

# Lionheart

*A love worth fighting for...*



Robin Huber

# *Lionheart*

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LIONHEART

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True North

Into The Blue

*For everyone who fell in love with Sam and Lucy's story.*

*I hope you enjoy this double feature!*

## Part 1

She slept with wolves without fear, for the wolves knew a lion  
was among them.

—R. M. Drake



## Prologue

### *Lucy, Eleven Years Old*

I pick at my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, tearing off the crust and shoving it to the side of my paper plate. I keep my eyes down to avoid making eye contact with the two boys sitting across the table from me. I don't know their names, but they're my new foster brothers. Their mother is standing over my chair with a fisted hand on her hip. "You get three chances a day to eat around here. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You don't eat now, you'll be hungry 'til morning."

Her firm voice draws my eyes up. Her yellow hair is tied in a knot on the top of her head, and a ring of dark brown roots surrounds her stern face. I nod obediently as she takes a drag from the cigarette hanging from her lips. But I can't eat, not when my stomach is full of rocks, like it always is when I get moved to a new home. I'll be hungry later, though. Probably tonight when it's dark and everyone is asleep. I got pretty good at sneaking food at my last foster house. I sip my water and watch a trail of smoke follow her out of the room.

One of the boys gets up from the table and folds his paper plate in half. He's taller than the other one, who looks about my age. He must be older. "When was the last time you brushed this mess?" he asks, tugging my hair as he passes me.

I shrink in my chair. My hair is always tangled and it's hard to get the knots out, so I don't brush it very much. I feel the tears coming, but I grit my teeth until they go away.

The younger boy with buzzed hair and freckles reaches across the table and grabs my plate. "Thanks, I wanted seconds," he says, taking my sandwich for himself.

Another boy walks into the room and smacks it out of his hand. He's tall and thin, and his hair is the color of caramel, hanging around his face and over his eyes. "Give it back to her, Will."

Will presses his lips together and slides the plate back to me.

“You don’t mess with her, you don’t talk to her, you don’t look at her the wrong way. Understand?”

Will swallows and nods.

“That goes for you too, Tommy,” he says to Will’s brother, who bobs his head. He sits down in the chair next to me and moves his hair out of his eyes, which are a mix of blue and brown, unlike any eyes I’ve ever seen before. “What’s your name, newbie?”

“Um, Lucy,” I say, looking at his strange eyes.

“You been in the system long, um-Lucy?”

“No, it’s just Lucy.”

He grins and nods. “Lucy...how long you been in?”

“Um, since I was eight. I’m eleven now, so...” I shrug. “Three years.”

“Seven for me. Been in since I was five.”

“You’re twelve?” I ask, surprised that he’s only a year older than me.

“Yep.”

“Wow,” Will says, leaning over the table. “I didn’t know your kind could add or subtract. I mean, I know you can’t read.”

“Shut your mouth, asswipe. That’s A-S-S-W-I-P-E. Do I need to write it on your forehead so you don’t forget?”

Will gets up from the table and Tommy follows him out of the room.

“Just ignore Tweedledee and Tweedledum. They’re morons.”

I giggle quietly.

“I’m Sam, by the way. Sam Cole.”

I nod and pick at my sandwich.

“You have a last name, Lucy?”

“Bennett.”

“Well, Lucy Bennett, either of them mess with you again, just let me know.”

“Okay.” I pick up a piece of crust and tear it in two.

“You going to eat that or just pick the crust into a million pieces?”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“First day’s always hard. But don’t worry, I’ve been here for a few months now. Maxine’s pretty cool. She’s strict, but fair. She knows her boys are assholes. She’ll tear ’em up if she catches them doing anything stupid. And if they mess with you again, I’ll kick both their asses.”

“Okay.”

“So, what’s your story?”

“My story?”

“How’d you end up here?”

“Oh, um, my mom died. And my dad’s in prison, so...”

“Drugs?”

I look down at my lap and nod.

“Yeah, mine are both in for drugs too, somewhere in California.” He shakes his head. “I’ll never touch that stuff.”

“How did you end up in Atlanta?” I ask.

“My uncle. Turns out, he didn’t want me any more than my parents did.” He leans back in his chair. “So here I am, living the life in Brighton Park.”

“I’m sure they wanted you. They probably just made some bad decisions. Everybody messes up.”

He leans forward and puts his elbows on his knees. “Is that what you tell yourself? Or has your social worker said it so much that you actually believe it?”

“What?”

“Our parents didn’t want us, Lucy. That’s why we’re here. The sooner you accept that, the better off you’ll be.”

“That’s not true. My mom wanted me. She loved me.”

“How did she die?”

“What?”

“How did she die?” he asks again, making me squirm uncomfortably in my seat. He stares at me, waiting for me to answer.

“A drug overdose,” I finally say.

“And your dad...he’s in prison for dealing, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“You’re here because they wanted drugs...more than they wanted you.”

The rocks in my stomach are the size of boulders now. I get up quickly and find the room where Maxine put my book bag, and cry into the musty pillow on the bed, hoping that no one hears me.

A few minutes later, someone knocks on the door.

“Lucy?” Sam calls, pushing it open. He’s holding my sandwich in a ziplock bag.

I sit up and wipe my face as he walks into the room and sits beside me.

“I’m sorry. I was a jerk. I didn’t mean it.” He shrugs. “I guess after a while, you just get used to it all...to being on your own, to not having parents or knowing where you’re going to live in six months. I gave up on my parents—and the idea of having a family—a long time ago. But I didn’t mean to upset you. And you don’t have to give up. Maybe your dad will come for you when he gets out.”

“No, you’re right. My dad’s not going to come for me. He didn’t want me to begin with. My mom was all I had.”

He nods and hands me my sandwich. “Thought you might get hungry later. Just put it in your backpack so Maxine doesn’t see. And don’t leave crumbs, unless you have a thing for rats.”

I glance around the dusty room. It's filled with stacked boxes that are overflowing with magazines and old junk. "No." I frown. "I don't like rats." I put the sandwich in my book bag.

"Did you do those?" he asks, pointing to the colored drawings inside my bag.

"Yeah."

He pulls a few of them out and looks at each one for a few seconds. "You drew these?" he asks again.

"Yes."

"They're really good."

"Thanks."

"Do you do other stuff, like paint, or do you just draw?"

"I like to paint. I just don't get to very much. I can usually find colored pencils lying around at school, so..."

"Well, I've never seen drawings like these. They're really cool." He narrows his eyes at me and says, "Kind of badass."

"Thanks." I smile softly. "And...thanks for the sandwich."

He smiles and I see dimples in his cheeks that match the one in his chin. "You're welcome." He stands up and walks to the door, but pauses and looks at me before he leaves. "Kids like us have to stick together, Lucy."

## Chapter 1

*Lucy*

“Are you ever going to hang this?” my future mother-in-law asks me in her polished southern accent, picking up a painting that’s leaning against the cinder-block wall in the back of my art studio. “I just love the colors you used. The blue is so vibrant, like the sky on a cloudless spring morning. And the magenta is just gorgeous. So deep and rich. Like the color of love,” she sings, draping her cashmere scarf around my neck.

I shake my head at her uncanny way of interpreting my paintings. But if she only knew the real meaning behind that particular one...

“What do you call it, dear?” she asks, flitting over to it again.

“Oh, um, I haven’t given it a name,” I say, fidgeting with the delicate gold bracelet on my wrist.

“Well, I think it should be called *True Love*,” she says wistfully, throwing her arms in the air as she spins over to me. “Art inspired by life.”

I choke a little, because the part of my life that inspired that painting is not the part I’ve spent with her son.

“Drew loves you so much, darling. What you two have is what I had with my dear Maurice.” She sighs and laments, “You would have loved him.”

“I’m sure I would have, Janice.”

“Drew is just like him, you know. Hardworking and tough as nails. But soft as a teddy bear on the inside,” she says, smiling with pride. Janice has had only three loves in her life. Her late husband, Maurice Thomas Christiansen III, her son, Andrew Thomas Christiansen, and her vintage 1986 Jaguar convertible, which was a present from Maurice the year Drew was born.

“Janice, I’m sorry, but I really need to get to work. I have a lot to do to get ready for the exhibit next month.”

“Of course you do, darling.” She grabs her expensive purse off my desk and smooths her short silver bob. “The best of Atlanta will be here and they’ll be buzzing about the wedding.”

“It’s still a year away.”

“Eleven months, to be exact. And you haven’t even picked out your dress.”

“I know, I’ve just had so much going on with the exhibit the last few months,” I say, hoping she doesn’t notice the gleam of sweat that sheens my forehead every time she brings up the lavish wedding she’s been trying to plan since Drew proposed.

“Don’t you worry, you just leave everything up to me.” She narrows her excited eyes. “We’re going to throw the biggest party this city has ever seen.”

“Oh, Janice, I don’t know.”

“Nonsense. You’re marrying my only son.” She reaches for my face and smiles softly. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to him. It’s worth celebrating.” She touches my cheek with the back of her hand. “*You* are worth celebrating, Lucy Bennett. My beautiful, smart, talented *future* daughter-in-law.” She drops her hand to her purse and retrieves her lip gloss. “Now”—she dabs some gloss on her thin lips—“how do I look?”

I smile and sigh with inevitable defeat. “You look great, Janice. Oh, don’t forget your scarf,” I say, removing it from my neck.

She takes it from me and wraps it around her neck several times as she sashays through the studio. “Well, I’m off. Oh, Sebastian, darling, you look as handsome as ever,” she says to my assistant, passing him on her way out.

“Thanks, Jan. You look gorgeous as always. Are those new diamonds?” he asks, touching his earlobes.

She spins around with a big grin on her face. “Do you like them? They were an early birthday present.”

“Oh? From who? A new suitor?” he asks, perking up in his chair.

“Heavens no. From me.” She winks and pushes her big black sunglasses on. “Lucy, you should really think about covering these windows. It’s awfully bright in here and you have utterly no privacy. Everyone on the street can see right in.”

I press my lips together and raise my eyebrows. “That’s the idea.”

She nods absently and blows two kisses as she opens the door. “Bye, darlings.”

“Bye, Janice.”

“Oh, my God, your mother-in-law is delectable,” Sebastian says, biting the end of his pen. “I’m so jealous. Paul’s mom is such a drag.”

“*Future* mother-in-law. And don’t encourage her.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie, it’s just too tempting. You have Joan Rivers for a mother.”

“She’s not my mother,” I remind him, and slouch against the front desk. “She’s just the woman who took me under her wing and introduced me to a community I never thought I could be a part of. The woman who told me to believe in my talents and convinced me that I could actually make a living off them. The woman who taught me to always wash my face before bed and to never leave the house without sunscreen.” I stand up straight. “Oh, my God. She is my mother.”

Sebastian gives me a satisfied smile. “I bet Drew has no idea how fabulous she is.”

“I’m not sure Drew would use the word ‘fabulous’ to describe anything.”

He rolls his eyes. “You definitely scored in the mother-in-law department, but the jury is still out on her son.”



“Sebastian.”

“Well, she’s just so amazing and full of life, and he’s just so...normal.”

“What’s wrong with normal?”

“Nothing. If you like that sort of thing.”

“Well, I do. As a matter of fact, normal is exactly the sort of thing I like. All I want is a nice, normal existence. So, case closed.”

He arches one of his dark eyebrows and bites the end of his pen. “Pity.”

I love Sebastian, from the top of his perfectly styled hair down to his patent leather loafers, but sometimes I want to throw a paintbrush at his head. He’s been happily married to his partner for three years, he lives in arguably the coolest apartment in Atlanta, his family adores him, and he’s generally pretty happy most of the time. My life is *messier*. Or at least, it was, until recently. Now, I’m well on my way to nice and normal.

“Can you help me with this?” I ask, struggling to pick up a heavy box off the floor by the front desk.

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” Bas says, taking it from me. “Where do you want it?”

“I think it’s the paints I ordered. You can just put it in my office for now.”

“You got it, boss lady.”

I follow him to my office in the back of the studio.

Sebastian probably knows me better than anyone, but I haven’t told him very much about my past. He doesn’t know why I strive so hard for normalcy. He knows that I met Drew when I was waitressing at La Pêche, one of the restaurants Drew owns here in Atlanta. But what Sebastian doesn’t know is that a few years before that, I dropped out of high school and left my foster home in Brighton Park after the love of my underprivileged life was arrested for drug possession and sent to prison. Then again, Drew doesn’t know either.

“Hey, Paul got tickets for fight night at the Garden this Saturday,” Bas says over his shoulder. “What do you say, take a break from all this and come to New York with us for the weekend?”

“New York? Who’s fighting?”

“Cole versus Sanchez. I’m surprised you don’t know. I thought you were a big Sam Cole fan.”

“I am,” I answer with what little air is left in my lungs, while I try to find my heart. “He’s fighting Mario Sanchez?”

“Yeah, it’s a title fight. It’ll be on HBO and pay-per-view. I know Drew isn’t a big boxing fan, but you guys should come anyway. Paul got like six tickets.” He raises his perfectly manicured eyebrows and puts the box down on my desk. “Perks of working for a music producer.”

“Yeah,” I say softly. “I guess so.”

“So what do you say?”

“I, um, I can’t go to New York,” I say over my pounding heart. “I’ve got way too much to do for the exhibit.”

“That’s why you have me. We’ve got it covered. Besides, it’s still six weeks away.”

“Five and a half to be exact. And Drew probably has to work anyway.” I try to keep my voice even, but my heart is still pounding inside my chest and my scattered thoughts are stammering around my head.

Sebastian gives me a slanted look. “Drew always has to work. In fact, as I recall, it was the very reason for your little breakup not so long ago,” he says. “I thought his work demands were no longer supposed to interfere with your ability to enjoy life. With or without him.”

“That’s not what this is.”

He narrows his eyes. “Mmm, really? How?”

“It just isn’t. I don’t want to go without him.”

“Oh, come on, Lucy. We can go to the Met and get some inspiration for the show. It’s just what we need right now.”

“I’ll be a third wheel, Bas.”

“Have Paul and I ever made you feel like a third wheel?”

“No,” I answer honestly. I adore them both, and I love hanging out with them.

“Then, come with us.”

I pick at my thumbnail. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t, Sebastian,” I say abruptly. “Maybe some other time.”

“Fine,” he says, holding his hands up. “But if you change your mind...”

I nod. “Thanks for the invitation. We’ll go somewhere after the exhibit is over, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Hey, you know, I was actually just going to paint this afternoon. So if you want to cut out early for the day, it’s fine.”

“You sure? You don’t need me for anything else?”

“No, not today.”

He smiles and shoves his hands in his pockets. “You know, you’re sort of the best boss ever, right?”

“Don’t forget it.” I narrow my eyes and force a small smile. “Now go, enjoy the rest of the afternoon with Paul.”

“Okay, Okay. You don’t have to twist my arm.” He winks. “See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

When Sebastian leaves, I fall into my desk chair, drop my face to my hands, and take a deep breath to clear my head. I quickly unplug my laptop and shove it into my desk drawer. I’ve Googled Sam so many times, I’m surprised the letters of his name haven’t worn off my keyboard yet. It’s a form of self-torture I’m far too familiar with. A game of Russian roulette where the search button is the trigger, delivering a blast to the head each time I see a new girl hanging off his

arm. He has varied tastes, but his favorite flavors are model, actress, and volleyball player, in no particular order.

I get up and grab my painting clothes off the back of the door, exchanging my pleated cream pants and blue silk top for my old ratty cutoffs and paint-covered T-shirt. I'm desperate for the solace only a brush will give me as I walk barefoot to a six-foot-tall canvas in the back of the studio. I grab its wide edge and shuffle it across the cement floor, holding it upright between my knees as I drag it to a spot where I like to paint.

I scan my paint cart and begin selecting various tubes and sizing up my paintbrushes, laying them out carefully as I go. I squeeze several small mounds of paint onto my palette and pull the colors together with my palette knife, blending and mixing them until they're just right.

I begin painting with large brushstrokes, thinking of Sam.

I wonder if he ever thinks about me.

I wonder if he's okay.

I wonder if he hates me.

I keep painting, until the only thing left to wonder about is if I'll ever stop thinking about him.

\* \* \*

### *Lucy, Sixteen Years Old*

I hold Sam's hand tightly as he leads me down a sidewalk adjacent to a chain-link fence that surrounds the airport a few blocks from our high school. "Where are we going?" I ask warily.

"It's a surprise."

"Well, I hope it's somewhere we can study, because you have a test on King Richard tomorrow, and I have a paper to write."

He looks down at me and grins. "We can do whatever we want there."

"You know, those dimples will only get you so far in life." I narrow my eyes at him.

“They worked on you, didn’t they?”

“It was more than your dimples, but yes.”

He pulls me off the sidewalk and pushes me up against the fence. “More than my dimples? Hmm...Was it my eyes?” he asks playfully.

I gaze up at his beautiful eyes. They’re a mix of brown and blue. The left one is more brown, but it fades to blue on one side and has a gold ring in the center. The right one is mostly blue with brown around the edges and a matching gold ring. “I love your eyes, but no, that wasn’t it either.”

“It must have been my body, then.” He can’t even say it without laughing.

I laugh with him and push against his chest, which is like pushing on a wall. “Sam.” I shake my head.

“No? Well, maybe it was my brains.”

“I love your brains too, you’re very smart, even if you dismiss it. But no, that’s not it either.”

“All right,” he says, gazing into my eyes. “What on earth could possibly make someone like you love someone like me?”

The corners of my mouth turn up because the answer is so obvious. I place my hand on his chest and say, “Your heart.”

His eyes narrow with curiosity.

“It’s strong and fierce and brave. You’ve always made me feel so safe...and loved.”

He drops his forehead to mine. “I do love you, Lamb. And I’ll always protect you.”

The corners of my mouth turn up again. “Because you have the heart of a lion.”

“Like King Richard?”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’ve been studying!”

He laughs softly and pushes on the chain-link fence, creating an opening where the metal wire has been cut. “After

you.”

“Sam, are we allowed in there?”

He doesn't respond and I know that the answer is no. But I bend down and slip through the opening in the fence anyway, scraping my jeans and catching my flannel shirt on the metal wire. Sam unhooks it and follows behind me. I take his hand again, and he leads me to a place on the wiry brown grass while I examine the damage to my shirt. It now has a hole in the back to match the one in the front that was there when I bought it from the consignment shop. I take it off and tie it around my waist over my white T-shirt, letting the bright November sun warm my bare arms.

Sam drops his book bag on the ground and pulls a tattered-looking sheet out of it. He spreads it out on the dormant grass and sits down.

“You had this whole thing planned out, didn't you?”

He smiles and pulls me down next to him. “Just wait a minute,” he says, pointing to a plane in the distance that's taxiing toward the runway. We're at the opposite end, directly in its flight path.

“Sam, is this safe?”

“As long as it takes off it is.” He laughs.

I grimace at the thought of the plane barreling down the runway and plowing right over us.

“Here it comes,” he says excitedly.

I can hear the engines roaring as it gains speed and charges toward us. We're on the opposite side of a small hill at the end of the runway, so hopefully the pilot won't be able to see us. I can only imagine what kind of trouble we'd get in if we got caught. I glance at Sam, and he smiles at me with eager eyes. *He's worth the risk.* I inhale a deep breath as the plane races down the runway.

It's getting closer.

Closer.

Closer.

I squeeze Sam's hand as the plane lifts off the runway into the air like a feather. I cover my ears as it roars over our heads, but I can't take my eyes off it. I lean back on my hands and watch the wheels retract, tipping my chin up until I'm lying on my back watching it upside down as it disappears into the sky. "Wow." I drop my head to the side and look at Sam lying beside me. "That was so cool."

"I thought you'd like it."

I smile and roll onto his chest and drop my mouth to his. "I do."

He reaches for my hips and pulls me all the way on top of him.

I sit up and place my hands on his firm stomach. "We have to study. Well, you do. I need to write a paper."

He rests his hands on my thighs and squints up at me. "I'm too happy to study."

I lean forward and kiss him again. "I'm always happy when I'm with you. If I only studied when I wasn't, I'd flunk out of school."

He crinkles his eyes. "Good point."

I climb off him and reach for my book bag.

Sam watches me, but he doesn't sit up. He doesn't like to study. He doesn't like school, period. But he tries, for me. One of the few things I remember about my mom is that she wanted me to get an education. She told me that if I made good grades, I could get out of Brighton Park. She hated what this place did to her. She wanted a better life for me.

Sometimes I still get angry at her for leaving me like she did, but I know that she was sick. The drugs ruined her. Sam and I promised each other that we'll never do drugs. Sometimes I think she's watching over me and put him in my life, because without Sam, I'm not sure how long I'd be able to avoid it. Drugs are all around us, all the time. Kids are usually buying them from other kids at school. And they can't

afford it, so they steal to get the cash. It's just a big ugly cycle. The same one that sucked the life out of my mom and put my dad in prison. So I'm going to get my education and get the hell out of this place, just like she wanted me to. And I'm taking Sam with me.

"Come on," I say to him, dragging his book bag into his lap. "I'm going to start my paper. Why don't you answer the study questions at the end of the chapter...and then we'll see where it goes." I press my lips together to cover a smile.

He shakes his head. "I think that's extortion."

"Not exactly, but I'm glad your government class is rubbing off."

He grins and pulls out his history book.

Both of us sit quietly, studying and writing, and looking up whenever a plane takes off. By the time the fourth one rumbles overhead, I shout, "This may not be the best place to study."

"I think you might be right." He closes his book and tosses it aside, tackling me to the ground with kisses.

"Sam!"

He holds my hands above my head so that I can't move, and he kisses my neck.

"You didn't hold up your end of the bargain."

"You said it yourself. It's too noisy to study."

"It is. So we should probably go somewhere else. Like a library, maybe?"

"I'll make you a deal." He rubs his nose against mine and looks into my eyes.

"You're going to try to coerce me now?" I laugh.

"Stop worrying about books and papers and studying, and just be with me, right here, right now...and *then* we'll see where it goes."

I grin and shake my head, but before I can say anything, his lips silence my retort with soft, warm kisses that fill my



head with clouds and my heart with sunshine.

Another plane roars over us again, but neither of us look up.

## Chapter 2

*Lucy*

“Are you coming to bed?” Drew asks from the doorway of the theater room, where I’m watching Sam fight Arturo Moreno for the gold.

“Yeah”—I glance up at him from the giant TV screen—“in a little bit.”

“Why are you watching an Olympic boxing match from two years ago?”

“Sam Cole is fighting this weekend and Sebastian and Paul have tickets. They invited us to go.”

“Here?”

“No, it’s in New York City, actually. Madison Square Garden.”

“New York? Luc, I have to work this weekend. I can’t go to New York.”

“And that’s exactly what I told Sebastian.” I give him a small, accepting smile.

He drops his hands on the couch and hovers over me. “You mad?”

I shrug and look up at him. “I could go by myself.”

He narrows his dark blue eyes and runs his fingers through chocolate-brown hair. “By yourself?” He walks around the couch and plops down next to me. “I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” I widen my eyes playfully. “Are you afraid I can’t handle myself in the big city?” I smirk. “I’m a twenty-six-year-old woman. And I grew up in Brighton Park, remember?”

“Oh, I know you can handle yourself.” He pulls me into his arms. “I just don’t want you to ever be in a situation where you have to.”

“I won’t. I’ll be with Paul and Sebastian the whole time.”

“Paul and Sebastian don’t look at you the way other men do. They don’t know the kinds of things that are going through their heads.” He pulls my chin up and looks in my eyes. “You are so beautiful. I don’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to you.”

I look away because the guilt seeping beneath my skin feels as if it’s about to reveal itself through my eyes.

Drew sighs heavily and drops his hand. “Okay.”

I look up at him, feeling a strange mix of excitement and angst. “Okay, you won’t mind if I go without you?” I ask, knowing good and well that I shouldn’t go, that I shouldn’t *want* to go. But I do. I desperately do. As soon as Sebastian mentioned Sam, all I could think about was going. I had an opportunity to see him fight a year ago, which I passed up under stronger resolve, and I’ve regretted it ever since. Part of me hopes that if I see him in person, it will quiet the unrest I feel in my soul whenever I think about him.

“I’ll miss you while you’re gone, but no, I don’t mind if you go.” Drew rolls his eyes playfully. “Besides, I know you have a thing for that Sam Cole guy.”

The guilt winds its long ugly fingers around my neck and slowly tightens its grip.

“Are you”—I clear my throat—“are you sure? I won’t go if you really don’t want me to.” *Say you don’t want me to.*

He smiles softly and reaches for my hand. “I know I’ve been working a lot, especially with the new restaurant opening in Philadelphia. It isn’t lost on me that you haven’t said a single word about how much I’ve been traveling, especially with all the wedding planning.” He pulls my hand to his mouth and kisses the back of my knuckles. “Not that I could get a word in edgewise with Momma in charge.” He laughs and gives me a sincere look. “You know I’m doing it for us, right? For our future?”

I bob my head.

“It won’t always be like this.”

“I know,” I say over the doubt that fills my mind.

“Before Daddy died, he told me the most important thing a man can do is provide for his family. That’s what he did for me and Momma, and that’s what I’m trying to do for you and our kids. One day.”

The thought of kids jerks my back up off the couch with an unexpected pinch in my chest.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” I smile and ignore the unwelcome feeling.

“Go to New York with Sebastian and Paul. Have a fun time. Just promise you’ll be safe, okay?”

“I will, I promise.”

“I love you...so much.”

“I know. I love you too.”

He tucks my hair behind my ear. “I’m going to bed. I have to get up early tomorrow.” He stands up, pausing halfway to kiss the top of my head. “Don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t.”

Drew leaves the room, and I stare at the stranger on the TV who resembles the person I used to know, except that now he’s huge and has tattoos everywhere—down his left arm and across his chest. There’s a fierce-looking lion roaring over his heart and the phrase *Pain Is Fleeting* scrolled in cursive beneath the curve of his collarbone.

When Sam was arrested for drug possession, I was devastated. He broke the very foundation we were built on. He betrayed everything we stood for. I wasn’t just hurt, I was shattered. The Sam I knew and loved was gone, and I was alone...again. At seventeen, I lost the only thing I ever wanted—a future with Sam. And for a while, I lost myself. I began ditching school and eventually I stopped going altogether. But as the months passed, my sorrow turned to anger and then determination. I refused to turn out like my mother. I wouldn’t break my promise just because Sam broke his. So the day I turned eighteen, I left the broken place that raised me and got a job in the city waiting tables at La Pêche.

The restaurant was elegant and always smelled like the most delicious food. It was so very different from anything I had ever experienced. The people who came in looked like celebrities. They dressed beautifully, they smelled beautifully, they smiled beautifully. I was definitely getting a strong dose of how the other half lived. I didn't want to be like them—I cringed just putting on my perfectly pressed black pants and crisp button-down shirt every day—but I couldn't deny the charm of a life that seemed so easy. A life that came with houses and cars and clothes that weren't purchased at secondhand stores. A life where kids went to good schools and could paint to their hearts' content. A life without thugs and drugs and guns. A life that I found myself wanting more and more.

I was making enough money waitressing to pay for the dilapidated apartment I rented, but not enough to support my habit. Painting had become my hobby turned therapy, turned obsession. It was as necessary as breathing. It was the only way I could organize all the clutter inside my head. So, in an effort to turn my obsession into a means of extra income, I got my GED and applied for the Savannah College of Art and Design in Atlanta. With the help of several student grants, I spent the next four years immersed in classes, learning new techniques, like painting with oils—my favorite—and art history. I graduated from SCAD with a bachelor of fine arts in painting, with a minor in art history. But that didn't exactly equate to a career in painting. So I began entering my artwork in local contests around the city.

Drew saw one of my paintings when La Pêche sponsored a community arts contest, and it wasn't long before he was taking an interest in more than just my artistic ability. But I was cautious, keeping him at arm's length. I was twenty-two with very little life experience, and he was twenty-eight with the life experience of someone twice his age, having already opened three successful restaurants, one of which I still worked at. Although I didn't have a lot of dating experience, I was pretty sure you weren't supposed to date your boss. But that didn't dissuade Drew from pursuing me.

\* \* \*

*Lucy, Two Years Ago*

“One date. That’s all I want,” Drew bargains as I wait patiently for him to hand me an invitation to his mother’s gala. He’s been trying to get me to go on a date with him for the last two years. He’s nothing if not persistent. But he’s still my boss. And more importantly, he’s my friend. As persuasive as he is, I just don’t see him as anything more than that.

“Drew, Janice invited me personally. I don’t need the invitation to attend.”

“Technically, you do. The doorman won’t let you in without it.”

I close my eyes and shake off the foreign thought of attending a party that requires a doorman. “I’m a guest of honor,” I say, ignoring the nerves that have been racking me since Janice asked to auction off one of my paintings at her annual charity ball. “And I have your mother’s number. I’ll just call her directly.”

He taps the sturdy card against his palm and narrows his eyes. “You have my mother’s number?”

I raise an eyebrow and hold out my hand. “Yes. Now, hand over my invitation.”

“All right, all right,” he says, giving it to me. He smiles wide and shakes his head.

“What?”

“I just haven’t figured out who likes you more. Me or Momma.”

I look at the vintage calligraphy on the beautiful invitation in my hand and say, “I’m pretty sure it’s my art that you both like.”

“Is that really what you think?”

“I don’t know.” I look up at him and shrug. “I mean, I’m not really like the people who will be at this party. I’m not, you know, fancy.”

“Fancy,” he repeats, pulling his dark eyebrows together.

“Sophisticated,” I clarify.

He brings his hand up to his face and rubs his jaw. “You’re right. You aren’t like the people who will be at this party. Because you, Lucy Bennett, aren’t like anyone. You are”—he puts his hand on my shoulder and slowly trails it down my arm—“so bright and kind and funny. All things that have nothing to do with your art.” He moves his hand over my wrist and wraps his fingers around mine. “You are the strongest—and most stubborn—woman I have ever met. And you are far more beautiful than any of the high-society women who will be at this party. You don’t need a trust fund to be sophisticated, okay?”

I press my lips together and bob my head. “You think I’m stubborn?”

He smiles. “That’s what you took away from everything I just said?”

I laugh softly and shake my head. “No.”

He reaches for my other hand and holds it in his. “Let me take you to the party tonight, Lucy. I’d be honored,” he says sincerely, and it eases the nerves buzzing around inside me. “It doesn’t have to be a date, it can just be—”

“Okay,” I answer.

His eyes widen slightly. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” I smile softly, “I’d like that.”

He nods casually and tries unsuccessfully to hide a smile. “Okay.”

\* \* \*

That night I listened to Drew tell stories of how he swam with great white sharks in South Africa and climbed Mont Blanc in France. I was as captivated as the other guests by how worldly and cultured he was. Though it only reiterated how different we were. But Drew had a way of making me feel like I belonged in that room. He held my hand and introduced me with pride, and for the first time in two years, I saw him in a different light. I saw *me* in a different light. And as much as I

wanted to believe that I could never love anyone besides Sam, I found myself falling for Drew, because he was all the things that Sam *wasn't*.

But that was before Sam won the US Amateur Boxing Championship and earned a spot on the US Olympic boxing team. I never even thought I'd see Sam again, let alone see him on my TV. But there he was, screaming back into my mind and staking claim on my heart, just days after Drew proposed. I couldn't believe it. Everything I'd wondered about, everything left unanswered, everything I'd given up on was right there in front of me. Sam was okay; he was *more* than okay. And suddenly, without warning, everything that felt right about me and Drew seemed *wrong*.

Sam won the gold medal, holds four championship belts, and is now the undisputed light-heavyweight champion of the world. He has twenty-two wins, ten of which were knockouts, and only two losses. He's well on his way to becoming the greatest boxer the world has ever seen.

"Just like he said he would," I whisper to myself as I click off the television. And then I head upstairs to Drew, the man I *should* be thinking about.



## Chapter 3

*Sam*

“Come on, champ. Come on,” Joe growls in my ear while I spar with Tristan. “Block the jab, baby, block the jab.”

I hold my gloves up to protect my face while Tristan throws punches at me. It takes everything in me not to hit him back, but the scar down the middle of his chest reminds me why I can't. He's my trainer and one of the toughest guys I know, but he has a weak heart. Joe just has me practicing defense with him.

Joe has been my coach since I was fourteen. He was Tristan's coach too, until Tris didn't get up off the mat one day—he was seventeen when he had his first open-heart surgery. Joe is like a father to us. He took care of Tristan when he was sick, and he never gave up on me when I was in prison. When I got out, he helped me rebuild my life, gave me a place to live, started coaching me again. He taught me how to fight professionally. He taught me how to win. Every belt I have is because of him.

“Ahhhhhh!” I scream, shoving Tris back against the ropes.

“What the fuck, man?”

“That's enough! Get out of my face!” I shout.

“Sam, take it easy,” Joe says. “Take a break.”

Tristan steps toward me and holds his gloves up. “You want to go for real? Come on, champ! I'm not scared of you.”

“I said take a break,” Joe shouts.

I duck between the ropes and climb out of the ring.

Tristan laughs and starts throwing practice jabs in the air.

“You all right?” Joe asks.

“Yeah.”

“You seem wound up today. More than usual,” Joe says.

“Wouldn’t have anything to do with Lucy getting married, would it?” Tristan chimes in as he moves around the ring.

“Lucy’s getting married?” Joe looks up at me. “To who?”

“Atlanta restaurant owner, Andrew Christiansen, according to the *Atlanta Journal*,” Tristan answers. “She’s moving up in the world.”

Joe puts his hand on my shoulder. “Sam, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not Lucy that’s bothering me,” I lie. “It’s just... Sanchez. I can’t stand that motherfucker.”

“Yeah, well, Saturday’s your chance to show him how much,” Joe says. “Sit down, cool off a minute. You want your headphones?”

I nod and Joe disappears to the locker room.

“Sanchez my ass,” Tristan says, but I ignore him.

Joe returns with my headphones and puts them over my ears for me. He turns the volume up, and the screaming rap music drowns out the sounds of the gym, and Tristan.

I drop my head to my gloves as my thoughts bounce between Sanchez and Lucy, but they ultimately stay with Lucy. Like they always do.

\* \* \*

### *Sam, Eighteen Years Old*

I jog across the street, weaving between the passing cars, ignoring the driver shouting out of his window at me. When I reach the uneven sidewalk, I push my hood off my head. It’s March, but the sun is making me hot inside my sweatshirt, even though it’s still pretty cool out.

“Hey, man, you need something today?” the dealer on the corner asks when I reach the crosswalk.

“Nah, man, I’m good. I don’t do that stuff.”

“You a boxer or somethin’?” he asks, eyeing the gloves hanging from my backpack.

“Something like that.”

“Yeah...yeah...I seen you. You that kid down at Joe’s. I seen you fight before.”

I nod and keep walking.

“You need a manager or somethin’?” he calls.

“Nah, man, I’m good,” I call back.

“Well, if you change your mind, you come find Big T.”

I ignore him and continue toward school. When I round the corner I see a small group of guys crowded together on the sidewalk. After I hear what they’re saying, I know they’re talking to a girl.

“Honey, you fine. Just let me get a little piece of that... Nah, she don’t want yo skinny ass. She want a real man. Don’t ya, baby?”

“Leave me alone.”

*Lucy.*

I drop my backpack and charge the three guys surrounding her, knocking them back like bowling pins. “Get away from her,” I shout, standing in front of her. One of them steps toward me and stands two inches from my face. He’s taller than me, but I push him back and make him fall against his friend.

He gets in my face again. “What? You gonna fight me, son? Over that?” He looks at Lucy and says, “Nah, she ain’t even worth it.”

“What’d you say?” The anger burns inside me like wildfire. “What the fuck did you just say?” I shout in his face.

“Sam, don’t.” Lucy tugs on my sweatshirt, but I can barely hear her through the rage that’s roaring through me. “I’m fine.”

“I said why don’t you back the fuck up.” He pulls his jacket open and shows me his gun.

“Cole...Cole!” Joe shouts, running up to me. He pushes me back a few feet. “Come on, save it for the ring.”

“Sam, let’s go,” Lucy says, grabbing my hand and yanking me back farther.

“Wait...wait. You’re Sam Cole?”

“Yeah, he is,” Joe answers, pushing me down the sidewalk.

“Oh, I’m gonna remember this. Sam Cole. I got you, Sam Cole. I got you,” he shouts down the sidewalk.

“Ignore him,” Joe orders, aware of the storm brewing inside me. “Keep it in until Friday. Russo won’t stand a chance.”

“He wouldn’t stand a chance anyway,” I say confidently.

“Yeah, well, that’s probably true. But you’ve got to start channeling your anger, Sam. Use it to be better. To be great. No more street fights.”

I take a deep breath and hold Lucy’s hand tighter. Just thinking of what they could have done to her makes my pulse race faster.

“You left this,” Joe says, handing me my math book. “Thought you might need it.”

“He does need it,” Lucy says, giving me a sideways glance.

Lucy is smart. Too smart for me. She’s a junior, but she’s in my senior calculus class. The only reason I’ll be graduating in a few months is because of her. She makes me study. I don’t like to, but she can be very persuasive.

“Is that what you were doing down here, coming to drag me to school?”

She looks up at me with her innocent pale blue eyes and shrugs. “I had some extra time this morning. I thought I’d meet you at the gym so we could walk together.”

“See ya this afternoon, Sam,” Joe says. “Stay out of trouble.”

“Bye, Joe.” Lucy waves at him.

“Bye, sweetheart. Make sure he gets to class.”

“I always do.”

After a couple of blocks, I look down at Lucy and she smiles up at me. The sun is shining on her porcelain skin, reflecting off her shiny pink lips and blond hair that's streaked pink to match. Much to her amusement, my fingertips are still stained from the Kool-Aid packets we used to dye it. It's pulled back into a ponytail, showing off the soft skin below her ear. My eyes follow the curve of her neck down to her bright yellow bra that's peeking out beneath the collar of her jacket, and they continue down to her creamy legs. I squeeze her hand and tear my eyes away from her. “You shouldn't be wearing that skirt.”

“Well, I thought it was going to be warmer today, but now I'm wishing I hadn't. Why? You don't like it?”

I pull her into the doorway of an abandoned building and turn her around so that her back is pressed against the brick exterior. I place my hands on the wall by her shoulders and lean in close. “I like it. But so do the wolves.” I bring one hand to her face. “You're so beautiful, Lamb. You don't even know it.” I slide my hand down her neck, tracing her collarbone with my thumb, and push her jacket off her shoulder. “And so pure.” I kiss the spot below her ear. “You have no idea what they'd do to you.”

She raises her hand and drags her finger down the middle of my chest. “That's why I have you. You've always protected me. And I've never felt afraid.”

“What if I wasn't there?”

“You always are.” She smiles and presses her lips to mine.

“Yeah.” I move my mouth to her ear. “I always will be.” My greatest fear is that one day, I won't. I close my eyes and kiss her hard, pressing myself against her so that I can be as close to her as possible. I drop my hands to her thighs and run them up her smooth skin until they're under her skirt. I groan against her mouth and she moans into mine, sending a fire blazing through me that only she can put out.

I pick her up and she wraps her legs around me. “We can’t,” she says, running her fingers through my hair, kissing me. “We have to go to class.”

I ignore her.

“Sam.”

I kiss her harder and she kisses me back.

“Not here,” she says, looking at me with a conflicted grin on her face. She lost the battle with herself.

I smile wide and put her down. “Come on.” I pull her around the side of the building.

“Where are we going?”

“There.” I point to a ladder that leads to the roof. “Come on.”

“You want me to climb up that?” she asks, watching me yank on the bottom of the ladder to test its stability.

“Yeah, it’s safe. You can go first. I’ll follow, in case you slip.”

She gives me a slanted look. “Wouldn’t have anything to do with the skirt, would it?”

I grin. “Of course not.”

She begins to climb the ladder, and I follow behind her. About halfway up, the wind blows her skirt up, and I groan quietly.

“Knock it off,” she says.

“Not possible.”

She pauses and looks down at me, pursing her lips.

“Don’t stop, you’re almost there.” I wink and give her a gentle push over the top. I climb over after her.

“Holy crap, it’s cold up here,” she says, rubbing her arms.

I drop my backpack and pull her into my arms, and hold her against me until she warms up. When the wind stops blowing, it feels ten degrees warmer in the sun. “Better?”

“Yeah. It’s actually really beautiful up here. So quiet. Kind of makes you forget all the crap down there.”

I look out at the low brick buildings that make up Brighton Park. The sky is so clear, I can see all the way to downtown Atlanta where the tall buildings stagger across a small section of the horizon. “We’re going to get out of here one day, Luc.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

She sighs. “How?”

“You’re going to get a scholarship after you graduate next year and you’re going to go to college.”

She props her chin on my chest. “No, I’m not.”

“Lucy, yes you—”

“No,” she says firmly, “not without you.”

I made the grades to graduate, but I won’t be getting any scholarships.

“Joe thinks I have a real shot at boxing. Maybe that’s my ticket out. If it is, I’ll work night and day to be the greatest boxer this world’s ever seen.”

She smiles wide. “Like Muhammad Ali?”

“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.”

“And we’ll live in a big house?”

“The biggest.”

“And we’ll eat pancakes every morning?”

“With bacon.”

“And I’ll be able to paint whenever I want?”

“Whenever you want.”

“And we’ll have a family? A *real* family?”

I tuck a windblown piece of her hair behind her ear and nod. “Yeah, we’ll have a family.”

“I love you, Sam. Even if none of that ever happens, I’ll still love you. You’re my family.”

I take her face in my hands. “I love you too.” I kiss her softly until we melt into each other, numb to the cool air that swirls around us. I pick her up again and she wraps her legs around me like before, kissing me slower this time.

She pulls my sweatshirt off and drops it on the concrete rooftop beneath us, and pushes my sweatpants down on my hips. She reaches under my T-shirt and runs her hands over my chest and stomach, making my muscles tighten where she touches me.

I sit down on my sweatshirt with her in my lap and lift her shirt above her bra, but I notice goose bumps on her skin, so I lower it back down and hold her close to me, kissing her slowly until I feel the heat between us.

Her tongue moves over mine, and I feel it everywhere.

I push her jacket off her shoulders so that it’s still covering her arms and kiss her neck, but she shrugs the rest of the way out of it. “I’m not cold anymore,” she whispers, taking her shirt off.

I run my hands up her thighs and tug on her panties. I might spontaneously combust if she doesn’t take them off soon.

“Do you have a condom?” she breathes.

*Fuck.* No, I don’t. I look at her, desperately hoping that she has one.

“I have one,” she says, smirking, reaching for her backpack. “I want a family with you, but not yet.” She tears it open and puts it on me, and I welcome her warm hands.

She climbs over me again, and I hold her hips while she sinks down on me until her skin is flush with mine, making me forget everything else. There’s only me and Lucy in the entire world.

She reaches for my face and kisses me slowly while she moves, sending electricity coursing through my body.



I grip her warm thighs and she moans against my mouth, igniting the fire that's scorching through me. I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight as we move together, listening to every breath, every moan, every whisper she makes.

"Sam." She tightens around me and her body trembles under my hands, making me lose control.

I hold her tight and let go, groaning against her neck. "Luc," I grit through my teeth.

After a few silent moments, I reach for her face with weak arms and kiss her softly as the blood returns to them, but the wind blows and raises goose bumps on her skin again. I grab her T-shirt and jacket and hand them to her.

"What would you have done if I hadn't shown up earlier?" I ask, watching her put them back on.

"Sam."

"Just humor me."

"I would have done what you taught me. Throat, knee, groin. And then I would've shown 'em my right hook." She smiles.

"Show me," I say, getting to my feet.

"Sam."

"Show me. Make a fist."

She curls her small fingers into her palm and wraps her thumb around her knuckles tight.

I push against her fist with my hand. "Good. Keep it strong." I hold my palms up. "Now show me. Let me see that right hook."

She pulls her right arm back and hits my left hand, but I barely move.

"Harder."

She does it again, a little stronger.

"Harder."

She does it again and my hand actually moves back an inch.

“Good.”

She shakes her hand.

“You can’t be afraid to hit, Luc. They won’t be afraid to hit you.”

“I just don’t like hitting *you*.”

I smirk. “I think I can take it.”

“I don’t care if you can. I don’t like it.”

I reach for her wrist and spin her around, locking her in my arms with her back to my chest. I hold her tight. “Now what do you do?”

She squirms in my arms but barely moves. I’m only using a fraction of my strength.

“Come on, Luc, what do you do?”

She squats down fast, spins out of my hold, and brings her knee up to my crotch. “Lower my center of gravity.”

“Good.”

“Am I done now?”

I nod and hug her. “I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you.”

She hugs me tight. “I know the feeling.”

“Hey, I got something for you.”

“You did?” She smiles up at me.

I pull a small black box out of my backpack and hand it to her.

“What’s this?” she asks suspiciously.

“Just open it.”

She opens the box carefully and touches the small gold bracelet inside. “Sam.” She gives me a shocked look. “Is it real?”

“Yeah, it’s real.”

She looks at it again. “How did you buy it?”

“Joe’s been paying me a little to clean up the gym after hours.”

“He has? Since when?”

“I’ve been doing it for a few months now.”

She gives me a wary look. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I wanted to surprise you. Here, put it on.” I take it out of the box and fasten it around her wrist. “Do you like it?”

She bobs her head and looks up at me, but I can’t tell what she’s thinking.

“If you don’t, I can—”

“No, Sam.” She smiles softly. “It’s beautiful. Really. I love it.”

“You do?” I ask, unable to hide the smile on my face.

She nods and touches it. “Yes.” She wraps her arms around my neck and whispers, “I’ll never take it off.”

“Good,” I breathe against her cheek.

“Thank you for giving it to me.” She places a soft kiss on my lips.

“I got you something else too.”

“Something else?”

I reach into my backpack and pull out three small bottles of paint and a new package of paintbrushes. “I got them at the drugstore. They only had red, blue, and yellow.”

“Sam, that’s perfect. Thank you.” She sits down and pulls her drawing pad out of her backpack.

I sit down beside her and watch her wipe off a section of the concrete and squirt a small amount of each color onto it.

She tears open the package of brushes and grabs the biggest one first, dipping it into the blue. She brushes it over

the top half of the paper until it's the color of the sky. Then she takes another brush and paints the bottom half red, blending it up into the blue. She mixes the two colors together, adding some yellow, and paints very carefully across the middle of the paper where the blue and red meet.

I watch her for several minutes while she works, biting her lip and concentrating.

When she's done, she holds the paper out in front of us, and I see the same cityscape that's in the distance.

“Wow, that's incredible.”

“You like it?”

“Yes.” I take the pad from her and hold it in my lap, noticing every brushstroke, every detail, every color she created. “You're so talented.”

“I used red here because that's us,” she says, pointing to the bottom half of the page. “You and me, up here above all the crap down there. It's love.”

I wrap my arm around her neck and kiss her cheek.

“And the blue”—she points to the top half of the page—“that's everything that's waiting for us. Our future. Big and bright.”

## Chapter 4

*Lucy*

I gaze out of the window over the wing of the airplane, watching the familiar mass of buildings and skyscrapers that make up the New York City skyline come into view as we approach JFK. Since opening my own studio, I've fallen in love with the Chelsea neighborhood, home to more art galleries than all of Georgia, and home to some of my favorite artists. To be among them and sell my paintings in New York would be the pinnacle of my career. Atlanta's art district is still waiting to be discovered, but I'm aiming to change that with my exhibit next month. If all goes well, it will get me one step closer to selling my artwork in New York.

"We're beginning our descent into New York, folks," the pilot says over the speaker. "The current temperature is fifty-three degrees. Please stay seated with your seat belt fastened until after we've landed."

I give Sebastian a worried look. "Fifty-three degrees? I hope I brought warm enough clothes."

"It's early," Paul says. "It'll warm up by the afternoon. It usually does in October."

"And if it doesn't, just buy something new." Sebastian winks at me. "I'm sure Drew wouldn't mind seeing you in a new dress when you go home."

I know that he's teasing, but just thinking about Drew ties my stomach into knots. Surely if Drew knew about my history with Sam, he wouldn't have wanted me to come. I've never been able to bring myself to talk about it with him. I wanted to once, but the more I thought about what Sam and I had, the more precious it became. I couldn't bear to pretend that it was anything less than a once-in-a-lifetime kind of love. And I couldn't bear to hurt Drew with the truth—that I'll never be able to love him the way that I loved Sam. So I keep Sam tucked away safely in a corner of my heart that will always belong to him, and I live with the secret pain, taking the blows

every time I read an article, watch an interview, or see a picture of him on the internet.

“You okay?” Sebastian asks me. “You look nauseous. Do you need the baggy?” He grabs the paper bag from the seat back in front of him and holds it out for me.

“No,” I say, batting it away. “I’m fine.”

I peek out of the window as the plane angles down and the horizon disappears.

We’re in the clouds.

Below the clouds.

And racing toward the runway.

I close my eyes as we bump along the tarmac until the plane eventually comes to a stop. I open them when we begin to taxi toward the terminal. I’ve only flown a few times in my life, and only since I met Drew. I don’t mind the flying part, but I could do without taking off or landing.

Sebastian hands me my carry-on bag from the overhead compartment, and I follow him and Paul off the plane. Before we even make it inside the airport, Sebastian starts rattling off to-do items from the itinerary he made us.

“Okay, I got us an early check-in time at the hotel, so we can drop our bags, and then we have lunch reservations at Balthazar. It’s too far to walk from Midtown, so we’ll take the subway to SoHo. After that, I thought we’d do a little shopping, and then head back to the hotel to get showered and dressed. We’ll take the subway to Grand Central Station and have cocktails at the Oyster Bar before the fight, and from there we can take a taxi to the Garden.”

“Take a breath, Bas,” Paul says, reaching for his hand as we file through the mass of people moving around the airport.

I laugh. “What about the Met?”

“Tomorrow,” Sebastian says with wide, smiling eyes. He loves it as much as I do. “And if we have time, we can look for a new gallery to check out in Chelsea.”

“Before we embark on the Sebastian Tour of Manhattan, we should probably get our bags,” Paul says, tugging him in the direction of the baggage claim.

I walk behind them, admiring their affection for each other. Paul laces his fingers with Sebastian’s in the most casual yet caring way, and I can’t help but envy them. I fantasize about Sam and I walking through the airport together, our fingers intertwined as he leads me to a car that’s waiting to take us home. I imagine our house and kids...and pancakes. My heart glugs heavily in my chest and my feet drag as if bricks are tied to them. I admonish myself for fantasizing about a life I already have with Drew. Sans kids, at least for now. I know Drew wants them, but I can’t imagine taking care of someone else when I can barely manage my own emotional well-being. Still, I often think of what my and Sam’s kids would look like. A little boy with caramel hair and eyes like his. A little girl with light hair and eyes like mine.

“Come on, slow poke,” Sebastian says, pulling me from my thoughts. I’ve fallen several paces behind them.

“Sorry.” I blink a few times to push down the sorrow I feel whenever I let go of that dream.

\* \* \*

“To good friends.” Paul raises his martini glass, and Sebastian and I do the same.

“And to sexy husbands,” Sebastian adds, raising an eyebrow at Paul.

“And good assistants,” I add, winking at him.

“And good bosses.” He winks back.

“And to that beautiful hunk of a man who’s going to be up on the stage tonight,” Paul says exuberantly.

“It’s a ring, not a stage,” Sebastian corrects, lowering his glass.

“Oh, put your glass back up,” Paul says to him. “You know I’m only here to see Sam Cole, half-naked and sweaty.”

I laugh awkwardly. “Cheers,” I say, ending our much too long, and now somewhat uncomfortable, toast. We all clink our glasses together and sip our martinis.

“Well, some of us actually came to watch the fight,” Sebastian says. “Right, Lucy?”

