



His

SECRET

Obsession

MILANA SPENCER

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HIS SECRET OBSESSION

Milana Spencer

Childhood friend.

My flatmate, Lucas, is gorgeous, aloof, and barely tolerates me. We used to be childhood friends but everything changed in high school. Now our relationship is... *complicated*, to say the least.

High school enemy.

Now that I'm in university, I decide to put myself out there romantically. But when I get into my first relationship, there's just one problem: Lucas hates my new girlfriend with a fiery passion.

University flatmate.

Whenever I mention her name or invite her to our apartment, he gets more pissed off. Whenever he sees us touch or kiss, he looks murderous. And soon I have to wonder...is Lucas *jealous*?

Future lover?

When secrets start to unravel and betrayals come to light, I learn there's more to Lucas than I ever realised. And perhaps the romance I've been seeking has been right in front of me this entire time.

'His Secret Obsession' is a friends-to-enemies-to lovers New Adult M/M romance with sexy scenes, a lot of jealousy and a guaranteed HEA.

Note: This book contains explicit language and sexual scenes.

As this story is set in Australia, it is written with Australian
English.

CHAPTER ONE

Now

Tonight, I'm going on my first date. Ever.

We're meeting at six and it's now 5:30. I've changed my shirt three times. Ultimately, I decided to go with a plain navy shirt made out of stiff cotton that makes my shoulders look broader than they actually are.

My reflection stares back at me in the bathroom mirror. I've applied deodorant, washed my face, and shaved, but I don't know what to do with my hair. It's dark and choppy, which I like a lot because it makes me look edgier than I actually am (I'm the least edgy person I know). My older sister Jemima did it for free, so that's a plus. But right now, strands of hair fall over my forehead, making me look like a kid.

I don't want to look like a kid, though. I want to look cool.

"What are you doing?"

I jump. My flatmate and friend (frenemy? It's complicated) pokes his head into the bathroom, his short, straight copper hair and grey eyes catching in the light.

"Nothing," I tell him.

Lucas steps into the room, taking care not to bump his head on the doorframe. That's how tall he is. In comparison, I'm only 165 centimetres — 5 foot 5. A fact he never lets me forget.

"Why are you all dressed up?" he asks.

"I'm not dressed up."

“You’re wearing your favourite shirt.”

How does he know this is my favourite shirt? “Yeah, but it’s a casual shirt. I look casual... I do look casual, right?” I want to look like I’ve put in effort, but not too much effort. Like I care, but not too much. The last thing I want is to look desperate.

Lucas tilts his head as he appraises me, eyes dragging from the top of my head to the ends of my feet. “I s’pose. Maybe you just look dressed up to me because most of the time you look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“I’ve seen you pick up clothes off the floor and wear them too many times to count.”

“I only do that when they still smell clean! Besides, I’m saving on the water bill.”

“Saving on the water bill, huh? Then why do you take hour long showers every night?”

I flush. “They are not an hour long.”

He gives me a knowing look, a slow smirk spreading across his lips, and I feel my skin become hotter. Damn it. He knows what I do in the shower, doesn’t he? I wouldn’t be surprised — he must have needs too, after all. But I hope to god he doesn’t know *exactly* what I do in the shower. What method I use. There’s a reason I turn the water pressure up to full blast to drown out any noise.

Lucas leans one shoulder against the doorway and crosses his arms. “So, what’s the special occasion?”

I consider ignoring him, but I can’t help myself. “I’ve got a date,” I say, not bothering to suppress my smile.

Lucas blinks. “A...a what?”

“A date.”

He lets out a breathy laugh. “Sorry,” he says, brows coming together. “I must have misheard. For a moment, I thought you said you had a date.”

I turn around, take two steps towards him and punch him in the stomach. Unfortunately, his abdomen is solid muscle, so my fist doesn't do much.

"Don't be a dick," I tell him.

"How'd you convince her to go out with you? Did you bribe her? Kidnap her? Threaten to kill her family?"

"Shut up." I return to the front of the bathroom mirror and wet my hands in the sink. "I know you think I'm hideous looking, but I'm capable of getting a date, you know."

"I don't think you're hideous looking," he says.

I run my damp fingers through my hair in an attempt to style it. "You called me ugly all the time in high school. Remember when I went to Year 10 formal without a date, and you laughed at me and said, quote, 'Not surprising with a face like that'?"

Lucas rolls his eyes. "That was back in high school. Everyone was an asshole in high school."

"I wasn't an asshole," I counter.

"No, you weren't."

I pause. Is this one of the rare instances where Lucas is actually sort of nice?

"You were a wimp who let everyone walk all over you," he finishes.

I exhale slowly. I don't want to think about high school, not now and preferably never again. "This is a riveting chat and all, but I'm busy. Mind leaving me alone?"

He doesn't go, which I should've expected. Lucas doesn't listen to anyone. "So, how'd you meet the chick? I'm assuming it's a chick."

"Yes, she's a she," I reply. "Her name's Cleo. I met her on a dating app. She goes to our university and studies communications." I push my hair back, but my fringe flops back in place.

"She taller than you?"

“No, she is not. She’s really nice, and she likes reading, too.”

“Everyone likes reading,” Lucas says.

“Yeah, right. I bet you haven’t picked up a book since English class last year.” I run my hands under the tap and use more water to style my hair. A fat droplet slides down a strand of hair and plops into my left eyeball.

Lucas chuckles. “You look like you just went swimming.”

I glare at him in the mirror’s reflection, but I can’t argue. My hair looks too saturated.

With a grumble, I grab a hand towel and rub it over the top of my head. “Why are you still here? Stop watching me like a creep.”

Instead of going away, he approaches, moving further into our tiny bathroom, until he’s behind me.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He snatches the towel from my hands. “Let me do it,” he says. Before I can react, his fingers comb through my hair. The feeling of his fingertips dragging over my scalp makes my spine tingle, and I let out an involuntary shiver.

Wow. I can see why cats and dogs like being patted so much. It feels nice. When I get a girlfriend, I’ll ask her to play with my hair like this.

Lucas massages my hair a little more, making it look natural, messy but not too messy, then opens the cabinet behind the mirror. From the top shelf, he pulls out a circular tin.

“What’s that?” I ask, as he unscrews the lid and dips his fingers inside.

“Hair wax. It’ll keep your hair in place.”

“I didn’t know you had that.” I look into the cabinets pretty much everyday, and they’re not that big either. Lucas and I are living on a budget so the apartment we rent is tiny, and that includes a minuscule bathroom.

“That’s because you’re not very observant, are you?”

I bristle. I’m plenty observant.

“Do you style your hair with wax?” I ask.

He wears an expression of concentration as he works the product into my hair. “I don’t use it that often. Only on special occasions.”

“So how do you usually do your hair, then?”

“Most of the time, I just wake up and brush it a bit.”

Of course he does. Everything comes naturally to Lucas. He’s never had to try. I bet that with his (as much as I hate admitting it) conventionally attractive face and tall, lean body, he could show up to a bar wearing a garbage bag and still have women fawning over him.

After another minute, Lucas pulls his hands away. Immediately, I miss the feeling of his fingertips rubbing against my head, but I’m distracted by how my hair looks. He’s pushed my bangs back and to the side, and I look... suave. Like a budget James Bond. Nerdy university student by day, ruthless spy by night.

“There,” he says. “You look good.”

My eyes flick to meet his in the mirror. “You really think so?”

“Yeah.”

Some of my nervousness about the date ebbs away. I feel good. I look good. Everything will be fine.

I check my phone — 5:45. “Shit, I’m gonna be late.” I rush out of the bathroom and hurry to the front door.

Lucas follows me, watching as I pull on my shoes.

“Wish me luck,” I say as I’m leaving, and the door slams shut behind me before I can hear his response.

*

After getting off the tram, I run through the busy city streets until I arrive at Melbourne Central, a large shopping centre in

the middle of the city. I go inside and make it under the golden clock at 5:59.

Cleo's not here. I pull out my phone.

Charlie: Hey, I'm here :)

Five minutes tick by without a response. I try not to wonder whether I've been stood up. That only happens in movies, right?

My phone buzzes.

Cleo: Gonna be twenty minutes late, sorry!

While I wait, I people watch and breathe deeply in an attempt to keep calm. This is my first time doing anything remotely romantic. I haven't even held a girl's hand before. I know a lot of my classmates dated in high school — Lucas alone had about a hundred girlfriends. But I never did.

To be fair, I looked like crap in high school. I was short and skinny, and my cheeks were covered with bright red acne. I had terrible posture, like I was trying to fold myself into something as small as possible so no one would look at me. All I needed was a pair of glasses stuck together with tape and I'd look like the stereotypical dork from an American teen movie.

The closest I got to getting horizontal with another person was when I was 15, when Lucas threw me onto the carpet in my parent's living room to taunt me. He held me down with his hands on my wrists, his knees digging into my thighs, his weight crushing me. I was so scared, I could've pissed my pants. So obviously, that doesn't count.

When I started university earlier this year, I decided it was time for me to get some experience. I made my dating app profile about a month ago, then asked Jemima to check it and give me her opinion.

“Well, there's no photos of you holding a fish or of a random car. So, I approve,” she'd said. When I asked if the answers to the prompts were okay, she said, “Yeah, you don't sound psychotic or misogynistic. Good job.”

Next was the swiping. At first, the profiles overwhelmed me — every girl was gorgeous, and many of them featured photos of them drinking cocktails, or wearing evening dresses, or travelling Europe. They seemed to lead such glamorous lives, and every one of them was way out of my league.

I got a few matches those first few weeks. Half of the profiles were girls advertising their OnlyFans accounts. The other half would stop responding after a couple of messages.

Then, a week ago, I matched with Cleo. I messaged her first, just a simple *hello* :) not expecting her to respond at all. In fact, I was surprised we matched in the first place. But, to my surprise, she replied with *Nice bookcase*, which had been in the background of one of my photos.

Haha thanks, I'd replied. Do you like to read?

From there, we started talking every day for a week. I quickly learned that Cleo was a student at my university. I told her I studied psychology. We were both in our first year. We both liked bubble tea, dogs (even though neither of us had any pets) and the beach.

Then, yesterday, she messaged me: *So are you going to ask me out or what?*

I'd stared at my screen. Should I have asked her out already? I didn't want to seem too eager. Nonetheless, I replied.

Charlie: Would you like to go out for dinner sometime?

Cleo: Yes.

Charlie: Would tomorrow night work for you?

Cleo: Yeah, that'd be perfect. What time?

Charlie: 6? We can meet in the city, at Melbourne Central.

Cleo: Great :) See you then.

Now, I check the time on my phone. Twenty minutes have passed, and there's still no sign of her. I'm about to check my messages again when someone rushes up to me.

“Hi! Charlie, right?” She brushes her hair out of her eyes. “I’m so sorry for being late, it’s totally unforgivable. Nice to finally meet you.”

I stare. She’s prettier in person. Long brown hair, a few shades lighter than Lucas’s copper hair. Full red lips, arched brows, brown eyes with long lashes.

My stomach squirms. Pretty people make me nervous.

“Uh, yeah, nice to meet you too,” I manage. “Don’t worry about being late, I get it.”

Cleo smiles. “Let’s get dinner,” she says. “Where are we going?”

“I have a couple of suggestions.” Last night, I spent an hour researching restaurants. I wanted to go somewhere nice, but not crazy expensive. While I work part time at a bubble tea store, I’m not rolling in money. “Do you prefer Malaysian, Italian or burgers?”

“Umm.” She taps her face as she thinks. “Is Malaysian food spicy?”

“It can be, though I don’t find it that spicy.”

“Well, I can’t handle spice, like, at all. And I don’t really like burgers. They’re so hard to eat in a dignified way, you know what I mean? They just fall apart and sauce gets on your fingers. Let’s go with the Italian place.”

I nod, and we head out of the shopping centre onto the street. Cleo chatters on for a minute about how her train was late and that public transport in this city is atrocious, then suddenly says, “You’re shorter than I expected.”

“Oh.” I’m silent for a moment. “I have my height on my profile.”

“I know, I know,” she says, “but to be honest, I don’t know what all those feet and inches mean. We use the metric system in this country for a reason, you know?”

I force a chuckle, then realise how fake and weird it sounds and stop.

“So, how’s your week been?” I ask, as casually as I can manage.

Cleo launches into a story about how one of her tutors for her advertising class is the worst. I nod and ask questions, feeling both relieved and anxious about the fact that I don’t have to talk much. I don’t want her to think I’m boring. I know I’m not physically attractive, so my personality’s all I really have.

Thankfully, by the time we reach the dimly-lit restaurant and are seated — “romantic,” Cleo says, about the candles on the wooden tables and the olive trees in the corners — I’m feeling more relaxed. We order our food — pasta for her, pizza for me, and when she asks me if I’ve done much travelling, I take the opportunity to talk about the school trip I took to Italy during high school.

“You must have eaten a lot of Italian food,” she says.

“Yes. I gained, like, five kilos.”

She laughs. “Well, then you can tell me how authentic this food is.”

When the food comes, I dig in, though I quickly learn it’s difficult to hold a conversation while eating, especially when she asks me a question when my mouth is full. I have to chew quickly, and I swallow an olive whole when she asks me whether I’m looking for something serious or casual.

“Well,” I say, eyes watering from the olive scraping down my throat. “I’m looking for a long-term relationship. So, something serious.”

Cleo nods slowly, spinning pasta around her fork.

“What about you?” I ask.

“I’m open to both,” she says. “But something long-term... sounds nice.”

We chat for a bit more and finish off our meals. When we’re ready to leave, I zip off to cover the bill and return to the table to find Cleo on her phone.

“Hey,” I say.

She smiles up at me, and we walk out into the night, the cool autumn breeze brushing over us. “Would you like me to transfer you half for dinner?” she asks.

“That’s okay. It was my treat.”

Her shoulders relax. “Such a gentleman. Thank you.” She laughs, which warms my body. I can’t believe I’m pleasing such a pretty girl.

We wander down the street, and I try to think of something to say while Cleo checks her phone, puts it down, picks it up and types something, then puts it down again.

“Do you want to grab some dessert?” I ask. “I know a great place nearby.”

“Oh, I would, but I’m full,” she says. She frowns at her phone. “Actually, I better get going. My friend’s kind of having a mental breakdown.”

“Oh. Okay. That’s all good.” I force a smile.

“I’m really sorry,” she says and reaches out to touch my forearm. My stomach swoops at the contact. “Sometimes she can be so needy and...” she shakes her head. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter. The point is, I had a great time. And thanks for dinner. Talk to you later.”

And before I have a chance to say another word, she’s gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Then

Lucas and I became friends in grade one. There was only one primary school in the small rural town I grew up in, and there were forty kids in our grade. The girls climbed the monkey bars or searched for fairies in the flower gardens, while the other boys played tiggy or ate mud. I tried it once — eating mud, that is — and promptly spat it out. I decided I'd rather play by myself.

The first time I spoke to Lucas, I was halfway up a tree. He stood on the ground, squinting up at me, and asked what I was doing.

“This is the crow’s nest,” I explained.

“Crow’s nest?”

“Of my pirate ship. And I’m the captain.”

“Oh,” said Lucas. His front two baby teeth had fallen out by then, giving him the slightest lisp. “Can I play?”

“You can,” I said, and thus began the adventures of Captain Charlie and his first mate, Lucas. We played pirates every recess and lunch. When it rained, we’d read books about Blackbeard and Anne Bonny in the library. Together, we created faraway lands and evil villains.

By the time we were in grade three, our pirate ship had doubled in size. One day, I decided I needed to climb the crow’s nest even higher to check for enemy ships. I pulled myself onto a thin branch that dipped with my weight. There was a crack, and then leaves were slapping my face, branches

scratching my cheeks, and I landed on the dirt, my arm underneath me.

Lucas screamed. He ran over to me, shouting at the teacher on yard duty that I was dying.

I wasn't dying. I'd just broken my arm.

When I showed up to school the next day with a cast, everyone wanted to sign it. That was the first and only time I've ever been popular at school. Lucas made sure he signed my cast first, though, and wrote his name so large, it spanned the entire length of my forearm. While the other kids said it was so cool and they wanted to break their arm too, Lucas never did. Instead, he asked me every day if I was feeling better. He would carry my pencil case for me and help me write notes for class, and he even shared half of his strawberry roll-up every recess (none of which was necessary, but I didn't complain).

All throughout primary school, I could say with certainty that Lucas was my bestest friend. I was closer to him than my older sister, who always said I was annoying, or my younger brother Nate, who cried every five seconds and hogged all of my parent's attention.

But then high school happened, and that's when everything changed.

CHAPTER THREE

Now

Charlie: Hey, it was great seeing you tonight. I had a lot of fun :) Would you be interested in catching up again?

It's been fifteen hours since I sent the message. I sit at the kitchen island, trying to finish my readings for this week's classes, but I can't help checking my phone every five minutes. She read it this morning, but she hasn't replied. Why not?

Maybe she hated me.

Oh well. It's fine.

It's fine.

It's fi—

“What are you looking at?” Lucas's head appears over my shoulder, and I manage not to fall off my stool.

“Can you stop sneaking up on me like that?”

“I didn't sneak up on you. You would've heard my footsteps if you weren't so preoccupied with your phone,” he says, then leans closer, and I can smell his shampoo. It's fresh, almost sweet, like tropical flowers. “What are you looking at?”

“The girl I went on a date with last night hasn't replied to my message. She kinda left abruptly as well. Maybe she didn't like me.”

“Show me her profile.”

Against my better judgement, I do. Maybe Lucas can tell me if I'm missing something — he is more experienced in the

dating game than me, after all.

He scrolls through her photos. There's couple of selfies, some group shots, and a photo of her in a dress holding a glass of champagne.

"I don't like her," Lucas announces.

My head whips to face him. "What? How can you say that? You don't even know her."

"She gives me a bad vibe."

"Exactly what about her gives you a bad vibe?"

Lucas turns his head, his nose almost touching mine. "She just does," he says, looking dead into my eyes.

I shrink away, using my free hand to shove him back. "Whatever."

"Are you busy right now?"

I turn my phone off and set it down. "Just doing some uni work, why?"

"We need to buy some groceries. I've run out of protein powder."

"That sounds like a you problem."

"And we've also run out of milk. And chicken. And frozen blueberries, which you constantly chomp on at night."

"Eh," I say as I scroll through PDF files on my computer, the words blurring by. I don't understand why my professors assign so much reading. I'll just read the introduction and the conclusion of these studies and be done with it.

"Come on," Lucas says, tugging on my arm. His hands are so big, his thumb and fingers almost touch when wrapped around my bicep. "We're going."

"Are we?"

"Yep. My schedule's packed for the rest of the week, so today's the only day we can go."

"You can go alone. I know for a fact you can carry all the groceries by yourself."

“No, you’re coming with me, because you’re my roommate. We share responsibilities, remember?”

I don’t budge.

“That’s it,” Lucas says as he scoops me up. I shriek, and admittedly, it’s not very manly of me, but how else am I meant to react when I’m suddenly tossed over someone’s shoulder?

“LUCAS!” I yell, battering his back with my fists. “Let me down. This isn’t funny.”

He used to do this all the time. First, it was during the summer before high school, when he grew half a head taller than me overnight and could carry me around with ease. He did it to make me laugh.

He did it again, a few years later, in high school. But not to make me laugh. No, it was more to demonstrate just how tiny and weak and helpless I was compared to him. He did it in my parent’s living room when he tossed me onto the carpet and held me down and lowered his head so that his hair tickled my cheek, and whispered into my ear —

Anyway.

Sometimes I can’t believe we became friends again. Although, to be honest, I don’t know if we’re friends, exactly. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say childhood-friends-turned-enemies-turned-roommates-who-tolerate-each other.

Lucas drops me on the couch. I land with a gasp, and then, a few seconds later, he’s putting shoes on my feet.

“Alright, alright,” I say, waving him out of the way. “I can put my own shoes on.”

The most efficient way to stop him bothering me is to go grocery shopping with him, and besides, maybe it’ll distract me from Cleo. It’s not like I need to do my readings right this instant anyway.

After my shoes are on, I grab a handful of reusable grocery bags and turn off my computer. Lucas waits by the front door, a smug look on his face.

“I hate you,” I say as we head outside.

“You love me,” he says.

“No. I really don’t.”

*

We walk to a supermarket that’s only a few hundred metres away from our apartment complex. Lucas talks about volleyball. Earlier this semester, he convinced me to join the social volleyball sessions held at the university sports centre. It was a good way to exercise, he said, and, “Charlie, you should probably exercise more.”

After bugging me about it for three hours straight, I agreed. We went one evening and joined the beginners’ group, and it was a lot more fun than I expected. Since then, we’ve been going weekly. However, after one month, Lucas moved up into the intermediate group.

“I’m not actually that good,” he says now, in a rare display of humility. “I’m just tall, so I can block and spike the ball more easily.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, fighting the urge to roll my eyes.

“Seriously, the coach constantly roasts me.” He leans over and ruffles my hair. “You’re getting pretty good, though.”

I push him away and flatten my hair back to the way it was. “Why do you say that?”

“I watched you during the practice match.”

I look up at him. Every time we walk together and I want to meet his eyes, I have to crane my neck. It drives me crazy. “You did?” I ask.

“Yeah. You’re getting better. Never would’ve expected you’d be a sporty guy, but here you are. Now I just need to convince you to hit the gym with me.”

“No way. Never gonna happen.”

“Come on, Lucas. You need to do it for your own good.” He grabs my wrist and holds it up. “I could snap this like a twig.”

I snatch my hand back. This happens every time — Lucas will be friendly for two seconds, and then he'll say something like that. "Stop trying to hold my hand," I say.

That stuns him. Then, he laughs, a harsh, nasty sound.

My skin burns. I think of high school and of my unanswered message to Cleo, and then I walk away, but no matter how fast I am, it's pointless. Lucas, with his long legs, catches up with me almost immediately.

*

By the time we're in the health food section of the supermarket, I've lost the energy to keep being angry at Lucas. Maybe it's because sometimes when I look at him, I see the little kid who used to follow me around.

I used to be taller than him, back in primary school. I was taller, and he was shorter, and I was the captain, and he was my first mate. Look at how things have changed.

"So," I say as he reads the back label of a huge container of protein powder. "What exactly is the point of that stuff?"

"Well," Lucas says, "it's all about the amount of protein you consume each day. When you're trying to build muscle, you need a lot..."

My phone buzzes. I nod along to what Lucas is saying, but I'm not listening as I check the notification.

"...gram per kilo of weight—"

"She replied!" I shout, then remember where I am and lower my voice. I shake my phone in Lucas's face. "She replied!" I repeat in a whisper-shout.

He frowns. "Who?"

"Cleo! The girl I went on a date with! She said, and I quote, hanging out was super fun, smiley-face. I'd def be down to hang out again. Are you free Thursday night? End quote. Wow. She doesn't hate me after all."

"Why on earth would she hate you?" Lucas asks.

I don't reply. Instead, my fingers fly across my phone as I type a response. "Thursday...Night...Works... Same... Time...and...meeting...place...question mark. That sounds okay, right? Doesn't matter, I've already sent it."

I tuck my phone away and smile up at Lucas. "Sorry. I interrupted your protein speech. As you were saying?"

His mouth is a flat line. "You seem awfully excited about this Claudia chick."

"Cleo," I correct. "Why wouldn't I be excited?"

"Do you like her?"

"Of course."

His face darkens. "What exactly do you like about her?"

"Well, she's pretty and she's shorter than me, and she's nice."

"Pretty, short and nice. Wow. She sounds *amazing*."

"Hey, you don't need to be a dick. Besides, even if she looked like a gremlin, I wouldn't care."

"You wouldn't?"

"No. It's all about personality."

He laughs. "That's a lie, and we all know it."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is."

"No," I repeat, my tone firmer. "It isn't. You're only saying that because you're hot and drowning in people who like you, so you can afford to be shallow and picky. Me? I'd be lucky to have anyone like me."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I cringe. Even though it's the truth, it sounds so sad and pathetic spelled out like that. I wish I hadn't said anything. Someone like Lucas would never understand.

Silence stretches out between us. I feel Lucas's gaze at me, prickling at my skin, but I can't bear to meet his eyes, so I stare at the tiled floor.

“You think I’m hot?” he asks eventually.

Seriously? *That’s* his response?

I sigh. “Come on,” I say, grabbing the container from his hands and placing it in the trolley with a thud. “We’ve got groceries to buy.”

*

On Thursday night, I meet Cleo for our second date. She chooses a restaurant by Southbank, a strip of fancy restaurants facing the Yarra River. I agree, and we go to a Greek place, though I start to sweat when I realise how much everything costs, especially when taking into account the wine she orders.

But, while I’m telling a joke, she touches my arm as she laughs, so that makes everything okay. It’s disconcerting, how nice it is to have someone’s undivided attention on you.

On our third date, we go to the National Gallery of Victoria. I muster up the courage to hold her hand, and to my surprise, she doesn’t rip her hand away from mine. Instead, she holds my hand tight and smiles at me.

“And then,” I tell the guys sitting before me, “for our fourth date — which was last night — I kissed her.”

There’s a variety of reactions. Hugo, a blond guy with freckles, grins widely. He was the first friend I made at university. We met at the science department orientation day, when we were in the same group for a treasure hunt activity.

Then there’s Gilbert, who goes by Gilly. He studies business and lives in the same student accommodation building as Hugo, so that’s how I know him. We’re both the middle child out of three siblings, but while being the middle child made me quieter and want less attention, it only made him louder.

He raises a brow. “You waited until your fourth date to kiss her?” he asks.

“I’m shy,” I say, drinking some of my bubble tea so I don’t have to explain myself further.

The four of us are sitting in the university's cafeteria, which includes all the major fast food and bubble tea chains, as well as sushi, ramen and pizza places. Hugo and Gilly are drinking energy drinks, and Lucas is drinking water, because he's healthy like that.

Lucas hasn't said anything the entire time I've been talking. Right now, he looks bored, blankly surveying the cafeteria.

"Dude, she totally knows you're a virgin if you waited until the fourth date to kiss her," Gilly says.

"Hey, don't make him feel bad for going at his own pace," Hugo says and gives me an encouraging smile. "I think you did good."

"Thanks, Hugo," I say. "And besides, she knows I'm a virgin anyway."

Gilly almost spits out his drink.

"We talked about our past relationships on our third date," I explain. "She knows I've never dated anyone before."

"And what about her?" Gilly asks, leaning forward. "Has she gotten around?"

Hugo punches him in the arm. "Don't be a dick," he says while Gilly winces.

"She just said she's had a few relationships before, nothing serious," I say. "She was vague about it."

"Yeah, she's a ho." He quickly raises his hands up in surrender before Hugo can punch him again. "I mean that as a term of empowerment, not to slut shame. I'm all for the sexual liberation of women. Equality and feminism, yaddy-yadda-ya."

Hugo narrows his eyes. "You're full of shit."

"I'm not!" Gilly protests, then turns his attention to me. "Did she say anything about her past relationships?"

"A little. She said that all of her exes were crazy." Last night, while we were sitting on a bench after our first kiss, she

started talking about her ex-boyfriend and how he was a piece of shit. She talked about him for a really long time, actually, but then she said that she just wanted to be transparent.

Then she said that she liked me a lot and...wow. It was like I'd just been given a drug or something, because I felt both ecstatic and relieved. It's such a simple sentence, "I like you a lot". But it meant a lot to me.

"What do you think, Lucas?" Hugo asks, looking down the table.

"Huh?" Lucas turns to us.

"Were you not listening to anything we've been saying?" Gilly demands. "Fine. Here's the rundown."

While Gilly talks, Lucas watches me, his expression blank.

Honestly, I'm surprised Lucas became friends with Hugo and Gilly. During high school, he always hung out with the jocks — the type of guys that spent their lunch time playing footy and their class time at the back of the classroom, talking back to teachers. I assumed that since he hung out with idiots, he also had rocks for brains, and then I found out he got into an engineering course.

One day, I invited Hugo and Gilly to the apartment to play some video games on the couch. Lucas was home at the time, and they quickly got along. I can't say I was surprised — everyone likes Lucas.

Usually, he's more involved in the conversation, teasing the rest of us and making Hugo and Gilly laugh. Today's the first time he's been so withdrawn.

"So that's the short version," Gilly finishes. "What d'you reckon?"

Finally, Lucas breaks eye contact and looks down at his water bottle. He spins it between his large hands. "To be honest..." he begins.

"Yeah?" Gilly asks eagerly, leaning forward.

"...I really don't give a shit. Can we talk about something else?"

The table is silent for a moment. I feel...a little insulted. Though I should be grateful. I'd rather him be uninterested than hear him talk about how much Cleo gives him a bad vibe again.

"No," Gilly eventually says, slamming both hands on the table. "This is important! Our boy's about to get his first girlfriend, and as his mates, it's our duty to provide him with emotional support. Don't you agree, Hugo?"

"Yes," he says. "This is one of the rare instances I actually agree with you."

"Well then, I'm leaving. I've got better things to do." Lucas stands up. "Catch you guys later."

Hugo and Gilly raise their hands in goodbye before focusing on me.

"What are you going to do the next time you see her?" Hugo asks as Lucas packs his bag.

"I'm going to ask her to be my girlfriend," I reply.

There's a loud bang as Lucas pushes his chair into the table. The rest of us flinch, and when I look at Lucas, now walking away, his shoulders are stiff and his jaw clenched.

"Jeez," Gilly says. "What's his problem?"

I shrug. "Sometimes he gets moody like that. Just ignore him."

*

On Friday, Cleo and I walk around the botanical gardens. It's a beautiful place — manicured lawns, majestic trees, native flowers providing bursts of orange and purple amongst the greenery.

Nearby the lake, where ducks glide across the still surface, I ask Cleo to be my girlfriend. She says yes. We kiss again, this time with tongue. I feel a little anxious about it — obviously I don't have much practice — but Cleo runs her hands up and down my neck and arm, so I think I'm doing an okay job.

That evening, I hum to myself as I enter the apartment. Since it's late on a Friday night, I expect Lucas to be out with friends or picking up girls at a club, but to my surprise, he's sitting on the couch, watching the news on the TV.

"What's got you looking so happy?" he asks.

"Guess who's got a girlfriend?"

He doesn't return my smile. "Don't tell me you're official with that Clementine chick."

"Cleo," I correct, smiling at the ceiling. "Wow. Life is wonderful. How have I never noticed how amazing life is before?" I walk over to him and shake his shoulders. He's heavy, so he doesn't move much, but that doesn't dampen my excitement. "I have a girlfriend! And she's perfect. Nice and interesting and cute and perfect. I can't believe she said yes. I'm so lucky."

CHAPTER FOUR

Then

The first time Lucas visited my house, we lay on our stomachs in the living room. Between us was a piece of A3 paper, stained brown and yellow and stiff under our fingers. Earlier that day, we'd brewed coffee and spilled it over the paper, then dried it on the porch.

I uncapped my mum's fountain pen, which I'd taken from the study. Black ink stained my fingertips as I explained that we were drawing a map of our own world, where we could do anything we wanted. I drew a palace made of pavlova for Lucas, since that was his favourite food.

He drew a mountain of blueberries for me.

"It's perfect!" I exclaimed, before remembering we couldn't have a world without pirate ships. I started to draw one, and unlike my other drawings, you could actually tell what it was, because I'd practiced drawing them a lot.

"Do you want to draw one too?" I asked Lucas, handing him the pen.

He shook his head. "I'd rather stay on your pirate ship."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I can keep being your first mate, I don't mind."

I thought about it, then shook my head. "I think we should both be captains." I drew two stick figures and added a pirate hat to both of them.

"Is that even possible?" Lucas asked. "I thought there could only be one captain."

I told him it didn't matter since it was our world, so we could make the rules. If we were both captains, we'd both have the same amount of important-ness and special-ness.

Lucas's eyes were big, his smile wide. "Okay!" he said.

We spent hours filling out the rest of the map. There was the ocean, filled with dangerous sea creatures, and several islands, and our kingdom, where we sat on two thrones, wearing tall crowns as we held hands.

"Why are we holding hands?" I asked.

"Because we're best friends!" Lucas said. He even wrote it on the map, in uneven handwriting with big spaces between the letters: *Charlie + Lucas. Bestest friends forever.*

That night, when it was time for him to go home, I rolled up the map and used one of Jemima's hair ties to keep it sealed. "Here," I said, handing it to Lucas while our mothers watched, laughing softly. "Protect this with your life."

"Aye," Lucas said, wearing a serious expression. He took the map and held it like it was precious cargo.

CHAPTER FIVE

Now

I dash around the living room, checking that everything is in its place. Lucas and I are already tidy people, but I want to make sure everything is extra clean for Cleo. She's the type of girl to check tram seats for weird stains and her food at restaurants for stray hairs. Her clothes are always ironed, and her white shoes are always clean. After a week of officially being her boyfriend, I've learned she's got high standards, and I'm making sure I meet them.

I check my bedroom, confirming there isn't any dust left on the furniture or windowpane. Are all my clothes hung up in the closet? Yes. Have I made my bed? Yes. I inspect my bedside table. On the top, there's a lamp, a box of tissues and the book I'm currently reading. The first drawer has some cords, cough lollies, hand sanitiser and a bunch of random papers. The second drawer —

“Shit,” I say, scooping up all of the... *ahem*... adult paraphernalia into my arms. Where can I hide this stuff?

In the end, I settle for the very back of my underwear drawer. The last thing I want is for Cleo to find my collection and think I'm a total pervert.

Afterwards, I survey my room. It looks good, and tidy, and normal. I wonder what'll happen when Cleo comes over. We might make out on my bed. We might...

We might have sex. I mean, probably not today. But eventually. That's what couples do.

Wait... I don't have any condoms.

That's okay, I'll buy some the next chance I get.

But Cleo's coming over today. Soon. What if we're on my bed and she tells me she wants to and I'm not prepared?

I have to be prepared. Just in case.

My phone buzzes.

Cleo: Will be there in 5! xx

There's not enough time to run to the closest supermarket. What do I do?

Then I remember who my roommate is. I snatch up my phone and call Lucas's number. It rings and rings. *Pick up, pick up, pick up.*

He doesn't answer.

Okay, I'll go into Lucas's room and grab one from his bedside drawer. He won't mind. He comes into my room all the time to bother me. Sometimes I'll be watching a YouTube video on my laptop, and he'll flop onto my bed and start poking my side, the soft part under my ribs, because he's an asshole like that.

An asshole who likely has countless condoms. He won't notice if one's missing. But even if he does, I'll pay him back. I'll pay him back with a whole box.

With that settled, I enter his room. It's the same size as mine and also looks out at a grey concrete street. He's also got identical furniture — a double bed, bedside table, desk and bookshelf filled with sports gear and random nicknacks.

The first drawer of his bedside table houses tissues, a bunch of pens held together with a rubber band, and a spare phone charger. I pull open the second drawer. There's nothing inside it except for a book.

I didn't know he read.

The cover reads *Pride and Prejudice* in gold lettering. *Impossible*. There's no freaking way that Lucas likes Jane Austen.

I pick up the book and immediately realise something's wrong. The pages are all stuck together. I flip open the front cover and find a rectangle has been hollowed from the centre of the book, replaced with a shiny silver safe. It's fitted with a combination lock, similar to the kind we used for our lockers in high school, just smaller, and the three numbers at the front of the lock are 0-0-0.

What the...? Why does Lucas have some weird-ass book safe in his bedside table?

Is there even anything inside it? I raise it to my ear and shake it carefully, in case there's something fragile inside. Something slides, making a whispery *shhh* noise.

My phone rings, and I almost drop the book-safe onto the ground. My heart pounds, rabbit-fast, like I've been caught stealing, but my phone screen reads Cleo.

"Hey," she says when I answer. "I'm downstairs."

"Great!" I say, forcing a smile into my voice. "I'll be down in a moment."

After I end the phone call, I look at the book-safe. *Time to put this away.* Before I do, though, I check the back. It just has a Pride and Prejudice quote in the centre. "*You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.*"

A beautiful quote, to be fair, but not exactly helpful. But, in the bottom right corner of the back, in minuscule writing, is *ClassicBookSecrets*.

I've kept Cleo waiting too long. I return the book to its drawer, rush out of Lucas's bedroom, and through the front door.

*

"Hi," I say when I meet Cleo in the lobby. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"That's fine," she says, leaning in to give me a quick kiss. She smells like raspberries.

I show her how to use the intercom so that next time she can come straight up, then take her to the elevator. She grabs

my hand.

“How was your week?” she asks.

“Mm, pretty good. Although the next few weeks are going to get busy with my mid-term assignments.”

“Me too! My psycho tutor — the one I told you about, remember? — is making my class write extra mini reports every week. I literally want to gouge my eyeballs out.”

“Maybe we should plan some study dates,” I suggest.

“That’d be cute,” Cleo agrees.

We step out of the elevator and walk down the hallway to my apartment. “Welcome to my humble abode,” I say after I unlock the door and push it open.

Cleo walks through. “Nice view,” she says.

“Thanks.” I close the door. “I have a flatmate, but he’s not in right now. Erm... Do you want something to eat or drink?”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. I haven’t eaten yet, so is it all good if I make something?”

“Sure, go ahead.” She follows me to the kitchen and sits down on one of the stools.

I grab some ingredients from the fridge and pantry to make a sandwich. “So,” I ask, “how have you been?”

“Good! My friends and I went to this rooftop bar. It was a little out of the city, but it has this gorgeous view of a park. Here, I’ll show you.” She pulls out her phone, which is the latest model. Every time I see it, it looks humungous in her tiny hands.

She opens Instagram and shows me a gallery of photos featuring her and her friends drinking brightly-coloured cocktails in front of a string of fairy lights.

“Wow,” I say.

“The drinks were pretty good,” she continues. “These girls are some of my closest friends.” She lists off a bunch of names

too quickly for me to remember any of them.

“Cool,” I say. “Maybe I’ll meet your friends some day?”

She hums, turning the phone back to herself. “Maybe. I wouldn’t want to bore you, though.”

“Why would that bore me? I want to learn more about my girlfriend’s life.”

She laughs. “You’re so sweet, Charlie.” She goes quiet for a moment, fingers tapping against the phone screen. “Don’t mind me, I’m just replying to some comments.”

“Sure, go ahead.” I focus on slicing a tomato, and once I’ve made my sandwich, I throw away the scraps. I take my plate to the other side of the kitchen island and sit down beside Cleo.

“You put a lot of effort into your Instagram,” I say.

Her shoulders stiffen, and she looks at me. “Yeah. A lot of people do.”

“I didn’t mean that in a judgemental way,” I quickly say. “I’m...impressed, I guess.”

She tilts her head. “Impressed?”

“Yeah. Most things people put time and effort into are impressive. Unless it’s like building a drug empire or — ”

She cuts me off with a laugh. “Well, I do study this stuff as part of my degree. I want to work in social media management or marketing after I graduate, so looking after my personal accounts is just practice.” She pauses. “My ex thought it was dumb. Shallow, you know?”

“Well, I guess it can be shallow,” I say. “I’m not really a big social media person myself. I just use it to connect with friends, but that’s it.”

“I kinda figured that, Mr no-profile-picture-and-empty-feed,” Cleo says with a smile. “And I agree. Maybe it is shallow. But it’s still important.”

“What do you mean?”

She pauses. “It’s like judging people on their looks. It’s shallow, and everyone knows it, but we still do it anyway. Everyone’s going to treat a young woman who looks like a supermodel a hundred times better than the old man with no hair and missing teeth. It’s just a fact of life.”

“Well...yes,” I say. I know it’s true. I’ve seen the way girls in high school would smile and giggle when the cool, handsome boys cracked a joke in class, but every time I tried to be funny, they’d roll their eyes and call me a weirdo. I’ve heard the way my grandparents would compliment Jemima on her beauty, the way they’d pinch Nate’s cheeks and call him adorable, and when it came to me, they’d praise my... interesting personality.

Which is fine. I’d rather be interesting than attractive. But still.

“Well, social media is just an extension of that,” Cleo continues. “Social media is your face and body, just digital. Even if you don’t post photos of yourself, it’s still in the way you post photos of a basic-ass sunset or of an expensive meal at a fancy resort. It’s in what emojis you use. It’s in how you write your captions. That’s what I believe.”

I’m not sure how to respond, so I just say, “Oh.”

“Appearances literally run the world,” Cleo continues, flicking her hair over her shoulder. “Even centuries ago, the whole battle of Troy started because of Helen’s beauty. That’s it. Her beauty.”

“Isn’t the Iliad just a myth, though?” I ask.

Cleo gives me a look, brows arched, and I fight the urge to sink into myself. “A lot of historians agree that Troy was probably a real city. And even if the story is fake, it holds a universal truth. After the war, when the city had fallen, and all those soldiers were killed and all the Trojan women taken as slaves, do you know what happened to Helen?”

I shake my head.

“She went back to Sparta and lived happily until she died. Pretty privilege at its finest.” She sighs. “I’ve learned a lot

about this in my advertising class. Beauty is money. Just look at any ad and you'll see someone hot. Or look at the most popular influencers on Instagram or TikTok. That's what generates interest. People like pretty people."

I tap the table. "What about plus-sized models?"

"Maybe those models don't fit into the skinny body ideal, but they're still gorgeous. They still have conventionally pretty faces."

"Okay, then what about all those gamer YouTuber guys? They just look like average dudes."

Cleo doesn't miss a beat. "It's easier for guys, because they can rely on being talented or funny, whereas women have more pressure to be hot to make it in entertainment. And besides, a lot of fangirls still thirst over those gamer YouTubers," Cleo points out. "I know I'm making generalisations, but the truth of the matter is that everything is about appearances, and to pretend it's not is naive."

I think it over as I finish off my sandwich.

"What?" Cleo asks. "Do you disagree?"

"Not exactly," I say after swallowing. "Sure, looks are important for profit or popularity. But not all the time."

"I think it's important all the time," Cleo says decidedly. Her eyes go distant. "People treat you better when you're pretty."

Neither of us say anything for a moment. I lose myself in the memory of sneering faces. Of a voice whispering in my ear, thick with contempt. *You're cute when you—*

"Hopefully that changes," I say eventually.

Cleo's lips pull into a smile. Something about it feels patronising, but I'm probably overthinking things, like usual.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" I ask.

"Sure," Cleo says.

I put my empty dish away and we move to the couch, Cleo snuggling beside me. After searching through a streaming

service's catalogue, we decide on an adaption of a British mystery novel we've both read.

It's pretty good, though I'm distracted the entire time by Cleo's body heat and the soft press of her arm against mine.

An hour into the film, she kisses my neck, and I startle.

"Sorry," she says. "Did you not like that?"

"No, I — I was just surprised."

She smiles and kisses my neck again. Am I meant to keep watching the movie, or do I do something in return? It's not like I can kiss her back in this position.

That's when she reaches for my hand and brings it to her boob.

"Is this..." I begin, suddenly nervous, "is this okay?"

"Why else do you think I moved your hand there, dummy?" she asks, her giggle muffled against the underside of my jaw.

So, I squeeze, ever so slightly. Cleo kisses up, past my chin, and meets my lips, and I kiss her back.

The movie's still playing, and I'm wondering whether I should turn the TV off. Before I can, Cleo climbs into my lap and slides her hands up under my shirt. Her fingers drag over my stomach. It feels nice, though not as nice as I would've thought. It's not like she's giving me goosebumps, not like the way it happens in the books. Instead, I'm wondering what she thinks about what she's feeling. Am I too soft? I don't have a six pack, like Lucas. Am I too small? The clothes I wear make me look bigger than I actually am.

My tongue tastes like her lip gloss, and I'm getting a little hard, but it's an anxious kind of hard. Like when you want to jerk off, but your entire family is in the house and you're all too aware that your mum could burst into your room any second and ask for your washing.

Should I try to make my boner go away? Or should I try to get fully erect? A pretty girl is in my lap. I should be hard. I don't want to offend her.

Alright, Charlie, think of really hot things—

That's when the front door swings open. Lucas walks in wearing a black singlet and gym shorts. His defined biceps and strong calves are on display, and his hair is shiny with sweat.

Cleo looks over her shoulder. When she sees him, her lips part.

Lucas notices us, and a range of emotions pass over his face before his expression shutters, so I don't have a chance to read him.

"Um," I say. "Cleo, this is Lucas, my flatmate. Lucas, this is Cleo, my girlfriend."

Neither of them move for a minute, then Cleo delicately gets off my lap and pats her clothing down. I quickly move my hands to cover my half-formed erection, and Lucas's eyes narrow.

"Hello," Cleo says, walking over to Lucas, her shoulders back and head tilted up. "It's nice to meet you." She flashes him a big, charming smile.

He looks down at her, eyes sweeping from her head to her toes, and twists his face like she's a cockroach.

It's official. I'm going to kill him later. I'm going to murder him in his bed.

"Lucas," I grit out.

"I'm going to take a shower," he tells me, looking past Cleo like she doesn't exist. He walks off without sparing either of us another glance.

Cleo stares after him. When the bathroom door slams, she blinks, as if woken from a daze.

"Sorry about that," I say when she returns to the couch. "He can be a dickface sometimes."

She nods slowly, looking over the back of the couch where the bathroom is located. "How do you know each other?"

"We grew up together," I explain. "We went to the same primary school and high school."

“Are you two close?”

“Kind of.”

“Is he studying?”

“Yeah, same uni as us.”

“Does he have a lot of friends?”

Weird question. “I guess. A lot of people like him. He can be nice when he wants to be.”

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“No. I think he just...screws around. He’s not the relationship type.”

“Right,” Cleo says.

She drags her eyes from the bathroom door to me, then smiles, something catlike in her eyes that makes me shiver. Then she brings her lips back down to press them against mine.

*

My sister looks like me, just cooler. We have the same fair skin. The same almond eyes. The same dark hair, although while mine is short and choppy, her hair is long with a sensible straight across fringe over her eyebrows. Of course, the sensibility of her haircut is undercut by the twenty colourful barrettes decorating the sides of her hair, making her look more like a six-year-old rather than a twenty-four-year-old currently studying a Masters of Education.

We sit across from each other in a pastel-coloured cafe, both holding laminated menus. The air around us rumbles with chatter and laughter.

“Charlie,” Jemima starts, giving me puppy eyes.

“No.” My voice is firm.

“What? Why not?”

“Because,” I say, exasperated. “You’re older than me! You should be grown up.”

“I *am* grown up. I have an investment portfolio. I vote. I remember to clean the shower drain. So, I am grown up, thank you very much.”

“Except you can’t do this one thing. When you’re a teacher, how do you expect your students to listen to you if you don’t even have the guts to talk to the waitress?”

“Because I’ll be teaching kids! Kids are younger than me, therefore, they aren’t scary. Besides, you don’t want to talk to her either.”

“Because I — it’s not that I’m scared. It’s just a matter of principle.”

“Charlie,” Jemima says. “Don’t make me go through with it. I already have to do it all the time. Yesterday, I had to make a phone call — a *phone call* — and it was the worst. I need a reprieve. Please.”

