back. “You want me to sign a nondisclosure agreement to not share the little information I have, and in exchange, you will tell me all the hockey team’s secrets?”

That doesn’t make any sense.

“Not all. But I will tell you about Ted’s involvement. Something tells me you want to know.”

Ted was involved with the hockey team? Shit, he’s right. I do want to know. I let out a breath. “All right.”

The man doesn’t know I’ve signed more NDAs than I can count; knowing what to keep to myself is what has kept me alive all these years.

He hands me the papers, and I look them over. They’re standard. I sign them, but I hold on to them. “Tell me about Ted.”

Chip returns to his chair. “I thought Joseph borrowed money from the hockey team to pay off some gambling debts. He did, but only a small portion. It turns out Ted had gained access to Sam’s secretary’s computer and transferred the remaining funds from the hockey team to an untraceable account. Apparently, he hoped Joseph would be blamed for all of it and it would anger Mr. Gardiner enough that he would do something about it.”

“Do something?”

“Kill Joseph.”

“What do you think Ted’s motive was?” I ask. How much does Chip actually know about what is going on under his nose?

“Lucy Taylor. As you are aware, he was obsessed with her. You sat in jail, framed, because of him.”

Damn, I guess he knows a lot. I shift in my seat. “How do you know all of this?”

“I spoke with Margaret the day after Ted died. She filled me in. Apparently, the two were spending time together.”

Margaret and Ted?

Then I remember the woman up against the car outside Ted’s house. The dress was tight and revealing, just like Margaret’s dresses. Brother, my ass. That had been Ted, I saw. If only the fucker had moved his head.

“According to Margaret, Ted would drone on about Lucy and Joseph, and how Joseph had spent all her money and left her in a bad way.”

So, Ted used Margaret to go after Joseph. “How do you know Ted took the money? Maybe Margaret is lying, and she took it. Or maybe she helped him. You said he used Margaret’s computer, but she must have had passwords in place.”

Chip sighed. “Once we discovered the funds were transferred from Margaret’s computer, she told me everything to avoid jail time. She said Ted tricked her into getting time alone on her computer.”

“But Sam said she didn’t have access to withdraw the money.”

Chip leans back. “Later that day, I spoke with Sam, and that is what he claimed. But the University police discovered Sam kept his online banking password on a piece of paper in his desk. Along with all his other passwords.” He sighs. “We are still working out what else Margaret has had access to.”

“Margaret lied and actually helped Ted, then?”

“I believe so.”

Ted framed me and Joseph? “Did she say why? She helped him?”

Chip sighs. “No, she didn’t.”

“Have the police picked her up for questioning?”

Chip runs his hands over his face. “No. After she confessed everything, she went missing. The next day, the police went to her apartment, and the landlord said she moved.”

“I know where her brother works—”

“The bar? Yeah, Sam told us about that. The bartender is gone too. According to a server there, they weren’t brother and sister.”

My eyebrows shoot up.

“She walked in on them getting cozy in the back room one time.”

They lied about being brother and sister. Why? I think back to how the man made it sound like she brought men there all the time. But that was a lie. A distraction. But from what?

I stand and begin to pace. “Did the hockey team ever recover its money?”

Chip shakes his head. “Mr. Gardiner believed Joseph had stolen it, so he replaced the money and planned to seek payment from Joseph. But no, the money was never recovered. I suspect Margaret and the bartender have it, and they probably left the country.”

“Do you believe the story Margaret told you about Ted?”

He meets my eyes. “No. I believe taking the money to frame Joseph was her idea and she used Ted. I also believe she only confessed to me in hopes I wouldn’t press charges and hinder her plans to leave.”

I stand up and pace the room. I've seen some corrupt places, but I didn't expect so much deceit at a university. One I thought I wanted to attend once.

"I have another question." I turn to Chip. "Now that Lawrence Gardiner is dead, what will become of the hockey program? I understand he was their biggest funder."

Chip smiles. "No worries. Someone has stepped in and promised to continue the funding."

"Who?"

"I shouldn't say, but as I understand you are involved with Mr. Gardiner's daughter, it's just a matter of time before you find out."

No. It can't be.