“Oh, uh, mm-hmm,” I say, taking another sip of my drink. My eyes dart around the dimly lit bar that’s tucked away inside Grand Central Station like an old hidden tavern. The arched ceilings are covered in century-old chevron-shaped tiles that glow amber in the ambient light.

“You know, our seats are close enough to see the sweat beading on their faces,” Paul says, and butterflies immediately flock to my stomach.

I want to see Sam tonight, but I don’t want him to see *me*. A million thoughts race through my head. *He won’t see me, he’ll be focused on the fight... What if he does see me and loses focus on the fight?... Would he even recognize me if he saw me?... What if he sees me and doesn’t recognize me?... What if he recognizes me and he doesn’t care?* My heart pounds inside my chest. “I can’t believe our seats are that close,” I say, just louder than a whisper.

“What?” Paul asks, leaning in to hear me better.

“I can’t believe our seats are that close,” I say again, louder.

“Maybe we’ll be on TV,” Sebastian says excitedly.

“Oh, God, I hope not.”

“Honey, in that dress, you’ll definitely be on TV,” Paul says, smirking at me.

My face feels hot and my hands automatically move to the taut material covering my thighs. I swallow hard and look down at the navy-blue cocktail dress. I tug at the material that’s barely hiding my cleavage. “You told me to wear this,” I say, shoving Sebastian’s arm.

“Yeah, because you look hot!”

“I’m too dressed up.”



“We’re all dressed up,” Paul points out. “You’re supposed to be.”

“Luc, why are you freaking out? You look gorgeous.” Sebastian tussles the ends of my long hair. “Your hair is super shiny and your skin looks like porcelain. You have nothing to worry about.”

I bob my head. *Right. Nothing to worry about.* Except that I’m secretly stalking the estranged love of my life during a title fight against his biggest rival, in which he may or may not see me, at which point he may or may not care. *I think I might throw up.*

“Can you just give me a minute?” I ask, getting up from the small cocktail table we’re sitting around.

“Yeah, but hurry, we need to leave in about ten minutes,” Paul says.

“Okay, I’m just going to the restroom. I’ll be right back.” I balance carefully on my stilettos to the bathroom, where I lock myself inside a stall and take slow, deep breaths. *It’s going to be fine. It’s going to be fine,* I repeat over and over in my head. The thought of not seeing Sam tonight, as anxiety-inducing as it may be, would be much worse for me in the end. I’d regret it forever. Not to mention that if I back out now, I might never fully regain Paul’s faith in my sanity, even if Sebastian eventually comes around. I’m just going to have to suck it up and get my dress-clad, stiletto-wearing butt ringside.

\* \* \*

### *Lucy, Seventeen Years Old*

“Are you ready?” I ask Sam, who is sitting in a folding chair across from me in the chaotic locker room at Joe’s. His hands are wrapped in tape and Joe, who has been trying to manage the disarray and mayhem that accompanies an amateur boxing match, is sliding Sam’s gloves on.

Sam nods, but he doesn’t answer me, because of his mouth guard.

“He’s ready,” Joe says, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He’s been supervising the ebb and flow of anxious

boxers and coaches all afternoon. Sam is one of four boys from the gym who have a match tonight, and all of them, along with their coaches, opponents, opponents' coaches, and officiators, are squeezed into the relatively small space. I fan myself with a folded promotional flyer that Joe had printed up. It's usually freezing in here, but there are so many moving bodies creating heat, I'm actually sweating.

"Craig. My man," Joe says, shaking the hand of an official. He's one of the many volunteers who helps Joe get these matches set up. It's a lot of work, but there's usually a cash prize for the winners of each weight class, and the event helps generate revenue for the gym. Joe runs a nonprofit facility. He grew up in Brighton Park and, after some success as a professional boxer, decided to open the gym to give underprivileged kids a place to come after school. After he saw Sam get into a fight four years ago, he convinced him to join and has been coaching him ever since.

Sam stands up. It's almost time for his match.

I hug him and he holds me to his chest for a moment. "Be careful," I say to him, and an eager smile lights up his eyes. As confident as I am that Sam will win tonight—because he always wins—I hate knowing he could get hurt. The last time he fought Anthony Russo, he was left with a fractured rib and covered in bruises. Russo looked even worse.

Sam says that pain is fleeting. I wouldn't know. I've never been hit before. I leave the fighting to him. Just watching it is painful enough.

"Lucy, you should go grab your seat," Joe says, tightening the strings on Sam's gloves.

"Go get 'em, Rocky," I say, winking at Sam, before I'm absorbed by the crowd of people flowing from the gym floor into the locker room. Once I squeeze past them, I find my seat in the front row next to the ring. It's marked by a sign with my name on it. Joe always reserves a seat for me up front.

Sam and Anthony climb into the ring and take their corners and, after a quick introduction by the referee, begin the dance I've come to know as boxing. The footwork, the

balance, the cardio, the strength, the technique required for a boxer to gain victory over his opponent...it's a little theatrical, but what can I say, I'm a fan of the arts. To me, boxing is just a very violent ballet. Much less chaotic than the street fights I've witnessed. Even the cheers and jeers from the crowd are synchronized to the movements of the match.

Sam takes a jab to the jaw, and I cringe, but it doesn't seem to shake him. He throws a left hook, followed by an uppercut that leaves Russo stumbling backward into the ropes.

The gym erupts even louder than before.

By the middle of the third round, Anthony and Sam both look exhausted. But everyone is still screaming and cheering them on. I'm too anxious to cheer. I'm just trying not to chew my nails down to the quick.

Sam takes an uppercut to the ribs. And another.

*Dammit.* This seems to be Russo's favorite move. It's how he broke Sam's rib before. *Come on, Sam! Move!*

Sam steps back and throws a jab, followed by a left hook, a right hook, and another jab that knocks Russo to his knees.

*Yes!*

The referee stands between them and pushes Sam into his corner. He holds his hand up and counts to eight while Russo gets to his feet, gauging whether he can keep fighting. I don't think I could watch if they just pummeled each other until one of them couldn't get up, like they do in professional boxing. The ref calls the fight and the crowd roars with excitement. By the sound of it, there were a lot of bets on Sam. The ref takes Sam's hand and raises it up in the air, and a smile stretches across my face when Sam winks at me, followed by a wave of relief that I always feel when a fight is over.

\* \* \*

My heart might literally beat through my chest. If it weren't for the booming thuds reverberating through the arena speakers, I'd swear you could actually hear it. Everyone is on their feet, cheering and clapping as the music grows louder and the lights dim over the crowd.

“These are seriously the best seats you’ve ever gotten us for an event,” Sebastian says to Paul. “Aren’t they fantastic?” he shouts to me over the music as we shimmy along the row to our seats, which are directly behind the rail that separates the ring from the stands.

“Um, yeah, they’re great,” I say, keeping my eyes down to be sure my stilettos meet the floor and not someone’s toe, and also because I’m terrified to look up at the ring, which I can see in my peripheral vision and know is only a few yards away from where we’re sitting.

“I love your dress,” a woman in our row says, touching my arm as I pass her. I thank her and smile graciously, but I feel nothing of the sort. Dresses that get compliments get attention, and that’s the last thing I want right now.

When we reach our seats, I sit down, hoping to disappear behind the rail and the arena staff on the other side of it, but Sebastian grabs my elbow and pulls me back to my feet. “You can’t sit down! This is amazing!” he shouts, rocking his head back and forth to the blaring music with a huge smile on his face.

I force a smile and try to move a little to the music, but my nerves have pushed me to the brink of paralysis. I curl my fingers into my palms and try to rub the sweat off them as I take in the well-lit ring before me.

It’s so close. *Too* close.

Whether Sam sees me or not, I’ll see *him*. I mean, *really* see him. Not through the filter of a screen, or even through a sea of people I assumed would be between us. But up close, in person. We’ll be breathing the same air. I swallow hard and take slow, deep breaths. *It’s been years. You were a child when you were together*, I think, trying to convince myself that what we had was nothing more than puppy love. *It’s what everyone experiences...and then moves on from. It’s perfectly normal to feel like this*, I tell myself, wanting so badly to believe it. But nothing about me and Sam was normal. Nothing about either of our lives was normal. Being orphaned by our drug-addicted parents as children wasn’t normal. Having lived in twelve

different homes, collectively, by the time we were in high school wasn't normal. Relying solely on each other until we were practically adults wasn't normal. The way that we loved each other wasn't normal. A shallow ache throbs inside my chest. We didn't just love each other; we lived and breathed each other. He was my universe. And I was his.

At the time, the universe seemed a lot smaller.

Blue and white spotlights bounce around the arena as the giant scoreboard monitors over the ring flash images of Mario Sanchez. There's a steady roar of applause from the crowd as the announcer highlights his career achievements. And then the showcase moves to Sam, and the roar of applause turns into rumbling thunder as the crowd cheers and screams and stomps their feet.

I gaze up at Sam in high definition, and I'm overwhelmed with emotion. Being surrounded by nineteen thousand people who are screaming for your childhood love is definitely not normal. I beam with pride, as if I somehow had anything to do with his accomplishments. Just knowing what he came from and how hard he's had to work to get here fills me with awe. *He's just a kid from Brighton Park.* An orphan who came from nothing. And now he has all this. It's everything he ever wanted.

Everyone's attention turns to the far corner of the arena where an entourage of people and flashing lights begin moving toward the center of the floor.

My heart stutters and my breath catches. I can't really see much through the crowd, but I feel light-headed. I look up and see Sanchez on the monitors over the ring and exhale the breath I didn't realize I was holding. I close my eyes and open them again.

Sanchez climbs between the ropes and holds his gloves up in the air, bouncing from foot to foot, encouraging the excited crowd. I can literally see every detail of his face, the white birthmark on his olive-colored torso, the blue-and-white stripes on his shoelaces. Before I have time to think about seeing Sam that close, the cheers from the crowd turn into

thunder again, and everyone's attention shifts to the opposite corner of the arena. This time, I know that Sam is making his way toward the ring.

My heart races and heat flashes across my skin. My breath catches again. I can't move. I can't breathe. I can't blink.

"Hey, look up," Sebastian says, pointing to the monitors that must be showing close-ups of Sam. But I can't.

My eyes are frozen on the moving bodies inching closer and closer to the ring.

"Hey," Sebastian says again, but his voice fades into white noise. I can barely hear him.

I blink once, slowly, and everything is quiet. I no longer hear the thundering cheers or the blaring music. I don't notice the flashing lights. I only see *him*.

Sam is walking toward the ring, toward me.

My heart pounds in my ears as the arena air swirls through my lungs and past my lips. I watch him climb between the ropes and stand in the center of the ring like a warrior, mighty and strong. I can see every line in his torso and every muscle that's wrapped around his body like armor. I can see the details of his tattoos and read the ones that are spelled out.

He raises his gloves and, to my utter shock, I see the word *Lamb* scrolled in cursive on his rib cage, small enough that his arm covers it when he puts it back down.

My eyes flash to his face and fill with tears. I stare at him, trying to memorize the way his eyes crinkle when he smiles at the crowd, the way he licks his lips and nods with the cheers, the way the small muscles flex in his jaw when he talks to the referee. His confidence is a stark contrast to the anxiety I'm feeling.

The noise rushes back into my ears like a tsunami, nearly knocking me over. I stumble, but catch myself on Sebastian's arm.

"You okay?" he shouts.

“Yeah, sorry, it’s just the heels. They’re hard to balance in.”

“This is crazy. They are so close.”

“I know.”

“Sam Cole is hot! Holy crap. He’s way too pretty to be a boxer. No one should be allowed to hit that face.”

A feeling that I haven’t felt since I was seventeen suddenly washes over me. It’s the feeling I used to get when I watched Sam fight at Joe’s, knowing that he would be hit, knowing that he could be hurt. It’s different watching him fight through the filter of TV. On TV, it’s not real; he’s not real. But here, now. This is real. He’s real. He’s *so* very real.

We take our seats as the fight begins, and the dance commences, leading the roar of the crowd.

*Sam Cole takes the first hit of the night*, the commentator announces, and air hisses through my teeth.

“Keep those hands up, Sam, keep ’em up.” We’re close enough to hear Joe shouting at Sam, and it takes me back in time. He looks exactly the same, except that his hair has a little more gray in it now.

Sanchez hits Sam again.

*Cole takes another hit to the head.*

“Throw the jab, Sam, throw the jab,” Joe shouts.

Sam returns two body slaps to Sanchez’s ribs and then throws an uppercut that knocks him into the ropes.

*Okay, okay.*

Sebastian puts his hand on my bouncing knee. “Don’t worry, Luc. Sam’s got this.”

I give him a tight-lipped smile and nod.

The second round starts, and Sam takes the first hit again.

*Jesus.* I don’t know how I’m going to watch this whole fight.

Sam throws a jab at Sanchez's face, and another, leaving him with a bloody nose.

"Holy shit, did you see that?" Paul shouts, leaning over Sebastian. "Forget seeing them sweat, I just saw blood fly out of Sanchez's face!"

"Yeah, it was totally gross," Sebastian says.

I wrinkle my nose. "It was pretty gross."

By the tenth round, Sanchez isn't the only one who's bleeding. Sam took a punch to the eye in the seventh round that split his eyebrow. But it hasn't slowed him down. He throws a right hook, followed by an uppercut that knocks Sanchez to the mat.

The referee counts, *One...two...three...four...*

The arena is going crazy.

By *five*, Sanchez is back on his feet. He throws a jab at Sam, but misses. He's tired. So is Sam. They lean against each other, hugging, until the referee pulls them apart. Then they explode like two volcanos, taking turns throwing jabs and uppercuts at each other like they were both saving their last ounce of energy until right now.

The crowd erupts and everyone is on their feet.

Paul's on his feet. Sebastian's on his feet. I'm on my feet, screaming for Sam.

He's beating the hell out of Sanchez, and Sanchez is beating the hell right back out of him.

Tears burn in my eyes. *I can't take this anymore.* I just want it to be over.

Sam takes one last hit to the head, and once again everything around me falls silent. I watch Sam fall to the mat in slow motion, his glazed eyes finding mine before they close, and the only sound I hear is my own voice screaming, "Sam!"



## Chapter 5

*Sam*

I open and close my unfocused eyes a few times, ignoring the sweat and blood stinging them.

*Lucy?*

“Get up, Sam. Get up!” Joe shouts from beside the ring.

*Four...five...six...*

“Get up!”

I pull my knees under me and grab the rope.

*Eight...*

I’m on my feet.

The referee grabs my gloves. “Come here, you good?”

I nod and take my stance in front of Sanchez.

Sanchez throws a punch at my face, but misses.

“Ahhhhhhh!!!!” I scream, feeling a roar inside me, louder than I’ve ever felt before. I throw everything that I’ve got at him. A left hook, a right hook, another right hook, and an uppercut that sends him flying backward.

He lands on his back.

*One...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight...nine...ten!*

The crowd erupts and my team climbs into the ring.

“You did it, baby!” Joe screams.

*Sam Cole has done it once again. He has successfully defended his title as the undisputed light-heavyweight champion of the world!*

I feel hands on my back and arms. People are congratulating me from every direction.

I spit out my bloody mouth guard and wrap my heavy arm around Joe’s neck. “Lucy,” I shout in his ear. “I saw Lucy.”

Joe gives me a confused look.

“She’s here. Have someone find her before she leaves.”

“Yeah.” He nods. “Okay.”

“I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah...okay. Hey, Miles,” he says, turning to my manager.

I’m consumed by the people crowding in around me and blinded by the flashing lights. I hold my belt up for the pictures, faking a smile for the camera.

*Lucy was here. She came. I can’t keep up with the thoughts racing through my pounding head. Was she alone? My eyes could barely focus. All I saw was her creamy skin and blond hair, her pale blue eyes. When she shouted my name, I knew it was her. Her voice would stand out from a hundred thousand other voices. Why did she come? Did she want me to see her? Has she come before?*

My team leads me through the crowd to my dressing room, where I’m greeted by the physician. I take the seat across from him and wait impatiently for Miles to return while the doctor examines me.

Miles walks in and reports, “I couldn’t find her, Sam. If she was here, she’s long gone.”

“Well, fucking ask around. I’m telling you, she was here. She was ringside, for God’s sake. Find out who she was with.”

“I’ll find out what I can.” He crosses his arms and stands over the doctor. “How’s he look, doc?”

“Gonna need a couple of stitches over that eye, and an ice bath wouldn’t hurt.”

“Stitches? Can’t you just put some glue on it?” I ask.

“Yeah, I can glue it, but it’ll leave a scar.”

“It’s fine.”

\* \* \*

My phone buzzes, waking me from a deep sleep.

*Fuck.* Everything hurts.

I sit up slowly and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I reach for a bottle of ibuprofen on the nightstand, ignoring the ache in my shoulder, and shake a couple into my hand. I swallow them down and answer my phone. “Yeah.”

“No signs of Lucy being at the fight last night,” Miles says on the other end of the line. “We checked all the ringside tickets.”

“That doesn’t make sense. She was there.”

“You got hit hard. Maybe you just thought you saw her.”

“She was there, Miles. Check the recording.”

“Recording’s in production now. It should be ready when we get home. We can check it then.”

I rub my stiff neck. “Yeah, okay.”

“Flight for Atlanta leaves at one. I’ll come by your room around eleven.”

“All right.”

“You need anything?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Order room service. Get some food in your system.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Bye, champ.”

I get up and walk over to the mirror, holding my aching ribs. My eye looks like shit. It’s swollen and blue under the glob of hard glue that’s holding my eyebrow together. I lift my arm over my head and stretch my aching muscles. *Fucking Sanchez.* He used my ribs as a punching bag.

I run my fingers over the word *Lamb* that’s camouflaged by bruises.

I don’t think I can wait until I get home to see the recording, even though it will have every angle of the fight. I have to find the clips on the internet; I have to see if Lucy was really there. I sit back down on the bed, grab my phone, and

search for the fight. I scroll through several video clips until I find one that's close enough to see the people sitting next to the ring. I watch it for about thirty seconds before I see her, and my heart stops. I pause it. *She was there.*

I take slow, deep breaths because just knowing that she was really there, that I didn't imagine it, does all sorts of fucked-up things to my head. I squeeze my eyes shut and grip the phone. *Why were you there, Lucy? What the hell are you trying to do to me?* I open my eyes and look at the screen again. I want to press play, but I know what seeing her is going to do and I'm not sure if I'm ready for it. I throw my phone across the bed and fall back against the pillows, grimacing at the ache in my chest, which now accompanies the pain in my ribs. But after a few seconds, I grab it again and press play.

When the camera focuses on Lucy, I pause the video and stare at her for a long time, until my pulse stops thumping in my neck.

She looks exactly the same, but different. Her hair is long and straight, and still the same shade of blond. And her face hasn't changed at all, except that maybe she's gotten prettier. She's wearing makeup, but it's not caked on like it usually is with the women I meet. I can still see the beauty mark under her eye and the one by her mouth. I can see her clear blue eyes. She looks worried. I un-pause the video and watch her pull her hand to her mouth. She looks down and shakes her head. The camera cuts to the ring and zooms in on me. I just took a hit from Sanchez. I rewind the video and watch her again. She's sitting on the edge of her chair, leaning forward with one hand on the rail in front of her. I take the hit and she grips the rail tighter and pulls her other hand to her mouth. Her face screws up at the same time and she shakes her head.

*She was worried about me.*

I watch it again.

And again.

I let the video keep playing this time, but it stays on me and Sanchez for the next several minutes. Finally, when the camera pans out again, I see Lucy standing up cheering. I just

knocked Sanchez on his back. She has the biggest smile on her face. I pause it and stare at her for a long time.

*God*, it hurts just to look at her.

I put my phone face down on the nightstand and fall back on the bed. I rest my hands on my chest, close my eyes, and inhale a deep breath to try to clear my head. But the only thing I can think about is Lucy. I squeeze my eyes shut tight and pull my palms to my temples, pressing against my thoughts, trying to clear my mind. I listen to my breathing. I focus on my pulse. I try to think about anything except for Lucy. But it doesn't work.

\* \* \*

*Sam, Fourteen Years Old*

Something wakes me from a light sleep. I turn my head to listen for it again, but the only sound I hear is the whistling of a train in the distance, cutting through the cold, quiet night. *It was probably just the heat kicking on.* My mind is so messed up right now, I doubt it would take much to wake me. I'm getting placed in a new home tomorrow. It will be my fifth foster home, my fifth so-called family, and my fifth time starting over. It's also the first time I wished like hell I could stay where I'm at.

I got into a fight today. My fourth fight this year. So my social worker is putting me with a family that has better "core values" and can help put me on the "right path." It's not like I'm some kind of hothead that just goes around beating people up. I was defending Lucy. And I would do it again. She tends to stand out from the crowd, especially at our school. The guys give her a hard time because they think she's pretty. And the girls give her a hard time because they know the guys think she's pretty. She *is* pretty. She's different-looking. She's a year younger than me, but I'm constantly fending off the older boys who live on our street.

Tomorrow it will be *her* street. I'll be three blocks away, and she'll still be living under the same roof as Will and Tommy. *I swear to God, if they even look at her.*

A noise pulls me from my thoughts, and this time, I know it's coming from Lucy's room.

She whines and cries. *No*.

A burst of heat flashes across my skin, and my pulse races as I jump from my bed, ignoring the noisy springs that creak inside my mattress. I step into the hallway to assess the danger, but everything is quiet, besides Maxine's snoring, which is loud enough to hear through her closed door. Will and Tommy's door is closed too.

Lucy whimpers again.

"Lucy?" I whisper, pushing her door open. I find her curled up in her bed, gripping the sheets. "Lucy," I whisper again, touching her arm.

She startles awake and looks up at me with wide eyes.

"Hey, it's okay. You were just having a nightmare."

She blinks at me a few times, and the gray moonlight coming through her window fills her pale, watery eyes.

"Luc, what's the matter?"

She rolls over and pulls the sheet up to her chin. "Nothing, go back to your room," she says with a wobbly voice.

I tug on her arm through the sheet. "Not until you tell me what's wrong. Was it the dream? Are you okay?"

She buries her face in her pillow and cries.

I'm not really sure what to do, so I sit beside her and wait for her to finish.

After a few seconds, she looks up at me and sniffs. "I'm crying because it wasn't just a dream, you're really leaving me...just like everyone else."

My face screws up at the tight feeling in my chest. "Lu—" I swallow hard. "Lucy." I wrap my fingers around her shoulder. Her skin is hot under my hand, and it sends a strange sensation through my body that makes me uncomfortable and excited at the same time. "I'm not. I'm not leaving you."

“Yes you are.”

“I’m just leaving this house. Not you. We’ll still see each other at school.”

“For now. But what about next year when you go to high school? I’ll never see you.”

“That’s not true. You’ll see me all the time. I’ll leave early every day and walk you to school, just like I do now.”

She sits up and looks at me with sad eyes, and it makes me want to kick the shit out of myself for getting into that stupid fight today. *I’m such an idiot.* “I’m sorry,” I say, wishing a thousand times that I could go back and walk away from it, like she told me to.

She nods and a tear rolls down her cheek. “I know.” She wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me tight. “You’re my best friend, Sam.”

I push down the feelings she’s stirring up inside me and hold her while she cries.

She sniffs again and asks, “Will you stay with me tonight, just for a little while?”

“Yeah.” I swallow hard and banish the uninvited thoughts that invade my mind when we lie down. She rolls onto her side and reaches for my arm, draping it over her shoulder, and I intentionally move my hips back a few inches away from hers. I pull her against my chest and hold her tight.

This isn’t the first time she’s asked me to stay with her in the middle of the night. She has nightmares about her mom overdosing sometimes. She was there when it happened, and she remembers things about it that no kid should know. But tonight feels different. *She* feels different.

I close my eyes and breathe in the smell of her hair and skin, knowing that this is the last time I’ll be able to comfort her in the middle of the night. My chest feels heavy when I think about tomorrow. Lucy is the closest thing that I have to family. She needs me...to protect her, to keep her safe. I knew it from the second I laid eyes on her. She was so innocent, like a little lamb or something. She didn’t belong in this place. She

still doesn't. But I need her too. I don't remember being happy before her. But she makes me happy. She makes me curious. She makes me want to do good things. I don't know if love is really a thing, but if it is, it must be what I feel for her, because I've never felt like this about anyone before.

"I love you," I whisper, wanting her to know. But I don't think she hears me. She must be asleep. I close my eyes, feeling pleased with myself. I've never said that to anyone before, but I like how it feels to say it to Lucy.

"I love you too," she whispers, and a strange feeling—a mix of joy and awe—settles over me.

No one's ever said that to me.

\* \* \*

"Sam! Sam!" Someone pounds on the door and calls my name again. "Sam!"

I grab my phone. *Shit*. It's 11:25. I jump up and answer the door.

Miles marches into my hotel room. "I guess you don't want to go home today."

"I fell asleep."

"Well, you might as well go back to bed, because you're not making a one o'clock flight out of JFK now."

"Just get the next flight, then." I reach up and rub my stiff neck. I'm still just as sore as I was earlier this morning.

"Damn," he says, eyeing the bruises on my ribs. "Did you take something for that?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just let me get a shower before we go." I head to the bathroom and strip down.

"You get some food?"

"No, not yet."

He grabs the room service menu and stands outside the shower. "What do you want? A an omelet? Eggs Benedict? Pancakes? All of the above?"



“Not pancakes.”

“I forgot, you don’t like pancakes.”

“I never said I don’t like them.”

“Then have a cheat day. You won last night.”

“Just order me the fucking omelet, Miles.”

“Well, you could’ve said that to begin with. I’m ordering you some coffee too. You’re grouchy.” He shuts the bathroom door. “Guess I would be too, if I looked like a punching bag,” I hear him say from the other side of the door.

I close my eyes and stand under the hot water, thinking about Lucy.

I spent every day in prison worrying about her. I wrote letters, but everything I sent to her foster home came back returned. I tried email, but her school account was deactivated. Gaining access to her file was like trying to pry open a locked vault. Family Services wouldn’t tell me anything. The only person who would give me any information at all was her last foster mom, Ms. Jenkins. She told me that Lucy dropped out of school and took off on her eighteenth birthday, but she didn’t know where she’d gone. The Lucy I knew would have never done that. Then again, the Lucy I knew would have never given up on me. When they put me in Central State Prison and she didn’t come, I knew it was over.

I turn off the shower and grab a towel.

“Breakfast is here,” Miles says through the door. “Oh, and I think I got some information for you.”

I swing the door open. “What information?”

“The ringside seats. Not everyone who paid was there. Antwon Cruz, a record producer out of Atlanta, was a no-show. But it was a packed house, there were no empty seats. So I called his office. Apparently, he sent someone from his staff instead. A guy named Paul Ford.” I listen quietly, waiting for his point. “I just Googled him. His partner, Sebastian, is Lucy’s assistant. She runs an art studio in Atlanta. I found an

article about an exhibit she's hosting next month. He was mentioned in it."

I let out a slow breath and lean against the door frame.

"They must have come together."

"She runs an art studio?" I drop my head and say quietly to myself, "Makes sense."

"Sam, are you listening? You were right, she was there last night. Or at least, it's possible that she was."

I glance up at him. "Yeah, no, I heard you."

He hands me a folded-up piece of paper. "It's the address to her art studio."

I take it from him and frown.

"If you don't go talk to this girl, I'm going to go do it for you."

I roll my eyes.

"I'm serious. These girls, they mess with your head, Sam. Maybe not the chicks you drag up and down red carpets and bang in the back of the limo afterward. But this one"—he points to my head—"she's in there deep. I can see it. So, please, for my sake...go talk to her, once and for all. Say goodbye, get closure, or do whatever you need to do so that you can forget about this girl and get on with your life. I need you focused on what's important. Your career. Your next match. Okay? You hear me?"

I crease my eyebrows. "Yeah. I hear you."

## Chapter 6

*Lucy*

I sip my coffee and gaze at the beautiful painting before me. “This one’s my favorite,” I say, admiring the smooth flesh tones of the partially nude woman lying on her back amid her discarded clothes and tousled hair, carefully balancing a vibrant, feathery-winged bird on her delicately splayed fingers. She looks so carefree, like she has no worries in the world.

*I envy her.*

“*Woman with a Parrot*,” Sebastian reads the painting’s label aloud. “Looks more like a parakeet. You could paint a better parrot.”

“Are you comparing me to Gustave Courbet, one of the most important artists of the nineteenth century?”

“I’m not comparing. I’m saying you’re better than him.”

I laugh a short but loud laugh that echoes off the walls of the quiet museum. I quickly cover my mouth. “Gustave Courbet led the realism movement in France. He’s arguably one of the best realistic painters of all time.”

“Well, I think you’re better.”

“Sweet, sweet Sebastian,” I say, pressing my lips together over an amused smile. “You’ve got so much to learn.”

“Look, I may not have studied art in college, but *that* looks like a parakeet.”

“He’s right,” Paul says, teaming up with Sebastian. “It does look like a parakeet. I think you could paint a better parrot.”

I laugh quietly this time. “I love you guys, but you’re both crazy.”

Sebastian gives me a sideways glance. “Speaking of crazy, maybe now you can tell us what happened last night.”

Paul gives Sebastian a disapproving look, but Sebastian ignores him and raises his eyebrows at me expectantly. Clearly I've let the employee-employer line blur a bit too much. You'd think he was my older brother or something by the scornful look on his face.

"Nothing happened. I just"—I shake my head, unsure how to explain why I bolted from the arena before the fight was even over—"I just wanted to get out of there." I *had* to get out of there. When Sam hit the mat, he looked at me. His eyes met mine and, if only for a second, he *saw* me. And I saw him. I saw him sitting at the kitchen table when he was twelve, pushing his hair out of his unusual eyes. I saw him in my bed protecting me in the dark, whispering *I love you* for the first time. I saw him lying on the grass beside me watching the planes fly over us. I felt his long fingers laced with mine. I felt his heart beating against my chest. And I felt *my* heart break into a thousand pieces, like a pane of glass shattering inside me. It hurt as much as losing him the first time. But once again, I had to let him go. And that's exactly what I did when I walked out of there. I ran, actually, which wasn't easy in my heels, but I was too busy wiping tears from my eyes to worry about my ridiculous choice in footwear, until one of my heels got caught in a sidewalk seam and broke off somewhere between West Thirty-Fourth and West Thirty-Sixth Streets. I was a barefoot bawling mess by the time I got to the hotel.

Suffice it to say it wasn't the best night for me. Except that it *was*. Seeing Sam in that ring, hearing everyone cheering for him and calling him *champ*. It was incredible. I've never felt so happy for someone in all my life. I'm immeasurably proud of him. It might have been one of the best and worst nights of my entire life.

Sebastian stands between me and *Woman with a Parrot* and places his hands on my shoulders. "Okay, you know I love you. But you are acting a little bit crazy."

I roll my eyes and shift my weight from one foot to the other.

"Are you pregnant?" he asks very seriously.

I let out a sharp puff of air. “No.” *Can you imagine the look on Janice’s face if I told her I was having a shotgun wedding?* I suppress a giggle.

“Are you sure? Because when my sister was pregnant, she acted crazy too. With a capital ‘C.’” He widens his suspicious eyes.

“Sebastian. I. Am. Not. Pregnant.”

“Well then, what is going on with you?”

“Nothing. I just have a lot on my mind right now.”

“You walked out of the Garden during the last two minutes of a title fight, featuring your favorite boxer, who won, by the way, because of the exhibit?” He shakes his head. “No, I’m not buying it.”

“Bas, drop it.” Paul winks at me.

“Yeah, knock it off. I have a lot on my mind, I’m not pregnant, and I don’t really want to keep talking about this. I left a boxing match early. I didn’t rob a bank. You can put my crazy card right back where you found it.”

“Fine. But if you take off like that again, without telling anyone where you’re going, I’m pulling it back out, and I’ll be forced to show it to Drew.”

Drew would have a heart attack if he knew I walked nine blocks alone in the dark, barefoot no less. I’ll definitely be leaving that detail out when I tell him about the trip. I cringe at the thought of telling him anything about it. At this point, I just want to pretend that it didn’t happen. *I shouldn’t have come.* All it’s done is left a new hole in my heart that I’ll have to pretend isn’t there.

“I’m sorry that I took off last night, I just didn’t feel good.”

“Crazy and nauseous. Hmm...Sounds like you’re pregnant.”

I hit Sebastian with my purse. “I am *not* pregnant. Now, let’s go so that we don’t miss our flight.”

\* \* \*

“You’re back,” Drew says, greeting me as I walk through the front door.

“Hey,” I say, surprised to see him. He was supposed to leave for Philadelphia this morning. “What are you doing here?”

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me up into a big bear hug. “I rearranged my meetings tomorrow so that I can leave in the morning instead.”

“Oh,” I say with a wobbly voice. I was expecting to come home to an empty house and wallow in my sorrow and guilt alone.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I lie.

He kisses the top of my head and murmurs, “I missed you.”

I nod and wrap my arms around him. “I missed you too.”

“I didn’t like being here without you.”

“I thought you had to work all weekend.”

“I did. But when I wasn’t working, I was here alone. I’ve gotten used to you being here.” He smiles at me. “I’m so glad you decided to move in before the wedding.”

I rest my chin on his chest and force a weak smile. “Me too.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“Mm-hmm.” I press my cheek to his chest, unable to look in his eyes when I answer.

“How was the fight?”

“Loud.”

He laughs and squeezes me in his arms. “Didn’t Sam Cole win?”

I swallow the hard lump in my throat and nod against his chest. “Yep.”

“I thought you’d be more excited.”

I shake my head and look up at him. “I’m just happy to be home. And to see you,” I say honestly. In his arms I feel quiet and calm, a welcome reprieve from the last twenty-four hours. “I’m glad you stayed.”

He unwraps my arms from around him and drags my bags over to the stairs. “Leave these here,” he says, taking my hand.

“What are you doing?” I laugh. “I need to unpack and take a shower.”

“Just a little surprise.”

It smells like he’s been cooking. *I hope he made dinner.* I’m starving. Our flight was delayed and all I’ve eaten today was the airline cookies they passed out on the plane. It’s well past dinnertime now.

He pulls me into the kitchen and my mouth pops open when I see flowers and candles flickering on the kitchen island, which he’s set for two. “It’s been a while since we’ve gone on a date, so I thought we could have one here tonight.”

My eyes mist over because he’s so incredibly sweet and thoughtful and I don’t deserve him. “Drew.”

“I had Sebastian text me when you landed, so everything’s warm.” He gestures for me to sit down at the island and then busies himself in front of the stove. He returns moments later with a bottle of wine and two small plates of what looks like something amazing. “Lobster macaroni with gruyère and cheddar.”

“Oh, my God, thank you. I’m starving.” I quickly get a forkful and shove it into my mouth, moaning over the bite. “It’s *so* good.”

He smiles and pours us both a glass of wine. “Don’t fill up. There’s more.”

I widen my eyes and smile, a genuine smile, maybe the first one I’ve had all day. “This was a good surprise. Thank

you.”

He leans in and kisses me. “You’re welcome.”

After the lobster mac, Drew presents me with a gorgeous fillet that is melt-in-your-mouth delicious. Then for dessert, fried cinnamon ice cream. It is the perfect meal and the perfect way to end a very crappy day.

Drew smiles at me and I smile at him, but he doesn’t say anything.

“What?”

I see a familiar look in his eyes, and I know exactly what. I’m frozen under his lustful stare, unsure how to tell him that I’m too raw from seeing Sam to be with him right now. I just need a day or two for everything to go back to normal, back to the way it was before I lost my mind and decided to go to New York. I anxiously bite my lip, which he takes as an invitation.

He presses his mouth to mine and kisses me, softly at first, and then deeply, taking my face in his hands. But instead of tasting him, I just taste *dinner*. I take a deep breath of his cologne and try to focus on how good he smells and how good he looks. I consider all the reasons he should be turning me on right now—besides the fact that he *loves* me...he’s handsome, he’s tall, he dresses well, he can cook—but I can only focus on why he isn’t.

He drops his mouth to my neck and unbuttons my shirt, dragging his lips across my collarbone down to my bra. I close my eyes and force a soft moan, trying so hard to feel something, but all I feel is uneasy.

“Lucy, I want you so bad,” he says, unclasping my bra, and even his voice feels wrong.

“I want you too,” I say automatically, but when he drops his mouth to my breast, it makes me shiver for all the wrong reasons. I roll my shoulder away from him and slip out of his arms. “Let’s go to the bedroom,” I whisper, trying to sound seductive, hoping that by the time we get upstairs, I’ll be able to shake whatever is wrong with me.



He eagerly scoops me up and, even though I feel pathetic in his arms, I let him carry me up the stairs to our room. He drops me onto the bed and climbs over me. His mouth goes right to my boob again, and it feels just as weird as it did before.

*Something's wrong.* I close my eyes and try to will it to feel good, but I can't. It doesn't.

He sits up and pulls his shirt off, and I welcome the space between us, as fleeting as it may be. He somehow manages to get my jeans and panties off in the same few seconds it takes him to get naked. He's moving with the speed of a train, unable to see the signs blurring past him, telling him that something's wrong, that I'm not into this at all.

"Wait." I sit up and put my hand on his chest, and he freezes.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

I stare at him for a second, trying to think of a way to tell him about Sam. He deserves to know the truth. But I can't do it. "I don't feel good. I think maybe from the flight."

"Oh. Okay," he says, trying to mask his disappointment. "Is it your head or your stomach?" He puts his hand on my forehead. "You don't think it's the food, do you?"

"No, the food was delicious. It's just a headache, probably from the flight. I'm sorry."

He nods thoughtfully and rubs my thigh. "You don't have to apologize. I know you and planes don't mix well. I should have thought to ask."

I shrug. "Do you think maybe you could get me some Tylenol?"

"Sure." He gets up and puts his pants back on.

I reach for my robe on the end of the bed and slip it on. "Hey." I grab his hand before he leaves. "Rain check?"

"Just say the word." He winks and leaves to get me some Tylenol, which I could actually really use now.

## Chapter 7

*Lucy*

“Good morning, sunshine,” Sebastian says, handing me a cup of coffee. “It’s a latte macchiato. Two percent milk. You’re welcome.”

“Thank you.” I take it from him and smile.

He gauges me and says, “You look very sunny today. I take it you liked Drew’s surprise last night?”

Before I can answer, a man walks into the studio, carrying a large vase of white roses. There must be at least three dozen of them. “Delivery for Lucy Bennett,” he says, eyeing the paper in his hand.

“You can put them there,” Sebastian says, pointing to the corner of the front desk. When the delivery guy leaves, he plucks the card from the vase and reads it out loud, “Ready for that rain check.” He raises an eyebrow. “I love you. Drew.”

I sip my coffee and smell the roses, ignoring Sebastian’s stare.

He puts the card down next to me. “Rain check?”

“What?” I look up at him. “I was tired from the trip.”

“Ahh.” He turns the vase until the roses are positioned to his liking. “You were tired.”

“Yes.” I laugh awkwardly. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“No. I just wish you’d tell me what’s really going on with you.”

“Sebastian, there’s nothing going on.”

“Lucy, your fiancé, the man that you love, rearranged his travel schedule to surprise you with an incredible dinner, and you asked him for a rain check.”

“So what? I loved the dinner. I just didn’t feel like having sex, okay?”

He holds his palms up and nods. “Okay.”

I exhale an exasperated breath and sip my coffee under his watchful stare.

“Just...you know that you can talk to me about anything, right?”

I nod and smile softly. “I know.” *But not about this.*

He gives me a sincere look and raises his dark eyebrows.

“There’s nothing to talk about, Bas. I just want to enjoy my coffee and roses, okay?”

He squares his broad shoulders, inhales a deep breath, and exhales with a smile. “Okay. Well, I think today’s going to be a great day. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, there’s a nip of fall in the air...and one of us got laid last night.”

“Sebastian.”

“What? I’m allowed to bask in the glow. You should try it sometime.”

“Sebastian, you’re like the sun. You never stop glowing.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant as one.”

He wraps his arm around my neck. “Come on, we still have about a mile of red tape to get through for the exhibit.”

“What’s on the agenda today?” I ask as we walk to the back of the studio.

“The schedule, the waivers, the price list, the theme. Want me to go on?”

I had no idea what an undertaking the exhibit would be. If it weren’t for Sebastian, I might have thrown in the towel already. “Let’s get started.”

\* \* \*

Sebastian stands up and pulls me up off the cement floor, where we’ve been sitting for the last three hours, scheming and planning and organizing for the event. “I don’t think I can brainstorm anymore. My cloud has run dry.”

I stretch my arms over my head. “I know, mine too.”

“How about I go get us some lunch? Sustenance will help. Fill our stomachs, nourish our brains.”

“Okay.” I look around at the mess we’ve made. We’re standing in the middle of a storm of scattered papers, open notebooks, our laptops, my iPad, and about twenty prints of potential artwork we’re considering for the exhibit. “I’ll clean up while you’re out and peruse the internet for a conference table, so we can actually work like grown-ups.” I laugh.

“Why would you do that? This is what I love about this job. We can sit on the floor, make a huge mess and be creative, and no one can say anything about it. I cannot be creative around a conference table.”

I laugh again. “Well, maybe just some floor pillows, then.”

“That’s more like it. I’ll see if I can find some while I’m out.”

“Don’t take too long or we’ll be eating dinner here too.”

“I won’t.”

Sebastian leaves and I begin organizing the chaos on the floor. Unlike the front of the studio, which is wall-to-wall white and adorned with my paintings, the back is all cinder block and exposed pipes and air-conditioning ducts. I like the industrial feel, and there’s plenty of windows for light, so I’ve never bothered finishing it. I just added a big area rug, an old leather couch, and a couple of chairs, which we never actually sit in. It’s a nice contrast to the clean, vibrant storefront. The two spaces contradict each other like the halves of my brain.

I get up and take my laptop to the desk in the front of the studio. I need a change of scenery. And I need to catch up on the emails I’ve been ignoring all morning. I sit down and look at the open space, wondering how I got here. I still feel like I need to pinch myself to be sure I’m not dreaming. Just a few years ago, I was struggling to make ends meet. Now I own my own gallery. Well, I’m running it anyway. It’s technically still in Drew’s name, but he’s gifting it to me for our wedding. Which is why this exhibit *has* to be a success. I want to earn

back every cent he put into it, and the only way to do that is by selling my paintings. Over time, I should be able to pay him back. It's the only way I can accept it.

I begin reading through my emails. I reply to a few and flag the ones I want to come back to later. After a few minutes, I look up from my task and I'm startled to see someone standing outside on the sidewalk staring at me through the glass.

The studio seems to turn upside down and I have to grip the desk, because it feels as if I might fall out of my seat and land on the ceiling. My eyes lock with the most beautiful set of eyes I've ever seen, eyes that have seen places inside me that no one else knows exist. My lips part, desperate for a breath that will bring the sweet relief of oxygen to my lungs.

Sam gazes at me and I gaze at him for what feels like an eternity, one I never want reprieve from, and then he mouths the word *hi*.

*Hi*, I mouth back, and it brings a flood of emotions screaming to the surface, feelings that I've repressed, ignored, and denied for so long. I hold my breath as he reaches for the door and pulls it open, stepping through my protective bubble, which pops and vanishes into thin air.

My heart is racing so fast I think I might pass out.

He walks into the studio and all I can do is watch him, terrified. I'm terrified of why he's here. I'm terrified of what to say. I'm terrified of what he's going to say. But mostly, I'm terrified of the way he's making me feel right now.

I get up and carefully walk around the desk. I'm also terrified of falling on my face, because I seem to have lost all feeling in my knees.

He stands just a few feet away from me, and we stare at each other for another silent eternity. He's bigger up close. *Has he gotten taller?* He's definitely more muscular, but I've seen him without a shirt on enough to know that. I try not to look at the tattoos that are peeking out of his rolled-up sleeve. I know them by heart, but seeing them in person makes me

feel like a stalker for having memorized them. I keep my eyes on his handsome face. His eye looks terrible—the cut over his eyebrow is glued shut and it's bruised around the side—but he's still the most beautiful man I've ever seen. His caramel hair is cut short and his chiseled jaw is covered in light stubble that surrounds his full lips. I would give anything to see his dimples, but his face is too intense right now.

I swallow hard and try to force something out of my mouth. "How did you—"

"The fight," he says before I can finish, and my heart shrinks and hides somewhere inside my chest. "I saw you there." He waits for me to say something, but I can't form any words. I just want to hear him speak again. I want to hear the warm familiarity of his voice. "What were you doing there, Luc?"

I feel a piece of my heart splinter off when he calls me that, like no time has passed at all, like he's still the only person I've ever let in. I drop my eyes to the floor, to the walls, to my paintings that seem so irrelevant now, to anywhere but his face. I can't look in his eyes and lie, but I can't tell him the truth either.

He boldly places his hand under my chin, and I suck in a breath. "Hey," he says, lifting my face so that I'm forced to look at him. I can barely keep my eyes open because the sensation traveling from his fingers is surging through me with the force of a hurricane.

I pull my chin away and take a step back to put some space between us again.

"Sorry," he says, pulling his eyebrows together, like it's just occurred to him that he crossed an invisible line, a fracture in the earth at our feet separating our lives.

"It's okay," I whisper, unable to speak any louder.

He stares at me again and more silence passes between us. "I just, I want to know why you came. Are you...okay?"

*Okay? No, I'm not okay. I love you and I don't even know you anymore. And I'm engaged!* A few of the tears I'm

working so very hard to contain make it to my eyes, but I blink them back, hoping he doesn't notice. "I'm, um..." I close my eyes and shake my head. If I say anything else, even just a single word, the dam is going to break. I open my eyes, force a weak smile, and nod over the lump in my throat. But he's watching me with so much intensity, like he's desperate for me to say something, anything to answer the question in his eyes.

"I mean, you came to the fight, but you didn't try to see me afterward or anything, so..." He pauses and stares at me again.

I swallow hard and look into his familiar eyes, and I'm wrapped in a blanket of warmth that shields me from the elements and protects me from the hurt and the pain and the anxiety of the moment. He feels like *home*. I'm compelled to answer him honestly, to tell him that I'm *not* okay, that I still think about him all the time, that I was wrong, that I miss him, that I'm sorry, that I'm proud of him, but the studio door swings open and Sebastian walks in with our lunch, balancing several square pillows against his chest that are stacked high, covering his face.

"A little help," he says, but before I can blink, he stumbles and the pillows scatter across the floor. He looks at me and he looks at Sam, then he looks at me and he looks at Sam. I've never seen him so shocked before. His eyes fix on Sam and his mouth pops open. "Sam Cole."

Sam presses his lips together and nods.

"You're Sam Cole."

Sam nods again and Sebastian gives me a confused look. "Why is Sam Cole here?"

"Sebastian, can you give us a minute, please?" There's no way to evade his questioning, but I can at least postpone it for now.

He bobs his head and raises the bag in his hand. "Got lunch," he says, still sounding perplexed. Perhaps he's putting some version of the puzzle together in his head. He makes his way to the back of the studio, and Sam and I are alone again.

"Your assistant?"

I crease my eyebrows and nod.

“I had my team call around after the fight. You came with him and his partner.”

“His husband,” I say irrelevantly.

“Why did you come to the fight, Lucy? Why did you come and sit right beside the ring? Did you think I wouldn’t see you?”

“Who’s your team?” I ask, skirting his question.

“Joe, Tris, my manager, a few other people in my circle. Will you please answer my question?”

“Tristan Kelley. He’s your trainer now, right?”

“Yes.”

I exhale a quiet breath. “You did it.” I shake my head slowly. “You really did it.” I can’t help but smile and gaze up at him with the same awe I felt during the fight when everyone was cheering for him.

I can tell that he’s frustrated because I haven’t answered his question, but the corners of his mouth turn up defiantly, just enough to show me his dimples, and my heart comes out of hiding. “I told you I would.”

My smile quickly vanishes and I’m filled with guilt. I press my lips together tightly, trying to hold in another wave of emotion, but it’s too big to contain now. The tears leak slowly onto my cheeks.

“Are you happy?” he asks.

*Say yes, you’re happy with Drew.* I look into his eyes, contemplating my answer, but the truth is I don’t know anymore. I shrug and answer, “It’s not that simple.”

He looks at me with his beautiful, strange eyes, the blue mixing with the brown like paints running together. “It *is* that simple.”

I shake my head and wipe my cheeks. “You have no idea what all I went through after you left, what I had to overcome



without you, or what I've struggled with every day since you showed up on my TV."

He drops his chin and says quietly, "I'm not the one who left."

"You went to prison for dealing drugs, Sam. What was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to believe me." He reaches for my wrist, just as boldly as when he reached for my chin before, and he runs his thumb over the gold bracelet dangling from it.

I swallow hard and say softly, "It was all I had left of you."

"I bought this for you with the money I earned mopping floors at the gym. I never sold drugs," he says quietly, and a cry bubbles out of me because I want so badly to believe him. I've gone over it in my head so many times over the years. I want to believe anything but the truth. That Sam chose drugs over us.

"I'm getting married, Sam," I say, overcome with frustration, because I never would have met Drew if Sam hadn't been arrested. I shake my head and say somberly, "You weren't supposed to leave."

"Neither were you." The pain in his voice makes me cry harder.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. My heart aches, knowing that I can't go back and change the past, doubting that I would now even if I could. I love Drew. He's my reality now.

"It's too late for sorry, Lamb."

I want to cry even harder when he calls me that. I inhale a shaky breath and wipe my eyes. "Please don't call me that."

"Why?"

"Because that's not who I am anymore. We have different lives now. We're different people," I say resolutely, double knotting Drew to my heart.

He stares at me for a few silent seconds and then shakes his head. "No we're not. You're still the little girl sitting across

the table from me, picking at her sandwich. The girl who called me to her room night after night because she couldn't shake the memories of seeing her mom dying on the floor in front of her. The girl I walked to school for six years and protected from the wolves that stalked our neighborhood. The girl I called *Lamb* because she was so pure, she was unlike anyone I'd ever met before. The girl who was, and still is, the most beautiful thing I've ever laid my eyes on."

I look away, as if I can somehow hide from his words, from our history, from the memories.

"And I'm still the boy who fell in love with that girl. The boy who promised to always protect her. The boy who lived and breathed for her happiness." He creases his eyebrows and runs his hands through his hair. "I came here to tell you goodbye, Lucy. To tell you that you were wrong. To finally let you go."

My heart weeps in a dark corner inside my chest.

"But you see, the problem with that is...I don't know how."

My heart stammers.

"So just tell me that you're happy, tell me that your fiancé is the love of your life, so I can let you go." He watches me intently, waiting for me to respond, but I can't bring myself to answer him.

Admitting the truth, that Drew *isn't* the love of my life, would mean acknowledging it, and the implications of that scare the hell out of me. But if I lie, I could lose Sam for good. My heart cries from the corner it's been painted into. If I answer honestly, life as I know it will change irrevocably. But part of me deep down knows that it already has. It changed the second I looked up and saw Sam standing outside on the sidewalk. When he mouthed the word *hi*, my fate was sealed.

He stares into the deepest part of my soul, seeking the truth, but I close my eyes before he can read me. When I open them again, he reaches for a pen and a piece of paper on the desk and scribbles something down.

“When you’re ready,” he says, gazing at me. But before I can respond, he turns toward the door and leaves me just as breathless as when he walked in.

I watch him jog across the street and get into a very expensive-looking black car.

“Bye, Sam.”

I reach for the piece of paper and read his familiar handwriting. An address. Here in Atlanta. *His* address? I look up as he’s pulling away from the curb and fall against the desk.

“Oh. My. God.” Sebastian rushes over to me, holding a tissue in his hand. He sniffs and wipes his eyes, and promptly pulls me into a hug. “Sweetie, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t. I’ve never told anyone. Drew doesn’t know,” I say, looking at him desperately.

He takes my hand and drags me to the back of the studio, and we fall onto the old leather couch together. He hands me a box of tissues and demands that I tell him everything, so I do.

“Lucy, I don’t even know what to say,” Bas responds after I’ve finished.