“Fine!”

I should’ve just given in from the start. I look around the cafe, find the waitress, and raise my hand. She walks over, and I immediately snatch my hand down, feeling like a stupid kid in a classroom.

“What can I get you two today?” she asks when she arrives.

“Um. Can we get two large iced matcha lattes. And, uh, can I get tapioca pearls in one of them?” I can’t help myself. I have an addiction.

“Sure,” the waitress says, jotting the order down on her notepad. “Is that everything?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“Great,” she says, flashing a smile and taking the laminated menus from us. “By the way, you can order using these QR codes.” She taps a finger against the menu. “Just for future reference.”

“Oh. Right. We’ll do that next time.”

After the waitress leaves, Jemima and I stare at each other.

“She hates me,” I say.

“God’s sake, Charlie,” Jemima says. “Why do you automatically assume everyone hates you? That’s something you really have to work on.”

“You know what you need to work on?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Jemima says, waving a hand. “I’ve been seeing these QR codes more and more frequently. It’s a genius invention. Like self-serve checkouts. No need to talk to someone.”

We look at each other for a second longer before bursting into laughter. I bite my lip so I’m not loud, while Jemima covers her mouth with a hand, shoulders shaking.

“There’s something wrong with us,” Jemima says, her lips still curled in a smile. “We’re total misanthropes.”

“I’m not a misanthrope,” I argue. “I’m just shy. I don’t understand why you’re shy.”

Jemima’s the oldest, so she’s always been bossy in our family household, at least for as long as I can remember. Despite that, though, she’s quite shy when interacting with people she’s not close with. It was pretty funny to see her go from tyrannical with me and my brother to meek when she’s talking to the neighbour down the road.

As for me, I wasn’t always shy — it wasn’t written into my personality from birth like it was with Jemima. I was confident in primary school. It’s only in my teenage years that I got the hint and learned to keep to myself.

“So,” Jemima says, leaning back in her seat. “What’s your news?”

“Right.” I clear my throat. A few days ago, Jemima messaged me, saying we should catch up for a coffee. I agreed, replying that I had some news to share. “Um. Well.”

“You look constipated,” Jemima comments.

“I’m not constipated.”

“Then what is it? You’re squirming in your seat. Don’t tell me you’re addicted to drugs or something.”

“I’m not addicted to drugs!”

“Just tell me it’s weed and not something like cocaine —”

“Jeez, Jemima, it’s not drugs. I’ve never even smoked weed.”

She raises a brow. “You haven’t? What have you been doing? It’s your first year of uni.”

“I’m going to tell Mum you said that,” I say, then bring my hands together like we’re in a business meeting. “Okay, so about my news.”

“You’re dropping out.”

“For Christ’s sake, Jem, can you stop interrupting me? It’s good news, actually.”

“Oh?” She perks up.

“Yeah. I’ve got a girlfriend.”

Jemima’s eyes widen, and she leans forward. “Really? I want to hear all about her. How did you two meet? It was from that dating app, wasn’t it? I deserve credit for helping you with your profile.”

I tell Jemima the whole story. At one point, our drinks arrive, and I take a break to chew on a tapioca pearl before continuing. Jemima’s one of the few people I can ramble on to without feeling guilty about talking about myself too much. When I finish talking, she smiles while tucking her chin into her neck, reminding me of an old lady.

“Oh, that’s so cute. My little brother’s got a girlfriend!”

“Stop it.”

She tilts her head, surveying me. Suddenly, she grows serious. “Make sure she treats you well, okay?”

“I already told you she’s nice,” I say.

And it’s true. We’ve officially been dating for two weeks, and Cleo’s as friendly and charming as ever. I mean, sure,

sometimes she's late to our hang outs, which makes me worried. Sometimes, she doesn't reply to my messages for hours, but that's just me being clingy. And yes, sometimes she's brutally honest, interrupting me when I'm talking about something I found interesting in my classes because, "*No offence, I don't really care about science mumbo-jumbo.*" And that time when we went out for dinner and we picked a restaurant at random, and she took a bite of her meal before announcing it was terrible and refusing to eat any more of it.

Jemima's voice rips me from my thoughts. "Charlie," she begins. "I'm glad you're in a relationship. And I'm happy you're happy. But sometimes... sometimes you can be..." she looks down at her drink and swirls the straw around.

I narrow my eyes. "What?"

She's silent for a beat, before shaking her head. "Nothing," she says, picking up her glass and taking a long drink. "I'm happy for you."

Before I can respond, her phone buzzes. "Oh, that reminds me." She picks up her phone and shows it to me. On the front screen, there's a notification from a reminder app.

BUY MUM'S BIRTHDAY PRESENT.

Jemima's the type to write everything down. She's been using a calendar and to-do list since she was ten. One time my grandparents witnessed her planning her month and called her precocious, and Jemima added "look up the definition of preckoshus" in her to-do list. I only know this story because my grandparents tell it when we get together for Jemima's birthday every year.

"Have you bought Mum a present yet?" Jemima asks.

"Not yet."

"I already asked her if she wanted anything, months ago so she wouldn't remember. She said the usual — candles, Australian novels and anti-aging stuff. I'll have to remind Nate to get something. That's if he hasn't already spent all his money on bite coin or whatever."

I laugh. Nate is two years younger than me, and as soon as he turned fifteen, he got a job at the local McDonald's. He lasted one day before quitting and announcing that he'd make money off the internet instead. Since then, he's started multiple businesses. Some have crashed and burned — one time, his room was filled with plastic toys he was sure would be the next fidget spinners. Some have been surprisingly successful though, if his expensive but ugly designer sneakers are anything to go by.

Sometimes I give him shit, but to be honest, I'm proud of him and his initiative. I would've expected him to grow up as a brat, because my parents have always spoiled him since he was the youngest.

Another thing about Nate is that he never wanted to play with me. Every time I tried to introduce him to my imagination games, he would refuse and watch TV instead.

Maybe that's part of the reason I liked spending time with Lucas so much — because he was like my little brother. Even though he was only a few months younger than me, he was always amazed by my imaginary worlds and loved listening to my stories. When he had problems, he always came to me. And I always listened, not because I wanted to be needed (okay, maybe that a little bit) but because I truly wanted to help him. I wanted to be important to someone.

“Dad's booked a reservation at The Golden Orchid,” Jemima continues, referencing Mum's favourite restaurant. “Her birthday's on Saturday, so we'll drive there Friday and leave Sunday. Does that work for you?”

I don't have a car since I live in the city, and there's no need, but Jemima's got a car since she lives in the suburbs.

“Yeah, that's fine. I don't have classes on Friday.”

“Good.” Jemima notes that down.

CHAPTER SIX

Then

High school me would've never expected that I'd be living with Lucas in university.

It happened by chance. Kind of.

We were the only students from our high school who chose to go to university in Melbourne. Our hometown, Maryford, is in South Australia, and everyone else applied for universities in Adelaide.

I didn't realise Lucas applied to my university too. I hadn't talked to him much in Year 12, though he was nicer than he'd been in previous years.

Anyway, the day university offers came out, Mum got a call from Lucas's mum, Natalie. The pair of them were still friendly even though Lucas and I weren't close anymore, and they suggested we live together for our first year. That way, even in an unfamiliar city, we'd have someone from home as an anchor. We could look out for each other, Mum reasoned. It'd reassure her, to know I was living with someone rather than by myself.

I said sure, only half-listening to Mum's reasoning. I didn't think it would actually happen. Lucas would never agree to live with *me*.

But he did.

The strange thing is that he was actually pretty friendly when we arrived in Melbourne. Sure, during Year 12 he wasn't a dick anymore, but it's not like he made an effort to talk to me. In fact, I'd gotten the impression that he was avoiding me.

He never sat near me in class. If I was studying on one end of the library, he'd study on the other end. There was more than one instance where we saw each other at the local supermarket and he pretended not to notice me.

But other times, I'd catch him watching me. Sometimes, in English class, the hair on the back of my neck would prickle and I'd turn around to see him sitting a few rows back, looking at me with his pen in his mouth. Chewing on pens was something I could never do — it was gross as soon as you hit fourth grade and I knew my peers would make fun of me. But Lucas still did it, even in high school, and somehow, he made it look cool.

Anyway, in our newly rented Melbourne apartment, he let me have the bigger bedroom of the two, though it was only slightly larger. A few days after we moved in, he organised a trip to the beach, and we had fun, swimming in the ocean and splashing each other. He even bought me a sprinkle-covered soft serve.

He's a good roommate too. He cleans up after himself, keeps quiet late at night, and does his half of the chores without complaint. He doesn't even bring girls over when I'm around. I don't know how he manages it, because my daily schedule changes all the time, but I've never seen him with a girl in our apartment. I know he must be hooking up a lot because duh, but he's very discreet about it, which I appreciate.

Sure, every now and then he gives me shit. He says something that makes my stomach twist, makes me wish that he liked me a little more, respected me a little more.

But when he says those crappy things, I give him shit right back. So, it's okay.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Now

The cursor blinks at the start of the search bar. Before I can think better of it, my fingers fly over the keyboard.

Classicbooksecrets.

The top result takes me to an online shop selling classic books repurposed as discreet safes. *Our books act not only as elegant home decor but also function as a discreet and secure place to store valuables*, the website reads.

Is that what Lucas's safe is used for? To store valuables? But what valuables, exactly? Cash? Weed? Is he doing something sketchy?

I click on a page that shows me the selection of books they have available. There's not only Jane Austen's works, but also Charles Dickens, the Bronte sisters, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Henry James... If it's British and in the public domain, it's there.

My bedroom door opens, and I slam my laptop lid closed.

Lucas raises a brow from where he stands in the doorway. "Oh," he says. "Was I interrupting?"

"No!" I say, too quickly. "No. I wasn't doing anything."

He scans me, from where my head is resting on my pillow, to the laptop on my stomach, to my feet flat against my bed. "No, that's not how you wank, is it?"

My skin turns blistering hot in a second. "What do you mean?"

He ignores me, instead walking up to my bed and sitting on the end. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Nothing.”

He leans back, brushing my legs. “Let’s go out. I’m hungry.”

“We have a fridge full of food,” I tell him. I’ve been trying to save money by cooking as much as I can, because my dates with Cleo are starting to add up.

“Yeah, but this new place opened on Swanston Street,” he says. “It’s supposed to be really good.”

“Go with someone else.” Knowing him, he’ll have an endless list of friends to ask. Or an endless list of girls to take.

He raises the corner of his lips. It’s his signature smug smile, and I’m going to ignore whatever he says next, as a matter of principle.

“It’s Thai,” he says.

I press my lips together. *Do not respond.*

He watches me, then slowly leans forward until his face is inches from mine. My stomach flips. It’s a survival response from the years I spent in high school terrified of him. Fight or flight, you know?

His eyes are the same grey as they were when we were kids. Graphite with flecks of sapphire. It’s a reminder that he’s the same Lucas, that he isn’t someone else, an alien wearing his skin.

I can see the ring of black around his irises. He’s too close.

I jerk my head back and accidentally hit it against the headboard. *Ow.* “You’re paying,” I say, rubbing the back of my head.

His lashes flutter as he laughs. “You want me to take you out? Sure, I can do that.”

“Shut up.”

I wait for him to move because he's still too close. When he doesn't, I place a hand on his chest and push him back, and he lets me.

I get off the bed, grab my phone and keys from the bedside table, and head out the door. He follows me — I can hear the weight of his footsteps, a breathy chuckle escaping his lips.

*

The Thai restaurant is cramped with tiny wooden tables, and we have to wait outside in a line for twenty minutes before being allowed in. Just as we're led by a waitress to a spot at the very back, nearby the bathrooms, I see a table by a window become vacated.

"Lucas," I hiss. "Ask the waitress if we can move there," I say, pointing to the window seat.

"Why?"

"Because I don't like this table," I say. We're right by the bathroom, and having my back to everyone else makes me feel anxious. I prefer to sit somewhere where I can have a good view of everyone else.

"I mean, why me?" he says.

"Well, I can ask if you want, but we're more likely to get our way if you do it."

He looks at me.

I wonder if he'll refuse — sometimes, Lucas refuses just to make my life difficult — but he raises a hand and a waitress comes rushing over. With a flash of his perfect smile and a "Sorry, but would we be able to...?" we're moved to the other table.

"Much better," I say, picking up the menu. I scan the list of curries, which have been helpfully labelled with chilli symbols. Zero chillis for not spicy at all, 5 chillis for burn-your-tongue-you-will-cry spicy level.

I choose a 5-chilli curry.

Lucas orders a level four, and then our menus are whisked away.

“I don’t think which person asks for a favour matters as much as you think it does,” Lucas says.

“Maybe,” I say. “Maybe not.”

Lucas bores his eyes into mine, and I avert my eyes.

“You probably don’t notice because you’re used to everyone giving you special treatment,” I say to the glass bottle of water.

“I do not receive special treatment.”

“Remember when you broke your surfboard on Year 8 camp and you didn’t even have to pay for it?” I ask.
“Remember the summer before high school, when we watched that superhero movie at the cinema, and that random mum gave you a large box of popcorn for free?”

“That was my bad. I shouldn’t accept food from strangers.”

“Even last week,” I continue, ignoring him, “I watched you talk your way out of getting a fine from a Myki inspector for not tapping on. And those inspectors are ruthless.”

Lucas’s expression flickers, and he picks up a glass and takes a long sip of water. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. He’s got such a nice neck. I’ve thought that since I was thirteen. Since the night we stood in the dead silence of Misa Tanaka-Randall’s shed, the air tense, as if it was a held breath. He towered over me, tall even then. I had two fingers under his jaw, and his pulse —

There were other times during my teenage years I thought about his neck. I imagined reaching up and wrapping my hands around that seemingly strong thing, with its elegant lines, and squeezing, squeezing enough to make him stop laughing at me. I wanted to make him remember just who I was, that we used to be best friends, that one time, as kids, under his pirate-ship themed bed covers, he whispered to me that I was his favourite person in the world —

“When was the last time you had Thai?” Lucas asks.

I blink. “Ages,” I answer. “It’s been forever since I ate Southeast Asian food, period.”

“What? But it’s still your favourite cuisine, right?”

“Yeah, but Cleo can’t handle spicy food. I took her to a Singaporean place last week and pointed out some dishes she could order that weren’t spicy. She took one bite and said it was too much for her. I tried some of hers and thought that if she found that spicy, she must find salt spicy.”

Lucas laughs, and it’s not at my expense. It’s because he thinks I’m funny, and maybe I’m just as bad as everyone else, because a part of me is pleased when I can impress Lucas.

“She enjoyed the coconut rice though,” I rush to add, because I don’t want to sound as if I’m making fun of my girlfriend. “What’s your favourite type of food? Cuban, right?”

“Why do you say Cuban?”

“Remember our pirate game? There was that summer when we made your poor mum cook us all types of Caribbean food, and I remember you loved the Cuban sandwiches.”

“I did love them, ten years ago,” Lucas says. “Nowadays, my favourite food’s anything with at least thirty grams of protein.”

“Right. And does this curry you’ve ordered have thirty grams of protein?”

“I doubt it. But today’s a cheat day.”

Our food comes out, and we go quiet as we devour our food. The flavours are phenomenal. Lucas was right, this place is incredible.

“Remember when you used to bring ramen to school, back when we were in Year 7?” Lucas asks after ten minutes, when we’re still eating but have slowed down considerably.

“Kind of,” I say. My memory isn’t the best, and I only remember bits and pieces of Year 7. I remember my first day on the big campus, where our classes were in several different

buildings rather than in just one room. I remember the Year 12s were tall and scary. I remember science class, where we had had to wear lab coats and used Bunsen burners.

At the beginning of high school, Lucas was still my friend. Sure, he'd grown a lot, and his voice was deeper, and I'd notice girls whispering about him, and he was always chosen first when we were split up into teams for sports class. But he was still mine.

"You'd bring it every Wednesday," Lucas says. "Because, back then, it was your favourite food even though your mum said it was bad for you. You'd make it in the microwave in the common room."

"Mm-hmm. But then, as soon as I took it out, half of it would be gone." Boys would badger me to give them some, even though I'd only cooked a single packet and there was hardly any to go around. I'd be left with barely any to fill my stomach, and I'd spend the rest of my school day hungry.

"Yeah. So then, you came up with a plan. One day, you showed up at school with spicy ramen."

"That's right. Shin Ramyun. Except that plan didn't really work." Sure, some of the guys couldn't handle the spicy Korean noodles, but there were a bunch of guys who gobbled it up easily. More than that, they preferred the Shin Ramyun to plain, basic chicken noodles, and so they ate even more than usual.

"So that's when you took the next step," Lucas says, lips twitching. "You showed up at school with extra-extra spicy noodles."

"When those guys asked me for some of my lunch, I happily gave them some."

"They spat it out right onto the grass."

I laugh. "Yeah, I remember. And afterwards, we sat on the stairs in front of the library, and I made myself eat the noodles, even though it made me cry."

"You got used to it pretty quickly, though. Only took you a few more weeks."

“That’s because we practiced eating spicy food together! Remember how we’d spend the weekends buying the spiciest looking chilli from the supermarket and see who could eat the most?”

Lucas grins, showcasing his top row of straight, white teeth. “Yep. My spice tolerance is all thanks to you.”

I look down at my bowl. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I remember everything you do, Charlie.”

I jerk my gaze up. Lucas’s smile is gone, replaced by a strangely serious look. It’s unsettling, and I don’t like it. I distract myself with drinking water.

A few weeks into our spicy-food competition, I bought a Carolina Reaper from the internet. We ate it after school one day, sitting on the back steps of my porch as tears poured down our faces.

A few days later, Misa Tanaka-Randall held her thirteenth birthday party. The following Monday, Lucas stopped speaking to me.

*

After we finish our food, we get up to leave the restaurant. I follow Lucas to the counter to pay my half, and he arches a brow at me. “Didn’t you say I was paying?”

I roll my eyes. “I was kidding. I can’t have you pay for me.”

“Why not?”

Before I can think of a response, a staff member appears, and Lucas pays with his card without giving me an opportunity to fight him.

“I’m going to transfer you half of the cost,” I tell him as we walk out onto the street. It’s surprisingly warm for an autumn evening.

“That’s okay,” Lucas says, nudging me with his arm. “It’s my shout.”

I rub my arm, the part that touched him.

“It’s been ages since we’ve gone for dinner together,” Lucas continues. “You’re always out with your girlfriend.”

“You’re welcome,” I say. I bet Lucas is happy I’m around less. It means more time for his sex life.

He doesn’t reply to that, and when I look up, I see him staring into the distance. Usually, he looks amused, like everything and everyone is merely entertainment while he sits above it all. Right now, though, he looks thoughtful. Perhaps a little lost.

I don’t like it.

I clear my throat. “Come on, let’s catch the tram back.” I start speed-walking towards the closest tram stop, which is already busy with people.

“You don’t want dessert or anything?” Lucas calls from behind me.

I shake my head. “Can’t have you ruining your diet,” I say.

“I don’t mind—”

“It’s fine. I’m tired anyway.”

Lucas falls into step beside me. Him and his stupid long legs. “Alright,” he says after a beat.

Soon after we arrive at the tram stop, the tram arrives. It’s already half-full, and it becomes even more packed as we get on with the rest of the crowd. I snag a seat, but Lucas isn’t so lucky, and he is forced to stand in front of me.

Should I offer my seat to Lucas? No. We’re not best friends now or anything.

The tram moves, and Lucas involuntarily swings forward but quickly corrects himself before his crotch smashes into my face. Which is good. But then my attention is unfortunately brought to the fact that Lucas’s crotch is right before my eyes. I look at the zipper on his jeans. The creases of denim.

Like most childhood friends, I saw Lucas naked when we were young. We’d have bubble baths together. Things changed

when puberty started, of course. Sometimes we'd get changed in the same room, the way we had for years, and while I didn't really care, Lucas was suddenly awkward about it, always averting his eyes.

And in high school, I never saw him naked ever.

Okay, these are weird thoughts. But I can't help it! Lucas's crotch is right there! My mind automatically wonders what's under his clothing. It's just curiosity.

I glance up and want to kill myself when I find Lucas watching me. How long has he been watching me stare at his crotch? Fuck.

Surprisingly enough, he doesn't look amused or annoyed. Instead, his lips are a straight, tight line, as if he's gritting his teeth.

Looking up at him looking down at me... If he wasn't wearing his clothes and my head was just a few inches closer...well, it'd be like I was giving him a blow job.

The thought makes my stomach clench. What would it be like to suck Lucas off? Well, for one, he'd stop looking so goddamn smug. Not that he's acted that way tonight, strangely enough. But if he was acting superior, if he was giving me shit, blowing him would shut him up. It'd make him helpless.

Excitement runs through my body, and if I'm feeling strangely lusty, it's only a lust for power. Only that.

"Charlie," Lucas says.

I jolt, cheeks burning. "Huh? What?"

Lucas tilts his head. "This is our stop."

"Oh. Right."

I follow Lucas off the tram. Once we're on the street, it's only a few metres to our building. As we walk in and take the elevator, I don't look at Lucas. I don't want to see his face. He doesn't say anything to me, and I have the suspicion he's avoiding my eyes too.

“Bags the shower,” I say as soon as I unlock the front door to our apartment. I barrel into my bedroom, letting the door close behind me, and make a beeline for my underwear drawer.

Ever since the first time Cleo came over, I’ve kept all of my stuff here, not bothering to move it back to my bottom bedside table drawer, even though that’s a more convenient location.

I push my hands to the back of the underwear drawer and pick up one of the brightly coloured silicone objects. With my other hand, I grab a tube of lube, then tuck both items under the front of my shirt in case I run into Lucas in the hallway.

To my relief, he’s already gone to his room. Thank god. I don’t want a repeat of that time the first week we’d moved in together and he almost caught me with a bright purple, eight-inch d—

Anyway.

I step into the bathroom, lock the door, and take out a fresh towel from the cabinet, folding it over the rack.

By the time I jump into the shower, hot water already steaming the air, I’m totally hard. I use the suction part at the end of the toy to stick it against the tiled wall and some lube to stretch myself out. Taking care to keep quiet, I press my lips together. Even with the rush of water pounding against the shower tiles, I still worry that Lucas might overhear me.

If he heard the noises I make, I’d seriously consider moving to another country and legally changing my name. That’s the law. Having anyone overhear my personal time would be bad enough, but Lucas — childhood friend, high school enemy, current flatmate Lucas — yeah. That’d be too far.

After I’m finished, skin pleasantly warm and body relaxed, I wash myself and then get out of the shower. I dry myself off, brush my teeth, and wrap the towel around my waist. As soon as I leave the bathroom, I run into Lucas.

“Took you long enough,” he says. He’s wearing his pyjamas, which translates into a pair of old grey shorts that reveal way too much of his thighs.

If Cleo ever stays over and Lucas is here too, I’ll ask him to wear longer pants, and a shirt as well. All that skin on display is distracting.

Back in my bedroom, I change into my pyjamas, and I’m about to collapse onto my bed when I remember I left my things in the shower.

Oh, fuckity fuck. What a rookie mistake.

I sprint into the bathroom, almost tripping over in the hallway as I do so. When I burst into the bathroom, Lucas’s brows jump up and he gives me a weird look. He’s in the middle of brushing his teeth, and some white toothpaste is on his bottom lip.

I ignore him and lean into the damp shower, past the droplet-splattered shower curtain, trying not to get my pyjamas wet. I grab the lube off the floor where it’s fallen on its side, next to the conditioner bottle. Then I pull off the toy. The suction makes a squeaky, squelching noise that’s far too loud in the tiny bathroom.

I pray Lucas isn’t listening too hard.

With nowhere to hide the two items, I resign myself to shoving them under my shirt, the dampness of them pressing uncomfortably against my stomach. Ugh.

Then I run out of the room before Lucas can say anything. Though, to be honest, he probably isn’t even paying attention to me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Then

The time Lucas and I went to the beach, a few days after moving into our apartment, he wore red board shorts that made his waist look tiny compared to his broad shoulders.

Earlier that day, we'd taken the bus to the beach in St Kilda. The place was packed, with more people, umbrellas and children's beach toys than sand. Leafy seaweed wafted through the water. Lifeguards were on duty, wearing yellow and red uniforms.

We dropped our stuff near the water, just beyond where the tide came out. He pulled his shirt off over his head and I snuck a peak. He had a summer tan, his skin honey gold. His chest was more defined than ever, and his nipples were a light brown colour, and below that, his abs looked hard, like stone.

Then there were his large hands, which he used to point at the ocean, and his arms, corded with muscle, and his shoulders, and his neck, and then his face, that gorgeous face.

As I looked at him, my stomach flipped. It did that a lot during high school, and I chalked it up to a fear response. The way my heartbeat picked up was fight or flight. But today, he was smiling — more than that, he was smiling at me. Maybe it wasn't a fear response, but that didn't make my reaction any less horrible.

I felt resigned. Lucas might smile at me like that a few times in my life, but it'd only be that — a rare occasion. And it hurt, because I knew it'd be something I wouldn't have.

It was like when I was a kid, and I'd spent one summer obsessed with a pirate theme park in America. It had everything I wanted — pirate ship rides, a mountain drop, a mermaid lake, rollercoasters that shot through a fake rainforest.

For a few days, I was convinced I'd be able to go to the theme park. I begged my parents, and when they said they couldn't afford it, I decided I'd pay for it myself. It was only later when I realised that it didn't matter if I made a lemonade stand or offered to mow my neighbour's lawns or do all of the chores in the house — I'd never be able to afford that theme park.

In the end, I stopped looking at photos of the theme park. Because it hurt looking at something I couldn't have.

As I stared at Lucas, lost in thought, he said we should get into the ocean, and there he splashed me and tossed me around. At first, I wondered if he was trying to hurt me again, but I quickly realised he was only having fun.

An hour later, we lay on our towels on the sand. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud, so it wasn't blistering hot anymore. I closed my eyes. Only the sound of a phone camera made me open them.

Lucas was standing in front of me.

“What?” I asked. “What are you — are you taking a photo?”

He laughed. “You look like a pin-up model.”

I was lying on my towel with an arm under my head and my legs up. I didn't think I looked very pin-up model-y, but I was distracted by the delight on Lucas's face.

Weak, I'd thought. I'm just like everyone else. Distracted by a smile on a good-looking boy. Weak, weak, weak.

CHAPTER NINE

Now

“*Soooooo*,” Gilly sing-songs, nudging his shoulders against mine. “How’s it going with the missus?”

“Fine,” I say, keeping my eyes on my computer screen.

The four of us — me, Gilly, Hugo and Lucas — are sitting at a table on the bottom floor of the Arts library, which is the biggest library on campus. It’s the kind of old-fashioned library you’d see in movies — dark-stained wooden shelves, plush red carpet, emerald green lamps. This floor allows talking, so there’s a hum of voices in the air, although from the way Lucas’s frown deepens, I bet he wishes we were sitting in a silent area.

“Oh, come on,” Gilly says. “You gotta elaborate on that.”

“I will, I will,” I promise, “but I don’t want to distract you all from studying.”

Hugo pushes his laptop away from him. “We’ve been studying for a good hour,” he says. “I think it’s time for a break.”

“Exactly!” Gilly says, pointing at him. “Research says if you work too hard without breaks, the quality of your work goes down.”

“But we don’t have to talk about your relationship if you don’t want to, Charlie,” Hugo says.

“I don’t mind,” I say. “I just don’t want to bore you all.”

Gilly rolls his eyes. “Come on! Talking about women is, like, my favourite hobby.”

“It’s all you talk about,” Hugo tells him. “If there were a reverse Bechdel test, you’d fail immediately.”

Gilly’s brow creases. “What the hell is a Bechdel test?”

“I’m surprised you’re even studying with us,” Lucas says suddenly, closing his laptop. His eyes meet mine, and my heart jolts.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hugo asks.

“For the last week, he’s been studying nonstop with Claire.”

“Cleo,” I correct.

Lucas ignores me. “I’m talking six hours a day, every day.”

“Right,” Gilly says, smirking. “I bet you two are having a lot of fun ‘studying’.” He makes air quotes with his fingers.

“I didn’t realise you were keeping track of the time I spent with my girlfriend,” I tell Lucas. “Sounds a bit stalkerish.”

His expression darkens for a millisecond before smoothing out into blank nonchalance, and he huffs a cruel laugh. “More like I’ve been enjoying having the apartment to myself for once,” he says. “It’s nice not having you constantly around.”

I look down at the desk we’re sitting around, suddenly interested in the grains in the wood. I feel like I’m thirteen again.

Gilly pokes me in the arm, and I muster up a smile.

“So, how far have you gotten?” he asks, a mischievous smile lighting up his face.

“Gilly,” Hugo hisses, and there’s a thud as Gilly is kicked in the shin. “Don’t ask weird questions.”

“It’s not weird,” Gilly protests, but he gives me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, man. I didn’t mean to be invasive.”

“No, it’s okay.” The back of my neck is warm, but I don’t feel uncomfortable. It’s more that this is new to me. In high school, I never had conversations like this with my friends, and it’d be nice to get their thoughts and advice.

I've never had sex before, and I want to be as good at it as possible. I don't want to disappoint Cleo.

"We haven't slept together yet."

Gilly snorts. "Who says 'slept together'?"

"What else am I meant to say? 'Fucked'? That sounds so vulgar. And stop interrupting me if you want me to tell you the story."

He raises his hands in surrender. "Alright, sorry. Go on."

"As I was saying, no, we haven't gotten that far yet. Just making out and touching."

To be honest, it hasn't been very exciting. I thought kissing my girlfriend would flood me with adrenaline, but most of the time, it's kind of...boring.

"That's all?" Gilly asks. "How long have you been dating for now?"

"Three weeks."

"Three weeks? Dude, what the hell are you waiting for?" Gilly goes on to give me advice but shuts up when a nearby desk crowded with mature-age students give us a dirty look after he starts listing off his favourite sex positions.

Hugo claps his hands together. "Let's talk about something more appropriate," he says. "Your birthday's coming up," he says to Gilly.

"Right," Gilly says, perking up. "I'm turning twenty. Gone are my teen years, hello being a proper grown up. It's quite tragic, really."

"Gilly and I have already started organising the party," Lucas says, speaking for the first time in a while.

Hugo and I blink.

"You have?" I ask.

"Yeah, Lucas is actually kind of good at planning," Gilly says, smacking Lucas on the back. "Alright, so at first, I thought about having a house party. Sounds good, right? But

we quickly realised we couldn't do that because, well duh, I don't have a house. All I have is a tiny room at my student accommodation building. And we also thought about having it at one of the games rooms in the building."

"But they don't allow alcohol in public areas," Hugo says.

"Exactly!" Gilly says, "So, in the end, I decided, screw the big party thing, I'm just gonna have a dinner and then drinks afterwards. We're gonna stay out all night and get wasted."

Lucas explains how he did some research and they ended up booking a banquet room at a pretty nice restaurant in the city. Fifteen to twenty people will come — I don't know how the hell Gilly has that many friends — and we're allowed to bring plus ones as long as we ask him, to make sure there'll be enough seats.

"Oh!" I say. "Can I bring Cleo?"

"Hell yeah, of course! I'm looking forward to meeting her."

*

As my mid-term assignments pile up, Cleo and I see each other every day. Mostly we study together at the university or the state library, but we also go out to eat often and watch movies at my place, which results in making out on the couch.

Lucas has walked in on us kissing a few times. Cleo's never looked embarrassed though — she keeps trying to be nice to Lucas even though he always ignores her.

I invite Cleo to Gilly's party, and she accepts when she recognises the name of the restaurant where it will be hosted. I assure her that everyone else will be much nicer than Lucas, but she just laughs and says he doesn't bother her.

While I spend a lot of time with Cleo, I don't actually know much about her life. I've never met any of her friends, and there's no hint of me on her social media, not that I expect there to be. It's not like I want her to write "Charlie <3" in her bio like we're thirteen years old.

I haven't ever visited her home either. She said it's because she lives with her parents in a faraway suburb and going over with her would be both a waste of time and awkward. Maybe later, she tells me.

It's fine. I don't mind, not really. There's just something about the whole thing that picks at me when I'm lying in bed at night, trying to fall asleep.

Anyway, today, we're sitting at a desk in the state library. The room has a high ceiling and is filled with white light, and we're surrounded by several other young people working on their shiny silver laptops. Some of them murmur to each other, so I don't feel bad about talking.

I lean over to look at her computer, where she's researching the market share of different cosmetic brands. "What's your assignment about?"

"I have to come up with a marketing plan for a brand of my choice. It's two thousand words, and I'm still in the research stage." She sighs.

"Damn," I say.

"Yeah. Now, leave me alone, I have to focus." She shoos me away, and I look at my computer screen.

I start reading a scientific paper explaining that lonely people are more likely to have a shorter life span, which is depressing as hell, when my phone buzzes with a text.

Lucas: Yo. You coming to volleyball today?

Oh shit. I forgot that was on today.

Charlie: Sorry, busy studying with Cleo.

Lucas: You've missed the past two weeks.

I look at my screen incredulously.

Charlie: Ok. It's not like it makes a difference to you whether I'm there or not. We're not even in the same groups.

I watch the text bubble that pops up as he writes a response. It disappears, then comes back again. What's got him taking so long?

Finally, he texts back.

Lucas: I'm only pointing it out because you look so skinny. Better gain some muscle or Clarice is gonna dump your ass.

Asshole! I drop my phone on my desk. Cleo glances over before continuing her work.

That's right. I should focus on studying, not Lucas. I stare at my laptop screen, but I'm not seeing any of the words. Instead, Lucas's face floats into my mind. It's high school Lucas — he's wearing our high school uniform, and he's laughing nastily at me.

I always ignored him. I thought that would make him leave me alone, but it did the opposite — he'd just keep taunting me until I lost it.

I snatch the phone up again.

Charlie: Why are you commenting on my body? Careful because otherwise you'll sound weirdly fixated. And I know you know my girlfriend's name. Have you resorted to searching up names on the internet to keep up your charade of ignorance? Because that's pathetic.

Lucas: Lol.

Lucas: You're so delusional, it's actually embarrassing.

I grit my teeth.

Charlie: Fuck off Lucas.

Lucas: That's all you got?

I grip my phone tightly as a myriad of responses flood through my brain. In the end, I push my phone to the end of the desk, face down. I'm not going to reply any longer, because I want to punch him in the face, and it's not a smart idea to have evidence of my intent to inflict bodily harm.

I'm not going to let Lucas's actions slide, though. He can't just say that crap to me whenever he wants.

This time, I manage to actually focus on the words on my laptop, and as I distract myself with studying, my anger slowly fades.

The library closes at six, so Cleo and I pack up and get dinner. Afterwards, I walk Cleo to Flinders Street Station, where she'll take the metro home. We're holding hands, and her palm is soft and warm against mine.

"You haven't done it before, have you?" she asks.

"Done what before?" I ask.

"Sex," she says.

My cheeks heat. "Oh. No. I told you, you're my first girlfriend."

"I know," she says, "but I wondered whether you'd done it with someone at a party, or something."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I wouldn't do it with a stranger. I want it to be special."

Her lips stretch into a smile. "That's sweet," she says. Her voice, though soft, reminds me of a teacher speaking to a child who doesn't know any better. "We've been dating for almost a month now," she continues. "I was wondering...whether you've thought about it."

Oh.

Oh.

"Well, yeah," I admit. "But I don't want to rush. But yeah, of course I've thought about it!"

She giggles. "Trust me, you wouldn't be rushing. To be honest, I'm surprised you haven't brought it up yet." She leans in, the smell of raspberry overwhelming my senses. "Would you like to try it soon?"

My brain glitches. "Y-yes," I reply. "That sounds..." I swallow. "Good."

She giggles. "Good."

"Should we do it at yours, or mine?" I ask.

"Yours," Cleo decides.

I nod. "I'll make sure my flatmate is out."

She's quiet for a moment. "Right. Your flatmate," she says slowly. "Yes, we wouldn't want him to interrupt."

*

"Charlie."

"No."

"Charlie."

"No."

"Charlie," Lucas repeats, standing over me.

I remain lying on the couch, head on the armrest and hands holding my phone above me. I still haven't forgiven him for being an ass. "Whatever it is, no. Leave me alone."

He leans down, trying to sneak a peek of my phone screen. I angle it away.

"Let's watch a movie," he says.

"I'm busy," I say as I finish my text.

Charlie: Can't wait to see you.

Lucas crosses his arms. "Let me guess, you're texting Clover."

"I see you're still pretending you don't know her name," I say, "but yes, I am texting my girlfriend. And I'm meeting her in ten minutes."

He groans. "Ditch her. Come on, let's watch a movie. Or we could play a game. You know you want to."

"No, I don't."

Lucas reaches out and starts poking my arm, and I slap him away like he's an irritating mosquito. "Could you be any more jealous?"

That shuts him up. "Jealous?"

"I'm the one with a girlfriend," I say. "As for you, you've never had a serious relationship, have you?" In high school, he did have countless girlfriends, but none of them lasted more

than a week. “And do you know why you’ve never had a serious relationship?”

My phone buzzes with a text.

Cleo: C u soon xx

“Because you have a shitty personality,” I say as I reply to the text with love heart emojis. “Your personality is so shitty that girls won’t even stick around, no matter how... somewhat okay looking you are.” I meet Lucas’s eyes again. “So, now that you know that, how about you work on yourself so women will find you tolerable? Then you can get into your own relationship and stop being so jealous of mine.”

Lucas looks at me for a long moment, then he raises a hand and drags it over his face. His shoulders begin to shake.

I stare.

A hiccup escapes him. Is he...upset?

If he’s crying, this will be the first time I’ve seen him cry since we were in primary school. Since the time that group of Year 6s pushed him into a puddle and he got his brand-new blue and orange sneakers wet. When that happened, I called the Year 6s pea-brained buttheads with pimply foreheads and they pushed me into the puddle too. Face first.

Lucas wiped my face with tissues after we retreated to the boys’ bathroom. He held me under the hand dryers, and I tried to pretend I wasn’t upset as the rainwater evaporated from my shirt. He hugged me tightly, hands around my middle.

I clear my throat. “Lucas?”

He removes his hand and lets out a deep laugh. “You actually think” — he pauses for breath — “you actually think I’m jealous of your relationship?” He shakes his head and sobers up. The remnants of laughter in his eyes, a shine that made them glossy, disappear and are replaced with something hard. “I will never be jealous of you, Charlie.”

I feel as if I’ve been dowsed with ice water. After a moment, I force my gaze back to my phone, swiping through

apps at random. In my periphery, Lucas moves to stand between the couch and the coffee table.

“What are you doing?” I ask, fighting the urge to make myself smaller.

He sits on the coffee table. “Let’s play a video game.”

“What the hell? No.”

“Yes,” he says, reaching for my arm. “Come on.”

I try to tug my arm out of his grip, but he’s too strong. I pull harder, then drop my phone and use my other hand to pry his fingers off. “No. I told you, I’m busy. And you can’t speak to me like that, then expect me to be your friend.”

“You insulted me first,” he snapped. “You called me unlovable.”

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did. You said that everyone leaves me because I’m intolerable.”

“I said you had a shitty personality.”

“Thanks, that’s so much better.”

Okay, fine, I was harsh, but he didn’t have to go and insult me right after. Why does this always happen? Why do we oscillate from friends to enemies in a single day, in a single hour, in a single minute? It’s exhausting.

I close my eyes. I wish...

Lucas’s voice sounds like it comes from far away. “Look at me.”

“Go away,” I say.

“Charlie. Look at me.”

I don’t open my eyes.

Fingers touch my jaw, and I slap his hand away.

“Look at me,” he repeats, voice like granite, and the closeness of it jolts my eyes open. He’s holding himself above

me, a knee on the couch. If he slackened his arms, he'd flatten me. "I could have anyone I wanted," he says.

I don't respond. I can't.

"Anyone," he repeats, as if I didn't hear him the first time. "*Anyone.*"

If I didn't know any better, I'd say there was a waver to his voice. As if he were trying to convince himself.

His face drifts close. "No one's ever left me. I've never had to chase anyone. I always get what I want. I do. Do you understand that?"

I want to swallow. I can't.

"You think I'm jealous of you? You think I'm jealous of your relationship?" He says the word *relationship* the way someone would say *horse shit*. "Do you really think I spend time thinking about you? Because I don't, Charlie. Most of the time, I forget you exist."

He starts talking about how he used to touch me like this when we were in high school. How he used to shove me around. How I was so short and skinny and tiny. How he could break me in half if he wanted. How he still could.

I know this speech. I know it off by heart — even if he says different things each time, I know the sentiment. I'm small and weak and contemptuous, and he's big and strong and could destroy me any time if he so wished.

He goes on and on, and I let my eyes unfocus. His voice turns into white noise.

I think about the Monday morning I ran down the high school hallway, waving at him and wearing a huge smile, excited to tell him about the ghost pepper I'd bought online. He'd looked at me up and down like I was a squashed insect.

Eventually, he moves, so he's no longer holding himself above me. I sit up. I stand up. I move away from the couch and pick up my shoes and pull them on. I let the door slam behind me as I head downstairs to meet my girlfriend.

CHAPTER TEN

Then

Misa Tanaka-Randall held her 13th birthday a month into high school and invited everyone in the year level. The excitement was palpable in the classrooms Friday afternoon, hours before the party was scheduled to begin. Teachers paused their lessons to reprimand us for not listening, but no one paid attention. We were too busy discussing what our first high school party would be like. Surely, we wouldn't play the basic birthday games. We were too old for pass the parcel and musical chairs. No, we'd do grownup, teenage stuff. There'd be music. There'd be the opposite sex. Maybe there'd even be kissing.

Lucas and I arrived together. The party was in Misa's backyard, which had enough lawn to play a soccer game, and there was a tin shed at the very back. Misa greeted us with two red plastic cups, the kind I'd seen in movies. We had a choice of drinks: cola, lemonade or orange juice. There were bowls of chips and lollies and chocolates.

After we filled our cups with lemonade, we joined the circle of other boys. Looking back at it now, the memory makes me both laugh and cringe. We stood around awkwardly and talked extremely loudly whenever a group of girls passed, puffing ourselves up and trying to impress them with stupid dares. *Hey, I bet you can't climb that tree. Hey, I bet you can't jump that fence. Hey, I bet you can't eat that whole pack of chips in one minute.*

Some of the kids would act wild, as if they were intoxicated, when all they'd had was soft drink. Girls would stick together, tugging down their skirts and awkwardly

adjusting their crop tops. Only Misa was really brave enough to come over to us and strike up a conversation, but she was the host after all. She wore a daisy-printed dress and had drawn on cat-eye eyeliner, and I thought she looked extremely grown up.

“You guys wanna play a game?” she said.

All of us nodded dumbly, except Lucas. Nothing ever made him dumbstruck.

“Follow me,” Misa announced, and she called to the girls, instructing one of her friends, Joan, to bring the glass cordial bottle. Unlike the other girls, Joan hadn’t dressed up. She wore knee-length shorts and a t-shirt with the Ravenclaw logo on it. She had huge, seventies-style glasses and her hair was tied back in a sensible braid.

We followed Misa to the far side of her backyard, behind the tin shed. She instructed us to sit into a circle, and some of the boys tried to subtly sit next to the girls they liked (it wasn’t subtle at all). The cordial bottle was placed in the middle of the circle, on top of a flattened piece of cardboard.

“We’re going to play seven minutes in heaven,” Misa announced. “Does everyone know how to play?”

She explained it for the people who didn’t. We’d go around in a circle, and each person would take turns spinning the bottle. Whoever it landed on would be their partner, and the two of them would go into the shed for seven minutes.

One girl raised her hand, as if we were sitting in class. “Then what do you do in the shed?”

“What do you think?” Misa said.

“Kiss,” one boy said, then laughed far too loudly in an attempt to look confident.

Another girl raised her hand. “My mum said I’m not allowed to kiss any boys until I’m sixteen.”

Misa rolled her eyes. “You don’t have to kiss. You can just stand there. Jeez.”

One boy raised his hand. “What if my bottle lands on another boy? Or if a girl spins it and it lands on another girl?”

“Then you just go in the shed with them. What’s the problem?” Joan asked.

The boy’s nose crinkled. “I don’t want to kiss another boy.”

“You don’t have to kiss them, remember,” Misa said. “You can just talk. Who knows? Maybe you’ll make a new friend.”

“But it’s weird, just standing in the dark with someone,” a girl said.

“If you’re a scaredy cat, you don’t have to play,” Misa said. “Anyone who wants to go can go. I ain’t gonna force you.”

She watched over us, but no one moved. I was practically humming with excitement. Tonight would be the night I’d have my first kiss.

Misa began, since she was the birthday girl. She spun the bottle, and we all leaned in closer to watch as the bottle slowed...

And then it landed on Misa’s best friend, Nadia. A girl. Everyone sighed in disappointment. Except for Nadia, who pressed her lips together to suppress a smile.

Misa dragged Nadia into the shed as if completing a chore, her strides purposeful. Nadia was practically skipping. Joan started the timer for 7 minutes on her phone, and then everyone turned to their friends beside them. I watched the others chatter, then glanced at Lucas, who sat beside me.

He was already watching me. He didn’t look happy — instead, he wore an expression of concentration, the same look he wore in maths class.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He blinked. “Nothing.”

“Who do you want your bottle to land on?” I asked.

“Who do you want *your* bottle to land on?”

That was a typical Lucas answer. I hummed as I looked around the circle. “All the girls are pretty. I wouldn’t mind it landing on any of them but...maybe Eliza. Or Samantha. Or Joan. She’s really nice to me...” I turned back to him. “What about you?”

Something flashed across his face, an expression too quick for me to read. “It’s a secret,” he mumbled.

“Lucas,” I complained, grabbing his arm and shaking it. “No fair, you have to tell me!”

Despite my wheedling, he refused to tell me. Eventually, Misa and Nadia came out, and everyone cut off their conversations, eager to see what happened next.

We went around the circle. Nothing particularly eventful happened, except for the times a boy’s bottle would land on a girl, or vice versa, and the girls would giggle and the boys would whistle obnoxiously.

When it was Joan’s turn, I held my breath as the bottle slowed. For a moment, I thought it’d land on me, and my stomach lurched. But then it passed me and rattled to a stop in front of Lucas.

Everyone was silent.

Then, the boys were singing, voices out of tune. “Lucas and Joan sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage. Then comes the baby in the golden carriage!”

I watched the girls on either side of Joan nudge her. She stood up and patted the grass off her pants, but Lucas stayed where he was.

“Lucas?” Misa said. “You need to go into the shed.”

“It’s not pointing at me,” he replied.

Misa huffed as everyone looked at the bottle. Technically, it pointed between Lucas and the boy sitting beside him, a guy named Brian who had volcanic acne covering his forehead.

“It’s closer to you than to Brian,” one boy shouted out.

“Actually, I think it’s closer to Brian,” a girl said.