Chip confirms my blooming dread. "Valerie Gardiner."

Why would Lucy's mom fund perks for a college hockey team?

I run my hand through my hair. "Are you sure?"

Chip clasps his hands. "Very sure."

If Valerie is stepping into Lawrence's business here, what other business is she picking up?



"HEY, SEXY," Lucy says as she sets her bag down.

I'm so deep in thought, I didn't even hear her come in. Even though she refuses to live together until the house closes, she's been staying with me at Stormy's house every night.

"Hey to you too." I pull her close for a kiss.

"What's wrong?" Her fingers brush the line I'm certain is between my brows.

"I met with the university president earlier today."

Her eyes widen. "You were on campus? You should have stopped by and said hi."

That was my original plan until my conversation with Chip left me reeling.

“What was your meeting about?” she asks.

“He asked me to sign an NDA, so I actually can’t say.”

She sits on the couch, staring at me. “You signed an NDA just to have a meeting?”

“There was more to it than that. He was concerned about what all I had learned while working with Joseph.”

“Well, I’ve always suspected there are more secrets at that place than anyone lets on, so I can’t say I’m surprised.”

I sit beside her. “Why do you say that?”

She shrugs. “I’ve overheard some of the things the students say.”

“Like what?”

Linking her fingers with mine, she looks up. “It doesn’t matter.” She stares past me. “Ted wrote me a letter before he died.”

I sit up straighter. “What?”

“The police found it at his house. They gave me a copy today.”

“What does it say?”

She leans into me and sighs. “A lot. It’s seven handwritten pages of rambling.”

“Wow.”

“He said he has to leave the country because he killed Randy, but that he’d be back for me.”

“He admits to killing Randy?”

She nods. “He said he overheard Randy talking to his friends about me. He didn’t include what they said, but he said it was very offensive.”

I rub her back. “Did he mention what he was doing with Vince?”

“No. And I don’t know why he wanted money from him either. He said he had enough cash stashed for us to live on for a while. Then he went on about losing his brother when he was young, and how he was never the same. Then three pages were about what he thought should be taught for the lab class.”

I pull back. “He really had a brother?”

She frowns. “I guess he did at one point. He lied about the woman kissing his brother, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, he did.”

She groans. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Sure. Want something to drink? I’m going to have a beer.”

“Sure, thank you.”

Knowing that Ted wrote such a long letter bothers me more than it should. But why should it? The man is dead. We have nothing more to worry about. I step away, then return with the beers.

“Thank you,” she smiles. “Oh, my mom called. She wants us to come to dinner this weekend.”

I stop mid-stride. “What? You two made up?”

“No, but she keeps trying. I told her I’m not ready.”

I twist the caps off the drinks and hand her one. “Do you think you ever will be?”

She shrugs. “She’s my mom. And maybe with my dad and all of his dealings out of the picture, we can have a normal relationship.”

Her mom. The dealings. She has no idea. “What if your mother takes over your father’s business?”

Lucy laughs. “That’s a good one.”

“I’m serious.”

She stares at me for a beat. “You are. Look, I can understand why you might think that, but my mom isn’t business savvy.”

She has no idea what her mother is doing. And with Lawrence out of the way, she might start working with Vince in whatever scheme he has. Then it all comes together. Oh no. Please let me be wrong.

“Cody? What’s wrong? You’re frowning.”

“Can I see that letter from Ted?”

She leans away from me. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s important.”

She shrugs and stands to get some papers out of her bag. As she hands them to me, she asks, “What are you looking for?”

I read through the letter as fast as I can. “Any clue what business Ted had with Vince.”

She sips her beer. “I told you, he never mentioned it.”

I’m on the last page when I see it.

“What’s this mean?” I ask, then I read from the letter, “*And now all the obstacles but one have been removed. Once the charges are dropped, I’ll come back for you. I’ll see you soon.*”

“I told you about that. He said he’s going to come back for me someday.”

‘All the obstacles but one have been removed.’

What obstacles would keep him from Lucy in his mind?

“He wrote this letter before going to your father’s house.”

I close my eyes. *No. Please let me be wrong.*

“Cody, what’s wrong?”