“There’s nothing to say.”

“Actually, I think you’ve got tons to say, to Sam.” He exhales loudly. “I cannot believe that Sam Cole was your boyfriend. Or childhood soulmate, or whatever he was. It’s insane. Paul is going to flip.”

“Bas, can you just keep it to yourself for now?”

He sighs. “Fine. But what are you going to tell Drew?”

I cringe at the thought of telling Drew anything about Sam. I can’t. Especially not that he came to see me today. “I don’t know. Nothing, for now.”

“Well, whatever happens, I’m here for you.” He smiles and puts his hand on mine. “You don’t have to figure it out alone.”

My eyes well with tears. “You’re kind of the best assistant a girl could ask for. And by assistant, I mean friend.”

He makes a fist and gently knocks it against my chin. “Aw, kid, you know I’d do anything for you.”

I wipe my eyes and nod. “Thanks, Bas.”

## Chapter 8

*Lucy*

It's been two weeks since Sam showed up at my studio and effectively ruined my life. Since then, I've been silently struggling with how to tell Drew about him, but with each passing day it's grown harder and harder. How do I tell Drew that I've been keeping a secret from him for years, a secret that popped up at my studio out of the blue and made me question every decision I've made since I was eighteen? I could risk losing everything that's good in my life. Which is why I decided not to.

I glance in the rearview mirror, checking my makeup for the third time in twenty minutes. That's how long it's been since I pulled out of the driveway I share with Drew, drove down our tree-lined street, and left our gated suburban neighborhood. Drew is seven hundred miles away in Philadelphia and, as much as I wanted him to stay and give me a reason to not go see Sam, as soon as he left I knew that I had to. I have to tell Sam that I'm happy with Drew, that I'm going to marry him, and that he can't come see me again. Then I'm going to go home, wait for Drew to return, and tell him about the boy I used to love.

I inhale a shaky breath and run my thumb back and forth over the seam in my black skinny jeans. I settled on these, a white T-shirt, and my white Chuck Taylors, opting for comfort over style, something I think I'm going to need today.

I follow the directions on my GPS through the city, squinting through my Ray-Bans as I chase the afternoon sun through the tall buildings that make up downtown Atlanta. All too soon I'm pulling into an unfamiliar parking garage below a shiny high-rise apartment building that matches the address Sam left for me. I'm stopped by a security guard who steps out of his booth as I approach the gate.

I lower my window and smile at him. "Hi, I'm here to see Sam Cole. He lives here," I explain, gesturing to the high-rise building.

The smirk on his face tells me he knows.

*Sam is famous, I remind myself, the whole building probably knows.* The thought makes me uneasy. What if word gets out that a mystery blonde in a silver Volvo is visiting Sam Cole at his home? *Maybe I should have told Drew first.*

“Name?”

“Lucy Bennett.”

“ID, please?”

I reach for my wallet and pull out my driver’s license.

The guard takes it from me and returns to his booth.

*Am I supposed to be on some kind of list?* Sam doesn’t even know that I’m coming today.

After a few seconds, the gate raises up and I feel a strange mix of relief and reluctance.

The security guard smiles and gives me back my ID. “You can park in spot 322 on level three. Mr. Cole reserves it for his guests.”

“Okay. Thank you.” I shove my license back inside my wallet, take a deep breath, and pull forward.

I wind through the garage until I’m on the third level. 322...322...I see it. And I pass it.

Not once.

Not twice.

But three times.

As I approach the spot a fourth time, I wonder if the guard is watching me on a security camera, thinking I’m some kind of half-wit. I park out of pride, but sit in my car for another ten minutes, until I finally get the nerve to open my door. When I do, I see an expensive-looking car parked beside me in spot 323 that I’m pretty sure is the same car Sam was driving the day he came by the studio.

I grab my purse and black leather jacket off the seat and take the stairs to the first level of the garage, hoping to buy

myself some time to figure out what I'm going to say.

Less than a minute later, I'm standing at the entrance of the apartment building looking through the giant glass doors. I take another deep breath, reach for the shiny handle, and pull the heavy glass door open.

I walk inside where, once again, I'm greeted by a security guard who promptly addresses me. "May I help you?"

"Hi. Yes, I'm here to see Sam Cole. He lives in"—I eye the paper in my hand—"unit 2500."

He gauges me with the same scrutiny as the parking garage guard. "Your name, please?"

"Lucy Bennett."

He looks at his iPad and scrolls over the screen a few times. "Yes, ma'am," he says, smiling at me. "I'll just need to see your ID."

I can't help but wonder if this level of security is afforded to all the residents in this building, or just Sam. I hand over my ID and, after the guard reviews it, he hands it back and says, "I'll let him know that you're here."

*Oh. I nod nervously. There's no turning back now.*

"You'll want to take the elevator to the twenty-fifth floor."

I wait for him to give me further instructions, but he just smiles and says, "That's it."

"O-oh, okay." I smile shyly. "Thank you."

*Has he got the whole floor?*

When I reach the bank of elevators, I press the call button and eye my blurry reflection in the shiny stainless steel doors. I look like an abstract painting, with the black and white colors of my outfit blending together. *There couldn't be a truer depiction of my life right now.* The *ping* of the arriving elevator startles me, and I consider turning around and getting back in my car, but the security guard in the lobby is still watching me, probably wondering if I need help. I smile at him and wave, then I take a deep breath, step inside the

awaiting elevator, and look for the button for the twenty-fifth floor.

23–24–PH. *The twenty-fifth floor is the penthouse?*

I take another deep breath and press the button. *Expensive cars and penthouse apartments.* I shake my head at the foreign thought.

The doors close and I'm whisked to the twenty-fifth floor before my stomach has a chance to catch up. When they open again, I step out of the elevator and take a second to steady myself. But the feeling doesn't last long. Sam opens his apartment door—the only door in the small foyer surrounding the elevator—and the floor falls away again.

The corner of his mouth turns up just enough to gift me with a dimple that sends my heartbeat sprinting. “Hi,” he says over a crooked smile, and my heart pounds even harder.

“Hi,” I say softly, letting him pull the heavy blanket of emotion off me, until I feel like I'm floating.

He's wearing gray joggers that look like they're tailored to the lower half of his body and a white V-neck T-shirt that hugs his tattooed chest. His hair is messy and he's barefoot.

“I, um, I hope it's not a bad time. You didn't leave a number, so I couldn't call...”

He crinkles his eyes, and I wonder if it's on purpose. “It's not a bad time.” He holds the door open for me. “Come in.”

I smile shyly and slip past him, taking in the soft scent of sandalwood and laundry detergent that clings to his shirt.

*Holy crap.* His apartment his *huge*.

I glance at the open space that is encased in floor-to-ceiling windows, the only thing I have time to notice before he draws my attention back to him. It feels intrusive to be standing in his apartment, as if seeing his personal space is going to expose a life I don't want to acknowledge he's had all this time. Just the thought of him standing in my living room and seeing proof of the life I've lived without him fills me with anxiety. I'm suddenly plagued with dread, for fear of



what I might see when I look around, or who I might see. *Why didn't I think of this before? Why didn't he just ask to meet him for coffee somewhere?*

“Do you want a drink or something?” he asks, eyeing me carefully.

I've never been good at hiding my emotions. “Water would be great.”

I take my jacket off and follow him to the kitchen, keeping my eyes on him the whole time. I'm pretty sure it's an impressive kitchen, by the gleam of the marble counters and the shine of the stainless steel refrigerator door that swings open, but I can't say for sure because I'm staring at a small freckle on the back of his neck.

He turns around and the freckle is replaced by the V of his T-shirt and the tattoo peeking out of it. “You okay?” he asks, pulling my attention up to his face.

“Your eye. It looks so much better,” I say, examining it in the bright light. The bruising is gone and there's just a thin line where the glue was holding his eyebrow together two weeks ago.

“Yeah, I guess I was still kind of a mess from the fight when I stopped by.”

I shudder at the thought of him taking that hit from Sanchez.

“I'm sorry about that.”

A puff of air passes between my lips. “You're apologizing for having a black eye?”

He hands me a bottle of water but doesn't let go of it when I take it from him. “No, I'm apologizing for coming to see you. I wasn't thinking.”

I gaze up at him and begin to feel the oxygen slowly seep from my blood, leaving me with a woozy head and a heavy heart. He's exactly *right*. He shouldn't have come to see me. So why does it hurt so much to hear him say it?

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” He takes a step closer, forcing me to step back until I’m bumping into the counter behind me.

I blink up at him, wrestling with my emotions, but I can’t think with him standing so close. “It’s, um, it’s okay.”

He lets go of the bottle and leans against the counter beside me.

I quickly open it and take a sip. Unwilling to look at him, I’m forced to take in my surroundings, but much to my surprise, there isn’t anything in the kitchen that appears harmful to my emotional health. Just a large wooden bowl filled with bananas, a coffee maker, a stack of papers, and a laptop.

“You’re a minimalist,” I say over the rim of the plastic bottle.

“I’m not here very much.”

“You travel a lot.”

He shrugs. “It’s part of the job. I leave again in the morning.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Las Vegas.”

“Ahh.” I raise my eyebrows. “Big party to attend?” I cringe at the thought of him partying in Vegas with God only knows who.

“No. I got Vegas out of my system a couple of years ago.” He smirks and I feel my face twist up as I recall reading a story about him partying all night in Vegas. “It’s for a charity fight.”

“Oh. You can fight again that soon?” His eye looks better, but it’s not completely healed.

“Doc said two weeks. It’s been two.” He watches me take another sip of my water. “I thought maybe you lost my address. Or threw it away.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a change of heart about coming to see me. Maybe I should have,” I say, feeling insecure about my decision to come see him now, especially if he doesn’t care one way or the other who I marry.

“I don’t regret coming to see you, Lucy. I just regret upsetting you.”

I take another sip from my half-empty bottle.

“I’m glad you came today,” he says.

I nod, unsure what to say. But the silence doesn’t last long.

“So are you going to tell me why you came to the fight now?” he asks, just like he did at the studio, his eyes still desperate for the answer.

I gaze into the familiar mix of blue and brown, and answer honestly. “Because I wanted to see you.”

His shoulders soften and slope a little. “Why?” he pushes, and my stomach tightens, because I think he has as many questions as I do, but he has no hesitation to ask them.

I give a weak shrug.

“You know, there was a time when you would tell me anything.”

“I guess the longer you keep something in, the harder it is to get out.”

“You don’t have to keep it in. You can tell me.”

I laugh quietly, because what he doesn’t realize is that *he* is what I’ve been keeping in all this time.

“What is it?”

I drop my chin. “It’s everything. It’s all of it. The articles, the pictures, the videos, the interviews, the girls.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. *You* are what I’ve been keeping in all this time. The more famous you’ve become, the harder I’ve had to hold on to the secret.”

He pulls his eyebrows together and drops his chin. “Secret. That’s what I am.” He walks out of the kitchen, forcing me to follow him into the adjacent living room, which is filled with contemporary-looking furniture that surrounds a large marble fireplace. But once again, my eyes stay fixed on the back of his neck, so I don’t see much else. Surely there are pictures and memorabilia in here, ready to stab at my heart.

He turns around when he reaches the couch. “Are you embarrassed of me?”

“Embarrassed? No. Why would you—”

“It’s okay, I get it. Your life is different now.” He drops his eyes over me. “Sophisticated. I’m just a fuckup from Brighton Park who got lucky with a pair of gloves.” He sits down on the long gray sectional couch, rests his elbows on his knees, and laces his fingers together.

“Sam.” I sit beside him. “You are not a fuckup from Brighton Park. And I’m a little offended that you think I would ever be embarrassed of you.”

“Then why would you keep me a secret? I mean, no one knows about us? Not even your—”

“No.” I can’t bear to hear him say *fiancé*. “But not because of the reason you think.”

“Everyone close to me knows about you, Lucy, so I don’t really know what to think.”

“They do?”

“Yes.” He sits back and looks at me. “My life was on pause for three years while I was in prison. And I spent the majority of that time worrying about you and wondering about you and praying that I’d get to see you again. It’s why I started fighting again. Because I knew I could win. I knew I had to. So you could see who I really am, who I’ve always been. Who I could have been for you, if you’d only believed me.”

I swallow the giant lump in my throat and try to tame the wild thoughts that are running rampant through my mind.

“So yeah, they know who Lucy Bennett is. The girl I spent my whole life fighting for, and fight for still, even if it is in vain.”

“Sam.” I close my eyes and warm tears roll down my cheeks.

“I’m just having a hard time understanding why that same girl would keep me a secret.”

I drop my head into my hands and mumble, “Because you hurt too much.”

“What?”

I sit up and wipe my eyes. “Because you hurt too much. I was in a dark place for a long time, Sam. Drew eventually pulled me out of it, but I couldn’t bear to talk about you with him or anyone else.” I close my eyes and recall the pain I felt when he went to prison. “When you pled guilty, it was like the earth crumbled beneath me and everything I believed, everything I knew to be true, disintegrated.”

“I pled guilty because my lawyer told me to. He said it would lessen my sentence, and it did. I told you that. Why didn’t you believe me?”

“I wanted to.” I shake my head. “But it didn’t make sense. I didn’t know what to believe. And I felt so betrayed. For a really long time. Because you were the only person I trusted.”

“I didn’t betray you, Lucy. You have to believe that. I would have never done that to you.”

I shrug, because it doesn’t change anything. “It doesn’t matter. You were gone. And so were we. Then one day, I turned on the TV and there you were, bulldozing your way back into my life and demolishing the walls I’d built around my heart. You were real. And I knew that what we had was real. But it didn’t change anything. It only made it harder.”

He holds his folded hands to his mouth and inhales a deep breath. “Then please, just tell me that you’re happy.”

I clench my teeth together and prepare to say the words, but my tongue won’t cooperate. I can’t lie to him. “Does it

really matter?" I finally ask.

"Yes." He drops his hands away. "It matters."

"Why?"

"Because I need to know that it was worth it, that I didn't spend three years in prison waiting for you to change your mind and call me, or visit me just once, for no reason."

My eyes well with more tears, but I hold them back this time. "I have a bad track record with people leaving me," I say numbly. "The only memory I have of my father is a scar he left on my mother's chin and the drugs he left in her veins that eventually killed her. And the last memory I have of my mother is a paramedic pulling a needle out of her lifeless arm."

"Luc—"

"She loved me too, Sam." I close my eyes and reach for the bracelet on my wrist. "I'd never been given a gift like this before. I didn't know how much it cost. When the police questioned me, I began to question everything too. And the more I did, the angrier I became. I was losing the person I loved and trusted more than anyone to drugs *again*. And I was alone again." I exhale an uneven breath. "I was so hurt."

He stares at me quietly for a second. "Do you remember the last day we were together?"

I swallow down my emotion and nod. "Yes."

"I mean *together* together. On the roof of that old building?"

I nod softly. "Yes."

"You were over on Brentwood Avenue, where you had no business being—"

"I was going to meet you at Joe's," I recall, like it was yesterday.

"You shouldn't have been there." He creases his eyebrows. "You remember the guys who were messing with you?"

"Yeah, I remember."

“Aaron Lewis, Tyler Jones, and Alex Brown.”

“How do you know their names?”

“Aaron Lewis has three arrests for possession. Tyler Jones has one arrest for possession with intent to sell. Alex Brown has two arrests for possession with intent to sell and is currently serving out a fifteen-year sentence.”

Anxiety pricks across my skin and my mind races with questions, but none of them make any sense. “What are you saying?”

“The tall one, Aaron. He said he would get back at me. Do you remember that?”

“The one with the gun?”

“Yes.”

“Wait...you think?” I pull my hand to my mouth and gasp. “Oh, my God.” I exhale, putting the jagged pieces of the truth together.

\* \* \*

### *Lucy, Seventeen Years Old*

“That’s twenty, forty, sixty. Good job tonight, kid,” Joe says, stacking three twenty-dollar bills in Sam’s hand.

Sam shoves the money into the pocket of his sweatpants and reaches for my hand. Even with the gloves, his hands always take a beating during a match. His red knuckles are rubbed raw.

“Sam, your hands.” I lift them to my mouth and kiss his knuckles. “You need ice.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“You still need ice,” Joe says, plopping a soft ice pack in his lap.

Sam jumps and makes a groaning sound that makes me laugh. He picks up the ice pack and holds it to his hand as I inspect his face.

“I don’t see any bruises this time,” I say, running my hand over his eyebrow and his cheekbone. I walk around him and examine his back and shoulders. “Nothing back here.” I run my hand down his spine. “Except for some goose bumps,” I say softly, and kiss his shoulder. I lift his arm and gasp when I see a deep-blue-and-purple bruise covering his ribs.

“What?” He looks down where my hand is tracing the edge of the bruised area. “Oh.”

I call for Joe, who left the room.

“Lucy, it’s nothing. I’m fine.”

“Joe,” I call again, ignoring him.

Joe walks back into the room and sees the dark spot on Sam’s side. “Jesus.”

“Do you think his ribs are broken?”

“Nothing’s broken,” Sam says, putting his arm down. “Doc already cleared me.”

“He didn’t mention anything to me,” Joe says. “But the bruises might not have been showing when he examined you. You sure he checked?”

“He checked,” Sam says.

“Just keep an eye on it, okay? Take some Tylenol tonight,” Joe orders.

“I will.” Sam stands up and pulls his T-shirt on over his head, grimacing through the pain he says he doesn’t feel.

“Here.” I take his hoodie from him. “Let me help.”

He shrugs into it and slings his book bag over his shoulder. “Come on, it’s late. You need to get home or Momma Jenkins is going to have your ass.” My current foster mom isn’t very lenient with my curfew, but she likes Sam, which is the only reason she lets me come to these matches.

“Hold up, I’ll walk out with you,” Joe says, turning off the lights in the locker room. He follows us through the gym and locks the door behind us when we step outside.



“It’s freezing,” I say, hugging myself, and I’m immediately enveloped in Sam’s arms. I snuggle against his sweatshirt.

“Come on, I’ll give you a ride home,” Joe says, and we walk a short distance to where his car is parked in front of the gym.

Sam opens the passenger door for me, but as I’m getting in, I’m startled by a car that roars up onto the curb in front of us—a shiny black sedan with flashing blue and red lights on the dashboard.

*The police?* My heart begins to race and my skin prickles as I consider the imminent danger that must be nearby. I stand up quickly and cling to Sam. His hands tighten around my arms and he pulls me against him, but my mind is flooded with potential threats. A break-in, a robbery, a drug deal gone bad.

The armed police officers approach us.

“What’s going on, officers?” Joe asks, but they ignore him.

“Sir, you need to step back,” one of the officers says, placing his hand over his gun.

Joe takes a step back and holds his hands up.

“Sam Cole.” The other officer steps toward us, and Sam holds me tighter. “You need to let go of the girl.”

Frightened and confused, I shout at the officer, “What? No!”

“You need to step aside,” the officer says to me, but I grip Sam’s sweatshirt tighter.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?” I feel someone’s hands wrap around my arms from behind. “Let go of me,” I say frantically, clinging to Sam.

Sam struggles to hold me close, but the officers pull us apart. “Let go of her!” Sam shouts, reaching for me.

The officer pushes Sam’s face down against the hood of Joe’s car.

“I didn’t do anything!” he says, but I can barely hear him through the fear that’s consuming me.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” I cry. “Why do they want Sam?” I ask Joe.

“Easy, easy,” Joe says. “There must be a misunderstanding.”

“We’re going to need to search your bag, son,” the other officer says to Sam, ignoring Joe.

“You have some kind of warrant or something?” Joe asks.

The officer pulls a folded piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and shows it to Joe, and then Sam.

“Go ahead, I’m not hiding anything,” Sam grits through his teeth.

The officer opens Sam’s book bag and begins rummaging through it, placing his belongings on the hood of the car—his gym shorts, a notebook, a bag of pretzels, a few pens, and a small plastic baggie that’s tied in a knot and stretched around a ball of white powder.

*No.*

“That’s not mine, someone put that there,” Sam says, but the officer ignores him and reaches for his handcuffs, locking them around Sam’s wrists.

*Oh, my God.* My eyes well with tears as my heart shatters inside me.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney...” The officer’s voice, the night sky, and the dimly lit buildings around us blur together into a fog that begins to consume me.

*Is the sidewalk moving?* I turn to Joe and he catches me when I stumble toward him.

The officer puts his hand on Sam’s head and places him in the back seat of his car.

“Sam?” I cry, feeling my world crumble into pieces.

“It’s okay, Lucy. Everything’s going to be okay,” he says before he disappears behind the tinted glass.

Joe drops his head and paces a few times, then he pulls out his phone and calls someone. He has a quick conversation with the person on the other end of the line and hangs up. “Come on,” he says, opening his car door for me.

“Who was that?”

“My lawyer.”

I swallow the hard lump in my throat and get in the passenger seat. “Where are we going?” I ask numbly. “To the jail?”

“No, I’m taking you home,” he says, pulling away from the curb.

I shake my head slowly, feeling as though I’m slipping out of my body. “He’s my home. Sam is my home.”

\* \* \*

“Anyone could have put the drugs in my bag that night,” Sam says, getting up from the couch. “The gym was open, everyone was crowded around the ring, no one was watching who was in the back.”

My heart throbs inside my chest when I realize that he’s right. Anyone could have done it. I swallow the giant lump in my throat and get up from the couch. I walk over to the window and stare at the horizon, unable to face him and admit that I was wrong.

*I should have believed him.*

An overwhelming wave of grief washes over me, flashing pictures of the life we could have had together, and I’m stricken with guilt, because *I’m* the one who threw it away. Not Sam.

*How could I be so quick to think he would betray me? He did everything for me. Even when I gave up on him. I squeeze my eyes shut, as if I can somehow hide from the truth. I’m the one who left.*

“That’s what happened, Lucy. Even if you don’t believe it.”

“I do, Sam.” I turn around and look at him with tear-filled eyes. “I believe you.”

He inhales a deep breath and closes his eyes. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted to hear.”

I bite my trembling lip and think of what could have been, but then I realize it erases Drew...and everything else that’s good in my life. “I’m sorry.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets and nods. “Yeah, me too.”

I swallow down my sorrow and walk back over to the couch. “Have you told anyone else? Your lawyer, maybe? There must be some way to charge those guys.”

He shakes his head and shrugs. “What’s done is done. I’ve spent enough time trying to figure out what happened back then. I’m done living in the past.” He closes the space between us and looks into my eyes. “I want to focus on what’s in front of me, right now.”

My eyes are everywhere, except for him. If I don’t get out of this emotional rabbit hole now, I may never find my way out. I look around, expecting to see his pictures and personal things, but all I see are a bunch of empty shelves, a few staged vases, and a couple of empty bookends. I turn around and take in the space, which looks a bit like a hotel. A very expensive hotel, but a hotel nonetheless. Definitely not a home. “Do you live here?” I ask, glancing around.

He raises an eyebrow. “Last I checked.”

“Sorry, I just meant, there’s no stuff. Where’s all your stuff?”

“My stuff?”

“Well, yeah.”

He drops his head and laughs quietly. “I told you, I’m not here very much.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“About a year.” He walks over to the wall of windows and slides one of the glass panels to the side. “It’s a bit much, but it’s got a great view.”

I follow him outside onto the balcony, which wraps around the corner of the building. “It’s freezing up here.” I wish I hadn’t taken my jacket off. I wrap my arms around myself and peer over the edge of the balcony. “Wow.” He’s right, the view is spectacular.

He leans against the ledge and looks out at the city. “It sure is a different view up close, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Which way is Brighton Park?”

He pushes away from the ledge and leads me around the corner. “Right there.” He points to a place in the distance with certainty.

I gaze out at the skyline and wonder how many times he’s looked this way. An airplane angles up into the sky from the same point on the horizon, and I know with equal certainty it’s the place where we found each other, where we grew up together, where we loved and eventually lost each other.

“Hard to believe it’s only a few miles away, isn’t it?”

“It’s a long way from all of this,” I say, gesturing to his penthouse apartment.

He nods but doesn’t say anything.

“You should be really proud of yourself, Sam.”

“It’s got a great gym. That’s really the only reason I’ve stayed here as long as I have.”

“Oh, yeah, I think I passed it downstairs.”

He grins and I see the shadow of his dimples before he tries to hide them. “Not that gym.” He leads me back inside, and I follow him through the living room, watching his bare feet meet the dark wood floor as he takes me down a short hallway with a door at the end of it. He pushes it open and gestures for me to go inside. “This gym.”

I walk in and I'm standing in the middle of Joe's, boxing ring and all, except that this gym is state of the art and situated twenty-five stories above the ground. "Wow." I breathe in the distinct smell of the rubber floor mats, a sort of industrial smell that I'll always associate with Joe's, and with Sam. I look over my shoulder and smile at him. "Okay, this is pretty great."

He walks past me and grabs one of the ropes around the ring. "It kind of is," he says, unable to mask his pride.

I smile and walk over to him, and wrap my hands around the bottom rope.

Sam grins and climbs up into the ring, shaking the rope in my hands, and my heart flutters when I see his bare feet against the worn mat. He leans down and reaches for my hand, which I reluctantly offer up. He pulls me up into the ring effortlessly, making me giggle as I find my footing.

"Well, this is a first," I say, trying to wrap my brain around the fact that I'm standing in the middle of a boxing ring with Sam, in his gym, inside his high-rise apartment.

He bounces from foot to foot. "You remember the moves I taught you?" he asks playfully, his eyes alight.

"What?" I laugh softly. "Get out of here."

"Come on," he says, still bouncing on his feet.

I hold the rope behind me and shake my head.

"Come on, humor me."

I fight a smile and finally say, "Throat, knee, groin."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Show me your right hook."

"Sam."

"Come over here and show me. I want to see if you still got it."

I let go of the rope and walk across the mat to him.

“Make a fist,” he says, holding his palms up in front of him, making it difficult for me to concentrate on anything other than the flexing muscles in his arms and the tattoos covering them. “Luc,” he says, grasping my attention.

I make a fist with my right hand, just like he taught me when we were kids, and he pushes against it. “Good. Keep it tight. Make it strong.” He holds his palms up again. “Now show me.”

I pull my arm back and hit his left hand as hard as I can, but he doesn’t move. Not at all. “Ow!” I shake my hand.

He stifles a laugh. “Come on, you can hit harder than that.”

Determined, I pull my fist back again and hit his left hand with all my strength, but once again, he’s like a stone statue. “Seriously?”

“Okay, we clearly need to get you in here working out.” He laughs openly now.

“I work out,” I protest unconvincingly, which is met with a dubious look. “Painting can be very strenuous.” I raise my eyebrows and laugh.

He narrows his eyes and then reaches for my wrists and spins me around abruptly, locking me in his arms with my back to his chest.

My breath leaves me in a rush, and my heart takes off in a wild sprint. I know exactly what he’s doing, because he’s done it a hundred times before, but if he weren’t holding me up right now, I’d be a puddle at his feet.

“Now what do you do?” he asks softly against my ear, the warmth of his breath falling onto my heated cheek.

I look down at the mat and see his bare feet planted firmly on either side of my Chuck Taylors, his strong legs encasing mine, which I pray he can’t feel shaking.

“What do you do?” he murmurs again.

I breathe in and out, trying to find my voice, but I only manage to whisper, “I, uh, I...”

“What are you going to do, Lamb?” he pleads softly, and I lose all feeling from my knees to my toes.

My heart pounds inside my chest and my eyes prick with tears when I grasp the question he’s *really* asking. I swallow hard and squirm in his arms, but I barely move, he’s holding me so tight.

“Come on, Luc, what do you do?” he grumbles, and I feel overcome with frustration.

I struggle in his arms, praying he doesn’t let go and see me crying, but after a few seconds, his arms soften and I realize that he’s holding me, not restraining me.

“It’s okay, I’m sorry,” he whispers against my ear. “I’m sorry.”

Afraid to turn around and face him, I stand with my back to his chest, feeling him breathe in and out against me, letting him hold me up in his strong arms, unsure if I can use my legs. I stare at the shelves in the back of the gym that hold his awards, his gold medal and his championship belts, trying to absorb the magnitude of everything he’s accomplished. “Lower my center of gravity,” I finally say, and Sam loosens his hold on me. I squat down and slowly spin out of his arms and face him. “Lower my center of gravity,” I say again softly.

He smiles gently. “You remembered.”

I press my lips together and look into his eyes. “I never forgot.” I climb down out of the ring and take a deep breath to clear my head. I dodge a large punching bag that’s hanging from the ceiling as I make my way to the back of the gym, where I take my time reading the inscriptions on each of his awards.

Sam walks up behind me, but he doesn’t say anything. He just watches me read them, one by one.

I touch the felt-lined case displaying his gold medal. “This is...” I can’t find the words to express how truly unbelievable it is. “It’s incredible.”

He manages a soft smile, but it’s clouded in sadness, a reflection of the joy and pain I feel when I see all that he’s



accomplished and who he's become without me. "I did it for you," he says, burying my heart under a heap of guilt and confusion.

"Sam."

"It's true." He shoves his hands into his pockets.

"Sam...I can't." I close my eyes. "I just...can't—"

"Are you hungry?" he asks abruptly.

"What?" I blink a few times.

"I'm hungry. Are you hungry?" he asks again.

I shrug and nod mechanically.

"Let's go see what's in the fridge." He leads me out of the gym and out of the fog I drifted into.

## Chapter 9

*Lucy*

I stand behind Sam, watching him pull an arsenal of food out of his fridge and pile it onto the kitchen counter. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that he requires so much food, but I'm surprised that he knows how to cook it.

"You cook?" I ask.

He pauses and looks at me and then eyes the greens in his hand. "Oh, um, I, uh...no," he finally says, laughing.

I smile and take the leafy bunch from him. "Do you even know what this is?"

"No."

"It's Swiss chard. It's kind of like kale. You can cook it down or put it in a smoothie. Why do you have all this food if you don't cook?"

He rubs the back of his neck. "I have a chef. He comes over and cooks for me."

"Ahhh..."

"I was hoping to find some leftovers, but I guess I ate them all."

I push my lips together over a smile and ask, "Want me to make something?"

"Are you sure?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. "We can just order something."

I look at the various ingredients heaped on the counter and begin sorting them. "Let's see..." I reach for the limes, some cilantro, and an onion. "Do you have any honey?"

He opens one of the cabinets and pulls out a little golden bear. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah, that's perfect." I peer into the fridge and find two thawed chicken breasts. "How long have these been in here?"

“Just today. Jean-Luc stocked the kitchen this morning so that he can cook while I’m gone.”

“Jean-Luc,” I say, unable to hide the amusement on my face. *So fancy.*

“What?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head and take inventory of the refrigerator shelves. “Okay, how about some sriracha?”

He reaches over my shoulder and the scent of sandalwood fills my nose. “Right here,” he says, handing it to me.

“Thanks.” I set the ingredients on the white marble counter beside the sunken sink and turn toward Sam’s grocery mound by the fridge. I start loading it all back inside, and Sam steps beside me to help. “Can you see if you have any quinoa?” I ask, needing to put some space between us.

“Sure.”

“It kind of looks like rice.”

“Okay.”

I finish loading the fridge and close the shiny stainless steel doors. “Salt and pepper?” I call across the kitchen, wondering where he disappeared to.

“In the cabinet,” he answers from somewhere nearby.

*Which one?* I begin opening the cabinet doors until I find one that’s filled with spices. I grab some kosher salt and a pepper mill. Still no sign of Sam.

“Sam?”

“Yeah?”

I follow the sound of his voice.

“Where did you go?” I ask, rounding the corner. I find him standing in the middle of a small room that appears to be the pantry, scanning the shelves dutifully. There’s enough dry ingredients in here to feed him for a year. I stand beside him and scan the stocked shelves until I see the quinoa. “There.” I

stand on my tiptoes to grab it, but barely brush it with my fingertips.

Sam reaches over me, gently pressing me against the shelves as he stretches for it, and I breathe in his warm scent as his body blankets mine.

He lowers the box between us. “Here.”

I blink up at him, desperately trying to absorb the oxygen in the small room, but there doesn’t appear to be any left. “Thanks.”

“So what exactly are you planning on making with this?” he asks, trying to hide a small smile, which calls his dimples front and center.

I take a step back. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“I’m good at waiting.”

I chew the corner of my mouth and spin around. “Where are your pots and pans?” I ask as I walk back into the kitchen.

He opens a deep drawer below the gas range and pulls out a very large stockpot. “Will this work?”

I laugh and shake my head. “That’s a little too big.” I find a saucepan and a sauté pan and set them on the metal grates. “These will do. Where are your knives?”

He points to a drawer beside me. “In there.”

I open it and find a chef’s knife, a santoku knife, and a couple of wooden spoons. “I’ll need a couple of cutting boards too.”

He finds two plastic cutting boards and places them on the counter beside me. “Can I help?” he asks, watching me take the paper off the chicken breasts.

“Sure.” I set the onion on the cutting board in front of him. “Can you chop this up?”

“Absolutely,” he says confidently, reaching for the chef’s knife.

“Not that one.” I hand him the santoku knife. “This one is for chopping vegetables.”

He eyes the knife curiously and takes it from me.

I point to the little divots on the side of the blade and explain, “Those help break the suction when you cut into the onion so that the pieces don’t stick to the blade.”

“Oh, okay,” he says, creasing his eyebrows.

I begin slicing the chicken breasts into cubes, watching him fight with the onion skin out of the corner of my eye. He picks at one end, pulling a few slivers of the papery skin off, and then starts on the other end.

“Try cutting it in half first. It should come off easier that way,” I encourage, but he gives me a dubious look. I smile and say, “Trust me.”

He cuts the onion in half and manages to get the skin off one side by the time I’ve completed my task.

I wash my hands and reach for his knife. “Here, let me show you.” I cut the end off the side that still has the skin on it and add, “If you cut one of the ends off after you cut it in half, the skin should peel right off.”

He watches me intently.

“Then you just make long slices along the top,” I explain as I begin cutting. “And because there are layers in the onion, you just have to cut across to get little dices.” I look up at him. “Want to try?”

“Okay.” He takes the knife from me and begins slicing.

“Good.” I place my hand over his and guide the knife a little closer to the edge. “Like this, so the pieces aren’t too big.”

He pauses and looks at me, and his skin flames under my palm.

I pull my hand away. “Keep going.” I look down at the small pieces of chicken on my cutting board, struggling to

remember what I need to do next. “Olive oil,” I eventually say. “I need olive oil.”

Sam looks over his shoulder. “Try the cabinet next to the stove.”

I walk across the kitchen, taking a deep breath of Sam-free air to clear my head, and find the olive oil. I drizzle it into the sauté pan and turn the burner on. It clicks and flames under the pan. I go check Sam’s progress while I wait for it to get hot. “Good job,” I say, eyeing the pile of diced onion.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect. You want to drop it in the pan over there?”

He carries the cutting board over to the stove while I season the chicken with salt and pepper. “You want me to put it all in?” he asks.

“Yep, just scrape it right into the pan.” When it hits the hot oil, it sizzles and fills the kitchen with its savory aroma. “Grab a spoon and stir it around a few times until the onions begin to sweat.”

He turns around and looks at me. “Until they what?”

“Sweat.”

“That can’t be the technical term for cooking onions.”

I laugh and walk over to him, and take over with the spoon. “Look, see how the juices are coming out? Onion sweat.” He shakes his head and grins at me, and I give him back the spoon. “You just keep sweating your onions and I’ll get the chicken.”

“Does it sweat too?”

“No.” I drop the pieces in. “Chicken doesn’t sweat. Only onions sweat.”

“I don’t know, that looks like chicken sweat to me,” he teases.

I scrunch my nose. “Chicken sweat is gross. There’s no chicken sweat.”

He holds his hands up. “Okay, okay, you’re the expert.”

I press my lips together over a small smile and he shoves the spoon in the pan again. “No, not yet. Let it sear for a few minutes. Get a bowl and a whisk and we can make the sauce while it cooks.” I go grab the limes and slice them in half.

“Now what?” Sam asks, placing a bowl on the counter beside me.

“Add the sriracha and honey and squeeze in some juice from the limes..”

He follows my directions and begins whisking the ingredients together while I tend to the chicken and get the quinoa going. He stands beside me, holding the bowl, still whisking obediently.

“Okay, now pour it over the chicken,” I instruct, and when he does, it fills the air with sweet, savory spice.

“That smells amazing,” he says, smiling, and I can’t help but smile back. It really does.

By the time the quinoa is done, the sauce has thickened and coated the chicken. I fill a couple of bowls with the fluffy quinoa. “Okay, scoop the chicken into the bowls, and don’t be shy with the sauce.”

I grab the cilantro, give it a quick rinse, and tear a few leaves over the top of each bowl.

“And that, Mr. Sam Cole, light-heavyweight champion of the world, is how you make sriracha chicken and quinoa.” I smile and hold the pretty bowls up between us.

He smiles and nods. “Should we go sit?”

I nod once and follow him to the long rectangular kitchen table. He sits at the end of it, and I take the chair next to him. I’m actually really hungry. I was too anxious to eat earlier today, and by the look of the sky outside, it’s starting to get late. The sun is glowing orange in the reflection of the mirrored building across the street.

Sam takes a bite and so do I. “Oh, wow,” he says over his mouthful.

“You like it?”

He nods and gets another forkful. “With you around, I might have to fire Jean-Luc.”

My heart flutters inside my tight chest. *Is he planning on me being around?* I force a smile over my bite, which suddenly feels too big to swallow.

“How did you learn to cook like this?” he asks, and I see the realization fall over his face before I have to answer.

I press my lips together into a flat line and shrug. “I had a good teacher.”

He pulls his eyebrows together and drops his chin, and pushes his food around with his fork a few times.

“Eat,” I say, stabbing a piece of chicken with my fork. I pop it in my mouth and give him big eyes, and after a few seconds he does the same.

We eat in semi-comfortable silence, until we’ve finished our bowls, then we take our dishes to the kitchen sink. Sam rinses them and loads them into the dishwasher, and we clean up the rest of the kitchen together.

I watch him dry the last pan after I wash it and something about seeing him standing barefoot in his sweats, holding a dish towel, drying a pan we cooked a meal together in, fills me with sadness. *This is how it was supposed to be.*

He puts the pan away and we both look around the spotless kitchen.

Sam reaches inside the fridge. “Do you—” “I should—” We both speak at the same time.

“Do you want a beer?” he asks.

*Do not say yes.*

“Sure,” I say, against my better judgement.

He opens a bottle and hands it to me, and I follow him into the living room where we take our previous places on the couch.



The sun is pouring into the room now, painting the pale gray walls amber. Sam watches me sip my beer, and I feel my fair skin flush under his stare. He must notice, because the corner of his mouth turns up. “Do you love him?”

I lower my beer and answer honestly. “I wouldn’t marry someone I didn’t love.”

He sips his beer.

“He’s good to me, Sam.”

He takes another sip of his beer and rests his arm on the back of the couch. “You never told me why you came to the fight in New York—why you wanted to see me.”

A long silent second passes between us as I contemplate an answer to the question he asked me earlier. “I don’t know. My head has been kind of a mess lately, and I just thought that seeing you might help, or help me realize that I’m insane, which I must be.”

“I was really happy when I saw you that night.” He smiles softly, and I fight the urge to touch the dimple in his cheek.

“You were?”

He narrows his eyes. “Happy is probably an understatement. But I was also really confused.”

I ignore the way my heart is twirling around inside my chest. “You said that you had your team try to find me after the fight.”

“Yes,” he says tentatively.

“Have you done that before?”

“Lucy, I’d be lying if I told you I didn’t have the resources to find you. The truth is, I didn’t want to come looking for you if you didn’t want to be found.”

I crease my eyebrows and consider that.

“But when I saw you”—he studies me with his knowing eyes—“I wondered if maybe you wanted to be found.”

I pick at my thumbnail and shake my foot, which is dangling off the couch. “I’m happy, Sam,” I finally say, but I can’t look up at him.

He sips his beer and watches me carefully. “I think if you were happy, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

I mask my disquiet with a smile. “Well, I am.” I’ve already hurt Sam so much. How do I tell him that I came here to say goodbye?

He leans in and whispers, “I know what happy looks like on you.”

I pull in a weak breath that does little to ease the wooziness in my head. “Are you happy?” I ask, diverting the question to him.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“The day. The match. The party. The girl,” he says, throwing a dagger at my heart.

I look down at my lap and accept the deserved stab. “Yes, you are quite popular with the ladies.” I peek up at him, but he’s looking down at his beer bottle now. “Is there anyone special?”

“No. The girls I go out with are...they’re not...”

“I know. You’ve got a reputation to uphold. It can’t be easy being boxing’s most eligible bachelor,” I say, quoting a headline I saw once.

His eyes flash to mine. “They’re not *you*.”

My heart flutters wildly inside my chest like it’s grown wings.

“It’s hard to meet people that don’t want to take advantage of someone in my position,” he adds. “Everybody wants something.”

I pick at the seam that runs along the inside of my jeans, feeling sad for him. “That must get pretty lonely.”

He holds my stare and laughs softly, but I don't get the joke. I crease my eyebrows and wait for the punch line.

"I slept in a cement room without windows for three years...waiting for you to come visit me. *That* was lonely."

I look down at my lap and part my lips, hoping to ease the pain in my stomach with a quiet breath. I worked so hard to block out thoughts of him living in prison, I never really came to terms with it. The reality of it now is overwhelming. "I'm so sorry, Sam. I can't imagine what it must have been like for you."

"It wasn't all bad. I got my GED. I even got an associate's degree."

A smile spreads across my face. "You did?"

"I know it's not a four-year degree, but..."

"That's wonderful," I say, smiling so big now it hurts.

He smiles too and I see the pride in his eyes. "I knew you'd want me to."

I press my lips together and hold my breath until another wave of emotion passes. "I'm really proud of you, Sam."

"I've waited a long time to hear you say that."

I stare at him, feeling completely lost in an emotional black hole.

"So tell me about your studio," he says, shifting my thoughts. "It seems pretty great."

"It is," I say, blinking at him. "I, um, I'm still getting used to the idea of it being mine, but it's a dream come true. It's starting to get some notice now, and I'm hosting an art exhibit later this month that will hopefully open a lot of doors for me."

"Is the exhibit for your paintings?"

"Some. And other pieces that were submitted to me from artists around the city. If it's a success, I might have a chance to participate in a show in New York next year."

"New York?"

I smile and nod. “That’s my real dream. There’s this gallery in Chelsea that’s hosting an exhibit for emerging contemporary realist painters next year. If I can get their attention with my show, I might be able to earn an invitation.”

“Well, they’d be lucky to have you.” He smiles and sips his beer.

I tuck my hair behind my ear and glance up at the windows. Twinkling lights have come on around the city, and the indigo sky is almost dark now. “I should probably get going.” I stand up and Sam follows my cue.

“I’ll get your jacket,” he says, taking my beer to the kitchen. He returns a few seconds later with my jacket and purse. “You know, I didn’t really have a chance to look around when I was there, but maybe you could show me your studio sometime. If that’s okay. I’d really like to see your paintings.”

A strange feeling exudes from my chest and tingles down to my fingertips at the thought of seeing him again. *Say no.* “Okay.” Drew flashes through my mind, and I remember my original plan to tell Sam that he can’t come see me again. But the thought of this being our last goodbye is almost unbearable. I can’t do it. Not yet.

“Why don’t you put my number in your phone and you can call when it’s a good time,” Sam suggests.

“Okay.” I pull my phone out of my purse and tentatively add *Sam* to my contacts. “What’s your number?” I ask, ignoring the warning signs my mind is holding up. *Proceed with caution...Dangerous territory.*

He recites his number and I enter it carefully.

“I’m really glad you came by today, Luc.”

“Me too,” I say, giving him a friendly hug goodbye. But when he winds his hands around my back and pulls me close, I don’t want him to let go.

“I missed you,” he whispers, and I could die right here in his arms. If he’s a stranger, he sure as hell doesn’t feel like one. He feels like family, like *my* family that I’ve missed so very much.

I close my eyes and breathe him in, nodding silently against his warm chest, savoring how it feels under my cheek. “I missed you too.”

My phone buzzes in my hand like a warning shot sounding, and I let go of him and look at the screen. I hit ignore on the call from Drew and feel the blood drain from my face.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, dropping Drew into my purse, which suddenly feels like a ton of bricks.

Sam walks me to the elevator and presses the call button, and the doors open not a moment too soon. But my heart pounds when I step inside the empty elevator.

“Have a safe trip tomorrow,” I say casually over the pulsing in my ears.

He stands across from me, looking into my eyes, and it feels as if there’s a rubber band wrapped around us, pulling us back together. He takes a step toward me, but the elevator doors close, snapping the rubber band as I’m whisked away from him.

I close my eyes and clutch my stomach, but I don’t think this feeling is going to go away anytime soon. I look at my blurry reflection in the shiny steel doors, grateful that I can’t see my face. I don’t think I could bear to look at myself right now.

## Chapter 10

*Sam*

I pull my hand away from the elevator door and grab my shirt. I try to rub away the ache in my chest, but it's no use. "Fuck!" I slam my fist against my door and push it open. *I'm so incredibly screwed.* I close the door behind me and lean against it, and look around my empty apartment. I've never felt more alone than I do right now. I close my eyes and slide down the door until I'm sitting on the floor. I pull my knees up and fold my arms over them. *She loves him.*

After a few minutes of feeling sorry for myself, I get up and pace around my apartment. *She isn't happy.* I could see it in her eyes when I asked. I fall onto the couch and lean against the cushion where she was sitting, and breathe in the soft scent of her perfume. I can't believe how beautiful she is. She was always pretty, but now...I couldn't take my eyes off her.

*I fucking hate Andrew Christiansen.* Does he know how lucky he is? Does he know how amazing Lucy is? Does he know all that she went through? Maybe it was wrong to spend the afternoon with her, but I don't care. He has the only thing that ever made me happy. I'm not looking to do him any favors.

I walk into my bedroom and lie on the bed. The truth is, I envy him. I grab the remote off my nightstand and lower the screens over the windows. I close my eyes and lie in the dark, listening to the sound of the ceiling fan, hoping sleep will put me out of my misery, but after a few minutes I open my eyes and resort to the only thing that has ever helped fill the hole Lucy left in my heart. I grab my phone and scroll through my contacts until I reach the M's.

"Molly. Let's go out."

\* \* \*

"Sam, get up," Miles calls from the living room, waking me from a deep sleep. "Come on, champ, we've got to go," he

says again, walking into my bedroom. I try to ignore him, but he slaps me on the ass. “Let’s go.”

“Jesus, Miles!” Molly shouts, covering herself with the sheet.

“Remind me again why you have a key to my apartment?” I ask him.

“Because if it weren’t for me barging in all the time, your sorry ass would miss every event you commit to.”

“That *you* commit to, not me,” I grumble, and sit up.

“Good point. If it weren’t for me, your sorry ass wouldn’t have a career.” He grabs my arm and pulls me up. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll see you later, Sam,” Molly says, gathering her clothes off the floor.

“Thanks for last night,” I say to her.

She shoves her hand into my hair and gives me a sincere look. “You know I’m here if you need me, right?”

“Yeah, Molls, I know.”

She gives me a soft smile. “Goodbye, Miles,” she calls over her shoulder as she leaves.

“Goodbye, Molly,” he says, rolling his eyes.

I stretch and head for the shower.

“You’re still banging that chick?” Miles asks, following me into the bathroom.

“She’s not some chick, she’s my friend.”

“I thought *I* was your friend.”

“You are my friend. But I’m not going to sleep with you. So stop begging.” I strip down and turn the shower on.

“Very funny.” He shakes his head and walks out of the bathroom. “I’ll be in the kitchen. I’m going to make some coffee.”

I stand under the hot water not thinking, until Lucy comes creeping back into my mind like a weed. It was all I could do

to block her out while I was with Molly, but now all I can think about is seeing her again.

When I'm through with my shower, I turn off the water and grab my toothbrush.

"You got something to tell me?" Miles asks, walking back into the bathroom, holding something sparkly in his hand.

"What is that?" I ask with a mouthful of toothpaste.

He holds up a diamond ring, and I know instantly that it's Lucy's. I spit out the toothpaste. "Where did you find that?"

"It was on the kitchen counter."

"It's Lucy's."

"Lucy who?" His eyes widen. "Lucy, Lucy?"

"The one and only."

"How the fuck did you end up with her ring?" He drops his hand and gives me a hard look. "Tell me you didn't." He closes his eyes and starts pacing. "I said I needed you focused, Sam. I just wanted you to get closure with this girl. Who, by the way, wrote you off the second you had a pair of handcuffs slapped on your wrists."

"You don't know what you're talking about. It wasn't like that," I say, feeling a shift in my stance on everything I believed for nearly a decade.

"Oh, I think I know." He stops pacing. "But maybe you need a reminder. The only people who gave a shit about you back then are the ones who stuck with you when you were incarcerated. Joe, Tris...they never gave up on you the whole time you were in that shit hole. You didn't have to prove anything to them. They knew you weren't guilty. They knew you were great. They knew you could be the champ. The only thing she ever saw was a criminal."

I shake my head and let out a controlled breath. "You're wrong."

"Where was she when you were locked in that cell, huh? In some fancy house in some stuck-up suburban



neighborhood. She wasn't thinking about you. She was too busy banging her way into high society."

I lunge across the bathroom and pin him against the wall with my forearm, pressing it against his neck. "You don't know what you're talking about," I growl at him.

"Get off me," he grits through his teeth, and I struggle to contain the fire raging through me. "Get the fuck off me!"

I let go of him and step back.

"Are you crazy?"

I grab the counter and take a deep breath.

"You want to risk everything you've worked for, go ahead. But don't say I didn't warn you." He slaps Lucy's ring down on the counter.

"I didn't sleep with her." I turn around and he runs his hand through his dark hair.

"So what, she just came over and took her engagement ring off so you could chat?"

"She must have taken it off when we were cooking."

He creases his eyebrows. "You were cooking together?"

I cross my arms over my chest and shrug.

"I told you to go tell her goodbye. Not ask her on a date."

"I tried. But...it's complicated." I shake my head. "And it wasn't a date. We just talked."

"Listen to me, Sam. I'm not just telling you this as your manager, I'm telling you this as your friend. You are treading on very dangerous ground here. Just promise me you'll think before you do anything stupid."

"You don't have to worry, Miles."

He lets out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, I've heard that before."

"I'm sorry about that," I say, nodding to the wall behind him.

"What, you mean the wall? That you shoved me into?"

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry about it. Stupid idiot.”

I grin. “Still haven’t figured out why you like me so much.”

“Well, I’d lie and say it was about the money, but the truth is you’re like a brother to me. And somebody’s got to look out for your ass.”

“Ah, Miles, I love you too.”

“Shut up.”

\* \* \*

“That was a hell of a fight,” Joe says encouragingly, buttoning up my shirt.

I hold my casted hand out so he can roll up my sleeve. “It was pathetic.”

“Ahh, it doesn’t count. It was for charity.”

“It’s still a draw. The first one of my career.”

“You weren’t exactly in your head tonight, were you?”

“No.”

“You know better than to throw a punch like that. You’re lucky you didn’t break every bone in your hand.”

“Just the one.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a small hairline fracture. It should heal pretty fast.”

“Is the cast really necessary?”

“No. But it’s the only way to keep you off the bag. You’ve got a big fight coming up. Your hand needs to heal as much as possible before then, so you can be ready for it.”

“I’ll be ready.”

He pats my cheek. “I know you will, champ. Take the next few days to work out whatever’s eatin’ ya, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Miles walks in and eyes my cast. “Jesus Christ.” He holds his hands out and looks me up and down. “You got any other injuries I need to know about?” He takes my unbruised face in his hands and inspects it. “I don’t believe it. The only injury you got, you did to yourself.”

“I’m my own worst enemy.”

“You said it.” He grins and wraps his arm around my neck. “You look good. You ready?”