Everyone argued for a minute before Misa made the executive decision that it was closer to Brian. Brian jumped up to his feet, and Joan didn’t react. She wore the same business-like expression she wore when everyone thought it landed on Lucas. I was surprised, to be honest. I knew loads of girls thought Lucas was good-looking. Even I could tell that he was handsome. He was taller than me, and he wasn’t slowing down growing anytime soon. And something about the colour of his eyes, his bone structure...he was simply pleasing to look at.

When Joan and Brian went into the shed, everyone resumed chatting. Some of the boys had started throwing blades of grass at each other. Lucas said he was going to get another cup of lemonade and asked me if I wanted any. I said no. I watched him go.

It was obvious when the bottle finished spinning that it had landed on Lucas. Everyone saw it. And then later, it appeared to point between Lucas and Brian. Then it seemed closer to Brian.

Lucas must have moved it. Maybe he turned the bottle, but someone surely would have caught him. He must have moved closer to me.

He didn’t want to kiss Joan, that much was clear. Maybe he thought she was ugly. Well, she was plain, and she didn’t have her hair out or wear makeup.

I would have happily kissed Joan. I would have happily kissed anyone.

But maybe Lucas didn’t want to kiss her because he had higher standards. Maybe good-looking people have higher standards, because they can. Maybe it’s in their DNA to be pickier.

That was the first time I really thought about Lucas’s looks, beyond a vague recognition that he was handsome. It was the first time I considered that Lucas’s way of looking at the world might be different from mine, just because he was gorgeous.

I was still thinking about that, even when Lucas returned, even when Joan and Brian came out of the shed, even when the next people in the circle had their go.

Then it was my turn, and I spun it.

The neck of the bottle pointed at Lucas.

I expected him to protest. Everyone was quiet, like they expected the same, like they thought Lucas would refuse and some other poor soul would be forced to go into the shed with me.

I wondered how he would doctor the spin. Maybe he'd shift ever so slightly away from me, so it wasn't pointing at him, but me instead. What would happen if everyone decided it was pointing at me? Did that mean I would have to go inside the shed all alone?

None of that happened, though, because Lucas stood up and offered me his hand.

I wasn't sure what was happening. I was vaguely aware of Misa's voice in the background, urging me to get up. I took Lucas's hand, which was soft, but his grip was firm, and he led me into the shed. I almost had to run to keep up with his long strides.

I felt dazed.

I thought: this is not how this is supposed to go.

I thought: I was supposed to have my first kiss tonight. Now I had to hope that one of the girls' spins landed on me.

We entered the shed, which couldn't have been any larger than an ensuite bathroom. The air was cool, and inside it smelled like soil and sawdust. Tools were hung up on the walls. A hammer, a saw, wrenches, screwdrivers. There was a wooden workbench, pockmarked with dents and burns, and a lawnmower was tucked in one corner.

Lucas closed the door. It was dark, except for a few cracks in the tin and the lines around the door frame that let in silvery light.

All I could make out was Lucas's silhouette. I couldn't read his expression. I doubt he could see mine. If he could, though, he'd see nervousness on my face.

Strangely, my heart was beating like crazy. Loud enough that I wondered if he could hear it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Now

The following week, things are tense between me and Lucas. I only speak to him when I have to — to inform him that we've run out of milk, or that I've paid the hot water bill so he can transfer me half the money.

On Thursday, he asks if I'm going to volleyball. I say I can't, I need to go shopping for birthday presents for Gilly and my mum. He offers to come with me, but I say it's okay.

That afternoon, I walk through a shiny department store, thick with clouds of expensive perfume, and try not to think about the wounded expression on Lucas's face when I told him no. He deserved it. He can't be a dick to me, then make those puppy dog eyes when I refuse to pretend to be friends with him. If he wants to be friends again, he has to actually try.

I pick a candle off a shelf and smell it. It's fresh, like clean laundry, but with a surprising dash of spice. It's the kind of scent Mum would love. I turn over the candle and almost drop it when I see the \$75 price tag. \$75 for a single candle? What the hell. Is the wax liquid gold? Is the container made of gemstones?

I put the candle back onto the shelf and end up purchasing two books instead. Mum's got a whole bookshelf at home in her bedroom dedicated to Australian fiction. She loves any novel about farmers in the outback, struggling with droughts, small-town politics and romance.

I get Gilly a pair of slides, since he's mentioned a few times that he needs them. I'm about to leave the department store when I spot a section dedicated to DIY gifts. There are

boxes that include all the parts to make a ceramic mug, a terrarium, a personalised notebook and a bracelet.

My eyes linger on the bracelet. The box includes thin silver, gold and copper strings, as well as different types of beads and charms. On the front of the box is a huge graphic of a red love heart.

I pick up the box. I could get this for Cleo. It's almost our one-month anniversary — not that I've been keeping count. Okay, yes, maybe I have been marking the days off my calendar, but not because I'm a mushy-gushy romantic or anything. It's more just to see how long it takes until she gets sick of me and dumps me. Part of me can't believe she hasn't dumped me already.

My fingers curl into the box, creasing the thin cardboard.

Shut up, Charlie. She's not going to dump you.

I buy the DIY gift.

When I return to the apartment, I set myself up on the carpet of my room. Lecture recordings play from my laptop as I unbox the bracelet set. I've already watched the lectures, but I've got a few tests coming up and want to try to squeeze in a bit more revision while making Cleo's present.

An hour later, the front door opens, and after a minute, Lucas pokes his head into my room. He's wearing sports clothes, so he must have just returned from volleyball. His eyes find mine, then fall to rest on the silver heart-shaped charm I'm threading onto the bracelet.

I don't say anything. He doesn't either. His jaw tightens, and then he leaves.

*

Lucas is scowling at me. Despite his expression, he looks good. But who am I kidding? He always looks good, and right now, he looks even better than usual. His hair is combed and styled with gel, and he's wearing a button-up shirt that accentuates his triangular torso. Wide shoulders, impossibly trim waist.

“She’s really coming?” he asks.

“Yes. Gilly said I could invite her.”

His mouth flattens.

“What?” I demand.

“Tonight’s meant to be about celebrating Gilly’s birthday, not seeing your girlfriend for the forty-seventh time this week.”

“Don’t speak to me like that,” I say. “You wouldn’t be lecturing me if you had a girlfriend.”

He rolls his eyes. “Here we go again. Do you really think I’m envious because you’ve found someone who deigns to be with you?”

I focus on writing Gilly’s birthday card. *Do not feel upset.* He doesn’t get to have that power over you. Focus on the good. Cleo will arrive soon, and then we’ll go to Gilly’s birthday, and I can ignore him for the rest of the night.

The intercom rings.

I get up from the kitchen bench and answer it, which allows Cleo through the front door and into the elevator. She arrives at my front door a minute later.

When I see Cleo standing before me, I remember just how lucky I am that she’s my girlfriend. She’s totally out of my league.

Tonight, she’s wearing a light-green dress that falls mid-thigh. Her sparkly eyeshadow makes her eyes pop, and her hair falls over her shoulders in shiny curls. Hanging over her shoulder is a floral-patterned duffel bag.

“Hey,” she says, leaning in to kiss me. Her lips taste like lipstick.

“You look beautiful,” I say.

She pulls back and flicks her hair over her shoulders. “Thanks,” she says. When she notices Lucas by the kitchen island, she flicks her hair once again. “Hey Lucas,” she says.

“Hi Clarissa.”

I stiffen, but Cleo looks unbothered. “It’s Cleo,” she corrects.

He returns his gaze to her and looks at her the way a kid would look at homework. “My bad,” he says, then meets my eyes. “Ready to go?”

“Almost.” I take Cleo’s duffel bag and start towards my bedroom.

“What’s the bag for?” The question is sharp like a blade.

Cleo smiles at Lucas. “I’m staying over tonight. Didn’t Charlie tell you?”

Lucas stares at me.

“It must have slipped my mind,” I say. I should’ve remembered to give him some warning, but a small part of me can’t help but delight in the annoyance on Lucas’s face. “I’m just going to put this away. Feel free to sit down, Cleo.”

I place Cleo’s bag in my room, and when I come out, she’s sitting on a stool by the kitchen table.

“Charlie told me you’re studying too. Engineering, right?”

“Yes,” Lucas says.

“What kind?”

“Electrical.”

I sit beside her and finish Gilly’s birthday card.

“How long are you going to take?” Lucas asks me. “We’re going to be late.”

“Don’t worry,” Cleo says, waving a hand. “It’s always better to be fashionably late than too early. So. You two grew up together, right?”

Lucas nods. “We’ve known each other since we were six.”

“That’s a long time,” Cleo comments.

“Yes.” Lucas rests his eyes on Cleo, and she smiles, but after a moment, when Lucas doesn’t say anything, her smile

fades, leaving her looking unsettled.

I stuff the birthday card into an envelope. Time to get out of here before things get even more awkward.

“How are you finding Melbourne?” Cleo asks Lucas. “It must be really different from the small town you grew up in. New South Wales, right?”

“South Australia.”

“What?”

“Charlie and I are from South Australia,” Lucas says, tone flat yet ice-cold, like a glacier. “How do you not even know what state your boyfriend is from?”

“I must’ve just gotten mixed up,” Cleo says, flicking her eyes to me.

“Right,” Lucas begins, voice dripping with contempt. “Maybe you —”

“I’m ready to leave,” I interrupt. “There’s just one last thing I need to grab. Lucas?” I plaster on the nicest smile I can. “Can you help me with something in my room?”

“What are you talking about?”

“There’s something in my room I need for the party,” I explain through gritted teeth. “Come with me. Now.”

To my mild surprise, he listens. As soon as we’re both in my room, I close the door and jab a finger in his face.

“Be nice to Cleo. I’m serious. Be polite to her, or I swear to god—” I bite the words off. There’s no way I can threaten Lucas. He’d beat me in a physical fight. And there’s nothing I can offer him, nothing he wants from me, nothing he respects about me. All I can do is hope he listens. “Don’t ruin her night. Just...be civil. Okay?”

His eyes have gone black and dilated. He doesn’t nod or say yes, but he doesn’t refuse either. He hasn’t shoved me away yet, oddly enough. Hopefully that means he agrees.

I pull back and start to open the door when he grabs my wrist, whipping me around to face him again.

“Are you sure you want me to be nice to her?” he asks.

“Of course, that’s what I just said.”

He’s silent for a few seconds. “Fine. Your call.”

I return to the main room to find Cleo standing by the kitchen bench, combing her fingers through her hair. I’ve never seen her look like this before. She’s always seemed to exude endless confidence, like she owns every building she walks into. Now she looks...rattled.

I smile at her, and hopefully it’s reassuring. “Let’s go,” I say.

*

“I searched up the restaurant we’re going to tonight,” Cleo says as the three of us walk down a narrow alley, her shoes clacking against the concrete path. “Apparently, it’s really good,” she continues. “It’s got great reviews.”

“Yeah, Gilly and I chose it,” Lucas says. He’s not smiling, but at least there’s some warmth in his voice.

“Really? You know, the winner of last year’s *Romance Isle* had dinner there a few nights ago. She posted it on Instagram.”

“No way,” Lucas says. “Hmm. I wonder if there’ll be anyone famous there tonight.”

“Hopefully!”

Lucas laughs. Then, over the top of Cleo’s head, he gives me a look. It says: *see? I’m being nice.*

“I’ve never seen *Romance Isle*,” I say.

“Don’t watch it,” Cleo says. “It’s terrible, but I swear the producers put crack or something in it, because once you start watching, you can’t stop. Anyway, I’m going to have to take so many photos tonight. Everyone will be so jealous. You’ll help take photos of me, won’t you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks, babe.”

Lucas’s jaw twitches.

We arrive at the restaurant, and before we've even stepped inside, I can tell the place is fancy. Through the huge windows, so clean they're practically invisible, are tables covered in white tablecloth, already set with gleaming silver cutlery and wine glasses. Light fixtures resembling avant-garde sculptures hang from the ceiling, illuminating the place with luxurious golden light.

After entering, we're led to the back of the restaurant, where a long banquet table sits in front of a wall covered in vine-patterned wallpaper. Half of the plush grey chairs have already been filled, and when Gilly spots us, he greets us in his booming voice.

"Charlie!" Gilly exclaims as he wraps me in a big hug, tight enough to lift me off the ground for a few seconds. "Thanks for making it tonight."

"There's no way I'd miss it. Happy birthday." I hand him his birthday card along with his gift.

"Thanks," he says, taking them.

Gilly hugs Lucas, though it's more of a bro-hug with them slapping each other's backs than a real hug. Cleo says hello and Gilly greets her with enthusiasm. "So you're Charlie's girlfriend! It's nice to meet you. Tell me — how exactly did he convince you to date him?"

"Oi," I say. Gilly laughs heartily and Cleo giggles.

I say hello to the other familiar faces, and Gilly makes introductions between people who don't know each other.

Cleo and I sit nearby Gilly, who holds court at the head of the table. I say hello to Hugo, who sits opposite us. To my surprise, Lucas thuds into the seat on the other side of me. Strange, since he's always seemed to prefer everyone else over me.

After half an hour, everyone has arrived, and the food and drinks come out. Instead of individual meals, we're treated to platters of fancy finger-food — slivers of pink meat folded over cream cheese and crispy bread, plum-sized burgers with honey-sweet buns, smoked-salmon sandwiches, meringues

topped with raspberries, skewered fruit carved into the numbers two and zero...

As expected, everything is delicious, and the table is loud with chatter.

Cleo asks me to take a photo of her drinking champagne, which bubbles in the glass. I take sixty-three photos until she decides that one is acceptable. Later, everyone moves around to take group photos. Hugo takes one of Cleo and I, huddled together.

Gilly comes over to talk to us. He realises he's taking one of the same subjects as Cleo — Intro to Professional Writing — and soon they're trash-talking the lecturer and following each other on Instagram. Their conversation veers to reality TV and celebrity gossip, and I zone out.

An hour later, dessert comes out — a tall chocolate cake covered in candles. Gilly flounces back into his seat at the head of the table. Everyone sings him happy birthday before he blows out the candles and cuts the cake. After slices of cake have been distributed, I'm just about to take my first bite off my fork when Lucas leans over and eats it.

“You ass,” I hiss, stamping on his foot. He licks and makes a show of swallowing.

He's done this before. On my tenth, eleventh and twelfth birthday, he always stole some of my cake. Not my thirteenth, though. By my thirteenth birthday, we hadn't spoken in months.

I look at my fork in disgust. “Now this is covered in your germs.”

He rolls his eyes and looks past me to ask Cleo how she's finding the cake.

“It's alright,” she replies. “Way too many calories for me, though.”

That leads to them talking about micronutrients and the best way to make a green smoothie. As Lucas nods along to what Cleo says, his knee nudges mine, as if to say, *I'm being nice to her right now. Aren't I so kind?*

I roll my eyes and pull my knee away, but a few seconds later, he's pressing his leg against mine again. I glance at him, but he's looking at Cleo.

"Shit, that's so cool," he says.

Cleo giggles. "Thanks." She continues talking about I-don't-know-what, flicking her hair over her shoulder, lips curled in a mischievous smile.

I pull my legs away again and turn from Lucas so I'm facing Cleo, and that's when Lucas shifts. I sense it before I feel the weight of him, his arm resting on my shoulders, heavy chest against my back, leg sprawled out, his thigh touching mine.

He's so big, to be able to encapsulate me like this. I can feel his body heat. Maybe I've had too much to drink, but his touch—

He laughs softly at something Cleo's said, and his breath tickles my ear, and goosebumps raise all over my body.

That's it. I stand up abruptly, mutter an excuse and head to the bathroom.

There, when I catch my reflection above the sink while washing my hands, I spend more time than I'd like to admit assessing my face. I'm not blushing, which is a good sign.

I think I look nice tonight, or at least nice-ish. I know that most people wouldn't say that I'm attractive, but I like the way I look. I've had nineteen years to get used to my face, and I wouldn't want to wake up looking like anyone else. I might not look like a movie star, not even slightly, but I still look like myself, and that's what matters.

I check my teeth to make sure I haven't got any food stuck in them, then muster up a smile.

When I return to the banquet table, Cleo has moved into my seat and is talking to Lucas, eyes big and expressive as her hands move around.

And Lucas... Lucas is smiling at her.

I don't know why he doesn't smile more often. His smile makes the world seem brighter, the colours sharper. He rests his chin on his palm, pointer finger tapping against his lips which are upturned in a small, knowing smile, and that alone oozes charm. Someone should paint him in that pose. I'd show it to him when he's being a surly asshole. I'd show him it to remind him that he can be relaxed. Effortless. Seductive.

I walk over. "Hey," Cleo says and takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. Lucas looks at me.

I fall in Cleo's old seat, and she continues to talk to Lucas. He laughs and makes a joke, and while Cleo tips her head back in a giggle, his eyes move past her to meet mine. The easy glitter in his eyes fades, replaced with dim slate.

Sometimes his eyes scare me. Grey-blue doesn't sound scary, but to me, they're more terrifying than pure black eyes or blood red. When he looks at me like that, I can't tell what he's thinking. I don't know whether he's going to pin me down and whisper something cruel, or if he's going to tug on my hand like a needy child. When he looks at me like that, my heart swoops, as if I'm on the precipice and I don't know whether he'll save me or push me off.

Heat crawls up the back of my neck, uncomfortable, itchy. I look away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Then

Misa Tanaka-Randall's thirteenth birthday. Seven minutes in heaven.

Cool air. The scent of soil and sawdust. Light creeping through cracks in the tin roof like liquid silver. The shed walls were thick enough to muffle outside voices. It was too dark to read Lucas's expression — all I could see was his silhouette. But I could feel the heat of him.

My heart pounded. I asked him, "Can you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"My heartbeat." I laughed. "I'm nervous. How weird is that? I'm here with you and I'm still nervous."

He reached for me, and I startled. Then I realised he was pressing his fingers against the inside of my wrist, searching for my pulse.

The feeling of his skin against mine sent sparks tingling over my body. That was the first time I realised how much I craved touch as a teenager.

"Is it fast?" I asked.

"Mm." He let go. "Feel mine."

I reached out blindly for him, and he wrapped his hand around mine and directed me to his neck, to the soft part under his jaw.

Everything was silent. I couldn't hear anything, but I could feel his heartbeat under my fingertips, the vibration thudding

throughout my body. His pulse was strong. And it was rabbit fast.

“Why is your heart beating so fast?” I asked.

“Because I’m nervous. And excited,” he said, voice low. “Why is yours?”

I stepped back, pulling my hand away. “I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Have you ever thought about kissing before?”

“Course,” I said. “That’s what you do in high school. Have you?”

He shifted. “Maybe.”

“You could’ve kissed Joan.”

“I don’t want to kiss Joan.”

“I know. That’s why you moved.” I laughed. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” I moved around the shed and dragged my hand across the walls, tired of staying in one place. “I would’ve kissed her, though. Now, I just have to hope one of the other girls’ spins lands on me. Otherwise, I won’t get my first kiss and that’ll be so sad.”

Lucas was quiet a long time. “What if a boy’s spin landed on you? Would you kiss him?”

The question made me turn red, and I was grateful it was too dark for Lucas to see. “Probably not. Unless he was as cute as one of the girls. And if he smelled as nice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you noticed? The girls smell nice. Like flowers, and...I don’t know what else. And they have soft-looking lips. I want to kiss soft lips like that.”

Lucas raised one hand and touched his lips. He didn’t say anything for a long time. I looked around the shadows of the shed, wondering how many minutes had passed. Surely, we were close to seven minutes.

I picked a screwdriver off the wall and spun it around in my hand. I put it back and took down a wrench.

“Charlie?” Lucas asked from behind me.

“Yeah?” I stuck a finger between the jaws of the wrench, then returned it to the wall. After that, I pulled off a saw and touched the teeth of it ever so carefully.

Lucas appeared behind my back, reaching around me to take the saw out of my hands. “Stop playing with that.”

I pouted. “It’s fine. I’m only looking.”

He replaced the saw and touched my shoulders, spinning me around to look at him.

“Charlie?”

“Yes?”

He sighed, and I felt the whisper of it against my hair. “Why don’t...”

Ten seconds passed. “What?” I prompted.

“Why don’t you do it with me?”

“Do what?”

He sighed again. “Why are you being so dumb?”

I bristled. “I’m not being dumb, you’re being dumb. Don’t call me dumb, dummy.”

“Why don’t you just kiss me,” he practically yelled, then suddenly let go of my shoulders. “Why don’t you kiss me?” he repeated, mumbling.

I laughed. It was startled out of me, but the more I thought about it, the funnier it was. Soon, I was bending over, one hand on my stomach, the other slapped against my mouth.

“Why are you laughing?” Lucas asked.

“Because,” I said after I’d calmed down. “I mean, come on, it’s funny.”

“Why’s it funny?” He was dead serious.

“It just is. Us, kissing? That’s weird.”

“Why’s it weird?”

“Because you’re my friend! People don’t kiss their friends.”

“Sometimes they do.”

“Is this about having our first kisses? ‘Cause don’t worry, I’m sure one of the girls’s spins will land on us.”

“That’s not — why are you being so stupid?”

“I’m not stupid.”

The shed door slammed open, loud enough to make us both jump. “Time’s up!” Misa announced.

“Uh — okay,” I said, before looking back at Lucas. I only got a glimpse of him before he was pushing past me, through the door and across the lawn, ignoring Misa calling after him about the next round.

Numbly, I followed Misa back to the circle and took my seat. I was vaguely aware of what was happening — the next person to spin was supposed to be Lucas, but he had gone to the house, to go to the bathroom or something, so Brian spun it. There were shouts and laughs and oohs, but I wasn’t paying attention. Instead, I kept replaying the split-second look of Lucas I got when the shed door opened. The white light was blinding, illuminating Lucas’s face. His cheeks were pink, lips parted, and eyes wide.

Panicked.

Scared.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Now

When the restaurant tells us that it's closing soon, Gilly announces that the party will move to a club, but I'm exhausted and want to go home. Cleo says she'll come with me, and Lucas says he will too.

"Charlie," Gilly whines, drunkenly tugging on my shirt. "It's my birthday. You can't leave early."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm pretty tired. But hey, don't let me stop you guys from having fun."

Gilly pouts, which looks ridiculous on a big guy like him. "Cleo," he says. "Tell your boyfriend you want to stay. Come on, don't you want to dance with us? Don't you want to dance with the birthday boy?" He takes her hands and tries to waltz with her.

She laughs and gently pulls away. "Sorry, Gilbert. I need my beauty sleep."

He huffs. "No, you don't! You're already smokin'. C'mon, it's my twentieth birthday!"

"Sorry," she says.

Gilly pouts for another five seconds, but then someone says that the Asian supermarket a few buildings down has a sale on soju, and he's distracted. We say goodbye, and the three of us walk through the city to go home.

When we arrive at the apartment, Cleo collapses on the couch and drops her purse beside her. "I'm exhausted," she says.

“Anyone want some water?” Lucas asks, walking to the kitchen.

“That’d be amazing, thanks.”

Lucas brings two glasses, one for Cleo and one for me. I sit down beside Cleo, and she lolls her head onto my shoulder. We drink. Lucas moves around the kitchen, drinking a glass of water himself and unloading the dishwasher.

Eventually, Lucas says goodnight and disappears into his room. Cleo watches him go.

“Hey,” she says, touching my arm. “Let’s go to your room.”

I nod and follow her, stifling a yawn on the way. Once in my room, I grab my pyjamas. “You can have the bathroom first,” I tell her, but when I turn, I find her sitting on the bed, watching me.

Her lips stretch into a slow, sly smile. “We don’t have to go to bed right away, do we?”

I stare at her. Is she...?

“No,” I say, sitting on the bed beside her. “No, I guess not.”

She laughs softly and places a hand on my thigh. Distantly, the warm spread of arousal makes its way through my body. It’s not how I expected to feel, though. When I was younger and imagined touching another person, I thought it would be explosive, exciting, terrifying enough to make my heart beat out of my chest.

Instead, it’s just...meh. Quiet. Subtle. Not bad, exactly, but if I’m honest with myself, disappointing.

I place both of my hands on Cleo’s hips, and we start kissing, which is wet and frankly a little gross, but I focus on the flicker of desire deep in my belly.

She pulls my shirt off, and I place my hands up her dress and try to get her bra off. She laughs after a minute, a touch of exasperation in her voice, and pushes my hands away, doing it herself.

We stretch out on my bed.

“How do you want to do it?” she whispers.

I blink. “As in, tonight?”

She shrugs. “We don’t have to do it tonight. But, okay, in the perfect scenario, how would you want it to happen? Like...” she moves forward, nudging my shoulder with her lips. “What position?”

“What’s your favourite position?”

She hums as she thinks about it. “Missionary. I like looking into each other’s eyes. It’s romantic.”

I nod. When I imagine it, though, the thought of looking into Cleo’s eyes freaks me out. If I’m looking at her, I’ll see every micro expression that flickers across her face. What if her lips thin, the way they do when she gets annoyed with me? What if I do a terrible job and I’ll see that in her reaction?

Surely, it won’t be hard. I mean, I’ve never done it before, but the movements are instinctive. Yet the thought of Cleo watching like an examiner assessing me makes me start to sweat. She’s probably going to compare me with every other guy she’s been with. She’s got high standards in general — in clothes, in restaurants, even in food — and I doubt I’ll be able to live up to her expectations.

I’ve been quiet for too long, because Cleo looks up at me. “Well? How would you want to do it? It’s okay, you can tell me.”

I close my eyes. Relax. Tell the truth. She’s my girlfriend, I can trust her.

“You...on top,” I answer.

“On top?” A soft laugh. “You want me to do all the work?”

Yes. That way I can relax.

“I think it’d be hot.” With my eyes closed, I can sink into the darkness, and the scene appears before my eyes. “I’d like it if you were...”

“What?”

“Bossy,” I finish.

Cleo props herself up on her side.

“Do you want to be dominated or something?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know.”

We’re both quiet for a moment. The moment stretches into a minute, two minutes of silence.

“I think missionary could be romantic too,” I finally say.

Cleo kisses my shoulder, then my neck. “Do you have a condom?” she whispers.

*

Two hours later, Cleo sleeps beside me, facing the wall. I stare at the ceiling.

There are footsteps. Lucas. I didn’t realise he’d still be awake. A door sliding open. A door closing. The rush of the shower, the noise muted by walls and closed doors.

Fuck it. I can’t sleep, and I know I won’t be able to any time soon. I get up and pull my pyjamas on, then roll up the towel that Cleo and I used to clean up. When I leave my bedroom, I gently close the door behind me as to not wake up Cleo.

After stuffing the towel into the washing machine, I fix myself a glass of water from the kitchen and lean against the bench.

A song’s playing in the bathroom. Lucas hums along to it occasionally, his voice low and deep. Huh. I didn’t realise he was the type to listen to music as he showered — he’s never done it before, at least not when I’m around. He’s always been in and out, quick and efficient.

I don’t recognise the song, and the lyrics are obscured by the shower, but the melody is slow, sad. Maybe one of Lucas’s hookups dumped him. Maybe that’s why he was so sensitive the other day, pushing me into the couch and ranting about how he could have anyone he wants, how no one ever leaves him.

The song, along with his humming, makes him seem so vulnerable. Add in the fact that he's naked in there, and it feels voyeuristic, violative to listen in. My gut twinges until I realise something even more horrifying: I can hear him. I can hear Lucas, even with the shower blasting. Does that mean...has he ever heard me when I've been having my...alone time?

The apartment goes quiet, enough that I can hear the fridge humming. Lucas has finished his shower.

I shake my head. No, there's no way that Lucas has overheard me masturbating, and it's not just wishful thinking. Lucas is the worst, and that means he'd take any opportunity to make fun of me. Me masturbating isn't an exception.

I must use a higher shower pressure than Lucas, which makes more noise and drowns out any sound. That's it. That's the answer.

Despite my relief, I'm frowning again. That's because thinking about jerking off makes me think about sex, which makes me think about Cleo—

Lucas opens the door. He's wearing pyjamas, and his hair is wet, and when he sees me, his brows jump up.

“You're still awake?” he asks after a moment, voice gruff.

“You are too.”

He grunts, heading to his bedroom.

I push off the kitchen bench and follow him.

“Why are you having a shower so late at night?” I ask.

“I was busy.”

“Busy? With what?”

“With stuff,” he replies as we enter his room. “Did you enjoy the party?”

“Yeah,” I say, and my smile is real. “I'm really grateful I got to go.”

“Grateful?” Lucas sits on his bed and doesn't complain when I get on it too. Frankly, I'm a little surprised he hasn't

kicked me out of his room yet.

“I haven’t been to many birthday parties,” I admit with a self-deprecating laugh. “I feel really lucky I’ve made friends at uni. Hugo’s the sweetest. And Gilly’s...”

“Gilly,” Lucas says with a touch of exasperation that makes me grin.

“Yeah. But they’re both important to me. When you only have a few friends, you appreciate them ten times as much.”

“I get that,” he says.

Does he, though? Ever since high school, he’s been surrounded by friends, acquaintances and admirers. I figured they were all disposable to him. I certainly was.

“Anyway,” I continue, “it sounds childish to say, but I hope I stay friends with them for a long time. It’s rare to find people who like me the way I am.”

Lucas’s expression flickers, then he nods his head in the direction of my bedroom. “Cleo asleep?”

Oh yeah. Cleo.

“Yeah,” I answer.

Lucas frowns. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Nothing really. Just...”

His frown deepens. “Charlie.”

I flop backwards so I’m lying on his bed and rub my face. “Well...I’m no longer a virgin. So.”

Lucas doesn’t say anything for a long time. When I remove my hands from my face, I see he’s looking at the opposite wall, his mouth a thin line.

“Lucas?”

He looks at me. I might be going crazy, but I swear his eyes soften. “You don’t look happy about it,” he says.

“No, it’s not that. I don’t regret it. Or maybe I do, I don’t know. I just...I feel weird.”

“How do you feel weird?”

“Mm.” I drag a finger over Lucas’s bedding. “Because I feel shocked. Or disappointed, that would be a more accurate term. But if I say I’m disappointed, that sounds like I’m insulting Cleo. Not that she did anything wrong. It’s more that...sex is overrated. In the movies and in books, people make it out to be this incredible thing, but in reality, it was... stressful.”

I draw patterns onto the duvet as I relive what happened.

Firstly, I had to take my clothes off and hope that Cleo would think my naked body didn’t look weird. I don’t have abs, I know my limbs are weirdly skinny, and I didn’t know whether I’d trimmed enough down there. Also — was my penis big enough? Was it a weird colour? Did my balls look weird?

Then, after we touched each other and Cleo said she was ready, I had to stick my dick in. So, I did. But then, sometimes when we moved around or I thrust in a certain way, it’d fall out, so I’d have to stick it back in. Every time I had to stick it in, I felt like I was cutting the red wire to defuse a bomb, which sounds dramatic, but that’s truly how I felt.

Anyway, as we did it, Cleo would look into my eyes, but that freaked me out, so I’d look away, but then I’d worry that was rude, so I’d force myself to meet her eyes. But sometimes she closed her eyes and I couldn’t help but wonder whether that meant she was thinking about it ending or thinking about being anywhere other than my squeaky bed.

She made tiny noises of encouragement, which was helpful to know what I was doing well, but then I wondered whether I should make noise too or whether she thought it’d be weird. In mainstream porn videos, the guys never make noise. But personally, I like it when the guys moan. It’s hot. In the end, I stayed silent, but then she asked me whether I liked it, so maybe I made her feel like I didn’t like it.

Sex was way more tiring than I expected. I could only go for so many minutes before I needed to take a break and catch

my breath. Maybe Lucas is right. Maybe I should go to the gym.

I think the whole thing lasted an hour. Cleo laughed that she'd never heard anyone lasting so long for their first time. The truth was, I spent half of the time worrying I'd lose my erection from anxiety, and I spent the other half willing myself to come so I could get it over with, but chanting "just finish already" in my head doesn't really help — it just made me feel more panicky.

Finally, I managed to come, but it didn't feel good. Usually I feel relaxed after finishing, but instead I felt like I had to get out of there. Cleo didn't come, but she said it was okay, because she enjoyed the sensation, which I suppose was reassuring, but maybe she just said that to be nice.

We both went to the bathroom, cleaned up and brushed our teeth. We didn't speak much. I couldn't tell what Cleo was thinking, but her cheeks were pink, so I think she must have liked it a little. When we returned to bed, she fell asleep immediately. And I just lay there.

"It just felt like exercise," I say. "But naked. And with someone else. Honestly, I prefer jerking off."

That startles a laugh from Lucas — a genuine laugh, without a trace of cruelty or mockery.

"Don't you think it's a bit early to be asserting that?" he asks. "It was your first time. No one's first time is amazing."

"What was your first time like?" I ask.

Lucas goes quiet.

"Sorry. You don't have to answer."

I only asked because, for a moment, hanging out on his bed in the middle of the night...it felt like the way it used to be. Just two best friends talking.

"No, it's okay," Lucas replies. "It wasn't fantastic either."

"How old were you?"

He looks at me. "Seventeen."

“Oh.” I’m a little surprised. Given how popular Lucas was in high school, I thought he’d have done it earlier.

“I did it with a...with a stranger.” Lucas starts drawing on the bedding too, our fingers moving around each other. “Someone from another school. It was on a sports trip.”

At our high school, certain students went on overnight trips to compete against other high schools. Lucas was on the soccer team, so he might have gone then, but he also did well in athletics.

“I snuck out of the hotel room and...and we did it in their car. It was so cramped.”

“Why did you do it with a stranger?” I ask.

“I just did it to do it. To get it over with.”

“But why not someone you liked?” Why not a girlfriend? God knows Lucas had heaps of them.

His eyes meet mine, and the sudden flash of grey-blue makes my stomach flip. “That’s what I planned at first. There was this person I was waiting for. I waited for ages, because I had decided that when I do it for the first time, it had to be with them. But I eventually realised that...that it wasn’t going to happen. That it’d never happen.” He closes his eyes.

My finger stills on the duvet.

“Anyway,” Lucas continues, “I went and did it in that tiny car, and it was messy and awkward, and the whole time, I wished that I’d waited, that I did it with someone I loved. In other words, it was crap.” He musters a smile. “So, don’t worry, Charlie. Loads of people’s first times suck.”

I stare at him. This room is so quiet. It’s pitch-black outside, and there are no sirens or echoes of shouts or traffic. It’s like only the two of us exist.

Lucas’s shoulders are sloped — not slumping, exactly, Lucas could never look as inelegant as that — but they lean slightly forwards, and his back isn’t the stiff straight line it usually is, instead a loose scrawl. As if he’s exhausted.

“What makes you so sure that it was never going to happen?” I ask.

His brow creases.

“The person you were talking about,” I explain. “That someone you were waiting for...what makes you so sure that it'd never happen? Who would ever reject you?”

If I had to guess, I'd say that the girl was religious and waiting for marriage. Although the thought of Lucas caring for someone that much — waiting and waiting and waiting for her — makes me feel strange. Almost...sad and...jealous. I'd never admit that out loud, though.

Lucas forces his lips upwards in a sad smile. “You'd be surprised, Charlie.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Then

The closest I got to romance (if I can even call it that) before Cleo was in Year 9, when I was fifteen. It had been two years since Lucas and I had our friendship breakup, and he'd grown increasingly mean. Year 9 was arguably when he was the worst though. I think everyone in our year level was a bit of a dick, reaching the peak of hormone-fuelled nastiness. I wasn't an exception — I also would complain about everything, roll my eyes at my parents and refuse to participate in class. That was probably the age I was most negative. The age I hated everything and everyone.

Except for one person: Joan.

Like me, Joan spent her lunchtimes by herself. She still wore her seventies style glasses and no makeup, and while other girls were usually nice to her, it was clear that they thought she was strange because she didn't seem to care about being popular or putting effort into her appearance.

The difference between Joan and I, though, was that I secretly wished I fit in more, whereas Joan genuinely didn't seem to care. She didn't linger around the lockers, like she was waiting for someone to talk to. She didn't survey every classroom, searching for the best place to sit. She just walked to and from class like she was off in her own world.

Slowly, Joan and I became acquaintances, if not friends. In most classes, Lucas and the other popular kids would sit at the back. Everyone else would sit in the middle rows. Joan would sit in the front, at one end, and I'd usually sit at the other end. When we had to do partner work, we'd end up together.

In sports, when we played games like dodgeball or softball, we'd quickly get out and sit on the sidelines. During lunchtime, we'd run into each other in the library. We'd talk about the books we were borrowing and we'd give each other recommendations. Then we'd start playing card games and chess.

By then, we were definitely friends, especially when we started opening up about deeper topics. Joan told me that she hated the way girls in our year level could be so judgemental. They'd make passive aggressive comments if you had an old phone model, or if you spent too long talking to a boy they deemed popular. Joan told me one time, on casual clothes day, one of the girls complimented her for not caring about what other people think of her outfits. Joan said she acted unaffected but admitted that the comment hurt, deep down. "It's so stupid how much people care about other people's opinions. Everyone's so fake. They're just acting the way they think other people want them to act."

"You don't act like you care about what other people think."

"Because I don't. But sometimes I do."

I stared out the library window. On the oval, a crowd of boys were playing soccer. Lucas was the tallest among them, his head visible above the mass of bodies. "I don't think it's stupid to want to be liked."

"Yeah, but people decide whether they like you for the stupidest reasons. Like how you style your hair or how many people have crushes on you or whether you go to parties on the weekend. They don't care if you're a decent person, or any other important quality. If you show that you care about something, you're cringe and a try-hard. If you study, you're a nerd. If you put effort into your appearance, you're an attention whore, and if you don't, you're lazy. If you tell the truth or offer criticism, you're mean, but if you're nice, then you're a liar and a push-over."

"Do you like me?" I asked. The question blurted out of me before I could think better of it.

“Yes,” Joan said.

I blinked. “Why?”

“You’re honest. I can trust you, and you don’t judge me the way others do. So, I feel like I can say what I want around you. That’s why I like your company so much.”

And in that moment, Joan suddenly became the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. It was instantaneous, the way I suddenly noticed how big and bright her eyes were, the elegant way she sat, the pinkness of her lips.

My crush was intense and obvious, because in less than a week, the other boys would throw pieces of paper at my head when they caught me staring at her in class. They’d ask, amongst raucous laughs, when I was going to ask her out. On more than one occasion, they’d forge fake love letters from her and slip them into my locker.

Dear Charlie,

I think you’re hot. Your acne and shortness really get me going. Do you want to do the deed with me?

XO

Joan.

I knew the letters were fake, if not from the content, then definitely from the handwriting. Anyway, the teasing got so bad, especially when they’d do it when Joan was present, and I knew I had to make my move soon.

So, I did, on Valentine’s Day. Our school had a system where you could mail love letters to someone’s locker. In student reception, there was a big cardboard box that had been painted red and decorated with heart stickers. All you had to do was write the recipient’s name on the envelope and the letter would be delivered. It was optional whether to sign your name. I didn’t. I figured it would be obvious to Joan that I was the author of the letter, especially since I’d written, *I’ve really enjoyed spending time with you.*

When I stepped into student reception, my envelope in hand, I ran into the worst person possible: Lucas. To be

honest, I didn't know what he was doing there. Probably trying to get a nurse's note to get out of art class, since he thought it was a waste of time. He said so loudly every time we had it, but for some reason, the art teacher always ignored him. Most teachers let Lucas get away with crap.

As soon as he saw me, his lips curled into a nasty smile. He started taunting me, asking who the lucky girl was. I ignored him and batted off his hands when he tried to take the envelope off me. Quickly, I shoved the letter through the slit in the red box and walked off.

It was only once I'd returned to my locker, I wondered whether mailing my love letter and leaving was a good idea. What if Lucas opened the box, rifled through the letters, pulled out mine and read it?

No, surely not. Even if it was extremely easy to take the lid off, looking through other people's love letters was something you simply weren't meant to do.

The rest of the day was relatively uneventful. Lunch with Joan was the same as always, and I figured the love letters hadn't been mailed yet. It was only at the end of the day as everyone returned to their lockers when girls started screeching, waving letters. And when I unlocked my locker, a folded-up piece of paper fell out onto the ground.

My heart jumped into my throat. Oh my god. Maybe Joan had the same idea and sent me a letter too.

Slowly, I picked up the letter and opened it up. The first thing I felt was disappointment. It was not Joan's handwriting.

In fact, I didn't recognise the handwriting at all — it didn't even resemble the messy scrawls of the fake love letters I'd received in the past.

Every letter was angular and evenly spaced, as if the author was trying to maintain anonymity by hiding their real handwriting.

To Charlie,

To tell you the truth, I like you a lot. I know you don't think so, but to me, you're the most beautiful person I've ever seen.

From: A secret admirer.

I stared at the lines of black ink pressed into the paper. The warm swell of emotion lasted about five seconds before I heard the crows of laughter. I looked up, and it felt like I'd been punched in the gut. It was the popular boys, with Lucas in the middle of the group. Every single one of them was watching me. "No way," one said. "Did someone write Charlie a letter?"—"Who'd write Charlie a letter?"—"Did you write it to yourself? Well, did you?"

It had been a prank. I scrunched the letter up in my fist and, with as much composure as I could manage, finished packing my schoolbag. I walked to the school bus stop. Every step felt heavy, and my eyes were beginning to burn. When I passed a bin, I chucked the letter in, as hard as I could, but paper doesn't make a satisfying sound when landing against rubbish, so I didn't feel much better.

I was praying the bus would arrive quickly when Lucas found me.

"Hi," he said.

I was not in the mood. I still couldn't believe I was naive enough to think for one second that someone liked me.

"What."

"So, uh." He cleared his throat. He probably needed a couple of seconds to think up the best way to verbally humiliate me. "Did you get a love letter?"

"No."

"But I saw you holding it before."

I looked around for his friends, to see whether they were watching nearby. I couldn't find them, but I still kept my face as expressionless as I could. "No, that was nothing. It was just a piece of rubbish."

There was a long silence.

"Who did you write a letter to?" Lucas asked.

"Leave me alone."

“Tell me.”

“No. Fuck off.”

There was a pause. Then, Lucas raised his hands in surrender and widened his eyes. “Oooh,” he said mockingly.

I wanted to go home and lie in my bed. I suddenly felt exhausted, like every bone in my body weighed a hundred kilos.

“I got a letter,” Lucas said as he started to unzip his schoolbag.

“Only one?” I figured he’d receive at least twenty.

“Only one that matters.” He pulled the letter out and started to read. “To Lucas...”

I tuned him out. At least until he said, “Joan is so cute, isn’t she? I had no idea she was into me.”

I whipped my head to look at him, and he looked back at me. I pulled the letter from his hands, and he let me.

It was Joan’s handwriting.

I stared.

I shoved the letter back into his hand. Thankfully, I didn’t have to respond because the bus arrived, and I quickly climbed on.

The next day, Lucas started going out with Joan. One week later, he dumped her. Joan never gave me any indication she’d received a love letter, or that she knew I’d written it. If I had any more crushes in high school, I never made a move. I knew not to bother.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Now

I wake up at 7:30 and get out of bed, careful not to disrupt Cleo who's still sleeping. After getting ready and changing into fresh clothes, I grab my laptop and set myself up at the kitchen bench, sitting on one of the stools with a mug of milky coffee and watching a lecture recording on double speed with my earphones in.

At eight, the front door opens and Lucas walks in. He's wearing his gym clothes, and the apples of his cheeks are shiny and pink. His arms are ridged with muscle, his long legs hard as if carved from stone and dusted with light brown hair.

"What are you doing?" he asks, passing me to get himself a glass of water. He smells like deodorant mixed with the strong scent of sweat. Somehow, his sweat doesn't smell like the usual foul, acidic scent of most men's body odour. Instead, it's kind of...pleasant. Not that I'd ever tell him. He's already got a big enough ego as is.

"Watching a lecture."

He nods over the top of his glass. Last night, after our conversation, I returned to my room. The worry that had been chewing me up inside had faded away. Perhaps it was Lucas telling me about his first time, letting me know that it's a universal experience, that it's okay things didn't play out like a romance movie. Perhaps it was simply talking to Lucas, sitting together on his bed, in the middle of the night.

Maybe things are good between us.

Then Lucas says, "When's breakfast?"

I pause the lecture. “What?”

“Breakfast.” When I don’t answer, he continues, “You are going to make breakfast for Cleo, aren’t you?”

“Ha! You do know her name.”

He rolls his eyes.

“How did you know I was going to make her breakfast?” I ask.

“Because you’re a gentleman.”

I give him a flat look.

“So,” he prompts. “Breakfast?”

“What makes you think you’re getting any?”

“Because I know you, Charlie, and you’re a very kind person. What’s on the menu? Bacon and eggs? Eggs Benedict? Pancakes?”

“Pancakes,” I say. “But I doubt they’ll have the amount of protein you’ll need. Sorry.”

“That’s alright. I’m sure I’ll still enjoy your cooking.”

“Why are you so eager to eat my pancakes?”

“Because it’s every man’s dream.”

“What are you on about? What’s every man’s dream?”

He gives me an arrogant smile that usually makes me want to punch him in the face, but this morning it’s kind of... endearing?

“Having someone to cook him breakfast in the morning,” he says.

I frown. “Don’t tell that to a prospective girlfriend. She’ll kick your ass all the way back to the 1950s.”

He laughs and tips his head back, mouth open. “Don’t worry. I’m not in any danger of that.”

He walks to the bathroom, and I shake my head. He must have tripped over a dumbbell in the gym and hit his head.

I've watched ten more minutes of the lecture when Lucas comes out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. "Call me when brekky's ready," he says as he walks to his bedroom.

"I'm not your housewife," I call at his back. His very wide, expansive, muscled back.

I finish the lecture and jot down notes, then close my laptop and get started on the pancake batter.

By the time I've cooked up a stack, Cleo comes out of my bedroom, wearing her pyjamas. They're light pink and made of silk, and her hair is tied up in a messy bun.

"Charlie, you're making pancakes?" she says, taking a seat at the kitchen bench. "You shouldn't have."

"This is yours," I say, handing her the plate of pancakes. I also pass her a squeeze bottle of maple syrup, a bowl of sliced strawberries and a container of vanilla ice-cream, the fancy kind with specks of vanilla bean in it.

"This looks incredible!" she gushes, picking up the silver knife and fork I've provided. "I'm going to get so many cavities, but it'll be worth it."

Part of me wondered whether things would be different after we had sex last night, but things are the same as before. Cleo eats, checking Instagram with her other hand, and I finish using the rest of the batter.

I realise too late I've burned half of the pancakes. They're not completely charred, but there are a few black patches. Still edible, but not perfect. I bite back a sigh as I place them onto a plate. I'll eat the crappy ones and give the good ones to Lucas. It's my fault I burned them, after all.

After I set two other plates on the kitchen bench, I go to Lucas's room and knock on the slightly ajar door. "Your pancakes are ready," I say after I poke my head in.

He looks up from where he's sitting at his desk, writing complicated-looking equations in a notebook.