I jump up. “Sorry, but I have to check on something. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Lucy stands. “Right now? Can’t it wait?”

I grab my coat, wallet, and keys. “I’m afraid not.”

I’m out the door before she can ask any more. I speed all the way to the food bank and am thankful when I see Vince’s

car. Once inside, I head straight for his office.

Vince jumps up out of the chair, his hand to his chest. “Cody, you scared me. You can’t sneak up on a guy like that.”

“How did Ted know where to find you that day?”

He sits back down. “I don’t know. Maybe he followed me. Hell, it looks like he was stalking Lucy, maybe he followed her.” He fidgets with some papers on his desk.

I slam my fists down on his desk. “He didn’t.”

Vince glances up, arching a brow, not at all affected by my outburst. “What are you accusing me of, Cody?”

“How did you convince a guy like Ted to shoot Lawrence?”

The man leans back, grinning. “I didn’t convince him of anything. You have a wild imagination there.”

“What did you promise him?”

He stands up and walks around the desk. “Ted was obsessed with Lucy. There was no knowing what he would do to be with her.”

I ball my hands into fists. “No knowing what he would do? You knew exactly what he would do because you dangled Lucy like a carrot to get what you want.”

“Cody, I’m a businessman. I do what needs to be done.”

I step toward him, wanting to tear his limbs off for using Lucy.

“Is Valerie in on it?”

He moves his jacket aside, revealing the gun he’s carrying. “Do not make accusations against Valerie. She’s an innocent victim in all of this. Now, I need you to step back and leave. And do not insert yourself in my business again. Do you understand?”

I watch him move his hand closer to the gun.

“Loud and clear.”

I got what I came here for, anyway. Once I'm in my car, I make the call.

“Carter here.”

I spit out everything I just learned. “Vince used Ted to do his dirty work. I don't know the details, but—”

“Cody, I know.”

“You *know*? Why didn't you say anything? It would have saved me from confronting him.”

“You confronted him?”

“Just now.”

“Cody, listen to me. Stay away from Vince. I'll handle him. I can't have you fucking up my investigation.”

Well, if you'd told me he was your suspect, I wouldn't have gone in there. Fuck.

“What am I supposed to do? Go to family dinners with Lucy and act like everything is normal?”

“That's exactly what you need to do. Actually, no, make an excuse and don't go. Cody, seriously, stay away from Vince.”

He ends the call before I can ask anything more.

CHAPTER 39



Lucy

SIX MONTHS later

“ARE you sure you want to go?” Cody asks me.

I nod. “I have to. The town needs to know I support this.”

Cody had been right; my uncle’s food bank wasn’t legitimate. It was a front for selling drugs. That all came out shortly after Vince was charged with conspiracy to murder my father and my uncle Louis. To say I was shocked is an understatement. But I was even more shocked when my mother agreed to testify against him.

I guess her love only runs so deep. She told me that once she learned Vince was responsible for her brother’s death, she was done with him.

Today, the mayor is holding a formal ceremony to thank Agent Carter and the FBI for cleaning up Fallwell Cove. News of my mom’s testimony spread through town faster than the gossip about their affair. I have to show up today in support of Agent Carter to show the town I’m not tangled up in any of their business.

Connie wraps her arms around me. “Lucy, no one thinks you’re a part of this. You don’t have to go today.”

“I do.”

She gives me a weak smile. “All right. Just be ready for questions.”

Questions. I have questions too. Once my mother was given full immunity for her testimony, she sang like a canary. According to her, Vince told her after the fact that he offered to pay Ted to shoot Lawrence, and he paid someone else to make Louis Altero’s death look like an accident. When asked about my dad’s businesses, she claimed to have no knowledge.

I would have believed that a month ago, but I don’t buy it for a single minute now.

“Rover will meet us at the ceremony,” Cody says.

“Rover will be there?” Connie asks. Her cheeks flush.

“Yeah, he’s got this thing about seeing things through till the end.”

“*Pfft.*” Connie mutters, “Not in his personal life.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Is there something going on with you and Rover?”

Connie grabs her keys. “Not anymore. I’ll meet you there.”