“Yeah.” I follow him to a media room for a panel interview and take my seat beside him.

Everyone begins asking me questions at once, but Miles picks the reporter he wants me to respond to, and the room gets quiet.

I lean in to the microphone and ask, “Can you repeat the question?”

One by one, they take turns asking me the same question a different way, all of them wanting to know about my hand and what my plan for recovery is. But the last reporter surprises me when she says, “You said you were distracted tonight. I don’t mean to get personal, but I can’t help but wonder if a girl isn’t responsible for your loss of focus in the ring?” She smiles and the room joins her in quiet laughter. The status of my love life regularly comes up in interviews, but for the first time, it’s actually relevant.

Miles puts his hand over my mic, leans in to his, and says, “Okay, we’re not here to talk about his love life.”

“So you’re still single?” she presses.

“Come on,” Miles says, irritated.

I lean in to my mic, look directly into the camera in front of me, and say, “For now.”

## Chapter 11

*Lucy*

My phone vibrates on my bathroom counter, but my hands are covered in face wash, so I don't answer the call. It's been forty-eight hours since I left Sam's apartment, and in that time, with plenty of space between us to think clearly, I've decided that I have to let him go. As painful as that decision is, my life is here with Drew. And it's a good life. A comfortable life. A nice, *normal* life. The kind of life that I used to dream of as a kid. Drew loves me and he doesn't deserve to be the third point in a love triangle that he doesn't even know about. Not to mention that his mother took me under her wing, made me feel like family, *and* singlehandedly launched my budding art career with her clout in the community. I owe her so much.

I rinse my face and hands under the warm water, and my phone buzzes again. I grab a hand towel, pat my face dry, and look at the screen. *Sebastian*. I put him on speaker so I can continue with my nighttime routine. "Hey," I answer, dotting my eyes with anti-wrinkle cream that Janice gave me. She says I'll thank her in my forties if I use it in my twenties.

"Sam broke his hand."

I stop dotting. "What?"

"He broke his hand during the Vegas charity fight."

The fight wasn't televised live here, so I haven't watched it yet. "Wait. What? How do you know? How could he break his hand?" *Isn't that what gloves are for?*

"Turn on ESPN."

I run into my bedroom and turn on the TV. I know all the sports networks by heart, so I find the channel quickly. Sam is sitting for a panel interview surrounded by cameras and reporters. The news scroll at the bottom of the screen reads: *Sam Cole breaks his hand during a Las Vegas charity fight.*

I pull my hand to my mouth. "Oh, my God."

"I know."

“I’ll call you back.” I hang up the phone and stare at the screen, watching Sam intently.

He nods and answers the reporters’ questions. His hand is in a hard cast that wraps around his outer three fingers and covers his wrist.

*What happened?* I listen to his manager explain how he fractured his fifth metacarpal throwing a bad punch, a surprisingly common injury in inexperienced boxers. *But Sam isn’t inexperienced.*

He assures the media that it’s a simple fracture that should heal quickly. Joe chimes in and tells the crowd that gloves are intended to protect the face, but good wrapping and proper technique are what protect the hands. When asked if his hand was wrapped properly before the fight, Sam leans in to his microphone and says, “Everyone on my team makes sure I’m ready before each fight. Tonight was no different. If there’s anyone to blame for this stupid mistake”—he holds up his casted hand—“it’s me. I was the only one who came unprepared tonight. I was distracted and I lost focus out there. That’s on me.”

*Distracted?* I chew the corner of my mouth, but when that doesn’t provide the relief I need, I pull my thumbnail to my teeth. I chew it nervously throughout the remainder of the interview, until Sam answers the final question.

He smirks at the bubbly brunette reporter who asks him if he’s single, and then he looks directly into the camera, into my bedroom, into my soul, and says, “For now.”

I swallow hard and stare at the TV, even as the network switches to a different story. I rewind it and watch it again.

*For now.*

...

*For now.*

...

*For now.*

My phone rings and I know it's Sebastian. I hold the phone up to my ear.

"Oh. My. God."

I don't say anything.

"Lucy!"

"What?"

"Did you see the interview?"

"I saw it."

"And?"

"And what, Bas?" I ask, irritated.

He's quiet for a second. "Oh, okay, we're doing the denial thing. In that case, I didn't see a thing. Not a single thing. Especially not Sam looking directly into the camera suggesting he doesn't plan on staying single for long. Or when he said he was too distracted to focus on the match, in which he broke his hand and received the first draw of his career. And I certainly didn't contemplate what on earth could have been so distracting to a world champion boxer that he could forget how to throw a proper punch."

"Are you trying to make me feel like shit? Because it's working."

"I'm trying to make you realize that the boy is still crazy about you."

"So what if he is? It doesn't matter."

"It matters if you feel the same way."

Drew walks into the bedroom with his bag slung over his shoulder. "I have to go. Drew just got home."

"Did you find your ring yet?"

"I have to go, Sebastian," I say again, ignoring his inappropriately timed question. I hang up the phone and turn off the TV. "I didn't hear you come in." I smile at Drew, trying to ignore the way my heart is pounding inside my chest.

"What was Sebastian making you feel like shit about?"

“Oh, my ring,” I say impulsively, feeling the need to point it out before he notices that it’s missing. “I took it off at the studio to paint and can’t remember where I put it. Sebastian was just giving me crap about it on your behalf.” As soon as the lie slips off my tongue, I regret it. *Just tell him the truth. You took it off at Sam’s apartment while you were cooking and didn’t realize it was missing until the next morning because you were too busy crying yourself to sleep over the fact that you’ve decided to let him go.*

Drew pulls me up off the bed by my left hand and looks at my naked ring finger, but I pull it away before he notices that it’s shaking. I swallow hard and prepare myself to tell him about Sam, but it’s about as easy as jumping off a cliff. “Drew, I, um...” I swallow hard and blink up at him. “I—”

“Sebastian doesn’t know me very well.” He smiles and pulls me close. “If you took your ring off at the studio, it’s there somewhere.” He kisses the top of my head. “You’ll find it.”

The breath I was holding rushes out, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“I need a shower.” He pulls his shirt off and drops it at my feet. “Want to join me?”

I give a weak smile and shake my head. “I already showered.”

He winks and walks into the bathroom. “I’m still waiting for that rain check,” he says before he closes the door.

*I know.*

I climb into bed, close my eyes, and hide under the covers, hoping to fall asleep before he returns.

\* \* \*

“That one,” Sebastian says, pointing to one of three paintings I’m considering for the last spot in the exhibit. “It’s dark and depressing, just like you,” he says, staring at the canvas, smirking.

I narrow my eyes and glare at him, but he ignores me.

“Fine. That one,” I say, stalking off to my office to sulk. It’s been a week since Sam’s interview, so I know he must be back in Atlanta, but I still haven’t found the courage to call him. Much to Sebastian’s dismay, the angst is making me miserable, but every time I reach for my phone, I’m paralyzed with anxiety. I don’t know what I’m more afraid of...looking into Sam’s beautiful eyes and saying goodbye, or knowing that I might not be able to. But I can’t wait much longer. I have to get my ring back. Drew left for Philadelphia again this morning, so there’s no excuse to delay any longer.

*The day is almost over now, I justify to myself. Tomorrow is better.*

“Darling,” Janice calls from the front of the studio.

I walk out of my office and find her hanging off Sebastian’s arm, clutching a large white garment bag. “I have a surprise for you,” she sings, and snuggles in close to Sebastian. “I brought you the most beautiful wedding gown to try on,” she squeals.

Sebastian smiles at me with big animated eyes but does nothing to dissuade her. Before I can say anything, she’s dragging me to my office.

“Oh, Janice, I don’t know if right now is the best time.”

“Darling, there’s never going to be a best time. That’s the price you pay for being Atlanta’s most talented up-and-coming artist. You’re in high demand. It’s a sign of success. Don’t be discouraged. But you’re going to have to learn to be flexible or this wedding is never going to happen.”

I swallow down my reluctance and try to be gracious.

“Sebastian, wait out front,” she instructs. “You can be the judge.”

“Okay,” he says, spinning around with a smirk.

I stand still for the next several minutes while Janice cinches me into the ivory lace dress. When she’s finished, she pulls her hands to her mouth and gasps. “This is it. This is the one.”



*Do I get a say?* I look in the mirror to see what all the fuss is about, and a sharp pinch shoots across my chest when I see my reflection. The dress is beautiful. It's simple and elegant. It's exactly my style. But something about wearing it feels wrong.

"Let's go see what it looks like in the light. Come on, you can show Sebastian," she says, gathering the train in her hands.

I lift the bottom of the dress and walk out to the front of the studio with Janice trailing me.

"Oh, Lucy." Bas pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and breathes deeply. "It's really beautiful."

Janice spreads the delicate train out on the floor, beaming as she admires the dress from every angle. She turns me from side to side and spins me around to look at the back of the dress in the light. "Oh, hello," she says, looking over my shoulder, and I cringe because I know someone just walked in, probably thinking they're in the wrong place.

I turn around to see who she's speaking to, and the earth stops spinning. Sebastian and Janice disappear and all I see is Sam. He looks at me as if no one else is in the room and says, "Hi."

"Hi," I breathe, drinking him in. His hair is combed back and he's freshly shaven. He's wearing a snug navy-blue V-neck sweater with the sleeves pushed up, slate-gray pants, and brown leather utility boots. His casted hand is hanging by his side and his other hand is dangling from his pocket.

"I'm Janice Christiansen," Janice says proudly, reaching out to shake his hand.

"Hi, I'm Sam," he says warily.

She looks at me and then smiles at Sam curiously. "Are you a friend of Lucy's?"

Sebastian coughs.

"Um, yes," he says, glancing at me, "a very old friend."

“We grew up together,” I add. I don’t want her getting the wrong idea. Or the right one.

“Really?” she breathes. “I’ve never met anyone from Lucy’s past before.” She puts her hand on my back and coos, “I just thought she dropped straight down from heaven, like a little angel.”

Sam lowers his eyes to the dress and follows the delicate ivory lace all the way up to my face. “I can see why you would think that.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “I’m sorry, let me go change. I was just trying this on.” I fumble over my words and gather the material up in my hands.

“Wait a minute, you’re the boxer.” Realization flashes across Janice’s face, and I freeze. She grabs Sam’s hand and drags him across the studio.

“Janice, what are you doing?” I ask anxiously, following on their heels.

Sebastian gives me big eyes and shrugs.

She pulls Sam to the back of the studio and stops in front of the canvas I’ve been working on for the past month. Before I can stop her, she pulls the drop cloth off the painting. “It’s you”—she smiles at him—“right?”

I feel Sebastian’s hand wrap around mine and squeeze tight. Sam takes a step back and stares at the six-foot canvas. He reaches for the back of his neck, and I watch his shoulders rise up and down slowly.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Janice asks me with a smile still plastered on her face.

“I, um...” I swallow hard and let go of Sebastian’s hand. I pick up the drop cloth and drape it back over the canvas. “I’m not finished with it. It isn’t finished,” I explain, feeling wildly self-conscious under Sam’s eyes, which I can’t even look at.

“Oh...” Janice puts her hand over her mouth. “Did I ruin the surprise?”

I shake my head with disbelief. “How did you even know about it?” I ask, feeling utterly exposed.

“Oh, you know me,” she says, flippantly. “I’m just so nosy, I couldn’t help myself. Were you saving it for the exhibit?”

“Yes,” Sebastian interjects. “She was.”

*Sebastian!* I shoot daggers at him with my eyes.

“Oh, good.” She claps her hands together. “It’s perfect. Has Drew seen it?”

An audible gasp escapes me.

She doesn’t wait for an answer. She grabs Sam’s arm and declares, “I have the best idea.”

*Oh, no.*

“We should get together and have dinner on Saturday...all of us.”

*What? Absolutely not!*

“My place is a mess, my kitchen is under a total remodel, but I’m sure Drew wouldn’t mind cooking for us when he gets back in town.” She looks at me with excited eyes. “Right, Lucy?”

*Is this really happening?*

“Sebastian, you should bring Peter.”

*Who’s Peter?*

“I think you mean Paul,” he corrects.

“Oh, yes, of course, bring Paul. It will be a great time.”

*No, it will not be a great time!*

Sebastian looks as shocked as I feel, but when I look at Sam, he has a mischievous grin on his face. “That sounds great. I’d love to,” he says, to Janice’s delight, and I look at him like he’s grown a second head.

“Wonderful. It’s set, then. Lucy will give you all the details.” She spins around. “I have to get going, but it was lovely to meet you, Sam. Lucy, I’m leaving everything in your

capable hands.” She leaves the room, taking all the air with her.

Sebastian gives me sympathetic eyes, but I’m still irritated at him for offering up my painting for the exhibit.

“Sebastian, right?” Sam asks, reaching out to shake his hand.

Sebastian nods and shakes Sam’s hand. “Yes, that’s right.” He looks at me and then casually tucks his hands into the pockets of his slim-fit chinos. “I need to get going.”

I look at him with panicked eyes, but he backs away heedlessly.

“It was good to see you again,” he says to Sam. He gives me an eager look. “I’ll lock up on my way out.”

I bob my head reluctantly, feeling the edges of anxiety prick down my arms and legs, especially when I realize that Janice trapped me in this dress. But when I look at Sam, all the worry and sorrow I’ve felt over the last week begins to evaporate.

“Hi,” he says, looking into my eyes, sending my heart sprinting.

“Hi,” I say, gazing up at him. I try to shake off the remnants of Janice’s overbearing presence. “Sorry about Janice. She’s a little over the top.”

He holds my stare for a long second. “You didn’t call.”

I look into his eyes but don’t know how to tell him that I didn’t call because I’m not ready to say goodbye to him yet.

“I guess I’m not as good at waiting as I thought.” He glances down at my dress. “Looks like you’ve been busy.”

I shake my head and huff. “This was Janice.” I look down at the dress awkwardly and notice his casted hand. I reach for it and carefully lift it up. “Your hand.”

“It’s fine.”

“Does it hurt?”

He shakes his head and pushes his lips into a small pout. “Pain is fleeting.”

My eyes flash to his.

“It’s missing from the painting.”

I lower his hand and try to hide my embarrassment. “I know...tattoos aren’t exactly the easiest thing to paint.”

He looks at me curiously.

“It’s like trying to copy someone else’s artwork. Besides, I can only get so much detail from a picture.” I point to the tattoos covering his forearm. “You were a blank slate when I knew you.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “You still know me.”

“You know what I mean.” I glance at his arm again. “Did that hurt?”

“My tattoos?”

I nod.

“You don’t have any?”

“No.”

“Good.”

I give him a reproachful look. “That’s a bit of a double standard, isn’t it?”

He smiles softly. “It would be a travesty to mar something so beautiful.”

My breath leaves me in a rush, and his words burn across my skin like wildfire.

“And yes, they hurt.”

I swallow hard. “You said pain is fleeting.”

“It is. But sometimes it reminds us that we’re still alive.”

I nod, trying to slow the thoughts that are racing through my mind.

“Do you want to see them?”

Excitement and apprehension fight for their place in line.

“Maybe then you can finish the painting.”

I close my eyes and sigh. “I wasn’t exactly planning on anyone seeing it.”

He looks at me with sincerity in his eyes that calms my racing heart. “Can I see it again?”

I chew the corner of my mouth. “Okay.” I turn around, take a deep breath, and pull the drop cloth off the canvas, letting it fall to the floor.

Sam stands beside me and stares at the painting for several silent seconds. “It’s really incredible.”

I glance up at him hesitantly. “You think so?”

He looks at me with awe in his eyes. “I’ll never get over how talented you are.”

I smile and touch the canvas, lightly tracing my fingers over his gloves. “I had a pretty remarkable subject.”

“Are you really going to use it in your exhibit? Or was Sebastian just trying to rile you up?”

I blink a few times, surprised by his intuition.

“That’s never been very hard to do.” He masks a smile. “He must know you pretty well.”

I close my eyes briefly, thinking about Sebastian’s brazen declaration. “He does. And...I don’t know. Maybe. If I can finish it in time.”

The corners of his mouth turn up. “I can help you with that.”

I laugh softly. “You want me to finish it now?”

He shrugs. “Unless there’s somewhere else you need to be.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Nowhere else.” And if there was, I’d cancel. I’d fake an illness or a flat tire. I’d say I was robbed at gunpoint if I had to, just to spend another minute with him. The thought is more than troubling. How am I going to say

goodbye to Sam when I can barely stand the thought of him leaving? “Just...let me change out of this.”

I gather the train in my hands, hurry to my office, and close the door behind me, grateful for a minute alone to calm my racing heart and clear my clouded head. But I soon realize that I can't reach the buttons on the back of the dress. *Janice!* I reluctantly open the door and call for help. “Sam?”

He walks into my office with an inquisitive look.

“I can't reach the buttons,” I say, turning around and squeezing my eyes shut.

“Oh, okay,” he says, walking up behind me, standing so close I can feel the heat coming off him. He reaches for the top button and unhooks the silk loop from around it. “Good thing they didn't wrap up my whole hand,” he says, and I laugh awkwardly. He's quiet as his fingers move down my back, but I feel his warm breath against the exposed skin between my shoulder blades each time he unloops another button.

“Sorry.” I force my eyes open and try not to sound breathy. “This dress is ridiculous.”

He leans in so that his mouth is right next to my ear and whispers, “It's beautiful.”

I breathe in and out slowly, trying to find my heart. “I think I've got it from here.”

He takes a step back, and I welcome the space between us.

“I'll be right out,” I say, closing the door behind him when he leaves. I lean against it and wait for the feeling to return to my legs, then I step out of the dress and carefully place it back in the white garment bag, trading it for my painting clothes on the back of the door. I pull on my old tattered cutoffs and look at the ratty T-shirt in my hands. *I can't wear this.* I glance around my office and see a plastic dry-cleaning bag draped over one of the chairs. *Thank you, Sebastian.* I tear into it and find a plain white poplin shirt, the most expendable item of the bunch, and quickly slip into it. I button up the front, roll up the sleeves, and head back into the studio.

Sam raises an eyebrow when I pass him.

“I just need to get my paints,” I say, walking across the cool cement floor on my bare feet. I return a few seconds later, dragging my paint cart behind me.

Sam smiles and crosses his arms over his broad chest, watching me intently as I prepare everything. I grab a small paint-covered remote from my cart and point it at the ceiling. “Lighting,” I explain, adjusting the lights until they’re just right.

He uncrosses his arms and reaches for the hem of his sweater with his good hand, pulling it up over his chiseled abs and chest, and I watch with anticipation like the unveiling of a masterpiece.

“I think I might need some help,” he says, struggling to get it over his head with one hand.

“Oh.” I step toward him and assess the situation. “Other arm first.” I laugh, tugging his sweater back down. I raise his arms above his head, and he holds them there while I work the sweater up over his stomach and chest. I stand on my tiptoes to get it over his head and shoulders, breathing in the familiar scent of sandalwood and laundry detergent that lingers on his warm skin. He tries to take over, but his sleeve gets caught on his cast. “Here,” I say, carefully pulling it down his forearm and gently tugging it over his cast.

His eyes meet mine, and I could dive right into them and swim around for days. “Thanks,” he says, low and husky. He lowers his hand to his side and stands before me like a perfectly sculpted statue, wearing slacks and boots.

I drop his sweater on the floor. “Sorry,” I say, realizing what I did. I lean down to pick it up, but Sam catches my wrist.

“Leave it.” He pulls me back up and inadvertently closer to him, making me stumble backward. But he puts his hand behind my back to catch me. “Careful.” I feel the warmth of his skin under my hands and his breath on my forehead, but I don’t look up, because I know that if I see even a glimpse of the yearning I feel right now in his eyes, I might not be able to pull away from him.



His hand falls away, and I'm both relieved and disappointed at once.

I raise my eyes slightly, but only as far as his chest, which I study carefully. I drop my head to the side and examine every detail and explore every line of the tattoos that cover him. I bring my hands up between us and touch the words scrolled beneath his collarbone. *Pain Is Fleeting*. I trace the letters, following the loops and memorizing the curves of the font with my finger. Sam lets out a heavy breath, and goose bumps flash across his skin.

"Sorry. It gets cold in here sometimes."

"I'm not cold," he says hoarsely.

My eyes flash to his, but I quickly avert them when I see the way that he's looking at me. I pause and quietly explain, "It helps me feel how I should paint it." I concentrate on my task, tracing the beautiful lion that covers his heart, memorizing its ferocious eyes and teeth with my fingers. I follow its mane over his shoulder, turning him slightly to see how it connects to the tattoos that cover his arm. "Okay," I say, when I'm ready to start.

"You forgot one." He holds his hand above his shoulder, showing me the small tattoo that's scrolled across his rib cage.

I inhale a deep breath of the thick air surrounding us and press my fingers to it lightly. I trace the cursive letters carefully. *L-a-m-b*.

"That one hurt the most," he whispers, piercing my heart and stealing the breath from my lungs. He finishes me with a devastating look that stokes a fire burning deep inside me.

I pull in a slow breath, but the oxygen only fans the flames higher. I swallow hard and reach for my paint cart with shaking hands. "Don't move," I say, just louder than a whisper. I reach for a tube of raw umber and squeeze a little onto my palette, then I add some ultramarine green and mix them together until I get a dark shade that's almost black. I dip my paintbrush into the little mound of paint, wiping it on my palette several times until my hand is steady enough to begin. I

position my brush over the canvas, but I freeze when I feel Sam standing behind me.

“Lamb,” he whispers in my ear, pleading.

I breathe in and out, desperately trying to extinguish the fire, but it sears through my veins with abandon. When his lips brush my ear, I stop breathing and close my eyes.

“I know you feel it.” His warm breath falls on my cheek.

“I—” I gasp. “I can’t—”

He reaches for my face and turns me around, and I drop the paintbrush. “Open your eyes.”

If I look at him, I’ll lose my grip on the small shred of willpower I’m holding on to, so I keep them closed.

He rubs his thumb over my cheek, coaxing me, and I feel it down to my bones. “Look at me,” he urges, closing the space between us until I’m flush against his heated body. His chest rises and falls against mine with tortured breaths. “Please,” he begs longingly, “I *need* you, Lamb.”

I open my heavy eyes to a fiery storm of blue and brown. “Sam,” I whisper, knowing that I’m on the precipice of a monumental decision. The kind that alters the universe and changes the lives of everyone in it.

“Please,” he begs again, dropping his mouth to mine, pushing me closer to the edge. “I can’t go another second without you,” he whispers against my lips.

A tidal wave of emotion washes over me, flashing images of the life I’m supposed to have with Drew. My nice, normal, *safe* life with Drew. But choosing that life will erase Sam forever. My panicked thoughts thrash around my head, rocking me to my fiery core. *I can’t lose Sam again.*

I close my eyes.

Take a breath.

And jump.

“Yes.” I nod fervently against his lips. “Yes,” I say again, until I’m silenced by their sweet relief. He presses his mouth

firmly against mine and holds me as I fall into an inferno I have no way out of. I shove my hands into his hair and kiss him with every fiber of my being, pouring my heart and soul back into him. He groans into my mouth, claiming my tongue with his, and I'm cloaked in a warm, familiar, velvety blanket that I never want to let go of. I close my fists in his hair and moan into his mouth.

He breathes heavily against my cheek and drops his hand to my waist, finding his way under my shirt. He presses his hand to my back and pulls me against him, but it isn't close enough. I reach for the buttons on my shirt and Sam takes over, yanking the two sides apart. He pushes it off my shoulders and drops his mouth to my neck. *Oh, God.*

Drew wanders back into my mind like a boat drifting out of the fog.

*Oh, God.* I can't do this. "Stop," I say urgently against his lips. "We can't do this. I can't do this." I cry, because I want him so badly I can barely breathe.

He squeezes his eyes shut and lets out a tortured breath. "Why?" he asks, just as pained, rubbing his thumb across my cheek.

"You know why."

He gazes into my eyes, into my soul, and says the words I've wanted to hear since the moment he ripped back through my heart. "I want you, Lucy. I want you *back.*" His proclamation reverberates through my head, and my heart doubles in size. "I know we've made mistakes," he says urgently, "but we can leave it all behind us and start over. Together. It can be like it was always supposed to be."

"Start over?" My throat suddenly feels tight. "I've worked so hard to get here."

"I'm not asking you to give up your career," he says with a small, apprehensive smile.

"Just my life," I whisper.

He lets out a frustrated breath and drops his hand. "Your boyfriend would suffice."

I pull the two sides of my shirt together and step out of the hazy cloud of desire. I walk over to the couch and sit down. “He’s not my boyfriend. He’s my fiancé. And we live together.”

“I’m aware.”

I give him an impossible look and explain, “Everything I have is tied up in him, Sam. Everything. My career. My *studio*.” A sick feeling is suddenly plaguing me.

“Lucy, if you’re worried about money, it’s not an issue.”

I let out a distraught breath. “How could I do this to him? How could I do this to Janice? After everything they’ve done for me.”

“Is that what this is? You think you owe them something?”

I get up and stand in front of him. “I do owe them something. I owe them everything! They became my family when I thought I had no one left. They helped me make my dream come true—my career took off because of them. The exhibit I’m hosting next week is only happening because of them.” I close my eyes and let out a remorseful breath, because I doubt the exhibit will still happen now. *Sebastian is going to be so upset.*

“Do you even love him, Lucy?” he asks skeptically.

“I told you, I wouldn’t marry someone I don’t love.”

“That’s not an answer. Do you...love him?” His eyes burn into me, imploring for the truth.

I swallow hard and chew the corner of my mouth, afraid to make any sudden moves. I’m aware that I’m standing on a very thin sheet of ice that’s filled with cracks, just like the ones I put in Sam’s heart. One wrong move and I could lose him forever.

“Yes,” I answer honestly, “I love him. But...not the way that I loved you. I could never love anyone else that way.”

“The way you *loved* me.” The corners of his mouth turn down, and he drops his chin. “Maybe that’s the problem.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out something shiny. “You

see, I *still* love you.” He hands me my engagement ring, and my heart shrinks inside my chest. “I never stopped.”

“Sam.” I reach for him, but he walks over to the painting and picks his sweater up off the floor. He slips it on over his head, but it gets caught on his cast.

I approach him carefully and reach for his sleeve. “Let me help,” I say softly.

“He doesn’t make you happy.”

“You don’t know him.”

He reaches for my hand and says firmly, “I know *you*.”

“Sam.”

“I can make you happy, Lucy. You know that I can.”

I swallow down a quiet sob. “I know you can, but it’s not that easy.”

“Yes it is.”

“No, it’s not,” I cry.

He reaches for my face and cups my neck. “I want you, Lucy.” He drags his hand to my chest and places it over my heart. “I *want you*,” he groans. “But if you tell me that you don’t want me back, that you don’t love me anymore, I’ll walk away and I’ll let you go.” His face screws up and he closes his eyes. “If that’s what you really want, I’ll leave right now and I’ll say goodbye to you for good.”

“No.” I shake my head and blink back tears. “I can’t tell you that. Because I still love you too.”

He exhales an uneven breath and wraps me in his strong arms. “Then come back to me,” he pleads against my ear. “Come back to me, baby. Please.”

A small cry bubbles out of me. “I want to. More than anything. But I don’t know how.”

He unwraps his arms from around me and looks into my eyes. “Yes you do.”

I stare into his beautiful eyes and nod, but the thought of hurting Drew and ending my career before it's even started is overwhelming. "I...I just need some time, okay? I need to figure everything out." I blink up at him, begging for his understanding. "Please."

He tucks my hair behind my ear and nods. "Okay. But don't take too long. Because I don't know how much longer I can live without you."

I ignore the storm of emotions brewing inside me. "I won't."

## Chapter 12

*Lucy*

*Pick up. Pick up. Pick up.*

When the unanswered call goes to Drew's voicemail, I huff loudly and hang up the phone. I immediately try to call him back, desperate to talk to him before the guilt eats me alive, but once again it goes to voicemail. "Always too busy with work," I grumble quietly to myself, shaping my guilt over kissing Sam into something that resembles anger and unfairly pointing out Drew's shortcomings. I pace around my studio, unsure what to do with myself since Sam left ten minutes ago. *Call Sebastian.*

"Hey," he answers on the first ring.

"Sebastian, I need you. Can you come back to the studio?"

"Sure. Is everything okay?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe."

"What's going on? Are you okay?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. Can you just come back, please?"

"Lucy Marie Bennett, if you think I'm going twenty minutes without knowing if you're okay or not, you have another thing coming."

"I'm fine, Sebastian. I just kissed Sam," I say quietly.

*Just?* I think and drop my face to my hand.

Sebastian gasps. "I'll be right there."

I hang up and fall onto the worn leather couch, breathing deeply in hopes that it will bring some small shred of comfort to kissing Sam and altering the course of both our lives—and Drew's. But it doesn't. I close my eyes and rub my tight chest. Drew is going to be devastated. And Janice is never going to speak to me again. I look around my beloved studio. I'm going

to lose it. Which means no exhibit. And no invite to the show in New York next year. My heart sinks inside my chest.

After a few minutes of feeling sorry for myself, I get up and walk over to the unfinished painting of Sam. I stand in front of it, gauging the additions that I need to make. Then I close my eyes and try to remember the way each word was scrolled across his skin. After several lingering seconds, I reach for my paints and mix them on a new palette. I grab a clean brush and begin painting the word *Pain*, but I stop after I make the loop for the *P*.

*Pain Is Fleeting.*

I really hope so, especially for Drew's sake.

I look at Sam's eyes in the painting, which are a perfect reflection of the eyes that bore into my soul when we kissed. I reach out and touch his full lips, which felt so right against mine. I trace his broad chest and shoulders and follow the curves of his muscular arms. I've always felt safe with Drew, but when Sam held me, it felt like he could protect me from the entire world. *He probably could.*

I begin painting again, thinking of the way that he called me *Lamb* and the way that he said he needed me. The way that he kissed me. My conflicted heart beats inside my chest like a bass drum, and I have to work hard to keep my hand steady. I love Drew, but Sam is woven through my soul like a piece of steel thread that can never be broken. After all these years, it hasn't weathered; it hasn't wavered. It's just as strong today as it was when I was seventeen. Strong enough to cut right through my nice, *normal* life with Drew.

\* \* \*

"Lucy?" Sebastian calls from the front of the studio.

"Back here."

He finds me in front of the large stainless steel sink in the back of the studio scrubbing my hands and paintbrushes.

"Hey," he says cautiously, "were you painting?"



“Yeah.” I dry my hands on a paper towel and toss it in the garbage, but as soon as I look at him, my face flushes with shame, and tears fill my eyes.

“Oh, Lucy.” He steps toward me and pulls me into a hug. “It’s okay.”

“How? How is any of this okay?” I cry into his thick sweater. “What am I going to do?”

He gently pushes my shoulders back and dabs the middle of his sweater with his sleeve. “Well, first, let’s find you something else to wear.” He flips the bottom of my shirt up and runs his thumb over the broken thread where a button used to be. He raises an eyebrow. “Must have been one hell of a kiss.”

I spin around to go find another shirt in my office, and Sebastian follows me.

“Are you sure that’s all it was?”

I turn around and lean against my desk. “Yes.” I tuck my hair behind my ear and nod. “But it could have been more,” I admit. “If I didn’t make myself stop, if I didn’t *force* myself to stop—”

“But you did stop.”

“Yeah.” I shrug, but it doesn’t make things any better. I didn’t *just* kiss Sam, I gave myself back to him. What could hurt Drew more than that? I close my eyes and confess, “I didn’t want to stop. I wanted Sam, more than I’ve ever wanted anything before.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder and says delicately, “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. I’m engaged and I kissed someone who isn’t my fiancé.”

“Yes, well, I can see how that might put a damper on the wedding plans.” He narrows his eyes, but I don’t laugh.

“I can’t marry him.” I exhale and blink back tears. “I can’t marry Drew.” Saying that out loud practically sends me into

hyperventilation. “Oh, my God, Sebastian. What have I done?”

“Okay, just slow down.” Sebastian lifts his hands and inhales a slow, deep breath, then he lowers his hands as he exhales. “You just need to breathe.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and says calmly, “It’s going to be fine. You kissed Sam. You didn’t sleep with him. I’m sure if you explain your history with Sam to Drew, he’ll forgive you and you can still get married. In years to come, this will be nothing more than a little bump in the road.”

“I meant, how could I have promised my heart to Drew when it still belonged to Sam?”

“Oh.” He drops his hands.

“And I knew it did, Sebastian. I knew it. But I fought it—that feeling in my gut that told me Drew wasn’t the one, that told me *not* to say yes when he asked me to marry him, that led me to break up with him shortly after he proposed.”

“Wait, I thought you broke up because he was working too much.”

I shake my head sheepishly. “That was just an excuse. I needed space. Because even though there were a hundred reasons for me to marry Drew, there was one reason not to.”

“Sam.”

My shoulders slump and I fall into my desk chair. “I spent those two weeks that we were broken up going over every possibility of ever being with Sam again and subsequently striking them all out. The odds were stacked so high against us that I eventually gave up.”

“And you decided to marry Drew.”

My eyes fill with tears. “I love Drew.”

Sebastian sits in the other wooden swivel chair in my office and rolls it over to mine. “I know you do,” he says, reaching for my hand.

“But it’s a different kind of love than what I feel for Sam.” I wipe my eyes. “Drew is like a blue sky after a storm, but

Sam is the earth and the sun and the ocean. He's the reason for the storm in the first place."

"Not too many people have that kind of effect on us."

"So how am I supposed to tell Drew that he doesn't?" I shake my head. "He thinks I'm the love of his life. He thinks he's *mine*. I'm the most selfish person."

"You're not selfish. You lost the only love you'd ever known and then you picked up the pieces of your broken heart and you moved on. You're strong. You tucked Sam away for safekeeping because you had to, and then you began building your life without him—a good life that included Drew. And sure, Drew's not the love of your life, but do you know how many people actually end up with their soulmate?"

"You did."

He flutters his eyes and shakes his head. "We're not talking about me." He puts his hand under my chin and says with certainty, "You did the practical thing, and there's nothing wrong with that. You built a life to be proud of with someone you love. That's far more than most people can say."

"And now it's about to come crashing down all around me. *God*." I groan. "I should have told Drew about Sam. I had so many chances. I was just so afraid to hurt him."

"Sometimes it's easier to protect our loved ones with a lie than hurt them with the truth."

"How do I protect him now?" I sigh and shake my head. "I'm not strong, Sebastian. I leapt off that cliff today and kissed Sam knowing I wasn't doing the right thing for anyone except me."

"Then why did you stop?"

"Because I don't want to hurt Drew any more than I have to."

He presses his lips together and nods. "Case in point. You're not selfish."

"Weak argument."

“What about Sam?” he asks, swiveling in his chair.

“What about him?”

“Well, you’re awfully concerned about Drew’s feelings. Have you thought about how hard this must be on Sam?”

“Sam is...tough.”

“I don’t care if he’s made of steel. If he feels the same way about you, he must be going through hell right now.”

I drop my head to my hands and fight the tight feeling in my chest. The thought of hurting Sam is far worse than the thought of hurting Drew. I feel awful for even thinking that, but it’s true. If they were in a burning car together, I would save Sam. I put my face back in my hands and mumble, “I’m a terrible person.”

“No you’re not.” Bas pulls my hands away from my face. “You’re a good person. And you’re a kind person. You care about everyone around you. Now, maybe it’s time to start caring about you. What’s right for you, Luc?”

“Sam. Sam is what’s right for me. I know it in my bones. But what if choosing what’s right for me means hurting everyone else in my life? How do I live with that?”

He drops his head to the side and asks, “Did I ever tell you about my Grandma Meg?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Margaret Monroe Monahan. She was a firecracker. She died when I was in college.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, reaching for his hand.

“Before she died, she said something to me that changed my life.”

I sit up in my chair and listen intently.

“As I sat on her bed, holding her hand, ready to say goodbye, with my girlfriend waiting in the other room—”

“Girlfriend?” I raise my eyebrows and he smiles.

“She looked at me and said, ‘Honey, I want you to do something for me.’ Of course, I told her I’d do anything. She said, ‘I want you to be honest about who you are.’ Now, I hadn’t told anyone I was gay, especially not my family—I was having a hard enough time trying to come to terms with it myself—so I blinked and nodded, trying to figure out what she was talking about. But she just smiled and said, ‘You’re gay.’”

“How did she know?”

“We were always really close. I guess I was just more myself with her than I was with anyone else.”

“Well, what did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything, at first. I tried to laugh it off. But she knew. She looked me in the eye and said, ‘You don’t have to pretend with me, honey. I’ve known you were gay since you were thirteen years old.’”

I widen my eyes. “Did you know when you were thirteen?”

He crosses his arms. “I knew I didn’t like girls the way that my friends did. I just didn’t know what it meant exactly.” He shakes his head and laughs. “Out of everyone in my family, my elderly grandmother was the only one who could see that I was gay.”

“So what did you do?”

“I wept like a small child. It was like she had cut the string to a giant helium balloon I’d been holding onto all those years. It was an enormous relief. But it was also terrifying. At that point in my life, the idea of coming out to my family, and to my girlfriend of two years, was almost paralyzing. It meant admitting that I’d been lying to them. And it meant accepting that they might not forgive me.”

“Sebastian.”

“Honestly, if it weren’t for the next thing she said, I don’t know if I would have done it. But she looked at me and said, ‘You listen to me, Sebastian. You only get one chance at this life. And it may seem like you have all the time in the world. But I’m at the end of the road and I know how fast it goes.’”

Don't waste your life pretending to be something you're not. Be who you are. Be happy, angel." His eyes mist a little. "That's what she used to call me." He clears his throat. "That was the last thing she said to me."

I press my lips together and reach for his hand again. "Grandma Meg was a really smart lady."

He nods. "She was a pretty incredible woman."

"Thanks for telling me that."

"Lucy, telling my parents that I'm gay was the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

"How did you do it?"

"With a lot of courage. And faith. I believed what my Grandma Meg said to me that day. Telling my parents the truth was scary, but I wasn't going to spend my whole life pretending I was happy when I wasn't. Because the thought of lying in a bed at the end of my life knowing I'd never found true happiness was far scarier."

"But your parents understood? I mean, you guys are really close."

"Now. But it wasn't always that way. My mom was devastated because she thought I'd never be able to give her a grandchild." He laughs and shakes his head. "She prayed for me around the clock. And my dad couldn't even talk to me for a while. But yeah, they eventually came around, and in the end, they were asking for *my* forgiveness." He shrugs. "I think it was the hardest on my girlfriend. She thought it was her fault somehow, like she'd done something to turn me gay. We'd been dating for so long, I can see why it was confusing for her. But now she's married and has a baby. And I'm so happy for her. Because I know I couldn't have given that to her."

"Wow."

"I sometimes wonder, if my Grandma Meg hadn't made it her dying wish for me to be honest about who I really am, how many years of my life, and my girlfriend's, would I have wasted because I was too afraid to tell her the truth?"

“Sebastian, I can’t imagine you being anyone other than you.”

He stands up and pulls me out of my chair. “You’re going to figure all this out, sweetie. You just have to be true to yourself. And keep harnessing all that emotion to create more amazing paintings like the one I saw today.” He raises an eyebrow.

“I finished it,” I say, trying to hide a smile.

His eyes light up. “Show me.”

I lead him out of my office and over to the painting.

“Wow.” He gazes at it. “It’s really incredible. It may be your best work.”

“You think so?”

He nods. “I love it. It’s strong. Powerful. Provocative.” He pulls his hand to his chin. “He looks determined, but I can’t tell if he’s winning the fight or losing it.” He drops his head to the side. “But he won’t give up. He’ll take hit after hit if he has to.”

I swallow hard, listening to his interpretation of the painting.

“And the way you layered the colors is really incredible. So...alive. And the lines here”—he points to the tattoos on his arm—“they’re so fluid.” He smiles at me. “You did good.”

I smile back. “Thanks. Especially since you volunteered it for the exhibit.”

“You’re going to use it?” he asks excitedly.

I shrug and nod. “If there still *is* an exhibit.”

“What are you talking about?”

I keep my eyes on the painting, afraid to look up and see the disappointment in Sebastian’s eyes. “When Drew finds out about Sam—rather, when *Janice* finds out”—I let out a remorseful sigh—“it might be the end of the exhibit. You should probably be prepared for that.”

“Then maybe you should wait until *after* the exhibit to tell Drew.”

I look up at him, but I can tell he’s not joking when I see the serious expression on his face. “Sebastian, it’s not until next week. I can’t keep this from him that long.”

“It’s *only* a week. You’ve been working for this all year, Lucy. *We’ve* been working for this all year. How can you throw it away when we’re this close? How can you throw away your chance to sell in New York?”

I chew the corner of my mouth. “New York isn’t a guarantee.”

“It will be when they see this,” he says, staring at the painting.

I look at it again and think of everything we’ve done to prepare for the exhibit. All the late nights and months of planning. I think of New York and the possibility that it holds. My whole career hangs in the balance. I swallow down the lump in my throat and clench my fists. “Okay. I’ll wait until after the exhibit. It’s only a week,” I tell myself. I may die of guilt, but I can wait a week to break Drew’s heart. *It’s not that long.*

Sebastian keeps his eyes on the painting and lets out a contented sigh. “It’s going to steal the show. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had an offer for fifteen thousand. Maybe more.”

I pull my eyebrows together. “I’m displaying it, but it’s not for sale, Bas.”

“Pity. Well, it will definitely get you some attention if Sam shows up.”

“Who said anything about Sam coming?”

“Lucy, you can’t have a painting of him in the show and then not expect him to be there.”

I hadn’t thought that far. “If Sam comes to the exhibit, so will the media.”

“Isn’t that what we want?”



“I want people to take notice of my work, but that kind of attention is on a whole other level. And how will I explain it to Drew?”

He narrows his eyes. “Let’s just worry about getting through dinner first.”

My throat tightens at the thought of having Sam over for dinner, which is inevitable if I wait until after the exhibit to tell Drew. “Why the hell would Sam even want to come to dinner?” I huff. “Is he insane?”

Bas looks at me like I’m the crazy one. “He wants to size up his competition. He’s a man. It’s what we do.”

“Well, I’d like to avoid it, but Janice isn’t going to forget about it, is she?”

“Nope.”

I roll my eyes and huff again. “Neither will Sam.”

“You have two options. Tell Drew about Sam now and kiss your career goodbye. Or suck it up and have dinner with your fiancé and your soulmate, who fascinatingly aren’t the same person.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “That’s not funny.”

He pulls his mouth to the side and pinches his fingers together. “Just a little bit.”

## Chapter 13

*Lucy*

“Hello?” Sam’s low, sultry voice answers the phone.

“Hey.”

“Lucy?”

I’m quiet for a second. I’ve been fighting the urge to call him for the last twenty-four hours since he left me at the studio to sort out the ambiguous details of our future. But I couldn’t wait any longer. I needed to hear his voice. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“Hang on a second.” He says something to someone in the background, but it’s muffled. “Hey,” he answers again, his voice softer now.

“Is it a bad time?”

“No, I was in a meeting, but I stepped out.”

“I’m sorry, I can call you later.”

“It’s okay. I can talk.”

I’m quiet again.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“I’m glad you called. I thought I was going to have to use my resources to find your number.” I hear the smile in his voice.

“Well, you have it now, so that won’t be necessary.”

“Good, because I can’t go a whole day without hearing your voice.”

“Sam—”

“I know, you need time. I’m trying to give it to you. But I don’t want to wait for you, Lucy.”

“I know.”

“Where are you? I want to see you.”

A mix of excitement and reluctance flashes hot across my skin. “Um, right now? I’m at home, but—”

“I’ll be done here in an hour. I’ll come get you.”

“You want to come here? To my house? No.”

He laughs quietly. “Okay, then meet me somewhere.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. I doubt we can meet in public without him being noticed. But I need to see him too. I have to explain my decision to wait until after the exhibit to tell Drew. “I can come by your apartment later.”

“Okay.” I hear the satisfaction in his voice.

“Will you be home this afternoon?”

“I’ll be there.” I hear someone in the background. “Lucy, I have to go.”

“Yeah, of course, your meeting. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I say, trying to hide the angst in my voice. “Bye.” I hang up, but my phone buzzes in my hand, startling me.

*Janice.*

I take a deep breath and answer, “Hi, Janice.”

“So, have you worked out the details with Drew yet?”

“The details?” My pulse races at the mention of his name.

“For dinner on Saturday.”

“Oh, um, no. I haven’t spoken to him about it yet.” Because I’m hoping there won’t be a dinner. “He’s been really busy this trip.”

“Well, I hope Saturday at eight is okay for everyone. I had Sebastian go ahead and add it to your calendar.”

“I’ll mention it to Drew when I talk to him.” Which at the current rate will be when he gets home tomorrow. He’s barely had time to respond to my text messages.

“Okay, well, be sure to tell Sam.”

“I will.”

“Saturday at eight.”

“Got it.”

“Oh, and darling, have you given any more thought to that gorgeous dress?”

“The dress. Right. I, um, I think that maybe I should see a few more before I commit.” My face screws up with guilt, because I have no intention of trying on any more dresses.

“Well, okay. I’ll see what else I can come up with.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. I don’t know who I’m more afraid of hurting. Drew or Janice.

“Bye, darling.”

“Bye, Janice.”

I slide my phone across the kitchen counter. I can’t imagine having Sam here for dinner. I walk into the living room and scan the framed pictures on the shelves next to the fireplace that showcase the life I built without Sam. I think about what Sebastian said—how hard this must be for him—and I begin to take them down, one by one, stacking them in my hands.

I step back and eye the space. *Maybe Drew won’t notice.* I shake my head and put them all back.

\* \* \*

I pull into spot 322, surprised that the parking garage guard didn’t ask for my ID. He just smiled at me and raised the gate to let me in. I park and get out, passing Sam’s shiny black car on my way to the stairs that I take to the first floor.

When I walk into the lobby I’m greeted by the guard at the front desk. “Miss Bennett, it’s good to see you again,” he says, smiling at me.

I camouflage my apprehension with a smile. “Just Lucy.”

“Okay, Miss Lucy. Is he expecting you?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“I’ll let him know you’re on your way up.”

“Okay.” I make my way across the lobby to the bank of elevators, my heels tapping on the marble floor as I go. I try to look at my reflection in the doors, but all I can see is a shadowy cast of black, my clothing color of choice this week, from my skinny-heeled zip-up booties to my moto leggings to my leather jacket. I did throw on a gray scarf to hide behind.

The elevator doors open and I step inside, followed by a woman I wasn’t aware was behind me. She presses the button for the sixteenth floor, and I shrink under her watchful stare as I press the button for the penthouse. Everyone in the building must know it’s Sam’s apartment.

She glances at my face and I feel my cheeks flame, but I try to hide it with a polite smile. She gives me a small smile in return, tucks her short brown hair behind her ear, and pulls out her phone. She taps a quick message with her shiny red fingernails and then presses her glossy lips together and stares straight ahead. When her phone buzzes, she looks at the screen and smiles, and it takes everything in me not to yank it out of her hand to see what she wrote. She drops it back into her expensive-looking purse, and I clutch mine tighter.

The doors open to the sixteenth floor and she glances at me again with a patronizing look. “Have fun up there,” she says as she steps off the elevator, and I feel the blood drain from my face.

*She knows Sam.*

The way she was looking at me, like I was pathetic...*He must have girls up there all the time.* I can’t help but wonder if *she* has slept with him. The troubling thought fills me with doubt quicker than it entered my mind. Here I am about to give up my entire life, and for what? So I can become the subject of dirty looks and patronizing comments?

When the doors open to Sam’s foyer, he’s standing outside his door waiting for me, wearing what looks like the remnants of an impeccably tailored suit, giving me his sexiest smile. His collar is casually unbuttoned and his sleeves are rolled up, but his belted pants and shoes are nothing less than Armani

perfection. My heart should be soaring, but right now I can't seem to pick it up off the floor.

He crinkles his eyes. "Hi."

I pry my tongue off the roof of my dry mouth. "Hi," I say, forcing a smile.

His eyes follow me as I walk inside before him. He catches my wrist and pulls me back, spinning me around to face him. "You look..." He presses his lips together. "I like this." He grins at my outfit and reaches for my hand. "You are so unbelievably sexy."

"That's not really what I was going for," I say, feeling him suck the oxygen out of the space between us. I grip his hand to keep my balance.

"Well, what were you going for then?"

"Concealment."

"Who are you trying to hide from?"

"You."

"You can't hide from me, Lamb." He pulls me close and looks into my eyes. "I see you." He nudges my nose with his, and I breathe in his warm scent.

*No.* "Stop." I push against his chest and scurry backward on my skinny heels, until I'm several feet away from him. "We can't." I swallow and shake my head. "I can't. We need to talk."

He scrapes his teeth over his bottom lip and rubs the back of his neck. Then he flashes his one-of-a-kind eyes at me. "Lamb."

*No.* I will not be seduced by his beautiful eyes, or his full lips, or the dimples in his flushed cheeks. And I will not fall into his arms every time he calls me *Lamb*. I march across his apartment to the kitchen and grab a bottle of water from the fridge. I twist the cap off and take a sip.

He follows me to within a foot of where I'm standing.

"No." I hold my hand up. "Stay there."

He raises his eyebrows at me.

“I need you to stay there...please.” I take another sip of water.

He leans against the counter and watches me. “Do you mind telling me why?”

I put the bottle down and take off my scarf, which is now suffocating me. I know that I’m on the verge of creating a very big crack in the ice beneath my feet, but I need him to know. “Sam, what we did was...wrong.”

He stares at me blankly, and I get absolutely no read on his thoughts, which is unnerving. “We kissed,” he says, like it’s no big deal, and I wonder if to him, it isn’t. Considering his track record with women, it’s probably a weekly occurrence. His eyes pierce mine, pulling me from my precarious thoughts, and his face turns to stone. “There was nothing *wrong* about it.”

*I hurt him.* I chew the corner of my mouth. “You’re right. It wasn’t wrong. But that doesn’t make it right, Sam. I’m still with Drew. And until I’m not, I can’t go around kissing you.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I want to tell Drew, before we...make out again.”

He laughs softly, but I don’t see an ounce of amusement on his face. “So then tell him.”

I huff and shake my head, because he has no idea how hard it’s going to be, no matter when I choose to do it. “You act like it’s so simple.”

“It is.”

“Well, Drew might not think so,” I say flatly.

His face falls again, but I won’t apologize for caring about Drew’s feelings. The thought of hurting him is crushing. My heart pounds in my chest for him. “I realize you don’t care about that, but I do.”

“So take your time, then.”

My heart begins to beat faster, now out of anger. “You have *no* idea how hard this is for me, Sam.”

“I don’t know how hard it is?” he asks with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Damn, Lucy. This isn’t just about you.”

I swallow down my anger and exhale a remorseful breath. “I know.” I shake my head and give him an apologetic look. “I know it isn’t. I’m sorry.” I reach for his hand. “I’m going to tell him soon. After the exhibit next week.”

He pulls his eyebrows together and asks, “Why then? Why wait until after the exhibit? Why not just do it now?”

“Because if I tell him beforehand, the exhibit might not happen. And, while I’m willing to give up my life with Drew to be with you, I can’t give up my career.” I give a halfhearted smile.

Before he can say anything, his phone buzzes on the counter and a green text bubble lights up his screen. He reaches for it and reads the message and starts swiping his thumb across the screen.

“Everything okay?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Sam, what are you doing?”

“Checking Twitter.”

I scrunch my face up. “You tweet?” I ask, trying not to laugh. I know he has an account, I’ve followed it for...a while. But the tweets are usually about his matches and various events. I can’t envision Sam sharing deep thoughts about his morning coffee with the world, or caring about anyone else’s.

“No. My manager handles my social media accounts.”

“Well then, what are you doing?”

He pulls his hand to his face and rubs it over his jaw and chin. Then he turns the phone around and shows me the screen.