"I thought you said you weren't my housewife?" he asks.

I give him the finger, then return to the kitchen, Lucas behind me.

“Morning, Cleo,” he says as he takes a seat at the bench, leaving the middle spot for me.

“Oh, hey.” She puts her phone down. “How’d you sleep?”

“Not bad.”

“That’s good to hear,” Cleo says, then looks at me. “Charlie, you wouldn’t have anything to drink, would you?”

I get her a glass of milk from the fridge, then take my seat between them. I dig into my food — these pancakes are pretty delicious, if I do say so myself — while Cleo passes her phone to Lucas to get his Instagram. Lucas compliments Cleo’s profile, making her glow with pride. She tells him all about her plans to work in social media, and he listens to her as if her voice is his favourite sound.

I take a look at Cleo’s Instagram too and notice that she’s posted a photo from last night — one of her by herself, with a glass of champagne in one hand, rather than the photo we took together. Not that it matters.

When she leaves to take a shower, Lucas nudges my knee with his. “Look,” he says, nodding at Cleo’s half-finished plate she’d left on the bench. “What is she, five?”

I stare at him.

“Didn’t her parents teach her to put her dishes away?” he continues by way of explanation.

That’s not what I’m confused about. For a moment, he seemed like he genuinely liked Cleo, and it’s a shock to the system to realise it was part of his act. It was because I told him to be polite.

I ignore him and fix my gaze on my pancakes, continuing to eat.

“Yum?” he asks. His knee is still pressed against mine. Just like last night, at the restaurant.

“Yes,” I say. “These aren’t bad, especially as I burned...” I pause. The black patches on my pancakes have disappeared. Where did they go?

I slowly turn to Lucas, who swallows the last of his pancake. I stare at his plate. Before I can say anything, he stands up. “Delicious,” he says. “Thank you, dear.” And before I have a chance to realise what’s happening, he leans forward and presses a kiss on my forehead, and then he’s gone, taking the plate to the dishwasher.

I stare after him, mouth open and cheeks burning. “Y— you asshole.”

He laughs.

After I finish eating, I gather up mine and Cleo’s dishes and rinse them in the kitchen sink. Then I bring them to where Lucas loads the dishwasher. He’s crouched down, and it’s one of the few times I can see the top of his head.

“Hey, Lucas?”

“Yeah?” He takes the plates from me.

“Did you swap plates with me?”

He looks up and blinks. “Why would I do that?”

“Because mine were burned. And...”

Maybe you didn’t want me to eat the burned ones. Maybe because you felt guilty about me cooking them. Or maybe you’re just a little bit kind, deep down.

When I don’t say anything, he shakes his head and returns his focus to organising the interior of the dishwasher. “I swapped our plates because you kept all the big ones for yourself. Selfish bastard.” Despite the words, there’s no venom in his voice. And after a moment, I smile at the top of his head.

*

Days pass, and I’m busy with work and studying, especially as I’ve got a jam-packed weekend. On Thursday night, I’m celebrating my one-month anniversary with Cleo. Technically, it will be a day early, but on Friday, I’m driving home with

Jemima, and that weekend I'll spend back at home with my family, celebrating Mum's birthday.

Late Thursday afternoon, Cleo sits on my bed, her cross-body bag in her lap.

"I'm so excited for dinner tonight," she says. "I've never had Japanese before, but I've read online that it's supposed to be really tasty. My friends said the atmosphere in the restaurant is really nice, too."

"Oh yeah?" I ask as I dig through my closet. Behind my jackets, I've stored a little gift bag that contains Cleo's present — the bracelet that I made. I turn around. "By the way," I say, "I got you a gift."

Her eyes go big, and she eagerly takes the gift bag from me. "Really? Oh, Charlie, you shouldn't have."

"It's only something small, but I wanted to show you how much I care about you."

"That's so sweet." Cleo reaches into the bag and pulls out the tiny, wrapped present. "It sounds like jewellery."

"I made it," I say as she peels back the paper. "I hope you like it. It's not very fancy, but..."

I trail off, not sure what else to say while Cleo stares at the bracelet. She's silent for a moment.

"Thank you, Charlie," she says.

Fuck. She hates it.

"Do you not like it?" I ask, trying to keep the worry out of my voice.

"No, it's...did you say you made it?"

"Yeah. It came in a DIY set. I thought it would be nicer to make something personal, rather than just buying something..."

She leans over and kisses me on the cheek. "Thank you," she says after pulling away, returning the bracelet and its packaging back into the gift bag. "That's so nice of you. I'm sorry I didn't get you anything."

“No, that’s okay,” I say with a wave. “I didn’t expect you to.”

She smiles.

I smile back, though it’s forced. Should I ask her to wear it? Or would that be pushing it? I thought that it’d be her style — I’ve noticed she wears silver jewellery, and the bracelet is silver too...

“Sorry,” she says suddenly. “I guess I’m just super picky with gifts. Next time you want to buy me something, ask me in advance, okay?”

“Okay. But wouldn’t that ruin the surprise?”

“I don’t really like surprises that much.”

“Oh.”

My stomach has plummeted to my knees. I know I’m being sensitive, and it’s not that big of a deal, it’s just...

I don’t know. I was so happy, making the bracelet on my bedroom floor, imagining how excited Cleo would be to receive it. Now I just feel dumb, like a silly child.

The front door of the apartment opens, and Cleo stands up. “That must be Lucas, right?”

“Yeah,” I say absently.

Cleo disappears through my bedroom door, and I stare at the gift bag left on my bed.

“Hey, Lucas!” comes Cleo’s voice from the living room. Since Gilly’s birthday, every time Cleo comes over — which has been every day this week after classes — she always talks a lot with Lucas. Sometimes, she convinces him to join us on the couch and watch a movie with us or play video games. Lucas usually agrees, though sometimes I catch him staring at where Cleo is sprawled over my lap with an annoyed expression on his face.

“Oh, hey,” Lucas replies. “How’s it going?”

“Not bad, yourself? Where have you just come from?”

“Volleyball.”

“Oh, duh, I should’ve guessed from what you’re wearing.”

“Charlie usually joins me, but he’s been ditching ever since he met you.”

“Of course. I’m way more interesting than volleyball.” A pause. “You must be hungry, right?”

“Starving. Why do you ask, are you gonna make me a meal?”

A tinkling laugh. “I’m not a cook. Actually, Charlie and I were just going to go out to a Japanese place for dinner. Do you want to join us?”

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude on your date.”

“Don’t be silly, we’d love to have you. Come on, you know you want to.” There’s a teasing smile in her voice.

“Alright, alright,” Lucas says and laughs kind-heartedly. “Let me just get cleaned up.”

“Yay!”

A moment later, Cleo returns to my room, and I look up to meet her eyes.

“Lucas says he wants to join,” she tells me, her face shining with a smile. “That’s all good, right? I think the more the merrier.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

*

I don’t know how much sake I’ve had. The logical part of my brain knows I’ve probably had too much, but I don’t really care.

“Another,” Lucas says, raising his sake cup, which is shallow and made of black ceramic. I pour the alcohol into his cup and Cleo’s, and top mine up too. Our plates were taken long ago, and since then we’ve just been talking. Correction: Lucas and Cleo have been doing most of the talking. I’ve just been drinking and listening.

At least I don't feel so low anymore. I never considered before how scary it is to tell the truth to someone you're dating. Someone you care about, but don't know well enough to know whether they'd hurt you.

I could've said, *Cleo, I just want it to be the two of us. It's a date for our one-month anniversary.*

But that would've meant disinviting Lucas, which would have been rude. Besides, Cleo wanted him to come. She would've looked at me and said, *It's only one month, it's no big deal.* That would've reminded me that she's had relationships before, for much longer, and it's not that special for her. She would have given me that smile that made me feel like a foolish child, getting excited over nothing and wanting to celebrate something insignificant.

Oh, well. I suppose it's nice Lucas is here. He seems to be enjoying himself, his cheeks slightly pink as he drinks the sake. He's never been much of a drinker, since he's so conscious about his health, but tonight he's indulged for some reason.

"I bet you," Cleo says, leaning over the table and pointing a wobbly finger at him, "were a cute baby."

"What can I say?" Lucas raises both hands in surrender. "My grandma said so, at least. Besides, all babies are cute."

"Nup. Not me." Cleo's words are slightly slurred. Since she's smaller than me, she must be even more of a light weight. "I was ugly as a baby."

"No way. Impossible."

"Yes." Cleo nods solemnly. "And as a kid. And as a teenager. You know, I only glowed up recently." She looks at me. "That's how I know."

I blink slowly. "Know what?"

"That looks matter," Cleo replies. "Remember we talked about this? Everyone wants to pretend there are more important things in the world, but the truth is, it's all about appearances. Like, you know what me and my friends have started doing?"

“What?” I ask.

“Using anti-aging skin products. And we’re only nineteen! But it’s, like, totally illegal to age these days. Unless you’re a hot man. Then you can age to look like George Clooney or something.”

“I’m sure you’d be beautiful even if you were ninety and wore dentures,” Lucas says.

“Thanks, Luc. You’ll be a hot grandpa in fifty years. A GILF.”

They laugh over that, even though I don’t think it’s particularly funny. I swallow another mouthful of sake.

“But yeah,” Cleo continues. “Now you know my embarrassing secret. I used to be ugly. I even have photos, but I’d totally die before I show you guys.”

“Show us,” Lucas says. “I’m sure you looked cute.”

“No, I will never! You wouldn’t even recognise me. My skin was awful, I was twenty kilos heavier, I had chubby cheeks. You know, the boys at my high school used to make fun of me. Ask me out as a joke, that kind of stuff. Or, when we had group projects, they’d totally ignore my suggestions, as if I were stupid. They would treat my very presence like an irritation. Like the fact that I even existed was infringing on their...on their fucking human rights or something.” She shakes her head and continues, “Then my skin clears up, and I lose some weight, and I stop wearing baggy clothes. Then, when they can see I have boobs, that I have some sort of figure, that’s when they start treating me nicely. They pretend to be gentlemen — they hold the door and actually listen to me when I have something to say. I mean, I know they probably didn’t actually respect me, they were just pretending to be nice to get into my pants, but still. It was night and day.” Cleo’s eyes have gone distant as she stares through the restaurant window.

I stare at her. I never would’ve guessed, not with the way she holds herself now, as if the world has always been at her feet. Maybe we have more in common than I thought.

“Anyway,” Cleo says, clapping her hands together, “I want a hot husband when I’m older, and the only way to do that is to be hot myself. Yeah, I hate the game, but the only way to win is to play it.”

“Can’t we just cancel the game?” Lucas asks.

“Easy to say when you’re gorgeous,” I tell him.

“No, I’m serious.” He straightens up, looking surprisingly business-like despite all the sake he’s drunk. “I’ve seen some discourse online about dismantling beauty standards. What?” he asks when he catches me staring at him.

“I can’t believe you know the word ‘discourse’.” I say.

He scowls. “Dickhead. I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, Mr. Electrical Engineering.” I swing my gaze to Cleo. “You want a hot husband?”

“Duh. Every girl wants a hot husband. Besides, I need to have cute children. That’s, like, the best privilege I could give them.”

I consider that. “What about money? I feel like that’s better.”

“Okay, fine, money’s the best thing you can give your kids, but looks are second.”

“What about athletic ability? Like, you marry a pro tennis player or something, and then he passes those tennis genes to your kids?” Lucas asks.

Cleo tilts her head, twirling a lock of hair around her finger as she thinks about it. “Looks are more important,” she concludes.

“What about brains?” I ask. “What if you married some Albert Einstein dude and he passed down superhuman intelligence to your kids. I think that’d be more advantageous than being attractive.”

“Blah blah blah, whatever,” Cleo says, reaching for the sake and pouring everyone another cup. “There are other reasons I want a hot husband, though. Everyone wants to be

with someone hot. Everyone would be jealous of me. And, if he's easy on the eyes, I'll probably be less likely to murder him when he forgets to do the dishes."

Lucas chuckles, and Cleo blushes, smiling at him shyly, her eyes warm.

I pour myself another cup of sake.

*

On the street in front of the restaurant, Lucas and I send Cleo home in an Uber. She waves and blows kisses through the window, and we watch as the car turns the corner.

"Alright," Lucas says, turning to me. "Time to get home."

"Mm." I don't think I'm capable of speaking full words. The three of us drunk enough to litter the table with sake bottles. Cleo got loud enough to get us kicked out of the restaurant for being too noisy. Even Lucas looks more drunk than I've ever seen him before. His usually graceful strides are ever so slightly uneven, and he's smiling more than usual. I don't think he's ever smiled so much around me. Usually, his expressions are more controlled.

Somehow, the two of us stumble onto a tram and manage to look somewhat sober by keeping quiet. I close my eyes and listen to the city noises around me. The chimes of the tram, the whoosh of cars passing by, shouts of pedestrians walking the streets. Construction noises from far, far away.

This is the most intoxicated I've ever been. I didn't even get this drunk in high school. In fact, I barely drank alcohol in high school because that usually happens at parties, and I was almost never invited to parties.

The tram turns a corner, and the sudden motion makes me slide down my seat, crashing right into Lucas. I blink a few times, then realise I'm smushed against his chest. "S—sorry," I mumble, slowly peeling myself off.

"S'okay," he says. He's still wearing that ever present, almost creepy because of how easy it is, smile. "You can rest, if you want."

“Kay,” I say. “Thanks.”

I must have fallen asleep against the heartbeat in his chest, but it feels like only seconds have passed when he wakes me up and takes my wrist to lead me down the tram steps onto the road. We check for oncoming traffic, then run across the bitumen to our apartment building.

In the elevator, we slump against the walls. I look up and see him watching me, and then suddenly we’re laughing, even though nothing’s particularly funny. This is weird. I feel weird. Not exactly good, but I don’t feel stressed anymore. I don’t even care that Lucas made Cleo blush at dinner. Anyone at the receiving end of Lucas’s gaze would blush. I would blush.

The elevator doors open, and Lucas takes my hand, leading me down the hallway so fast I have to run to catch up, the two of us laughing so loud I’m sure our neighbours can hear us.

Nope. I’m not disappointed at all.

“Ice-cream,” I say once we’re inside our apartment.

“You want ice-cream?”

Lucas looks so clear in front of me. The coppery brown of his hair is bright, the blue in his eyes overpowering the grey. His teeth are blinding white. I almost never see his teeth because he smiles so rarely, and when he does, it’s usually a closed mouth smirk. He should smile like this more.

“Yes,” I reply. “Do we have some?”

“You bought some when you made pancakes for Cleo,” Lucas replies, walking to the fridge and dramatically opening the freezer door.

“Oh, yeah.” I haul myself onto the kitchen bench, my legs hanging over the edge.

Lucas takes the ice-cream out and fishes for two spoons from a drawer. He hands me one and settles between my legs, flinging off the ice-cream tub lid. We dig in, and as soon as Lucas takes his first mouthful, he lets out a moan.

I may be drunk, but that sound still makes my heart rate spike. “That good?” I ask. “That must be the first unhealthy

thing you've consumed in what, a week?"

"Alcohol's unhealthy."

"Right." I think that over while I suck ice-cream off my spoon. "I didn't think you'd drink so much tonight. You barely ever drink."

"I drank sometimes in high school." Lucas offers me the tub, and in doing so, he moves closer, his hips brushing against my inner thighs. I can feel his body heat. He's warmer than usual, probably because of the alcohol.

He smells good. Not like sake, but his usual deodorant and tropical flower shampoo.

"Do you remember the party at the end of Year 11?"

I nod. That was one of the few parties I was invited to, because everyone in the year level was invited.

"I saw you there," Lucas says. "And then I started chugging rum and cokes like they were water."

I laugh. "Really? Why?"

He thinks while a spoon sticks out from his lips. Despite such a handsome face, Lucas's lips look surprisingly pink and soft.

"Thought maybe it'd make me brave enough to talk to you," he says.

I blink. "What?"

"Yeah." He shrugs, then pops the spoon from his lips. It makes a lewd noise, and my brain immediately goes into the gutter.

I shake my head. *Focus*. "Wait. What do you mean?" Does he mean being brave enough to walk over and insult me? To shove me against a wall? To taunt me?

When he doesn't answer, I tug the front of his shirt. "Lucas. What do you mean?"

He doesn't answer.

“Lucas,” I whine, shaking him more vigorously, which just makes me dizzy. Lucas pushes me back onto the kitchen island while I’m shaking him, and something cold lands on the back of my fingers.

I look down at the chunk of ice-cream that’s fallen from my spoon. It’s starting to melt, creamy white rivulets running down past my knuckles.

Lucas picks my hand up. And then, without another word, he puts the three sticky fingers into his mouth and sucks, eyes on me.

I inhale sharply, my entire body feeling like it’s caving inwards. It’s as if I’ve been punched in the gut, but it doesn’t hurt at all. It’s...

And then the heat of Lucas’s mouth disappears from my fingers, and I blink, watching him lick his lips before digging his spoon into the tub and eating some more ice-cream like nothing happened.

Fuuuuuuckk.

It happened so quickly, I didn’t have an opportunity to savour the moment. All I know is that my nerves are on fire. And I can feel blood rushing downwards. And my body feels tight, like before I was a tangle of string and now both ends have been pulled, turning me into a taut knot.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Then

Even though Lucas and I weren't friends anymore in high school, our mums were still close, ever since Lucas's parents divorced in Year 5 and Lucas's mum relied on my mum to help her through the difficult time. But even though Mum and Natalie were friends, I didn't pay much mind to it. They'd go out for brunches or walks, and when Natalie did come over to my family's house for coffee, she'd never bring Lucas.

But one time she did. I was fifteen, and when I saw Lucas sitting on the living room couch, I froze. I couldn't remember the last time he'd been over. It must've been at least two years, when we were both thirteen. When we were still friends.

He was playing on his phone, looking bored, but when he noticed me in the doorway, his lips curled. He stood up and I was suddenly reminded of his height.

"Hi Charlie," he said.

I didn't move from the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

"Mum brought me. She's out in the garden with your mum." He nodded at the window, and through it, I could see our mothers walking and chatting amongst some flowerbeds.

I took a step back.

Lucas took a step forward. "Where are you going? Gonna run away?"

I scowled. "No," I lied, because I had every intention of hiding in my room until he left. But before I could escape,

Lucas had his hand on my shoulder. I don't know how he moved so quickly.

He whirled me around. "What are you doing? I'm a guest here."

"So what?" I snarled, trying to shake his hand off me. He just tightened his grip, fingers digging into the skin by my collarbone.

"So, it's impolite to just leave me." He took a step closer, so I had to crane my head back to look at him. How was he so tall? Why was I still so small?

He dipped his head, his mouth a breath above my ear. "You're meant to entertain me," he said in a low voice.

I tried to flinch away, but I couldn't. Then, before I knew it, I was being thrown to the ground. I landed on my butt, and Lucas loomed on top of me, pushing me down until I was lying flat. I wanted to shove him away, but he had his hands around my wrists and pressed them down against the carpet. I started bucking my hips, but all he had to do was apply his weight to my thighs and I was helpless.

"Get off me," I said.

He didn't say anything. He wasn't even smiling anymore, just staring.

"Get off me!" I repeated, louder this time.

He didn't look like he was listening. Instead, he looked like he was in his own world, eyes roaming over me. Like he was inspecting me. Or searching for something.

"Lucas!" I shouted. "Get the fuck off *now*!"

He blinked, as if he'd been roused, and stared at me. Then, his cruel smile returned. He lowered his head, and his hair tickled the side of my face. His words were a breath in my ear.

"You're cute when you struggle," he said.

Then he got off me and disappeared in the direction of the bathroom. I lay there, on the carpet, staring at the ceiling for a

moment. First, I felt dazed, then furious. But underneath the anger, I felt weak, which was the worst feeling of all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Now

“You look like shit,” Jemima says when I open the passenger side door to her car.

It’s too early to be awake, and the city is blue and cold. The street is full of professionals wearing suits or pencil skirts.

“Thanks,” I say as I fall into the passenger seat. I didn’t bring any luggage with me since home will have all the clothes and toiletries I need. All I need is my phone.

After doing up my seat belt, I lean my head against the headrest.

Jemima pulls out of the carpark onto the street. “Did you get wasted last night or something?”

I rub my temples. My entire skull hurts, as if an iron hand is trying to crush it. “Yeah. Ever heard of sake?”

She whistles. “What was the occasion?”

“One month anniversary with Cleo. We went to a Japanese place, but in retrospect, we should have gotten drunk somewhere cheaper. The bottles really added up.” I sigh. “At least Lucas helped cover the bill.”

Jemima glances over at me. “Lucas was there?”

“Yeah. Cleo invited him.”

“Huh.”

“Whatever you’re thinking, don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“I know what you were thinking.” I close my eyes. All I want is for the lingering nausea to go away. Why did I think drinking was a good idea? That’s it, I’m never drinking alcohol ever again.

“Okay.” Jemima’s silent after that, but I can practically feel her thoughts floating in the car, nudging me.

I crack one eye open. “What?” I ask, sharper than she deserves.

“Nothing. I won’t annoy you with unsolicited big sister advice,” she says. “But...” A sigh. “Remember you deserve the world, okay?” Before I can form a response, she clicks on the indicator. “Now, how ‘bout we get some Maccas? What do you want, coffee? Some water as well? It’s good to stay hydrated after a night of drinking...”

We go through the McDonald’s drive through, and Jemima gets her usual breakfast meal, including a chai latte, while I get a coffee, a bottle of water, and a stack of hash browns.

We’re quiet as we make our way out of the city. We briefly discuss the presents we bought for Mum, making sure we didn’t get the same thing. The radio plays pop music with intermittent traffic and weather updates, as well as obnoxiously noisy ads.

Soon enough, we’re out of the city, zooming on the highway past farms and suburbs in development. I settle myself in for a long drive — it’s almost six hours to Maryford, so I might as well use the time to sleep.

*

It’s only after spending months in Melbourne that I can appreciate how beautiful my hometown is. There are trees everywhere — tall eucalyptus in the parks, oak trees lining streets, pine farms on the outskirts of town. We pass the train station, which is made of red brick and reminds me of the grand stations in books set in England.

It’s late afternoon by the time we arrive home. After Jemima parks in the driveway, she lets out a sigh of relief. “Thank god we’re finally here.”

“Thanks for driving me,” I say as I scan the house. It’s quiet — Mum and Dad are at work, and Nate’ll be at school.

I follow Jemima up the front steps of the porch to the front door. Our family house is a typical farmhouse, with big square windows, a wraparound porch and a brown doormat that reads *home is where the heart is*.

Jemima unlocks the front door, and we step inside, the wooden floorboards creaking.

“I’m taking a nap,” Jemima announces, dragging her mini suitcase behind her to the back of the house, where her bedroom is located. “Wake me up when the others get home.”

“Sure,” I say. I head to the kitchen and drink some water, then grab a few apples to snack on.

Afterwards, I go to my bedroom. It’s the smallest one, tucked next to the laundry. Mum and Dad have the master, and Jemima and Nate’s are the same size, both bigger than mine. Jemima got a big room because she’s the oldest, and Nate’s the youngest so he’s always gotten nice things.

I fall onto my bed and text Cleo.

Charlie: Arrived home :)

*

“How nice is this?” Mum asks at dinner. “We’re finally all together.” We sit around the table in our usual seats. Mum at the head of the table, Dad beside her, and Jemima on the other side. Nate and I take the remaining seats.

Nate arrived from school at four after taking the bus home. Strangely enough, he seemed pretty happy to see me. During my teenage years, he always acted too cool to hang out with me, but this afternoon he ushered me into his room and showed me stocks and cryptocurrency stuff on his computer I didn’t really understand. I listened anyway and was secretly pleased at the fact that maybe he kind of missed me.

Mum and Dad arrived home at six. Mum’s a nurse and Dad’s a financial planner, and even though they both looked

tired, they quickly changed out of their work clothes and got dinner ready.

“Are you excited to turn a year older tomorrow, Mum?” Nate asks while helping himself to a large amount of garden salad.

“Not at all,” Mum says. “As far as I’m aware, it’s not my birthday at all. It’s just a celebration of me.”

“How old are you turning again?” Nate asks and taps his chin as he pretends to think. “Is it fifty...”

“Hush,” Mum says, waving a hand in his face. “You know a lady never reveals her age.”

“In my opinion, you don’t look a day over thirty-five,” Dad says.

“Stop that,” Mum says, failing to stifle a smile.

Dinner goes by quickly as we talk a lot, updating each other on our lives. Afterwards, Jemima and I load everything into the dishwasher as the eldest siblings, while Nate jumps onto the couch. Mum and Dad follow him, and they discuss what TV show they want to watch tonight.

When Jemima and I join them, they’ve settled on a rerun of MasterChef. It’s just like old times, including the frozen berries we munch on as dessert.

That night, after having a shower and changing into my pyjamas, I climb into bed. Cleo hasn’t responded yet, so I call her. She doesn’t pick up. I call again — no answer. Oh well, she’s probably busy. It’s a Friday night, after all, so I bet she’ll be out with her friends, drinking fancy cocktails on a rooftop bar or something like that.

In the end, I send her a goodnight text and then go to sleep.

*

The following evening, my family goes out to the Golden Orchid for Mum’s birthday dinner. It’s the typical kind of nice restaurant in a small town. Nothing that would hold up against highly rated places in the city, but it has high ceilings, soft piano music playing from speakers and thick white tablecloths.

Mum's wearing a bright blue dress while Jemima's hair is covered in hair clips. Dad wears a checkered button up shirt, I wear a polo shirt Mum bought me for Christmas last year, and Nate wears a t-shirt with a hole in the armpit because he's Nate. He'll wear thousand-dollar sneakers but refuses to change into something more appropriate for dinner.

We sit at a table by the window, with a nice view of the river that cracks through town, and everyone is discussing Jemima's career choices. Nate's announced that he's betting a hundred dollars Jemima will quit secondary teaching a year into her job because "high school kids are little shits." Dad's bet fifty dollars Jemima will last five years, and Mum's admonishing the pair of them, saying they shouldn't be making such wagers on Jemima's job. I'm laughing along when I get a text message. It's from the group chat I have with Lucas, Hugo and Gilly named "the boyz." Gilly named the group, and I haven't been able to decide whether the name is ironic or ironically unironic.

Gilly: Bruh, why's ur girlfriend here.

I frown.

Charlie: What?

Gilly: Cleo's here.

Charlie: What do you mean? Where?

Gilly: We're at ur place, playing video games w Lucas and all of a sudden ur girlfriend's here lol.

Gilly: She just showed up randomly. We told her ur out but she's still here lol.

"You shouldn't be on your phone at Mum's birthday," Nate says to me. I look up to see him looking smugly at me and respond by sticking out my tongue because I may be nineteen, but that doesn't mean I'm mature.

"I'm going to head to the bathroom," I announce, getting up from my chair, crossing the restaurant floor and leaving through the front glass doors. The night air prickles my cheek.

I call Cleo. It rings once, then twice, then three times before going to voicemail. I hang up and try again. No answer.

I call Gilly. No answer.

“Why isn’t anyone answering?” I say aloud. My body is surging with adrenaline. I try again, but Gilly doesn’t pick up, so then I call Hugo.

Thankfully, he answers.

“Yeah, yeah...okay, listen, I’ve got a call. Just let me...” he says to the voices on the other end of the line. “Hey Charlie.”

“Hi,” I say. Suddenly, I’m not sure what to say. “Um. What are you doing?”

“We’re at your place right now. Lucas invited us over for a boys’ night in. How’s South Aus?”

“Yeah, it’s good,” I reply quickly. “Is Cleo there?”

“Yeah, funnily enough.” He laughs before quickly turning it into a cough. “Actually, it was really random. She showed up like five minutes ago, talking about some skincare stuff she left here. Next thing we know, she’s taken the controller from me and is absolutely destroying Lucas. Did you know she was so good at FPSs?”

“Um. No.”

“Apparently, she played them all throughout high school. Lucas looks pretty pissed, though. He keeps asking her when she’s going to leave, but I think he’s just butthurt she keeps beating him.”

“Listen, can you ask her why she isn’t picking up my calls?”

“Probably because she’s in the middle of a round.”

“It’s important,” I say, then stop pacing. Is it? What am I going to say to her when she answers? *How dare you hang out with my friends without me?* No, that’s stupid. Stupid and possessive and jealous.

But I can't help how I feel. My stomach is tying itself into knots, like I'm watching a horror film and I know the jump scare's coming, so I'm trying to prepare myself in advance.

"Can you ask her to call me back when she's done?"

"Sure." The voices in the background raise, and I hear Hugo call back to Gilly, something about running to the bottle shop because they've run out of beer. After half a minute, Hugo's voice returns, clear in the phone. "Is everything okay, Charlie? You sound a little worried."

"Yeah, no, I'm fine. Um...I'll let you go."

"Alright. Have a good time with your family."

"Thanks," I say.

When Hugo hangs up, I listen to the tone for a few seconds as I stare out at the lights illuminating the town. I'm six hours away from the city. I'm helpless to whatever's happening back in the apartment.

I inhale deeply, deep enough to make my chest rise with the breath. It's okay. It's fine. I'm only stressed because I'm focused on the worst possible scenario.

I take a step back towards the restaurant. Then, because I'm weak, I make another phone call.

"Hello?" Lucas's voice is deep, even over the phone.

"Hi," I say, then notice the absence of noise in the background. "Where are you?"

"My room. The others are really loud."

I run my tongue around the inside of my mouth and try to sound nonchalant. "Right, you're having a boys' night."

"Mm."

"And Cleo's there."

"Mm." Everything I need to know about what he thinks is clearly communicated in that noise. I feel like there's a heavy stone in my gut.

"Lucas?" I ask, voice slightly higher than usual.

“Yes?”

Be nice to Cleo. Be polite.

No.

Have fun. Have a good night.

No.

“Nothing,” I eventually say. “Bye.”

I hang up.

I stare at nothing for who knows how long. My moping is interrupted when Nate opens the restaurant doors. “Hey!” he calls. “Food’s been served.”

I follow Nate inside and force a smile for the table.

*

By the time I drive everyone home—Mum, Dad and Jemima are wine-drunk—I’m distracted enough that I forget all about Cleo and the Melbourne apartment.

It’s only when I’m in bed, eyelids heavy and tired from eating so much good food, that I start to panic again after receiving a message from Lucas.

Lucas: Yo. Can you tell your girlfriend to leave me alone?

Instantly, my body is alert. I type out a response.

Charlie: What do you mean? What’s going on?

He doesn’t respond for a few minutes before a blurry image comes through. All of the shapes are smeared, and the angle is strange, as if Lucas took the photo discreetly. I squint at the screen. It was taken in Lucas’s room no doubt — those are his black bed sheets. And on top of those black sheets are a pair of slim, slightly tanned legs. The photo catches a bit of her denim skirt before the image cuts off.

Cleo.

She’s sitting on Lucas’s bed, legs hanging over the edge. The pose looks relaxed, not that I can really tell that much from the image.

So Lucas took a photo of this and sent it to me. Why?

My stomach sinks. I already know. I know what the Lucas from high school would've done. He would've taken any opportunity to show me up. To prove how inferior I was to him.

I stop wondering and call. It rings, and rings, and rings, but he doesn't pick up. I call again, and again, and again, and again. When I consistently go straight to voicemail, I realise he must have turned his phone off.

So, I call Cleo. Straight to voicemail. I call several times — surely, she'll pick up if she thinks it's an emergency. And it is an emergency. She's alone in a room with Lucas.

My girlfriend's in Lucas's bedroom.

If I was in Lucas's bedroom... well, all he'd have to do is look at me and my knees would go weak.

*

I barely get any sleep that night. I toss and turn as I clutch my pillow and wonder what's happening in Lucas's bedroom. I check my phone at 2 AM, hoping I've received a message from Cleo reassuring me that everything was fine, but my lock screen is blank.

In the morning, I sit on the couch with the TV on to distract me. When I hear a creak down the hallway, I snap my head up, hoping it's Jemima. If we leave soon, we can get to Melbourne soon, and then I can...

I'm not sure what I'll do, but at least I'll find answers that'll resolve the nervous energy buzzing through my body.

But it's not Jemima. It's Mum.

"Oh, Charlie. I'm surprised to see you up. I have a job for you," she says.

"A job?" Hopefully, it's not mowing the lawn or another chore. Then again, that might distract me from the dread weighing me down.

"Natalie messaged me."

Lucas's mum, which makes me think of Lucas, which makes me think of Lucas's room, and Cleo in that room, on his bed —

I think of Lucas, with his bright eyes, part stormy, part sapphire. I think of his cheekbones, the line of his jaw, his broad shoulders and his height, tall enough and strong enough to pick me up and break me.

Mum's still talking. “— have enough room in the car, would it be possible to take some things with you back to Melbourne?”

I blink. “Huh?”

Mum's smile is exasperated. “Natalie has asked whether it's possible for you to take some of Lucas's things with you.”

“Oh. Yeah, whatever.”

“Fantastic. I'll let her know.” Mum pulls out her phone from her dressing gown pocket and types a response, using a single pointer finger which means she takes a full minute to write a sentence.

“She says you can go over any time today.” Mum lowers her phone. “You could go now, if you wanted.”

“Right now?” I ask.

“Why not? This is a good opportunity to get some fresh country air before you return to the big smog.”

I check the time on my phone. Yesterday, Jemima wasn't out of bed until ten, so I have hours to kill. I might as well.

I take Mum's car to Lucas's home, and when I knock on the front door, Natalie lets me in with a huge smile and a barrage of questions, saying that it's been so long since I've been over. She asks me if I'm eating enough and whether I'm used to university yet and how I'm finding Melbourne. As we talk, she leads me to Lucas's room, explaining that she's left a box of his things on his desk.

Just as she opens the door, though, she brings her hand to her face, the gesture a more elegant version of a facepalm. “Oh, I almost forgot the winter jackets! I won't be a moment,

I'll just grab them from the garage. We can't have him freezing during the winter."

She disappears through the door, leaving me in the room alone. It's changed a lot. I haven't been in Lucas's room since the walls were covered in posters of soccer players and drawings of fictional pirates like Jack Sparrow and Monkey D Luffy. He used to have a pirate ship themed bedspread when we were kids, and it was during a sleepover, when we were hidden under the covers, using a small torch to tell ghost stories, that he wrapped his arms around me and told me I was his favourite person in the world. I still think about that moment a lot.

Now, all of the pirate stuff is gone. His bedsheets are black, like those at the Melbourne apartment. The black covers that Cleo was sitting on —

I squeeze my eyes close. Don't think about that.

On his tallboy is a terrarium, the green moss inside thriving. Stuck on the wall in front of his desk are motivational quotes, which make me smile. I wonder if his jock friends thought they were dorky. Well, most of the quotes are from professional athletes, so probably not. There's also a calendar from last year, still stuck on November, exam dates written in bold black letters.

I walk over to the bookshelf tucked away in one corner. As I expected, there aren't many books — not even fake books that are actually safes, like the one he has in Melbourne. He's got random things, like a stack of university booklets from Year 12, probably from when he was deciding what university to go to.

I open the bedside table drawer, which is crammed with stuff — random papers, loose coins, a bottle of lube. That makes me smile, though I'm not sure why. It's proof Lucas is human, I suppose. That he has needs like the rest of us.

It's also evidence that Natalie really hasn't gone through his things, because I doubt she'd leave this lying around. I shift the bottle out of the way. If he's got lube, he's probably

got condoms too. It's no secret girls in our high school wanted him. Some boys wanted him too.

But I don't find any condoms. Well, he probably used them all.

In the rest of the drawer contents, I find a packet of tissues, a random roll of sticky tape, a bunch of beer bottle caps, batteries and sticky notes. Everything is random, but typical.

I push the drawer back in, but it gets stuck. Something must be jamming it, so I reach in and press all the items down. That doesn't fix the issue. There must be something in the very back...

My fingers land on something flat, with a matte-like texture.

I curl my fingers around it and wedge it out, and in the process, the drawer slides inward, no longer stuck. In my hand is a book with a plain black cover.

Another book? My heart starts to race. Maybe this'll give me a clue into Lucas's secrets.

But it's not a fake book-safe, like his copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in Melbourne. It has real pages... It's a notebook.

I open the front page. He's written his name, Lucas, with the graffiti style S everyone drew in primary school. Underneath is a top-secret sticker. *Do not read!!* he's written. Under that, in brackets, is *I'm serious*.

Aww. Little Lucas is adorable. I'm about to flip the page when I pause. Should I really read Lucas's...whatever this is. Diary? Idea book? Dream journal?

If the roles were reversed...well, firstly, I didn't have a diary of any kind during my childhood. I know my siblings well enough to know they'd go through it without a second thought. But let's say that I did have a journal... Okay, I definitely wouldn't want Lucas to read it. If I had a diary in high school, it'd be full of emo stuff. *I'm so alone, no one likes me, I wish I just had one best friend. Like before.* And if it wasn't full of emo stuff — if I was really bold and filled my

diary with the thoughts that plagued me most of the time — then it would be full of all my horny desires.

I check the doorway, but thankfully, Natalie hasn't returned yet.

Idly, I flick through the pages of the notebook — not because I'm planning to read anything, I just want an idea of what the book contains. Drawings? Or is it really a diary? At first, the pages are full of Lucas's cursive handwriting I remember from primary school, when we had to learn cursive in order to get our pen licence. It's still pretty messy, though, the words unintelligible, which is good. It means I can't accidentally read anything.

Later in the notebook, though, the handwriting changes — grows straighter, less cursive, neater. It's legible, and I know it is because I see my name.

My finger catches the page, and I look at the date written at the top. I count the years back — the entry was written when we were fourteen.

My conscience doesn't have a voice. I read the entry with my name in it without thinking about it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lucas

Age 14

It was House Athletics today, and I saw Charlie, and his P.E shorts were too short. They made him look like a girl. They're probably hand me downs from his sister.

He came third in the hundred-meter sprint. The B a hundred-meter sprint. And he was smiling about it and waving around his green ribbon like it was actually something to be proud of. I came first in the A hundred-meter sprint. Let's do the maths. If everyone in the A sprint is faster than the B boys, and there's 10 boys in a heat... That means that I'm 12 boys ahead of him. I came first. Not that coming first even matters.

We ran into each other in the bathrooms, and when he saw me, he ignored me, like he's so much better than me. I should've fought him. I keep on promising myself I'm going to beat him up, but I can't bring myself to do it. He needs to be taught a lesson.

Oh yeah, when we were getting changed into our P.E uniform this morning, I looked for him in the change rooms, but he wasn't there. I think he's been changing in the cubicles ever since some of the guys laughed at his skinny legs.

I should tell him not to hide in the cubicle when he gets changed because it just makes him look even more self-conscious, which makes everyone tease him more. He needs to grow some balls.

I would tell him to change with the rest of us, so he doesn't look so weak, but I don't want him to think I want to watch

him take his clothes off, because I don't. I'm not a pervert.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Now

“Here they are!”

At the sound of Natalie’s voice, I almost jump a metre into the air. I slam the diary shut and shove it deep back into the drawer. Thankfully, when I turn around, Natalie isn’t paying attention to me. She’s folding the winter jackets into neat squares.

“I hear it gets really cold in Melbourne during the winters,” she says. “Lucas says it isn’t bad at the moment, but it’s still only autumn. I thought I might as well send these jackets with you, since I doubt Lucas will visit before uni break. I always ask him to visit, but he says he’s busy. Well, I suppose it is a long drive...”

I nod along to whatever Natalie’s saying, trying to act like my heart isn’t racing. In my mind, I imagine high school Lucas. The way he’d tilt his chin up arrogantly so he could look down at me, eyes filled with nothing but contempt.

I feel ill. I knew he didn’t like me, but...

I’m thankful when Natalie leads me out of Lucas’s room, both of us holding a box. Even if I had a chance to swipe Lucas’s diary, I wouldn’t. And no, it’s not because of my conscience. Fuck my conscience. Fuck being decent. Fuck Lucas.

No, I wouldn’t take it because I never want to read that thing again.

*

It's late afternoon by the time Jemima drops me off at the Melbourne apartment. The streets are quiet, yellow sunlight stretching above the silver skyscrapers.

My bones feel as if they're made of lead as I walk down the hallway to the apartment, two boxes of Lucas's things stacked in my arms. When I arrive at our door, I drop the boxes on the ground, and after I unlock the door, I shove them inside with my foot.

It's silent in the apartment. No footsteps, no rustle of movement. The front door slams shut behind me.

I enter Lucas's room. He's not here. The bed has been made and I reach out to touch the black cotton, then snatch my hand back at the last moment.

Where is he? I know his schedule well enough that most Sundays, he's at home, studying like crazy in preparation for the next week.

I call him, and the phone rings and rings and rings, but no answer. Because I already have my phone out, I try Cleo. She doesn't pick up. I'm not surprised.

I look at the messages I've sent her.

Charlie: Hey, can you call me back?

Charlie: Cleo, please call me.

Charlie: It's urgent.

Charlie: Call me back.

Charlie: Please.

Charlie: Where are you?

Charlie: Cleo.

Charlie: Did I do something wrong?

Charlie: Did I upset you?

Charlie: Talk to me.

Charlie: Please.

Charlie: I'm sorry for whatever I did, just can you please call me back, please.

Charlie: Are you upset with me?

Charlie: Can you tell me where you are?

Charlie: Please call me back.

I don't bother typing out another message. Instead, I tap on Hugo's phone number. It rings and rings and rings, but he doesn't pick up. I call Gilly, and he doesn't pick up either.

Why won't anyone answer?

My heart aches, and panic travels from my chest to my fingers and down my legs to my toes, giving me enough energy to run a marathon. Without thinking about it, I step towards the bed and tear the covers off.

Underneath, the dark bedsheet looks...clean. I pull open the bedside table drawer with enough force to accidentally wrench it out completely, then dig through its sparse contents. Where's the box of condoms? Where's the evidence?

I try the second drawer. There's nothing except that dumb copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. I pick it up, my fingers digging into the cover and spine, knuckles turning white. This stupid fucking thing. What the fuck is Lucas hiding that's so precious?

I don't care. I'm going to find out.

I flip open the cover and find the safe. There must be a way to open it. I make a fist with my hand and smash it into the safe, which doesn't do anything except hurt my hand, and I gasp. Fuck. I thought the safe might be made of a silver-coloured plastic, but no, its metal. I try smashing the book against the corner of the bedside table. Nothing.

Well, fuck. I guess I'm going to have to do this the hard way. I'll just have to figure out the password. Three numbers.

123. Wrong.

456. Wrong.

789. Wrong.

101. Wrong.

420. Wrong.

555. Wrong.

666. Wrong.

696. Wrong.

000. Wrong.

911. Wrong

I try combinations of his birthday, which is the 10th of September. 109. 910. Wrong.

What else...his parents' birthdays? I don't know them. His friends' birthdays? I don't know those either. Besides, Lucas has too many friends to try, and he'd hardly be the type to be that sentimental about a friend.

A girlfriend's birthday? He doesn't have a girlfriend, so maybe a girl he's talking to or hooking up with?

Or maybe it's not a birthday at all. Maybe it's something to do with this year. Or his player number from high school soccer. Or his favourite athletes' numbers.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

"Goddamnit," I say, teeth gritted. I curl my fingers against the front of the safe, the skin under my fingernails going pale. *Just...fucking...OPEN.*

The bedroom door slams open, and I drop the safe in surprise. It bounces against the bed and lands on the floor near my feet, the front and back cover splayed open.

I turn around to find Lucas. He's leaning against the closed bedroom door, hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. He looks not quite bored, but not nervous either. His expression is blank, but there's something in his eyes that gives me the distinct feeling that he's hiding something from me. That he's laughing at me.

The sight of him reminds me of our dynamic, of what he thinks of me. Weak. Pathetic. Nothing.

Anger and adrenaline rushes through my veins, and I curl my hands into fists to control my energy. I want nothing more than to fight.

I march over and stop a few centimetres before him. “Where the hell have you been?” I snap.

He looks down at me and doesn’t say anything for a moment.

Then, “Went out to buy some groceries. We ran out of milk. You’re welcome.”

“Don’t ‘you’re welcome’ me. I’ve been calling you non-stop since last night. Since you— you—”

He raises his brows.

“Since you sent me that photo. Of Cleo. In your room.”

“Who?”

He manages to keep the poker face for a second before smirking at his stupid joke, and I want to scream. Instead, I shove both hands against his chest, as hard as I can. “Don’t. Just don’t.” I shove him again. It doesn’t do anything — he’s not even moving a little bit, but it feels good to get my rage out, otherwise I might explode. “What happened? Why was she here?”

He shrugs.

“Lucas,” I growl and shove him again.

He cracks a smile. Does he think this is funny? Does he think this is fucking funny?

The muscles in my arms feel tense, my skin burning hot, and this time I punch him as hard as I can, hopefully hard enough to bruise. “Tell me what you did. Tell me right now.” When he doesn’t respond immediately, I dig my nails into his shoulders and push him against the door, hard and fast enough to hear the wood creak.

His eyes are still alight with amusement, but at least his smile has disappeared.

“What I did? I did nothing. She’s the one who showed up here.”

“What happened? What did she say?”

He tilts his head, as if trying to remember. Bastard. I know he knows exactly what happened. It was last night. It’s not as if he could have forgotten.

“I told her you’d gone to visit your family, and she said that she knew. That she was just here to pick something up.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, some skincare product. So, I let her in. You’re the one who’s always telling me to be polite.”

I grit my teeth. “And then?” I grind out.

“She joined us on the couch, even though no one invited her. She didn’t leave for hours.” Lucas shakes his head. “Hugo and Gilly left, and I stayed here, and she stayed too. She followed me into my room. I asked what she was doing, but she ignored me. She just walked around my room, playing with my things.”

“You’re lying.” He must have invited her inside his bedroom.

“I’m not. She even walked up to my bedside table and asked me where I got my lamp. Said she was looking for a good one. I told her I had no idea. I knew she was full of shit anyway.”

“How do you know?”

He rolls his eyes. “Come on, Charlie.”

I don’t say anything. He continues.

“Next thing I know, she’s on my bed. Oh, by the way, I should probably mention that she showed up looking like a hooker. Yeah. She wore the shortest skirt I’ve ever seen—”

That’s it. I swing a fist at him, prepared to ruin his face, his stupid fucking face, but he grabs me before I make contact. His grip is tight, his fingers easily fitting around my wrist.

He continues speaking as if nothing happened. “She was so close to me. Close enough for me to smell her. Raspberry, right?”

I can’t believe this.

“That’s when I sent you the message. Thought I should give you a little warning that your precious little girlfriend isn’t so loyal.”

I start to shake.

“She put my phone down. Turned it off. She didn’t want distractions, you know? Not when we were busy.”

My vision’s going blurry.

“I wonder how long she’s been thinking about me. I’d always catch her looking at me, you know, whenever she came over to visit you.”

I can’t breathe.

“Every time she showed me something on her phone, she’d press her tits right up against me.”