After she walks through the door, I turn to Cody. “What did he do?”

He shrugs. “He hasn’t mentioned anything.”

I make a note to take Connie out to happy hour soon and get to the bottom of it. I can’t say I’ve ever seen her upset over a guy. She’s usually the one leaving them.

Cody wraps his arms around me. “I love you. And if you decide at any point, this event is too much, let me know. I’ll get you out of there.”

“I love you too. And as soon as it’s over, I’ll want to come back here and relax.”

He kisses the top of my head. “Sounds good to me.”

Cody bought the house on the cove, and I absolutely love it. The view is so serene. Living with him has been a dream.

He travels more than I'd like, but when he's home, he's all mine.

He leans down and gives me a light kiss. "Let's go."

The drive into town is short, so I don't have much time to brace myself for what is to come.

The media has not been kind to my family. I don't expect them to be today.

"Lucy Gardiner." a woman yells through the crowd. Next thing I know, a microphone is shoved in my face. "Did you know your uncle planned to murder your father? Is that why he used your colleague?"

"No questions," Cody yells. "Come on."

He tucks me under his arm and pushes his way to the front of the crowd where two chairs are waiting. After I sit down, I close my eyes. I wonder how long I'm going to have to deal with this.

As if reading my mind, Cody leans over and whispers, "It will be over soon."

I nod, but I'm left in a daze of my thoughts.

Someone introduces the mayor who gives a speech. I tune out, but my attention is brought back to the stage when everyone claps. Agent Carter takes the stage.

"Leave me alone," Connie says beside me.

I turn to see Rover on her other side.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs.

"Go away," Connie says without looking at him.

Rover gives me a sad look, then stands and walks to the back of the crowd.

I turn my attention back to the stage as Carter wraps up his speech.

"Thank you for this recognition. It means a lot to me and the FBI." Carter gives a nod then steps away from the podium.

The crowd breaks out in applause. Thank you, Carter, for giving a brief speech.

Hopefully, I can get out of here before I see my mother. Any normal person in her position wouldn't attend this event, but I got a text from her this morning saying she'd see me here.

People stand, and I see this is my opportunity.

"Let's go," I say to Cody.

He nods.

I turn to say goodbye to Connie, but she's gone. That's strange.

Cody leads me through the crowd, but before we exit the park, a hand grabs my arm, pulling me away from Cody. Startled, I turn to see my mother. She's wearing a hat and sunglasses.

I roll my eyes. Instead of being in disguise, she stands out. But fortunately, she's pulled me behind a wall where there is no crowd.

"Mother, what are you doing here?"

She releases my arm. "I texted you that I would be here."

Cody steps up beside me. "You being here isn't a good idea, Valerie."

She straightens and lifts her chin. "I want a moment with my daughter. Since she won't return my calls, what choice do I have?"

I sigh and turn to Cody. "It's fine. If I don't talk to her now, she'll keep calling."

He stares at me for a moment. "Okay, but I'll be right over there." He points a few feet away.

Once he's gone, my mom glances around. No one is close.

I cross my arms. "What do you want to say?"

She smiles. "I need to ask you something."

"Go on."

“As a Gardiner, you have a right to your trust fund, and I’ll reinstate it. I also want you to know that you can be involved in the business. I understand the university might hold some distaste for you now, after everything that happened with that student and professor.”

My mind is whirling. “What are you talking about? I thought you sold Dad’s business.” Really I had hoped all the rumors I’d heard weren’t true.

She smiles. “I sold off his interest in the investment firm, yes. But he had other lucrative interests that I plan to continue.”

I’d heard the talk in town that my dad, besides his legitimate business, also held an interest in some criminal activity. I didn’t want to believe it but deep down I knew it was true. I’d also heard my mom was taking over. That’s when I knew my mom had been more involved than she ever let on.

And she’s here asking me to be a part of the business? Just on the off chance I may be wrong, I ask just in case.

I drop my voice to a whisper. “Are you talking about criminal business?”

She arches a brow. “Oh, don’t act all innocent. You were aware of what your father was doing. We all were. And now with Vince out of the picture, I need someone I can trust to help me run things.”