Who’s the mystery girl in @samcolefights life?...Is boxing’s most eligible bachelor @samcolefights off the



market?...Breaking News: @samcolefights spotted with a mystery blonde.

I think I might actually throw up. “Oh,” I say, trying to keep my voice even.

He calls someone and holds the phone to his ear. “Fix it. Now...I don’t care, just fix it...Tell me when it’s done.” He ends the call and drops his elbows onto the counter.

“The woman in the elevator.”

“What woman?”

“There was this woman in the elevator on my way up.” All the thoughts she evoked before come storming back into my mind, making my pulse race. She obviously knows him. I’m guessing *intimately*. Jealousy fills my chest and oozes from the tips of my fingers, turning my fingernails into claws. “She looked me up and down and then told me to have fun up here, like I’m some kind of groupie,” I say agitated, unable to hide my disdain.

“What did she look like?”

I cross my arms. *Need to sort through the catalogue?* “She had short brown hair. A lot of makeup. And an arrogant smirk on her face.” I shake my head. “I guess you probably have women up here a lot.”

“No, not really.”

“I mean, I get it. Women probably throw themselves at you all the time. I just never really thought you’d be the kind of guy who parades them in and out of your bed like some kind of wannabe rock star.” I hear the unflattering jealousy in my voice, but I don’t care. I am jealous. I resent each and every woman who has ever captured his attention.

“You know that’s not me.”

“No, actually, I don’t. What I know is that I see you photographed with a different woman every day of the week.”

He raises an eyebrow and smirks. “I don’t even have time for that to be possible.”

I huff loudly and roll my eyes.

He stands directly in front of me and says firmly, “You’re right, there are women who would probably love to be ‘paraded’ up here, to use your word. But not because they like me, or even know me. I figured that out pretty quickly,” he says, shaking his head. “I don’t bring strangers into my home, Lucy. So to answer your assumption...no, I don’t have women up here a lot.”

I pull in a slow breath and try to lasso the untamed emotion that broke through the fence and ran wild inside me.

“The woman you saw in the elevator...her name is Molly. She lives in this building. She’s a friend. She was probably just wondering who you are.”

Relief takes over and tugs hard on the reins. “She texted something to someone,” I say, finding my way back to my original point. “I think it was about me.”

He shakes his head and grumbles, “Molly.”

“You think she’s the reason for all those tweets?”

He shrugs and lets out a sigh. “That’s how it usually works. Someone just has to plant the seed and the media goes nuts. Everyone wants the story and they want it first. But Molly wouldn’t do something like that.”

*I’m a story?* “Wow,” I say, astonished. “I can’t believe how cheap I feel.” I take a sip of my water. “I’ll be right back.” I escape the kitchen to the nearest bathroom, where I sit on the lid of the toilet with my face in my hands.

“Lucy?” Sam knocks on the door, but I don’t answer. “Lucy, the media makes up stories all the time. It’s fine.”

I stand up and open the door. “How? How is any of this fine? If they find out who I am...that I’m engaged! Well, there goes my career. How do you feel about Iceland? Is there boxing there? Because that’s where I’m going to have to move after my reputation gets flushed down the toilet.”

He grabs my hand and drags me back to the kitchen. He pulls a stool out from the island for me. “Sit down. I’m going

to make you some tea.”

“You know how to make tea?” I ask, smiling involuntarily.

“I’m not an invalid. I just don’t cook.”

“Tea would actually be perfect right now.”

I take a deep breath and shrug out of my jacket while he fills a teakettle with water.

He sets it on the range and turns the gas on under it. “I’m sorry about Molly, but you really shouldn’t worry. My manager will take care of it.”

“What am I supposed to say if I see her again?”

“That she’d be right to stay on your good side, because you’re from Brighton Park.” He grins and winks.

“I try so hard to pretend that I’m not, then one condescending comment brings it all out.” I drop my head and laugh softly. “Sorry about that. My reaction was less than ladylike.”

He looks at me and smiles. “I loved your reaction. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

“Are you saying that I’m not a lady?” I laugh quietly.

He walks around the island and spins me around on the stool. He leans over me and pushes me back against the counter. “You are every bit a lady. And you are... breathtakingly sophisticated. But you’ll always have a little of the Park in you. You can’t polish that away.” He grins and shows me his dimples. “It’s part of you. And it’s part of me. It’s what makes us fight so hard for what we want.” The whistle of the teakettle screams across the kitchen, demanding his attention, and he stands up straight, leaving me breathless and biting my smiling lip.

“Still, I’m sorry that I jumped to conclusions about your love life.”

“The only love life I’ve ever had is you.” He drops two tea bags into a couple of mugs. “Sugar?”

“Yes, please.” I tuck my hair behind my ear. “I didn’t like the way she looked at me.”

“Molly looks at everyone that way.” He hands me a mug and sits on the stool beside me.

“She’s very pretty.”

“Yes,” he says impassively.

I sip my tea and consider asking a question I don’t really want the answer to. But I have to know. “Have you two…”

“Yes,” he says, just as nonchalantly as before.

I presumed the answer was yes, but hearing him say it so freely is shocking. I blink at him and nod, unable to find any words.

“She’s a friend,” he reiterates, as if that somehow makes it better.

“Do you sleep with all your friends? Or just her?” I ask, unable to hide the jealousy that’s bubbled back up to the surface.

He creases his eyebrows and shakes his head. “She’s someone I talk to.”

I sip the warm peppermint tea in my mug. “Do you ever talk to her about me?”

“Sometimes.”

I take another sip and accept the fact that Sam has an intimate relationship with the woman who just tweeted about me. “Do you *talk* to her a lot?”

His blank stare tells me that he does.

“When was the last time?” I ask, like some sort of masochist. “I’m just curious.”

“Lucy, why are you doing this?”

“I just want to know.”

He anchors his hands around his mug and looks at me. “Last week.”

I can't hide the shock on my face. "Last week? Before or after I poured my heart out on your couch?"

"After."

"It was rhetorical," I whisper with what little air is left in my lungs.

"Lucy, you showed up out of the blue, ripped my heart out, shoved it in your pocket, and drove home to your fiancé. I didn't know if I'd ever see you again, and I was a little bit fucked up about it. So yes, I called Molly. Because unlike you, I have no one else."

I let out a slow breath and close my eyes, feeling like the world's biggest hypocrite. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't have any right—"

"You have every right." He drops his hands to his lap and looks at me. "You have every right. And I understand why that would upset you. But believe me when I tell you, I would trade every minute I've spent with Molly for just one fraction of a second with you."

I nod softly, feeling my emotions settle, but I can't shake the anxious feeling bubbling inside me. I chew the corner of my mouth and consider what I'm about to say. "Sam...I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"For what?"

"For women, or anyone for that matter, to look at me like I'm the scum of the earth just because I'm with you."

"You're not with me," he says, taking a sip from his mug.

I purse my lips and say seriously, "My life is easy, Sam. It's so incredibly different from where we grew up. I come and go as I please and people are nice to me. They actually think that I'm sophisticated, even if it is just a show. They treat me like I am. They respect me."

"I respect you."

"I know that you respect me, but I'm talking about everyone else. I just don't know if I'm ready to become a newsflash. I want people to take me seriously. I want to see

my name on the cover of the *New Yorker* or *ARTnews* magazine, not *Us Weekly*.”

“So what are you saying? You’d rather marry Drew so you can have a quiet life in the suburbs? All because of a stupid tweet?”

“It’s not just that. It’s everything that it represents. It’s a world I’m not ready for.” I close my eyes and exhale a breath that’s laced with worry and uncertainty.

“That’s a cop-out. You’re just scared.”

I open my eyes and he holds my stare.

“You’re scared because you know that it’s going to be hard and you’re going to have to say things to people that aren’t easy to say.”

I push my mug of tea away and stand up.

“Do you think it was easy for me to come see you at your studio after the fight in New York?”

“Sam,” I whimper, feeling overwhelmed, because he’s the one person I can’t hide from.

He stands up and grabs my wrist. “Do you think it was easy for me to walk away after we kissed, knowing you were going back to him? Do you think it’s easy for me to stand here now, wondering if you’re really going to leave him or not? Because the thought of losing you again is fucking terrifying.”

A sob bubbles out of me.

“I can’t...I can’t lose you again, Lamb.” He lets go of my hand. “I don’t know how many more rounds I have left in me.”

I shake my head and wrap myself around him. “That’s not going to happen.”

He closes his arms around me, but he doesn’t pull me against him. “You’re starting to make me wonder.”

I look up at his wary eyes and say resolutely, “I love you.”

“Then be with me.”

I press my cheek to his shirt. “Soon...I promise. The exhibit is only a week away.”

His chest rises and falls against my cheek, but he doesn't say anything.

“It's important, Sam. The show might be my only chance of getting to sell in New York. I need it to go well. If I tell Drew beforehand, he or Janice could pull the proverbial plug. And I've worked too hard to let that happen. I know you don't want that to happen.”

He unwraps my arms from around him and sits back down on his stool.

“This is all so much,” I say, sitting down next to him. “I feel incredibly selfish. And you're right, I am scared. I'm scared of what to tell Drew, I'm scared of what to tell his mother, I'm scared of what they'll think of me. I'm scared that I'll be shunned by a community I've only just earned my place in. And I *am* scared that I'm going to be some kind of joke in the media. But most of all, I'm scared of hurting you.” I place my hand on his arm and he closes his eyes.

“I've waited for you this long, Lucy. I can wait a few more days.” He opens his unguarded eyes and they consume mine. “I'd wait for you forever.”

His vulnerable words wrap around my heart, squeezing it so tight I can barely breathe. There's nothing I want more than to be with him, from this second on until my last second on earth. I want to throw caution to the wind with abandon and find an island somewhere we can live on, just the two of us, for the rest of our lives. But that's a fantasy. Real life is harder and it's full of consequences that I have to face.

“You won't have to,” I say tentatively. “Just one more week, that's all I need.” One week isn't enough time to carefully shatter Drew's heart, but it's a deadline I can hold myself to. Maybe by then I will have figured out a way to process all of this and gather the courage I'm going to need to make the most seismic decision of my life.

“And when the exhibit is over, you'll be mine?”

I smile softly and nod. “Yes, officially.”

He reaches for my hand and pulls me to my feet, so that I’m standing between his knees and directly in front of his face. He wraps his hand around my hip and then rubs it across the small of my back. “What am I supposed to do with myself until then?”

“Well, first you’re going to focus on getting better, so this can come off,” I say, touching his cast. “And you’re going to concentrate on your next match, so you can win,” I say softly against his ear, “because you’re a champion, and that’s what champions do.”

He exhales heavily through his nostrils, and I feel it on my cheek.

“And you’re going to take care of whatever you need to take care of, so that we can start our life together.” I press my lips together to fight the sudden onslaught of emotion. Overwhelming as it may be, the thought of starting a new life with Sam is every dream I’ve ever had. And now I’m standing on the verge of it being reality.

“I know you’re scared right now, Lamb. But I promise that I will do everything I can to give you the life we always wanted.” He smiles and shows me his dimples. “Forget this apartment. I’ll buy you a house. The biggest one I can find.”

I laugh softly and shake my head. “I’d live with you in a box.”

“And I’ll make you pancakes every morning,” he says, just like he promised when we were kids.

“With bacon?” I add, remembering how much he loves it.

He smiles and nods. “And you can paint all the time. I’ll build you a studio right inside our house.”

I smile and think of the other dream we shared growing up. “And we’ll have a family?” I couldn’t imagine having kids with Drew, but I realize now it’s because I wanted them with Sam. A strange rush of desire surges through me like a tsunami, and I’m shaken by the fierce need to have a family



with him. Thoughts of him holding our baby girl, or boy, in the early morning light swirl through my head.

He nods and looks into my eyes, and I wonder if he's having the same vision. "Yeah," he says huskily.

I hold his face in my hands and whisper, "Even if none of that ever happens, I'll still love you." As I say it, I feel a pinch in my stomach. I want it all, so badly, but I can't shake the feeling of doubt that we'll ever actually have it.

"It will happen," he says certainly.

I drop my hands and look away.

"Why don't you have faith in me?" he asks.

"I do have faith in you," I say firmly, looking up at him again.

"Good. Because I have faith in you." He pulls me closer, making me feel weak and strong at the same time. "If that's the life we want, that's the life we'll have. We're in control of that now. You and me. But it won't be easy and I can't do it alone." He wraps his hand behind my neck and rubs his thumb over my jaw. "Are you with me?" He gazes at me with pleading eyes, and all of my uncertainty and doubt falls away.

I am *so* with him. I don't care if it does shake the universe; I'll do it a hundred times for him. "I'm with you," I whisper, but before I can say anything more, his lips cover mine.

He stands up and pushes me against the counter, and kisses me passionately, pushing and pulling my lips with his and scraping them softly between his teeth.

Forgetting my virtuous resolve, I reach for his face and wind my hands into his hair, moaning quietly as he satisfies a place in my soul he carved out so very long ago. He lifts me up onto the cool marble counter and tugs my hips forward so that my thighs are pressed firmly against him as he rocks his hips up with a husky groan, gifting me with a morsel of pleasure when I feel him through his perfectly tailored pants.

"Sam," I mumble against his lips, but before I have to say anything else, he pulls away from me.

“I’m sorry,” he pants.

I wait for the oxygen to return to my brain. “It’s okay.”

He unwraps my legs from around him and shakes his head. “No, it’s not.” He stands in front of me, his shoulders rising and falling with ragged breaths, and says, “I don’t want to be something you feel guilty about and regret later.”

“Sam.” I reach for his shirt and pull him close to me again. “I would never regret you. But please don’t do that again until after the exhibit. Because I might not be able to stop the next time. And I *would* regret not waiting.”

He drops his head and nods once, then he looks up at me with a grin. “One week. And then I want you every way I can have you. Without strings. Without doubt. Without hesitation.”

“One week,” I say with anticipation, “and then, the rest of our lives.”

“It can’t come soon enough.”

## Chapter 14

*Lucy*

“Lucy?” Drew calls from the kitchen. He walks into the living room, and I look up at him from my place on the couch. He looks exactly the same as he did when he left, but I feel like a completely different person.

“Hey,” I say, fighting every bone in my body that’s telling me to get up and tell him about Sam. “How was your flight?”

“It was good.” He sits down on the couch by my feet and begins rubbing them through my socks.

“That’s good.” I force a weak smile and turn my eyes back to the TV. I can’t look at him.

“Everything okay?”

*No. It’s not okay.* And I don’t know how I’m going to keep pretending like it is. I tuck my feet under my legs and sit up straight. “Besides the fact that you were too busy to answer my phone calls while you were gone,” I say coolly. Because the truth is, if he had answered my call after I kissed Sam, I would have already told him about it, and I wouldn’t have to spend the next week lying in wait to break his heart. But then the guilt starts gnawing at me for even thinking that way. None of this is Drew’s fault.

“What?”

I pause the TV and look at him. “It’s just, I called you a lot and you barely had time to text me back.”

He pulls his eyebrows together and sits up straight. “Because I was at the site, dealing with contractors all day, every day. And when I wasn’t doing that, I was with the design team. And when I wasn’t doing either of those things, I was sleeping, because the stress of it all is exhausting. I’m sorry that I didn’t stop to check in on you. I just didn’t realize you needed that level of attention.”

I feel my face screw up at his backhanded apology. But before I get pulled into a fight, I remind myself that he

shouldn't be apologizing at all.

"That didn't come out right. It's just, you know why I'm doing this...why I'm working so hard." He reaches for my face and rubs my cheek. "For us."

I turn off the TV and stand up. "It's okay. I knew what I was getting into."

"What is that supposed to mean?" He stands up and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Nothing. I'm just tired. I want to go to bed."

"What is it that you want me to do, Lucy? Stop working? Close my restaurants? Stay here and hang out with you all day?"

"No, of course not."

"Then what? You want me to call more? Text you ten times a day?"

"No." I shake my head. "That's not what I want."

"Then what do you want?"

I want *Sam*. "I just...want to go to bed."

"Lucy."

"Honestly. I'm just really tired. I'm not even mad. I'm sorry I gave you a hard time." I begin making my way up the stairs, but he follows me.

"You're really not going to talk to me about this? I mean, the last time we fought about it, you...you broke up with me."

I ignore the way my heart is pounding in my chest and say, "There's nothing to talk about. Really. I'm fine." I go into the bathroom and shut the door behind me, squeezing my eyes shut once I'm alone, but Drew stands on the other side of it.

"You don't seem fine."

"I am," I lie.

"You aren't acting like it."

I open the door, agitated that he won't let me be alone with my misery. "You know what, I'm not fine. I'm annoyed at your mother, as a matter of fact." As soon as I say it, I realize I've opened a whole new can of worms.

He pulls his head back warily. "What did my mother do?" he asks defensively.

"Nothing. She's just been a little overbearing with the wedding plans lately."

"She's just excited, that's all."

"I know," I say, nodding over the waves of guilt that are sloshing around inside me.

"Wouldn't hurt for you to show a little more enthusiasm about the big day."

"I thought we agreed that we didn't need to rush into it."

"Rush into it? You make it sound like some kind of risky business deal."

"You know that's not what I meant."

He narrows his eyes. "You're not getting cold feet, are you?"

"No." I pull my eyebrows together and shake my head, ignoring the frozen blocks of ice around my feet. "I just wish Janice was a little *less* excited, that's all."

"Okay, well, I'll talk to her."

"She also planned an impromptu dinner for us tomorrow night, which we're hosting, and you're supposed to cook."

He raises his eyebrows, and the corners of his mouth turn down. "Okay, so...I cook for people all the time." He shrugs. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that she invited an old friend of mine, and I don't really feel comfortable having him over for dinner."

"Him?"

"Yes, *him*. Am I not allowed to have male friends?"

“Sure you are. It’s just that you’ve never mentioned any of your old friends before, and the first one who shows up is a guy. Was he a boyfriend?”

“Yes,” I admit.

“What’s his name?”

“Sam.”

“Is he from Brighton Park too?”

“Yes,” I say with a defensive edge to my voice I didn’t intend to have.

“And my mother invited him here, to our house?”

I slant my eyes at his insinuation.

“I understand why you’re not comfortable with it.”

I feel my blood run hot through my veins. “He’s not some kind of thug, Drew.”

“Well, what does he do?”

“He’s a boxer.”

He grins. “That’s not a job. What does he really do, to earn a living?”

“He’s a professional boxer. Maybe you’ve heard of him. His last name is Cole,” I say, exasperated. “I hear he makes a pretty good living.”

He holds his head back and squints. “Sam Cole,” he says skeptically.

I raise my eyebrows and nod.

“Very funny. Who is he?”

“He’s Sam Cole.”

He blinks at me for several seconds. “You’re telling me that you not only know Sam Cole, but he used to be your boyfriend?”

I raise my eyebrows and nod again.

“What the fuck, Lucy?” He puts his hands on his hips and starts pacing around the bathroom. He walks into the bedroom and paces a few more times with a determined look on his face.

“What is this reaction?” I ask, dismayed, not that I have any right to be.

“Are you serious?” He stops and shakes his head. “All this time...every match you’ve watched, every match you’ve made me watch with you, going to New York, for Christ’s sake... and you didn’t think to tell me? Don’t you think that’s a little strange?”

I try to lasso my heart, which is running wild inside my chest. If he only knew how many times I wanted to tell him about Sam. How many times I tried to tell him. I should have done it a long time ago. But if I had, who knows if I would have gone to New York to watch Sam fight. And if I didn’t, I might not have ever seen him again.

“I didn’t tell you because I thought you’d freak out. Clearly I was right.”

“Well, Jesus, Lucy, that’s kind of a big deal.”

“Why? It’s not like he’s a Kardashian or something. He’s from Brighton Park, remember?”

“Yeah, didn’t he do time for dealing drugs or something?”

“That was a long time ago,” I say over the tight feeling in my chest, “and he didn’t do it. He was set up.”

He gives me a dubious look that sparks my defenses and plays off the guilt attached to those words.

“He was,” I say adamantly. “Sam didn’t do drugs.”

“And how exactly did my mother meet him?”

“He came by the studio earlier this week while she was there.”

“So he just stopped by, out of the blue?” he asks suspiciously.

“Yes,” I say, telling him the truth. I had no idea he was going to show up that day. “He heard about the exhibit and wanted to come say hi.” Just not necessarily in that order. I shrug, hoping to slide the guilt off my shoulders. It doesn’t work.

“Does he want to buy some artwork or something?”

“He mentioned coming to the show, so hopefully.” That’s a complete and utter lie. *I’m a liar*. I’ve just slipped on the slope of deceit. *It’s for his own good*, I tell myself.

His or *yours*, my conscience argues.

*Sebastian’s*, we both agree.

“Huh. Well, I can’t say I’ve met too many friends from your past. Or too many famous boxers.”

“Well, there’s no need to start now. What you need to do is call your mother and tell her that this dinner is a bad idea.”

“What? No way.” He shakes his head and smirks. “I want to meet this guy.”

“Oh, God. Seriously, Drew?”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket.

“Do not call your mom,” I order.

“Hey, Momma,” he says, grinning at me.

“Drew,” I grumble through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, Lucy just told me about it. That sounds great... She’s excited too.” He widens his eyes at me. “Sure, I can make my signature dish...Yes, I’m sure he eats meat.” He shrugs at me, but I don’t respond. “Okay, see you tomorrow at eight...Love you too.” He hangs up and grins.

“I’m glad you find so much humor at my expense.”

He smiles and pulls me into his arms, but it doesn’t comfort me at all. It only exacerbates everything that’s wrong with this situation. “You’re just so cute when you’re flustered.”



I push him away and he laughs. I march into my closet and grab my Chuck Taylors.

“Where are you going?”

“To paint.”

“I thought you were tired.”

“I was. But now I’m *flustered*, so I’m going to my studio to paint. I’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

He laughs again and falls onto the bed. “Don’t stay too late.”

\* \* \*

I call Sam and it rings through my car speakers.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

No answer. Disappointment settles over me, making me feel anxious. I was hoping to talk to him and persuade him to skip this absurd dinner.

I pull onto the dimly lit highway, finding my place in the center lane between the bright headlights of the car behind me and glowing red taillights of the one in front of me. Together we travel down the highway toward our destinations.

Fifteen minutes later, my phone rings through my speakers, startling me.

I glance at the dash. *Sam*.

“Hi,” I answer.

“Hey. Sorry, I was in the shower when you called earlier.”

I smile and raise an eyebrow thinking of him naked and wet. “I thought maybe you were asleep. I know it’s late.”

“You can call me anytime. If I’m asleep, I’ll answer.”

I nod but don’t say anything.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” I tap my thumb against my steering wheel. “Drew came home tonight.”

He’s silent for a second.

“Lucy, where are you?”

“I’m driving.”

“Where?”

“I’m on the highway. I’m on my way to my studio.”

“By yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s almost midnight.”

“I know, but I want to paint.”

“Do you do that a lot?”

“Paint? Yes, quite often,” I tease.

“Do you go to the studio at night?”

“Sometimes. Why?”

“Because it’s not safe.”

I laugh quietly. *Always the protector.* “Sam, I assure you, it’s perfectly safe.”

“You shouldn’t be coming downtown at night by yourself.”

“You live downtown.”

“I live in a highly secured building.”

“My studio is secure,” I say, creasing my eyebrows. “I have an alarm.” I can’t help but feel a little uneasy now.

I hear a low rumble in the background. “What are you doing?”

“He was out of town. Where?” he asks, ignoring my question.

“Drew was in Philadelphia.”

“Were you home alone all week?”

I press my lips together over a smile. “Yes. He travels all the time. I’m home alone more often than not. But I assure you, I’m quite capable of taking care of myself. I’m pretty independent,” I say confidently.

“Do you have a house alarm?”

“Yes. And my neighborhood is gated. Why the sudden concern for my safety?”

“It’s not sudden. I’m always concerned for your safety.”

I smile. “Well, rest assured, I’ve reached my exit and I’m safely leaving the highway. I should arrive at my studio in”—I glance at my GPS—“six and a half minutes.”

“How long are you going to be there?”

“I don’t know, an hour or so. I’ll stop painting when I get tired.”

“It’ll be two a.m. when you leave. That’s not safe, Lucy,” he says firmly.

“Sam, my studio is on a quiet street in a good part of downtown, minutes from where you live, I might add. It’s not like it’s in Brighton Park,” I point out, but he doesn’t respond.

After a couple more minutes of trying to convince Sam of my welfare, I pull up to the curb in front of my studio. “You should know that I’ve arrived safely at my destination,” I say assuredly, putting my car in park. I hold my phone to my ear while I unbuckle and open my door, but I freeze when a shiny black car roars up behind me.

“I see that.”

I squint to see through the dark tinted windows. “Sam, is that you?”

Sam steps out of the car wearing black joggers and sneakers and a hoodie that’s pulled up over his head. He holds his phone to his ear. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“What are you doing?”

He drops his phone into his pocket and walks over to me.

“Look, I’m fine. See”—I glance around the empty urban street that my studio is on—“it’s safe.”

He pulls his eyebrows together and reaches for my face. “He has no idea how precious you are.”

“Sam, I’m fine,” I say again softly. I glance around nervously, not because I’m afraid, but because I don’t want anyone to see us together. Twitter is a far scarier place than downtown after dark. “Let’s go inside.”

He follows me inside and watches me turn off the alarm. He locks the door behind us, and I set the alarm again.

“Safe enough for you?” I smirk.

He follows me to the back of the studio.

“Lucy—”

“I know, the wolves...”

“You have no idea what kind of monsters are out there.”

I turn around and look at him, but my smile disappears when I see the look on his face.

“There are terrible people out there who will do unthinkable things.” His face is tortured by whatever thoughts are running through his mind. “I know, because I lived with them for three years. I was surrounded by them. Gates and alarms won’t stop them.”

“Sam.” I reach for his sweatshirt and pull him close to me, and wrap my arms around him. I shudder thinking of what he saw and heard in prison.

“I will always worry about your safety.”

I press my cheek to his chest. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

He hugs me tight. “He shouldn’t be leaving you alone all the time.”

I let go of him and walk to the couch to sit down. “I don’t need Drew to protect me. He’s not really the type anyway.”

He sits down on the opposite end of the couch. “Well, what type is he?”

“I don’t know. The too-busy-to-worry-about-me type. He works a lot.”

“Then why did you agree to marry him?”

“Because I thought his work ethic was admirable. And he made me feel worthy of a life I didn’t think I deserved. He encouraged me to follow my dreams and helped me turn my passion into a career,” I say, glancing around the studio.

He rubs his hand over his mouth and jaw. “Sounds like the perfect guy.”

“He is...on paper.” I shrug. “But I’ve been trying to force a puzzle piece for a long time. I realize now that it will never fit, because he isn’t right for me.” I drop my head to the side. “Because he isn’t you.” I stare at him for a few seconds, deliberating over a truth I don’t want to admit. But I finally do. “I still don’t feel worthy of this life. Honestly, I’m not sure I ever will.” I look around my beloved studio. “I’ve always felt like an imposter on borrowed time. None of this is really mine. And when I leave him, I’ll lose it.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Well, this studio was supposed to be a wedding present. One I only agreed to accept because I knew I could pay him back over time. But without a wedding, I doubt he’ll still want to give it to me. And I wouldn’t take it, even if he did.”

“What if you bought it from him?”

I give him an impossible look. “I can’t afford it. Even if the exhibit is a success, it would take years to earn the money it costs.”

“Then I’ll buy it for you,” he says, like it’s no big deal, and I know that he would.

I smile at his sweet offer, but the thought of him spending his money on me so freely makes me uncomfortable. “What makes you think he would sell it to you?”

He moves closer to me on the couch, until our legs are touching. “Then I’ll buy the whole damn building.” He reaches for my hand and pulls me into his lap.

I lean against his chest and breathe in his clean scent. “You’re so warm,” I say, shoving my cold hands under his arms. He reaches between us and pulls the bottom of his oversized hoodie up, capturing me in it, and tugging it down over my shoulders and arms so that I’m pressed against him inside of it.

I giggle and peek up at him and he kisses my forehead. I press my cheek to his neck. “How did you get here so quick?”

“I drove...fast,” he admits.

“I know you want to protect me, but it won’t do me any good if you kill yourself in the process.”

“It was reckless, I know.”

I wrap my arms around him inside his sweatshirt, and he shivers when I press my cold hands to his back. “Sorry,” I say, but I don’t move my hands. He’s *so* damn warm.

He holds me tighter and rubs my back for a long silent minute.

“Was it awful?” I ask softly against his neck.

“What?”

“Prison,” I say tentatively.

“Yes,” he answers quietly without elaborating. I don’t push him, but after a few silent seconds, he sighs and says, “Not all the time. Boxing was always good. And school helped keep my mind off it. But it’s not a place I ever want to go back to.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Lamb. You’re what got me through it.”

I close my eyes and try to hide from the guilt.

“You gave me a reason to go on. A reason to get into the boxing program. A reason to take classes. I could hear your voice in my head telling me to study.” He laughs softly. “You always did know how to get me to.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come,” I whisper, remembering the betrayal I felt that kept me away and the subsequent sorrow

that nearly destroyed me.

“There’s nothing either of us can do to change the way things happened. Our paths went in different directions, but they were always meant to cross again.”

I nuzzle his neck. “I really don’t know how I would have made it through the rest of my life without you.”

“Me neither.”

I reluctantly shrug out of his sweatshirt and get up from the couch before my eager lips find their way to his. “We should probably thank Sebastian. He convinced me to go with him and Paul to New York to watch you fight Mario Sanchez.”

He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. “You needed convincing, huh?”

I stand in front of him, looking down at his amused face. “It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. Because there was a chance that you’d see me and do one of two things: devastate my heart or devastate my life.” I run my fingers through his hair, and he gazes up at me. “Thank you for not devastating my heart. My life will recover.”

He reaches for my hand and rubs his thumb over the inside of my wrist. Then he stands up and looks into my eyes. “Thank you for not devastating mine.”

My heart takes off in a wild sprint, and I have to bite my lip to keep from kissing him.

He drops his forehead to mine and exhales a warm breath against my cheek. “I thought you wanted to paint.”

I press my burning lips together. “I did. But I guess I just needed to see you. I feel better now.”

He holds his head back and looks at me. “Were you upset?”

I realize I never explained *why* I wanted to paint in the middle of the night. “No, I was really more irritated than upset.”

“About what?”

I let out a small sigh and roll my eyes, feeling my irritation return. “About this stupid dinner that Janice arranged.” I cross my arms. “It’s tomorrow at eight, by the way. Consider that your formal invitation.”

He pushes his lips together over a smile, but his dimples give away his amusement.

“Why is everyone so gung ho about having this dinner? It’s ridiculous.”

He laughs at me.

“I think you two just want to size each other up.”

“I guess that means you told him about me.”

“Yes,” I say softly. “I did. He’s quite keen on meeting my pro boxer ex-boyfriend.”

“Then I’d say your assumption is right.” He grins.

“Sam, please, nothing good could come of it.”

“I have to wait until after the exhibit to have you...fine, I’ll wait. But I’m going to meet the guy you spent the last two years with.”

My shoulders slump. I lost this battle before it even began. “Okay,” I say, defeated.

“It’s not only that.”

I look up at him curiously.

“I’m really proud of you, Lucy.”

“What?” My heart swells inside my chest.

“When I went to prison, you could have given up, but you didn’t. You made something of yourself. *You* did that. No one else did it for you. I want to see the life you’ve built, even if it was with the wrong guy.” He smirks.

I bob my head and smile softly. “Okay.”



## Chapter 15

*Lucy*

“Andrew, that smells amazing,” Janice says, sipping her glass of prosecco. She leans against the kitchen counter, beaming with pride at her son’s ability to make a perfect braised lamb shank. She’s the picture of elegance in her ivory wrap top and matching ivory pants. She flips her shiny silver hair, showing off her sparkly diamond earrings.

*I wonder if Sam even likes lamb.* I giggle quietly to myself, just now realizing the irony of the dish.

“It really does smell fantastic,” Paul says. “I think we need to come over for dinner more often.” He smiles at Sebastian, who glances at me with apologetic eyes. As agreed, Bas hasn’t yet filled him in on my predicament.

I busy myself wiping plates with a dish cloth and stacking them on the counter. I collect them in my hands. “You want to help me set the table?” I ask Sebastian, hoping for a few minutes alone with him.

“Sure.” He grabs a pile of silverware off the counter and follows me.

“Anything I can do?” Janice asks, but I just smile and shake my head.

“I think we’ve got it.”

“You sure?” Paul offers.

“Yep. Just enjoy yourselves.”

Sebastian and I carry our tableware to the dining room and deposit it on the farmhouse table that Drew recently purchased.

“You have to admit, he’s got great taste,” Sebastian says, eyeing the table.

“Yes,” I say, setting a plate in front of each tufted button chair.

He follows me around the table, carefully placing the silverware on either side of the plates. “Are you nervous?” he asks softly.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Do you think Drew has any idea?”

I pause and look at him. “No,” I say surely, which makes me feel even shittier about having Sam over for dinner. “What is wrong with me, Bas? How could I let this happen?”

“You didn’t exactly have a lot of say in the matter.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to do this. I don’t know how I’m going to be the person that Drew knows and the person that Sam knows at the same time.”

“Just be yourself, Luc. It’ll be fine.”

“You don’t understand. I’m different with Sam. Drew’s going to notice. And if he doesn’t, Sam’s going to notice that I’m different around Drew.”

“How are you different?”

“It’s like my volume is set on low with Drew. But with Sam, it’s all the way up. It always has been.”

“So then find the remote and get somewhere in the middle.”

I sigh and smile at Sebastian, not for his sage advice, but because he always gets my weird metaphors. “I need your help tonight, okay?”

“You don’t have to ask. I’ve got you.” He winks.

“You always do.”

“Hey, who do you think will throw the first swing? My money is on Sam, broken hand and all.”

“Bas! That’s not funny.”

“What’s not funny?” Paul, asks, joining us. But before Sebastian can make up an answer, Paul holds one of Drew’s goat-cheese-stuffed, bacon-wrapped figs to his mouth. “You have to try this.”

Sebastian opens his mouth and closes it around the decadent appetizer. “Uh-muh-gawd,” he mumbles as he chews. “Is it too late to change my bet?” he asks me.

I purse my lips and narrow my eyes.

“What bet?” Paul asks, but Bas just shakes his head and laughs.

“I need another one of those,” he says, leading us back into the kitchen.

“Lucy, why don’t you turn some music on,” Drew suggests, mincing a garlic clove.

“Okay, what do you want to listen to?” I ask him.

Before Drew can answer, Sebastian says, “Why don’t you put on that playlist you were listening to at the studio the other day? It was great.”

“Okay.”

“And make sure to turn the volume up,” he says, smiling.

“Got it.” I grab my phone and pull up the playlist Sebastian was referring to. I press play and a leisurely cover of Radiohead’s “Creep” begins to play through the kitchen speakers.

“Why would anyone mess with a nineties classic?” Drew asks, keeping his eyes on his task.

“I think her voice is beautiful,” Sebastian says, regarding the soft female voice that’s crooning the lyrics to the somewhat dark song.

When it ends and James Arthur’s “Always” begins to play, Drew glances up at me and grins. “I like this one,” he says, seasoning the lamb shanks and sprinkling my heart with a pinch of salt. It shrivels as I listen to the song we danced to at Janice’s charity ball two years ago.

The doorbell rings and my breath catches in my throat.

Drew remains focused on his task, Janice casually sips her sparkling wine, Paul looks at me excitedly, and Sebastian looks at me expectantly. But I’m frozen knowing that Sam is

standing on the other side of the front door, waiting for me to invite him in to have dinner with my fiancé.

*This is my punishment.*

“You’ve got to answer it,” Drew says, holding up his rosemary-and-olive-oil-covered hands.

“Okay.” I inhale a quiet breath and force a smile to hide my apprehension.

Janice puts her glass down. “I’ll get it,” she says, giving me the push I need.

“No,” I say, stepping in front of her. “I’ve got it.”

I leave everyone in the kitchen and hurry to the foyer, glancing at my reflection in the large mahogany floor mirror that’s leaning against the wall by the front door. I straighten my short floral-print skirt and run my hands over my waist where my black scoop neck sweater tucks into it. Then I smooth my hair, take a deep breath, and open the door to find Sam standing on my front porch against a suburban backdrop of two-story houses and well-established trees that line the dimly lit street. I see his shiny black car parked against the curb next to the mailbox, and it ties my stomach into knots. *Nothing about this feels right.*

His eyes trace me, from my high heels up to my face. “Relax, Lamb,” he whispers, reading me like a book he memorized long ago.

I smile softly and inhale another quiet breath.

He crinkles his eyes. “Hi,” he says, showing me his dimples, and my heart falls lazily into a hammock and swings back and forth to the tune of James Arthur’s “Certain Things,” which my playlist shuffled to just in the nick of time.

“Hi.” I press my lips together, and the corners of my mouth turn up. “Come in.” I hold the door open for him.

He walks inside and glances up at the crystal drop chandelier that’s lighting the foyer.

“Drew picked it,” I say, feeling compelled to explain away the lavish lifestyle I’ve been privy to since I moved in with

him—even if it doesn't compare to Sam's. Sam earned his luxuries, I didn't.

He nods and glances around the open space. "It's a nice house."

I shrug, unsure what to say.

"This is for you." He hands me a bottle of wine.

"Why thank you, sir. How very kind of you," I say in my best proper voice, trying to make light of the situation.

"It's a fairly customary gesture." He laughs softly and so do I.

"We've come a long way, haven't we?"

He looks at me with his unusual eyes and whispers, "Wait until you see where I'm going to take you."

My breath escapes between my parted lips as James Arthur croons the perfectly timed lyrics "*I'm certain that I'm yours*" through the house speakers.

I bite my lip and inhale a slow breath. *Be still my heart.*

"Should we go in?" he asks, glancing in the direction of the voices coming from the kitchen.

I bob my head apprehensively and eye the wine label on the bottle in my hands. Château Margaux. "Sam." I look up at him. "You didn't have to—"

"Sam, dear, I'm so glad you could make it," Janice says, joining us in the foyer, her heels tip-tapping on the marble floor.

"This is a four-thousand-dollar bottle of wine," I say quietly through my teeth. I recognize it from my days waitressing at La Pêche.

"Just take the wine," he urges, and steps around me. "Mrs. Christiansen. You look lovely," he says, charming her with his dimples.

She smiles and wraps her hand around his arm, pausing to feel his bicep. "Oh, wow, you are strong, aren't you?"

I give him apologetic eyes, but he just grins and obliges her.

“I have to be. It’s kind of a requirement of the job.”

“Yes, you must.” She pats his arm and grins. “Come on, I want you to meet my son, Drew. He’s making us an incredible dinner.”

“Can’t wait.”

*Neither can I...*

I follow them to the kitchen, watching Sam walk with confidence in his tailored navy slacks and brown leather dress shoes. His fitted white button-down is tucked neatly into his belted pants, but his sleeves are rolled up casually, showing the tattoos on his forearm. If he’s uneasy at all, you’d never know it.

“Drew, this is Lucy’s friend, Sam,” Janice says, before I have a chance to introduce him.

Drew is standing at the sink, drying his hands on a dish towel.

I hold my breath and brace myself for the showdown. Just seeing the two of them in the same space is unnerving. Drew is handsome in his black slacks and blue button-down, but he pales in comparison to Sam, who is about the same height, but much bigger. Where Drew is trim and lean, Sam is chiseled and strong.

Sebastian stands beside me and puts his hand on my back. “Breathe,” he whispers in my ear.

I inhale quietly and relax my shoulders.

Drew reaches out to shake Sam’s hand. “Hi, I’m Drew, Lucy’s fiancé,” he says confidently. “It’s great to meet you.”

Sam wraps his hand around Drew’s and they share a sturdy shake. “Sam Cole.”

“Oh, I know who you are.” Drew grins and glances up at me. “Lucy’s a big fan.”

Sam ignores Drew’s tone, but it unsettles me.

“Don’t get me wrong, I think you’re great. I just don’t have as much time to watch all the matches,” he says, tightening the knot in my stomach.

Sam shakes his head and shrugs. “You either love boxing or you don’t.”

“Or you know the boxer,” Drew says, glancing at me again. “I have to tell you, I was pretty shocked when Lucy told me she knew you.”

“I just figured you wouldn’t believe me,” I say, eager to change the inevitable subject. I know there’s no way around it, but I can at least try to steer the conversation in a more comfortable direction.

“I suppose you’re right. I mean, it’s not like you know that many people to begin with, Luc. Let alone a world champion boxer.” He grins and shakes his head.

“Well, she knows me,” Sam says flatly, changing the atmosphere in the room with the disparaging look on his face.

Drew gauges him and says, “So it seems.”

“Sam, you remember Sebastian,” I say, searching for the pressure valve.

Sam turns toward him and smiles, and his dimples light up Sebastian’s face.

*I know the feeling.*

“Good to see you again, Sebastian,” Sam says warmly, like they’re old friends.

Sebastian beams. “Good to see you too, Sam.” He puts his hand on Paul’s shoulder. “This is my husband, Paul.”

Paul smiles and shakes Sam’s hand. “It’s great to meet you, Sam. I’m a huge fan. I watch all your matches. Seeing you fight Sanchez at the Garden was incredible.”

“Thanks,” Sam says humbly. “That was a memorable fight, for sure.” He gives me a knowing look that calls the blood to my cheeks.

“I hope everyone’s hungry. Dinner’s almost ready,” Drew says, inserting himself into the conversation again. “You like lamb, right?” he asks Sam.

“Actually, I love lamb,” he says, flashing his beautiful eyes at me again.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Drew asks him, pulling the refrigerator door open. “I’m guessing you’re a beer guy.”

“Actually, Sam brought us a bottle of Château Margaux,” I say, handing him the bottle.

He eyes the label, and the corners of his mouth turn down. “Well, that’s one hell of a gesture.”

“I thought a man of your tastes would appreciate it,” Sam says.

“You’ve been to one of my restaurants.”

“No.” Sam shakes his head. “Haven’t had the time.”

Drew eyes him carefully. “Should I pour you a glass then?”

Sam stares at Drew and Drew stares back, and they engage in some silent exchange that dates back to the Paleolithic era. The growing tension between them is only intensified by everyone’s watchful silence.

*Where’s that freaking pressure valve?*

“No, I’ll take a beer,” Sam finally says.

Sebastian coughs and my eyes flash to him. He’s trying, unconvincingly, to hide a smile.

*Oh good, this is fun for him.* I give him a sideways glance.

“Well, if you’re going to open the Château Margaux, I’d love a glass,” Bas says.

“I’ll take one too,” Paul adds, and the pressure slowly starts to release.

Drew hands Sam a beer, but I intercept it and twist off the cap with a dish towel, seeing as how he has only one good



hand. “Sorry,” I apologize for Drew’s tactlessness, wondering if it was intentional.

“Thanks.” He winks at me, but thankfully Drew doesn’t see because he’s busy with the wine bottle opener.

He twists the cork out of the Château Margaux and casually pours eight hundred dollars into each glass for Sebastian and Paul.

“It’s a shame what happened in Las Vegas,” Paul says, eyeing Sam’s cast.

“Yeah, that was a stupid mistake on my part.”

“You’re a southpaw, right, Sam?” Drew asks, and I push my lips together to hide my amusement. Drew doesn’t know the first thing about boxing. Whenever he does watch a match with me, he loses interest by the second round. He must have been studying up on his boxing terminology last night.

“What’s a southpaw?” Janice asks.

“A left-handed boxer,” Sebastian answers. “Sam’s left hand is his dominant hand. His stance is different than an orthodox boxer because he puts his right leg in front.” He glances at Sam and shrugs. “Sorry, it’s the fan in me.”

Sam grins and shakes his head. “No, that’s right.”

“So then how did you break your right hand?” Drew asks, holding his head back. I think he’s genuinely curious. Still, I feel myself shrinking every time he opens his mouth. Maybe by the end of dinner, I’ll have disappeared into oblivion.

“The most dangerous southpaws put their weak arm in front from time to time,” Sebastian answers again. “It’s the only way to strengthen it,” he says in defense of Sam, and it makes me grin.

Sam smiles at Sebastian. “You know a lot about boxing.”

“Yeah, I guess so. My dad has always been a big fan, so I grew up watching the greats.”

“Well, I aspire to be like them.” He sips his beer. “It takes focus.” He pulls his eyebrows together and holds his cast up.

“I wasn’t focused the night this happened,” he says, tugging on an invisible string that’s tied tightly around my heart.

“When does it come off?” Paul asks.

“Tomorrow.” He leans in to Sebastian and Paul. “I can’t fuckin’ wait,” he says quietly out of the side of his mouth, and they both laugh.

“I’ve never been able to watch men hitting each other in the face. It’s just so...barbaric,” Janice says, pressing her splayed fingers to her chest dramatically. She touches Sam’s tattooed arm. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

“Yes.” He laughs and Paul and Sebastian join him. They’re quite smitten with Mr. Cole.

It makes me smile.

“But lots of things hurt.” He looks at me and my smile wanes.

“Well, I guess you probably had no choice but to fight when you were younger,” Janice infers, and I feel my blood pulse through my veins before she even says, “growing up in Brighton Park.”

I reach for the open bottle of wine and pour eight hundred dollars into a glass. “Just because we grew up in Brighton Park doesn’t mean we were heathens,” I say, keeping my voice steady, aiming to get my point across graciously.

“I’m sorry, dear, that’s not what I meant.”

“No, it’s okay. I did fight. A lot, actually...so that Lucy didn’t have to.”

I smile over my first sip of buttery Bordeaux. It fills my head with vanilla and spice and berries and smoke. I press my lips together and savor the taste and smell, unsure which is more lovely.

“So you and Lucy...you go back a long way?” Drew asks, and I cringe.

Sam looks at me. “What were we? Eleven? Twelve?”

I push my lips together, thinking of how his shaggy hair hung over his eyes when I met him. I hated that house, but he made me feel so safe. “I was eleven,” I say, smiling.

“Oh.” Drew smirks. “When you said ‘boyfriend,’ I thought you meant, like a real boyfriend.”

I see a hundred different thoughts flash across Sam’s face, but he just smiles and says, “She was my family.”

Janice exhales a dramatic breath. “Well, thank God she had you. I can’t even think of our darling girl in a place like that.”

“Yeah, well, she never belonged there,” Sam says, giving me a knowing glance that I’m fairly certain Drew saw.

I turn my counterfeit eyes to Drew, hoping to convey my innocence, but I don’t think he’s buying it.

“Thank God she found a way out,” Drew says provokingly, making my skin flush with anxiety.

Sam stares at him and I feel the tension rising in the room again, like a tank filling with water, threatening to drown me. “Thank God,” he says flatly.

“Tell us how you got out, Sam.” Drew pushes further.

“Drew, don’t you need to check on dinner?” I ask. “It smells like it’s ready.”

“I, for one, am starving,” Sebastian adds. He elbows Paul, whose eyes are glued to the two gunslingers.

“Me too,” Paul says, eyeing Sebastian curiously.

“Should we go sit then?” I ask, clasping my hands together.

“Yes, let’s,” Janice says, tipping her glass up. She seems to be the only one in the room who can’t feel the palpable tension. Must be the prosecco.

“I was arrested for a crime I didn’t commit,” Sam says, answering Drew’s question. “And then I spent three years in a state prison. That’s how I got out. But I’d say things worked out okay for me after that.”

Drew smiles condescendingly. "Dinner's ready."

"Great," Janice says, flitting across the kitchen to refill her glass.

I narrow my eyes at Drew, hoping to convey the thoughts I can't say out loud. I've never seen him behave like this before, but apparently jealous and antagonistic are on his very short list of faults. "Come on, everyone, let's go sit down," I say, waving my hands toward the dining room. "I'll bring the wine. I think you've got everything else covered," I say quietly to Drew.

Drew puts his hands on the counter and gives me an apologetic look, but I ignore him and follow our party to the dining room.

"Sam, it's pretty incredible how quickly you dominated the boxing world after your release," Paul says. "That's something to be proud of."

Sam pulls his eyebrows together and nods. "Thanks."

"Lucy, I love the new table," Janice gushes. "I think I might get something similar after the remodel. Did Drew pick it out?"

"Yes," I say flatly.

"Drew has such a keen eye for design." She smiles. "It's in his blood. I wish Maurice had been more like that. I spent most of my marriage in the driver's seat. It would have been nice to ride shotgun every now and then." She puts her hand on mine. "Enjoy it, dear."

The look of disapproval on Sebastian's face makes me uncomfortable, but the look of disappointment on Sam's makes me want to run and hide.

"So tell me, Sam, is there anyone special in your life?" Janice asks, placing her napkin in her lap.

"Yes," he says matter-of-factly, and I stop breathing. I think Sebastian has too.

"She must be a lucky girl."

He shakes his head and says, “I’m the lucky one.” His eyes flash to mine and my heart starts pounding.

Drew enters the room, carrying several steaming dishes. I’ve always been amazed at how he balances them on his hands and forearms. He places them in the center of the table. “Okay, we’ve got rosemary-braised lamb shanks, brown-butter-roasted potatoes, and asparagus ribbon salad. It’s family style tonight, so please, help yourselves.”

“Thank you, darling. I can’t wait to dig in,” Janice says, picking up her fork.

I give him a small smile, hoping that he’s reined in his male bravado. “Everything looks great, Drew. Thank you.”

“It looks amazing,” Paul says. I watch him cut a piece of lamb and put it in his mouth. He closes his eyes as he chews.

I can’t help but smile. I’ve always loved seeing how people react to Drew’s food for the first time. He’s an incredible chef.

Sam takes a bite and nods. That’s probably the closest thing to a compliment Drew is going to get from him.

It’s quiet for a minute besides the clinking of silverware as everyone eats. I relish in the relaxed atmosphere, no matter how short-lived it may be. For the moment, everyone seems to be enjoying their meal.

I sip my wine, savoring the way the warm, buttery notes complement the lamb. I swirl my glass, watching the burgundy liquid coat the crystal, thinking how this will probably be the last time Drew cooks for me. I glance up at him and he smiles, all of his ego falling by the wayside. I look at my glass again and take another sip. *What is he going to think when he looks back at tonight after I tell him about me and Sam?* I take another sip and try to swallow down the giant lump in my throat.

Sebastian subtly raises his eyebrows at me. He must notice me struggling with my thoughts about the not-too-distant future. “Lucy, I’m sure everyone would love to hear about the

exhibit,” he says, pulling me back into the here and now, which isn’t much better.

“Yes, Lucy, tell us. Are you ready for next week?” Janice asks. “You must be getting so excited.”

I take a deep breath and answer, “Yes, we’re both very excited,” I say, looking at Sebastian. “I think we’re almost ready.”

Sebastian puts his napkin down and reports, “The RSVPs have been tallied, the guest list has been finalized, all the featured artwork is set up—”

“Are you coming, Sam?” Janice interrupts Sebastian excitedly.

“That’s right,” Drew says, sitting back in his chair. “Lucy said you were interested in buying some artwork.” He sounds genuinely interested. Maybe he’s trying to redeem himself.

Sam raises an eyebrow at me.

*Yes, I lied!*

He takes a sip of his beer and puts it down on the table. “There’s a piece I’ve got my eye on.”

Drew puts his elbows on the table and gives Sam a hard look, but before he can say anything, Sebastian says, “The only thing we have left to do is confirm the menu with you, Drew.”

Drew’s ears perk up to that. “Well, there’s no time like the present.”

“Actually, I’ve had some last-minute thoughts about the menu,” I say, squinting, because I know how much Drew loves when I change my mind at the last minute.

He looks at me warily. “What kind of thoughts?”

“Well, you know how I wanted to have fun with the food since it’s an art show?”

“Hence the mac and cheese you requested,” he says flatly, because I finally wore him down and got him to agree to a less refined menu.