My skin is both hot and cold, like I’m burning up in icy blue flames.

“You should have seen how quickly she got on her knees.”

I’m going to kill him. I’m going to murder him, right now

—

“You should have seen how fast she spread her legs for me

—”

I try to wrench my wrist from Lucas’s grip, but he doesn’t let go, so I thrash my arm around. He just pulls me closer until I can feel his body heat through my clothes. He lowers his head so he can whisper into my ear.

“Honestly, she wasn’t a great lay. I can see why you’re so frustrated all the time.”

I go still. My voice is a rasp. “...What?”

He pulls his head back so he can look into my eyes and laughs softly. “Oh, Charlie. Did you think I wouldn’t notice all

of your toys?”

All the air has been knocked out of my chest. It's as if I've been shoved off a ledge and landed hard enough to crack concrete.

Lucas continues, because he has to, because it's his job to push and push and make me feel worse and worse. “Come on. You play with yourself every night. Sometimes multiple times a night. The walls are thin. Even with the shower running...”

His pupils are black and large, swallowing light like a blackhole. I rip myself from his grip, and this time he allows it, watching as I stumble backwards. I might die from mortification if I don't die from fury first.

“Shut...” I take a deep breath. “Shut the fuck up.” I grab the edge of his desk behind me for balance, then point at him. “You had sex with my girlfriend. Who the hell does that?”

“She was the one who—”

“Shut up!” I roar. “I can't believe you. I...I always knew that you were an asshole. And I know you think I'm a loser, and uncool, and a nuisance, but we were still friends, once upon a time, and you had sex with my girlfriend. You fucking had sex with her! What kind of friend does that?” I'm shouting by the end. It's the first time I've ever lost my temper like this, the first time I've raised my voice since moving into this apartment. We have neighbours on every side of us, I know that, and yet I can't help it.

Lucas just looks at me.

“Clearly, you were never my friend,” I continue, managing to speak at a normal volume. “We haven't been since primary school. But even so, what kind of person does that? You knew we were in a relationship, so you can't pretend you didn't know. You...you still...”

I can't bring myself to say the word “fucked.” It's too vulgar a word to describe what they did together. It connotes raw, animalistic carnality. It conjures up explicit, rough acts.

“You still slept with her,” I finish helplessly. Something burns against my cheeks, and a moment later, I realise it's hot

tears streaking down my face. Quickly, I wipe them away with my arm. I can't believe this is happening. I'm crying in front of Lucas. I promised myself never again, and here I am.

When I make myself meet his eyes again, all the amusement has left his expression.

"I just wanted you to see her true nature," he says.

I shake my head, my eyes still wet. Why won't the tears stop? "Don't," I say, my voice clogged.

Lucas takes a step forward. "I wanted to prove she doesn't deserve you."

"Don't," I repeat. "Don't make excuses."

He takes another step. "To prove she isn't loyal."

I wipe my face again. My shirt is getting damp. "Don't come closer," I warn him.

He ignores me, taking another step. "You deserve someone better, Charlie. Someone who only wants you. Someone," — another step — "who only loves you."

I shake my head rapidly. "Don't. Stay away from me."

He takes another step. He's right in front of me, but I refuse to look at him. I fix my eyes on the carpet, wiping my cheeks. I know my eyes are puffy, and my nose is red and swollen. I'm sobbing in front of Lucas, and I want to die.

"Charlie," he says, voice dropping in volume until it's almost a whisper. "You deserve the best."

In my periphery, he raises his hands. I flinch, but he doesn't hurt me. Instead, his large hands take my face, and gently, he uses his thumb to wipe away my tears.

I breathe heavily as I gather myself. Crying has sapped away my energy, and I feel like I'm about to collapse. That's the only reason I don't push Lucas away, don't shove his hands away from me.

"I hate you," I manage after a moment.

He doesn't reply. His eyes are...sad. Not remorseful. No. He's looking at me the way someone would look at a sick puppy.

With pity.

I shove him away, and this time, I catch him by surprise, because he falls backwards, catching himself on the edge of his bed. His eyes flash big, and it's satisfying. It's good knowing that for once, I've made him feel unsteady.

"We're done," I hiss, voice heavy with venom. That expression of his has renewed me with power, and I feel momentarily free. "I'm never *ever* going to forgive you for this. We're finished."

Lucas's lips part. Good. *Good*. Finally, he's the one being taken by surprise.

I walk towards the bedroom door. I'm going to go to my room and lock the door.

I've just reached for the handle when he grabs me from behind, spins me around and pins me against the door. His hands are wrapped around my wrists again, holding them against the door. His chest presses against mine.

"Fine," he says, and his breath is hot against my lips. "You're right. I'll stop making excuses. I did it for me."

His pupils are so big, the black eclipsing the grey. It's terrifying. My heart thuds in my ribcage. He's got me totally trapped against the door, and there's no way I can escape.

"You hear that? I fucked your girlfriend for myself. Happy now? Happy I'm admitting it?" he asks.

I open my mouth. I want to tell him to let me go, but I can't make the words come out.

"But guess what? I had to. Yeah. I had to. You made me do it. You...and your stupid fucking relationship."

His face moves closer, and I try to pull back, but there's nowhere to escape to.

“Ever since you started dating her...you should have heard yourself. Cleo this, Cleo that. My girlfriend this, my girlfriend that. Non-stop. Every single day. Hell, every single hour. You couldn't stop talking about how gorgeous and perfect and amazing she was.”

He lets out a heavy breath. “You did everything for her. Took her out to restaurants you couldn't afford, showered her with all of your time and attention, listened to her vapid problems. And even when you weren't with her, you were constantly messaging her. Thinking about her. It was all about Cleo, Cleo, Cleo.

“When was the last time we hung out, Charlie? Huh? We're roommates, and we've barely spent any time together since you got a girlfriend. It's like...” his voice breaks. “I don't even exist to you anymore.”

I stare at him.

“You never have time for me anymore. You stopped paying attention to me.”

What is going on?

His expression hardens. His eyes, almost totally black now, glint like onyx. “So yeah. Maybe I did it on purpose. Maybe I fucked your girlfriend knowing full well it'd make you mad. But at least...at least you're looking at me right now. That's all I wanted. For you to look at me.”

My heart's still racing. I feel as if I'm on the precipice, about to fall. I've never seen Lucas act like this before, and I don't know what's going to happen next.

“She...” he exhales a ragged breath, “She got to touch you all the time. She got to kiss your lips. Sit on your lap. Hold your hand.”

His body is so, so close. His skin is as hot as mine.

“She got to do *everything* with you.” His voice drops even lower, until it's quieter than a whisper. “That night after Gilly's birthday...when the two of you went to your room and I could hear the bed squeak through the walls...it drove me insane.”

I shiver.

“And yet,” he continues, and every word feels like it’s leaving an imprint on me, a stain. “And yet she didn’t satisfy you, did she?”

One of his legs is between mine, keeping me trapped. His thigh is warm. And heavy.

“I’ve heard you masturbate, late at night. I’ve seen the toys you’ve accidentally left in the shower.” He wets his lips. “I know how you like it.”

I feel sick with mortification, but that still doesn’t stop my body from registering his thigh pushing against me. The blood in my body rushes downwards. *No, no, please, no.*

“That’s what you do in the shower, isn’t it? A toy in your ass, your hand on your dick.”

My dick starts to swell. No, no, no, no, no. This can’t be happening. I *hate* him. *Remember what he did to you.*

“Well? Is that right?” Lucas asks.

I quickly shake my head.

“No?” Lucas asks. He shifts his leg, and it presses slightly harder against my groin. Oh, god. He leans in close. “Liar. I know you jack off in the shower until your legs shake and you’re shooting all over the tiled floor.”

My stomach flips. “Lucas,” I say, and to my embarrassment, my voice is weak. “Let me go. Please,” I add, hating myself all the while.

“You want me to let you go?” He looks down at me. How is he so tall? He’s so, so tall. And — I look at his hands around my wrists — *so* strong.

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Then why” — he shifts his thigh again, and I bite back a whimper — “are you hard?”

It’s not because of you, I want to say. Please let go of me. I want to run away. Let me run away.

Lucas leans in so his lips are brushing my cheek. “I can make you feel better than she does,” he murmurs into my ear, and tingles run down my spine. “I can make you moan. I can make you gasp.”

He presses his lips against my skin. It’s a kiss. He’s kissing my face. I can’t comprehend any of this. My brain’s malfunctioning.

“I’ll make you feel better than any girl,” he says. “I’ll always be better.”

I’m running out of breath. That’s when he lets go of my wrists, and I melt into the floor. I land on my ass, and it should hurt, but it doesn’t. This isn’t real.

Lucas remains standing, and there, before me, is the bulge in his pants. The sight makes my mouth go dry. Fuck. I suspected he was big, but I didn’t realise how huge he was.

I tear my eyes away and look down at my own erection.

I’m having a dream. A wet dream. I’m going to wake up with sticky underwear and then will promptly kill myself. I’ll have a shower and scrub my skin until it’s red, and I’ll say to myself, *What’s wrong with you? Why would you dream something so messed up — featuring Lucas, no less? Are you some sort of masochist?*

I drag my eyes upwards and meet Lucas’s eyes. We remain like that for a minute, not saying anything, only the sound of our breaths filling the room.

Then he crouches down, scoops me up and carries me to his bed. He does it so easily, like I weigh nothing, and lays me down carefully, placing his pillow under my head.

His bedding smells like him, the masculine scent strong in my nose. My dick is still stiff.

The mattress dips when Lucas gets on the bed, and he holds himself over me, hands on either side of my head as his knees bracket my legs. “Can I kiss you?” His voice sounds different. I’ve never heard him like this before.

I can't react. I just stare at him, eyes wide. What is happening? What is —

“Please,” he says, and his voice breaks.

No. No, no, no. I hate him. I *hate* him. I hate him, I hate him, I hate him —

He lowers his head, resting it against my shoulder. “Please. Please let me kiss you,” he says into my neck, his exhale a barely-there tickle.

I can't believe this. I genuinely — *what?* Lucas. Lucas is begging me to let him kiss me.

Lucas.

I don't understand, but I find myself nodding, and I don't have a reason why, but when Lucas feels my head shift against him and raises his head to look at me, I nod again. His expression changes, as if all of his pain has melted away in the blink of an eye. And it's a relief.

And, when he presses his lips against mine, gently, softly, almost not there at all, it feels right. It feels good. It makes my body spark, the way it happens in books, the way it never did with Cleo.

The kiss only lasts a moment before he pulls back and caresses my face. His hand drags down past my neck and over my collarbones.

“I bet she doesn't appreciate your body like I do,” he says, pulling my shirt up by the hem. When he tugs it over my head, I let him.

“Does she even know how cute your little tummy is?” he asks, and he brushes over my skin with his fingers, leaving sparks of pleasure in their trail. “How soft your hair is?” He burrows his nose into my hair and inhales. “Does she tell you how gorgeous you are?”

I stare at him. Me? Gorgeous? It's official: he's gone insane.

When he leans down to kiss me again, it's slow. His wet tongue comes out, pressing between my lips, and I part them,

letting him inside. He licks into my mouth, and it's gentle, almost...loving.

Yep, he's definitely lost his mind.

As Lucas kisses me, he roams his hands over my body. He touches me like he's only got a few minutes left, like it's a race, like I'll be taken away any second. A graze over my stomach, a touch of my hips, a brush over my nipples which makes me suck in a sharp breath. He touches me like he's a blind sculptor, memorising every contour of my body so he can recreate it out of marble later.

I wait for him to slide my pants down. There's no way he hasn't noticed my erection, and I've definitely noticed his, the way it grazes my hip as he holds himself above me. But when he drags his fingers down my body, he jumps from my belly to my thighs. He doesn't touch my butt either. There's something strangely innocent about it, something non-sexual about the moment, despite the fact I'm so, so hard.

His fingertips are slow and light. His breaths are soft. Gentle. His body cages me in, but I don't feel like a captive. I feel like I'm tucked away in a safe haven.

My eyelids become heavier and heavier. I'm so exhausted, and not only because I barely got any sleep last night. The tsunami of emotions I've experienced in the past fifteen minutes alone has left me bone-tired.

As if sensing my sleepiness, Lucas stretches out beside me, so we're sharing a pillow. His eyes are soft as he gives me a small smile, then reaches out for my hand, bringing it to his lips as he closes his eyes.

I feel myself sinking into the mattress and let my eyelids fall shut.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lucas

Age 15

I've had dreams about Charlie since I was a kid. Just normal dreams, about us playing in the playground, or on a tropical island, or on a pirate ship and he had a pet parrot and I had a pet monkey.

I only started having *those* kinds of dreams last year. It wasn't only Charlie, of course. Sometimes it would be faceless guys, or some actor I'd seen on TV, or a model I'd see on the cover of *Men's Health* in the supermarket.

Of course, the dreams about Charlie pissed me off the most. When I'd go to school and see him in class and notice that he looked exactly as he did in my dreams...well, that'd piss me off even more.

I hated my subconscious for conjuring up such dreams, and I'd hate my body for how it'd react, and then I'd feel guilty for dreaming such things about someone I knew in real life, and then I'd get annoyed at myself for feeling guilty in the first place.

My biggest fear was that one day, Charlie would look at me, and he'd *know*. He'd know what happened in my dreams the night before.

My biggest fear was that he'd realise how much power he had over me.

I thought about this in Geography today, while staring at the back of his head. Sure, he acts like he's terrified of me, but if one day he walked up to me and said that he'd let me hold

his hand if I licked the floor of the boys' bathroom, then I know that without a doubt, I'd get on my knees and lick the boys' bathroom floor, germs be damned. If he told me to turn over all the money I saved for a chance to press my face into his neck and smell him, then I would. If he told me that if I did all his homework for the rest of the year, he'd let me pet his hair for sixty seconds, then I would. If he told me he'd let me kiss him, just once, if I got myself suspended from school—

So that's why I hate him. And that's why I can't ever let him know the truth; that all he would have to do is ask, and I'd do it. I'd do it without a second thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Now

When I wake, I don't know what time it is, and I don't know where my phone is, so I can't check. Through Lucas's open blinds, the sky is deep navy, tinging with light blue and purple at the edges, the way it does before sunrise.

Lucas sleeps beside me, his arms around my middle like I'm his teddy bear. As if he can sense I'm awake, he stirs, pulling me even closer to him and pressing his lips against the crook of my neck.

And then he kisses, and kisses, and kisses, until I'm burning up, until his skin is burning up too. Until my stomach twists with need and I'm hard, and he's hard too, because I can feel it nudging against my hip.

Sometime in the early morning haze, after making me shiver with his lips against the most sensitive parts of my neck, when my desire peaks and starts to spill into frustration, I say it:

“Lucas.”

It could be a complaint or a beg.

It feels as if it's been an eternity, but he leans back and slips his fingers into the waistband of my pants. He drags them down, along with my boxer-briefs, at a glacial pace. I wonder if he's trying to drive me insane. I wouldn't be surprised if that was the sadistic kind of thing Lucas was into.

After pulling my clothes down enough, my cock pops out and slaps against my lower stomach, and my cheeks heat. I hope the room is too dark for Lucas to see it properly.

But he must, because he pauses and stares. After a moment, he lets go of my pants and reaches out, and when his fingers touch my erection, my entire body jerks and a whimper escapes me.

His lips curl into a smirk. That's the Lucas I know.

His thumb massages the slit until pre-cum leaks, and his smirk widens. Then, he lets go and finishes undressing me, chucking the pants and boxer briefs and socks off the side of the bed.

"I meant what I said," he whispers. "I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to take care of you the way no one else can."

His fingers curl around my cock, and I can't help myself, I moan. And then I keep moaning, mouth open, my body going tense as he strokes me up and down. Right now, I feel a hundred times more sensitive than usual. I'm not sure why. Maybe the emotions from last night have frazzled my nerve endings, but it doesn't take long until I'm on the verge of finishing.

That's when Lucas slows down to a torturous pace. He lowers his head and kisses a trail from my lower stomach, up over my abdomen and chest, to my neck. He starts to suck, his wet tongue against my skin.

"Listen to you," he says, "panting already."

His fingers focus on my cockhead for a bit, coaxing out more pre-cum and using it to make the whole shaft slippery. "Look at how much you're leaking."

He kisses the underside of my jaw, then over my cheek, following the places where my tears had dried earlier.

"You like this, don't you?" he says. He increases the speed of the hand stroking me, and I gasp. "Tell me. Tell me you like it."

I can't. I don't.

"Tell me you like it," he repeats, holding his face above mine so he can look directly into my eyes. When I don't respond, he lets go of my cock, and I whimper in protest.

He sighs, as if annoyed. “Charlie. Tell me you —”

I grab the back of his neck and kiss him. He’s startled for a second before relaxing, and when he parts his lips, I slide my tongue inside. He moans into my mouth, and the deep noise does something to me. I’m so hard it hurts.

This time, Lucas kisses me roughly. He’s messy, spit getting everywhere, and kisses me so hard I wonder if my lips will bruise. When he tugs my bottom lip between his teeth, sharp enough to sting, I make a whining sound. The faintest hint of stubble on his jaw scratches against me, but despite the sting, I like it.

It’s a reminder I’m kissing a man. It’s a reminder I’m kissing Lucas. Which is terrifying. The thing about terror, though, is that when it twists my stomach into tight, complex knots, it feels a lot like butterflies.

I make a whimpery noise. Maybe it’s a sob.

He continues to kiss me savagely, and I pray to god he doesn’t notice me thrusting into his tight, slippery fist.

When he pulls back, his lips are darker than usual. Swollen. His fingers play with my dick slowly, the tips of his fingers trailing up and down.

Frustrated, I buck my hips up and down. He curls his lip and lets go, leaning back on his haunches.

“Get up,” he says.

I stare at him. Is that it? Isn’t he going to finish?

“Get up,” he repeats, louder, and I startle.

Slowly, I do as he says, kneeling on the bed as I keep my eyes level with him.

He drags his eyes over me. I can’t believe he’s looking at me like that. I still can’t believe we’re doing this.

With a shock, I realise he’s still dressed in the clothes he wore yesterday afternoon. It’s unfair, and if I was sure I could speak coherent sentences, I’d tell him to take his clothes off too.

Or tell him to touch me again.

“Turn around,” he says.

I obey. I don’t even pretend to hesitate. I’m so weak.

“Bend over and show me it.”

“What?” I gasp.

“Charlie, bend over, spread your cheeks, and show me your asshole,” he orders.

I tremble. “I can’t,” I whisper. “It’s too embarrassing.” What if he thinks it looks weird, or gross and disgusting —

He kisses my cheek. “Please,” he says, lips against my skin. “I want to see it.”

I meet his eyes, and the desire evident in them gives me enough confidence to lean over, so I’m holding myself up on my forearms and knees. My cock bobs, leaking onto Lucas’s bedsheets.

Nothing happens. He doesn’t touch me. He’s waiting for me to follow his instructions properly. Waiting for me to spread my...

I can’t think it. It’s too filthy.

To expose myself properly, the way he asked, I can no longer support myself on my forearms because I’ll need to use my hands. That’s how I end up with my face pressed into his pillow and my chest against the mattress, nipples grazing the bedsheet as both hands reach around me. I grab a buttock each and spread them. Air brushes against my asshole, making it tingle in anticipation.

“Oh, fuck,” Lucas says in a low voice. He lets out a long exhale, and the next time he speaks, his voice sounds broken. “Oh, holy fuck.”

I hear the rustle of clothing but don’t dare move to see.

“You should see how you look right now,” he tells me. “Putting yourself on display for me.”

My cock twitches.

“It’s only for me.” There’s more rustling, and the mattress shifts with Lucas’s movements. Then he places a large hand on my ass.

Suddenly, the reality of what is happening all rushes in, and I blink — *what are you doing, Charlie?*

Look at yourself: you’re lying on Lucas’s bed, head buried in the pillow, with Lucas’s hand on your butt. And now he’s moving his hand ever so slightly, caressing you.

The logical part of me knows I should stop him. Knows I should run far, far away. But I don’t — maybe I’m just too far gone. Maybe I’m so emotionally drained from yesterday and all I want is to do something reckless and destructive. Something that makes my mind go blank.

Or maybe, just maybe, deep down I want him —

There’s the snick of an opening drawer, and a moment later, a slippery lubed finger presses against my hole. *Oh*. I’ve touched myself there at least a hundred times, but never before has someone else...

Hot desire burns up my body, and I’m torn between squeezing my legs closed to hide from the painful vulnerability or spreading them even wider.

Before I can decide, the very tip of Lucas’s finger slides past the ring of muscle. All reason goes out the window, and I push my hips back, trying to communicate that I want him deeper inside without having to say it. He understands and gradually pushes his finger in, and my jaw drops open so I’ve got a mouthful of pillow. *Fuck*. Oh, it’s...it’s so good.

I’m not the only one affected. As he adds another finger, and then another, his breathing grows more ragged. It’s surprisingly reassuring to know Lucas isn’t a robot after all — he’s affected by this. He’s affected by me, spread out in front of him like a meal ready to be devoured.

“Your ass is practically swallowing my fingers,” he says when he has three digits inside me. He’s dragging them against my inner wall, teasing my prostate, and I feel so, so tense, my

joints locked and my body begging for more. My cock is leaking so much that the bedsheet below me is wet.

I lose all of my pride and tilt my head so that my cheek is pressed against the pillow. I look over my sweaty shoulder at Lucas kneeling behind my raised ass, and the sight of him — tall, gorgeous, muscular — makes my hole twitch. “Lucas,” I say, through gritted teeth.

He rips his eyes from my ass to me, lips parted.

“Fuck me already,” I say.

He raises the corner of his lips, a “ha” escaping him. His free hand — the one not teasing my asshole — appears out of nowhere, pushing my head back into the pillow so that all I can see is darkness.

“Don’t worry,” he says, sounding breathless. *Breathless*. “I’m going to take care of you.”

His fingers slip out of me, making me feel empty. There’s the rustle of clothing coming off, and when I try to look around to have a peek, his hand keeps me looking into the pillow.

“Just relax,” he tells me.

He removes his hand from my head, but I don’t raise it. Maybe I don’t want to look. Maybe I don’t want to confront the reality that Lucas — Lucas, with all of the conflicting emotions I have associated with him — is about to fuck me.

Something tears. A condom wrapper. So he did have condoms and lube after all. I wonder where he had hidden them.

Before I can ponder the mystery any longer, I’m distracted by one hand on my ass, his thumb spreading my buttock. The other hand slicks up my hole with extra lubricant, and then Lucas shifts on the bed, his weight making the mattress dip. I feel the heat of him moving closer. He exhales unsteadily and then —

I suck my stomach in, tense with anticipation, when something blunt nudges against my hole. He starts to push in,

but I make a noise against the pillow and he stops.

Oh, hell. The head of his cock is huge — I can feel it throbbing against my entrance. How the fuck is he going to fit?

The moment of pause makes me think. Do I really want him inside me?

Do I really want Lucas inside me? Do I really want to have sex with Lucas? Lucas, my childhood friend. Lucas, my high school enemy. Lucas, my roommate. Lucas, who slept with my girlfriend.

But my ass feels so empty. My prostate is screaming for stimulation. My dick has been as hard as a rock for ages. All I want is to come. I want release.

Screw it. I'm not capable of rational thought anyway, not when Lucas's velvet soft cockhead is pressed against my hole.

So, I take a deep breath and cant my hips back, trying to push onto Lucas's member. His fingers tighten on my butt cheek, and he slowly presses his cock inside. I squeeze my eyes closed as it burns, but once the tip is past the tight entrance, things get easier. The rest of him is still huge, but not as thick as the tip, so he works the rest in with relative ease.

It's a tight fit inside, and when he bumps against my prostate, everything goes white and I instinctively squeeze down on him. It's so good —

Lucas grunts. "Oh fuck," he says, voice lower than a whisper. "That's good. That's so fucking good."

He pulls back, then thrusts in, the bulbous head of his cock slamming against that bundle of nerves inside me, and my balls tighten. I squeeze my eyes shut, knowing what's going to happen before it does.

Every muscle in my body goes tense before suddenly relaxing as pleasure floods my body, surging from the pit of my belly to the rest of my body. My dick twitches as it shoots cum all over Lucas's black bed sheets, and it's sticky and warm against my lower stomach.

Only after the shock of the sensation ebbs away and I've fallen limp against the bed, do I have the capacity to hear Lucas behind me. He's breathing heavily, harder than after jogging ten kilometres, harder than after intense volleyball games. Harder than tough gym sessions.

Something damp presses against my shoulder. His forehead. He's whispering something against my skin, too low for me to hear, but it's fast and quick, almost crazed as he thrusts again and again, hitting the sensitive place inside me. It's so, so sensitive. I don't know if I can handle it anymore —

And then he finishes with a low moan, shoving himself deep inside me one last time. I tense, expecting him to collapse on top of me, but he holds himself up with his forearms as he pants, his breaths tickling my hair.

We lie like that for a minute before Lucas peels himself off me. Sweat cools on my back, making me feel slightly chilly, and the globs of cum under my stomach are starting to dry.

Lucas moves around behind me before something soft brushes over my tender ass. I look over my shoulder and watch him clean up the remnants of lube with a bundled-up handful of cloth. It takes me another moment to realise it's his t-shirt.

When he gently rolls me over, I let him, and he wipes up the cum on my stomach and what's left on the bedsheets. Part of me expects him to be annoyed — he's going to have to do laundry — but he looks surprisingly pleased, the tiniest hint of a smile on his lips.

I don't say anything. I'm not sure what to say. I'm still waiting for it all to hit me — for the post-nut clarity to slam into me like an eighteen-wheeler and make me start screaming in horror. But it doesn't. I just feel... warm.

Lucas throws his shirt onto the floor before lying down on the bed beside me. I watch, waiting for the conversation. Waiting for something.

He doesn't say anything. Instead, he raises my body with ease and repositions me so that I'm lying on his extended arm,

then pulls me close.

My eyelids are heavy. I'm exhausted, and all I did was lie there. I don't think I've had an orgasm like that since...never, actually. It's so different, doing it with someone, compared to a silicone toy.

A breath of laughter escapes me.

"What?" Lucas asks, voice gravelly. His eyes are closed.

My lips twitch, but I don't hesitate to say it. The sex must have dissolved all of my inhibitions, the way alcohol does. "I thought you would've lasted longer."

Lucas harrumphs. "Like you can talk. You came as soon as I stuck it in."

I laugh. "That's different. I'm me. You're you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Charlie."

"I mean that you're a sex god."

Lucas's eyes remain closed, but his shoulders shake with a suppressed laugh.

"I'm serious," I continue. "You're a player. You must have had sex, like, a thousand times. I figured you'd last an hour or something."

"I haven't had sex a thousand times."

"Okay, well, that was an exaggeration. You've probably done it, like, at least fifty—"

"And I'm not a player, either," he says, and he pulls me closer, so I'm eye-level with his collarbone. Even his collarbone is pretty.

It's nice, lying in his arms. With him right there, I feel safe and protected. I feel like I can relax.

*

My muscles are relaxed, bones wavy, the way they get after a good night's rest. Content seeps through my body, slow like honey, and when I open my eyes, I'm met with golden sunlight streaming through the window. That's a good omen.

Then I turn my head, and my heart jumps out of my chest. Immediately, I'm alert, pulling myself into a sitting position, limbs tensing and arms raised like I'm about to fight.

The events of hours ago hit me like an avalanche.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I slept with Lucas. I had sex with Lucas.

My brain isn't working properly (I don't think it's been working for the last 24 hours because what on earth possessed me to have sex with *Lucas!*?) because as I stumble out of bed, I fail to untangle my legs from the covers, which is how I end up falling onto the floor, hitting my forehead on the corner of Lucas's bedside table in the process.

"Fucking hell shit fuck," I curse, then slap a hand over my mouth. The only thing worse than having this next-morning freak out would be having it with Lucas awake to witness it all. Wincing, I press my fingertips to my forehead. At least I didn't break the skin — it just feels tender, so it'll probably leave a bruise. God damn it. The last thing I want is a physical reminder of my stupid decisions.

I get onto my knees and peek over the side of the bed, but Lucas is still asleep despite all the noise I've made. He's on his side, facing the empty spot where I was sleeping, and his face is relaxed. It's been a while since I've seen him asleep, and he looks...innocent. Like he'd be incapable of saying a single cruel thing.

Quietly, I pull the covers off me and throw them in a dump on the bed. My forehead throbs. Maybe it's karma for making idiotic mistakes.

Because that's what this was. A mistake.

Before I leave the bedroom, I turn in the doorway to glance at Lucas one more time. His copper hair is flattened over his forehead, and his chest moves slightly with each breath. My heart twinges at the sight.

Regret. It's definitely regret.

I get the hell out of there.

*

I don't dare stay in the apartment for longer than I have to. After pulling clothes on, I throw water on my face and brush my teeth, and then I'm walking down the windy city streets, the morning air freezing my ears. I find myself in Flagstaff Gardens, and this early it's practically empty except for joggers and stylish twenty-somethings walking their tiny, fluffy white dogs with brown crust around their eyes.

I sit on a bench, and the chill seeps from the wood through my tracksuit pants onto my legs. My butt hurts. The ache spreads from my buttocks all the way inside —

I bury my head in my hands. Eventually, I remove my hands from my face and take my phone out from my jacket pocket. I need to call someone.

First, I call Gilly, but he doesn't pick up. The phone rings and rings. I can't be surprised — he's probably sleeping in after a long night of partying.

I try Hugo, and thankfully he answers after a few rings.

“Ello?” he answers, voice dry.

“Hi. It's Charlie. Are you awake?”

“Am now.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I dig my thumb into my palm hard enough that I can feel the sharpness of the nail.

“It's fine.” There's some background rustles. “What's wrong?”

“What? Why do you think something's wrong?”

“Your voice,” he explains. “You sound...panicky.”

“Right.” I force a laugh. “Um. Are you busy? Can we talk in person?”

Hugo says he can, and I can hear the concern in his voice as he tells me he can get ready in two minutes and that'll he meet me here. He hangs up, which leaves me on the park

bench, staring at the tree branches moving around in the wind. It's actually pretty fucking cold, just sitting here, and I should probably walk around to warm myself up, but I don't have the energy.

Hugo arrives twenty minutes later with two McDonald's coffee cups. "Here," Hugo says, handing me a cup, and he sits down beside me. "It's a mocha, already mixed in with two sugars."

"Oh my god, thank you."

"Don't worry about it. I figured we'd need the coffee to stay awake." He takes a long sip from his large cappuccino, then looks at me. "So, what's up?"

"Um." There's so much to say, I don't know where to start. I could just explain everything, but the thought of telling Hugo I slept with Lucas strikes me with horror. It's not simply the embarrassment — it's the shame. It makes me feel weak, to admit how quickly I let myself get into bed with him. All he had to do was ask and I did it. And that was after I found out that my girlfriend cheated on me, with him, no less.

I clear my throat. "I...I think it's over between Cleo and me. She cheated on me." And maybe I cheated on her too, by sleeping with Lucas. Does it count if we hadn't officially broken up? I don't want to think about it. I've got enough on my mind already.

"What! Are you okay? What happened?"

"So, uh...you know how I visited my family?"

He nods.

"It happened while I was away. I'd been trying to get a hold of her all weekend — I still haven't talked to her — but that's when she did it. She didn't tell me, but I have definite proof. And now we're broken up, I guess. I mean, like I said, I haven't even talked to her because she won't return my calls. I...I don't know."

"Shit," Hugo says. "I'm so sorry, Charlie."

"Yeah."

“What are you going to do? Do you want to try calling her again?”

“Right now?”

Hugo shrugs.

Well, I might as well, though I doubt she’ll pick up. I call her, and it rings, and rings before sending me to voice mail. So, I send her a message.

Charlie: Can you please call me back? It’s important.

A few seconds later, the read receipt appears.

“She’s read it,” I say, showing Hugo. He looks at my phone screen with the same kind of concentration he’d give a maths question.

“But she’s not calling back. Or replying,” Hugo says.

I put the phone away, because there’s no point looking at it. “I don’t know why. I don’t know what happened, or what I did wrong.” That’s the sick feeling under all my panic and confusion: the dreaded confirmation that I wasn’t good enough, not for the person who should’ve liked me, or tolerated me, enough to do me the service of not cheating on me.

I let out a sigh, and my body sinks inwards on itself. “I should’ve expected it,” I murmur.

Hugo frowns. “What are you talking about?”

I shrug. “I don’t know why she was even dating me in the first place. Obviously, she’s way out of my league. She was probably just killing time with me. Humouring herself. There’s no way she’d genuinely want to be with — *ow!*”

Hugo punched me in the arm, and not softly either. “Charlie, usually you’re a pretty smart guy, but that’s got to be the dumbest zero-IQ thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

“You just punched me,” I say.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, and you shouldn’t be justifying Cleo treating you like that. That’s crazy. The stuff you’re saying is so nonsensical, it’s on the same level as the

stupid crap Gilly spouts — not that he would ever say anything like that, because he's too egoistical for that."

I rub the spot he punched. "That hurt," I say. "Why did that hurt so much? Have you been going to the gym?"

"The question is: where's your ego?" Hugo continues as if he didn't hear me. "Most of the time you seem like a normal guy — not arrogant but not unconfident either — but then sometimes you say stuff that makes me think you have... I don't know, self-esteem issues or something."

I stop rubbing my arm. My gaze drops to my feet, and I notice the soles of my shoes are damp with dew.

I wish this day would finish already.

"Hey," Hugo says, and I sense him move a centimetre closer. "I get it."

"Do you?"

"Of course, I do. I was a total weirdo in high school. Even now, people scare me. Look at you, Charlie. You went on a dating app, you talked to girls. I'm too scared to put myself out there like that. I'm self-aware enough to know that I could have more faith in myself."

"So, what are you saying? That I should shake this off, tell myself I'm awesome, and continue on with my life? No offence, but how am I supposed to feel great about myself when my girlfriend just cheated on me? Any self-esteem I might have had has been totally obliterated."

"That's fair," Hugo says. "But what I'm saying though is that even though things suck right now, you can't think there's something inherently wrong with you. You can't think, oh, I deserve this, oh, I made this happen. This isn't your fault. It's Cleo's fault. It reflects on her as a girlfriend, not on you as a boyfriend." He pauses to let that sink in.

I sigh. I want to go home and crawl into my bed, but that means facing Lucas, and I can't do that. All I can do is sit here and listen to Hugo. Intellectually, I know he's right, but I can't help wanting to resist — to plug my ears and throw myself a

pity party where I list all the things I've done wrong and that's why I'll be alone forever.

Jesus. Not only do I have self-esteem issues, I'm also a drama queen.

"I don't want to sound preachy," Hugo continues, "so I'll stop with the self-confidence talk. You're the one studying Psychology, so I'll leave that to you. But let's look at the objective facts: Cleo willingly chose to date you. You were a great boyfriend. You took her out to dates and I know you — you're an attentive and caring person."

The words make me shift awkwardly, but Hugo barrels on with his speech.

"I'm serious, Charlie. You're a good guy. That's why I'm friends with you. That's why Gilly and Lucas are friends with you." The mention of Lucas makes me flush. "If you were crap, we wouldn't spend time with you, would we?"

"I know. You're right. I...thanks, Hugo."

"It's nothing." He twirls his coffee cup. "It's cold. You want to get out of here? It might do you good to keep you busy so that you don't think about Cleo."

"Okay." I stand up, and Hugo leads the way out of the park, back to his student accommodation building. "I need to do some grocery shopping, if you don't mind coming along. And then afterwards we can just hang at mine."

"Okay. Sounds good."

At the edge of the park, we drop our cups into a bin before stepping onto a street surrounded by tall brown-brick buildings. In the distance, a car alarm goes off.

When we're halfway to Hugo's, passing a Korean grocery with its windows plastered with ice-cream advertisements, his phone rings.

"It's Lucas," he tells me before picking up. Standing beside Hugo, I can overhear the conversation. They exchange greetings before Lucas asks if Hugo knows where I am.

I widen my eyes and mouth “no” while making a cross with my arms. Hugo raises his brows but loyally says, “No, sorry,” to Lucas. “What do you need him for?”

“Nothing,” Lucas replies, voice straightforward, almost emotionless. “Just wondering where he is.”

“Oh. Maybe he’s with Gilly? Or...” Hugo hesitates. “Cleo?”

Lucas’s silence on the other end of the line is deafening enough to make Hugo cringe.

I mouth at Hugo, “What the hell?”

He mouths back, “Trying to act normal.” Then he returns his attention to the phone. “Or maybe he’s buying food or running errands. Have you tried calling him?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas says and hangs up.

Hugo pulls the phone from his ear and stares at the screen for a second. “That was kind of odd.”

“Yeah.”

He puts his phone away and we continue walking. “Does he know? About you and Cleo?”

“Um...”

What to say, what to say? I could tell Hugo the truth — that Cleo slept with Lucas, so yes, he knows. But what will happen then? Will our group of friends fight and break apart? I don’t want to turn this into a big drama. Then there’s also the fact that I slept with Lucas. I don’t want that to get out. Better to keep things under wraps for now.

Hugo is watching me, one brow raised. “You’ve been umming for a while.”

I settle for a half-truth. “I think Lucas has been distrustful of Cleo for a while. He was always saying he hated her, that kind of stuff. Anyway, I don’t know why he called you,” I say, changing the topic. “Why does he care where I am? And if he’s so curious, why didn’t he just call me?”

Then again, perhaps he doesn't want to be the first to reach out after last night. I shiver. God, our next conversation is going to be awkward as hell. Maybe I can avoid him forever so that I never have to deal with it.

Hugo shrugs. "Weird, but not that weird. Lucas has always had that thing about you."

"Thing'?" I echo. "What thing?" Contempt? Hatred? Irritation? Barely managed tolerance?

"A sort of...protectiveness. That's the only way I can describe it," Hugo says. "He never bad-mouths you when you're not around. Which I'm aware is the bare minimum, but even if someone tries to joke about you — light-hearted, unserious stuff— he'll shut it down. Kind of like you're his baby brother."

I don't know what to say. I'm pretty sure Hugo is mistaken, but I can't correct him without sounding rude.

"Even if he doesn't know the details about what went down with Cleo, he's probably sensed that you're distraught and that's why he's worried about where you've gone," Hugo continues. "For all that Lucas pretends to be an insufferable dick, he's actually a caring guy deep down."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lucas

Age 16

Charlie rarely comes to parties. I won't pretend I don't know why — he's almost never invited, not when he has barely any friends. It's like he doesn't even try.

No, I know that's not it. The reason why I'm popular and Charlie isn't has nothing to do with effort and everything to do with stupid stuff. It's because I'm good at sport and I'm tall and I don't care about anything. Not caring equals coolness in high school. Charlie cares too much. He's too earnest, so sweet to people that it comes across as servile. He gets way too enthusiastic about the smallest things, like when the canteen restocks its flavoured milk, or when class ends five minutes early, or when the library orders in new books, or when people invite him to their party.

It's Misa's 17th, and she invited the whole year level, as well as the year level above and below. Her backyard was decorated with pink and gold crap. It must've cost a fortune.

Anyway, I was sitting on the grass, bored out of my mind, and that's when I saw him, sitting with a group of randoms, and he looked relaxed for once. Maybe it had to do with the beer he was nursing, but he was flashing his smile everywhere, giving it away for free.

His legs were bent, and he was propping himself up with one hand behind him, the other hand holding the beer can in his lap. And then he laughed, and it wasn't a small laugh, it was the way he would laugh when we were kids, with his eyes closed and his mouth open wide enough to catch flies.

I finished my drink and started another, and while everyone sitting with me continued talking about crap I didn't care about, I continued to stare at Charlie like a creep.

I watched as more people talked to him, acting like they were friends when they'd never speak to him at school. I know that's a thing that happens at parties. With music, a bit of alcohol and good vibes, people are friendlier than usual. Bolder. Like, for example, that party two months ago when that boy from Year 10 — someone I'd never spoken to before — came up to me and asked me in a way that was simultaneously shy and unflappable if I wanted to take a walk with him.

I was stunned. Then I considered it — seriously considered it — because I was horny like every other teenage guy and it's not like it'd ever happen with Charlie.

But I said no. Because I hate myself, apparently.

Anyway, as I was watching Charlie chat to randoms, I got to thinking that maybe I could do it too. Get drunk enough to talk to him, and hopefully he'd be in a good enough mood to talk back. We'd laugh, and then we'd touch the way we did when we were friends. Our shoulders would brush, and he'd nudge me, and I'd tug on the hem of his shirt when I wanted his attention.

Then, after talking the whole night, Charlie would admit that he liked me, and that he wanted to be my boyfriend, and I'd pretend to think about it, then play it cool and say, alright, I guess, if you want me that much, I'll do it for you.

At the time, I thought all of this was perfectly logical. I was already tipsy by that point, but I wasn't feeling brave enough, not yet, so I started chugging rum and coke.

The anticlimactic but retrospectively obvious ending is that Charlie did not confess his love for me. He didn't even talk to me. And I didn't talk to him because I was busy kneeling in front of the toilet in Misa's house, throwing up. It appears I do have a limit after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Now

I spend as much time as I can with Hugo, but when he starts yawning, I know I better head home. The sky is purple-black as I walk through the city. Windows of skyscrapers glow, like honeycomb.

I stop at a convenience store and browse the shelves for something to buy, even though I'm not hungry; I just want to kill more time. I consider buying a tub of blueberry ice-cream, but I don't have much of an appetite.

By the time I arrive at the apartment building, it's almost midnight. I drag my feet inside and hesitate in the hallway outside the apartment. Lucas won't be asleep by now, but hopefully he's in his room with the door closed.

I unlock the door, but as soon as I push it open, I see the living room light is on, and my heart sinks.

Lucas sits on the couch. The TV isn't on. He's not on his phone. He's not even reading a book or eating a late-night snack. He's just sitting there. And now he's staring at me.

"Where have you been?" His tone is so sharp, I instinctively take a step back.

"None of your business," I retort.

His expression doesn't change. He just looks at me, his eyes burning holes into me. Whatever. I don't want to have another conversation like yesterday, and I especially don't want to end up in his bed again.

I start towards my room when Lucas speaks again, voice cutting through the air.

“I was worried about you.”

I turn around to give him an incredulous look. “Why would you be worried? I’m allowed to leave the apartment by myself, you know.”

“I know you are.” He pauses, then suddenly looks at his lap. It’s so different from his usual arrogant self, so unexpectedly shy, that I almost soften. *Almost.*

“I— I was just—” Lucas begins, then bites down on his lip. It’s like he’s a kid again, stumbling over his words.

I can feel myself growing sympathetic. *No, no, no, no.* Don’t. You’re making excuses for him. Every time you think about the kid version of him, the innocent version of him, you allow him to manipulate you all over again. He’s not your best friend anymore.

He hurt you. A best friend doesn’t do that.

And he fucked you. A best friend doesn’t do that, either.

“What?” I say, and I’m proud my voice comes out stone-hard.

He looks at me, and his hand creeps up to scratch the back of his neck. He catches himself and forces his hand down before standing up, and I’m suddenly reminded of his height.

The hesitation fades from his expression. “I was worried about how you’d react after what we did,” he says, and it’s only because I’ve known him since we were six that I know his confidence is false.

“You don’t need to worry about me. And I don’t want to speak about what happened.” With that, I take a step towards my room. “I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

“That’s it?” he says to my back. “We’re not going to talk about it?”

“Did you not hear what I just said?”

“Charlie.”

I ignore him.

His sudden footsteps are the only warning I have. I spin around in time to catch him reaching for me, and I slap his hand away. “*Don’t touch me,*” I hiss.

He freezes. Then, his hand drops. “We’re really going to pretend last night didn’t happen?” he asks. His eyes are bigger than usual.

“Ideally,” I say.

He frowns. “But...”

“But what?”

“We had sex,” he says. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

I stare at him, wondering if I heard him correctly. “Come on, Lucas,” I say.

His frown deepens, and perhaps he’s not mocking me after all. “It meant something to me.” His voice is almost a whisper.

“Oh god,” I breathe. “You’re serious.”

He stares at me. “Of course, I’m serious. You think I...you think I did all of that for the hell of it?”

“All of what? Are you referring to the fact you *fucked my girlfriend?*”

He flinches and looks away, his mouth twisting like there are so many things he wants to say, but he can’t. Or he’s stopping himself. Or he’s trying to think of the best way to manipulate me, to get me on his side.

Then, the craziest thing happens, even crazier than what happened yesterday or this morning. A part of me, in my wildest daydreams, would be able to imagine Lucas kissing me. Lucas touching me. Unlikely, yes, but within the realm of possibility. And the fact that he slept with Cleo — well, that just seems painfully obvious now, like I should’ve seen it coming.

But this — *this* is impossible. *This* is what makes me genuinely wonder whether I’m hallucinating.

Because Lucas sinks to his knees. The floor creaks with the movement, and I can see the top of his head, the skin of his scalp through his thick hair. His eyes are cast down, and I have to strain my ears to hear him.

“I...I know that I...it’s not like that, Charlie. But I meant what I said. That I did all of it for you. Do you think I said all those things in the heat of the moment? Because I didn’t. I meant them. I’ve wanted to say them for ages. This morning... I was so...” he swallows. “You were gone in the morning. I reached out for you, and you were gone.”

When I don’t say anything — I can’t — his lashes flutter, and then he’s looking up at me, and his eyes are so, so big.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks.

I touch the side of my face. “Like what?”

“Like you don’t understand. Like you think I’ve gone insane.”

I take a step back. Lucas stays on his knees but tracks me with his eyes.

“Because I don’t understand,” I reply. “Because you have gone insane. Look at yourself. You’re on the ground.” I shake my head. “You’re saying all of this stuff and it’s like you’ve conveniently forgotten the fact that you hate me.”

“I don’t h—”

“Fine, maybe hate’s too strong a word, but you don’t like me, Lucas. We don’t like each other. You barely tolerate me. Only a few weeks ago, you said all that crap to me on the couch. And that’s not even taking into account high school, when you were an asshole to me for no reason. You let your friends make fun of me. You shoved me onto the floor in my living room. You never even told me what I did wrong, what made you decide you didn’t want to be friends with me anymore. You never told me why, you didn’t give me any warning, you just looked at me like I was trash, like I was less than human.

“And we were best friends. Before that, we did everything together. I could tell you anything, I could trust you with

anything. In primary school, we played together every day. We took baths together. We ran away from our families together — yeah, we only ran away for two hours before we got hungry, but still. And then one day, you decided I wasn't good enough. And I never knew why.

“Do you know how damaging that is? Do you know how much it hurt, for you to suddenly treat me like that? It was as if you kicked me in the stomach multiple times. Worse than that. Because you knew me better than my siblings knew me, and yet you still rejected me. Do you know what that means? It means that there's something deep inside me that's repulsive, that makes even my best friend want to abandon me. That's what it means.” I inhale deeply. Talking so much has left me breathless, but I'm not even finished. I could rant at him all day.