Oh, my god. My mother is trying to recruit me into... what exactly? I don’t know. I don’t want to know.

“No. Say no more. That way, I won’t have to testify against you because I won’t know anything. Keep your money. Keep all of it. I want nothing to do with it.” I turn to walk away.

“Lucille Antoinette Gardiner!” she snaps.

I press my lips together and turn back, not wanting to cause a scene. Not here. Not with my mother, who shouldn’t even be here.

“I don’t think you understand what you are turning down. I worked hard to keep this in our family.”

I narrow my eyes. “What do you mean you worked hard?”

She takes a step back. “I meant being with your father.” She sniffs. “He was a hard man to love.”

“Why don’t you tell her the truth?” Carter steps up beside me.

Cody also returns to my side.

“What truth?”

“You have immunity, so why not tell her everything?” Glaring at her, Carter crosses his arms.

“Agent Carter, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I turn to him. “What’s going on?”

“Once Vince found out Valerie got full immunity, he had a lot to say. According to him, the entire plot to kill Lawrence and Louis was Valerie’s idea so that she could take over the business. Vince claims Lawrence told her six months ago he wanted a divorce, but she said no and told him she’d fight it every step of the way.”

I glance back at my mom. “Dad wanted a divorce?”

My mom takes my hand. “Lucy, all couples have their ups and downs. Lawrence and I had a little more up and down than most. We both tossed around threats of divorce over the years, but neither of us was actually going to follow through.”

“No, you made sure of that,” Carter inserts. “Once you knew he was serious, you set this plot in motion. Everyone thought you were the meek wife, doing whatever Lawrence told you. Great job on the immunity deal.” He claps. “It’s pretty ironclad. But know this, Ms. Gardiner, I’ll be watching you. You might be free today, but it won’t last.”

I step away from my mom. “You killed dad? And Uncle Louis?”

Who the hell is this woman? I knew she was cold, but I never knew she was capable of this.

“Poor Vince.” I shake my head. “You convinced him he’d be next in line, didn’t you? Why else would he have done any of this?”

I still can’t believe Vince was involved at all.

My mom glances at Cody. “People in love do stupid things. Don’t forget that.” Then she turns to Carter. “As for you, I’m not afraid of you. But you should be afraid of me.”

She turns away from all of us and walks toward the parking lot.

I’m frozen in place as I stare at her back. “Did my mom get away with murder?”

I hear Carter sigh. “Yeah, I’m afraid she did. But don’t worry, she’ll screw up, and then we’ll catch her.”

She won’t screw up. I don’t know how I know this, but I do. I also know I lost my mom today. I don’t know who that woman is, but she isn’t the woman I grew up with.

“Lucy, let me take you home.” Cody’s arm is around my shoulder.

I nod. We turn and walk away.

Connie is waiting at our car. “Hey, I saw your mom. Are you okay?”

She knew the rumors about my family. I always said they weren’t true, but she knew.

I try to give her a smile, but it falters. “I will be. I’m so happy to have you and Cody in my life.”

“I’m happy you’re in my life too.”

She gives me a hug, and deep down, I know I’ll be all right.

CHAPTER 40



Lucy

“CODY, I’d rather we just stay in today. We can go out for pizza tomorrow.”

I’m not sure why he is pressing this so hard. It’s been two weeks since the ceremony for Agent Carter, and one week since the media finally decided to leave me alone. Staying home in my pajamas and slippers sounds fantastic, but for some reason, he wants to get a pizza and go to Picnic Point.

“Luce, humor me.”

I glance out the window. “Cody, it’s raining. Let’s order delivery and stay here.”

It might be June, but here in the Pacific Northwest, that usually means a gray and rainy day.

He sighs. “Okay. We will order delivery. But we’re eating it picnic-style.”

“Fine. As long as I can stay in my pajamas.”

His hands are on his hips as he stares at me. “Sure.”

“But first, I’m going to take a bath.”

“Really?”

“It will take a while before the pizza is here anyway,” I point out.

He stalks to the kitchen to call in the order. His grumpiness is ruining my relaxation vibe. Why the hell is he so grumpy, anyway?