“Mac and cheese?” Janice reproaches, unable to hide the look of disapproval on her face.

“With lobster and gruyère,” Drew clarifies. “Served in martini glasses, of course,” he says, placating her.

Sebastian looks at me over the rim of his wineglass. “What were you saying, Lucy?”

“Oh, just that I thought we could add some color to the menu by serving little stacks of macaroons for dessert...in a rainbow of pastels,” I say, smiling at him, “from fuchsia to violet. And those paint palette cookies we saw in the window display at Canicci’s. I know they could fill an order within a week’s time.”

Sebastian grins and bobs his head. “I love it.”

“And there’s this drink I saw that looks like a rainbow,” I say to Drew excitedly. “It reminded me of the watercolors I used to paint with when I was little. That should be an easy addition, right?” I smile when I see Sam smiling at me.

Drew’s mouth is covered by his folded hands, but when he drops them I see the concerned look on his face. “Luc, we should probably serve champagne.”

“Of course. But I want the rainbow drink too.”

“It’s an art show, Lucy. Your first art show. I thought you wanted people to take you seriously. Icing cookies...rainbow drinks?” He pulls his eyebrows together. “That just feels a little bit like a kindergarten orientation, don’t you think?”

I feel my cheeks flame.

“If she wants the drink, let her have the drink,” Sam says, putting his napkin on the table.

I feel the blood drain from my face. “Sam, it’s fine,” I say, masking my embarrassment.

Drew stares at him and shakes his head. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, in defense of Sam.

“Nothing.” Drew puts his napkin on the table and sits back in his chair.

“I think it means that it’s time for me to go,” Sam says, backing his chair away from the table.

Janice holds her hand up. “No, of course it doesn’t.” She looks at Drew. “Tell us what you meant, darling.” She prompts him to explain away his comment.

He lets out an exasperated breath and looks at me. “It means that just because he brings a fancy bottle of wine to dinner and drives a hundred-thousand-dollar car doesn’t make him sophisticated. For crying out loud, he fights for a living, like a damn dog.”

“Andrew!” Janice admonishes.

I watch Sam get up from his chair, the look on his face calm yet terrifying. His eyes meet mine and I shake my head. I know what he’s capable of when he’s angry.

“I think I should go.” His voice is deep and controlled.

I glance at Paul’s and Sebastian’s shocked faces and see the embarrassment on Janice’s. I shake my head at Drew with shock. “What is wrong with you?” I grit through my teeth.

“Lucy, honey, you didn’t grow up with this...lifestyle. And that’s okay,” he says, looking at me like I’m some kind of injured puppy. “But the people who will be at your show did. They’ll expect a more sophisticated menu. Trust me on this.”

Sam rounds the table and my muscles tense as he approaches Drew. “She’s not a child.”

Drew stands up and my blood races through my veins. “I’m well aware of that.”

“Sam, just go,” I say, stepping in front of him.

His shoulders rise and fall to the rhythm of my racing heartbeat.

“Sam, please.”

He looks down at me and I’m gutted by the look in his eyes.



*I'm sorry, I mouth.*

He walks away, dragging my heart on the floor behind him.

Drew reaches for me. "Lucy."

"No." I push his hand away and go after Sam. I pull the front door open and run down the steps after him. "Sam," I call, but he ignores me. "Sam, stop," I say, catching up to him just before he gets in his car.

He closes the door and slams his fist down on the shiny black roof, making all the muscles in his forearm ripple, but he doesn't look at me. He drops his head and takes several deep breaths.

"Sam, please, just talk to me." I tug on his sleeve.

"What are you doing with that guy, Lucy?"

I pull my eyebrows together, unsure whether the question is rhetorical. "He's not normally like that."

"Bullshit."

I shake my head and repeat, "He's not."

"Because you always do whatever he tells you to? Because you never challenge him? Because he doesn't let you forget where you came from?"

"What? No. He's a good guy, Sam. And he's never been anything but wonderful to me."

"Is that what he's programmed you to think? That he's this great guy you don't deserve, who will give you whatever you want? Jesus, Lucy." He shakes his head and gives me a serious look. "Has he put his hands on you before?"

"What? No!" I exclaim, ignoring the pit in my stomach. *Where is this coming from?*

He watches me carefully, looking for any cracks in my resolve.

"He isn't that kind of guy, Sam. You don't know him," I say, defending Drew now. "He was just, I don't know,

threatened by you tonight. It didn't help that you were prodding him every chance you got."

He folds his hands on the roof of his car and drops his head between his arms.

"I'm sorry for what he said to you. It isn't true."

He looks at me again, the anger gone from his eyes now. "Of course it's true."

I blink at him, unwilling to participate in his self-deprecation.

"Lucy, I'm not sophisticated," he says, patting his chest. "I was raised in the system without parents, without privileges. I saw drug dealers every day. I stepped over needles on my way to school. And I spent three years wearing a jumpsuit in a state prison."

"Sam—"

"And I fight. Like a fucking dog, because nobody ever gave us anything. I fight so that we can have a life like this." He throws his hand up at the house. "I fight so that one day, our kids won't have to."

"I know," I breathe.

"He's right. I have more money than I know what to do with. But I'll never be sophisticated, because that's not me. I'll never be like him."

"I don't want you to be."

His face screws up. "I don't know."

"What don't you know? I was raised in the system too. I didn't have privileges either. I saw the same drug dealers and stepped over the same needles. We're the same, Sam."

"Then why do you care so much about these people?"

"Because these people care about me! That's how it works," I say, frustrated.

"You sure about that? Because they didn't seem to care about anything you had to say in there."

“That isn’t true. You just don’t understand them.”

“Oh, but you do?”

“Yes,” I say, exasperated, “I do!”

He shakes his head and huffs. “I forgot, you speak upper-class now.”

I feel a sharp pinch in my heart. “Screw you,” I say, blinking back tears.

He stares at me with a face of stone, but he doesn’t say anything.

“They are the *only* ones who cared about me when I was struggling to get started. They did everything they could to help me. They’re the reason I’m even having this exhibit.”

“You’ve mentioned that.”

I shake my head, because I’m so frustrated with him I could scream. “You don’t have to accept it, Sam, but Drew loves me. And I’m going to break his heart when I tell him about us,” I practically yell.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t.”

My heart pounds inside my chest and a hot flash of panic pricks across my skin. “What?”

“You’ve got it all, Lucy. A great guy, a great career, a great house.” He chews the corner of his mouth. “What have I done for you?”

I shake my head and say firmly, “Don’t do that.”

He rubs the back of his neck and closes his eyes. “It’s my fault.” He drops his elbows on the roof of his car. “*I* was supposed to get you out of Brighton Park. *I* was supposed to give you a better life. *I* was supposed to protect you.”

“This isn’t your fault, Sam. Life just had different plans.”

“I’m so proud of you, Lucy. I really am.” The corner of his mouth turns up into a small half smile, but it doesn’t hide the pain in his voice. “I mean, this”—he glances up at the house—“it’s more than we ever could have dreamed of when we

were kids. But this life, this guy”—he gives me a disheartened look—“it’s changed you.”

I shake my head and insist, “No it hasn’t, Sam. I’m still the same.”

“How could you be?” I see the defeated look in his eyes, and it fills me with fear.

“I’m the same,” I say through clenched teeth, tears filling my eyes now.

“The fact that you can’t see it tells me you’re not.”

“Sam, what are you saying?”

“I’m sorry I let this happen.”

“Sam.” I step closer to him, but I resist the urge to touch him, knowing several pairs of eyes might be watching me.

His face screws up and he closes his eyes. When he opens them again, they’re filled with fire. “Kiss me,” he says urgently.

“What?” I ask, feeling my emotional wave pool slosh inside me.

“Kiss me,” he pleads.

“That’s not fair. You know I can’t.”

“I’m not testing you, Lucy. I just want you to kiss me.”

My knees soften and my hands begin to shake. “Why are you doing this?”

“Please, Lamb. Just kiss me, right here, right now. And then go inside and tell him about us.”

The air leaves my lungs in a painful rush, and the street lamps begin to sway.

“Come home with me,” he begs.

My heart beats painfully against my ribs. “I—I can’t,” I cry. “You know why I can’t.”

He closes his eyes and drops his head. “Yeah. The exhibit. *Drew.*”

“Sam, please...don’t do this.”

He opens his car door but pauses before getting in, propping his arm on the edge of the door. “Go on.” He nods toward the house. “Go back to him.”

I wrap my arms around my stomach to hold myself together, but a sob bubbles up out of me anyway. “I’m sorry.”

He drops down into his seat and shuts the door, but not before I see the pain on his face.

When the car roars to life I rush to the window and press my hands against the dark glass. “Sam.”

He begins to pull forward but stops when I don’t move.

“Sam, please.” I tap the window desperately.

He lowers it just enough for me to see the heartbreak on his face again. “Lucy, move back,” he says roughly.

“No,” I grit through my teeth.

“Lucy,” Drew calls from the front porch.

When I look over my shoulder at him, Sam peels away and takes off down the road.

I wrap my arms around myself and inhale a shaky breath, but when Drew calls my name again, I wipe my eyes and march back to the house. When I reach him, I pause and say firmly, “He is my friend and you insulted him. And you embarrassed me.” I shake my head with disappointment and step around him to find three very alarmed faces waiting for me inside.

“It’s okay,” I answer the question in Sebastian’s worried eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “But I think it’s probably best for everyone to go home.”

Bas pulls me into a tight hug. “Call me,” he whispers.

I hold on to him and let out a quiet sob, but quickly swallow it down. “I will.”

He releases me and leads Paul through the front door, passing Drew without looking up at him.

Janice tucks her purse under her arm. “Lucy, please pass my apologies along to Sam, should he ever speak to you again.” She stands directly in front of Drew and says sharply, “Your behavior tonight was unacceptable.” She presses her lips together tightly and continues through the front door and down the steps.

Drew watches her get in her car, and then closes the door and leans against it. He puts his hands in his pockets and looks at me with heavy eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” I say quietly.

“I am.” His face is soft and unguarded.

I wipe my eyes. “Do you think you rescued me like some kind of stray dog?”

“What? No.”

“That’s what you think of us, me and Sam.”

“I don’t think that about you, Lucy. I love you,” he says firmly, stirring my emotions. “I’m sorry for how I acted tonight. I’ve never really felt insecure about us before. But he’s a lot to compete with.”

*Just tell him and get it over with. Go to Sam.*

I close my eyes and ignore the thought.

“It was childish, I know. And, I realize, pretty stupid. I’m just glad one of his hands was in a cast. But I saw the way he was looking at you.”

My pulse pounds in my ears.

*Rip the Band-Aid off now.*

“You don’t see the way men look at you like I do. He couldn’t keep his eyes off of you. I don’t care if he’s the president. I’m not going to let another man come into my house and stake claim on something that isn’t his.”

My face screws up reflexively. “You know I’m not a piece of property, right?”

“Of course. You know that’s not what I meant.” He takes a few steps toward me.

“Don’t.” I hold my hand up, wanting to keep my distance from him.

“I know you’re mad. You should be. I was a jerk.”

“He’s like family to me, Drew.” He’s *everything* to me.

He furrows his brow and shakes his head. “I realize that you have a history with him, Lucy, but you’re not kids anymore. I don’t know if I want you striking up a friendship with him.”

Sam’s presumptions about Drew echo in his patronizing tone.

“Well, I’m sorry you feel that way, but you can’t tell me who I can and can’t be friends with.” Maybe it’s a wasted effort, but after the way he spoke to me at dinner, I’m not about to let him start telling me what I’m *allowed* to do.

The corners of his mouth turn down. “No. I can’t tell you who you can be friends with. But I will tell you when I don’t want you hanging around men who want to fuck you.”

My mouth pops open and I feel the disgust make its way onto my face.

“I know that’s crass, honey, but it’s the truth. I could see it all over his face.”

“He’s not some random guy I met at a bar,” I say, feeling like I need a shower.

“Dammit, Lucy, I don’t want you seeing him!” he shouts, unsettling me further. He closes his eyes, inhales a deep breath, and runs his hand through his hair. When he opens his eyes again, his face is relaxed. He reaches for me, but I take several steps back. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

*Screw the exhibit. It’s not worth it.*

“Drew, I—I have to...” I look up at his dark blue eyes and steel my heart, but my unwilling tongue won’t cooperate. “I—I...”

“Lucy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you like that.”

When I see the remorse in his eyes, I search for sympathy, but I only find doubt. Suddenly, everything I thought I was so sure about before becomes a question. “Is this what it would be like?” I ask, shaking my head.

“What?”

“If we got married.”

“If?” His face grows serious. “Lucy, what are you talking about?”

“You just thought that because I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for me, I’ll do whatever you say? And when I don’t, then what? You’ll just scream at me until I fall in line?”

“What? No.”

I close my eyes and exhale a somber breath as I let go of the life I used to see with him.

I let go of the exhibit.

And then a new dream takes their place.

*Sam.*

“Drew.” I open my eyes and focus on my steady, sure heartbeats. “I don’t want to get married,” I say certainly.

He puts his hands on his hips, and his chest rises and falls in hurried breaths, but his face is smooth and unreadable. “Lucy, you’re, um, you’re just upset. You’re not thinking clearly.”

I give a small, apologetic smile and shrug. “Yeah, actually, I am. For the first time in a long time.”

“No, you’re not.” He swallows hard and says, “You’re just mad because I was rude to—”



“Sam?” I huff a quiet breath and shake my head. “Drew, Sam isn’t just some old friend.”

He clenches his jaw tight and looks away.

I wait for him to say something, but when he doesn’t, I reach for him. “Hey,” I say softly, trying to get him to look at me.

“Why don’t you, uh, why don’t you go ahead and go to bed?” He keeps his eyes off me and makes his way into the kitchen.

“Drew, we need to talk about this,” I say, following him.

“You’re tired.” He reaches for his bottle of bourbon and slides it across the counter. “And you’ve got a lot on your plate right now. Let’s just get past the exhibit and then we can talk about the wedding. Okay?” He opens the cabinet and pulls down a glass.

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” I ask, watching him fill the glass with bourbon.

“Don’t worry about the mess in here,” he says, bringing the amber-colored liquor to his lips. He takes a long sip and puts the glass down. “I’ll clean up.”

I watch him with wary eyes, but he quickly busies himself with the pots and pans he left on the stove.

“Drew.”

“Go on,” he says without looking up at me. “Go get some sleep.”

I exhale a frustrated breath, because there’s no talking to him now. “Okay.”

## Chapter 16

*Sam*

“Hey, Jimmy.”

“How’s it going, champ?” He steps out of his security booth.

I drop my head back against the headrest. “I’ve had better nights.”

He pulls the waist of his pants up and leans against my car window. “How’s the hand?”

“Fine. Cast comes off tomorrow.”

“You gonna be ready for Ackerman?” he asks skeptically.

Beau Ackerman is the reigning super middleweight champion of the world, and now he’s vying for my title. Cocky fucker couldn’t stay in his own weight class. Some people think he might actually have a shot since I broke my hand, but I plan to disappoint them.

“I’ll be ready.”

“All right.” He smiles and steps back. “Have a good night, Sam.” He raises the gate and I pull forward into the parking garage.

I circle the ramp up to the third level and park, but I don’t get out. I look at the empty spot beside me, imagining Lucy’s car there. She should be here with me right now. I grip the steering wheel and try to ignore the ache in my stomach. I turn the car off and get out, and head inside my building.

“Sam,” Terrance calls as I pass the security desk in the lobby.

I stop and walk over to him. “Hey, man, how’s it going? Haven’t seen you in a few days. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, my wife had a baby girl a couple of days ago.”

“No kidding?”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and holds the screen up for me to see. "Isn't she the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?"

I smile and nod. "Yeah, she's gorgeous. What's her name?"

"Jasmine."

"I like that."

"I call her momma sunflower, so it just fit, you know?"

"Is that her?" I ask pointing to the picture.

"Yeah, that's my sunflower. My day one."

I smile over the ache in my heart. "You're a lucky man."

"Don't I know it."

"Well, congratulations." I shake his hand.

"Thanks, Sam. You have a good night."

"You too, Terrance."

I continue across the lobby to the elevators. When I step inside, I hear heels tapping on the lobby floor. Just before the doors close, a small hand with red-painted fingernails appears between them, and they open again.

"Hey, Sam," Molly says, smiling up at me.

I look down at her big brown eyes, wishing there was a way she could help me that didn't involve sleeping with her.

"Hey," I say flatly, staring straight ahead.

"What's the matter?" she asks, eyeing me carefully. "Everything okay?"

I pull my eyebrows together and shake my head. "Not tonight, okay, Molls?"

"Sam, whatever it is, you can talk to me."

I give her a sideways glance, because she knows as well as I do that talking just leads to sex. "Not tonight."

She raises her eyebrows and faces the elevator doors. "Okay."

I glance at my casted hand, feeling like a chained dog. All I want to do is put on a pair of gloves and beat the hell out of a punching bag. The doors slide open to the sixteenth floor, and she begins to walk out, but I grab her hand and pull her back. “Wait.” I’m too wound up to sleep. If I go inside my apartment, I’m just going to climb the walls. “Take a drive with me.”

“A drive?”

“I could use the company.”

The corners of her mouth turn up. “I thought you said not tonight.”

“I just want to go for a drive, Molly. Do you want to come with me or not?”

She studies me carefully. “Yeah, Sam, I’ll come with you.”

“Okay.” I press the button for the lobby and my mind wanders to Lucy. She’s with *him*. *What’s the difference?*

The doors open to the first floor and Molly follows me out.

“Sam, Miss Pritchett,” Terrance says curiously as we pass him.

“Hold down the fort,” I say to him as we walk outside.

I lead Molly to the parking garage stairwell, and she proceeds up the stairs before me. I can’t help but look at her ass in the red leather pants she’s wearing. It’s in my face the whole way up to the third floor. “You could take someone’s eye out with those boots,” I say, wondering how she doesn’t topple over in them as we climb the last few steps.

“Your girl had on something similar, if I recall.”

I ignore her and follow her to my car.

“Are you going to tell me who she is, Sam?” she asks, sliding into my passenger seat.

I start the engine and back out of the spot. “Why, you need something new to tweet about?” I glance over at her. “That was pretty fucked up, what you did that day.”

The corners of her mouth turn down. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You insulted her on the elevator and ten minutes later my Twitter feed was blowing up. I think you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

She closes her eyes and shakes her head. “I’m sorry.” She sighs. “I texted someone who I thought was a friend and I guess she tweeted it.”

“It was fucked up,” I repeat.

“You’re right. It was. But it was a mistake. You know I would never do something like that to you.” She drops her chin and then peeks up at me. “Forgive me?”

She’ll never let me hear the end of it if I don’t. I look over at her and nod. “Yeah, okay.”

“So, who is she?”

I grip the steering wheel and stare straight ahead. I don’t want to talk about Lucy right now.

“All right, I’ll guess. She’s...your sister. No, no.” She shakes her head. “You don’t have any siblings.” She narrows her eyes and smirks. “That you know about.”

I give her a slanted look.

“Okay, she’s...your lawyer.” She bites her bottom lip and shakes her head. “Mixing business with pleasure...*not* a good idea. Been there.”

“She’s not my lawyer.”

“Why won’t you just tell me who she is?”

“It’s complicated.”

“You should probably know by now, I’m good with complicated.”

I give her an incredulous look and she frowns.

“Just because I’m a trust-fund baby doesn’t mean that I’m shallow and pretentious.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“That I’m shallow and pretentious or that I’m a trust-fund baby?”

“I’ve never thought you were shallow or pretentious. I didn’t know about the trust fund.”

“Yeah, well, my dad owned a pharmaceutical company and he made a lot of money before he died.”

I glance over at her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“So, is that how you started your company?”

“Well, I got a bachelor’s degree in graphic design and a master’s in marketing first.” She narrows her eyes at me. “Prerequisites for running a web design firm.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. And yes, it helped.” She looks out of her window. “I barely remember him. Except, well”—she shifts in her seat and smiles—“when I was little he called me peanut. He would come home from work, which sometimes seemed like days later, and say, ‘Come here, peanut.’ Then he’d throw me on his shoulders. I remember that. I always loved that.”

“What happened to him?”

“My mom.”

*What?* “She killed him?”

She laughs quietly. “No.” Her smile fades. “She got cancer.”

“Jesus, Molly. Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

She shrugs. “It was so long ago. I was only seven, so...” She picks at the corner of one of her red fingernails. “He was heartbroken when she died, so I’m told. He started drinking. And then one day he ran his car into a tree. He died on impact.”

I’m not sure what to say, so I don’t say anything.

“He wasn’t in his right mind. He didn’t mean to leave me. He just loved her so much...” Her voice trails off and she

stares out of her window again.

We ride in silence for a few minutes, until we're on the outskirts of the city. But when we pass the graffiti-covered *Welcome to Brighton Park* sign, Molly looks at me and asks nervously, "Where are we going?"

"We're both orphans, Molly. The only thing that really differentiates us is circumstance. You were left with a trust fund, and I was left with all this." I raise my hand and gesture at the dimly lit projects we're driving past.

She squirms in her seat. "I can't believe you grew up here."

"Well, not far from here." I glance at her concerned face. "Don't worry, I'm not going to stop. I just like to drive through sometimes, remember where I came from."

"Why would you want to remember a place like this?"

"Her name is Lucy. We grew up here together."

She stares at me for several seconds. "Wait. The woman in the elevator? *That* was Lucy? *Your* Lucy?"

"The one and only."

"But she was so..." She shakes her head. "*She's* from Brighton Park?"

"I know. You wouldn't know it by looking at her, but believe me, there was a time when she wore secondhand clothes and dyed her hair pink with Kool-Aid packets." I think about the day she came into my life, with her tangled hair and shy smile.

"When did you reconnect?"

"A few weeks ago."

She gives me apologetic eyes. "Oh, Sam, I hope I didn't —"

"No. I talked her off the ledge after she saw the tweets."

She nods and looks down at her lap. "So is that why you wanted to take a drive instead of going up to your place?"

I reach for her hand and give it a squeeze. “You’ll always be my friend, Molly. Just not that kind of friend. Not anymore, okay?”

She pulls her hand away and tucks her hair behind her ear. “Isn’t she engaged?”

“For now.”

“And you’re you expecting that to change?”

“I don’t know. Yes,” I say, frustrated by the events of the evening.

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then I’ll wait.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know, Molly. Forever,” I say, irritated.

“Wow,” she whispers. “You really do love her.”

“Life would be a hell of a lot easier if I didn’t,” I say, winding the steering wheel to pull into a gas station.

“What are you doing?”

“I just have to get gas.”

“Is it safe?”

“I know the tenant, Marcus. He’s been working here since I was a teenager. It’s safe.”

She glances around the well-lit gas station. “Do you think I could use the restroom?” She scrunches her nose.

I nod. “Marcus keeps them clean.”

“Okay.” She gets out and hurries across the parking lot.

I insert my credit card into the gas pump and begin filling my tank. I watch the numbers climb on the meter for a few minutes until they reach twenty-three gallons, and then I hear Molly’s heels tapping across the parking lot again. I look up and she gives me two thumbs up, but then she freezes and her face falls.



“Give me your wallet,” a gravelly voice says from behind me.

I turn around and see a man in a dark hoodie standing behind me, holding a gun.

“Give me your wallet!” he shouts.

I reach for my wallet and pull several hundred dollars out of it. “Here, just take the money.”

He takes the cash and shoves it in his pocket. “I know there’s more. Credit cards too. And your car.”

I shake my head and rub my hand over my chin. “You’re not taking my car.”

He points the gun at my face. “Are you crazy?”

“Just give it to him, Sam!” Molly cries.

I take a step toward him. “Do you know who I am?”

“The bullets in this here gun don’t give a fuck who you are.”

“You think I’m scared of a gun?” I shake my head. “I’ve known guys like you my whole life.”

He looks down at my arm. “You got some tattoos, so you think you’re tough, huh? You don’t know me. Cocky rich boy in your fancy clothes on the wrong side of town. In your fancy car with your fancy lady.” He looks over my shoulder at Molly. “I bet she tastes real good.”

“Sam.”

I take another step toward him and grit through my teeth, “Put the gun down, take the money, and walk away.”

“Nah, you ain’t scared. But she is.” He points the gun at Molly.

She screams and falls to her knees.

I step back and hold my hands up. “Okay, man. Just leave her alone. She didn’t do anything. If you want to shoot somebody, shoot me.” I pull my key fob out of my pocket. “Here, take the car.”

He ignores me and starts to walk toward Molly.

“Hey!” I shout, and he stops. When he looks over his shoulder at me, I throw a hard left hook at his face, and he falls to the ground. But not before firing his gun. The blast sounds through the empty gas station and rings through my ears.

I look down at the man out cold on the pavement and kick the gun away from his hand. Molly is still crouched down on the ground. She looks up at me, but her face is sheet white.

“Molly.” I run over to her, and she reaches for me with a bloody hand. *Oh, fuck.*

“Sam! You okay?” Marcus shouts across the parking lot. “I called the police.”

“We need an ambulance. My friend was shot.”

He runs back inside.

“I was shot?” Molly asks weakly.

I lift her arm and try to find the wound, but all I see is blood. “Yeah, but you’re going to be okay. Help is on the way.” I hear sirens getting closer.

“Sam?” I hear the fear in her voice.

“You’re going to be okay.”

“Something’s...wrong,” she slurs and falls limp in my arms.

“Molls? Molly?”

Several police cars pull into the gas station, followed by an ambulance.

“She needs help!” I yell to the officers getting out of their squad cars with their guns drawn. “She was shot.”

One of the officers lowers his gun and kneels down beside me. “Is she breathing?”

“I don’t know. I think so. She just passed out.”

Several EMTs surround us and begin checking her vitals. I try to lay her down, but one of them looks at me and says,

“Don’t move, Mr. Cole. We’ll move her.”

I stay still while they transfer her onto a stretcher. “Is she going to be okay?” I ask as they wheel her over to the ambulance.

“We’re going to do everything we can to make sure that she is.”

A second team of EMTs huddle around the shooter.

“What about him?” I ask one of the officers.

“He’ll be treated for his injuries and charged with attempted armed robbery and attempted murder, if that’s what happened.” He looks at me inquisitively.

“It is.”

“Mr. Cole, can you come with me, please?” He walks toward his squad car, and against every fiber of my being, I follow him.

After providing detailed answers to his scrutinizing questions, he pats my back and gives me permission to follow the ambulance to the hospital. “You better get that hand checked out,” he says, which only at the mention begins to ache.

I flex my fingers in and out a few times. I think it’s okay, but I need to have it looked at just in case.

The officer gives me his card. “I’ll be following up soon, Sam.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Take care of that hand, champ.”

\* \* \*

“Hi,” I say to Molly, who is blinking up at me from her hospital bed.

“Hi,” she croaks.

“How are you feeling?”

She swallows and closes her eyes. “Thirsty.”

I hand her a cup of water from her bedside table, and she reaches for it with a shaking hand. “Here.” I hold it to her mouth and she takes a sip.

She inhales a deep breath and groans. “Ow.”

“Do you need me to get the nurse?”

“No.” She shakes her head and clicks a small device in her hand. “I need morphine.” She smiles weakly and I see that the device is connected to her IV.

“The nurse said you were shot in the side, but the bullet didn’t hit any organs. You were really lucky.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t believe I got shot.”

“Molly, I...I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

“I should have never taken you there. It was stupid.”

She reaches for my hand. “Thank you for what you did, Sam.”

“I don’t know, maybe if I didn’t hit him, you wouldn’t have been shot.”

“Or maybe I would have, at close range.”

I shrug and nod.

“How’s your hand?”

“A doctor looked at it and said it’s fine.” I make a fist and only feel a slight ache in it now.

She closes her eyes. “Good.”

“The nurse said your aunt is on her way?”

“She’s flying down from Chicago. She’s going to stay with me until I’m better.”

“That’s good.”

She yawns. “What time is it?”

“Three.”

“In the morning?”

“Yeah.”

She looks at my bloodstained shirt. “You should go home and get some sleep. And burn that shirt.” She scrunches up her nose and gives me small smile.

“I can stay until your aunt gets here.”

She shakes her head from side to side. “No. I’m fine. Go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Okay.”

“And, don’t worry about me tweeting anything. I can barely hold my phone right now.” She laughs quietly.

“TMZ already took care of that for you.”

Her eyes widen a little. “What? They did?”

I nod and she closes her eyes again.

“There were a lot of people around tonight. It was inevitable.”

“Have you talked to Lucy yet?”

“No.” I can’t even begin to think of how I’m going to explain this to her.

“Please tell her how sorry I am for that day in the elevator.”

“I will.”

“She must be a pretty incredible woman.”

“She is.”

She closes her eyes and whispers, “I hope everything works out for you, Sam.”

“Me too.”

She lies quietly.

“Molly?” I whisper, but she doesn’t answer. The morphine kicked in.

I lean over her and gently kiss her forehead before I leave.

## Chapter 17

*Lucy*

I wake to the smell of bacon and look over at Drew's side of the bed. It's still made from the night before. He didn't come to bed. My heart sinks, because I know there's more than breakfast waiting for me downstairs. There's a man waiting for answers. Answers I tried to give him last night. I close my eyes and sigh. I should have tried harder.

I sit up and grab my phone, blinking until my blurry eyes adjust to the daylight, and I see three missed calls from Sebastian. He texted too.

**Sebastian:** OMG. Are you okay? Call me

**Me:** Yes but I can't talk now. I'll come over after I shower

**Sebastian:** Ok

I throw my covers off and climb out of bed, lured by the smell of coffee and bacon. I pass the guest bedroom on my way downstairs and find the guest bed slept in and unmade.

"Good morning," I say to Drew, who is standing over the sink.

"Good morning," he says over his shoulder.

I take a seat at the island. "Did you sleep okay?"

He nods and turns around. "I thought maybe we could use a little space last night. And I know how much you like when I come to bed smelling like bourbon." He smiles softly.

"You didn't have to sleep in the guest room."

He shrugs and says seriously, "That bed's actually really comfortable."

I nod and watch him make a cup of coffee. "Drew, I think we should talk about last night."

He hands me the cup. "I meant what I said, Lucy. You need to spend the next few days focused on the exhibit. Not on

us. And I need to focus on my work too. A problem came up with the permitting this morning, and I'm going to go back to Philly to handle it in person."

"You're leaving again?"

He looks at me and says, "I heard you last night, okay?" He puts his hand on mine. "But right now, I think the best thing for both of us is a little space. That way you can focus on making the exhibit a success. Because no matter how muddy the waters are between us right now, I'm not going to let it interfere with the biggest night of your career. Not when you've worked so hard for it."

"Drew." I close my eyes and exhale a tentative breath.

He walks back over to the stove and makes a plate. "Here, have some breakfast." He puts the plate in front of me, but there's no way I can eat with my stomach in knots.

"I'll be back in a few days. Then we'll get through the exhibit and talk about it," he says, giving me a small, sincere smile. "Okay?"

"Okay."

\* \* \*

I knock on Sebastian's door, and he answers with record speed, like he was waiting on the other side of it.

"Hey." I walk inside and drop my purse on the bright yellow tufted bench that's pushed against the wall in the foyer. Paul and Sebastian's apartment is the picture of midcentury modern perfection. Straight, clean lines are contrasted by smooth, curved angles, and warm neutral tones are accented with vibrant pops of color. It's 1955 meets today, and I love it. "Where's Paul?" I ask when I don't see him.

"I sent him away when you said you were coming over."

"Sebastian. You didn't have to do that."

"We were out of groceries anyway. I hope you're not hungry."



“No.” I shake my head. “I ate.” I picked at my bacon anyway. But I did finish my coffee.

“Oh, good. I’ve been really worried about you. Are you sure you’re okay?” He takes my hand and pulls me into the living room.

I sigh and fall onto the sofa. “I don’t know.”

“Have you talked to Sam?”

My heart sinks at the mention of his name. “No.” He was so upset when he left last night. I just want to give him some space today. It seems to be a common theme, but maybe it’s the best thing for all of us. Honestly, after everything that happened last night, I need some time to regroup.

“Well, I’m sure the story was grossly exaggerated.”

“What story?” I ask, raising my eyebrows curiously.

His eyes narrow and then widen. “Are you joking?”

“No,” I insist, trying to slow the thoughts that are suddenly storming my mind. “What story?”

“Didn’t you see the news?”

“No,” I say, practically shouting at him now. I was a little preoccupied.

He inhales a deep breath and says gravely, “Sam was involved in a shooting last night.”

“What?” My pulse races and my vision blurs around the edges. Suddenly the developments with Drew seem insignificant. “Oh, my God. Is he okay?” I scramble for my phone as tears flood my eyes.

“He’s fine. He wasn’t shot.”

I stifle a cry.

“But he got mugged at a gas station.”

I fumble with my phone, trying to unlock it. “I have to call him.”

Sebastian reaches for my arm. “Lucy. He was with a woman.”

My eyes flash to his, and when I see the pity in them, I know that it's true. "What?"

"She's the one who was shot."

My heart turns inside out and hides from a pain so big it could destroy me.

Sebastian puts his hand on mine, which I realize is shaking. "She's okay."

*Should that give me some sort of comfort?*

"Who is she?"

"According to the news, her name is Molly Pritchett."

My heart stops beating altogether.

"She owns a graphic design company and..." Sebastian's voice fades away. All I hear is the strangled sound of my breath catching in my throat.

"Lucy?"

I look up at him.

"You okay?"

I stand up and shake my head. "No. I am not okay."

He reaches for me, but I pull my hand away.

"She's the woman from the elevator in Sam's building. The one he admitted to sleeping with. The one who tweeted about me!"

"No." His eyes get big. "Are you kidding? Of course you're not." He grabs my hand and pulls me back down onto the couch.

"Why was he with her, Bas?"

"I don't know, sweetie."

I grab my phone and search for the story.

*Sam Cole Shooting: Girlfriend Shot.*

*Sam Cole's Girlfriend Shot in Mugging.*

I put my phone down when I see a picture of his car.  
“Girlfriend?”

“You know it’s not true.”

“When did it happen?” I ask, knowing Bas has already read every article.

“Ten thirty.”

“Where?”

“Brighton Park.”

I exhale a silent breath and drop my head to my hands.  
“This is my fault.” I cry softly.

“What? Honey. No.”

“He was so upset when he left last night. He begged me to go with him. He begged me, Sebastian. And I told him no.” I go grab a tissue. “I was so worried about Drew and the stupid exhibit, I just let him go.”

“The exhibit isn’t stupid,” he says, reining me in. “Drew, however...” He gives me a slanted look.

“I don’t know what got into him last night,” I say, wiping my eyes.

“I do. *Sam.*”

“How could I do this to him?”

“How could you do what to who?”

“Drew! I told him that I didn’t want to marry him last night.”

“Wait. What? You did?”

“Don’t worry, he’s in denial or something. He won’t talk to me about it until *after* the exhibit.”

Sebastian listens quietly, but I see a thousand thoughts cross his face.

“He said the only thing he wants me focused on right now is the exhibit, because it’s the biggest night of my career and he doesn’t want anything to mess it up.”

“Oh,” Sebastian says, pulling his dark eyebrows together behind his clear-framed glasses.

I put my face in my hands and cry, “And all I can do is worry about Sam.”

“Because you love him.”

“I thought he loved me too,” I say, wiping my eyes.

“Sam does love you.”

“What if something changed? Maybe something clicked in him last night.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works.”

“I really hurt him, Bas. You should have seen the look on his face.”

“Then you should call him.”

“And say what?...Hi, Sam. How are you? I’m glad you didn’t get shot!...He knows I’ve seen the story. Why hasn’t he called *me*?”

“Technically you haven’t seen the story. And, I don’t know, maybe he has PTSD from a man waving a gun around in his face.”

I give him an doubtful look.

“Okay, maybe he’s sleeping.”

“It’s one o’clock in the afternoon.”

“Maybe he was at the police station all night.”

I shudder at the thought.

“I’m sure there’s an explanation, Luc.”

“And what if there’s not? What if I lost Sam before I ever got him back? Or worse, what if this whole time he’s been someone I didn’t want to believe he could be? I mean, it would explain why he was in Brighton Park that time of night. Maybe he’s involved in something.”

Sebastian stands up. “Okay, I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Until you know the whole story, stop jumping to

conclusions.”

I go to the foyer and grab my purse.

“Where are you going?”

“To clear my head.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No.”

“Lucy.”

“I want to be alone.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I’m fine, Bas. I just need to be alone for a little while.”

“Okay,” he says, reluctantly. “But please check in with me later. Don’t forget and turn me into a crazy person running around the city looking for you.”

“I won’t.”

“Everything’s going to be fine,” he says unconvincingly.

“I hope you’re right.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “I usually am.”

## Chapter 18

*Lucy*

It only takes me ten minutes to get to my studio from Sebastian's downtown apartment. When I park my car, I drop my head to the steering wheel and peer inside my studio through the giant windows. Painting is usually my go-to fix, but as I gaze at my dark studio, I can't find the motivation to go inside.

I see the reflection of an airplane in the glass, angling up into the sky. When it disappears, I look up and try to find it again. I see it and pull forward, rounding the corner to keep it in view. I drive several blocks and then turn again. And again.

Before I know it, I'm halfway to the airport and approaching Brighton Park.

I look at the rundown houses as I pass them, thinking of Sam and what happened somewhere near here last night. I check my gas gauge. I have a full tank. I didn't mean to end up here, but it's a straight shot to the airport, so I keep driving, watching the planes angling up into the sky as I get closer. I think about Sam and what life was like for us here. It was a hard life. At least that's what everyone says. It's what they think. But not me. Life was so much easier when we had nothing to trap us, to hold us back, to tangle us up. We just had each other. No strings. No binds. Just us. And we were happy.

I see a group of girls on the side of the street coloring the cracked sidewalk with chalk. They look up when I pass them, and I see the envy in their eyes, the same envy I had at their age whenever a nice car drove down my street. But what they don't realize is that I also envy them.

I follow the service road that circles the airport and find a place to pull off at the far end of the runway, on the *right* side of the barbed-wire fence. I turn my car off and open the door just as a plane takes off. I get out and watch it fly over me. I forgot how loud it was this close. I close my eyes and let the roaring engines take me back to when I was sixteen.

My phone vibrates in my hand and I open my eyes. *Sam*. I fumble to answer it. “Sam,” I shout over the noisy engine.

He says something inaudible.

“I can’t hear you, hold on.” The plane disappears, taking the noise with it. “Sam?”

“Hey,” he answers tentatively.

“Are you okay?” I ask, needing to know that he really is.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Are you?”

“Yeah.” Physically, anyway. Mentally, not so much.

“Where are you?”

I chew the corner of my mouth. I wanted to talk to him, to hear his voice, to know that he was really okay. But I’m overflowing with fear and frustration and anger. I want to know what really happened last night, but I don’t think I can take hearing it right now.

“Lucy, where are you?” he asks again, as another plane flies over.

I press the phone to my ear and shout, “Sam, now’s not really a good time.”

“Lucy, please,” I hear him say when the plane is gone. “I need to see you.”

I close my eyes to block the tears that rush to them, but it doesn’t work. They leak onto my face anyway.

“Please, Lamb. Just tell me where you are.”

“I’m really glad you’re okay,” I say over the lump in my throat, and hang up the phone.

He immediately calls back, but I don’t answer. I toss my phone on the seat and shut the door.

Another plane screams overhead, and I watch it fly over, but the view isn’t the same standing up, so I climb onto the hood of my car and lean back against the windshield. I cross my outstretched legs and let the bright November sun warm me inside my jacket.

A few minutes later, I watch another plane fly across the cloudless blue sky. And another a few minutes after that.

I begin keeping count.

Five planes later, a car roars up next to mine, startling me.

*Sam?*

I sit up as he gets out and hurries over to me.

“Sam, what are you doing here? How did you—”

“Why weren’t you answering?” he asks desperately.

I shake my head, still wondering how he knew I was here. “I—” I close my eyes. I can’t look at him. I swing my legs over the side of the car and slide off the hood.

He stands in front of me. “Lucy, please.”

“What were you doing with her, Sam?”

He shakes his head. “It’s not what it looked like.”

“Really? Because it looked like you were involved in something sketchy at night in Brighton Park with a woman you’ve admittedly slept with.” I exhale and ask the question that’s been burning inside me since I left Sebastian’s apartment. “Were you...buying drugs?”

“What? No, I wasn’t buying drugs! I’ve never touched drugs. Dammit, Lucy, when are you going to believe me?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” I shout.

“Just let me explain.” His beautiful eyes implore me. “Please.”

I lean against the car and give him my attention as another plane flies over.

He inhales a deep breath and runs his hand through his hair, and the muscles in his arm flex beneath his painted skin. When it’s quiet again, he rubs his scruffy chin and tightens his square jaw. “You hurt me last night.” His eyes water and it nearly knocks me down.

My heart comes out of hiding, where it’s been since Sebastian uttered the words ‘*He was with a woman*’, and it



practically leaps out of my chest, wanting to comfort him.

“Sam—” I close my eyes, feeling overcome with guilt and regret. I know that I hurt him.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you back,” he says hoarsely. “That’s not why I was with Molly.” Hearing him say her name makes me nauseous. “But I know that it did hurt you. And I’m sorry.”

I look at him and shrug. “It’s my fault.” *My own selfish fault.* “I was so worried about Drew and the exhibit...” I exhale a sorrowful breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for everything to get so screwed up.”

“It’s not screwed up.”

“Then why were you with her?” I ask desperately.

“I was really upset when I left you last night. I was angry. I just needed something to take my mind off it.” He shrugs. “She was there.”

I press my lips together and nod, accepting my punishment.

“We just talked.”

“You talked? In your car?”

“Would you rather I took her up to my apartment?”

I let out a weighted breath. *No.*

“I thought taking a drive was a better alternative. We just talked,” he says again.

“About what?”

“You.”

I close my eyes and shake my head.

“It’s true.” He gazes at me with honesty in his eyes, but I’m not ready to accept it.

“Why, so she can tweet something else about me?”

“She didn’t do that. She admitted to texting someone, probably because she was curious about you, and maybe a little jealous, but she didn’t put anything on Twitter. She

wanted me to tell you that. She's really sorry about it. She didn't know who you were."

I cross my arms and look down at my feet. "Is she okay?" I ask softly, allowing myself to feel sorry for her.

"She will be."

"What were you doing driving around Brighton Park that late?"

"I just wanted to feel close to you." He gazes at me and I exhale the last of my resentment.

I know exactly what he means. That's how I felt driving here.

"Why did you wait until a few minutes ago to call me? What were you doing all morning?"

He holds up his right hand, which is no longer casted.

"You were getting your cast off," I say, shaking my head, thinking of the anxiety I've had all day. *Couldn't that have waited?* "I know you wanted it off, Sam, but considering last night's events—"

"It had to come off before I saw you."

"Why?"

"Because I knew that when I saw you, I'd have to do this." He takes my face between his hands and kisses me passionately as another plane rumbles over us. He pushes and pulls my lips with his, and the scruff that surrounds them scrapes wonderfully against my skin, leaving it tingling and my lips swollen when he parts them. He caresses my tongue with his, healing the places in my heart that were falsely convinced of betrayal all day. A cry of relief bubbles out of me, and Sam responds with a moan. I no longer care about anything else. *He* is all that matters.

He tugs my lips between his teeth once more, then he kisses me softly and rubs his thumb over my cheek as the noise from the plane disappears.

“Damn that felt good,” he whispers, balling his right hand into a fist. He steps back and looks at me. “I’m sorry, I know you told me not to kiss you. But after last night...”

“It’s okay,” I breathe, trying to remember why I invoked that rule in the first place. When I remember, I press my tingling lips together and reach for his right hand. I turn it over and touch his palm. “Is it better?”

“It is now.” He laces his fingers with mine and gazes at me. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you either,” I say, looking into his beautiful eyes.

He rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. “I’ll wait for you, Lucy. If you need more time, after the exhibit, you can have it.”

“No.” I shake my head and shrug. “I already told Drew.”

“You told him? What did you say?” His impatient eyes search me for the answer.

“That I didn’t want to get married.”

“You did?” he asks, unable to hide the relief in his eyes.

“Yes.”

“Is that *all* you told him?”

“Well, I tried to tell him about you and me, but he didn’t want to hear it. I think he believes I’ll change my mind if he gives me space. He wants to wait until after the exhibit to talk about everything. He said that I’ve worked too hard to let anything get in the way of it.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Well, that’s one thing we agree on. He shouldn’t get in the way of it. And neither should I.”

“Does it even matter anymore?”

He drops his chin and gives me a pensive look. “Yes, it does.”

“Sam, last night after you left, I realized the only thing that really matters is *you*.”

“Lucy—”

“When I was driving here, passing the streets we grew up on, all I could think about was how simple life was back then. How good it was. I didn’t have a fancy house or a car or a studio. I had you and that was all I needed.”

“You didn’t have those things, but you wanted them.”

I shrug. “I have them now. And without you, they’re meaningless. Without you, the studio, my paintings, my career...none of it matters.”

He shakes his head. “Forget everything else. I can buy you a house and a car and a studio. But I can’t buy back all the hard work you’ve put into your career, and into this exhibit.”

“Sam.”

“I’m not going to let you do anything to mess it up, not when it’s only a few days away. You, Lucy Marie Bennett, are going to earn your spot in New York.”

I bite my bottom lip, disappointed that it’s no longer tingling, and nod reluctantly. “I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“So don’t.” He shows me his dimples, and my heart searches for a chisel and stone to carve the following vow into: *I will never hurt you again.*

“You know Drew’s not going to be thrilled to see you at the exhibit,” I say warily.

“So does that mean I’m invited?” He fights a smile, and the corners of my mouth turn up.

“It would be a shame if the star of the show wasn’t there for the unveiling of his painting.”

“You’re going to use it?” He smiles freely now.

“It should draw quite the crowd.”

“Well, I guess I better be there, then.”

I laugh softly, but my smile wanes. “Sam, you tend to bring out the worst in Drew. He made it clear last night that he

didn't want me to see you again."

"Why, what did he do? Did he hurt you?" He scans my face.

"No." I shake my head, ignoring his absurd assumption. Although I did see an unfavorable side of Drew last night. "He just said that you couldn't take your eyes off me all night." I raise an eyebrow at him.

"I can't help it." He shrugs. "It's like breathing."

"Yeah, well, he noticed."

"It doesn't help that I can't touch you until after the exhibit." He balls his right hand into a fist again, like he's fighting some carnal urge to touch me now that it's out of a cast.

I reach for his arms and wrap them around my waist. "Well, maybe you could kiss me again," I say, throwing caution to the wind, desperate to feel his lips on mine again. "Just once more."

He grins and shows me his dimples. "I'm not kissing you again until you're mine."

I give him an incredulous look. "But you just did."

"In a moment of weakness." He crinkles his eyes. "But I won't do it again." He drops his hands and leans against the car beside me.

I press my lips together and try to savor the kiss, which I can no longer taste, knowing it will be my last until after the exhibit. Maybe even longer, depending on how everything goes with Drew.

I sigh quietly and frown.

Without looking at me, he loops his pinky with mine and grins, and his dimples send my heart soaring like the plane flying over us.

I gaze up at it and tug on his hand, pulling him toward the front of my car. He smiles and climbs up onto the hood after me, and we lie back against the cool windshield.

Seconds pass before he reaches for my hand again.

I squeeze his hand tight when another plane roars over us. When it's gone, I let out the breath I was holding, along with all the stress from the last twenty-four hours. I feel Sam's body relax too, and it fills me with a sense of peace and calm. I inhale another deep breath, savoring the comfort I feel lying beside him with the warm sun on my face.

I drop my head to the side and look at him staring up at the blue sky. "How did you know I was here?"

He looks at me and I lose myself in his eyes. "You can't hide from me, Lucy. Not anymore. I'll always find you."

"Promise?"

"If I have to use every resource I have."

The corners of my mouth turn up. "Good."

"I heard the plane engines." He winks.

## Chapter 19

*Lucy*

I stand in front of the floor-length mirror in my bedroom, admiring my sparkly reflection. I put my hands on my waist and feel the tiny gold beads and crystals that cover the top half of my dress. A strip of black silk separates it from the long black taffeta skirt that touches the floor. I turn around and look at my bare back, and tighten the black silk ribbon that's tied behind my neck.

*I love this dress.*

I swing my long, slicked-back ponytail and smile. I spontaneously stopped into the salon and had the bottom third of it dip-dyed pink for the occasion, and I think I love it even more than my dress.

“Lucy?”

“Upstairs,” I call to Sebastian, who is picking me up for the exhibit.

Drew is already at the studio with his staff getting the food set up. After three days in Philly, he returned home upbeat and determined to make the exhibit a culinary success. But I'm not so sure the space apart did me any good. It only exacerbated the fact that tonight is now the pendulum upon which our relationship swings. And I'm somewhat convinced he's still completely unaware, which only adds to the cloud of anxiety that's been looming over me all day. I wanted tonight to be about my work, but it's been irrevocably tangled up with Drew and Sam, and I have no one to blame but myself.

Sebastian walks into my bedroom, looking debonair in his snug black tux and indigo bow tie.

We both gasp at the same time when we see each other.

“Sebastian, you look so handsome!”

He eyes every inch of my dress and then turns me around so he can see the back. He widens his eyes and smiles. “Holy bananas, you look so hot.”

“Really?”

“I mean it. If I were straight, you’d be in trouble.”

I laugh. “Sebastian.”

“I love everything about this.” He holds his hands up in front of me. “The dress. Your hair!” He touches the pink end of my ponytail. “Your eyes. Those lips!”

I press my Ruby Woo red lips together and smile.

“You’re channeling your inner Gwen Stefani.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Wait until Sam sees you.”

I smile with nervous excitement. I haven’t seen Sam since last week, which was intentional on all counts. I decided to use the space Drew gave me to focus solely on the exhibit. And Sam has been with Joe and Tristan getting ready for a fight in Quebec tomorrow night. Other than a few text messages from him, which were undoubtedly the highlight of my week, my days were filled with event planning, to-do lists, dread, and guilt. Not necessarily in that order.

“Are you ready? We should get going,” Sebastian says, glancing at his watch.

“Yeah, just let me grab my shoes.” I go to my closet and step into my black Christian Louboutin stilettos. “Is Paul downstairs?”

“No. He said he had a pit stop to make, so he’s going to meet us there.”

“Oh, okay.” I kick up one of my red soles for Bas to see.

“Fancy.”

“I thought a little retail therapy might make me feel better about breaking Drew’s heart.”

“Did it?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Well, at least you’ll look good doing it.”



\* \* \*

It's dusk when we pull up to the curb in front of my brightly lit studio where Sebastian is promptly greeted by a valet. We rented a nearby parking lot and hired a valet service to assist with parking. I just hope we have a big enough turnout to justify it.

We walk inside and the waitstaff stops and looks up at us from their tasks.

"We're not guests, but we are in charge, so get back to work," Sebastian teases, and several of them smile before returning to their jobs.

"I love your dress," one of the waitresses says as I pass her on my way to find Drew.

"Thank you."

"And your hair." She smiles with wide eyes.

"Thanks," I say, smiling at her.

"Lucy," Drew calls from behind the macaroni bar, where he's busy wiping out martini glasses with a dish cloth.

"Hi," I say, smiling at him. I hold my hands behind my back and sashay from side to side in my dress.

"Hey, can you grab the other box of champagne flutes from your office? I put them in there this morning so no one would break them."

I stare at him for several seconds, waiting for him to compliment my dress, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's in *the zone*. "Yeah, sure."

"Be careful not to break any of them. I don't have extras."

"Okay." I head to my office, glancing around the studio as I go, checking the vibe and feel of each strategically positioned piece that I pass. I stop in front of the painting of Sam that's now hanging on the wall beneath a track of lights that are shining on his powerful body, highlighting his handsome face and unusual eyes. I smile thinking of how

everyone might react to it. Hopefully not the same way Drew did. He was fairly underwhelmed by it.