Lucas stares at me, eyes shinier than usual. Oh god, is he going to cry?

No way. He hasn't cried since primary school.

“I know,” he says, voice weak and broken. “I know, I know, I know. But I can explain. Charlie...I've loved you this entire time.”

My ears start to ring. “No, you don't.”

“Yes, I do. I have since we were kids.”

“No, you don't,” I repeat, louder and angrier.

“Every time I was rude to you...it's because I wanted you so much.”

“You weren't just rude,” I say. “You were a dickfaced asshole.” His diary flashes in my mind, every word hurting me. “You called me ugly, you shoved me around, you made fun of my body, you rolled your eyes at me, you pretended I was invisible, you sniggered if I raised my hand in class and tried to contribute, and any time I was proud of something, you'd be sure to put me down. And you think you can get on your knees and expect me to forgive you? You're trying to manipulate me.”

He shakes his head rapidly. “No. No, I’m not. I’m sorry, Charlie, I really am. I hate myself every time I think about high school. I hated myself for what I said to you on the couch, when I held you down. I know it’s unforgivable. I’ll do anything to make up for it. Whatever you want, just say it and I’ll do it. I will.”

My eyes start to burn. It’s as if my brain has suddenly processed everything he said in the past ten minutes, because I’m no longer just pissed — I’m devastated. I’m reminded of how much Lucas hurt me, and I’m suddenly noticing how much he’s hurting me now. My throat feels sore, the way it does when I’m about to cry.

“Too bad,” I say, as hard as I can. Thank god my voice doesn’t break. Thank god tears don’t fall.

I can’t do this any longer. I turn and disappear into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me and leaving Lucas kneeling on the floor.

*

The next morning, I wake up at 6:30, earlier than usual. I don’t linger in bed, figuring if I get up now, I can get ready quickly and slip out of the house without coming face-to-face with Lucas. I’ve got work in the afternoon, so I plan to spend this morning studying at uni and definitely not thinking about the way Lucas looked at me last night.

Who knows? Maybe it was all an elaborate prank. Because there’s no way Lucas actually got on his knees and confessed his love to me.

The memory makes me angry, angrier than I thought possible, and I stomp into the kitchen, only to stop short when I see Lucas by the sink, making his protein shake. He’s wearing a black singlet and his gym shorts, and his headphones are around his neck.

As soon as he notices me, he turns so that his back is to me, quick enough that I can’t get a look at his face. “I’ll be out of your way in a sec,” he says. His voice sounds normal

enough. True to his word, he cleans up after himself in record speed, and then he's out the front door.

I don't see him for the rest of the day, not even when I return in the evening.

Every day for the next few weeks follows the same pattern. If I open the bathroom door to find Lucas brushing his teeth, he'll apologise politely, then get the hell out of there. If I'm in the kitchen and he needs to get something from the fridge, he'll give me a wide berth, almost as if he thinks that if he gets too close, I'll bite.

We don't bother each other about flatmate stuff. When he goes grocery shopping, he doesn't ask me to go with him, like he used to, but buys everything himself, including packets of frozen blueberries. I leave his half of the mail on the kitchen bench. When I pay for the internet, or he pays for the electricity, we send each other screenshots of the bill and wordlessly transfer the other half.

I wish I could say that other than the inconvenient fact I live with Lucas, life is great, but in reality, it doesn't feel like I'm living at all. Instead, it's like every day, I'm wading through thick, suffocating jelly. I go to class. I study, to distract myself. I read, to distract myself. I watch movies, to distract myself. I take more shifts at work, to distract myself.

When Hugo asks how I'm going, I pretend I'm fine. I still haven't seen Gilly since his birthday. According to Hugo, Gilly's freaking out because he's so busy, still going out every night while also dealing with his endless assignments. So, while Gilly and I have exchanged a few texts, I haven't updated him about what's going on in my life. It kinda sucks, because while he's an unserious guy, I know he'd make me feel better.

I also still haven't spoken to Cleo. It's not like I'm dying to, but I can't believe it ended the way it did: without a word and only the knowledge that she had slept with Lucas.

For a couple of days, I tried to contact her. I just wanted some sort of explanation, some sort of apology, or at the very

least, acknowledgement of what had happened. But no response.

Today, two and a half weeks after everything went down, I check her Instagram. Maybe I can find answers there, even if it's something as small as a post of her in a fancy restaurant — proof that she's living life as normal, that what happened hasn't affected her in the slightest.

But when I search up her username, nothing comes up. I go through my following list — she's not there. Not in my followers either. Where is she?

Oh.

She's blocked me.

The truth is, I don't want to talk to Cleo. Not really. I don't want to stand in front of her, ask her why, and see her facial expressions as she conjures up an explanation. But surely even hearing the painful truth from her is better than this: lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling and imagining the worst.

Maybe I pushed her to do it. Maybe I wasn't attentive enough, or kind enough, or attractive enough, or assertive enough, or smart enough, or athletic enough, or sophisticated enough, or cool enough, or funny enough.

Maybe every sweet thing she said to me was a lie. Maybe she always planned to get with Lucas, ever since the moment she laid eyes on him. Maybe she was just keeping me around as a distraction. Maybe she just saw me as someone to lavish her with praise and attention and fun dates. Maybe in her eyes, I was simply better than nothing.

I should have known.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lucas

Age 15

Sometimes I do stupid things, and I know it's stupid before, during and after I do it, but I still do it anyway. It's like I can't help myself.

Today's stupid thing was writing a Valentine's Day love letter, which is literally disgusting. It makes me sick. Yesterday, the boys and I were talking about how gross and cringey the whole love letter thing is at our school. Yet, I still found myself writing one last night anyway. Mum has a whole stack of blank Valentine's Day cards that she can't use now. She always bought Dad chocolates and teddies and flowers. I don't think Dad ever bought her anything in return.

Anyway, I started writing in the card without thinking, and the words just came out. At least I remembered to change my handwriting. I wanted the letters to look like they'd been typed by a computer. I pushed the letter into the dumbass mailbox thing in student reception this morning when *he* came in. I thought he'd know what I was up to, but he barely noticed me, to be honest. I had to start the conversation first, as usual, and when I noticed he had a letter in his hand, my heart started to race. I asked him who the lucky girl was, but his cheeks just turned red and he didn't say anything. So, I thought, maybe it wasn't a girl after all. And why was he so embarrassed to tell me? Maybe it was...

I won't tell anyone this, not even on my death bed, but I checked my locker like every fifteen minutes. The people in charge of the love letter delivery did not do a good job because

everyone's letters only arrived at the end of the day. Let me tell you, I practically ran to my locker. Okay, I didn't run, because that would be embarrassing, but I did walk faster than usual. Two girls were in front of my locker, waving their letters, and I barked at them to get out of the way. When I opened my locker, a whole bunch fell out. I think there were eight or nine? Most of them were from twelvies — I mean, I don't know for sure, since they were anonymous, but the handwriting suggested they were — and I chucked them out immediately. I looked through the rest.

None. Not a single one had his handwriting. And even if he disguised his handwriting the way I did, I would still know it was him. I know the way he phrases things, the kind of words he uses.

But no. His wasn't there.

I could only be depressed for so long, because the other guys wandered over and started wolf-whistling and reading the letters I received, and I didn't even care, because none of them were his. If I did get the one I wanted, there's no way I'd let anyone else touch it.

That's when some of the guys started yelling about Charlie receiving a letter, and I looked over to where he stood by his locker, and that's when I thought about killing myself. Especially when Charlie heard us shouting and looked over at us and into my eyes, then scrunched up the letter. My letter.

Later, he threw it into the bin by the bus stop. I don't know why he did that. Okay, it wasn't the most grand, elaborate confession of love. English is my worst subject anyway, it's not like I was going to write something incredible. But it was honest. When he threw the letter away, it felt like he kicked me in the chest.

I thought about crawling up into a ball. Then, I thought about shoving him. But the temptation to crawl into a ball was stronger, and so I had to focus on the anger, the hot embarrassment, to keep a straight face.

I marched up to him and showed him the letter that Joan wrote me, and under the satisfaction of making him feel as

terrible as he made me feel, was the sick realisation that he cared about Joan. That he liked her the way I liked him.

I'm going to date Joan, then dump her in about a week, just to make a point. I'm being a dick, but at least I'm self-aware. Besides, this is the only idea I have to stop feeling so shit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Now

“How’s Lucas?” Jemima asks from across the table.

It’s been three weeks, and Lucas and I only speak when we have to, with overly polite words. Yesterday, when I was looking for disinfectant spray under the kitchen sink, Lucas said “excuse me” as he leaned over me to fill up his water bottle. I’ve never heard him say “excuse me” before in his life. I’d be less shocked if a dog got up on its hind legs and said, “I beg your pardon.”

When I noticed him, I jolted so much that I almost buried my face in his thigh. I ended up crash-correcting a little too much, leaping back and bumping the back of my head against the dishwasher.

“Ow,” I said automatically. Lucas looked down at me for a second that felt like an hour. His mouth parted, but he seemed to think better of it and left the kitchen.

That was just one example. Every interaction I have with Lucas is so awkward, it makes me want to squeeze my eyes shut and groan.

“That bad, huh?” Jemima says when an eternity has passed and I still haven’t replied.

Jemima insisted on catching up today because, in her words, that’s what family does. When I met her at this cafe, she seemed normal enough. Her hair was decorated with one cherry barrette above one ear, and a strawberry barrette above the other, and like always, she convinced me to be the one to talk to the waiter. But the way she’s looking at me now, similar

to the way a GP looks at you when you're describing a rash, makes me wonder if this is some sort of interrogation.

"As soon as I mentioned Lucas, your face twisted up like you tasted something bad," she explains.

"He's just annoying," I mutter. "I'm sick of living with him."

"Is that why you look so depressed?" she asks.

"I look depressed? I'm not depressed," I add.

"You look exhausted, you haven't smiled once all morning, and Mum said that every time she's called, you sound like a robot."

My shoulders slump. "Jemima, don't tell me Mum put you up to this."

"She didn't! She just mentioned it, but she's not actively worried. I'm the one who's worried because, well, I know it can be sad moving out. The first few months are fun because you can do whatever you want and can pretend that you're an actual, proper adult. And then *bam* — the horrible realisation that you're no longer a kid kicks in."

I stare at my mocha. When I raise my eyes, Jemima smiles at me. A soft, encouraging smile.

"I'm not sad about not being a kid anymore. Being a kid sucked. Well, being a teenager sucked, being a kid was okay" —and here I am, thinking about climbing trees in the playground with Lucas — "the point is, it's not that."

"It's Lucas."

"He's just a butthead. I don't know what I was thinking when I agreed to live with him."

"What did he do?"

Oh, you know, he just had sex with my girlfriend, then had sex with me, then he kneeled on the floor and told me he loved me.

I still can't accept what he said to me. It would be like saying "okay" to someone telling you that the earth is flat.

Then imagine that person's a scientist.

"He...he's just so mean," I answer eventually.

Jemima's brows come together sympathetically. She's about to say something consoling, but I don't want to talk about Lucas. I already think about him enough as it is and I hate that he takes up so much space in my brain.

"Cleo and I aren't together anymore," I say to change the subject.

"Shit." Jemima takes a long sip of her matcha, looking as if she's thinking deeply. "Was it mutual?"

"No. She ghosted me."

Jemima's face crumples with pity, and now more than ever I wish Cleo had broken up with me in person. I wish she'd yelled and slapped me in the face, anything but just disappearing without a word, anything but making me feel small and meaningless.

"Oh, Charlie," she says.

"I know. It's been three weeks, and I still feel like shit."

"That's completely reasonable."

"Yeah, but it's like things haven't gotten better in the slightest. I still feel just as terrible as I did when it happened. When is time going to do its thing and make it suck less? I'm sick of waiting."

Jemima swishes around her drink. "The way I see it, you have two options. You can feel your feelings or distract yourself."

"The second option. But I've been trying to distract myself and it's not helping."

"What have you been doing?"

"Studying. Working."

"Charlie, you need to distract yourself with *fun* stuff."

"Well, I've been doing that too," I say defensively. "I read and watch movies, which is somewhat fun."

“What about going to the gym?”

I recoil, because the word ‘gym’ conjures up images of Lucas in the kitchen every morning, making a protein shake and wearing a singlet and shorts and running shoes.

I’m only pointing it out because you look so skinny. Better gain some muscle or Clarice is gonna dump your ass.

I grit my teeth at the memory of Lucas’s text. How could he make such comments about my body, then claim he’s been in love with me this entire time? What a joke.

“The gym? Are you saying I look too scrawny or something?” I snap. Jemima frowns, and I immediately regret my tone.

“Of course not, Charlie. I’m just saying that exercise might cheer you up. It doesn’t have to be the gym, that’s just what I do... Didn’t you say you started volleyball? Have you still been going to that?”

“No. I haven’t gone in weeks.” Months, if I calculate it properly. I hadn’t realised it’d been so long.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“I guess. I was crap, but it was fun.” My shoulders fall. “I can’t go, though, because Lucas goes.”

“Will it really be that bad? You live with him, after all.”

“I don’t want to see him more than I have to.” Although, if I go, Lucas will probably maintain a distance of fifty meters from me. And it’s not like we play in the same groups. He’s in intermediate, and I’m in beginner.

“Just give it a try,” Jemima says. “Trust me. The best way to make yourself feel better isn’t to do stuff that’s simply fun. You need to do stuff that makes you feel good.”

“Feel good?” I echo. Like what, masturbating? I haven’t used my toys since before Cleo ghosted me. It’s as if I’ve totally lost my sex drive.

That’s another thing that should feel good: sex. Should I go out and hookup with someone random? That seems to be the

course of action in movies. What's the term again — rebounding?

But even the prospect of chatting up a random makes me feel exhausted. I have no desire to have sex with a random, and even if I did, I know it won't feel as good as the time with Lucas —

I slam the brakes on that train of thought. No. *Nope*. Not going there.

“Things that make you feel good about yourself,” Jemima clarifies. “You need to remind yourself of how awesome you are.”

“That is so cheesy,” I say. *And I'm not even remotely awesome.*

“It may be cheesy, but it's the truth. I'm older than you, which means I know everything in the universe.” Jemima finishes off the rest of her drink. “Speaking of doing good deeds, how 'bout you go and pick up the cheque?”

I stare at her. “Are you kidding me?” I deadpan.

She laughs. “Sorry. I'm joking! Of course, I'm joking. Jeez.” She stands up and goes to the counter to pay.

*

I take Jemima's advice and go to volleyball, even if part of my motivation is to prove Jemima wrong. Unfortunately, she's right — I do have fun. Everyone in the beginner group cheerfully greets me, and I'm surprised they remember me. Afterwards, my thighs burn since it's been so long since I've squatted down to receive, but beneath the ache is a satisfaction. Who would've guessed? Exercise actually does make you feel better.

It's the end of the session, and I'm sitting on a plastic chair, sculling water, when the coach for the beginner's group walks over. Chelsea's a PhD student who towers above me, but she's a really friendly and encouraging person. I'm glad our group has her, compared to the gigantic men with booming voices who coach the intermediate and advanced groups. Once, I saw the intermediate coach bellow at Lucas, “What are

you doing? That was yours!” If I was on the receiving end of that, I’d turn bright red and possibly never come back again. But Lucas just smiled easily and said, “Sorry, my bad.”

Anyway, Chelsea tells me that the volleyball club’s holding a clinic for primary school kids over the weekend and they’re looking for volunteers to help out.

“But I’m not even good at volleyball,” I say.

“That’s fine,” Chelsea says. “I’ll be in charge of everything, I just need some extra hands in running drills. All you’ll need to do is set some balls and possibly ref some games at the end.”

“I’m happy to do it,” I say. “Really. But my setting isn’t that good.”

“I’ve seen you, and you’ll be perfectly fine. What do you say? If nothing else, you can put this on your resume. Hell, I’ll even be your referee if you need it.”

I can’t think of a good reason to protest, so I shrug. “Okay, yeah. I’ll do it.”

“Great!” Chelsea gives me a double thumbs up. “We’re holding it here on Saturday from four to seven. Bring what you usually bring. And thanks for agreeing, Charlie, I really appreciate it.”

*

Saturday comes, and as I walk from the tram stop to the stadium, I catch myself humming along to the music playing in my earphones. Am I actually excited to help kids play volleyball?

When I arrive at the stadium, I spot Chelsea setting up a net with two other volunteers — one girl is from the beginner group, and the other girl belongs to the intermediate group, I’m pretty sure.

“Hey Charlie! Thanks for making it,” Chelsea says, flashing me a smile as she adjusts the height of the net pole. The other two girls are adjusting the other one. “We’re just

setting up — would you be able to go to the storeroom and grab another net? We're going to have three courts in total."

"Sure," I say, dumping my bag and water bottle on one of the plastic seats by the sidelines, then head for the storeroom.

There's already someone inside; I can hear the clang of two poles bumping against each other. I step inside, my eyes adjusting to the darkness...

And then my stomach drops.

I fight the urge to blurt out *what are you doing here?* There's no reason he shouldn't be here. It's just...

"I didn't know you were the volunteering type," I say, then cringe, because that's equally rude.

Lucas slowly turns around, and there's the barest flicker of shock in his eyes before his expression dulls into distant politeness. "I'm not," he says. "I just wanted the opportunity to destroy some kids at volleyball."

I stare. "You know we're not going to be playing them."

"Oh, we aren't? Darn it."

In spite of myself, I start to smile and immediately smother it. "Chelsea told me to help set up the nets." I say.

"Yeah, I've got the poles here," Lucas says, hefting his arms to show me them. He's wearing a black shirt, and his biceps are swelling with the weight of the poles.

I avert my eyes.

"The nets are over there," Lucas continues, nodding at the corner. "You can grab two of them."

So he's getting me to hold a pile of string while he holds two metal poles? No way.

"I can help with the poles," I say, starting towards him.

He watches me with a blank expression. It's strange — it's like he's the same as he's always been. Bored and slightly cool. Like he never got on his knees in the living room of our

apartment. Like that wrecked expression never crossed his face.

“Alright,” he says. “Carry that end, we’ll bring them out together.”

Lucas lets me take the lead, and we bring the poles out of the storeroom and into the stadium. I glance over my shoulder, but Lucas isn’t looking at me. His eyes are roaming over the courts, and strangely, that calms me. Things, for the first time in a while, feel normal between us.

By the time all the courts are set up, kids start pouring in, talking loudly and wearing sports clothes and colourful runners. I grin as I spot a girl tie up her shoelaces carefully and dust off the sides. I remember when shoes were the most precious things in the world to me. I had black and green ones, and Lucas’s were blue and orange...

Once all the kids are here, Chelsea claps her hands and calls them all over to the centre of the stadium. She introduces herself, as well as me, Lucas, and the other two volunteers.

The first thing we do is my least favourite part of volleyball, probably because it’s simultaneously the most boring and most painful. We warm up. Chelsea gets everyone to run five laps of the stadium. I pace myself because I am not a runner. Thankfully, I’m not at the very back — there’s a crowd of kids surrounding me. Although, I’m not sure if I should feel exactly reassured that primary school kids are equally as slow as me.

“I can’t wait to go home,” a kid says beside me when we’re on our third lap.

I turn. He’s wearing an oversized shirt that falls halfway down his thighs, which reminds me of when I’d wear Jemima’s too-big hand-me-downs. The kid’s got a round face and chipmunk cheeks that are red and sweaty. I probably look pretty similar.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “You just have to get through this and then we get to do the fun stuff.”

“What are we doing after this?”

“Uh, well, stretches —”

He sighs.

“But then we can do drills!” I quickly add.

He gives me a bored look.

“What’s that look for?” I ask him. We finish the third lap and start on the fourth, and the pain in my legs starts to subside. The end is in sight.

“I didn’t even wanna come, my mum made me. I’d rather stay at home.”

The truth is, I can relate. When I was younger, there was nothing I hated more than sports class, or when the whole school day was replaced with the swimming or athletics carnival. That was in high school, though. In primary school, I was a lot more enthusiastic about, well, everything.

“It’ll be fun.” I don’t sound very convincing.

“I hate sports,” the kid says.

“Come on, you have to positive.”

“Well, it’s the truth,” he says. “I suck.”

“That’s okay. I suck too.” It’s the first thing I can think of to make him feel better.

Even though he’s panting and running like he might collapse any second, he has enough energy to give me the side eye. “Then why are you teaching us?”

I start to explain that I’m not teaching them exactly, just helping out, but give up. “I only suck a little bit,” I say.

The kid doesn’t look reassured.

The majority of the group has finished and are spreading out along the base line. I pass by Lucas, who appears to be having an argument with a kid that’s — I widen my eyes in surprise — taller than me.

How is a Year 6 taller than me? I must have six or seven years on him.

“I was faster than you,” the tall boy says, pointing a finger at Lucas.

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas says, waving a hand. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Once I finish my fifth lap, I barely have a chance to catch my breath before Chelsea tells everyone to start stretching. We do lunges to the centre of the stadium, then back to the baseline. Then it’s opening and closing the gate.

“Everyone drink some water,” Chelsea announces. “Then we’re going to spend the first part of today working on some drills.”

The first drill is receiving. We all stand in a circle with Chelsea in the middle, giving a demonstration. Everyone copies her stance, while she gives out pointers. “Get lower”—“Chest up”—“Remember, you want the ball to hit the flat part of your arms.”

Next, she gets the kids to make five lines while us adults under-arm throw volleyballs to them so that they can practice their receives. As expected, most balls go flying all over the stadium.

“You can hit it more gently,” Chelsea calls out. “We’re not that far from you.”

Despite her additional instruction, I spend more time during the drill chasing after the ball rather than actually throwing it. The kids seem pleased though — I overhear them say things like “did you hit it?” then “Yeah!” and show each other the red marks on their inner arms proudly.

For the next drill, we’ll practice receiving in pairs. The tall kid marches up to Lucas.

“I want you to be my partner.”

“Sure,” Lucas says.

“I’m going to aim for your face.”

I almost trip over. “Volleyball isn’t about aiming for people’s faces,” I say to the kid. “If you’re partners, it means

you're on the same team. You have to work together." I smile to soften my words. I don't want to sound too teacher-y.

"We're not on the same team though," the tall boy says. "He's my rival. He thinks he's faster than me."

"I am faster than you," Lucas counters.

The tall kid straightens. "No, you're not! I won!"

Lucas's face breaks into a grin as he chuckles. His face is...soft when he laughs. It's nice.

It takes me a moment to realise I'm staring and involuntarily smiling too. I quickly turn away and busy myself with making sure everyone has a partner. By the water fountain, one girl stands with a hand curled around her elbow, looking around uncertainly. She has jet black hair, with a straight fringe falling above her eyebrows, reminding me of how Jemima looked when we were kids.

"Hi," I say, walking up to her.

Her eyes widen. Oh no, have I scared her? I suppose that to some kids, everyone older is scary.

"Do you have a partner?" I use my nicest voice.

In the tiniest voice, she replies, "My friend...Lola...went to the bathroom."

"I see. In the meantime, do you want to pair up with me?"

"Um...okay."

I grab a volleyball from the basket by the edge of one court, and we find an empty space in one corner.

"I'll throw to you first," I say.

"Okay." Hesitantly, she gets into the receiving position.

"Yep, that's right," I say with an encouraging smile. I throw her the ball, and she receives it, but rather than aiming it back to me, it goes flying left.

"Sorry!" she says.

"That's okay!"

I chase after the ball, and we continue the drill until Lola arrives. I think it goes pretty well, even though the girl — whose name I learn is Madeline — apologises every five seconds. A few times, we even manage to get a rally going as we pass it back and forth to each other. Every time I compliment her, she looks down at her shoes and mumbles a thank you. By the time I leave to let Lola take my place, I reckon Madeline's gotten more confident, and there's something satisfying about that.

The next hour of the session follows a similar structure. Chelsea shows everyone how to set, then we do a couple of drills. Next is a serving demonstration, then some serving drills.

Then, Chelsea tells everyone to drink some water and take a rest because next we're going to play some games.

“What about spiking? I want to spike!” The tall kid — whose name is Newton — exclaims.

“I don't have spiking in our schedule,” Chelsea tells him. “It's pretty difficult.”

“What?” Newton whines. “But spiking's the coolest part of volleyball!”

“Sorry, dude,” Chelsea says. “Maybe if we have time at the end, but for now, I need to take a break and get something to eat.”

“I can show you how to spike,” Lucas says after Chelsea disappears. “But only after you drink a lot of water. You gotta stay hydrated, okay?”

“Okay,” Newton says, and no joke, he sprints to his water bottle. I feel like I'm eighty years old, because I genuinely don't understand how kids have that much energy. Then again, I remember being that energetic when I was in primary school too. There were more than a few lunchtimes when Lucas and I would run non-stop all lunch, pretending we were being pursued by the pirate-hunting navy.

Lucas catches me listening in, and I flush. “Can you set for us?” he asks.

“Oh, yeah, sure.” I consider telling him that I’m not the most accurate setter, just like I told Chelsea, but stop myself. It’s unnecessary. I don’t need to constantly tell people about all my deficiencies, especially when I know Lucas will just wave his hand and say that it’ll be fine.

I stand by the middle of the net while Lucas goes through spiking with Newton, showing him the footwork and how to open up his chest in order to slam the ball down. Lucas demonstrates by getting Newton to throw the ball to me, and I set it up high. Lucas jumps up and hits it fast and hard, and the volleyball bangs against the other side of the court.

“Good set,” Lucas tells me.

“Thanks,” I say.

When it’s Newton’s turn, I’m worried that he won’t be able to jump high enough to spike the ball, even though the net is lower than usual to accommodate for kids. There’s no need to worry though, as he manages to hit it.

Soon, more kids gather round, likely lured in by the spectacle of spiking. In no time, most of the group are lining up, waiting for their turn. The other two volunteers get involved too, setting on the other courts. When some kids express the fear that they can’t jump high enough — including the chipmunk-cheeked boy from the running warm up — Lucas offers to lift them up.

That gets them really eager, because with Lucas’s help, they’re more than high enough to smack the ball. After Lucas sets them back down, he gives them a high five, and I can’t help staring. I didn’t think he was a kid person, but he’s genuinely encouraging to everyone, and they all seem to love him. Even Newton, who constantly badgers him, likes him. I can tell in the way he follows Lucas around, demanding Lucas teach him how to jump higher.

I realise my mouth’s hanging open and quickly shut it. It’s just that...wow. I’ve never seen him be so...sweet before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lucas

Age 18

I already planned to go to uni in Melbourne before I knew Charlie was going to study there too. I know I have a... preoccupation with Charlie, but I'm not such a stalker that I'd follow him to the same city.

But I'll admit, the morning that the university offers came out, when Mum told me I was going to the same university as Charlie...I felt happier than a child on Christmas morning.

And I'll admit, when Mum suggested we live together, I didn't dismiss the idea immediately, the way I would've when I was younger. In fact, I said it was a good idea. I said it'd be more affordable to share a place, to split the rent and utilities. I said we should do it. I said I wanted to.

Mum said that Charlie's mum would talk to him about it, and every day after that, I felt suspended, waiting for an answer.

I didn't get my hopes up; instead, I expected the worst. Charlie would say no. Of course, he would. We hadn't been friends, or even friendly, for years.

Sure, now that it was the final year of high school, I'd made an effort to be more polite. I know I wasted too long being an asshole, but at least I was both self-aware and disciplined enough not to take out my anger on him. So, sure, we'd been civil to each other throughout Year 12. But you don't decide to live with someone you're merely civil with.

Especially when that person has a history of being a massive prick.

But for some inexplicable reason, Charlie said yes. And that's when I felt it: the rising, warm hope in my chest. That maybe, I could fix things, and maybe, if I played my cards right, I could make him mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Now

By the time the kids have left and the volleyball nets are put away, I'm exhausted. The remainder of the session consisted of games. Chelsea and the other two volunteers umpired the games while Lucas and I wandered around, helping out if we needed to. When there was only half an hour left, Newton started calling out to Lucas, saying, "I bet I can beat you" and "come on, play me unless you're scared."

Lucas being Lucas would retort things like, "You couldn't beat me even if it was twelve on one."

Newton, possessing the outrageous confidence all eleven-year-olds have, said, "Bet."

Lucas raised his brows at me. "What about it?" he asked. "You wanna play?"

"That's cheating!" Newton immediately argued. "You said twelve on one, not on two." He was still excited to play though, and so it was me and Lucas on one side of the court, and twelve kids on the other side.

We didn't destroy them the way Lucas said we could, but we didn't humiliate ourselves either. In fact, it was pretty equal. I think the fact that there were twelve kids squished on one side was more of a hindrance than an advantage, though.

Lucas and I actually played pretty well. At first, every time I made a mistake, I'd instinctively stiffen, expecting Lucas to ask me 'what the hell was that', but he'd just say 'good try'. And in fact, we made a good team — I'd set, and he'd spike, hard enough that I was scared it'd be a safety hazard. The kids

seemed to find it exhilarating, running out of the volleyball's path as if it were a meteor.

Now, I drag my feet into the men's changing rooms. From my bag, I pull out a towel and some soap, and head to the door labelled with a shower symbol.

I was hoping for cubicles, but it's an open shower with taps and shower heads spaced around the room. Oh well, I'll just quickly rinse myself off, and then I'll have a proper shower back home.

I've never used a communal shower before. In high school, sometimes we'd travel to sports facilities that had them, but I was always too shy to get undressed in front of my classmates and opted to change in the toilet cubicles and spray on a lot of deodorant instead. I was never too smelly because I barely moved in sports class anyway.

Standing in one corner, I pull my clothes off. I turn the tap on, and when the water is warm enough, I step underneath it.

I'm in the middle of rubbing soap all over my chest when the door behind me swings open. I whirl around. Lucas.

We both turn sideways, avoiding looking at each other directly. Even though most of my body is angled towards the wall, I still feel exposed, skin turning hot from my cheeks to my toes. I shouldn't be embarrassed. He shouldn't be embarrassed either — it's nothing he hasn't already seen.

"I can, uh..." Lucas's voice is quieter than usual, and over the running of my shower, it is barely audible. "I can wait for you to finish."

"It's fine," I say bluntly, trying to hide my self-consciousness.

Why am I feeling like this? It's fine. This is just what happens in communal showers. I wouldn't care if it was anyone else here.

But this is Lucas. And if I feel his eyes on my naked skin, then I'll think about what we did in his bed in the middle of the night.

In order to stop thinking such thoughts, I keep my eyes firmly on the tiled wall while washing myself off as quickly as possible. I can't help but strain my ears to listen for Lucas's hesitant steps as he pads across the room and takes a place in the corner opposite to mine. There's the whisper of clothes being pulled off, the squeak of the tap, then the rush of water.

As I soap my shoulders, I act before I can stop myself. I glance over, and I've already got an excuse composed in my head: *oh, I was just making sure I was properly cleaning my shoulders. I wasn't actually trying to peek at you.*

But I don't have to say anything. Lucas's back is to me, and there's the inverse triangle of his back and his narrow hips and his muscular butt and his long legs. He's washing his armpits, and it's only in the slow, stiff way he cleans himself that I realise he's feeling the same way I am.

I don't know how long I've been lost in my thoughts, gawking at him, but suddenly Lucas straightens up and looks over at me.

I whip back around. I'm turning red, I know it. Shit. He's going to think I was perving on him, but I wasn't. I mean, yes, I did look at his body, but I wasn't fixating on that. I was thinking about how everything between us has changed, and how it's still almost impossible for me to believe that everything that happened all those weeks ago was real.

I rinse the soap off my body and haphazardly throw the towel around myself. Gathering up my clothes in a messy bundle, I make for the doors — I'll dry and change in the other room. I need to get out of this steam-filled room as fast as possible.

“Are you going?”

Lucas. I glance over, which is a mistake, because all of him is on display. His wet hair stuck to his forehead, his chest, his torso...even his soft dick makes my stomach squirm. Cleo once told me that soft dicks are weird and ugly, and yes, I suppose they can sometimes look funny, but the image of Lucas in front of me reminds me of those naked Roman statues.

“Yeah,” I say after too long of a pause.

I wait for Lucas to smirk and tease me, but instead, he just bites his lip. Not in a seductive way. More like he’s hesitating too. And it’s cute, but it makes me feel even more awkward and self-conscious.

“Do you want to head back together?” Lucas asks. “We could grab dinner. I know a Singaporean place on the way.”

Droplets of water fall from his hair, down his cheek, and onto his collarbone. If I were closer, I’d see the droplets shatter into a million specks of water.

“Sure,” I say, blinking rapidly to get my brain working again. “Yeah, that’s... Good idea.”

His lips curl into the softest smile, and that’s when I catch it. The flick of his eyes from my face to my body, so quick, it’s almost imperceptible. The effect of it, of just his gaze on me, is enough to make my stomach flip.

I get out of that room before I burn up.

*

By the time I’ve changed into clothes, I’ve regained my sanity. Dinner with Lucas? What was I thinking? Sure, it sounds innocuous enough, but now that my mind is clear, I know it’s a bad idea.

I sit on the wooden bench in the centre of the change rooms, preparing what I’m going to say for when Lucas comes out, but he doesn’t.

I open the shower room door, and Lucas is standing in the same position under the spray of water, but now he’s hanging his head, resting his forehead against the back of his hand, which is pressed against the tiles.

“Lucas?”

No response. Perhaps he can’t hear me over his shower, which has gotten louder.

I walk over, careful to keep my bare feet on the places that are dry.

“Lucas,” I try again, raising my voice.

He startles and raises his head to look at me.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He stays quiet, eyes on mine.

I notice that there’s no steam emanating from him and reach out to feel the water. Immediately, I snatch my hand back. “That’s freezing. Why are you...?”

He keeps looking at me, and the question dies in my throat.

Oh.

I swallow, feeling myself go pink again.

“Listen,” I say. “I don’t think we should get dinner.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “That wasn’t me trying to trick you into a date.”

“No, I know, I know.” I sigh. “I don’t want to talk about... things.” God, I’m eloquent.

“We don’t have to talk about that,” Lucas says. “We don’t have to talk about anything. We don’t even have to talk.”

“So you want to just sit in silence?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Let’s just go back to normal.”

“That’s exactly it,” I say. “How can I pretend everything’s normal after what happened?”

“What happened?”

You got on your knees. “We had sex,” I whisper, as if someone’s listening in.

“So what?” he asks in a tone I know all too well, the one that sounds bored and above it all. “If I recall correctly, you were the one who said we didn’t have to talk about it, that it didn’t mean anything. That was *your* idea.”

I flinch. He’s right.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, and you don’t want to pretend nothing happened, then what’s the alternative?” he continues. “Continue avoiding me?”

“I’m not avoiding you.” That’s an obvious lie. I try again.
“You avoid me too.”

Lucas’s jaw clenches. “If you didn’t want to go home with me, or have dinner with me, you should’ve just said. In fact, why don’t you just give me your schedule so I can make a concentrated effort to stay out of your way? That way, we won’t have a repeat of today. While you’re at it, why don’t you give me a minute-by-minute plan of your life so in twenty years, I don’t accidentally run into you in a supermarket and, god forbid, make you uncomfortable.” He’s curled both fists.

“Did I do something to upset you?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Then why do you look so angry?”

He follows my gaze to his hands and forcibly relaxes them.
“I’m not angry. Sorry.”

Despite his size, in this moment, he looks so small as cold water slams down on his back, his hair soaked and dripping. I wonder how much courage it took him to ask me to dinner. To confess to me, all those weeks ago. And I reacted in the worst possible way.

I reach out and slam the tap, hissing as freezing droplets cover my arm. Lucas has been standing under the water for way too long, and it’s a wonder his teeth aren’t chattering.

“Maybe you’re right,” I admit. “I know I’m being annoying, hiding and changing my mind and —”

“Charlie, I’m not annoyed,” he says quietly. “If I seem like I’m on edge, it’s because...” he cuts himself off.

“Because?” I prompt.

He looks at me, and I flush.

“But you just had a cold shower,” I say lamely.

“Yeah, it was working pretty well until you marched back in here.”

I look down, unable to meet his eyes. “But...but I’m fully dressed. You’re the one who’s naked. If anything, I’m the one

who should be..." I trail off.

It's silent a moment too long before Lucas says, "It wouldn't matter whether you were fully dressed or wearing a potato sack."

I blink at him. "Really?"

"Really," he says. "Welcome to my hell." With a sigh, he grabs his towel and heads towards the door.

"Wait," I say, grabbing his arm.

He looks down at my hand around his arm, then slowly meets my eyes.

I wet my lips. I forgot what I was going to say — it was something important, I'm sure. Something absolutely essential.

An eternity passes, and under Lucas's gaze, every hair on the back of my neck stands up. It's not unpleasant, though.

I take a step towards him, sucking in a sharp breath, and it's so loud, it seems to echo around the room. I take another, feeling my knees weaken. One more step, and my breath is bouncing off his skin.

He looks down at me. If he lowered his head a little, he'd be kissing the top of my hair.

I don't know why I'm not running. I put a hand on his chest, and I don't know why I do that either. Despite showering with ice-cold water moments ago, his skin is hot under my palms.

He stills.

"I..." My mouth is dry. "I need to..."

"Yes?" God, his voice is so deep.

"I need to tell you that...it wasn't meaningless."

His eyes darken, and the next thing I know, I'm pressed against the tiles, his lips crashing against mine. Cold water seeps through the back of my t-shirt and onto my skin,

chilling, but I barely notice it. I can't, not while Lucas is kissing me like he's trying to bruise my lips.

Hot pleasure spreads from my sensitive mouth and down my spine, tingling through me, before spreading throughout my limbs and to my groin. I feel weightless, mindless. All of my worries and stress and anger fade away, and it's just him. Just him, caging me in against the wall, protecting me from the world.

My hand is still on his chest. Realising that, I drag my fingers over his pecs, pushing slightly into the muscle. When I find his nipple, I pinch it ever so slightly between my thumb and forefinger. Just because I want to. Just because I'm curious.

He hisses into my mouth, and my desire swells and grows.

Now both of my hands are on him, pressing and pulling, anything to make him react, to make those pained, pleased sounds.

With a groan, he spins me around and pushes me hard against the wall. My erection's trapped between my hip and the cold tile, and Lucas is right behind me, sucking on my neck and pressing his stiff dick into the crack between my ass. He fingers the waistband of my pants.

"Can I?" he murmurs into my skin. "Please?"

I rub back against him instinctively. "We...can't," I say, and to my surprise, I'm breathless. "S—someone could come in."

"No one's going to come in," he promises me. Now he's licking the shell of my ear. "It's the weekend. We're the only ones here."

"That's not..." I suck in a deep breath when he places his other hand on my hip. "That's not true." There'll be staff around. Someone has to lock up. They'll catch us, I know they will. I should say it. I should tell him.

"We can be quick," Lucas murmurs, still playing with my waistband. "Please. Let me?"

It's a bad idea. I know that it is, and the logical part of my brain is trying very hard to keep reminding me that. Except... Lucas's breath is on my skin, making me shiver, and it's thrilling, and this is wrong but exciting and —

“Okay,” I breathe. “Okay.”

I help Lucas tug down my pants and boxer-briefs, which puddle around my feet. Lucas presses forward, so his cock nestles between my thighs, pressing against the underside of my balls.

When he reaches around to take me in his fist, I bite down on my bottom lip. I can't be loud, can't draw attention. But Lucas's hand is tight, and his thumb is playing with the tip, coaxing out wetness.

Slowly, Lucas pulls back, then pushes forward, so he's thrusting gently between my thighs. He does a better job of keeping quiet compared to me — the only sound he makes are low exhales, a throaty hiss when I press my thighs together to make it even tighter for him.

I fold both of my arms against the wall and rest my head against them, stabilising myself because my legs are turning to jelly. Lucas has one hand on the wall next to my head, while the other jerks me off. Gentle at first, then faster and faster. His hand matches the rhythm of his cock between my thighs, which are now sticky with his pre-cum.

I press my lips closed, but I can't help whimpering, not when my eyes are fixed down at the sight of Lucas's large hand touching me so expertly. I'm so, so hard, and his hand is moving up and down in a rotating motion that feels heavenly and oh, god —

My balls get tight and my heartbeat is pounding in my ears and —

And Lucas is saying something.

“Huh?” I ask, my voice slurred.

“Is it good?” His voice is low and breathy. “Am I doing a good job?”

“Yes. Yeah. Yeah, you are, Lucas. Keep going.” It feels so good and —

“I want to cum,” I whisper. “I want to cum. Lucas, can you — ?” I don’t finish the sentence because somehow, inexplicably, he starts jerking me off even faster, and his fist is so tight, and the subtlest wet sounds are coming from it because my dick is glistening with pre-cum.

All of a sudden, the orgasm hits me, and I squeeze my eyes shut. Behind me, Lucas lets out a long, sexy groan, before he’s kissing my neck as hot wetness splashes my inner thighs. After a moment — I don’t know how long — my breaths even out and my heart rate slows down. Lucas untangles himself from me, and I open my eyes.

My thighs are a mess, and so is the wall in front of me. On the floor, my pants are damp from draining shower water, and I’m sweaty and tired. But who cares? Most of all, I feel blissed out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lucas

Age 19

When I was six, I proudly announced I was going to marry Charlie when I grew up. I was at his house for a playdate, and we were lying on the carpet, drawing, while our mums drank coffee on the couch. They immediately starting cooing and saying that was adorable. Charlie turned red.

For a month after that, at every dinner, Mum would ask me who I was going to marry, and my answer would be the same: Charlie, Charlie, Charlie. Mum would giggle while Dad was less amused and told Mum to stop asking silly questions, but she didn't. She'd ask me about the wedding venue (a pirate ship), the wedding cake (orange — Charlie's favourite colour at the time) and whether she'd be invited (of course, you're my mummy).

When I was a moody fourteen-year-old, the memory of my younger self saying all that stuff made me want to neck myself. Sometimes Mum would tease me about it and I'd snap and overreact and slam my bedroom door.

Now I'm less moody and slightly more mature, and the thought of six year old me no longer makes me feel queasy. In fact, I think he was onto something. I don't know why I stopped letting myself want what I want for as long as I did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Now

The Singaporean restaurant is bathed in hues of gold and amber, and spicy aromas fill the air. Lucas sits across from me at a wooden table, in front of a window that showcases the modern Melbourne cityscape under the dark blue sky.

As I scan the menu, I catch myself stealing glances at Lucas. Before we left the gym, he combed through his hair with his fingers, but it's still slightly messy at the back, and the sight is both unsettling and thrilling.

I don't regret what happened in the shower. I refuse to. I don't want a repeat of the shame I felt after the first time with Lucas. The way my gut ached as I slipped out of his bed and disappeared into the cold Melbourne morning.

No. If I could redo anything, I would be more careful with my clothes, so I wouldn't have to spend fifteen minutes holding them under the hand dryer.

The waiter comes over, a handsome Asian guy who looks our age, and he takes our orders. After he goes, I watch Lucas as he fills up our glasses with the complimentary tap water.

"What?" he asks when I've been staring for too long.

"He was cute."

"Who?"

I huff a laugh, certain he's playing dumb on purpose. "That waiter guy."

Lucas scowls. "Was he?"

"He had black hair."

“Incredible.” Lucas takes a sip of water, and the column of his throat works as he swallows.

“I have black hair,” I say.

“Do you?” His eyes glint, and yep, he’s definitely playing dumb on purpose.

“I’m just saying,” I begin, leaning back in my chair, “maybe he’s your type.”

“Do you think any guy who looks a tiny bit like you is automatically my type?”

My cheeks heat. Now I sound narcissistic. “Forget it,” I say and chug some of my water, before realising I should save it for when dinner comes, in case it’s spicier than I expect.

The waiter comes over and places down a napkin, a pair of chopsticks and a spoon in front of both of us. I murmur a thanks, but Lucas gives the waiter a full smile thank you and watches him walk away.

“You’re right,” he says once the waiter is out of earshot. “He *is* cute.”

I grit my teeth.

“Maybe I should ask for his number,” Lucas muses.

“Maybe you should,” I say and fix my chopsticks so that they’re perfectly straight on the napkin.

After spending way too much time also making sure the spoon is straight, Lucas taps my foot with his. “Charlie.”

I look up.

“Are you upset?”

“No.” Even if I do feel...less than great...it’s not his fault. I started it. And I wasn’t trying to pick a fight. I was only asking about the waiter because —

“Are you gay?” I ask.

Lucas’s eyes widen for a millisecond at the sudden question, before he relaxes, a lazy smile stretching languidly across his face.

“Gee, I don’t know,” he says. “Maybe the fact that I had you against the shower wall less than half an hour ago answers that question for you.”

“Lucas!” I hiss, glancing around, but no one is paying attention. Nearby us is a family of three and a bunch of twenty-something couples, and they’re all wrapped up in their own conversations.

“I mean,” I say, feeling my skin grow warm again, “are you...do you...” I pause, thinking of a way to phrase it. “Do you like girls?”

“No.” His answer is short and simple. “Do you?”

I raise my brows at him.

He nods to himself, looking down with a serious expression. “Right. Claudette.”

I stare.

He peeks up at me.

And then, in spite of myself, I crack a smile, and a moment later, I’m shaking with laughter. Maybe it was Lucas’s faux serious expression, or the unexpectedness of the joke, or maybe it’s simply the name Claudette, but I can’t stop laughing and I don’t know why.

When I finally calm down, I blink the amusement from my eyes to find Lucas smiling at me with pride. I immediately smother the smile from my face — I don’t want to encourage him — but I know the damage has been done.

Our meals arrive: chilli crab for me, a laksa for Lucas. We dig into the food without waiting. I spoon up some of the sauce my crab is bathed in, and as soon as the burst of flavour hits my mouth, I sink into my chair. I should’ve gone out for food earlier, back when I was mopey and depressed. I should’ve eaten my way through Melbourne.

Later, when I’ve demolished half of my meal and finished all the water in my glass, I reach out for the jug of water, but Lucas grabs it at the same time. Our fingers brush, and it sends an electric bolt through my body. I would’ve thought that the

fact Lucas was pressed against me earlier today would temper the power of his touch, but it hasn't. If anything, it's only amplified it.

"Let me," Lucas says, and then he tops up my glass for me.

"Thanks," I murmur.

After he finishes filling up his own glass, he looks up and our eyes lock. I'm reminded that despite how normal this dinner feels, there's still something under the surface, something that I don't want to acknowledge.

I clear my throat. "If you don't like girls, why did you have so many girlfriends in high school?"

Lucas's expression tightens ever so slightly. "Why not?" he replies, and his voice is nonchalant. Too nonchalant.

"Give me a proper answer."

He shrugs. "Because it was the thing to do."

I wait.

"Because I was bored."

He eats some more of his laksa.

"Because it made me feel powerful," he finishes.

I stare down at my meal, but suddenly it doesn't look so appetising.

"Do you remember Joan? She was in our year level. You dated her," I say.

"I remember."

"You waved her Valentine's day letter in my face."

"I did."

"I was crushed."