Ignoring him, I go to the master bathroom and fill the tub. Then I get in, grab my book, and get lost in the story.

There's a knock on the door.

"Lucy? Are you okay?"

My eyes snap up from my book. "Yeah."

"You sure? You've been in there for an hour."

An hour?

That's when I notice the water has grown cold.

I shiver. "Oh, I lost track of time. I'll be out soon."

"Okay, I was waiting to order the pizza. I'll go order it now."

I quickly dry off and get dressed into my warmest pajamas. There's a knock at the front door as I step out of the bedroom.

"I got it," Cody yells.

I walk down the hall but stop at the corner when I hear Cody whispering. I strain to hear him.

"Mom? Why are you here?" he hisses.

"I'm sorry, she couldn't wait."

That sounds like his sister Emelia.

"Did she say yes? Does she like the ring?" his mom asks.

"*Shh!* I haven't asked her yet. We had a change of plans."

Ring? Asked me? Oh! He wanted to go to Picnic Point to propose where we had our first date.

Tears spring to my eyes. That's so romantic. No wonder he was grumpy I wouldn't go.

"Change of plans?" his mom asks. "Why?"

He sighs. "She didn't want to go out."

A laugh escapes my lips, and I slap my hand to my mouth.

Cody pops around the corner and spots me. He arches a brow. “You heard all that?”

I nod.

“Shit,” he mutters.

“Oh honey, I’m sorry.” Kathy Anthony comes to stand next to him. “I was just so excited for the two of you, I wanted to be the first to congratulate you.”

“I tried to stop her, but she was coming over here with or without me,” Emelia said.

“You were going to propose?” I ask Cody.

His eyes snap to mine. “I had a plan.”

I bite my lip. “We could recreate that plan here.”

Cody takes my hand and leads me to the dining room. The table has been pushed aside, and there is a blanket on the floor. Flameless candles are lined up outside the perimeter of the blanket.

My eyes well with tears.

“Like I said, I had a plan.”

I give him a hug. “I love it.”

He pulls back and takes my hands in his. “Lucy Taylor, I have loved you since high school. I lost you once, and I can’t lose you again. You are the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

“Hey,” Kathy protests as she enters the room.

Emelia grabs her arm pulling her away from us. “Mom! No.”

Cody rolls his eyes, then gets down on one knee. He takes a breath and asks, “Will you marry me?”

The doorbell rings.

“For fuck’s sake,” Cody grumbles as he goes to rise.

Emelia pushes him back down with a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll get it. You two continue.”

Sweat beads on Cody's forehead and his eyes are pleading with me to respond.

I grin, then put him out of his misery. "Yes! Of course, I'll marry you."

He lifts me up, spinning me around while kissing me.

"Where's the ring?" his mom asks.

Cody stops mid-spin and lowers me. With his forehead to mine, he chuckles. "I really imagined this going differently." He pulls a box out of his pocket and opens it.

He holds the ring up. The band is white gold, and it holds one large, round diamond with two smaller diamonds on each side. I cradle his face in my hands and kiss him.

"It's perfect. All of it. The proposal and the ring. I love you, Cody."

"I love you too."

Emelia rejoins us, carrying the pizza. "Mom, we should go, give them their privacy."

Kathy shakes her head. "Nonsense. It's time to celebrate!" She opens the box and takes a slice of pizza.

Cody grins. "Welcome to my crazy family."

I laugh. "I love them too."

EPILOGUE



LARS “THUNDER” Guthrie

Nine months later

As I walk around the back of the Morgan Thompson Security building, I can hear Rover and CT talking shit already. I laugh to myself. Hopefully since Stormy just bought Hawthorne’s half of Reed Hawthorne Security, I’ll get to work with these guys again.

As I make my way over some bushes, I’m questioning my choice of protective gear. I’ve played paintball before, and it can hurt like a motherfucker. But my three layers are currently making bending or moving fast tough.

Rover spots me before the rest. “Thunder! Glad you could make it.”

“Thanks for the invitation. Sounds fun.”

The whole crew is here, and most are wearing coveralls. A couple others are putting some on.

Rover throws a pair at me. “These should fit.”