I sigh and my shoulders fall under the weight of the worry that seems permanently affixed to them lately.

“What’s wrong?” Sebastian asks, walking up behind me. “It looks great. Everything looks great.”

“What am I doing, Bas?” I ask, keeping my eyes on the painting.

He stands beside me and stares at the painting for a few seconds, before saying, “You’re hosting your first art exhibit.”

“I feel like a fraud.”

“You’re not a fraud. You’re incredibly talented.”

I press my lips together and shake my head. “They’re all going to know. Maybe not tonight, but sooner or later, they’ll know.”

“So they’ll know. And they might even care for twenty-four hours. But then they’ll move on.”

“Maybe we should take it down,” I say, gesturing to the painting. “It feels like I’m just rubbing it in Drew’s face.”

“No,” he says firmly.

“Drew doesn’t even know that Sam’s coming tonight. Maybe I should call Sam and tell him not to come.”

“Lucy, the show starts in a half hour. He’s probably already on his way.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” I say, unlocking my phone to call him.

“You were thinking that the love of your life might like to be part of a night that will likely be one of the biggest nights of your career.”

I pause and look at him.

“And you were thinking that using his painting in the show would be a beautiful way to honor everything he’s accomplished and the man he’s become for you...a way to say

thank you for being patient and waiting while you navigate this unfamiliar road.”

“Yes, but...” I cover my face with my hands and try to shake off the frustration of my self-inflicted predicament. “If I do that for Sam, I hurt Drew.”

He drops his head to the side and looks at me.

“But if I protect Drew, I hurt Sam,” I say, reading his not-so-subtle thoughts.

He raises his eyebrows and nods.

“These choices suck.” I huff.

“Is there really a choice?”

“I don’t want to hurt Drew any more than I have to, Bas.”

“Well, life’s not that easy. There’s a cost for the things we want. That’s what makes them worthwhile.” He sighs. “There’s no ‘buy one, get one free’ here, Luc. If you want Sam, you have to be willing to pay the price.”

“You mean, be willing to hurt Drew.”

He shrugs. “Yes.”

“And be willing to risk my career. And be willing to give up my nice, *normal* life.”

“Yes, to all of the above.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “And I’m just supposed to be okay with hurting Drew because that’s the break?”

“Of course not. You should care that it’s going to hurt Drew and it’s probably going to hurt Janice too. And that’s going to suck. And people are going to have opinions about it and that’s going to suck too. It’s not going to be easy. But *that’s* the price. That’s what you have to be willing to pay for Sam.”

I swallow hard and nod, accepting a truth I know I’m going to have to face.

“Isn’t he worth it?” Bas asks.

“Of course he is.”

“Okay then, there’s no choice.”

I exhale a deep breath. “I just want tonight to be over with. I think I’m going to tell Drew about Sam as soon as it is. If he’ll listen.” The thought of ending things with Drew fills me with anxiety. Not because I’m second-guessing my relationship with Sam. But because it means giving up the safe, expected life I’ve come to know. And the foster kid deep inside me panics at that. It’s like jumping off a high dive. I want to jump. But it goes against every self-preserving bone in my body.

I look at the time on my phone, eager to get it over with. “Three hours. The show should be over by then, don’t you think?”

“Hey.” He looks at me. “This is your night. Be here. Okay?”

I blink at him and nod. “Okay.”

“Let’s just focus on the show for the next few hours before you take your running leap off the cliff.”

I nod at Sebastian, whose uncanny way of knowing exactly how I feel helps ease my anxiety. “Okay.”

The corners of his mouth turn up. “Smile. You look too good not to.”

I smile automatically.

“And don’t forget...Sam’s not the only one you get at the end of all this.” He reaches for my hand. “You’ve got me too.”

I squeeze his hand. “I’m pretty lucky.”

Drew calls my name.

“Shoot. The champagne glasses.” I hurry to my office and pick up the box that’s sitting on my desk. I carry it in my outstretched arms, wrapping my fingers around the corners of it tightly.

“I can carry it,” Sebastian says, walking beside me.

I tighten my grip on it. “I’ve got it.”

“Lucy,” Drew calls again.

“I’m coming,” I say, stepping on the hem of my dress. I stumble forward. “Shit!” The box wobbles in my hands. I try to balance on my heels, but it’s a losing battle. Sebastian grabs my arm, keeping me upright, but the box continues its trajectory to the floor, landing with a crescendo of shattering crystal.

I gasp and assess the damage. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Drew walks over to me and stands with his hands on his hips, staring at the crushed box on the floor. He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, I tripped.”

“It’s fine,” he says calmly, but he doesn’t look calm. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Sebastian, do you think you could help Lucy clean this up? I’ve got to go put my tux on.”

“Sure, we’ve got it.”

Drew heads to my office to get changed, and Sebastian gives me a crooked smile. “You okay?”

“Yes.” I reach for the box.

“Here, let me help this time,” he says, reaching underneath the box to help me carry it to the back.

A few minutes later, Drew steps out of my office looking handsome in his black tux. I walk over to him and straighten his bow tie. “You look great.”

He looks at me and sighs.

“I’m sorry about the champagne glasses. I didn’t mean to drop them.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“It’ll be fine. We can just use the other eight hundred and one glasses you brought.” I smirk.

“You can’t serve champagne in a martini glass, Luc.”

“Well, what about the box you already unpacked?”

“Each box holds fifty champagne flutes. It’s not enough.”

“You really think everyone will come?” I smile with anticipation.

“Janice Christiansen is nothing if not persuasive. I think you’ll definitely need another box. I’ll be back,” he says, pulling his keys out of his pocket.

“What? Where are you going? People are going to start showing up any minute now.”

“The staff knows what to do. I’ll be back in no time. Don’t worry.”

“But I need you here,” I say, panicked. These aren’t my people. These are *his* people. Janice’s people.

“You’ll be fine.” He stretches his neck and looks behind me.

I glance over my shoulder and realize he’s looking at my ponytail.

He pulls his eyebrows together, and the corners of his mouth turn down. “When did you do that?”

I reach behind me and pull my hair over my shoulder, touching the pink end of my ponytail. “This morning.”

“Isn’t it fabulous?” Sebastian says.

“It’s something,” he says, amused, concerned, maybe a little worried about my mental well-being. “I’ll be back soon.”

I follow him through the studio. “Please hurry.”

“I will.” He turns around and smiles at me before he leaves. “You look great, by the way.”

I purse my lips over the smile he evokes. “Thank you.”

Sebastian scans the list in his hands. “Done, done, done...” He looks at me. “Wait. The music,” he says, smiling with what I can tell is nervous excitement. It excites me too.

I widen my eyes and nod. “Hurry.”

He disappears to the back and a few seconds later, Ben Howard begins to croon the lyrics to “Keep Your Head Up” through the studio speakers. I smile and close my eyes and let the airy melody flow through me. When I open them, Sebastian is walking toward me, singing along to the cheerful song.

He smiles and takes my hand. “Keep your head up, keep your heart strong...no, no, no, no...keep your mind set, keep your hair long...” He spins me around, and I laugh. “My, my darlin’...keep your head up, keep your heart strong...” He puts his hand behind my back and pulls me against him, and we sway back and forth to the music, laughing and singing along.

He spins me again, and I swing my ponytail, shouting, “Keep your hair long!”

He squeezes his eyes shut and shouts, “My, my darlin’.”

We dance until the song ends and when it does, I feel like there’s light pouring out of me. I smile and hold his hands. “I love you, Bas. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head. “I love you too. Now let’s have some fun!” He spins me out of his arms. “This is our night! We deserve it!”

I smile and agree, “Okay!”

“Quick, before everyone gets here. Let’s have a toast.”

I bob my head and follow him over to the bar, where the bartender promptly greets us. “What can I get you?”

“Champagne”—Bas glances at me and smirks—“in two martini glasses, please.”

The bartender gives him a funny look, but serves the champagne in martini glasses as requested.

Sebastian raises his glass. “Here’s to a successful *and noticeable* night. And...to keeping your hair long.” He winks.

“Cheers to that.” We clink our martini glasses and sip our champagne.

A few minutes later, several people file into the studio, including a few of the artists whose work is on display tonight.

“My people,” I say relieved, remembering that they aren’t socialites. Most of them are struggling just to make ends meet, just like I was not that long ago. We leave our glasses on the bar and cross the studio to welcome them.

Sebastian pours on the charm and encourages everyone to look around. “Please, help yourselves to a drink. And be sure to try the lobster macaroni. It’s to die for.”

The waitstaff buzzes around with trays, offering drinks and hors d’oeuvres as more people make their way inside the studio. As soon as the door closes behind them, another group walks in.

I look at Sebastian with wide eyes and see the satisfaction in his.

Janice walks in on Paul’s arm, dragging him from person to person as she schmoozes her way through the room.

“Should I go rescue him?” Sebastian asks.

“If you care about him, yes.”

We make our way over to them, and Janice smiles when she sees us. “Look who I found.”

“Thanks for returning him to me,” Sebastian says, taking Paul’s hand. He kisses Janice on the cheek. “You look fabulous,” he says, eyeing her crimson gown. It sweeps over one of her shoulders and hugs her slender body.

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

I lean in to hug her and she squeezes me tight. “I’m so proud of you,” she says quietly against my ear. “Have fun tonight.” She releases me and I swallow down the conflicting feelings of gratitude and sorrow. She steps back and looks at my dress. “Darling, you look absolutely stunning. This dress is incredible,” she says, spinning me around to look at the back. “Oh.” She gasps.

I look over my shoulder. “What? What is it?” I reach for the zipper at the small of my back, but it’s secure.



“Your hair. It’s...pink.”

“Oh, yes. I, um...”

She raises her eyebrows and smiles softly. “You’re an artist,” she says, surprising me. “You express yourself through color.”

I nod. “Yes.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Paul says, spinning me around again to look at it.

“Thanks.” I turn around and admire his fitted indigo tuxedo. “You look great.”

He smiles graciously and Sebastian beams. “He’s perfection.”

“So what was the pit stop you had to make?” I ask curiously.

“Ah.” He reaches inside his tuxedo jacket. “Just a little something to commemorate the night.” He hands a small box to Sebastian, whose eyes light up when he sees the personalized cuff links inside.

“Oh, I love them,” he gushes, and hugs Paul. “Thank you.”

“Here, let me help you put them on,” Paul says, and I smile watching them.

“Lucy, where’s Drew?” Janice asks.

“He went to get more champagne glasses. I accidentally dropped one of the boxes he brought.”

“Oh, dear.” She touches her diamond necklace and presses her lips together into a tight smile.

“Lucy?”

I turn around and see an unexpected face with short brown hair and glossy lips smiling at me.

“I don’t know if you remember me, but—”

“Molly,” I say, but it comes out like a question.

Sebastian’s head snaps up.

“I know you must be really busy tonight, but I was hoping to talk to you for just a minute. If that’s okay?”

“Um, sure. Yeah.” My eyes flash to Sebastian, who offers little help.

I walk with her across the studio, glancing down at her tight black cocktail dress.

“Your studio is really beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“I love art.” She smiles shyly. “I’m a graphic designer, so it’s in my nature.”

“I didn’t know that.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear. “I thought maybe Sam would have mentioned it.”

I tense automatically upon hearing his name and stop walking. “He didn’t.”

“I hope he passed along my apology.”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She drops her head. “I really am sorry for how I behaved that day in the elevator. And for the media stories that ensued. I never meant for that to happen,” she says sincerely.

I nod and begin walking again. “Are you feeling better?” I glance down at the place on the side of her flat stomach where she was shot.

“Oh, yeah. I’m much better now. I mean, it’s still pretty sore, I won’t lie. But I was going stir crazy inside my apartment. Your show was just the reason I needed to get up and put on some real clothes.” She laughs softly and admits, “Sam thought it might be a good idea.” She smiles and shakes her head. “He really loves you, you know.”

My smile wanes and my heart races.

“Like the way girls dream about being loved.”

Part of me is irritated that she knows anything about the way Sam loves me, but the other part is delighted to hear her

say it.

“It’s not a wonder why. Besides the fact that you’re beautiful and have *really* cool hair, you are talented, girl!” She laughs and shows me a beautiful white smile.

I laugh uncomfortably and smile back.

“Seriously. I had a chance to look around, and I’m really impressed with your work.”

“Thank you.”

“I was wondering if you might be interested in doing some work for me.”

“For what?”

“I own a graphic design company. I’m guessing Sam didn’t tell you that either.”

“No.” But I did *read* about it.

“Well, I’ve been looking for an artist who can breathe some new life into our designs, and what I’ve seen tonight is exactly the kind of thing I’ve been looking for.”

“I don’t know anything about graphic design,” I say, shaking my head.

“That’s okay. You don’t have to. You just have to create the artwork. Draw, sketch, paint. Whatever you like. My developers will do the rest.”

“Oh. Well, um...I don’t know.”

“Look, you don’t have to decide tonight.” She reaches into her clutch and pulls out a business card. “Just think about it, okay? Then call me,” she says with wide eyes.

I take the card from her. “Okay.”

“All right, that was longer than a minute. I don’t want to keep you. But I’m really glad that I got to meet you, Lucy. Good luck tonight.”

“Thank you.”

She smiles and I watch her weave in between tuxedos and cocktail dresses all the way to the door. I head to my office to

put her card away, and when I walk back out into the studio, I hear a commotion and see everyone gathering around the entrance.

Sebastian appears beside me. “Sam’s here.”

My heart speeds up on cue as Ben Howard’s “Only Love” plays through the speakers. The crowd thins as he makes his way inside and walks over to me.

“Wow,” I breathe.

“Yeah.” Sebastian sighs.

Sam’s eyes meet mine and he smiles, charming me and the rest of the room with his dimples. He’s wearing a perfectly tailored black tuxedo that looks like a million bucks, he’s freshly shaven, and his hair looks as if it was professionally styled.

“Does he have a stylist?” Sebastian whispers to me.

“No. I don’t know. Maybe.”

The closer he gets, the less oxygen seems to go to my brain. I giggle just before he reaches me, and Sebastian nudges my arm. “Don’t forget that everyone’s watching,” he says quietly.

I nod and try to compose myself.

“Sam, it’s great to see you,” Sebastian says, reaching out to shake his hand. “So glad you could come.”

Sam raises his eyebrows and smiles. “You too, Sebastian.” He leans in to him and says quietly, “Just be yourself. They’ll lose interest in a few minutes.”

Sebastian smiles and nods.

“Lucy, you remember Tristan,” Sam says, gesturing to the man standing beside him. He’s tall and well built, almost as well as Sam, and is wearing an equally impressive suit. His dark, almost black hair is styled perfectly over his handsome face, and his blue eyes shine when he smiles at me. I remember him as if I saw him at Joe’s yesterday.

“Lucy Bennett, I can’t believe it,” he says in a deep, almost unrecognizable voice.

“Tristan,” I say, smiling at him. “I can’t believe it either.” I reach up to hug him, and he wraps his arms around my waist, squeezing me tight. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too, beautiful. Congratulations on all this.”

“Thank you.”

Sebastian clears his throat, and I promptly introduce him. “Tristan, this is my good friend and *amazing* assistant, Sebastian Ford.”

Tristan gives Sebastian a firm handshake. “Tristan Kelley. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Sebastian says, unable to hide the enthusiasm in his voice. “Sebastian Ford.”

I lean in to him and whisper, “I already said that.”

“Right.” He smiles and bobs his head.

*Somebody has a crush on Tris.*

“And this is my manager, Miles Angelo,” Sam says, introducing us to a thick man with olive skin and jet-black hair that’s slicked back.

Sebastian shakes his hand and so do I. “It’s nice to meet you, Miles,” I say. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you too, sweetheart.” He looks at Sam and says to him, “If you would have told me she was this pretty, I wouldn’t have given you such a hard time about her.”

I push my lips together over a polite smile. *A hard time about me?*

Sam drops his chin. “That’s not true. Don’t listen to him.”

Miles slaps Tris’s shoulder. “Come on, I’m gonna go get a drink.”

“I’ll come with you,” Sebastian says.

“Do you want to get something to drink?” I ask Sam.

“No, I don’t drink before a fight.”

“Oh. Right.” I smile and glance around the room at all of the faces that are watching us. “Come with me,” I say to him, and lead him to the back of the studio.

As soon as we’re away from everyone, he reaches for my hand. “Wait. Stop.”

I turn around. “What? What’s the matter?”

He lowers his eyes to my dress and slowly brings them back to my face. “God, you’re beautiful.”

My shoulders relax and I smile.

“I mean it.” He steps toward me, closing the space between us. “You are the greatest work of art in here tonight.” His warm breath falls on my parted lips, and I quickly inhale to taste it on my tongue. He reaches for my ponytail and brings it over my shoulder. “I love this.” He shakes his head and smiles. “You have *no* idea how much I love this.”

I smile at the seductive tone of his voice, and my anxiety disappears, replaced by the longing and desire I’ve been suppressing since the moment he pressed his lips to mine in this very spot. I swallow hard and try to ignore it. “So, um, what have you been doing all week?”

“Thinking of you.”

I fight a smile and say casually, “I thought you were training for your fight against Beau Ackerman tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, well”—he laughs and scrapes his teeth across his bottom lip—“I’m ready for that now too.”

“What else are you ready for?”

He gazes at me and says, “You.” He crinkles his eyes, and I see the excitement and anticipation in them. “Us.”

“Me too.”

“Lucy, Drew’s back,” Sebastian says, popping his head around the corner, and my face falls.

Sam raises his eyebrows and gestures for me to go before him.

I follow Sebastian through the studio and immediately see Drew behind the bar, setting up the champagne glasses.

“You might as well get it over with,” Sebastian says.

I nod and continue toward Drew with Sam on my heels. “Behave,” I say to him, and he grins.

“You made it.” I smile at Drew, but he only glances up from his task for a moment.

“Lucky for you, I decided to come back.”

Humor. *Good.*

“Well, I’m glad that you did.”

He glances up again and sees Sam standing beside me, and all humor subsides. He stands up straight and asks rather rudely, “What is he doing here?”

Some part of me hoped that Drew might act differently around Sam tonight, that he might suck up his insecurities for my big night. It was a senseless notion—one I had no right to hope for.

“It’s good to see you too, Drew. Everything looks really great tonight.”

“Lucy, can I talk to you for a minute, please?” Drew asks me, ignoring Sam, who tenses beside me.

“Yeah, sure.” I glance up at Sam and follow Drew. “Drew, please, this night is important and I know you wouldn’t do anything to ruin it. Sam is my friend and I invited him here.”

“And I thought I told you, I don’t want him to be your friend.”

“Yes you did. But that’s like telling the sky not to be blue. He *is* my friend. He’s more than that, he’s family,” I say, trying to make him understand, as if it will somehow soften the imminent blow. I clear my throat and say softly, “I invited him here, Drew. I want him here. So please respect that.”

“Is this your way of getting back at me for dinner the other night?”

“What? No.”

“Then what, Lucy?” He drops his head to the side and gives me a devastated look. “Do you really not want to get married anymore?”

My throat begins to close. *Not here.*

He puts his hands on his hips, and I see the panic spread across his face. “Is there...is there something going on between you two?”

I stare at him like a deer in headlights, frozen by the words I need to say but can't. Not yet. *Not now.* “Drew—”

“Miss Bennett?”

I look over my shoulder and see a portly-looking man holding a camera. “Yes?” I manage, trying to keep my voice even.

“I'm Whalen Michaelson, from the *Atlanta Journal*. I was wondering if I might take some pictures of you.”

“Of me?”

He nods and says brightly, “Yes.”

“I'd love to get a few shots myself,” another man says, holding up his laminated *Atlanta Daily* badge.

“Oh, um.” I turn around and bob my head. “Okay.”

“Perhaps Mr. Cole wouldn't mind getting in a few with you?”

“Oh,” I choke out, “I don't know.”

“Surely he'd be willing to pose for a few shots in front of his own painting,” Whalen Michaelson suggests.

I pull my eyebrows together and look for Drew, but he's gone.

“It is him, isn't it?”



“Um, yes, but—” Maybe it’s my imagination, but it feels as if everyone in the studio has formed a concentrated circle around me. I glance around at the unfamiliar smiling faces.

“I’d be happy to,” Sam says over my shoulder, smiling at the reporters.

I look up at his handsome face, and I’m disconcerted by how calm he is, a stark contrast to how I feel.

“Great. Shall we?” Whalen Michaelson gestures toward Sam’s painting.

I feel Sam’s hand gently brush the small of my back, urging me to go before him, and I force my stiletto-clad feet to carry me over to the painting.

“Okay, Mr. Cole, Miss Bennett, if you could stand together here...” He positions us beside the painting and looks through his lens. “A little closer.”

Sam reaches around my waist and pulls me closer to him, making every muscle in my body clench tight.

“Perfect.”

Sam slowly pulls his hand back, trailing it along the waist of my dress, and gently caresses the small of my back with his thumb. I let out a slow breath, and try to calm my pounding heart.

“What is it called?” one of the guests asks.

“Is it for sale?” someone else asks.

I shake my head and smile. “No, it’s not for sale.”

“Pity. I would pay top dollar for it,” another man says, raising his rainbow martini, and everyone laughs.

“And the name?” Whalen Michaelson prompts.

“Oh.” I look at Sam and then look at the painting. “*Lionheart.*”

Sam looks at me as if no one else is in the room, and for just a moment, I forget that there is.

“It’s called *Lionheart*,” I say softly to him.

“Sam, how do you know Lucy?” someone asks.

“We grew up together,” he says, crinkling his eyes at me. “We go way back.”

“Two hundred and fifty thousand,” Drew says, stealing my attention away from Sam.

“What?” I look at him like he’s lost his mind.

“For the painting. It’s two hundred and fifty thousand,” he says again, raising his amber-colored drink to the man who asked if it was for sale.

“No.” I shake my head and look at Sebastian with wide eyes.

“Like Lucy already said, it’s not for sale,” he says, helping me.

“Two hundred and fifty thousand,” the man agrees.

“Two seventy-five,” another man counters.

“No!” I shout, then quickly cover my shock with a smile.

“Anyone for three hundred?” Drew asks, ignoring me.

“She said it’s not for sale,” Sam says calmly, leaving my side to stand in front of Drew, which I know is a bad idea. A *very* bad idea.

I quickly follow behind him. “Sam.”

Drew swallows down the last ounce of bourbon in his glass. “What are you, her bodyguard now?”

“If I need to be.”

I roll my eyes at Sam and his unnecessary security detail. “Drew, I know you’re upset right now, and I’m sorry.” I groan, feeling my emotions slosh around inside me. “But you can’t sell my painting.”

“Upset? Why would I be upset?”

I swallow hard and whisper, “I don’t know.”

“Oh, honey, I think you do know. I think you both know,” Drew says, loud enough for the people around us to hear, and

my cheeks flame when their eyes light up with curiosity.

*Not here.* I give Sebastian a panicked look, and he successfully diverts everyone's attention by introducing one of the artists whose work is on display.

"Follow me," he says to the crowd, leading them to the far corner of the studio to see her painting.

Sam raises his hand to Drew's chest. "Maybe we should take this to the back, so we don't disturb Lucy's guests."

Drew looks at Sam with disdain. "I don't care who you are or how well you think you know Lucy. You need to stay the hell away from her."

"Drew, that's enough!"

Sam takes a step toward him and stands two inches from his face. "When *she* tells me to stay away from her, I will. But I don't see that happening anytime soon."

"Sam, stop it!"

Drew shoves his glass into my hand, and I take it mechanically, paralyzed by what I'm watching unfold before me.

*This is it. It's over.* The show. My career. It's all coming to a head right here, right now, in the middle of my studio. And I can't do anything to stop it. I close my eyes. *I probably deserve it.*

Sam hovers in front of Drew. "What? You want to hit me?"

"Sam," I scold, but he ignores me. He doesn't even hear me. There's too much testosterone pumping through his veins.

He opens his arms wide and holds his hands out, inviting Drew to hit him. "Come on, hit me."

"Drew, don't!" I'm no longer concerned about the show or the guests who have started to migrate toward us again. Sam could kill him.

Drew pulls his fist back and throws an impressive right hook at Sam's face, and everyone around us gasps, including me.

“Sam!” I reach for him, but I’m quickly blocked by Miles and Tris, who are both shouting at him and pushing him back.

Sam smiles at Drew. “Is that all you got?”

“That’s enough,” Miles says, pushing Sam back.

Drew lunges at Sam again, and I reach for his arm. “Drew, stop it!” He yanks his arm away, but it comes back at me, knocking me to the ground by accident.

Sam breaks through Tris and Miles, and grabs Drew’s collar.

“Sam, don’t!” I scream when he pulls his fist back, and he freezes. “Please,” I beg. “Don’t hit him.”

His chest rises and falls, but he lets go of Drew’s collar. He holds his arms out, like before. “Hit me again,” he growls at Drew.

Drew shakes his head and steps back.

“You wanna fucking hit me? Hit me!”

Miles steps in front of Sam and shouts in his face, “Are you kidding me right now? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Tris takes the opportunity to grab Sam’s arms and pull him back again.

“Get him in the car!” Miles shouts, pushing them toward the door. “You gotta be fucking kidding me. Get in the goddamn car!” he shouts at Sam as Tris pushes him through the door.

I watch Sam climb into the back of a black SUV and disappear behind the dark tinted windows. It pulls away from the curb, leaving me standing in the middle of my studio, surrounded by a sea of alarmed faces.

Drew steps toward me.

“No.” I shake my head and walk calmly to my office, but he follows me.

“Lucy, talk to me,” he pleads, once we’re alone.

“What do you want me to say?” I spin around and glare at him. “I’m so angry at you right now.”

“Yeah, well, the feeling’s mutual.”

“You tried to sell my painting, Drew! What is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me? How about the fact that you don’t want to get married, for starters?”

“I tried to tell you a week ago and you wouldn’t listen to me,” I say.

“Because I thought you’d come to your senses!”

I shake my head and bite my trembling lip. “I have. Which is why I can’t marry you.” I shrug and say tearfully, “It’s over, Drew.”

“Over? How can you say that?”

I swallow the painful lump in my throat and cry, “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” He shakes his head and stares at me. “How could you do this? After everything I’ve done for you. After everything we’ve— You’re just going to throw it all away?”

“You *have* done so much for me. But that was never why I was with you.”

“Then why?”

I blink at him and shake my head. “Because I loved you,” I say wholeheartedly. “I *love* you.”

“You love me?” He huffs a short laugh and closes his eyes. “Damn, Lucy, you sure have a fucked-up way of showing it.” He turns around and opens the door.

“Drew, where are you going? We need to talk about this.”

“I’m done talking.” He walks out of my office and closes the door behind him, leaving me to wallow in my despair and self-loathing for the next thirty minutes, afraid to show my face to anyone who might still be lingering around the studio.

Someone knocks on the door and I get up from my chair to open it.

“Sebastian.” I look over his shoulder. “Where did Drew go? Is he still here?”

“No, he left. Everyone’s gone. Are you okay?”

“No.” I plop back down in my chair, and my dress puffs around me. I prop my elbow on my desk and put my face in my hand. “I guess the show was a failure, huh?”

“Actually, you sold twelve paintings, over half of which were yours.”

I sit up straight. “I did? Really?”

“And I think there was enough buzz around Sam’s painting to get the attention of the modern art curator at the Met,” he says, grinning.

“Funny.”

“Not funny. I’m being serious.”

“Sebastian.”

“You had an offer for two hundred and seventy-five *thousand* dollars. That’s insane.”

“That is insane. Do you think he was insane?”

He laughs. “I think everyone was much more impressed with your work than your love life. Several of the guests said it was one of the best shows they’d been to.” He arches an eyebrow. “Maybe in part because of the entertainment at the end. But I think, mostly because of your talent.”

I huff a disbelieving breath. “Entertainment for them, torment for me.” I groan. “That was awful.”

“I know.”

“I want to be so mad at both of them, but I did this. It’s not their fault.”

Bas tilts his chin to the side. “Ehh, it’s a little their fault. I’d say more Drew’s than Sam’s. He did try to sell your painting.”

I groan. “What am I going to do, Bas? Drew won’t talk to me, and Sam leaves for Quebec in the morning. I can’t let him go after what happened tonight.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Not unless you’d like to see him get hurt again.”

“Sebastian.”

“Well, you remember what happened the last time he was distracted by the likes of you.”

I bob my head and stand up. “What should I do?”

“Go to him. Right now. Come on.” He takes my hand. “I’ll drive you to his apartment.”

## Chapter 20

*Lucy*

I direct Sebastian as we make the short drive through the city to Sam's apartment. "Just pull up there," I say, pointing to the curb in front of the entrance to his building. My hand hovers over the door handle, ready to open it when he stops.

He parks in front of the large glass doors outside of the lobby. "Want me to wait?" he asks as I gather my dress and hurry from the car.

I turn around and shake my head. "No."

"Good luck," I hear him say as I dash inside.

I turn around and give him a small wave through the glass door.

"Miss Lucy."

I stop in front of the guard. "Hi." I smooth my long black skirt. "I'm sorry"—I flash an apologetic smile—"I don't think I ever got your name."

"Terrance."

"Hi, Terrance." I smile at him. "It's good to see you again."

"Good to see you too," he says warily, glancing down at my dress. "Sam was dressed up fancy tonight too." I smile automatically, but he shakes his head and says, "He sure was hot when Mr. Miles brought him home, though."

"Oh, um." I pull my eyebrows together. "Yes."

"Does he know you're coming to see him?"

I shake my head and he studies me for a moment, but then he nods toward the elevators and says, "Go on. I'll let him know."

I flash a small smile and dash across the gleaming marble floor toward the bank of elevators. "Thank you, Terrance," I call across the empty lobby, and my voice echoes off the walls.



“Slow down, Miss Lucy,” he calls back.

When the elevator doors open, I hurry inside and press the button for the penthouse. I’m whisked up to the twenty-fifth floor in record time. *Thank you*, I say to the universe, which clearly understands the importance of me seeing Sam right now. I hold my breath for the millisecond it takes for the doors to open again, anxiously waiting for him to appear on the other side of them, but all I see is his empty foyer.

The door to his apartment is cracked open.

I exhale my anticipation, in exchange for a lungful of apprehension, as I step out of the elevator. I press my hand to his door and push it open. “Sam?”

I walk inside his dark apartment and follow the orange glow coming from his living room. I find him standing in front of the fireplace, still partially dressed in his tux, with his hands on the matte-black mantel, gripping a lowball glass. His sleeves are flipped up and his open collar is hanging loosely around his neck.

“Hey...what are you doing?” I ask tentatively.

He sips the clear liquor from his glass and sets it back down on the mantel.

I put my hand on his back. “Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, staring at the fire.

I wrap my hands around his thick arms and rub them over his broad shoulders and down his wide back, savoring the way he feels through his crisp white shirt. “It’s okay. You don’t have to be sorry.”

He sighs quietly.

“Hey,” I say against his shoulder, “look at me.”

He turns around and his eyes grip me. “It was all for nothing.” He clenches his jaw tight, and the tiny muscles flex where it hinges. “I ruined your show.” His skin glows in the light of the fire, and the flames cast a shadow on the cleft in his chin, making it hard to focus on what he’s saying. “I’m sorry,” he says, squeezing my heart.

I reach for his face. “Sam, you didn’t ruin anything. Believe it or not, the night was a success.”

He gives me a dubious look.

“We sold twelve paintings.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” I smile and see the relief in his eyes, but it’s fleeting.

“It’s already in the media, Lucy.”

I assumed it would be. I drop my hands and sigh. “So what?”

“So what?” He raises his eyebrows. “They know your name now. It’s not just me in the headlines. They’re speculating. About us. About Drew.” He shakes his head. “There were a lot of people there tonight.”

I swallow down the sick feeling in my stomach. *That’s the price.* I look at his handsome face and stand a little taller. *I’ll pay it ten times over if I have to.* “And?”

He exhales an incredulous breath. “Don’t you care?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Not anymore.” I reach for his face again. “Right now, the only thing I care about in the entire world is you.” I rub my thumb over his cheek where Drew hit him. “Are you okay?”

His face softens and the corners of his mouth turn up into a small, amused smile, but then he reaches for my hand and says sincerely, “I am now.”

I smile, glancing at the glass on the mantel behind him. “What are you doing drinking before a fight?”

He shrugs. “It didn’t seem that important when I thought I wrecked the biggest night of your career.”

“And now that you know you didn’t?”

“Maybe a little more important again.”

I push the glass down the mantel until it’s out of reach. “Are there *other* things you shouldn’t do before a fight?” I ask,

trailing my fingers over the buttons on his shirt, desperate to feel his healing lips on mine.

“Like what?” he asks, low and husky.

I reach for his hands and lace my fingers with his. “I’m yours, Sam.” I gaze up at him, and the fire I’ve worked so hard to control finally breaks free and blazes through me, burning me from the inside out, sending embers soaring into the space between us.

His chest rises and falls with a quiet groan that fans the flames higher when I see the look in his stormy eyes. He slowly trails his hand up and down my back, sending goose bumps across my bare skin, and I savor the feeling of his firm stomach pushing against me each time he inhales. “I’ve wanted to do that all night,” he whispers, steeling the last bit of breath from my lungs. He brings his hands to my face, and I part my eager lips to welcome his, but he doesn’t kiss me. “You’re mine,” he says aching, and I see the question in his eyes.

I nod fervently and answer, “Yes.”

He presses his mouth to mine and kisses me desperately, pushing and pulling my lips with his, the way that I love, the way that leaves them tingling and wanting more. He rubs his hands up and down my back, finding the zipper at the top of my skirt, and tugs it down, groaning into my mouth when his fingers brush over my black lace panties. He reaches inside my dress and squeezes my lace-clad bottom, pulling me against his hips.

I moan into his mouth, wanting to absorb him through every pore in my body, but he releases me and reaches for the silk bow that’s tied behind my neck. He pulls the ends until they fall loose and chase my sparkly gold dress to the floor, which settles around my feet in a puff of black taffeta.

I stand weak-kneed on my stilettos as Sam gazes down at my nearly naked body, and I’m silently begging him to touch me *anywhere*. He reaches for my ponytail and brings it over my shoulder, letting his hand slide down the length of it over my aching breast, which he resists with a quiet groan as his

fingers follow the curve of my arm, leaving a blazing trail on my skin that I feel everywhere.

He raises my hand above my head and says softly, “Turn around.”

I carefully step out of the cloud of black taffeta at my feet and slowly spin around under his tattooed arm, feeling his fiery eyes ignite every place on my body they meet.

He wraps me in his arms and pulls me close to him again. “You’re so beautiful,” he breathes, and I melt in his arms. He presses his lips to mine and kisses me again, and I know that the only reason I’m still standing is because he’s holding me up.

He lifts me off my feet and I wrap my legs around his waist, crossing my red-soled heels behind him. I shove my hands into his hair, undoing the work of whoever styled it, and kiss him urgently as he carries me to his bedroom on the other side of the wall.

“A double-sided fireplace,” I mumble into his mouth, surprised to see the orange flames glowing against the walls.

“Uh-huh,” he mumbles, uninterested in the matter. He drops me onto the plush duvet that covers his giant bed and crawls over me, kissing me slowly, caressing my tongue with his, and soothing a place deep inside me that only he can. He kisses my jaw and neck, holding my hands by my shoulders as he slowly drags his lips to my breast, and I welcome the warm rush of desire that surges through me. His mouth covers my nipple, and he moans softly against it, sending vibrations to the deepest part of my body. He continues with hot, wet kisses all the way down to my hip, pressing his hand against my stomach when I arch my back. He wraps his other hand around my knee and trails kisses along the inside of my thigh.

“Sam,” I whisper, desperate for him to extinguish the flames just inches from his mouth, but he moves farther down my legs and kneels between my feet.

He carefully removes my shoes, and I press my bare feet to the bed, feeling the soft duvet under my toes as he kisses his

way back up my legs. He hooks his fingers in my panties and pulls the black lace over my hips, pausing to press his lips to the burning place between my thighs, igniting the flames with his warm breath, before dragging the lace the rest of the way down my legs, leaving me naked and squirming beneath him.

He presses his hands to my thighs and covers me with his mouth, giving me the sweet relief of his soft lips and warm tongue. I look down and see him gripping my thighs in his strong hands, still wearing the remnants of his tux, the muscles flexing in his tattooed forearm when he stretches it over my stomach, and the fire sears down my legs. He looks at me with his beautiful eyes, and the flames engulf my entire body.

I grip the duvet in my fisted hands as waves of pleasure rock through me, bringing my back off the bed beneath his hand. He groans against me, shattering me into a million pieces, and the world falls away for a few blissful seconds.

When I open my eyes, he's kneeling at my feet, unbuttoning his shirt. He kicks his shoes off and they tumble onto the floor behind him. I sit up and smile, but his face is even more intense than before. His hungry eyes pierce me and reignite the smoldering fire inside. I kneel in front of him and push his shirt off his broad shoulders and down his arms, taking in the sight of his sculpted torso glowing in the light of the fire. I press my fingers to the tattoos that cover his chest and softly kiss his neck, dragging my lips up to his jaw. My hands roam freely across his stomach, feeling his muscles flex under my touch as my fingers follow the defined V that points below his pants. I unbutton them and pull his zipper down, feeling the heat radiate off him when I tug them down a little.

He reaches for my face and kisses me, but my eager hands remain diligent. I reach inside his pants and rub him, and he groans softly against my cheek.

"I want you," I whisper, tugging his pants down past his hips.

He kisses me hard and lays me back on the bed as he shrugs out of his pants and positions himself between my legs. He runs his hand along my thigh and bends my leg over his

hip, and I rock my hips up, feeling him between my legs. “Sam,” I beg.

He rubs himself against me, and I bite my lip, anticipating the feeling of him inside me, a feeling that could never be replicated. He exhales a warm breath against my parted lips and pushes into me, sending electricity coursing to every nerve ending in my body. I cry out, but he covers my mouth with his, muffling the sound as he slowly moves out of me and pushes back in, filling me up and satisfying the ache deep inside. *Ohh*. He eases out of me again, and I gasp at the sensation, at the heavy fullness of him when he glides back in. I press my hips up against his, needing to feel every familiar inch of him.

He drops his head beside mine and I breathe in his warm scent as he gifts me with the heavy, full sensation again, before he pulls back, leaving me aching and wanting more. He sinks into me again, deeper this time, making me gasp and hold him tighter as I rediscover the puzzle piece that’s been missing for so long. He reaches for my hands and pulls them above my head, lacing our fingers together as he rocks into me, again and again, synchronizing his movements to our slow, deep kisses, like a familiar dance we perfected long ago.

“I love you,” I whisper against his lips.

He rolls over and sits up, pulling me into his lap without breaking our connection, and I sink down on him until our hips are flush. I wrap my arms around him and close my fists in his hair, and he loosens my ponytail until it falls in silky strands down my back. “I love you too”—he shoves his fingers into my hair and grumbles against my ear—“so fucking much.”

I laugh softly, but when he lifts me again, we both fall silent at the sensation. He lifts me again and I slide back down, exhaling shallow breaths against his lips. Up and back down. Up and back down. Again and again, like waves on the ocean, bobbing up and down together, our tongues dancing to the slow rhythmic motion.

I lean back in Sam’s arms and he kisses my breasts, softly tugging my nipples between his lips until the heat begins to

take over again, crawling up my thighs and burning between my legs as my breasts swell under his tongue. He leans forward, until I'm practically lying on the bed, and I rock my hips against his, trying to extinguish the fire. "Sam," I cry, begging him to put out the flames.

He lays me on the bed, leaving me empty and aching as he crawls over me. But when he sinks into me again, I feel the relief through my whole body. He moves in and out of me faster, pushing deeper, sending electricity to the tips of my fingers and the ends of my toes. *Oh, yes.*

He groans and moves out of me again, leaving me gasping for air, but before I can beg him for mercy, he rolls me onto my stomach and pulls my hips up off the bed a little. He lies on top of me, pressing me against the bed under his welcome weight, and I grip the duvet in my fists when I feel him sliding between my thighs. He pushes into me, groaning against my ear when I push back against his hips. He grips my hands and begins to move in and out of me, satisfying me in a whole new way.

I close my eyes and exhale a silent breath through my parted lips, savoring the way he's pressing *every* single part of my body against the bed each time that he moves. "Ahhh," I cry as he pushes me over the edge without warning, sending me soaring through a beautiful familiar blackness that consumes my body and leaves me trembling beneath him.

He rolls me over and kisses me hard, making me cry out each time he thrusts into me, pressing his hips hard against mine.

"Sam," I say when I can't take it anymore, but his mouth covers mine and the fire consumes me once more, leaving me writhing beneath him as he groans against my lips and holds me tight as he lets go.

I lie beneath him, waiting for the feeling to come back to my fingers and toes, but without oxygen it's not likely. "Sam"—I gasp for air, which I can't find because he's lying on top of me with his full weight—"you're crushing me."

He rolls onto his back and gives me a small, satiated smile that makes my heart fall dreamily into a bed of flowers. He pulls me over to him, and I drape myself across his chest like an overcooked noodle. He wraps his heavy arm around me, and we lie quietly for a while until I begin to drift off.

“I can’t go back,” he says softly, pulling me from the early stages of sleep, which my body is now demanding.

“Hmm?” I hum against his chest.

“I lived without you for a really long time, but I can’t go back to that now.”

I open my drowsy eyes and look at him.

“I can’t live without you, Lamb. Not anymore.” He gazes at me and I see our entire lives painted in his eyes.

I put my hand on his worried face. “You don’t have to.”

He pulls me back down on his warm chest, and after a few minutes, or maybe even seconds, I drift into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.



## Chapter 21

*Lucy*

I wake from the best sleep I've had in as long as I can remember. I stare at the ceiling in Sam's bedroom, knowing exactly where I am and not wanting to be anywhere else. I sit up in his comfy bed, holding the soft duvet under my arms, and look at the blue sky through the giant windows. The autumn sun is filling the room with soft light. I smile and stretch my arms above my head, and fall back against the plush pillows.

"Sam?" I call, smiling, knowing he must be somewhere nearby. After a few seconds and no answer, I sit up again. I listen for the shower but don't hear anything coming from the bathroom. "Sam?" I call again.

No answer.

I get up and look down at my naked body, briefly contemplating my options before yanking the sheet off the bed and wrapping it around me. I walk through the living room, glancing around the open apartment. "Sam?"

I find him in the kitchen standing in front of the stove, working diligently over a frying pan. There's a mess of bowls and batter-covered utensils lying on the counter beside a box of pancake mix. He picks up the box and studies the back of it carefully.

"Hey," I say, smiling at the sight of him freshly showered and shirtless.

He turns around, spatula in hand, and smiles at me. "Hey."

"What are you doing?" I ask, feeling my heart swell with every beat, because I already know the answer.

"Making pancakes." He smiles shyly and it takes everything in me to fight the sudden onslaught of tears. "I'm trying to anyway." He laughs softly. "I don't have any bacon."

"Next time." I walk over to him, wrap my arms around him tight, and eye the perfectly golden pancakes in the pan.

“You’re doing a great job.”

He smiles proudly. “I made coffee if you want some.”

I pull the sheet tight, tucking it under my arms, and pour myself a cup.

“Sugar’s over there,” he says, pointing to a small bowl. “And there’s half-and-half in the fridge.”

I grab the half-and-half and pour it into my coffee until it clouds under the surface, then I stir in some sugar and carry it to the island, where I perch myself on a stool.

I sip my coffee and watch him slide the pancakes onto a plate.

He turns off the burner and carries it over to me. “I’ll get the butter and syrup,” he says, rounding the island again. He returns after a few seconds and sits beside me.

“Plates and forks?” I suggest, pressing my lips together over a smile.

“Right.” He jumps up again.

When he returns, I wrap my hand around his wrist and kiss him softly. “Thank you for making me pancakes.”

He smiles and his dimples go straight to my head. “You’re welcome.” He sits down beside me again and we help ourselves, slathering our warm pancakes with butter and drizzling them with syrup.

I take a bite and smile as I chew. “It’s really good,” I say over my mouthful.

By the time I’ve finished my plate, Sam is on his second helping. I sit back and sip my coffee and watch him clean his plate. When he’s through, he puts his fork down and turns toward me on his stool. He reaches for my face and tucks my hair behind my ear. “This,” he says, gazing at me.

I smile softly and set my coffee down when I see the look in his eyes.

“I want this,” he says longingly. “Every day.”

“Me too,” I breathe, igniting the familiar fire in his eyes.

He reaches for my face and pulls me off the stool, kissing me passionately until the sheet unravels from around me and falls to the floor. I press my naked body against him and melt into his kiss, tasting the sweet syrup on his lips.

“I can’t.” He gasps, releasing me.

“Oh...okay,” I say quietly, nodding over my disappointment as the oxygen reaches my tingling limbs again.

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Lamb.” He gazes down at my naked body. “Believe me, I do. But I can’t. Not right before a fight.”

I blink up at him and smile. “I can wait.”

He scrapes his teeth over his bottom lip. “Promise?”

“Just be sure to save a few rounds for me. Okay, champ?”

He nods his head and grins. “Okay.” He picks up the sheet and wraps it around me. “I have a surprise for you,” he says.

“You do?”

He crinkles his excited eyes. “I want you to come to Quebec with me.”

My breath catches in my throat. “Quebec?”

“Yeah. I want you to come to the fight.”

I look up at his smiling face and try to lasso my frantic heart. “I, um, I’d have to look at flights,” I say, trying to sort through the details of the impending day in my head. *Maybe I could...No, I have to go talk to Drew.* I have to explain everything. He deserves that much. It could just be a gut feeling, but I think it might take a while.

“That’s the surprise. It’s all taken care of. You just need your passport and some clothes. We can swing by and get them on the way to the airport.” He grabs his phone off the counter and looks at the time. “Miles should be here any minute to pick us up. The flight’s at noon.”

“What? No,” I say, feeling my face scrunch up. “Sam, I—” I feel like I can’t breathe. “I can’t get on a plane right now.”

His face falls. “Why?”

Because I need to work out the details of my broken engagement with Drew. I have to pack my things. I have to find out what he plans to do with the studio.

“Don’t you want to see me fight?”

“Yes. Of course I do.”

“Then what’s the matter?”

I hold the sheet around me and walk to the bedroom, where I aim to find some clothes to put on. “Do you have a T-shirt or something I can borrow?” I ask as he watches me from the doorway.

He pulls a shirt out of his dresser drawer and hands it to me. “Here.”

I put it on. “Where are my panties?” I ask, frustrated.

“They’re around here somewhere,” he says, scanning the floor.

I march past him to the opposite side of the room, where I find them on the floor and pull them on. I pass him again and plop down on the bed.

“Lucy, what is going on?”

“I can’t go to Quebec with you, Sam.”

He inhales a deep breath, and I watch the muscles in his torso flex all the way down to the V. “Why?”

My phone buzzes on the floor, and I immediately wish I hadn’t gotten up to bring it in here last night. Sam picks it up, pausing to look at the screen before handing it to me. “I guess I got my answer.” He tosses it on the bed beside me and walks into the bathroom.

I pick it up and look at the screen, and my heart shrinks inside my chest. It’s filled with text messages and missed calls from Drew and Janice.

**Drew:** I'm sorry about last night

**Drew:** Where are you?

**Drew:** Please come home

**Drew:** I'm worried about you

**Drew:** We can work this out

**Janice:** It's normal to have cold feet, but I know you and Drew can work this out

**Janice:** There's still plenty of time until the wedding

**Janice:** Don't forget about the cake tasting this week

It buzzes again. Low battery.

I toss it on the bed and get up. "Sam." I find him in the bathroom, leaning over the sink, gripping the counter. I put my hand on his back and say softly, "Sam."

He turns around abruptly. "Why?" he asks urgently, and my heart aches at the strangled sound of his voice. "Why did you tell me it's over with him?"

"It is over. I ended it with him last night."

"Well, I don't think he got the message."

"Which is why I can't go to Quebec with you. I need to go talk to him."

"I'm done sharing you, Lucy."

"I never asked you to share me," I say, swallowing my frustration. "I'm yours, Sam. I've always been yours."

"Don't." He drops his chin and shakes his head. "Don't say that again, until you really are. *Without* strings. *Without* hesitation."

I exhale a silent breath. Nothing hurts like the pain inflicted by Sam. "Okay. I'm sorry," I whisper, and walk back into the bedroom.

I look through the giant windows at the city below and touch the cold glass. "I told him it was over," I say, when I feel Sam standing behind me. "Maybe I should have gone home to

him last night to make sure it got through to him, but”—I turn around and look into his sad eyes—“I wanted to come home to you.”

He exhales a heavy breath. “Come with me to Quebec, Lamb.”

Someone knocks on the door.

“It’s Miles,” he says, giving me one last pleading look before he goes to let him in.

He returns a few seconds later. “Lucy, please just come with me. We’ll worry about everything else later. It doesn’t matter.”

“I can’t do that, Sam. I have to talk to Drew. I owe him an explanation. He deserves that much. Everything will be settled by the time you’re back.”

He grabs his shirt off the bed and slips it on. “So go talk to him then,” he says, reaching for his duffle bag. “I’ll tell Miles to cancel your ticket.”

“Sam.”

“I have to go, Lucy,” he says, deflated.

“I don’t want you to leave like this.”

“Then come with me.”

“I can’t,” I say, feeling overwhelmed.

“Sam, we have to go,” Miles shouts across the apartment.

“I’ve got to go,” he says flatly. “Stay as long as you need. Terrance can arrange a car for you. His number is on the inside of the keypad by the front door.”

“Sam.” I reach for him and wrap my arms around his waist. “I love you.”

He drops his bag and wraps his arms around me. “I love you too,” he says quietly.

“I’ll be watching tonight,” I say when he releases me.

He picks up his bag again and nods. “Bye, Lucy.” He walks out of the room.

“Bye, Sam,” I say softly, feeling the words leave my body with a wave of anxiety. When I hear the door to his apartment shut, the apprehension consumes me.

*What am I doing?*

I pick up my phone to call Sebastian, but the battery dies and it powers down. *Shit.* I look around for a phone charger, hoping to find one plugged into the wall behind one of the nightstands, but I don’t see one. I sit on the bed and open one of the drawers, where I find one and quickly plug it in. I connect my phone and lay it on the nightstand to charge, but something catches my eye inside the drawer—an envelope with my name written on it. I pick it up and see several more stacked beneath it, all with my name written on them.

I open the unsealed envelope in my hands and pull out several pieces of folded notebook paper that are filled with Sam’s handwriting. My chest falls heavily as I begin to read them.

\* \* \*

*Sam, Twenty-One Years Old*

I close my eyes and try to ignore the noise in my cell block. I imagine Lucy. I see her face and focus on her pale blue eyes. When everything is quiet, I pick up my pen and begin writing.