"I know you were."

I keep my eyes on the dish before me. I don't want to start a fight, or dredge up bad memories, but I can't help myself.

“What do you want me to say, Charlie? Do you want me to say I’m sorry?”

“No,” I say, a little too defensively.

“Because I am sorry. I did a lot of things in high school I regret.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. “Okay.”

We finish off our meals in silence. It’s only when I’m finishing off the water, washing away the last remnants of spice from my mouth, that I speak again.

“If you don’t like girls, that means the only reason you slept with Cleo was to spite me.”

Lucas’s brow creases. Perhaps I’ve caught him off guard, suddenly bringing up the topic again. Then his brow smooths, but he bites the corner of his mouth. When he replies, he doesn’t meet my eyes. “I don’t want to talk about her.”

I should feel annoyed that he’s blowing my question off, but I don’t. When I really think about it, I don’t want to talk about her either. Better to forget. The past is the past.

Lucas’s pink tongue comes out, wets his lips, then disappears. “Maybe....maybe one day...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence. I don’t prompt him.

We pay the bill and leave. The street is quiet compared to the din of the restaurant, more intimate. I notice every footfall of Lucas’s, the way his jacket rustles. He looks at me, and the intensity of his gaze causes my heart to skip a beat.

I feel the pull of him, as if he’s magnetic. I could brush my arm against his, and he’d let me. I could hold his hand, and I know he’d smile.

But I can’t. There’s a difference between letting him into the space between my thighs and letting him into my heart. I can still remember how much it hurt when he left me when we were thirteen. And just because we’re older now, it doesn’t mean it’ll hurt any less.

It'll hurt more, because we won't just be friends. And when he does hurt me, I'll feel all the more stupid for ignoring all the warning signs.

How can I give in when I look at his track record?

He slept with Cleo.

"Lucas?" I whisper.

"Yes?"

He knows what I'm going to say before I say it — I can see the melancholy in the line of his mouth, the resignation in his eyes. Maybe it's been there all dinner and I didn't notice.

"I just want to be friends. I want to go back to normal."

"Alright," he says, his tone casual. "Friends it is."

"What happened this afternoon...it can't happen again."

"I know."

"It's not that I regret it, or that I didn't enjoy it —"

He cuts me off with a sad smile. "I know, Charlie. I get it."

*

I hate to prove Jemima right, but going to volleyball was a good idea. I've continued going weekly, and I'm even making an effort to eat well and sleep early.

Since the dinner at the Singaporean restaurant, Lucas and I have settled into friendship. Or, at least, as close as we can get. I'll admit, sometimes when he comes back from the gym, wearing a black singlet and his skin shiny with sweat, my thoughts go somewhere decidedly not platonic.

I also admit that sometimes, when I catch sight of his black sheets in the washing machine, I'll think about him and Cleo. But that's only sometimes. The memory of Cleo is no longer the wound it used to be. It's healing.

Aside from Lucas, I spend a lot of time with Hugo. It only occurred to me recently how much I neglected him after getting a girlfriend, but now I see how important my

friendships are, and I try my best to show how much I appreciate him.

I'd do the same with Gilly, but I think his social life has gotten even more hectic in the past month. That, coupled with assignments piling up, means that I still haven't seen him since his birthday. I've texted him a couple of times in an attempt to catch up, but he's always been busy. Hugo has barely seen him either — only in the kitchen of their student accommodation building, when he's been chugging a red bull at 11 P.M in an attempt to finish an essay.

I message Gilly again today, determined to hang out with him, even if it's only for fifteen minutes. He replies that he's going to be at the library, busy studying, but I ask if he can spare a moment to grab some bubble tea.

I watch the dots on my screen as he composes a message. For the first time, I wonder if he just doesn't want to hang out with me. Maybe he thinks I'm a loser like Cleo did. Like the boys in high school did. Maybe I'm annoying him; maybe I'm dense, refusing to see the hints he's been dropping —

I force myself to stop that train of thought. If Jemima were here, she'd shake my shoulders and tell me to stop jumping to conclusions.

Don't be so pessimistic, I tell myself. Don't be so self-deprecating. We're not doing that anymore.

My phone vibrates as Gilly's response comes through.

Gilly: ok yeah I can do 3 if that suits?

Charlie: perfect see you then :D

See? Nothing to worry about.

*

I wait for Gilly at the bubble tea place in the university's cafeteria, the same place I sat with him, Hugo and Lucas at the beginning of the semester, when I told them about my first dates with Cleo. That day feels so long ago.

When he arrives, I give him a wide smile. "Hey! Long time, no see."

“Yeah, sorry about that,” he says in his usual booming voice.

After grabbing our drinks, we sit down at one of the tables. Gilly stabs his straw into the plastic covering of the drink but messes up, and matcha green liquid seeps out and onto the table. He swears as he mops up the mess with napkins.

“I hate it when that happens,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. He takes a long sip of his drink, then chews on the tapioca, eyes trained on something in the distance. I notice his fingers are fidgeting on the table.

I frown. “Is something wrong?” I ask, nodding at his fingers.

He looks down and stills them, laughing. “Shit, I didn’t realise I was so jittery.”

“You haven’t drunk a bunch of energy drinks, have you?”

“Only one. I’ve got an assignment due tonight and it’s freaking me out.”

“Ah. I hope I’m not taking you away from your studies for too long.”

He waves me away. “No, it’s fine. I was going crazy in that place. It’s so goddamn quiet, and if you make a single sound, everyone death glares you. I accidentally dropped my charger and everyone in a ten meter radius turned around simultaneously, like they were killer robots or something. It was scary.”

I chuckle.

“Anyway,” he says, “what did you want to talk about?”

“Nothing in particular, just wanted to catch up since it’s been a while.”

“It has,” he agrees. “I’ve just been so busy—”

I wave him off. “Nah, don’t worry about it, it’s all good. So, how’s life been?”

He tells me about the adventures he's been up to, referencing people I think I met at his birthday party. The more he talks, the more he seems his normal self, his voice growing louder, his smile growing bigger. After a story about how he got thrown out of a nightclub, he slumps a little in his chair, likely exhausted from telling such a long, bombastic story. "What about you?" he asks. "What have you been up to?"

"Not much," I answer. "Oh, well, Cleo and I aren't together anymore."

Gilly blinks, mouth parting. "What? When?"

"About a month ago."

His eyes dart away. He must be feeling guilty that the only reason I'm telling him now is because he's been so busy, but it's no big deal. At least he didn't have to see how sad I was in the immediate aftermath.

"What happened?"

"She cheated on me."

He freezes, eyes wide. "Really?" his voice is loud enough to draw the attention of a nearby table, and he quickly lowers his voice. "How did you find out?"

"Lucas told me."

Gilly's fingers curl around his bubble tea.

"I'm not mad at him though," I hurry to explain. I don't want Gilly to get angry with Lucas on my behalf. All I want is everything to go back to normal. The four of us friends, the way we were at the start of the semester. "I mean, I was," I continue. "I was pissed, and we fought, but now...we're just trying to be friends."

Gilly stares at me, frowning, his brow creased. "I'm so confused. What happened?"

Even Hugo doesn't know Cleo cheated on me with Lucas. but I find myself explaining everything to Gilly.

“Lucas told you he fucked Cleo? Just like that?” Gilly asks, aghast.

“It’s not like he could deny it. In fact, he was gloating.”

Gilly turns to stare at his drink. “Let me get this right,” he says. “He admitted to fucking your girlfriend?”

“Yeah, that’s what I just said.”

“And you’re...still friends with him?”

“When you put it like that, it sounds insane.”

“It is insane,” Gilly tells me. “What the hell, Charlie?”

“It’s...complicated.” I wince at Gilly’s incomprehension. “I just want to forget it happened. We’ve known each other since we were kids, after all.”

Gilly’s expression softens. “It’s your call, I guess,” he says. “I can’t believe Lucas did that,” he murmurs, more to himself than to me.

“We don’t have to keep talking about it,” I tell him. “Let’s talk about something fun.”

Gilly stares at me, but after a moment his shoulders relax. “So, I know you’re going to judge me, especially because I have a project due next weekend, but I got invited to this house party up in Brunswick this Friday. This super hot chick from my finance class invited me, and when I asked around, a load of friends were already going. You should come too. I’ve already asked Hugo.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said it depends whether you and Lucas are coming.” Gilly rolls his eyes. “You know how he is. He doesn’t like going to parties where he doesn’t know many people.”

“That’s fair enough,” I say. “I wouldn’t want to go to one either.”

“Yeah, but I’ll be there. And if you encourage Hugo and Lucas to go, that’ll be two other friends. Besides, there’ll be a bunch of people from my birthday party. You know them too, right? You should come.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

Gilly slaps a hand against my back. “Awesome! Remember, however much alcohol you think you need to bring — double it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lucas

Age 19

My parents divorced when I was ten. At the time, I didn't properly understand what was happening — I just knew that Mum was teary, Dad was grumpy and that no one talked at dinner. Yes, Dad would lose his temper at me more often than usual, but the upside was that he'd feel guilty immediately after and buy me ice-cream, and Mum would let me play at Charlie's house all the time.

Charlie and I played the pirate game, and it's impossible to describe how fun it was. Kids these days will probably say it was dumb because they're glued to their iPads and TikTok, but in Pirate land, we could do anything. If it was raining outside, then we'd make a fort in Charlie's living room and say the fort was a hidden compartment in our ship. Or we could make maps for various treasures: an elixir that grants immortality, a precious ruby, a mirror that lets people look into their future.

If Jemima kicked us out of the living room, we'd watch movies in Charlie's room. Or we'd go into the bathroom and mix up shampoo and conditioner and hair oil to make potions. Or we'd go into the kitchen and use baking soda and vinegar to make explosions.

One time, I accidentally spilled vinegar all over the kitchen bench. Charlie's dad walked in and I was ready to get in trouble. But then Charlie said it was his fault, and he cleaned it up and said sorry and promised not to conduct science experiments in the kitchen anymore.

Another time, Charlie led me to the kitchen so we could grab a rainbow Paddle Pop each. But Nate was there, and he'd taken three of the ice-creams for himself to mash up into a big ice-cream goop. Charlie got mad because there was only one left and Nate always took all the yummy food for himself, but Nate just stuck out his tongue and ran out of the room.

We looked at the single Paddle Pop left before Charlie announced he wasn't hungry anymore and let me have it.

The next day, at school, I went to the canteen during lunchtime and bought a Zooper Dooper with the one dollar in change I'd found in Mum's car. It was no Paddle Pop, but at least it was a good flavour: raspberry. When I gave it to Charlie, his eyes lit up and he gave me a big hug. I've missed those hugs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Now

The Brunswick house is Victorian-era, with intricate wrought-iron detailing and a quaint front porch covered in potted plants. During the daytime, it'd look classic and elegant, but now, under the navy sky, it pulses with remixes of pop songs. University students hang around the front sidewalk, smoking cigarettes or vaping. I'd bet money they were from the Arts or Design faculties from their nose piercings, bright berets and chunky boots.

Lucas, Hugo and I walk through the front garden and up the steps, dodging a couple who are making out.

Inside, the house's wooden floorboards glow under the lights. We dump our alcohol in the 70s style kitchen, with its lino floor, wooden cabinets, and yellow and orange floral wallpaper.

I survey the crowd of people who stretch from the connected living room out to the backyard. Above me, there's the thump of people dancing or jumping or whatever it is they're doing upstairs.

"I want to go home," Hugo says.

"We've just arrived," Lucas says.

"Here," I say, ripping the cardboard holding the beer I bought together. "Drink some alcohol, it'll loosen you up." Privately, though, I agree with Hugo. This many people in such a small place freaks me out, and surely it's a fire hazard.

At least the house is warm inside compared to the cold night air. It's almost winter. Next week is the final week of

semester, then SWOTVAC, and then the beginning of June marks exam season, and that's the end of my first semester of university. The fact that half of the year has flashed by so quickly scares me.

Hugo obediently takes the beer, and I hand one to Lucas before popping one open myself. I take a long sip as I listen to the sound of clinking glasses, laughter, conversations and the splashing of liquid. Then a noise louder than all of those breaks through the clamour.

“Charlie! And you brought Lucas and Hugo!” Gilly emerges from the crowd with his arms spread, one hand holding a bottle of beer. “Legends, you made it.”

“Thanks for the invite,” Hugo says.

Gilly waves his hand. “It was nothing. The more the merrier, that's what I say. Welcome to the party! Come out to the back.”

Gilly leads us through the throng of students, telling Hugo a story with his hands moving wildly. Lucas and I follow behind them, and he nudges me with his elbow.

“Having fun?” he asks.

“We'll see.”

He smiles. When I first brought up the fact that Gilly invited us to a party, he seemed hesitant, even if he didn't say it. But when I said I'd go, he agreed to come too.

The backyard has slightly overgrown grass and a lemon tree in the corner. We follow Gilly into the garage, which has its door open, where a ping pong table sits.

“Beer pong!” Gilly announces. “We're playing next,” he says, raising his voice loud enough so everyone nearby hears him.

“I've never played before.” As soon as I say it, I realise I basically admitted to not having been to many parties. I tense self-consciously, but no one reacts, except for Lucas.

“Team up with me,” he says. “I'll win for us.”

When it's our turn to use the table, Lucas and I stand on one side of the table, Gilly and Hugo on the other. The flickering garage light casts an eerie shadow on the blue surface, and the wafting smells of cigarettes and weed are distracting to me, but Lucas lines up the beer cups with precision.

After everything is set up, he straightens up. "You ready to win, Charlie?"

"You're awfully confident," I say.

"Too confident," Gilly shouts from the other end of the table. "Hugo, let's show them how it's done."

"Um, just so you know, I'm not really good at throwing things," Hugo begins. "Or anything to do with hand-eye coordination. Just warning you —"

"Chill, you'll be fine," Gilly interrupts. He leans over and gives us a look. "Prepare to be humbled."

I quirk a smile despite myself.

Lucas starts, and the ping pong ball leaves his fingertips, arcing through the air before landing in one of the cups on the other side. I cheer, along with some of the people on the sidelines, as Gilly picks up the cup and chugs it.

Gilly goes next, and he's just as good as Lucas. Lucas drinks the cups. I miss when it's my turn, the ping-pong ball bouncing off the edge, not even close to the cups.

"Don't worry," Lucas says while Gilly teases me from the other end. "I'll give you some tips next time."

Then Hugo goes, and his throw is equally terrible, which makes me feel a little better. I grin at him while he covers his mouth with a hand, embarrassed. "I told you, I don't have any hand-eye coordination!" he says to no-one in particular.

The next time I throw the ball, Lucas reaches over and positions my hand and arm. His skin is surprisingly cool against mine, and I look up at him as he explains the technique.

“Don’t throw too hard,” he says. “Otherwise it’ll go flying. Release the ball when your hand is about here. Try the movement. Okay, a little more powerful than that...”

He’s so...

He’s just so...

There’s so many words I could use. But in the darkness of night, half of his face illuminated by a yellow lightbulb hanging from the garage roof, all I can think is *pretty*.

The way he’s instructing me is sweet and encouraging, and I’m reminded of how he made those primary school kids laugh in glee when he held them up to the top of the volleyball net.

He releases my hand, and I realise a second too late that I’m meant to throw the ball. I do, and somehow, it smacks into Gilly’s stomach.

Lucas laughs softly. “Good try,” he says.

I shake my head. *Don’t get distracted*, I think.

The game continues, and Lucas and Gilly are matched in skill, landing the ping pong balls in cups with pinpoint accuracy. Lucas and I alternate, so I drink one of the cups and he drinks the next one. There’s not too much alcohol in each cup, but I feel myself grow lighter, louder, less shy.

With a final, well-aimed throw, Lucas lets out a triumphant whoop and shares a victorious grin with me as we high-five.

“What was that you said about humbling us?” I call over to our opponents.

Hugo laughs good-naturedly while Gilly waves his middle finger.

“Don’t be a sore loser,” Lucas says. His voice is playful enough, but there’s an edge to it, and Gilly’s jaw tightens. Maybe the pair of them took the game more seriously than I expected.

I glance around at the people watching and waiting for their turn. A crowd of girls has arrived, wearing trendy shirts that show off their shoulders and midriffs, despite the

temperature. Perhaps Gilly was more sensitive because he'd lost in front of the opposite sex.

"Let's get some more booze," he says to Hugo, dragging him back to the house.

A group of the stylish girls crowd the beer pong table, setting up a new game, and Lucas and I take that as our cue to leave.

"You were really good."

I turn around and see it's a brunette girl who spoke, and she's smiling at Lucas, her teeth white and straight.

"Thanks," Lucas says with a chuckle. I know him well enough to know the laugh is forced, added in there to be polite.

"Any tips?"

"Practice."

"Oh, so you've played a lot?"

"Yeah, I'd say so," Lucas replies.

I shift on my feet, feeling like an intruder just standing here and listening to their conversation.

"Actually, can I ask you a favour?"

"I don't have a secret to winning, if that's what you want."

The brunette laughs way too much for a sentence that wasn't even funny. "No," she says. "I was wondering if you'd be on my team? See, my friends and I have bet that whoever loses has to pay for brunch tomorrow and I'm totally broke, so..."

One of the girls from the other team shouts out, "Hey! That's cheating!"

She's equally as beautiful as the brunette, and I can't help but feel a pang of insecurity. It gets worse when I notice that the brunette, who's smiling up at Lucas with glossy lips, is taller than me.

I must look like a dwarf next to Lucas. A gremlin.

Stop tearing yourself apart, I think, but right now, it's really hard.

“Pleaseeeee?” the brunette says when Lucas doesn't reply. “My bank account is on the line.”

“Uh, well. I would, but...” Lucas glances at me.

All the other girls follow his gaze, and the feeling of their eyes on me makes me want to run out of there. “Go ahead,” I tell Lucas. “I'll join up with the others.”

Then I disappear back into the house.

I can't find Hugo or Gilly, and I don't have the energy to try and make conversation with a stranger, so I help myself to another can of beer.

He doesn't like girls.

I push myself out of the kitchen and down the hallway in an attempt to distract myself.

He doesn't want them.

The hallway is bare: no family photos, no paintings. I'd guess this house has been rented out to a bunch of university students living together for the year.

It doesn't have anything to do with you.

The hallway spits me out to the front yard, and I sit down on the porch.

Don't be greedy.

I'm not sure how long I spend sitting on the porch with only the beer in my stomach to provide me warmth, but eventually, I return to the kitchen for some water. As tempting as it would be to drown myself in alcohol to escape the twisty feeling in my stomach, I don't want to make myself sick. I don't want to throw up. I don't want to wake up tomorrow morning with a pounding headache.

Standing by the kitchen sink, I fill up a glass to the top with water, then down it all. Then I fill it up again. I want to flush the beer out of my system. I thought alcohol was supposed to cheer you up, but I feel dull and miserable.

A flash in my periphery causes me to turn my head, and I see Lucas and a girl — a different one, blonde this time — walk through the kitchen into the connected living room. I draw closer, standing behind the kitchen bench so that I don't look like I'm obviously watching, and see them sink into the couch.

“That’s cool,” Lucas says, and if his voice was polite earlier tonight, it’s rapidly losing patience. I can tell when he’s teetering on annoyed, because it’s the way he used to talk to me all the time.

“Right?” the blonde exclaims. “So then I was like…”

Lucas looks around, smiles at her stiffly, nods and says, “Yeah,” then keeps looking around.

The blonde is gorgeous, and even though I know Lucas is gay, I still feel inadequate next to her. Because sitting next to each other like that, they look like they’re meant to be together. Beautiful people are meant to be together. Just look at celebrities.

And if the blonde was a guy...well, that’d be even worse. In fact, there are heaps of attractive guys around. In this house, at our university, in Melbourne. Even back in Maryford. Why does Lucas want someone as plain as me when he could have any of them?

Now the blonde’s touching his arm. Her voice is too low, but from the way she’s looking at him, up through her lashes, I can bet it’s something suggestive. Something like he can take her home, if he wants.

If Lucas was my boyfriend, everyone would constantly hit on him. Just like they already do. If I went to a party with him, I’d have to watch this—unless he wore a t-shirt that said “gay and in a relationship” which is obviously unrealistic, and even then, I bet guys would still try.

“I’m not interested,” Lucas says now. That’s the classic Lucas I know. Blunt, cold.

Pain flashes over the blonde’s face as her brow furrows. “Why not?”

“I’m taken,” he says simply.

I leave my glass in the sink and leave the kitchen, heading upstairs. I don’t want to listen in anymore.

If Lucas was my boyfriend and we walked down the street together, holding hands, people would wonder why someone like him was settling for someone like me.

It’s not that I think I’m undatable. Maybe I thought that in the immediate aftermath of Cleo, but I kind of like myself right now. I know I’m not handsome, but I’m smart and determined. I’m trying to be a better person, and that matters.

But if I walk down the street with Lucas, if I go out for dinner with him, strangers aren’t going to see my personality. They’re going to see a beautiful person and a charity case.

My feet are unsteady on the stairs. I don’t know whether it’s the lingering effects of the alcohol or if tonight has affected me more than I expected, but my skin feels hot and uncomfortable.

I walk through the upstairs hallway, searching for a bathroom. At least the pulsating music and voices from below are dulled. It’s not exactly silent up here — there’s still laughter and some slow music playing from a room — but I feel more alone up here. And that’s exactly what I want.

I find a bathroom and close the door behind me, not bothering to lock it. I’m just going to splash my face with water, stare at my reflection in the mirror and tell myself to get a grip.

I’ve just turned the tap on, cold water splashing my palms, when the bathroom door slams open.

“Shit, soz,” a voice slurs.

“It’s okay —” I start, looking up, and my heart drops.

Standing in the doorway, swaying ever so slightly in a floral purple dress and smelling like raspberry, is Cleo.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lucas

Age 19

I'm an asshole, but at least I have self-awareness. I know I was terrible in high school. At one point, I thought that even if I stopped, there was no point, because I'd already been cruel to him for years and there was no way he'd ever forgive me.

It's always easier to lean into what people think of you. Even now. He detests me, so I'll be detestable. Except this time, I actually think I have a good reason.

Yes, I lied. But I did it for him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Now

It's the first time I've seen her in a month, but she looks the same as the last time I saw her on the night of our anniversary: pretty, stylish, tipsy.

Her eyes, shimmering with eyeshadow, widen and her jaw drops open. "Charlie," she says after a moment.

"Cleo," I manage. The bathroom sink tap is still flowing, drowning my hand in water, and I turn it off.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

"Gilly invited me," I say.

Something flashes across her face, and I narrow my eyes. "Why, did he invite you too?"

"No," she says. "I didn't even realise he was here."

"Hugo too. And Lucas."

If she has a reaction to Lucas's name, she hides it well.

The seconds stretch into eternity as we stand there, locked in a gaze, and I want to shout at her, demand why she cheated on me and cut me out of her life without a word. But at the same time, I want to run before she can say anything, because I'm terrified of her answer if I ask her why.

Eventually, she closes the bathroom door behind her and sits down on the closed toilet seat. "I suppose we should talk about —"

"The fact you ghosted me without an explanation?" I interrupt, voice hard. It seems my anger overpowers my fear,

at least for now. “Yeah, maybe we should.”

“Listen, Charlie, I didn’t mean to.”

I scoff at that. “You didn’t mean to?”

“No, I...I just mean that...” Her eyes flicker away, the first sign of guilt, and that satisfies me in a sick way.

“What?” I ask.

“It was easier.” Her voice wavers, and she takes a moment to steady herself. “I know I fucked up, and I didn’t know how to face you. I didn’t want you to look at me like you’re looking at me now.”

“How am I looking at you?” I ask.

“Like you’re judging me.”

“Of course, I’m judging you!” I burst out. Anger crackles through my body, and it’s like everything I did to forget about Cleo has gone to waste. I didn’t think I’d be this upset, but looking at her dredges everything back to the surface. “You cheated on me, and you didn’t even have the guts to tell me yourself.”

“Come on, Charlie,” she says. “It would have hardly made things easier on you if I talked to you face to face and said, *oh yeah, by the way, I fucked someone else.*”

“That’s an excuse. You’re a coward.”

Cleo continues talking like she didn’t hear me. “And besides, I knew he’d tell you anyway.”

“Who? Lucas?”

“Yeah. He said he would. Threatened me and everything.”

I frown. “Threatened you?”

“Told me to not even dare to lie to you or twist the facts or try to get out of it. While he was at it, he told me exactly what he thought of me. Said he never liked me from the beginning, called me a bitch. What a fuckhead.” Her eyes flash, and the fury on her face takes me aback. “You know why I didn’t reach out? Because Lucas told me not to.”

I shake my head. “He didn’t. That’s a lie.”

She shrugs. “The implication was there. He’s a psycho.”

“So what happened, exactly?” I ask, leaning against the sink and crossing my arms. “You sleep with him, and in the morning he calls you a bitch and throws you out? Is that why you hate him so much — did you think he’d be your boyfriend?”

Her brow creases. “Who are you talking about?”

“Lucas,” I say, annoyance rippling through me. Obviously, Lucas. Is she going to try to play dumb now?

“Lucas?” Cleo echoes. “What about Lucas?”

My annoyance doubles, and I grit my teeth. “What happened between you two? You have sex in his bed, I know that, and then the next morning —”

“What are you on about?” Cleo interrupts. She’s looking at me like I’m crazy, a line between her brows. “I didn’t have sex with Lucas.”

Everything goes silent. Even the music downstairs and the voices from the next room. All of it fades away.

I blink. “What?”

“I didn’t have sex with Lucas,” Cleo repeats. “Where did you get that from?”

For a moment, I wonder if she’s trying to gaslight me, but the shock and confusion on her face looks real.

“I — he...” I trail off.

He told me.

“Who did you have sex with?” I ask.

Cleo hesitates for a moment but meets my eyes when she replies, “Gilly.”

I stare at her. The house is still silent, and then the noise whooshes into startling clarity—loud, too loud—and I remember why I came up here: to splash water on my face,

because my skin was hot and itchy, and it feels like that now, only a hundred times worse.

I walk past her and leave the bathroom.

“Charlie?”

I ignore her, heading towards the stairs.

Her voice follows me, calling me, but it only prompts me to walk faster. I practically slide down the stairs and shove my way through the dancing crowd. The music is so loud down here that it hurts my ears, but even so, I can still hear Cleo shouting my name.

I’ve made it to the living room when Lucas appears in front of me, face creased with concern. His eyes flick from me to Cleo behind me. His lips part to say something, but I don’t give him the chance. I push past him, through the front door, and out from under the veranda. Something cold is splattering against my skin, and only then do I realise it’s raining.

I stare for a moment at the raindrops dotting my jeans in navy splotches and a puddle seeping into my sneakers. Then I continue down the path that cuts through the front garden and out on to the street. I walk faster, and faster, and faster until I’m almost running.

*

I find myself in a McDonald’s with my clothes soaked. At least it’s late at night and it’s located in the middle of a suburb, so there aren’t many patrons around. Even if there were, I’m not sure if I would care that much.

I order a hot chocolate. I don’t make the conscious effort to do so and just find myself in front of one of the electric machines that takes your order.

Once I have the warm drink between my palms, I take a seat in the corner of the restaurant and call my sister.

“Charlie?” Jemima answers.

I burst into tears.

“Charlie, what is it? Charlie? Charlie, tell me.”

“It’s Lucas,” I say, and I can taste salty teardrops against my lips. I’m incoherent, voice wobbly with sobs. “H-he lied to me.”

*

It’s two in the morning when I return to the apartment. It’s hush and still, and all the lights are off.

“Lucas?” I call out.

No response. I turn the lights on, but there’s no sign of him.

After I finished sobbing to Jemima and ended the call, my screen lit up to tell me I had 37 missed calls from Lucas, and I figured it was time to go home.

But he’s not here. I pull my phone out of my pocket and call him. He picks up on the first ring.

“Charlie?” he sounds breathless.

Suddenly, I feel sheepish, though I’m not sure why. “Hi,” I say, and my voice is raw after crying in the McDonald’s.

“Where are you? I’ve been looking everywhere.”

“I’m back at the apartment,” I tell him.

“I’m coming.” He ends the call, and I’m left staring at the empty apartment.

Fifteen minutes later, the front door opens. I jump up from where I was waiting on the couch. “What happened to you?” I ask.

Lucas walks over and takes my shoulders. His hands are ice-cold, and I can feel them through my shirt. “Where did you go? I was looking all over for you.”

“In the rain?”

He’s dripping with rainwater. His shoes are soaked, and droplets are leaking from his hair, over his cheekbones, and settling at the corner of his lips. His clothes are drenched, sticking to him like a second skin. In fact, they leave nothing to the imagination, clinging to his pecs and abs, and normally

the sight would fluster me, but now the only thing I am is concerned. “Lucas, you’re freezing. You need to take a hot shower.”

He shakes his head like it’s nothing, like he didn’t even notice. “What happened? I saw Cleo chasing you, and the look on your face...”

I shut my eyes. I was momentarily distracted by the empty apartment, by rain-saturated Lucas, but now everything comes rushing back.

“I ran into her at the party... She told me the truth.”

“What?” Lucas asks. His voice is demanding, but I can hear the note of fear underneath it. “What did she say?”

I open my eyes and meet his. Grey. Stormy. Scared.

“Why did you lie to me?” I ask. “Just when I thought that I could trust you, I found out that you lied the whole time. And what was the point? To make me feel worse? To rub salt in the wound?”

“Charlie,” Lucas pleads. “What did she tell you?”

I exhale. “She told me she had sex with Gilly. Not you. You lied.” I can’t help repeating the last part — I must’ve said it a hundred times to Jemima — *he lied, he lied, I can’t believe he lied to me.*

I feel so stupid. I was just starting to trust him again.

Lucas’s eyes shutter close. “I’m sorry.”

I huff and try to turn away from him, precariously close to tears again, but he grabs my arm. “I swear I had a good reason.”

“I bet you did.” I try to sound hard and uncaring, but my voice cracks on the last word.

“Please listen to me, Charlie. Please. Just let me talk.”

If I had the energy, I’d storm away. If I had the energy, I’d yell and fight. But I don’t have the energy. I let him pull me down onto the couch and wrap the throw blanket around my shoulders.

“You should have it,” I say, indicating to the blanket. I completely dried off in the McDonald’s and avoided the rain on the way back. Lucas, on the other hand... where exactly did he look for me? And for how long? “You’re going to catch a cold,” I add.

“That’s a myth,” Lucas says, adjusting the blanket around my neck. He takes a step back.

“Remember when you told me that you only have a few friends. I know how important they are to you — Hugo and Gilly. I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

Anger flares up in me. “So you thought you’d just let me continue to be friends with someone who fucked my girlfriend? I feel like such a moron. I thought that he was busy, and I did think he acted a little weird when I talked to him, but now I know the whole time, he was avoiding me.”

“He didn’t mean to sleep with Cleo,” Lucas says.

“What, he just tripped and fell into her vagina?” I retort.

Lucas’s shoulders slump. “I mean that he was drunk out of his mind. At least he was when he left the apartment. He left with Cleo and Hugo, and I don’t know exactly what happened later, but the next morning I went over to Gilly’s, and she was in his bed. Naked.”

I close my eyes, as if to protect myself from the image Lucas’s words conjure up in my brain.

“You already thought that I was the one she had sex with,” Lucas continues. “I sent the photo. Besides, you already think the worst of me. It was better for you to hate me than Gilly.”

“That doesn’t make any fucking sense, Lucas,” I snap. “It’s not your right to decide who should take the fall. It’s not your right to lie! I’d rather know the truth than continue being friends with someone who did something like that to me. And you know what? Letting me think that it was you rather than Gilly hurt me way more than just telling me the truth.”

Lucas shakes his head. “That’s not true. You already know I’m the worst. I already had a history of being cruel. Maybe it hurt you, but you couldn’t be disappointed. You couldn’t be

shocked, not really. Fucking your girlfriend is exactly the kind of shitty thing I'd do."

That's it. I reach forward and shove his chest as hard as I can, and it catches him off guard because he actually falls back a little bit.

"Shut up," I snarl. "Just fucking shut up. I've known Gilly for three months. I've known you for more than thirteen years. You used to be my best friend, Lucas. And you thought that if you took the blame, it would hurt less? How are you this fucking dumb?"

Lucas stares at me, mouth open, and I shove him again for being so dense.

"Do you know how conflicted I've been this entire time?" I demand. "Do you know how much self-loathing I've had about the fact that...that..."

That I had sex with you. Twice.

I bury my head in my hands. This night has been so long, and now I have a headache. I want to go to sleep, to drift somewhere where I won't feel miserable anymore.

Lucas's voice comes from far away. "I'm sorry, Charlie. I didn't think about it that way. I thought you hated me."

I keep my face in my hands. "I do. And I don't. Right now I do."

"I shouldn't have lied. I want you to know that I truly didn't do it to be malicious. I thought I was protecting you. But it wasn't my right."

I lift my head.

His eyes are so earnest, so sad, and that, paired with his drenched clothes, makes him look like an abandoned puppy dog. My heart splinters.

"I'm sorry. I really am."

My shoulders slump. It's extremely hard to maintain my anger when he's looking at me like that. When his hair is soaked because he was searching the streets in the rain for me.

“I believe you,” I say. “Take a hot shower and go to bed.” I take off the blanket, fold it, and get up. Just as I start towards my bedroom, I look at him.

He’s watching me, and he’s gnawing on his bottom lip, the way he did as a kid when he thought he was going to get into trouble.

I fight the urge to walk back to him and comfort him. To wrap my arms around him, the way I would when we were little. “It’s okay,” I promise him. “We can talk in the morning. Get some sleep.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lucas

Age 19

She never deserved him. I couldn't tell Charlie that — not without exposing my own feelings or upsetting him. No one wants to hear that their first girlfriend has a wandering eye. No one wants to know their girlfriend's expression glazes over every time they speak for more than fifteen seconds straight.

That morning, when I found her in Gilly's bed...

Gilly was still asleep. Hungover from the night before. But she sensed me in the room and her eyes snapped open. Her face paled because she knew exactly what she'd done.

I hated her. I despised her most of all when I found out she'd taken Charlie's virginity. It should have been me.

It could've been, if I hadn't ruined everything. If I didn't punish him every day for how he made me feel. I keep thinking that, even though I can't be sure. Perhaps I would've confessed and he would've rejected me, and we'd have gone our separate ways anyway. Perhaps I never would've had the courage to tell him the truth about how I felt, but we'd have remained best friends. And I would've suffered in silence.

I can't know.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Now

The next morning, the apartment smells like pancakes. In the kitchen, Lucas flips pancakes with a spatula. He's got broken egg shells and flour all over the counter, and his pancakes look less circular and more blob-like, but they smell delicious.

"What's this?" I ask as he passes me a stack on a plate.

"Pancakes," he answers.

"I see that," I say, eyes tracking him as he opens the fridge and pulls out a plastic carton of blueberries. "What for?"

He shrugs, passing me the blueberries.

I cover my pancakes with the fruit and some syrup and dig in. Lucas pauses by the frypan to watch my reaction.

"They're yummy," I say, then wince. "Did you put salt in this?"

"That's what the recipe said. It's meant to enhance the overall flavour. Why, does it —"

"No, it's fine," I quickly reply. "I think I just got a chunk. They're good, Lucas. Thanks."

He gives me a hesitant smile and returns to flipping more pancakes. There's a line of concentration on his forehead, and a tuft of hair sticks out from the back of his head. Bed hair.

He finishes cooking and takes a seat on the stool beside me. I let us eat peacefully for a moment before I break the spell.

"I said we'd talk this morning."

Lucas's hand holding his fork stills, but he nods.

"I don't think we should talk about it."

He turns to me. "Charlie..."

"Not because I want to avoid it," I hurry to explain. "But what else is there to say? I just want to move past it. I want things to go back to normal."

"Normal," Lucas repeats.

I wince. 'Normal' is a hollow word. "I mean that I don't want to fight anymore. I want to stop arguing. And I'm sorry for shouting and swearing at you last night—"

"I'm the one who's sorry," Lucas says.

"Let's just say we're both sorry and promise not to argue anymore. I'm tired of it."

Lucas looks exhausted too, shadows under his eyes and a sadness around his lips. "We can't promise that we'll never argue again."

I quirk my lips in spite of myself. "You're right. Fine... Let's promise that the next time we fight, we'll try to be mature about it. Like the adults we supposedly are."

He nods. "Okay. Let's try."

We eat in silence, and I lose myself in thoughts about what I have to do today: call Jemima to let her know I'm no longer an emotional mess, do a load of laundry, text Hugo in case he was worried about me leaving the party—

Lucas coughing interrupts my thoughts.

I frown. "Are you okay?"

"M fine," he says with a wave of his hand.

"Maybe you should have a rest day."

"I can't. Exams in two weeks, remember?"

Shit. That's right. This week is the final week of semester, and then it's SWOTVAC, and then exam season. I mentally add *study a hell of a lot* to my to-do list.

*

By that evening, Lucas's cough has turned into the flu, I'm sure of it. He sits at his desk with his laptop in front of him, and he's trying to watch Khan Academy videos on YouTube while I wave a thermometer in his face.

"Stop being stubborn and let me take your temperature," I say.

"If I'm actually sick, it's probably contagious."

"If you're actually sick, you need to rest."

When he doesn't respond, I reach over and press the space bar so the video on Kirchhoff's voltage law pauses. Then I move the laptop off the desk before he can play it again.

"Lucas, if you're actually sick, there's no point studying. Now let me take your temperature."

"I'm fine."

He's not fine. He looks even worse than he did this morning, his complexion grey. I was watching lectures in my room, but I could still hear his sneezes and coughs over the video's audio.

I wave the thermometer in his face once more.

"Fine," he says, taking it from me. "But I can take my own temperature. I'm not a child."

He places it under his tongue, and after a moment, it beeps, the screen reading 38 degrees Celsius.

"Just like I thought, you're sick. You need to get some sleep."

"I feel fine. Really. And I've got so much to do —"

I reach out and press my palm against his forehead. He's just as hot as the thermometer indicated. "It's better if you recover now rather than later. Get into bed."

Lucas stares at me, and for a moment, I'm sure he'll argue. But then he pulls himself out of his chair and walks to his bed.

“I’ll listen to you if you listen to me. Don’t catch it. I don’t want you to get sick.”

“I’m fine. I get my flu shot yearly.”

Lucas crawls into bed. “So do I.”

I arrange his blankets around him. “Yeah, but I didn’t spend last night in the rain.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Not as long as you did,” I reply, softening. “It’s my fault you’re sick.”

He closes his eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. Not everything in the world revolves around you.”

I huff a laugh. That’s the Lucas I know. “Get some sleep. I’ll take care of dinner.”

I expect him to protest, but he doesn’t. He already looks as if he’s sinking into slumber, his limbs relaxing into the mattress.

In the kitchen, I make a phone call. “Hi, Mum. What was that sweet corn chicken soup recipe?”

*

Now is one of the few times Lucas looks less than perfect. His skin, still pale grey, is coated with a sheen of sweat. His lips are thinned, and there’s a crease in his brow even as he sleeps.

“Lucas.” I gently shake his shoulder.

His eyes open and he blinks rapidly as he looks around, disoriented.

“I made you some soup.”

“I’m not hungry,” he says, settling back down amongst his pillows.

“Just have a little bit.” I push some hair away from his forehead. His skin is burning up.

Lucas watches me. A small, confused frown plays about his lips before he softens.

“Alright,” he says, sitting up. I rearrange his pillows so he’s sitting against them.

I offer him a spoon of soup, holding it steady. After he swallows the spoonful, he says, “Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“I can feed myself.”

I blush. “Right. Of course.” *This is what they do in the movies*, I want to explain. But now I feel silly for treating him like a child.

“No, I didn’t mean...” Lucas shakes his head, tongue darting out to wet his dry lips. “Thanks. Did you say you made this?”

“Yeah, I asked my mum for the recipe. It was pretty easy, I just had to dump everything into a pot.” I hold out another spoonful, careful not to spill it on the bedsheets.

“I didn’t know we had sweet corn.”

“I dipped out to the supermarket. Don’t give me that look. It wasn’t even an inconvenience, and I know you would do the same for me.”

“Would I?”

I still but keep my expression carefully blank as I stare down at the bowl of soup. The recipe said to create ribbons of egg by spilling the mixture in slowly, but they look less like ribbons and more like ugly clumps and blobs.

“Part of me thinks that I’d let you suffer just so you wouldn’t suspect that I care,” he says.

“You really think so?”

Lucas swallows another spoonful. “No. In high school, maybe. Probably.” He leans his head against the headboard with an alarming bang. “I don’t know how you can stand me, Charlie.”

I freeze. I know it’s an innocent question, likely rhetorical, but to me it sounds like an interrogation. The only safe way to reply is *because I’m a decent person*, which sounds annoying

and sanctimonious, and besides, it'd be a lie. The truth is, I care. Which sounds awfully close to admitting I have feelings for him.

“It’s because we agreed to stop fighting,” I say instead, feeding him another spoonful.

“I don’t deserve you,” he murmurs, more to himself than to me.

“Hush.”

By the time Lucas has finished the bowl, I can tell he’s struggling to stay awake. I tell him to hold on a little longer and disappear into the bathroom. I return with a wet cloth, so he can wash his face, and his toothbrush and a glass of water.

After he finishes brushing his teeth, he rinses his mouth with the water and spits into the glass. He lets me take the glass from him with embarrassed resignation. “I feel like a kid again,” he admits.

*

The next day, Lucas’s temperature remains high as ever. I give him mugs of tea and tell him to rest while I study in my room. Tomorrow will be Monday, and we both have classes. If Lucas is still sick, I’ll have to force him to email his tutor that he’s sick. Maybe he can get a doctor’s note? A Telehealth appointment, or something similar, that’d be most ideal.

Studying isn’t fun. Sitting at my desk, trying to memorise information about the sympathetic nervous system and social learning theory and research methods — I *hate* research methods — reminds me a little too much of studying for my Year 12 exams. While I usually find my course interesting, right now it’s dryer than a box of Weetbix, and I find myself enjoying the intermittent breaks I take to check on Lucas or tidy up my room or reply to messages.

I haven’t received any messages from Cleo or Gilly, which isn’t surprising, but I have messaged Jemima and Hugo.

To Jemima, I reassured her I’m okay.

To Hugo, I word-vomited everything that happened. Cleo, Gilly, Lucas, all of it. Even the part about Lucas and I sleeping together. Twice. It's an important detail of the story, and besides, if Hugo has a problem with it, he should know now.

He takes several hours to respond, which, in Hugo's world, is a lifetime. When his message comes through, it says: *Wow. That's a lot. I can't believe Gilly would do something like that.*

And Cleo.

That sucks Charlie. I'm sorry you had to go through such a shit show.

We keep texting through the day, both of us talking about what happened as well as complaining about studying. I thought it would be tiresome to go through everything that happened again, but strangely, I feel better about it after texting Hugo. What happened now feels like a funny story. Funny in a twisted way.

That evening, Lucas has a shower. I sit on top of his bed's headboard, him on the mattress between my legs, and towel dry his hair while he eats more of my soup. He talks more than usual, probably because he's been quiet all day.

"I wonder how much protein this has since it's got eggs and chicken. How many eggs? Okay, not bad. I'm dying to go to the gym. I've got so much work to do. All of my exams are in the first week and there's so much content..."

Lucas's wet hair is almost brown. I comb my fingers through it. "Don't worry," I tell him. "You're smart, you'll be fine."

"I'm not smart."

"Sure, you future engineer. Which reminds me, I had no idea you were such a nerd in high school."

"Hey. I wasn't a nerd."

"You were a secret nerd. A closet nerd, studying away while all your friends were playing in dumpsters or whatever it was those guys did. Don't give me that look, I use the word 'nerd' endearingly. I was a nerd too."

“I know you were. You spent practically every lunch time last year in the library.”

“Well, you were there too.” I continue to untangle his hair with my fingers. His hair’s so soft, and his shampoo is deliciously fragrant.

Lucas turns and looks at me. “Yeah. Because you were there.”

My cheeks warm, and I’m caught between ducking my head and smiling. “It’s not like you ever talked to me.”

“I talked to you a couple of times. About the English exam. That time at the printer. Whether you’d seen my highlighter.”

“Ah yes, those riveting conversations. How could I ever forget them?”

“Stop it. I was shy, okay?”

“Shy?” I echo. “Come on. You were the coolest guy in our year level. In the whole school, even.”

He turns away, and I laugh as I return my focus to his hair.

“You can’t deny it, can you?” I ask.

He’s quiet for a moment. “I couldn’t wait to graduate.”

I didn’t know that. I thought Lucas loved high school. I thought he loved it way more than I did. My fingers catch on a snag in his hair, and he winces slightly.

“Sorry,” I say, quickly pulling away.

“No, it’s okay. Keep doing that. Please,” he adds.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. Occasionally, Lucas moves the spoon around the empty bowl, producing a few clinking noises, but mostly, he stays still.

This is one of the few times I can see the pale line of his scalp. He’s sitting between my legs, and my knees are brushing against his shoulders. It feels like we’re kids again.

One time, in primary school, Jemima demanded that Lucas let her braid his hair. I watched Jemima touch his fluffy copper

head for thirty seconds before I pushed her out of the way and took her place.

“Lucas?” My voice is slightly raspy from not talking.

“Yes?”

“Why did you tell that girl at the party that you were taken?”

“You heard that?”

“Yeah.”

He plays with the spoon again. *Clink.*

“Why did you tell her that?” I prompt when he doesn’t reply.

His voice is so soft, it’s almost inaudible. “You know why, Charlie.”

I swallow. I’m glad he can’t see my expression right now.

“You know,” I begin slowly, “when you do get a boyfriend, it’s going to be hard for him. It’s going to hurt, constantly watching you get hit on. And it’s going to hurt, feeling people watching him. Thinking that he’s not good enough. That he isn’t...attractive enough. If you walk down the street with him, everyone’s going to think he’s a charity case. If you hold his hand, people will think that you’re insane. That you’re blind.”

Lucas’s shoulders, previously relaxed against my legs, now raise into a stiff, straight line. “I don’t care what people think. Why would I give a second thought to what strangers think of me? They’ll be the blind ones, judging without even knowing us.”

“Everyone wants you,” I say helplessly.

“I don’t want them. You know who I want.”

“People will try to steal you.”

“They’ll fail.”

“I don’t even know what you see in me.”

Lucas turns around. His brows are furrowed, mouth twisted like I’ve said something horrible. “How can you say

that?” he demands.

“Because it’s the truth.” Sure, I’ve spent all this time after Cleo left trying to feel better, and I do feel better, and I do like myself, I do. I just can’t comprehend how Lucas likes me as much as he does.

I’ve loved you this entire time.

He loves me.

I can’t help but wait for the punchline.

Lucas’s face softens. “You used to be so confident when we were kids.”

“Yeah, well it disappeared somewhere between the day you stopped talking to me for no reason, and that time you and your friends pointed and laughed at my legs in the boys’ bathroom.”