Well shit. If I’d known about these, I wouldn’t be walking like the abdominal snowman right now. I toss them back. “Thanks, but I got on enough layers.”

Rover laughs. “Suit yourself.”

CT steps off the back deck as he zips up his coveralls. Then he rings a bell to get everyone’s attention. “Okay, listen up! I divided the group into two teams. The red team consists

of Rover, Connie, Cody, Fox, and Trax. The blue team consists of Thunder, Maverick, Sarina, Peaches, and myself.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Maverick says.

CT frowns. “The teams are even. It’s fine.”

“It’s fine now that I’m here. I’m on the blue team.”

All eyes turn to Cara Harding, CIA Agent, and my friend, who is now standing behind Maverick.

“Thunder told me what he was doing, and frankly, I’m insulted you never invited me. Then I realized I’m a better shot than all of you assholes, so I get it. All I can say is sorry in advance.”

I hold back my laugh. Cara is not this arrogant but get her in a competitive situation, and that woman can talk some serious shit.

CT stares at her for a moment. “Well. I’m glad you’re on my team.”

Trax laughs. “It doesn’t matter. No one beats me. Now let’s go.” Trax runs into the forest.

Peaches hands Cara one of the paintball guns.

“Thanks,” she says.

“Let’s go,” Maverick says as he walks into the woods.

CT walks next to me. “Are you done with your assignment here?”

“I am. I took a few days off so I could check out some of the hiking around here.”

CT smiles. “There are some great trails. Let me know if you need a hiking buddy. I’m always up for that.”

“Will do.”

Part of me feels guilty being gone from New York for so long. My brother said everything was fine with the properties. I have two rental properties my brother manages. Usually, I’m there to fix anything that breaks, but when I’m gone, all of that falls to him to deal with. And since he has a full-time job,

sometimes it can get stressful for him. Hopefully, he hired the landscaping company I told him about instead of trying to take care of it himself.

I'd ask him, but I know what happens when I try to have a conversation with him. He'll just bring up Madison again. My brother has it in his head that he met the perfect woman for me. His track record of trying to set me up is, well, beyond bad. I've learned just to avoid the entire topic now.

"Okay, everyone has one minute, then we start!" Peaches yells.

Twenty minutes later, most of us are back on the back deck of MTS.

"Shit, you guys are good," I say. I drink down the bottle of water I brought with me.

Since I wasn't familiar with the terrain, I snapped a twig as I walked, which got me taken out. Trax, Sarina, and Connie are all still in the woods.

"Ouch!" Sarina yells.

"Gotcha!" Trax says.

The two of them come walking out of the woods.

"And I win again!" Trax says.

I glance over at Rover, who is grinning.

"Not so fast. Connie is still out there."

The smile on Trax's face falls. "She is?"

Rover nods.

Trax heads back into the woods. But he doesn't get far. He walks back out covered in red paint and goes straight to Rover.

"I don't think your woman understands we're on the same team."

Connie is right behind Trax. "His woman understands perfectly. It was down to the two of us, and since you were clucking about how you'd won, I figured I'd let you know you were wrong."

Trax slowly turns and glares at Connie. Damn. I guess he doesn't like losing. Then he storms up to the deck, rips off his coveralls, and goes into the building.

"Don't mind him. He's been in a mood lately," Rover says to Connie.

"Hey, who wants to grab a beer?" CT asks.

"That sounds great," I say. My phone rings. It draws the guys' attention since it's the rock song, "Thunder."

It's my brother. I reluctantly answer it. "Hey, please don't tell me you're calling about trying to set me up again."

"No, I wish I was. Lars, you need to get home now."

The hairs on the back of my neck go up. "What's going on?"

"I just got off the phone with Detective Tranvers. He said they got a tip that the trailer parked in front of your rental is being used as a meth lab. If they get a warrant and discover it is, they will seize all of the property. He called me as a courtesy to give you a chance to deal with it."

I close my eyes as my head falls back. "Deck, fuck. Even if I catch the next flight, I likely won't be back till the morning."

"And I explained that to Tranvers. He says the most he can hold off is three days."

Well fuck. There goes my relaxing vacation. "Fine. I'll text you once I have my flight scheduled."

"Sorry. This cuts into your chance to relax."

"Yeah, maybe next time."

"Oh, since I have you on the phone. Once you get rid of those tenants, I have someone lined up to rent the place."

I chuckle. "That's fast."

"Well, Madison's current lease ends in a couple of months, and I talked her into renting one of your properties."

And there it is. “We can talk about this when I get back.” I pocket the phone and take a deep breath.

“Bad news?” Rover asks.

“Yeah, I have to head home tonight, unfortunately. But I do want to thank you for inviting me out for this. I needed it.”

“Hey, anytime you’re in town, you’re welcome to join us,” Rover says as he claps my shoulder.

Peaches is giving me a funny look. I haven’t figured that guy out yet. He’s quirky, that’s for sure.

“You all right?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “How did you get your call name?”

Well, I wasn’t expecting that. “My ring tone,” I say, holding up my phone. That’s bullshit, but I’m not in the mood to share stories. I have to get going.

“Why does he get the cool ring tones, and I get all the songs about peaches?” the man grumbles as he walks away.

I say my goodbyes and eventually make my way to the airport with my bag. I was fortunate to find a flight that will get me in late tonight. At least I can get some sleep before I check out the trailer in the morning.



WHEN I PULL up at the rental, I’m immediately angry. I was expecting some nice trailer and that this would all be a misunderstanding. When I rent out my properties, I meet with the tenants personally, and this couple seemed like an honest, straight-forward pair. But what I pull up to looks more like a scene out of *Breaking Bad*. There is no way that trailer could make it down the block, much less on a camping trip.

I park on the street and walk up to the house. The lawn needs to be mowed. I knock on the door and ring the doorbell. No answer. Then I check out the trailer. There is a padlock on the outside. I try to look in the windows, but they’re all

covered with cardboard. Well fuck. There's only one way I'm going to get the answer I need.

I go back to my car and grab my toolbox. I fish out my bolt cutters and return to the lock. My brother will be here any minute. I should probably wait for him, but the sooner I get this lock off, the sooner I'll know what the fuck is going on here. Because it doesn't look good.

"Hey, who the hell do you think you are?" A voice comes from behind me.

I roll my eyes, ready for this confrontation. I turn as I say, "The fucking land—"

Then something painful jolts my chest. The next thing I know I'm on the ground writhing uncontrollably. They fucking tased me.

One of them rolls me onto my stomach. Cold metal grips my wrists as the sound of handcuffs clicking shut tells me I've been bound. This isn't good.

This must be a misunderstanding. "I wasn't trying to steal anything. I'm the landlord. I got a call from the police to clear the trailer off or they will."

Apparently, they don't believe me because they shove me into the trunk of their car. Where is my brother? Damn it Deck, today is not the day to be late.

The engine turns on and the car is moving. I spend the entire drive trying and failing to get my cell phone.

The sound of seagulls squawking tells me we are near the water. Where the hell are these guys taking me? I roll over a bit more and my hands connect with my phone.

Thank fuck. I try to call anyone I can without seeing the screen, but before I can, the trunk pops open.

They haul me out of the trunk. All I see is water in front of me as they walk me down a pier. We pass several boats but there are no people. Where are the people?

The men taunt me but all I'm thinking is how will I get out of the water wearing handcuffs? Shit. The water here is cold. It

may be early Spring, but we haven't had warm weather yet this season. Before I can finish that thought, I'm pushed from behind. I fall in. The men are standing on the dock staring down at me. Well, fuck me. How the hell am I going to get out of this one?

Want to know if Thunder survives this trap? [Click here for Thunder.](#)

Thank you for reading Cody. Want to read about how Ted lured Randy and Joseph to Joseph's house and what he did when he got them there? This bonus scene is only available to my VIP list. [Sign up here to get it.](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle Pays writes steamy romantic suspense with twists you won't see coming. She enjoys romance as well as mystery and suspense and blends them both using her beloved Pacific Northwest for inspiration with its mix of small towns and cities.

When she's not writing her characters into some kind of trouble, she can be found binging Netflix shows, trying to convince her children to eat her cooking, or playing with her puppy.

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