Lucas slumps. “I’m sorry, Charlie. I can’t tell you how much I despise myself for all those things I did. I wish I could take it back. I wish I never hurt you, I wish I stayed your friend. I know words can’t make up for anything, but I’m so, so sorry. I regret it every day.” He squeezes his eyes closed. “You used to be so bright and shiny, but after that day in Year 7, you grew quieter and quieter, and it’s all my fault, I know it is. I wish I’d done everything differently. I hope you believe me.”

I stare at him, unable to form a response.

“The thing is, if you saw yourself the way I see you, you wouldn’t care about what other people think. You think everyone wants me, but if they really knew me, they wouldn’t. I’m not a good person. I’ve done so many stupid things, you know that. If people knew you, they’d want you. I’m the one who should be scared of you being stolen away. I won’t let you, of course. I’d love you better than anyone else. And I know you have no reason to trust me, and I know I have a terrible track record, but if you just gave me a chance —” He cuts himself off to take a deep breath, and his cheeks have pinked as if he’s gone on a run.

I touch his hair. His soft, beautiful hair.

“Kiss me?” I whisper.

His eyes widen and he leans forward, resting his forehead against my thigh. “I’m sick.”

“I don’t care.”

His hand curls around my ankle, soft and possessive at the same time. “I do. I’m not getting you sick. I’m not harming you ever again.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lucas

Age 19

Charlie accidentally fell asleep in my bed. I'm keeping my distance, almost falling off the edge, because I don't want him to catch my flu. When I look at him, my insides melt. I wish I could curl up around him, like a dragon protecting its treasure. I can't stop staring at him.

He's so beautiful.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Now

Lucas recovers by Thursday, which means he makes it to his final class of the semester. As for me, my week's been packed with my last classes in which we ask the tutor a hundred questions about the upcoming exams.

Friday evening, Lucas accompanies me to the supermarket, and we buy groceries for the upcoming week. We both plan to study morning to night during SWOTVAC, which doesn't give us a lot of time for errands, and we plan out our meals.

"This'll make us smarter," I say, picking up a pack of smoked salmon and placing it into the trolley Lucas is pushing. "It's brain food, you know."

Lucas chuckles. "You know what else will make you smarter?"

"I sense that's a trick question."

"Work out with me."

"Why, am I looking too scrawny?" I mutter.

"No," Lucas says, nudging my side. "Of course not."

"Uh-huh," I say, my attention on the display of meat before me.

"You're perfect the way you are," Lucas continues.

I already know my face is turning red.

"I'm already planning to take a brisk walk every morning," I say in the most even tone I can manage. I already know I'll need the daily walks, since I'll spend the rest of the day at my

desk. Volleyball won't be on, since it'll be exam season, and even if it were, I doubt I'd have the free time.

"Work out with me," Lucas says. "Come on, it'll be fun. We can do it in the living room."

"Maybe," I say, returning my gaze to the display of cold meat. I pick up some chicken. "Look, it's your favourite."

We finish shopping, Lucas throwing in a packet of frozen blueberries without me saying anything. We walk home, both of us holding a bag of groceries in each hand. The back of my hand brushes Lucas's, and it both is and isn't an accident.

I sense Lucas look at me but keep my eyes on the wintery grey street. Eventually, my lips twitch.

"I'm not sick anymore," he says in a low voice. Today, it's cold enough that his breath comes out in white wisps. "You know what that means?"

My breath catches, and I speed back to the apartment, Lucas's laugh following me. It's only when I'm in the elevator, Lucas leaning against the wall beside me, that I realise that I looked like I was eagerly rushing home rather than running from him in embarrassment.

When we exit the elevator, the hallway is dead quiet. Lucas unlocks our apartment, and I follow him into the kitchen. He drops his groceries onto the bench, and I do the same.

Then he picks me up and places me on the bench, so quickly that I gasp. He leans forward, nudging my nose with his as his eyes meet mine. Waiting.

My heart pounds. I tilt my head up ever so slightly.

Then his lips are on mine, slightly cool from the outside June air. Soft at first, then more insistent, and when I part my lips, his warm tongue slides in.

I lean forward, no longer just accepting his kiss but taking it from him just as hard, tasting him. I'd worry about falling forward, but Lucas is there, keeping me steady. He fits

perfectly between my spread legs, and the way he presses into me makes my dick twitch.

I'm not sure how long we kiss like that, pressing into each other, my legs spread open wide while he rocks into me like he's trying to fuck even with all of our clothes on. But by the time I pull away, I'm panting.

“We — we —”

God, I can't even talk.

“Hmm?” His hand snakes around, touching the bare back of my neck, which makes me shiver. He drags his fingers to my chest and tugs on a nipple.

I let out a humiliating moan.

He flashes his teeth before dragging his hand downwards. I don't stop him. “L-Lucas.”

“Mm?”

The heel of his hand presses against my straining erection, and I press my lips together to suppress any noises I might make.

“We can't,” I say, fully aware that I'm pushing forward to get more of his hand against me. Hell, I throw all of my dignity to the wind and wrap my legs around his waist like a wanton whore.

He pauses. “We can't?”

“I just mean —” I take a deep, sobering breath, “if we start today, I'll be obsessed. And exams —”

He chuckles, and I feel it against my breath. “I think it'll be a good motivator.”

I shake my head rapidly. “No. I know what'll happen. I'll want to do it every day, and I won't be able to concentrate on anything else. I won't be able to focus on studying for five seconds without thinking about you. About doing this. I'm serious, Lucas. Won't it be like that for you?”

His lashes flutter. “Failing a few exams seems worth it.”

I make to shove at his shoulder, but at the last minute, I change my mind and dig my fingers in instead. “Don’t be stupid. We’re not flunking out of uni.”

“I didn’t realise you cared so much about academics.”

“Of course, I care. We’re going to graduate together.”

Lucas smiles. “I won’t fail. I’m a genius.”

“Your humility astounds me.”

He laughs at that, properly.

“You understand what I’m saying though, right?” I ask. If we have sex now, with nothing between us, no hatred or lies or conflict, then there’ll be nothing stopping me from jumping him several times a day.

I can see it now. If we start today, then in two weeks I’ll be sitting in a creaky, old hall, staring at my examination paper, and the only thing that’ll come to me is the memory of Lucas bending me over the kitchen bench and fucking me hard.

But there’s something else that’s stopping me, something I can’t say aloud. If we get intimate, it means I’m going to have to take a long look at the “friend” label. I’ve told myself for ages that I can’t be with Lucas. I had a whole laundry list of reasons why.

But now, I’m having trouble remembering what they were.

“I know,” Lucas murmurs. “I know. I can wait a little longer.”

He takes his hand off my crotch, and I fight the urge to make a disappointed noise, even though it’s what I wanted. I unwrap my legs from around him.

“We can still kiss though, can’t we?” he asks against my lips.

“Yes.” His lips touch mine. “But only chaste kisses.”

“Okay.” He kisses the corner of my mouth. Then the tip of my nose. Then my forehead.

And then, with a slow exhale, he pulls away. His eyes flick to the groceries on the bench. “We should put those away.”

*

SWOTVAC drips by like a leaky tap, every day painfully slow. On the upside, Lucas and I get a routine going. We drink coffee in the morning and chat, then head back to our respective rooms to study for a few hours. We get in a short morning walk, return for lunch, then complete practice questions until dinner.

One afternoon, Lucas convinces me to do an at-home workout with him. He tells me that when a person exercises, they’re able to pay more attention and learn and remember more, which sounds like something I’d heard in one of my lectures. So, I agree, and painful crunches and planks aside, it’s nice to watch Lucas work out. He wears his usual exercising gear: shorts and a singlet, and I don’t even have to pretend I’m not staring.

But then we start the push ups. My limbs are already jelly, and in the time it takes me to complete one, he’s done five.

To my dismay, he starts talking. “Come on, Charlie,” he says, voice low and breathy, and I fall flat on my face.

“Get up,” he says, still doing the stupid push-ups. “I’m almost finished.”

“Are you speaking like that on purpose?” I ask, struggling to get up on my hands and feet.

“Like what?” he says through an exhale. “If you keep going, you’ll finish the workout.” A sigh. “I’m almost there.”

Jesus.

“You’re... you know. You’re moaning.”

“I’m not moaning.” It’s definitely a moan. He lowers himself so he’s parallel to the floor, his face tight and his triceps bulging, and all I can do is stare, mouth parted.

I’ve seen porn that’s less erotic than him doing this right now.

“Charlie,” he begins.

I snap to attention and place all my focus on finishing another horrible push-up. I do not think about the way he said my name, or the way all my blood rushes to my dick.

One week, two days to go.

*

One afternoon, after spending so long at my desk that English no longer makes sense, I think of Lucas in his room and decide to stretch my legs and pay him a visit.

I open his door and knock on the frame to get his attention.

“Yeah,” he says, taking his earphones off and turning to face me.

“When we do it, let’s do it without a condom.”

He blinks once. “What?”

“We can get tested, make sure we’re clean.” I shrug. “Then we can do it without protection. Skin on skin.”

He stares.

“Sorry for interrupting,” I say, then leave.

That evening, as we prepare dinner, I ask Lucas how his day went. He stares into space. “I had the least productive afternoon ever.”

I hide a smile. “Oh?”

“Don’t act coy,” he says. “Last week, you were the one who said we can’t get distracted, that uni’s too important, and then this afternoon you go and say *that*.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hmph.” He turns away. “But...”

“Yes?”

He looks adorably shy. “But I think you’re right. It’s a good idea.”

I grin.

*

Exam season arrives. I have an exam early Monday morning, and I'm surprised to find that I'm nervous. I thought that any anxiety I had about tests and grades would have disappeared with high school, but nope, it's still here.

At least I have morning tea afterwards to look forward to. Hugo has an exam at the same time as me, but for a different subject, so we've made plans to go to a cafe and treat ourselves. It'll be the first time I've seen him in a while.

Lucas follows me to the front door of the apartment. "Good luck," he tells me and kisses me on the forehead.

On the tram ride to uni, I try not to worry too much about the exam, or the fact that it'll make up 75% of my grade.

Thankfully, it goes alright. I'm certain I passed, but I'm not as sure I did well enough to get the grade I was aiming for. I don't have time to dwell on it too long before catching sight of Hugo coming out of the hall. He has a red mark on his temple, probably from rubbing it through the exam, but otherwise looks well.

We discuss how we did as we walk to a nearby cafe. There, we order coffees to keep us awake for the rest of the day, as we both intend to study at home. I also pick up a carrot cake, while he chooses a jelly slice.

"I still can't believe everything that happened," Hugo says, referring to my word-vomit text messages. "Gilly's been avoiding me like the plague, though. Probably because he knows that I know."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Hugo says, raising his mug and taking a sip. "After you left that Brunswick party, Cleo and Gilly started arguing about something, I don't know what. And Lucas had ran into the rain. It was chaos. I had no idea what was going on, but it makes sense now. If I wasn't so scared of confrontation, I'd yell at Gilly for what he did to you."

I shrug, too tired to muster up any outrage. "Lucas said he'd been drinking."

“That’s not an excuse,” Hugo says. We drink some more of our coffee in silence before he says, “Lucas told me he got sick. Did you catch it too?”

“No, thankfully. He must have caught it from running around in the rain.”

“That’s Lucas for you,” Hugo says, his voice a mix of exasperation and endearment. “Rushing off without taking the time to think of a plan.”

I swish my mug. All the foam has melted away into the milky brown liquid. “You must think it’s weird. What happened between Lucas and me.”

Hugo gazes at me for a few seconds. “Why would I think it’s weird? Because you’re both guys?”

“No — not that...”

Hugo leans in. “I had a suspicion Lucas was gay from the moment I met him.”

I drop my jaw. “What? How?”

He shrugs, a smile playing on his lips. “I like to think I have an advanced gaydar.”

I blink at him. Wait. Does that mean Hugo likes boys too?

“Anyway,” he continues, “the only thing I can’t believe is the fact I didn’t realise Lucas had a thing for you the entire time. I feel so oblivious.”

“Welcome to my world,” I say.

“At least you have him now,” Hugo points out. “And even though he can be a bit blunt, I know he’ll treat you well. Way better than your ex.”

“We’re not together,” I say.

Hugo lowers his mug. “Oh. Sorry, I thought...”

“We haven’t talked about it,” I say. Yes, we’re going to sleep together at the end of exam season. But that’s different from dating. The thought makes me frown.

“You should,” Hugo says gently. “You can’t lead him on.”

“I know,” I say. “I don’t want to. I…” I want to keep doing stuff with him. I want to grocery shop while our hands brush, and I want to take care of him while he’s sick, and I want all of his soft expressions for myself, and maybe it’s selfish for me to admit that, but it’s true.

“I’m scared,” I finish. “What if things end badly? What if Lucas realises I’m not as special as he thought I was? What if he’s just constructed some fantasy of me in his mind?”

“You’ve lived together all year,” Hugo replies. “You’ve gone through fights and dramas. He’s seen all sides of you, Charlie.”

“I’m still terrified,” I admit. “I’ve known him since I was six. What if we break up and hate each other? I’ll never forgive myself for losing him like that.”

Hugo takes a moment to consider that. Slowly, he carves his spoon into his slice.

“What?” I ask when I can tell he’s holding back.

He gives me a small, slightly sad smile. “It’s ultimately your decision. All I can say is that you’re extremely lucky to have someone who loves you the way he does.”

*

I mull over Hugo’s words for the rest of the day. He’s right. I *am* lucky. And the thought of someone snatching Lucas away because I was too much of a coward panics me.

That evening, as we eat pesto pasta at the kitchen bench, I bring up the topic.

“Are we dating?” I might as well be blunt.

Lucas swallows his mouthful. “If you like me.” He continues eating.

“Of course, I like you.”

“Yeah, but do you like-like me?” He raises his brows, and I chuckle.

“Yeah. I do.”

Lucas looks at me and his shoulders relax, and I realise just how tense he was beneath his nonchalant expression.

“Really?”

“How could someone not? You’re the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.”

He frowns and turns back to his bowl.

“Hey.” I nudge him. “What’s wrong?”

His mouth twists as if he’s trying to find the words. “You don’t just like me for my face, do you?”

Damn it, I shouldn’t have said that.

“No. I mean, you’re gorgeous Lucas, but you’re also my best friend. When we were kids, you were so cute and sweet, and you’re still like that, deep down. I saw it when you ate my burned pancakes and when you helped those kids play volleyball.”

Lucas looks at me. “My dad used to say I was a difficult kid.”

“Are you kidding? You were the opposite. You were the kindest. Maybe you’re difficult now, but...I still like you.”

He shifts in his seat. “But why?”

“I just told you why. You’re usually so arrogant, and now you can’t believe me when I say I like you. Do you think I kiss you for the hell of it?”

His gaze flicks down. “You’re so decent, Charlie. I’m not a good person.”

“I’m not as decent as you think I am. I lose my temper, I get resentful, I’m constantly doubting myself. Okay, fine, sometimes you’re mean. But you’re not a pushover. You don’t take people’s bullshit, and you don’t care about what others think, and you do what you want, and sometimes, I wish I could be more assertive like you.”

“You’re assertive with me.”

“Yes, well... It’s because I’m comfortable with you.”

After a moment, he nods. “I want to be your boyfriend,” he says, sometime later.

I smile, my insides turning gooey. “Good.” I love his rare earnest moments. It clashes against the image he projects out to the world, with his frowns and eyes that glare daggers.

When he says those heartfelt things, it’s only for me.

*

One day to go.

We have our final exams tomorrow afternoon, and the knowledge that I’m so close has renewed me with energy to push through the last stretch of studying.

We stand side by side at the sink. He washes, and I dry and put away the dishes and cutlery we used for dinner. And usually I hate chores — god knows I do at home — but with him it feels fun.

“I need to take a shower after this,” I think aloud. “Then I’m going to try and complete a practice exam before bed. I should try and sleep about...let’s think...ten?”

“You’ve been taking a lot of showers this week.”

“Yeah, it’s this thing called hygiene. Ever heard of it?” I bump my hip against his teasingly. Lucas always smells incredible.

“Long showers,” he adds, raising a brow at me.

That’s all it takes for me to turn tomato red. “Shh. I need to focus my mind, you know?”

“Mm-hmm.” He passes me a saucepan.

I take it and dry it with the towel. “How did you even know about that anyway? I was so embarrassed when you found out.”

“Every guy wanks. It’s not like it was a Sherlock Holmes level deduction.”

“No, I mean...”

I recall his words from the day I returned to Melbourne.

I've seen the toys you've accidentally left in the shower.

“How long did you know?” I ask. “About the toys?”

He takes his time answering. “Second week here. I was about to use the shower when I saw you'd left behind a dildo. So I went back to my room, waited an hour, and when I returned to the bathroom, it was gone.”

I look down. Jeez, how mortifying. I should've been more careful, but I was excited. Being away from home, I felt safe storing sex toys in my room because there were no siblings or parents around to find them accidentally. So as soon as I was in Melbourne, I bought one, and my collection only grew from there.

“Hey.” Lucas starts to reach out, then pulls back his wet hand at the last moment, settling for crowding me with his warm body. “Don't look like that. There's nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I just feel...not very clever.”

“Don't,” Lucas says decisively. “I'm the one who spent an hour in my room, pacing, hands shaking. I'm the one who should be embarrassed.”

I look at him shyly. “Back then...”

“Mm?”

“Would you think of me when you jerked off?”

Now Lucas is the one who turns red. He mumbles something under his breath and elbows me while I laugh.

*

Exams are officially over. I take the tram back home, and although I should be exhausted after my final exam, which was two and a half hours, I'm not. Energy buzzes through me from my fingertips to my feet. I don't let myself think too hard about what's waiting for me at home because if I do, I'll pop a boner in public.

Lucas is already back at the apartment. He waits for me by the door, and the sight of him makes my stomach flip over. He

looks on edge, hands twitching by his sides, eyes a dark, stormy grey. He doesn't bother with pleasantries, doesn't ask me about my day or my exam, and I don't ask him either. I just let him pull me into my room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lucas

Age 19

When I was little, my parents had a fight in the kitchen. They started out quiet, because they probably thought I wouldn't be able to hear from the living room where I was watching ABC3. But their voices grew louder and louder, and Mum's was so high that it hurt my ears. That's what happens when she starts to shriek.

As for my dad, he started yelling and bellowing, like a scary lion.

Some of their words I didn't understand. Words like income and incompetence. Some things I did understand. Simple language like *you're never here and you never help and I'm the one making money while all you do is nag me.*

Actually, there were a lot of things I understood. A lot of plain, simple language I remember.

I ran to Charlie's house. He lived two kilometres away, and I had to cross several roads. It's a wonder I didn't get lost. He answered the door and brightened and asked if I was there to play, but then I started crying.

In his room, he gave me orange juice and asked what was wrong.

I told him my parents were arguing again, that my mum had said my dad was leaving because he doesn't love me enough. I was still crying as I explained that it was because I was naughty, because I always made messes and never

finished the porridge he made me in the mornings and my shoelaces kept undoing, which annoyed him.

“It’s okay.” Charlie wrapped me in a big hug, and at that time, I was smaller than him, so he practically swallowed me in his arms. “Don’t be upset because *I* love you.”

“You do?”

“Yep. I love you times a hundred, so don’t be sad about your dad, ‘cause you have me.”

I’m sure that’s the moment I fell in love with him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Now

I thought it'd be rough and ravenous. I thought Lucas would thrust into me like he wanted to bury me into the mattress, and I would dig my nails into the firm muscles of his back, scratching him, marking him. It would be loud and noisy and animalistic.

But once we're in my room and the door behind us closes, he's gentle. He leads me to my bed where I lie on my back so I can watch him as he stretches me out with lubed fingers. We don't talk except for when I remind him not to use a condom. When Lucas enters me, the only sounds we make are soft sighs and moans.

He slides in, then out, then in, a consistent, languid pace that makes my toes curl as the pleasure spreads from that spot deep inside me to every nerve in my body. Lucas looks down at me, hair hanging, lips parted. I love the faces he makes — the way his eyes are glued to mine, the tremors in his jaw that let me know that he's holding on, that he's trying so hard not to lose it. I love the sounds he makes, so soft and breathy and unrestrained. Vulnerable. Raw. Honest.

As he fucks me, I run my hands up and down his arms, which are tense as he tries to control himself. I touch his back, his shoulders, the soft skin of his neck all the way to the underside of his jaw.

“Kiss me,” I breathe.

He does. He leans down and his tongue is instantly against mine, and we both moan at the same time. I love it — swallowing each other's sounds of pleasure, the way his lips

weld to mine. I love the taste of him, the taste that's now grown so familiar.

I nibble on his bottom lip, ever so lightly, but he still growls and picks up the pace of his thrusting, just ever so slightly. I buck my hips, trying to meet his thrusts.

“Y— you feel so good.” My voice is a broken, whimpery mess. I sound as if I've lost my mind.

He groans, and it vibrates against my lips. His jaw scratches against mine, and it feels so good. I want him to rub his face all over me.

“You do,” he replies. “You have no idea how much I'm trying to....”

I clench around him, and he groans again, eyes fluttering shut, lashes sweeping against his skin. Then he snaps his eyes open, bright and electrifying.

“How much I'm trying to hold back,” he finishes. “I could come just looking at you.”

He buries his face into my neck, and I feel him suck the skin into his mouth. My stomach swoops at the sensation, at the knowledge he's making me his. He smells so, so good. Even like this, sweaty and messy, I'm addicted to the scent of him.

He slams into me, a thrust that hits my prostate perfectly, making hot pleasure spread through my cock. I'm leaking precum all over my belly. The sensitive underside of my erection is stimulated every time Lucas moves on top of me, rubbing against his lower abdomen.

“You're fucking me so good,” I tell Lucas. My words are almost inaudible, that's how breathless I am. “You feel so good inside of me.”

“You're so fucking tight,” Lucas groans. “I don't — I might not...” He starts ramming into me faster, and his cheeks are growing pinker by the second.

“I want you to finish inside me,” I whisper.

His eyes darken. “Yeah? You want me to finish in your ass?”

I nod eagerly, not trusting myself to speak.

“Okay,” Lucas says, nodding, jaw tight with concentration. “I’m going to cum in your ass. I’m going to cum inside you.”

My cock starts to throb differently. I feel it happening. I’m going to —

“Oh fuck, you’re so good, Charlie. You’re so good.” Lucas closes his eyes, then forces them open. “I’m going to cum inside you, and later, when it leaks out of your swollen asshole, you’ll remember that you’re mine.”

The filthy words tip me over the edge, and everything blanks for a moment. Then, the pressure in my body snaps until I’m nothing but heat, and ecstasy and calm. I take a moment to come back to myself, and I’m distantly aware that my stomach is wet with hot, sticky cum. Lucas finishes, slamming into me one final time, his cockhead pressed against my prostate, and the oversensitivity is enough to make me jolt. Lucas’s cum splatters inside of me, and then he’s a sweaty heap on top of me, breathing heavily, eyes closed as his body shudders with the aftereffects. There’s a sheen of sweat on his hairline, his collarbone, the back of his neck.

Slowly, he peels himself off me and rolls onto the bed beside me. I don’t waste any time snuggling up to him, and he pulls me close, wrapping an arm around my waist.

He runs his fingers through my hair, and I smile at the sensation. “Playing with my hair?”

“I’ve always wanted to. It’s so soft.”

I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensation of being touched.

“Do you like it when I touch you like this?” he asks.

“Of course. You know I do. I could have you play with my hair all day, every day.”

He chuckles, then quiets. “When you told me to cum inside you...I think I lost my mind.”

“Speaking of...I feel it spilling out right now.”

Lucas untangles himself from me and sits up, reaching out to spread my legs. I let him, and he stares at the sight for a long time.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, it’s just...seeing it leaking from your ass...it’s really fucking hot.”

I don’t have the chance to blush before he picks me up and carries me to the bathroom. “Time to clean you up,” he says.

“It’s okay,” I say when he puts me down in the shower. “I can do it myself.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. It’s my mess, I’m the one who has to clean it up.”

I shake my head in return, biting back a smile. Well, when he puts it like that...

I lean against the shower wall as Lucas washes me. He comments it’d be easier to do in a bathtub, and maybe that’s true, but I don’t mind it. It’s the two of us in our tiny bathroom in our tiny apartment, and it feels perfect.

Afterwards, Lucas turns the shower on blast, and we wash the rest of our bodies, cleaning away any drying cum or sweat. Soon, we both smell like soap. We kiss slowly under the rainfall of water before getting out.

Back in my bedroom, I peel off the dirty bedsheets and fold them into a bundle on the carpet, then leave the room. “Where are you going?” Lucas says, following me.

“Your bed,” I answer over my shoulder.

We climb into his clean bed, the sheets pleasantly cool under our naked skin, and look at each other. “That’s the upside of having two beds,” I say. “One for sex, one for sleeping.”

“Are you suggesting we get another two-bedroom apartment in the future?” Lucas asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, our lease ends in February.”

“And you want to live together again?”

Lucas gives me one of *those* looks. I always thought it was judgemental, but now I see that it’s teasing, a little hint of smile, his eyes soft. “Charlie,” he says, “I’m in love with you. Of course, I want to live with you again.” He glances away, then meets my eyes again. “Do you?”

“Yeah.” I don’t even have to think about it. “Yes. Let’s do it.”

He smiles widely.

“Although, I’m not sure if we should get two bedrooms again. It’ll be cheaper to have one. But having a designated sex bed would be really convenient.”

“We can save the second bedroom for when we’re rich. In fact, we can get a mansion. Five bedrooms. One to sleep in, four to have sex in.”

I laugh. “Let’s think bigger. Eight bedrooms. One to sleep in, seven for having sex every day of the week.”

“Oh, so we’re going to have sex every day, are we?”

“That’s what I’m planning to do this winter break.”

He grins. “That’s because we’re young and energetic. When we’re forty and have knee problems, I bet you’ll be less enthusiastic about it.”

“Oh, whatever. You always have to ruin my good ideas.”

Lucas laughs, snuggling closer to me. “Let’s worry about the number of bedrooms we’ll have in our mansion until after we’re rich.”

“And how exactly do you know we’re going to be rich?”

“Because I’m going to be an engineer, and you’re going to be a psychologist.”

We lay there quietly for a little bit, and I listen to the sounds of Lucas’s breaths, the way his chest raises and falls.

“Sometimes I find it so hard to believe,” I say.

“What?”

“The fact that you...”

“That I love you?” Lucas asks.

“Yeah. And that you have since we were little.”

He smiles, then suddenly widens his eyes. “Do you want proof?”

“What?”

“Do you want proof that I’ve been in love with you since we were kids? I wasn’t exaggerating when I said that, by the way. Oh. You might think it’s creepy, though.”

I stare at him, needing time to process everything he’s saying. “Lucas,” I eventually say, “I’ve already seen all sides of you. I promise I won’t think you’re creepy.”

“Right. Yeah. You already know how obsessed and psycho I am.” He says it self-deprecatingly, and I lean forward to kiss it away.

“I love you the way you are,” I murmur against his lips.

He leans back, eyes big, mouth parted. How can he be surprised? It’s true. I love him.

“Show me,” I whisper.

Lucas props himself up and reaches over to open his bedside table drawer. I can’t see what’s happening on the other side of his back, but a moment later, he turns and places a book on the bed sheet between us.

Correction: not a book. It’s the book safe. The title, *Pride and Prejudice*, shimmers.

I pick up the book and flip open the front cover. “The first time I saw this...” I trail off, realising what I’ve admitted.

Lucas chuckles. “I know you know it exists. You were holding it that afternoon, remember?”

The afternoon I came back from Maryford, blind with emotions. I focus on the book before me and fiddle with the lock, absentmindedly sliding the numbers. “I knew this existed

before. I accidentally found it when I was going through your drawers.”

“I know you did.”

I look up at Lucas. “How?”

“I always position the book in a specific way so that I know when it’s been meddled with. It’s a habit I’ve had since I was in high school and my mum started looking through my things. No doubt she was trying to find beer or cigarettes.”

“Do you do that with everything?” I ask.

“No. Only the important things. The things I want to keep secret.”

I nod, fingers still fiddling with the lock.

“Are you going to try to guess the password?” Lucas asks.

“I already tried,” I admit.

“Oh? What numbers did you try?”

I list off everything. First, the obvious ones, 123, 111, etc. That makes Lucas smile. “I’m more creative than that,” he says.

Next, I tell him the numbers I came up that had to do with Lucas. Various combinations of his birthday. His soccer team number. The numbers of his favourite athletes.

“I can’t believe you remembered those things about me,” he says.

“Of course, I did,” I say with a shrug.

Unexpectedly, Lucas kisses me. When he pulls back, his eyes are warm. It’s only now that we’re together that I can appreciate how warm his eyes are, like a tiny, cozy fire is burning behind them. It’s only now, when I think back, that I can see how cold and empty his eyes used to be. I always thought he was smug, that he had an air about him that suggested he had everything. But now I see that his eyes were hungry, and not in a greedy way, but as if he was desperate. Longing. Lonely.

When I raise my brows, Lucas grins. “I couldn’t help myself,” he says by way of explanation. “Alright, try to unlock the safe.”

“I already tried.”

“Yes, but you’re going to try again.”

I huff, pretending to be annoyed and failing to suppress my smile. “Fine. But you’re going to have to give me a hint.”

“You want a hint?” Lucas reaches out and brushes his index and middle finger over my lips, slowly dragging them down and making my lips part in the process. “There,” he murmurs. “That’s your hint.”

I stare at him for a moment, before looking down at the lock. I turn the numbers. First, a six. Then an eleven, for November. My birthday.

The lock unlocks with a click, and I have to take a moment to process the fact that those numbers actually worked. I pull the door of the safe open.

There are two items inside. First is a photograph, printed on glossy paper. It was taken on a sunny day — the sky in the background is pure blue and cloudless. Waves a few shades darker tumble calmly in the background, and the sand shimmers with summer daylight. But those are all periphery details; the subject of the photo is me, lying on a towel on the beach, eyes closed, face relaxed.

Lucas has pulled himself close, so he’s looking at the photograph over my arm.

“Do you remember that day?” he asks.

I do. The day we went to St Kilda Beach. “I forgot you’d taken a photo.”

“I didn’t plan to. I just did it,” Lucas says. “I thought to myself, I need photographic evidence of you being happy in my company.” He glances away. “I thought it’d be only a matter of time before I made you hate me again.”

Oh, Lucas. I put the photo down and touch the back of his neck, bringing him close and pressing my lips to his.

“What’s this?” he murmurs, breath tickling my mouth.

“I couldn’t help myself,” I echo his earlier words.

After we pull away, Lucas nods at the second item, a folded piece of paper. It looks ancient, yellowed with time. “Open that.”

I quickly learn that while the paper looks like it’s come from the seventeenth century, it’s only thirteen or so years old, and the reason it’s so yellowed is because two six-year-old boys stained it with coffee. The handwriting, in black ink, is so messy it’s almost illegible, half of the letters lowercase, the other half uppercase. The illustrations, which I probably thought were spectacular feats of visual art at the time, are nightmare inducing, but also ridiculous enough to make me laugh.

Then, at the bottom of the handmade map, is something that makes my eyes prickle with tears. For a moment, I can’t breathe, and my heart feels like it’s being squeezed by a fist. It’s not because what I’m looking at is bad. No, not at all. The opposite of that.

There are two wobbly stick-figures with big smiley faces holding hands. And, above them, in jagged handwriting, are the words:

Charlie + Lucas.

Bestest friends forever.

Thank you for reading *His Secret Obsession*! I'd love to stay in touch with you. To get the latest on new releases, sign up to my newsletter!

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She'd love to hear from you! Emails from readers always make her day.

Also by Milana Spencer, an excerpt from *The Straight*

Game:

Chapter 1

Daniel: Toffee

“Daniel, I swear to god—” Eloise begins. Even though we’re on a phone call, I know she’s rolling her eyes right now.

“Please hear me out,” I say as I rush down the street, my phone pressed against my ear as the chill of the spring morning bites at my cheeks. “You picked up, right? That means you want to talk.” I check the time on my watch—five minutes to eight. I need to hurry, or I’m going to be late.

“Only because you’ve called me like a million times,” she says. I bet she’s still in her bed, which is white and fluffy like a wedding cake. I’m jealous. I wish I was sleeping in instead of running around Melbourne—a city I don’t know well—going somewhere I don’t want to go to.

When I catch sight of a street sign pointing me toward a university campus, I pick up my speed.

“Okay, listen. I think we made the wrong decision. We should talk things over, maybe try again—”

“We didn’t make the wrong decision,” Eloise interrupts me. “It was my decision, and it was the right one. So stop pestering me, otherwise I’ll block you—”

“Elly—”

A car horn cuts through the air, and I freeze. Beside me is a shiny black car, the guy behind the wheel waving his hands at me before honking again. Jesus, that’s loud.

Then I realize I’m in the middle of the road. It’s a single lane road, and the area is pretty quiet right now, but still.

“I almost died,” I murmur.

“Daniel?” Eloise asks. “What’s happening?”

I scuttle off the road while waving apologetically at the driver, and when I reach the footpath, I take a deep breath.

“Nothing. Just almost got run over.”

“What?”

“But I’m still alive,” I say, and then I start running because I’m going to be late. But would that be so bad?

“I got that,” Eloise says. “What’s all that noise, anyway?”

She must be talking about how much my puffer jacket is rustling. “Nothing, just running. I’m in Melbourne,” I say as I cut through a park as a shortcut, the grass thick and damp under my shoes. “My parents are making me go to this maths exam revision lecture thing.”

During the spring holidays prior to Year 12 exams, education companies crawl out of the woodwork to offer intensive subject lectures. I’m pretty much guaranteed to fail my maths exam, so my parents paid \$400 for me to sit in an old university lecture hall and listen to teachers explain integration and cos graphs. It’s a two-day intensive, six hours each day with an hour for lunch. I’m *so* totally excited.

I told my parents that it doesn’t matter how many times someone explains calculus to me, I’ll never understand it. They said that I was just being lazy and how could I expect to be an engineer if I couldn’t pass maths?

So now I’m here.

“Ew,” Eloise says.

“Yeah.” I turn a corner, and an old building made of orange bricks appears in front of me. I stop running when I reach a bunch of kids my age waiting by the front. I’m not late

after all. I turn my attention back to Eloise. “Anyway, as I was saying, when I get back to Easton we should meet up—”

“We’re not doing that,” Eloise says.

“Come on, Eloise. We’re good together.” All my friends said so. They said there’s no girl better for me than her.

As I approach the building, I see the students are showing their tickets on their phones to get into the lecture hall, kind of like getting into a club.

“We are not, Daniel. How many times do I have to tell you? Sorry to break it to you, but you’re just not—”

“Wait a second,” I interject because I need to get my ticket ready on my phone. I find it in my emails and show the usher at the front door.

Inside, the lecture hall is warm. The carpet and chairs look worn, but the large screen at the front of the hall is modern. It’s pretty packed in here. I guess a lot of other kids struggle with maths, too.

I start up the stairs, then remember the phone call. “Hello? Sorry, I had to—”

“Whatever. The point is, I’m not changing my mind.” She sounds even more pissed than before.

I rush into a row and fall into the first free seat I see, needing to focus on the conversation. “Wait, Eloise, please. Don’t do this. I’m sorry, okay, I am, for whatever I did.”

She sighs.

I remember what my friends told me. *Win her back, dude.*

“Please?” I add. It doesn’t sound desperate enough, so I try again. My friends said groveling is the key. “Please.”

“Daniel.” Her voice has gone quiet, like she feels sorry for me.

“Are you breaking up with me right now?” I whisper.

“Daniel, I broke up with you two weeks ago. Goodbye.”

I don’t believe she’s hung up until I check my phone screen. It reads *call ended* before showing me Eloise’s contact page. Beside her name are two pink hearts. Her contact photo is a picture of us at formal, me in a suit, her in a red dress, and her wavy blonde hair dripping over her shoulders.

I stare at that photo for a good thirty seconds. She looks pretty. Yes, Eloise is objectively pretty. Yes, she is.

“You alright?” a voice asks, and I almost jump out of my seat.

The guy sitting beside me has yellow-blond hair that curls up around his ears, and his eyes are light brown, like the color of toffee. Black-frame glasses are perched on his ski-slope nose. His legs are stretched out in front of him, feet nestled under the chair in front of us.

“Did you hear that?” I ask.

He grins, revealing two perfect dimples. “You begging your girlfriend not to dump you? Yeah, I did.”

I stare at him and try to decide whether he’s an asshole. He doesn’t look like an asshole, but he’s smiling like this is funny. Like my pain is funny. Not that I’m in that much pain. I should be feeling more depressed right now.

“She’s not my girlfriend. Not anymore,” I say.

He stops grinning. “I’m sorry. That sucks.”

“Have you ever been dumped before?” I ask.

He raises his brows, then shakes his head.

I look at him from head to toe again. Well, I should’ve figured.

“Look on the bright side,” he says.

“What bright side?”

“Um.” He looks around the lecture hall slowly filling up with more and more students. Some have notebooks and calculators and multi-colored highlighters organized on the desks in front of them. Some lean against their seats, wearing hoodies and drinking coffee in take-away cups. There’s a girl resting her head against the wall, not even pretending to be awake. “Now you can focus more on your studies?” he suggests.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those.”

“One of what?”

“A studious person.”

He chuckles. “Nah. My maths teacher made me come. You?”

“My parents.” I sink down in my seat and cross my arms.

At the front of the theatre, a grey-haired man in a button up checkered shirt sets up. He connects his computer to the screen and neatens a stack of papers. Afterwards, he talks to the people in the front row.

In my periphery, I feel the blond guy’s eyes on me. I raise a brow at him.

He smiles. “I’m Tate, by the way.”

“Daniel,” I say.

He peers at me, bringing his face closer, and the back of my neck prickles.

“You look familiar,” he says. “I think I’ve seen you at a party or something.”

“I don’t think so. I’m not from the city.”

“Me neither.” His eyes flit down my body.

I shift. “I’m from Easton. You wouldn’t know it, it’s pretty far...” I trail off when he smiles.

“I know it,” Tate says. “I go to Easton High.”

This time I’m the one squinting at him, but he doesn’t shrink away under my gaze. Instead, he straightens up, proud like a peacock.

“Maybe I’ve seen you before. But I would’ve remembered you,” I say.

Just then, the lecturer clears his throat and begins. First, he explains the schedule. We’re starting off with polynomials and functions—he calls it “the easy stuff” and Tate and I give each other a look—before moving on to differentiation. We’ll have lunch halfway through, at one o’clock. As he talks, students pass around a fat stack of papers covered in practice questions.

Then we start. The lecture hall is quiet except for the lecturer's voice, the tapping of calculator buttons and pens scratching against paper.

The first few questions aren't bad, and as much as it sucks being here, I want to make the most of it. I don't want to be bad at maths, despite what my parents think. I tried my hardest at school. There's just something about it that doesn't compute with me.

An hour passes, and then another. Tate stretches his arms out in front of him, his skin the color of ivory and his body hair the color of honey.

In the third hour of the lecture, the lecturer does something that turns my blood to ice. He starts calling on students.

I suck in a breath when the first victim is called on, a boy sitting in the front row who answers the question perfectly. God damn it, if people are smart, why do they come here? They should run a revision program for people like me—people who are hopeless. The lecturer chooses several students, some who get it right, though there's a fair amount of people who don't.

I grip my pen tight. Getting called on is my worst nightmare. Some teachers at school do that—they go through

every person in the class and I get heart palpitations while I try to figure out what I'll be asked in advance so I can answer correctly and not look like an idiot.

I pray to whoever's up there. Please, don't let me be called on. I'll be a good person now. I'll buy a metal straw. I'll stop jaywalking. I'll pay my friends more compliments.

I realize I've scrunched up my eyes and open them. Tate's watching me. He glances at my hands, which are clasped together in a ball.

I quickly break them apart. Shit. How embarrassing.

"What about you in the navy shirt?" the lecturer's voice booms.

I take a moment to realize he's looking right at me. I look at my shirt. It's navy.

I point at myself.

"Yes, you," the lecturer says.

"Um," I say, and my voice comes out small. I look at the question on the screen. The first line of working out has already been completed, but I wasn't paying attention because I was praying to the heavens, and I don't even know what the question is about and the numbers look like a language I don't

understand, and I've already taken too long to answer and people in the front row are glancing at me and I can feel my breaths getting faster—

Tate nudges my knee with his. I glance at him and see him pointing at his paper. He's got the second line written out, in handwriting big enough for me to read.

“Um,” I say. “Do you swap x —”

“Louder, please,” the lecturer interrupts.

My skin grows hot as I raise my voice. “Do you swap x and y , so this means that, um, x equals 1 over y minus 2 squared...yeah with the brackets...”

I can hear my pulse in my ears. Time feels like it's in slow motion. Then, the lecturer nods.

“Yes, good work.” He writes the working out down on his computer, which shows up on the screen. “To explain why we swap x and y , remember that inverse functions...”

As quietly as I can, I exhale through my teeth.

*

“You saved my ass back there,” I say.

It's our lunch hour. Tate and I got out of that lecture hall as quickly as we could. Now, we walk down the footpath away from the building, heading to a cafe Tate says he saw nearby. He didn't formally invite me to join him for lunch, he just told me about the cafe like we'd already agreed that we were eating together. It's not like I had other plans.

"Don't worry about it," Tate says.

"You must be pretty smart to have known the answer," I continue. "Smarter than me, at least."

"Nah, I had no idea what that lecturer dude was on about. I just copied the answer from the guy in front of me."

"Oh." I find myself smiling. "Well, thanks."

I think he's going to bring up the fact I was freaking out, but to my relief, he shrugs.

We cross the road I almost died on, and Tate leads me past several black and chrome office buildings until we arrive at a cafe. Inside, pot plants hang from the ceiling and the menu is written with white chalk on a blackboard. Tate and I both get a burger and a side of fries each, taking a seat at the back of the cafe.

“I’ve thought about it, and it’s likely we’ve been to the same party,” I say. “But I swear, I still don’t recognize you.”

“Maybe it’s the glasses,” he says, taking them off.

His eyes are even browner with his glasses off.

“Maybe,” I say.

He slides them back. Somehow, he looks cool doing it, like a glasses model or a hacker in a spy movie.

A waitress arrives with our meals, which stops me from staring.

The burger is delicious, and I devour it, only now realizing how hungry I am. I think using my brain ate up a lot of my energy.

“So which school do you go to? You don’t go to mine,” Tate says when we’ve finished our burgers, starting on the chips.

“Easton Grammar.”

He pauses, one chip halfway to his mouth.

“What?” I ask.

“So you’re a rich kid.”

“No, I’m not a . . . Is that what you think? That everyone at Grammar’s rich?”

Tate shrugs as he chews, but his smile lets me know he’s not serious. “Come on. You must have stereotypes about my school, too.”

“Not really. It’s just a school. Anyway, you shouldn’t make assumptions about other people,” I say. I look down at my plate to eat another chip when I realize I’ve finished all of them.

Tate pushes his plate to me, half of his chips left. “Fine, I won’t make assumptions, Daniel-from-Easton-who-goes-to-Easton-Grammar-who-is-hopeless-at-maths-who-also-got-dumped-by-his-girlfriend-this-morning.”

“Thank you, Tate-also-from-Easton-who-goes-to-Easton-High-who-is-apparently-also-hopeless-at-maths-who-has-never-been-dumped-and—” I pause. “Do you have a girlfriend?” I ask.

He smiles. “No.”

My heart does something weird. Must be heartburn from eating too fast.

“And-who-doesn’t-have-a-girlfriend,” I finish.

He smiles wider. “You’re funny,” he says, and I’m not quite sure if he’s being serious or if he’s mocking me. In any case, my heartburn’s getting bad, so I remind myself to eat slowly.

Read the rest in *The Straight Game!* Find the full blurb below:

DANIEL

When I’m stuck in an unfamiliar city, attending maths lectures for my final high school exams, I resign myself to two days of boredom. That’s when I meet Tate. Something about his toffee-brown eyes and fearless attitude immediately draws me in and I learn we have a lot in common:

- 1) We’re both from the same rural town.
- 2) We’re both staying at the same hotel.
- 3) We’re both extremely competitive.

I can’t say no to a competition, no matter whether it’s a swimming race or an intense match of truth or dare, no matter how much Tate makes my heart flutter. But as we spend the summer holidays together and our games get increasingly

sexual, I'm forced to face the terrifying truth: I might like Tate more than a friend.

TATE

Somehow our competitions somehow turn R-rated. Honestly, I'm impressed Daniel's brave enough to keep going even when it means kissing and touching each other and taking our clothes off. But there are a lot of things about Daniel that are impressive — he's kind, thoughtful and absolutely gorgeous. Not that I have feelings for him. I don't. We're just friends, and besides, I'm 100% straight. This thing we're doing? It's just a game. A game I intend to win.

The Straight Game is a New Adult M/M Romance with a HEA.

This is a slow burn novel with the strangers-to-friends-to-lovers trope. It can be read as a standalone.

Want more Milana Spencer? Check out:

THE ENEMY BENEFIT

JASPER

It's my final year of high school, I'm school captain and I'm getting perfect grades. My only issue is my tiny little sex problem, but I'm trying not to think about that.

Then my grandfather goes officially senile and decides to take in a guy named Kieran, a walking red flag complete with scars on his knuckles and intense dark eyes. I hate him on sight.

KIERAN

If being sent away from home and forced to attend a posh school wasn't bad enough, I have to deal with the biggest brat I've ever met. Jasper's stuck-up rich boy who takes every opportunity to insult me, and because I'm living with his grandfather, I can't escape him.

If only there was a way to shut him up...

The Enemy Benefit is a New Adult M/M Romance with a HEA featuring high school students. This book is a slow burn romance that includes enemies-to-lovers and enemies-with-benefits tropes.

Want a more light-hearted Milana Spencer romance? Check out:

THE BOYFRIEND RIVALRY

CURTIS

My relationship with my girlfriend, Kennedy, is almost perfect. The only problem is Kennedy's best friend, Liam, who hates me. Well, I hate him too. I hate that he's taller than me, I hate that he's so confident, and I'm sure he's trying to ruin my relationship because he's secretly in love with Kennedy.

When Kennedy invites me to her family's beach house for the school holidays, I think it's the perfect opportunity to spend quality time with my girlfriend. Until I find out Liam is coming too.

LIAM

If spending two weeks with Curtis wasn't bad enough, Kennedy has also made me promise to be nice to her boyfriend. I won't let her down, even if trying to be friends with Curtis makes me want to pull my hair out.

But through sharing a bedroom, beach soccer games and sailing disasters, I realise that I might have been wrong about Curtis. But I can't get too close to him. That would be dangerous.

The Boyfriend Rivalry is a M/M Romance with a HEA featuring high school students. This book contains the enemies-to-lovers, slow burn, forbidden love, and forced proximity tropes. It contains no sex scenes.