*Lucy,*

*It’s been three years since I’ve seen you. I worry about you all the time. I don’t know where you are. Are you okay? I know you may never get this letter. I don’t even know where to send it. Did you graduate? Did you leave Brighton Park? Did you go to college? I pray that you did. I pray a lot these days. I pray that I’ll get out of here soon. I’m up for parole in a couple of months. I can’t believe I’m even saying that. I didn’t want my life to be like this. I’m sorry.*

*I got my GED. I’ve been taking college classes too. I’m about to get my associate’s degree. Can you believe it? That’s the only good thing about this place. That and the boxing*

*program. Since I've had good behavior I've been able to participate in it and I've actually won all of my matches.*

*I'm so lonely, Luc. I miss you so much. I miss everything. We never had much but here I have nothing. Without you I have even less.*

*Please be okay. Please have faith in me. I can change this. I can make it better. I'm not like our parents. I don't belong here. I'm doing everything I can to get out early. My lawyer thinks I have a good chance. I just want to see you. I want to hear your voice.*

*Are you ashamed of me? Is that why you haven't come? I understand if you are. When I get out I'll do everything in my power to change that. I'll make you proud of me again. I'll do good things. I'll show you that I'm still the person you thought I was. You've known me since I was twelve. You know my heart. You know who I really am.*

*I love you, Lucy. I love you and I always will. Even if you can't find faith in me again. Even if you never come back to me. I love you. You made me better. You made my life better. I don't know who I'd be if it weren't for you. You made me want to be a good person. You taught me that it doesn't matter where you start. You taught me the importance of an education. You taught me to love. You were the first person to love me and I'm forever grateful for that.*

*When I close my eyes tonight I'll see your face and I'll dream of your voice like I always do. It's the only thing that comforts me in this awful place. I hope you've found comfort too wherever you are. And I hope that you're happy.*

*Sam*

*\* \* \**

*Lucy*

I fold the letter with shaking hands and carefully place it back in the envelope, crying quietly over the pain of losing him all those years ago, over the pain he must have been in when he wrote it, over the loss of who we were before, and the lives we lived after. An abandoned sob bubbles out of me and



echoes through his quiet apartment, reminding me why I'm alone, and I sit up straight in the bed. I wipe my eyes and reach for my phone, which has turned back on now.

"Sebastian."

"Hey. How did everything go?"

"I need you to come get me," I say urgently.

"Why? Where's Sam?"

"He left for Quebec."

"Is everything okay?"

"It will be."

"Lucy, what's going on? Are you okay?"

"I'll explain when you get here. I'm fine. Just hurry."

"Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Could you bring me some clothes?"

"Sure. Let me just grab my cape and I'll be right over." He musters the smallest laugh out of me.

"Terrance is the guard downstairs. I'll tell him you're coming up. It's the twenty-fifth floor."

"Which apartment?"

"His apartment is the twenty-fifth floor."

I hear a quiet gasp.

"Sebastian."

"Okay, got it. Hurry. Bring clothes. Terrance. Twenty-fifth floor."

"Yes. See you soon."

"Okay, bye."

I hang up the phone and hurry to the keypad by the front door, where I dial Terrance's number and plug my dying phone into the nearest outlet to keep it charging. "Hi, Terrance, this is —"

“Miss Lucy.”

I pause. “Yes.”

“Sam gave me your number. For security reasons,” he explains. “He wanted to make sure you could reach me while you were staying with him.”

“Oh, okay,” I say, nodding with approval as if he could see.

“He said you might be needing a car this morning. Is that why you’re calling?”

“No, but—”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything’s fine. I’ve arranged for my assistant to pick me up. He’s bringing me a change of clothes, so I was hoping you wouldn’t mind letting him up.”

“What’s his name?”

I give him Sebastian’s information and then head for the bathroom where I proceed to take the fastest shower of my life.

\* \* \*

I turn my head to listen for the front door, but when I don’t hear anything, I turn the hair dryer back on. It’s one of the few things I found in Sam’s bathroom that might help me look more like a human than a drowned rat. I run my fingers through my hair, separating the pink and blond strands as the dryer whips them around my face. I hear something again and turn the dryer off.

Knocking. Definitely knocking.

*Sebastian.*

I hurry to the front door, holding my towel securely under my arms. “Hey,” I breathe when I open the door and see him carrying a multitude of bags that will hopefully improve the state of my appearance. I take a quick inventory. Dry-cleaning bag, drugstore bag, my makeup bag from the studio...and coffee. I sigh in relief. “You’re my hero.”

He smiles and walks in, casing the apartment with abandon. “Oh, my God, this place is incredible,” he gushes.

“Yeah, I know, it’s great. Now come on.” I take the coffee from him and drag him to the bedroom. “We have to hurry.”

“Wait,” he says, laying the dry-cleaning bag over the back of the couch in the living room. He gazes at the stone fireplace and his eyes wander to the giant windows that enclose the space.

“Sebastian.”

He turns his attention back to me. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

I raise my eyebrows. “That we need to hurry.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

I shake my head and try to explain. “Sam wanted me to go to Quebec with him and I told him no.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I think I should probably give Drew his ring back before I go flying off to another country with Sam.”

“Okay, it’s Canada, not the South of France.”

I drop my head to the side. “I need to finish things with Drew the right way, Sebastian. I’ve screwed so many things up, but I need to take responsibility for my actions. Sam and I have a second chance, and I want to start our future without my engagement to another man hanging over our heads.”

“Okay. But if Sam’s going to be in Quebec for the next couple of days, what’s the hurry?”

“The fight starts at seven. I want to be there.”

“You’re going to Quebec?”

I shrug. “I’ve made Sam wait long enough, don’t you think?”

Sebastian’s eyes dart around like he’s connecting points on a graph. “Okay, well, have you looked at flights yet?”

“No.”

“Take this,” he says, handing me the drugstore bag and my makeup. He pulls out his phone and starts tapping the screen. “Go.” He urges me toward the bathroom. “Wait, take your clothes,” he says, handing me the dry-cleaning bag.

“Bas—”

“I know, you couldn’t live without me. It’s true. Now get your butt in that bathroom and get dressed!”

I smile, feeling hopeful, and hurry to the bathroom. I open the dry-cleaning bag and find my black ripped-kneed skinny jeans, a white cami, and my soft gray oversized cable-knit sweater. I shake the bag and find my black suede lace-up ballet flats at the bottom of it. I throw on my clothes and rummage through the drugstore bag, finding deodorant, toothpaste, and a toothbrush. *He really is the best.* I grab my brush and a hair tie from my makeup bag and pull my hair up into a messy ponytail. Then I rub on some tinted moisturizer, brush on some mascara, and dab my lips with gloss.

I step out of the bathroom feeling refreshed and ready. *Kind of.* Sebastian is still tapping away on his phone. “Okay,” he says without looking up. “I’ve got two tickets out of Atlanta at 1:18.”

“Two tickets?”

He looks up at me. “You’re crazy if you think I’m letting you leave the country by yourself.”

I press my lips together over a smile. “It’s just Canada, remember,” I say, smirking.

“We have a two hour layover in Toronto, so we won’t actually get to Quebec until seven.”

“Seven? That’s too late,” I say, panicked. “The fight starts at seven.”

“That’s the best I can do, Luc. We’ll just have go straight to the arena from the airport.”

I take a deep breath and nod, grateful that he’ll be with me. “Okay.”

“That’s a much better look for you,” he says, eyeing my outfit.

“Thanks.” I smile and drop my hands to my hips. “A friend of mine picked it out. He’s got great taste.”

“You’re just lucky that I had some of your dry cleaning in my car. And those shoes, which have been rolling around in my back seat for weeks.” He picks my dress up off the floor where it fell off me last night and clears his throat. “You know, you could have at least laid it across a chair or something.” He gathers it in his hands. “A dress like this deserves better.”

“I’ll remember that next time.”

He shakes his head at me. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

## Chapter 22

*Lucy*

Sebastian and I are both quiet on the drive to my house, until the silence makes me anxious. “Can you turn on the radio?” I ask, pulling my thumbnail to my mouth. I scrape my teeth back and forth over the edge of it.

“Yeah.” He turns the radio on, but the soft tempo and soulful voice pouring from the speakers doesn’t help.

I gaze out of my window and see a plane angling up into the clouds that now blanket the sky. I let out a heavy sigh, thinking of Sam, imagining that it’s his plane.

“We could go straight to the airport instead. Flee the country and whatnot,” Bas teases.

“Don’t tempt me.”

He pats my bouncing knee. “You’re going to be fine, Luc. Just think, in a couple of hours you’ll be on your way to see Sam.” He glances at his watch and I know that I’m going to have to hurry or we’ll miss the flight.

He pulls into my neighborhood and my heart pounds with both apprehension and determination. I take a deep breath as he navigates the tree-lined street, and I feel the angst grow with every familiar driveway we pass. By the time he pulls up in front of the house and puts the car in park, I’m frozen.

My pulse pounds in my ears when I look up at the house and think about the familiar life I’m about to give up.

Sebastian turns to me and takes one of my hands in his. “Don’t waste another second because you’re afraid, Lucy. Be brave.” He gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, and I swallow down the trepidation that’s creeping up my throat.

“Okay.” I open the door and step outside, welcoming the cool breeze that blows against my heated cheeks.

“I’ll be waiting right here,” he says as I shut the door.

I give him a weak smile and make my way to the house, stepping on the brown papery leaves that cover the ground as I go. By the time I reach the front door, the fall air has wrapped around me and crept inside my sweater. I rub my arms and pull my keys out of my bag. I can't remember the last time I used my key to open the front door, but it occurs to me I probably never will again. I push the door open and walk inside.

"Drew?" I call up the stairs.

He walks out of the kitchen wearing sweats and messy hair. "Where have you been?" Concern, relief, anger, and sadness each take their turn on his face.

I stare at him for several seconds, thinking of everything I need to say to him, but as he looks at me, my feelings slide off my shoulders without my saying anything at all. The truth lands at his feet, and his face falls.

"You were with him."

"Drew—"

He runs his hands through his hair, and I see the realization in his eyes. "Did you sleep with him?"

Tears roll down my cheeks as I look in his eyes and answer honestly. "Yes."

He stares at me for several stunned seconds before exhaling. "Wow." He staggers over to the stairs and sits down on the bottom step.

I ignore the giant pit in my stomach, pick up my heavy feet, and go sit beside him.

"I know you said you didn't want to get married, but I didn't think—I thought—" He looks at me with watery eyes and huffs. "You didn't even give me a chance."

I drop my head to the side and give him a rueful look, because it wouldn't have made a difference. "I'm sorry."

"Was this a onetime thing, or..."

"Yes. I mean, we haven't...since we were kids."

He huffs a quiet breath and shuts his eyes.

“But I kissed him,” I admit, snipping the string to the balloon of guilt that’s been tied to me ever since.

He looks at me with disappointment in his eyes.

“I wanted to tell you about it. I tried to. Right after it happened, I called and called, but you wouldn’t answer.” I close my eyes and shake my head. “That’s no excuse, I just...I wanted to tell you. It’s been eating me up inside. But I didn’t know how to tell you that I love him. That I’ve always loved him. Even when I tried not to. And I’m sorry for hiding that from you. I should have told you a long time ago. I was just afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of losing everything that’s good in my life. The studio, my career...*you*.” I shake my head and say solemnly, “The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you.”

He drops his chin and asks roughly, “So is that why you never told me about him before?”

I nod and look in his eyes. “Yes, because I love you too, Drew.”

“Just not enough.”

I swallow the hard lump in my throat. “No. Not the way that you deserve.”

“What I deserve? What I deserve is a fiancée who wants to get married, who doesn’t flinch at the mention of a wedding dress.” He shakes his head. “I knew you were getting cold feet before all this. I just wish I knew why.”

“Drew, there’s a part of my life I’ve never told you about. An ugly part that doesn’t fit into a memory box or a photo album. A part that I worked very hard to try to forget about. And I did, for a long time. When I met you, I was so lost. But you were like a candle flickering in the night, leading me out of the dark. You opened my eyes to a world that was big and bright and full of promise, a life that gave me hope. You helped me find purpose and showed me how to pursue my



passion. You picked up all my broken pieces and made me whole again. You loved me.”

“I still do.” He looks at me with tears in his eyes. “I did those things because I love you,” he says, lassoing my heart and tugging it hard. “From the moment I saw you, I knew you were different. The way you spoke, the way you moved, the way you shielded your eyes from everything around you. Maybe nobody else saw it, but you couldn’t hide your scars from me. They were deep and they were beautiful. Just like you.”

“Drew,” I cry, feeling a shift in the earth beneath me.

“I know that you have a history of people leaving you. Your dad and then your mom, the way that she did. Sam left you too. But I want to be the one who stays.”

A cry bubbles out of me.

“I know I don’t have your history the way he does. But I know you, Lucy. I know us. And I know what we can be together. Just give me a chance.”

“Drew.”

“You don’t have to do this, Lucy. I forgive you, okay? After everything that happened last night and the way that I left, I understand why you went to him. But I forgive you,” he says, piercing my heart with his desperate eyes.

I inhale a shaky breath and look at his face, full of forgiveness that squeezes my heart. I reach for his warm hand and hold it in both of mine. “I’ll always love you, Drew. You gave me a life I never knew before and you taught me to chase my dreams. You believed in my talent and helped me start my career, and I will always be so grateful for that. And for the two years we spent together.” I smile softly and squeeze his hand. “I love how hard you work for your future. And I know that one day, you’re going to find the right person to share it with.”

“Lucy.”

“That person’s not me, Drew. My heart belongs to Sam. I could go on pretending that it doesn’t, but eventually, maybe

years from now, you'd realize it. And I won't let that happen.  
Because you deserve to be happy. I think we both do.”

## Chapter 23

*Lucy*

“You know you can’t take all of this,” Sebastian says, closing his trunk over the mound of clothes I deposited in it.

“We’ll sort it out when we get there. Can we just go, please?” I beg, rounding his car to get in. I open the door and plop down in the passenger seat, trying not to look up at the picturesque house I called home for the last year, but my traitorous eyes steal one last glimpse of it. As soon as Sebastian pulls away, I let out a breath that’s accompanied by a quiet sob.

“Oh, honey,” he says, reaching for my back.

“I just can’t believe it’s over,” I say, wiping my eyes.

“I know it wasn’t easy for you.”

“Do you think he’ll be okay, Bas?”

“Drew, yes. Janice, however...”

My shoulders slump. “I’ll reach out to her when we get back, try to apologize. But I have a feeling Drew will forgive me before she does.”

Sebastian glances at the clock on the dash. “You don’t have time to worry about it now. The flight leaves in an hour.”

“Just hurry, okay?”

“Well, maybe we wouldn’t be so rushed if someone didn’t decide to empty her entire closet into my car.”

“I wasn’t sure what the protocol was. I just grabbed everything I could carry. It didn’t help that Drew’s heartbroken eyes were glued to me the whole time. I think I was having an out-of-body experience.”

“Did you ask him about the studio?”

“No.” I sigh and shake my head. “I couldn’t. It’s too soon.”

“Well, Drew’s a good businessman. Whatever he decides, I’m sure it will be well thought out over weeks, if not months. You have time to consider your options.”

I drop my head back against the seat rest and look at him. “Sam offered to buy it.”

“Well, that seems like a pretty good option.”

“I can’t let him do that, Sebastian. What would that say about me?”

“That your boyfriend’s a millionaire.” He smirks.

I shake my head at the notion. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable.”

“You could sell the painting of Sam, buy the studio on your own,” he offers, giving me a sideways glance.

“That isn’t an option either.”

“I know. I was just throwing it out there.” He taps his thumb against the steering wheel as he drives, and says quietly, “Two hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars.”

“Right now, there are more pressing matters. What am I going to wear to the fight? I can’t go in this,” I say, pulling on my sweater.

“I made arrangements.”

“You did?”

“I’m nothing if not resourceful. While you were inside, I was scouring the Toronto airport for clothes on my phone. Luckily, there are a few high-end stores near our gate. They’re holding a dress for you and a suit for me.”

“You never cease to amaze me.”

“I just hope your shoes from last night are somewhere in that crumpled pile in my trunk. They’ll look great with what I bought you.”

“Underneath it, actually.”

“Oh, good. I’m sure Christian Louboutin always imagined his iconic red-soled pumps buried at the bottom of a Lexus RX

trunk.” He shakes his head at me.

“What about tickets to the fight?”

“I’ve got it covered.”

“Did Paul pull some strings at work or something?”

“No, I called Miles.”

“Miles? Sam’s manager, Miles?”

“Yes. He gave me his business card last night, so I called him.”

“Wait a minute. How did you call him? Aren’t they on their way to Quebec? Was Sam with him? Of course he was.” I answer my own question quicker than I asked it. “Does he know you called? Does he know that we’re coming? Was he okay? Is he upset?”

“I don’t know, Lucy,” he says, stopping me. “He didn’t pick up.”

“Oh.”

“I left him a message. I asked him to leave the tickets at will call, but told him not to tell Sam because you wanted to surprise him.”

“You don’t think he should tell him I’m coming?”

“We don’t need him distracted,” he says, raising his eyebrows.

“Right.”

“Now, let’s get this show on the road,” he says, taking the exit for the airport. “Just pray that the security check line isn’t long.”

Thirty minutes later, we’re running through the Atlanta airport.

“Excuse me. Pardon me,” Sebastian says, weaving through the crowd of people.

I follow on his heels as closely as possible, keeping my head down to avoid their annoyed, judging looks. *Yes, we’re*

*late for our plane because I was busy breaking off my engagement.*

“Come on,” Sebastian says, taking my hand as he jogs through an open path. “Gate F5, up there on the right.”

“Do you think we’ll make it?”

He looks at his watch as he runs, impressing me with his coordination. “We have five minutes before they close the gate. Run faster.”

When we reach the gate, I drop my hands to my knees and suck in as much oxygen as I can, but Sebastian is barely out of breath. *Sam was right, I need to get to the gym.*

“Boarding passes, please,” the stewardess says.

We hand them to her and enter the jetway.

“I can’t believe we made it,” I say, feeling the blood return to my legs.

“Me neither,” Sebastian says, smoothing his hair.

\* \* \*

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Québec City Jean Lesage International Airport,” the pilot says over the speaker as we taxi to our gate. “Local time is 7:02 p.m. and the temperature is thirty-five degrees. Grab those jackets.”

I look down at my exposed thighs and give Sebastian a worried look. He obviously wasn’t considering the temperature in Quebec when he chose my sleeveless black cocktail dress.

“Bienvenue à l’aéroport international Jean Lesage de Québec,” a female voice says.

“They speak French here,” I say, shaking my head.

“And English,” Bas reassures. “We’ll be fine.”

“I’m going to freeze in this,” I say, glancing down at my exposed shoulders.

Sebastian takes his suit jacket off and hands it to me. “Put this on until we get there.”

I shrug into it as we make our way down the narrow aisle.

Sebastian already has his phone to his ear before we exit the plane. “Thanks, we’ll be outside in about ten minutes,” he says to the Uber driver.

“It’s twenty minutes to the arena, Bas. The fight might be over by the time we get there.”

“You headed to the Ackerman fight?” a burly man behind me asks.

“The Cole fight,” Sebastian answers.

“By looks of that first round, it’ll be the Ackerman fight,” he says, staring at his phone.

“Why, what happened?” I ask, panicked.

“Sam Cole’s finally met his match, that’s what happened.”

I glare at the man, but Sebastian grabs my elbow and pulls me into the busy airport. “Let’s go.”

I run beside him, feeling my ponytail swing back and forth to the beat of my heels tapping across the floor. Since we already cleared customs in Toronto, it doesn’t take long to reach the exit. I wrap Sebastian’s jacket around me before we step outside, but it doesn’t block the chilly Canadian air that wraps around my bare legs and creeps up my ruffled skirt. Thankfully, my dress has a high neckline, so I’m not completely exposed to the elements. But *holy crap*, it’s cold.

Sebastian spots our Uber and ushers me into the back seat.

“You are going to the Ackerman fight, correct?” the driver asks in his French accent.

“The Cole fight,” I grumble.

“Yes. Please hurry,” Sebastian says, showing me the time on his phone. It’s 7:15. “We’re obviously running late.”

“I will turn it on for you,” the driver says, changing the channel and turning up the volume on his radio.

*And that’s another hard blow to the head for Sam Cole*, the commentator says, and I grab Sebastian’s hand.

“It’s okay, he can take it,” Bas tries to reassure me.

*If you’re a Sam Cole fan, this is not easy to watch...No, another announcer says, this isn’t the Sam Cole we’re used to seeing fight...And that is the end of round three...A smiling Ackerman is showing the world that Sam Cole isn’t the only champion in the ring tonight.*

“Can you go any faster?” I ask.

“I am going as fast as I can. It is not much farther.”

Three excruciating rounds later, he pulls up in front of the arena. Sebastian pays him and we run from the car to the will call window.

“We need two tickets,” I say urgently to the man behind the window.

“Miles Angelo,” Sebastian interrupts. “Can you check to see if he left tickets for us, please?”

“What’s the name?”

“Sebastian Ford.”

“Or Lucy Bennett,” I say.

“IDs please.”

We hand him our IDs, and he picks up the phone and speaks to someone. He slides our IDs back and says, “Go right through those doors.” He points to the main entrance.

“Thank you,” we both say, and run inside where we’re promptly greeted by a large security guard.

“Lucy Bennett?”

“Hi, yes, I’m Lucy Bennett. This is Sebastian Ford. Miles Angelo was supposed to leave tickets for us?”

“You don’t need tickets, just come with me.” He hands us laminated lanyards. “Put these on.”

We drape them around our necks and follow him to a set of double doors. I feel the roar of the crowd rumbling against them before he even opens them.



“Oh, wait,” I say, taking off Sebastian’s jacket. I hand it to him and he slides it back on. “You look great,” I say, smiling at him.

“So do you.” He winks at me.

The security guard opens the door, and we’re blasted by the music thumping through the arena speakers. Just like in New York, the lights dance around the arena and everyone is on their feet, cheering and clapping. But when I look up at the giant scoreboard monitors over the ring, I realize that they’re cheering for Beau Ackerman.

*And the bell marks the end of the seventh round, the announcer says over the steady roar of the crowd. I have to tell you, I’m amazed that Cole has lasted this long...I have a feeling this next round may be his last.*

I glance up at the giant monitor again as we follow the security guard toward the ring, and I gasp when I see Sam. “Oh, my God.” He’s bleeding from his left eye and blood is dripping down his chest and stomach. I look away and grab Sebastian’s hand, but when the security guard takes us to our seats, I can’t look away. Sam’s right in front of us. We’re right next to the ring. And Miles. And a few other faces I recognize from the New York fight.

“Hey, honey,” Miles says, wrapping his arm around me when I sit down. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it,” he says, hugging me. He reaches across me and shakes Sebastian’s hand.

“I take it you got my message,” Bas shouts over me.

“Yeah, but I think I should have told Sam you were coming. He’s a fucking mess. Look at him.” He rubs his jaw. “Ackerman’s using him as a punching bag. Come on, Sam! Get off those ropes!” he screams, jumping to his feet.

Sebastian jumps up too. “Come on, Sam!”

I can’t stand up. I feel sick. I can barely look up, but I do. I look up at Sam between my hands that are shielding everything else from my eyes. I only see him, beaten and bruised, hugging Beau Ackerman. His thick arms are wrapped

around Beau's neck, but not for long. Beau throws a punch at his ribs and Sam lets go.

"Put your gloves up, Sam!" Joe yells at him.

Sam blocks a couple of punches and then throws a left hook that makes Beau stumble back.

"There you go, baby, there you go!" Joe shouts.

"All right, Sam, there it is. Come on now!" Miles yells.

But all Sam did was piss Beau off, because Beau comes right back with two body slaps and an uppercut to the jaw that knocks Sam backward onto the mat.

I gasp when I see the blood coming from his nose and bolt up between Miles and Sebastian. "Get up, Sam," I say, but it's so loud in here I can barely hear my own voice.

The referee counts, *One...two...*

"Get up," I say again, but it might as well be a thought.

*Three...four...*

"Get up, Sam!"

He just lies there.

*Something's wrong.* My skin prickles with fear and my blood pulses behind my ears.

*Five...*

"Sam!" I scream and he opens his unfocused eyes.

*Wait a minute,* the announcer says, and the crowd erupts. *Let's see if Cole can get back on his feet...He's done it before.*

"Come on, baby, get up, get up!" I beg.

*Seven...*

He pushes himself up and every muscle in his body strains as he pulls his feet beneath him and stands up.

*I don't believe it. Sam Cole is back on his feet, ladies and gentlemen.*

The referee grabs his gloves and pushes on them. “You okay?”

Sam looks at me and smiles over his bloody mouthpiece.

“You good? You ready?” the referee asks him again.

He nods and stretches his neck from side to side. He pulls his gloves up to his face and screams when Beau takes his stance across from him. “Ahhhhhhh!”

The crowd goes crazy, and I pull my hands to my mouth to cover my smile.

“Yeah, baby, yeah, baby. Show him who the fucking champ is!” Miles screams.

The referee drops his hands away and steps back.

Beau throws the first jab, but Sam dodges it and throws a right hook, a left hook, and another right hook that knocks Beau back against the ropes. Sam hovers over him, throwing jabs faster than I can count.

*Sam Cole is back, ladies and gentlemen. I don't think he's ready to give up his title just yet.*

Beau holds his gloves up to cover his face, but Sam connects with an uppercut that leaves him hanging on the ropes. He swings his arm around Sam's neck and hangs on him until the bell rings.

*The tide has turned in this fight.*

The referee pulls them apart and Sam falls into his corner.

“He's back,” Miles says. “I can see it in his eyes.”

“How can you see anything through all that blood?” I ask, looking away.

“He's okay. The doc will fix him up,” he says, like it's nothing.

I look at Sam, slouched in the corner of the ring, spitting blood into a cup while Joe crouches in front of him.

“He's okay,” Miles assures me.

Sam gets to his feet and waits for the bell to ring. When it does, he circles Beau like a shark, waiting to attack. As soon as Beau comes within two feet of him, Sam throws a left hook that knocks him to the mat, and the crowd erupts again.

*One...two...three...four...*

“He fucking did it!” Miles shouts.

I hold my breath and feel the blood racing through my veins.

*Five...six...seven...*

Beau pulls his glove under him, but he can't push himself up.

*Eight...nine...ten...*

*And that is it. A comeback win for Sam Cole!*

“Yeah, baby!” Miles shouts, jumping up and down. He rushes to the ring.

I let out the breath I was holding and feel Sebastian's arms around me. He lifts me up off my feet and shouts with excitement.

“I need you to come with me, please,” the bodyguard says, but it feels like an order. I'm quickly consumed by a crowd of people, and I understand why he's here.

“Lucy, can you confirm your relationship with Sam?” a photographer asks, taking my picture.

“Don't answer,” Sebastian says.

“I'm going to need you to back up,” the bodyguard says, putting his hand up in front of me, and I gratefully follow him through the crowd, around the ring, and out of the arena to a quiet room in the back.

\* \* \*

“Lucy,” Miles says, walking into the room that Sebastian and I have been anxiously waiting in for the last ten minutes. “Sam's asking for you.”

I bite my smiling lip and look at Sebastian with excited eyes.

“Go,” he says. “I’ll wait here.”

I hurry toward Miles, but pause when I reach the door. “Hold on,” I say, putting my finger up. I turn around and walk back to Sebastian.

“What are you doing?” he asks with smiling eyes.

I stand in front of him and reach for the lapel on his jacket. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

He smiles softly and nods. “You’re welcome.”

“Not just for today, Bas. For everything. I know we have this running joke that I couldn’t live without you, but...I couldn’t live without you. And not just because you know my dress size or how I like my coffee. But because you’re my best friend. And I love you.”

He wraps his long arms around me and hugs me tight. “I love you too,” he chokes out. He releases me and clears his throat. “Now, go get him.”

I smile wide.

“Lucy, you coming or what?”

“Yeah, I’m coming.” I hurry over to Miles.

“Listen, before you go in there, you just need to know, he’s pretty beat up.”

My heart sinks and my smile fades. “Is he okay?”

“He will be. But he got hit a lot tonight. It slows him down a little. He’ll be better by the morning, but he’s gonna be hurting tonight.”

“Okay.”

He leads me to an adjacent room that’s filled with a few familiar faces, including Joe’s. I assume the other guys make up the rest of his team. But I don’t see Tristan.

“Hey, champ, there’s someone here to see you. She’s a hell of a lot prettier than these guys.” They grumble at Miles, but

as soon as they move out of the way and I see Sam, the room might as well be empty.

He looks up at me from the table he's sitting on and my guarded heart pounds inside my chest. His face is swollen and bruised, and his hair is soaked with sweat and blood. He pulls the bloody towel away from his mouth and says slowly, "You came."

"Yeah," I say, smiling over the tears that fill my eyes.

He smiles weakly, but I see the question in his tired eyes through the dried blood.

I nod and walk toward him, ignoring everyone else in the room as I close the space between us. "I'm yours, Sam. Only yours. From now on. No more strings."

He wraps his heavy arms and gloves around my waist and drops his head to my chest, making me stumble back a little. "You sure?" he mumbles without looking up.

I laugh softly and push against him so that he doesn't knock me over. "Yeah, I'm sure."

He turns his head and looks at Joe. "Get these fucking gloves off me," he says with a little more gusto, though it's still slightly slurred.

I laugh and watch Joe tug and pull at the laces. "It's good to see you, sweetheart," he says, smiling up at me with his warm, familiar eyes, and it fills a hole in my heart I didn't even know was there.

I swallow down the sudden burst of emotion and put my hand on his shoulder. "It's good to see you too, Joe. It's been too long."

When he gets Sam's gloves off, Joe pulls me into a hug, and says, "Don't let it happen again, okay?" He squeezes me tight and kisses my cheek.

"I won't."

Sam wraps his taped hand around mine and pulls me back over to him, knocking Joe out of the way.

Joe just smiles. “All right, let’s give ’em a minute,” he says, leading everyone out of the room.

Sam reaches for my face, but he barely has the strength to hold his hand up. It falls to his lap. “You are the only reason... I won tonight.”

I shake my head and hold his battered face in my hands. “You won because of the lion inside you. I saw it tonight.”

He shakes his head slowly and says quietly, “You are the lion inside me.” He drops his head and leans against me again. “Without you...without you, I...”

“Shhh...it’s okay,” I say, wrapping my arms around him to hold him, but he leans on me with all his weight. “Sam.” I grab his shoulders and push against him, but it’s like trying to hold up a stone statue. “Sam, sit up,” I grit out, digging my fingers into his arms, but he’s too heavy. He leans forward, knocking me backward, and we both fall onto the floor with a loud thud. “Sam!” I frantically reach for his face, but his eyes roll back in his head. “Joe!”

“Joe!” I shout from Sam’s dressing room, praying that he isn’t far.

“Lucy, what’s the matter?” Joe asks, rushing into the room, but before I can answer, he sees me on the floor with Sam and runs over to us. “Sam,” he calls, patting Sam’s cheek, but he doesn’t respond.

“What’s going on?” Miles asks from the doorway.

“We need a doctor!” I say to him, keeping my eyes on Sam.

Seconds later, I hear Miles yelling down the hall outside the room.

“What’s wrong with him?” I ask Joe, feeling the edges of panic seep across my skin.

“I don’t know,” he says calmly, but I can hear the underlying panic in his voice too. “Maybe a concussion. He took a lot of hits from Ackerman tonight.”

“Okay, everybody, back up,” the doctor says, following Miles into the room.

The doctor kneels down beside us, but I can’t move.

“Come on, Lucy, let him work,” Joe says, pulling me back by my elbow, but I stay on the floor and watch the doctor inspect Sam’s eyes and ears, feeling each one of my heartbeats thump inside my tight chest as he examines Sam.

“Lucy,” Miles says, but I ignore him.

“Lucy.”

I look up and see Sebastian leaning over me. He reaches for my hand and I let him pull me up into a hug.

“He’s going to be okay. Just let the doctor work on him.”

“What if he’s not, Bas? What if...” I bury my face and cry quietly inside his arms.

“Shhh...”

“I just got him back, Bas.”

“I know.”

“Sam, can you hear me?” the doctor asks him, and I quickly kneel down beside Sam again.

Sam opens and closes his eyes a few times, and I feel my breath catch. Finally, he nods and rasps, “Yeah.” He tries to sit up, but the doctor holds his shoulders down.

“Don’t move, Sam, we need to get you onto a stretcher.”

I hold my hand to my mouth and try to push down the fear that’s gripping me.

“Lucy,” Sam mumbles, and I reach for his hand.

“I’m right here,” I say, hovering over his battered face.

“Don’t leave,” he says quietly.

I shake my head softly and blink back tears. “I’m not going to leave you.” I give Sebastian a knowing look and he gives me a subtle nod. We’re going to be in Quebec longer



than we planned. I look at Sam and say again, "I'm not going anywhere."

\* \* \*

"How you feeling, champ?" Miles asks from across Sam's hospital room.

"Fine. Just ready to get the hell out of this place."

"Sam, you need to rest," I urge, squeezing his hand. "You have a serious concussion and two broken ribs."

"She's right," his doctor says, entering the room.

Joe follows him in, and Sebastian lingers by the door.

"You need to rest, Sam," the doctor says to him. "You have a grade three concussion. Your brain needs time to heal. And so do your ribs."

"What's he need to do, doc?" Joe asks.

"Take a break. Rest. That's the only way to get better."

Joe nods firmly. "You got it."

"How long does he need?" Miles asks.

"At least three weeks."

"Three weeks?" Sam chides. "In this place?"

"No." The doctor smiles. "But somewhere you can relax and lie low for a while. Somewhere that *doesn't* have a gym."

"So, nothing then?" Miles says. "No conditioning? No running?"

"Well, maybe a slow jog in about a week, but other than that, no. No conditioning. Definitely no boxing."

Miles smirks at Sam. "Tristan's sure gonna have his work cut out for him when you get better."

"Tristan has enough on his plate right now," Joe says. "He could use the break too."

"Where is Tristan?" I ask, wondering why he didn't come to Quebec.

“He’s back home in Atlanta,” Sam answers. “He had to have the battery replaced in his pacemaker.”

“Oh.” I try to hide the alarm in my voice. He had heart surgery when we were kids, but I assumed he was better now. “Is he okay?”

“It’s a minor procedure,” Joe says casually, but I see the worry in his eyes.

Sam squeezes my hand and assures me, “He’s okay.”

“So the question is, where are you going on vacation?” Miles asks, lightening the conversation.

“Vacation?” Sam looks at him and laughs softly. “I just want to go home.”

“Sam, there’s literally a gym inside your apartment,” Joe says. “No way you’ll stay out of it for three weeks.” He crosses his arms and shrugs. “I think a vacation might be good for you.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” the doctor says. “As long as it’s somewhere you can relax.”

“I’ve got the perfect place,” Miles says, scrolling on his phone.

Sam looks up at him. “Yeah, where?”

Miles turns the screen around and shows him a picturesque scene with blue water and palm trees. “Exuma.”

“What’s Exuma?” I ask curiously.

Miles looks at me with wide eyes. “What’s Exuma? Only home to some of the bluest water in the entire world, white sand beaches, and sunshine,” he says exuberantly.

“It’s in the Bahamas,” Sam says to me.

“Oh.” I frown softly at the thought of him being gone for three weeks.

Sam looks at me with smiling eyes and dimples that he can’t hide. “What do you say? Want to disappear with me for a while?”

“What?” I laugh and shake my head. “Sam, I can’t go on vacation with you. Not right now anyway. And especially not to the Bahamas. There’d be people everywhere.” I think we’ve caused enough media frenzy for the time being.

“Not on a private island,” Miles says, dropping his phone into his pocket.

“Private island?” The foreign thought clouds my head.

Sam smiles and pulls me down onto the bed next to him. “You’re telling me you wouldn’t want to spend three weeks on a tropical island...alone?”

I smile over the inviting thought. “Of course I would. But I can’t.” I shrug and say quietly to him, “I have to go home. I have to get the rest of my things from Drew’s house. And I still have to figure out what’s going to happen with my studio.”

“No you don’t,” Sebastian chimes in, inching his way into the room. “I can handle it for you while you’re gone.”

“See, that’s why you have Sebastian,” Sam says, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. “He can handle it for you.”

“I don’t have any clothes. And neither do you. We’d have to go home anyway.”

“I can help with that too,” Sebastian offers, giving me an enthusiastic grin.

“Go,” Joe encourages, giving me an approving smile. “It’d be good for both of you.”

I drop my head to my hands and laugh softly. “A private island?” I peek up at Sam between my hands.

“Come on, Lamb. Come away with me.” He reaches for my face and says softly, “Let’s go to paradise and leave everything else behind for a while. Catch up on the last ten years.” He gives me a grin, and irresistible dimples.

I bite my lip and laugh again. “Three weeks?”

“Just you and me.”

I smile wide and for the first time in my life, throw caution to the wind. “Okay...let’s go.”

## Part 2

She could not make sense of the things that were meant for her, but she was drawn to it all, and when she was alone, she felt like the moon: terrified of the sky, but completely in love with the way it held the stars.

—R. M. Drake

## Chapter 24

*Lucy*

I squeeze Sam's hand and close my eyes as our small seaplane skips and skids across the surface of the turquoise ocean, spraying the windows with saltwater. I feel Sam's warm breath against my cheek as his smooth, deep voice settles softly on my ears. "Open your eyes, Lamb."

I cautiously peek up at him with one eye, keeping the other closed. "When you said private island, I assumed it had a runway."

He chuckles quietly under his breath. "It's not that big."

"There's only one island in Exuma with a landing strip," our pilot says in a thick Bahamian accent, "and that island doesn't look like this."

Intrigued, I open both eyes and take in the view through the small window, unsure what is more breathtaking—the white sand beach and lush green that surrounds it or the contemporary mansion just beyond its shallow dunes.

"Wow," I say softly.

As we flew south over the Exuma Cays, the islands looked like tiny emeralds scattered across a canvas of blue, strung together by shifting sandbars and crystal clear water. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, but I couldn't have imagined *this*.

I look at Sam. "This is incredible."

He smiles and it crinkles his bruised eye. "It's been a rough few weeks. I think we deserve it."

I smile softly, recalling the tense weeks leading up to my impromptu trip to Quebec. And the following three days I spent in the hospital with Sam, while they monitored his concussion. I'm grateful that his injuries weren't worse, but I haven't been able to shake the unsettling feeling that it won't be the last time he gets hurt. I reach for his cheek and say, "I think maybe we both need a break."

The pilot gets out to unload our bags from the back of the plane, but Sam keeps his eyes on me. “It wasn’t all bad, was it?”

“No.” I smile and pull his face to mine. “In fact, I’d say there were some pretty incredible moments.”

“Yeah?” He gives me a sexy grin. “Like what?”

“Well, there was the match in New York, when I saw you standing in the ring for the first time. I was so proud of you that night,” I say softly, and he drops his forehead to mine. “And when you walked into my studio and turned my whole world upside down. I’ll never forget that day.”

“Neither will I,” he says, making me smile again.

“And when you kissed me and you reminded me of everything we were and everything we could be again.”

He reaches for my face and says quietly, “When we made love.” His eyes burn into me with desire and anticipation.

“Yes,” I whisper, because it’s all I can manage through the fire he ignites that burns slowly across my skin. I press my eager lips to his and kiss him firmly.

The pilot clears his throat and I glance up at him from our kiss. He’s standing on the dock smiling at us, waiting for us to exit the plane.

I give him an apologetic smile and reach for his extended hand, and he pulls me out of the plane into the thick island air that wraps around me. After nearly freezing to death in Quebec, this might take some time to get used to, but three weeks should be enough time to acclimate.

*Three weeks in paradise with Sam.*

The thought puts a smile on my face that I’m pretty sure will stay put until we’re back in Atlanta. I try not to think about the clouded reality that awaits our return. Especially when I’m standing in front of the most magnificent house I’ve ever seen, on the most incredible beach, under a piercing blue sky that’s filled with sunshine. The only thing I want to worry about right now is Sam.

As much as I'd like to use this impromptu vacation to make up for lost time, Sam's going to have to take it easy and get as much rest as possible. I take a contented breath of the warm island air and think, *That sounds perfect.*

Our pilot escorts us up the travertine steps to the white stucco house and I see an infinity pool that overlooks the ocean. It's surrounded by large canopy beds and oversized planters that are spilling over with tropical plants. He sets our bags down and tips his straw fedora. "Mr. Cole, Miss Bennett. I hope you enjoy paradise. I'll see you in three weeks."

"Thank you," I say, gazing into the house through the giant glass doors. I see Sam tip him and shake his hand in the reflection, then he makes his way back down the steps.

"Ready?" Sam asks, pulling a key from his pocket.

I nod eagerly and watch him open the front door.

"After you," he says, pushing it open, and I'm greeted by a rush of cool air that escapes the house.

Air conditioning. *Thank goodness.*

I walk inside before him and take in the beautiful coastal space. "Wow," I whisper, walking through the foyer and into the living room, which, much like the living room in Sam's apartment, is surrounded by glass. Except that this view is a little different. Instead of the tall mirrored buildings that surround Sam's windows, all I see is blue, in every direction. I spin around in Sam's arms, which are suddenly wrapped around me. "Sam, this is beautiful. I couldn't have dreamt up a place like this."

He gazes into my eyes and says, "This is just the beginning, Lamb."

I smile over the nagging thought of how much it costs to rent a home like this for three weeks, on a private island no less. Or how much everything in Sam's life must cost.

It's a strange concept, Sam having so much money, one I haven't quite wrapped my head around yet.



“You know, you don’t have to take me to places like this to make me happy, Sam.”

His eyes narrow slightly.

“Don’t get me wrong, I may never want to leave.” I rest my chin on his chest. “I just mean, I’m yours, free of charge.”

“I want to take you to places like this. It makes *me* happy.” He rubs my bare arms and says thoughtfully, “I want to take you everywhere. I want to show you everything I’ve seen. And everything I haven’t. I want to see the whole world with you, Lamb.”

My heart stands at attention with a suitcase in each hand. “I hear it’s pretty big. It might take a while.”

“Hopefully the rest of our lives.”

I press my smiling lips together and nod. “I like the sound of that.”

He glances over my shoulder with a glint of excitement in his eyes. “For now, I’d like to show you the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?”

He lowers his hands to my waist and picks me up, and my sandals fall to the floor.

“Sam, put me down!” I scold as he carries me to the kitchen. “You’re not supposed to be lifting anything heavy!”

“You’re not heavy.”

He deposits me on the white marble island in the middle of the open kitchen and tugs my hips forward so that I’m sitting on the edge of it with my legs slung over his hips. He rocks up against me and pushes my long skirt up my thighs.

“Sam, this isn’t resting. You’re supposed to be taking it easy.”

He reaches for my face and pulls it to his. “I can’t think of a better way to relax.” He presses his lips to mine and kisses me slowly, stroking my tongue with his until I’ve completely melted in his arms. I’m at his mercy. He moves, I move. He pushes, I pull. The call to nurse him back to health is suddenly

silenced by the overwhelming need to extinguish the fire that's consuming us. He tugs his shirt off, wincing when he raises his arms above his head, and the caretaker in me returns.

“Sam, stop, we shouldn't—”

He silences me once more with another passionate kiss and tugs my crop top down, exposing my bare breasts.

“Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry,” a delicate British accent says, and I shriek.

Sam curses under his breath and I scramble inside his arms to pull my top back up.

“I'll just be in the foyer,” she says, spinning around quickly.

“Who was that?” I ask with wide eyes as I adjust my top and try to compose myself.

Sam pulls his shirt back on and shakes his head. “I don't know.” He takes my hand and leads me into the foyer, where we're greeted by a graceful smile.

“Hello.” The woman stretches her small manicured hand out to shake Sam's. “I'm Jacinda. I work for Paradise Properties.” She smooths a few stray hairs that have worked their way out of her tight top knot and straightens her crisp white skirt. “I take it no one mentioned that I'd be here to familiarize you with the home and ensure you have everything you need for your stay with us.” She gives an apologetic smile and I see the blush in her olive-colored cheeks.

“No,” Sam says to her.

“I'm so sorry, I didn't hear you come in.”

“That's okay,” Sam says, unfazed by the interruption.

“Not to worry, though. This won't take long.” She winks and the blood burns in my heated cheeks. “Shall we begin?”

I swallow the awkward lump in my throat. “Sure.”

Sam gives me a sly grin and follows her into the living room, where she begins to run through a list of instructions for the amenities. Then she takes us on a tour of each room.

By the time we make our way back to the kitchen, I feel like I probably should have been taking notes.

“Per your request, the kitchen has been fully stocked,” she says dutifully. “But your chef will arrive at these times to restock and prepare any meals you’d like.” She hands Sam a printed schedule. “Your cleaning services will take place during these times,” she taps the paper with her shiny fingernail.

I shoot Sam a worried look. “They’ll be here with us?”

“Not to worry, Lucy,” she says gently. “Your privacy is our utmost concern. You can relax here, I assure you.”

“So, you won’t say anything, then...about earlier?”

She gives me a warm smile and says softly, “Of course not.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, if you need anything at all, my number’s here. You’re my top priority for the next three weeks, so please don’t hesitate to call. My job is to make sure you leave here happy, well rested, and ready for your next big match.” She winks at Sam.

He smiles and nods. “You spoke to Miles.”

“Yes. He’s gone to considerable lengths to ensure you’re well taken care of here.”

I smile at Sam and wrap my arm around his waist.

“You, as well, Lucy.”

“Oh.” I bob my head and smile graciously.

We follow her to the front door.

“Thanks for showing us around,” Sam says to her. “I think we’re going to settle in just fine,” he adds, giving me a wink.

“My pleasure. Talk soon.”

Sam closes the door behind her and flashes his unique eyes at me, and his dimples almost make me forget the

embarrassment of being topless in front of our welcoming committee...almost.

I purse my lips over a smile. "I take it Miles forgot to tell you she'd be here to greet us?"

He pulls me into his arms. "Well, either that or I've taken one too many hits to the head."

"Sam, that's not funny. And since when does Miles care so much about my well-being?"

"Since your well-being is directly tied to my well-being. If you're not happy, neither am I."

I look up at him and exhale the worry I've been holding in for the last few days. "I'm really happy."

He drops his hands to my waist and lifts me up again.

"Sam, don't!"

He ignores me, wraps my legs around him, and hugs me tight. "I'm happy too," he says against my lips, before enveloping them in his.

"Let's go to the bedroom," I mumble against his mouth.

"Lucy, there's no one here."

"You might have convinced me of that before Jacinda saw me topless. But I'm not likely to forget it anytime soon."

He puts me down. "Come on. Follow me." He takes my hand and leads me through the house, pushing the giant glass doors open and pulling me through them until we're standing outside next to the infinity pool that seems to disappear into the turquoise horizon. He stands behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. "What do you see?"

I gaze out at the crystal blue ocean, searching for signs of life, but the only thing I see is the fading wake of a boat that must have been Jacinda's transport off the island.

I turn around in Sam's arms and say, "Okay, you've made your point. We're alone." I reach for his hand and spin around to go back inside, but he plants his feet and pulls me back to him, his lips landing on mine again.

He reaches for my skirt, gathering it around my waist, and groans against my neck. “I want you,” he grumbles between his eager lips, which leave blazing trails on my heated skin. “It’s been days. I can’t wait any longer.”

Sweat sheens my forehead and beads down the back of my neck, dampening the strands of hair sticking to it. It’s so hot, I might melt before he has his way with me. “It’s so hot out here.”

“Mm-hmm,” he murmurs, his sticky wet lips finding their way back to mine, and the way that his dewy skin rubs against me makes me forget that I care. I want to melt, if it means melting with him.

I reach behind him and run my hands under his shirt and over the thick muscles in his back until I’ve carefully removed his shirt over his head and pulled it down his tattooed arms. It falls to the travertine tiles at our feet. I run my hands over his round shoulders and across his broad chest, reflecting on the words tattooed beneath his collarbone: *Pain Is Fleeting*.

I smile softly and look up at him. “It really is, isn’t it?”

His hungry eyes soften and he shows me his dimples, which are accentuated by the flush of the Caribbean heat in his rosy cheeks. “It’s relative, but for the most part, yes.”

“I guess it depends on the source of the pain.”

He furrows his brow and drops his forehead to mine. “I’ve had broken ribs, countless black eyes, a broken hand and hundreds of cuts and bruises. I’ve been hit by some of the strongest men in the world. I’ve spent hours having my skin tattooed with a needle, repeatedly...” He lets out a soft breath that blows against my heated cheek. “But none of that compares to the pain of losing you.”

“Sam.” I close my eyes and swallow down the echo of the pain that used to hide in the far corners of my heart, hidden away from Drew and Janice and even Sebastian, but mostly from me. “You don’t have to feel that way anymore. You never have to feel that pain again.”

He gazes at me with his beautiful, strange eyes, the blue brightened by the reflection of the sky and the brown lit by the warm sun that reflects the shimmering layers of gold and amber, like the sand meeting the sea. “I’ll never let myself forget what it was like to lose you. To pine for you. To see you with someone else. And to want you so badly I could hardly breathe.” He reaches under my chin and vows, “I will never take you for granted.”

I wrap my fingers around his wrist and promise, “I won’t take you for granted, either.”

The fire returns to his eyes and his lips return to mine.

His hands tangle in my skirt again, the gauzy material clinging to my legs as he fights to get it up around my waist, and I stumble backward onto a dark wicker canopy bed that’s covered with a sheer mosquito net. He shoves it to the side and pushes me back against the creamy white pillows that line the circular bed, kissing my thighs as he moves my skirt out of the way.

I pull my long hair up and lay it over the pillows, giving my neck reprieve from the infringing heat, and relish the shaded cushions that cool me slightly.

Sam shrugs out of his shorts and closes the mosquito net around us, and it billows in the breeze, dappled with shadows that dance in the filtered sunlight.

“Stop.” I hold my hand up and sit up a little on my elbow.

“What?”

“Don’t move.”

“Lucy, if there’s a fucking spider on me, you better get it right now!”

I crinkle my eyes and laugh softly, remembering his fear of the little eight-legged creatures. “There’s no spider, Mr. World Class Champion.”

“What is it then?”

I sit up all the way and pull my bottom lip between my teeth. “You. This place. Right now. I just want to remember

this moment. Forever.”

He smiles and his dimples light up the darkest parts of me, sending a cool rush through my veins, which beg to be heated again. He crawls over me and kisses me passionately, pushing me back against the pillows as he tugs my lips between his teeth, the way that I love, the way that leaves them tingling and begging for more. He yanks my crop top down, leaving it around my waist while he takes turns cupping my breasts and rubbing his thumb gently over my warmed nipples.

I push his boxer briefs down over his hips while he tugs my panties down, and I wriggle my legs against his until at least one of mine is free and he’s lying on top of me naked, rocking his hips against me, though I’m still partially skirted and somewhat crop-topped.

With both articles of clothing corralled around my stomach, he pushes into me with an audible groan that resonates deep in my soul. I wind my arms around his back, careful of his injured ribs, which I know must be aching, though he’ll never admit it, and savor the feeling of him sinking into me, filling me the way only he can, the way only he ever has.

I drop my head back and breathe in the warm island air that only he and I are sharing, overcome by the freedom of being miles away from another human being. It’s just me and Sam. *No one else*. And with that, every ounce of worry, every extraneous thought that has overshadowed our reconciliation disappears.

“Sam...” I breathe against his mouth, my body absorbing every ounce of him. I put my hand on his face, and he smiles when he sees the smile on mine.

He reaches for my hands and holds them above my head, lacing his fingers with mine as he looks down on me with every slow, intentional thrust.

“I love you,” I whisper, gazing up at his handsome face.

“I love you,” he whispers back and the flames licking my thighs ignite in an explosion that’s fueled by all the oxygen in

my body.

I cry out as he continues with slow, strong thrusts, holding my hands and watching me writhe beneath him. I rock my hips up to bring him closer, but he just gazes down at me, holding my hands above my head, keeping his slow, steady rhythm that fans the glowing embers still burning just below the surface of my skin.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“I want to remember this moment. You. Like this. Forever.”

I lie beneath him with a satiated smile, watching him watch me as we make love in the shaded heat of the Caribbean, pink cheeked, sweat beading, eyes seeing places inside each other that no one else has ever seen. *He's mine.* I bite my tingling lip and sigh with pleasure that resonates through my body and soul. *And I'm his.*

*Finally.*



## Chapter 25

*Lucy*

I bend over and wrap my freshly washed hair in a towel, twisting it on top of my head as I stand back up. Sam follows me out of the bathroom, dripping water all over the floor.

“Do you ever use a towel to dry off?” I ask, laughing and steeling a glance of his naked, wet body. His week-long Bahamian tan is beginning to turn the color of honey.

“Not when it’s eighty degrees out,” he says, opening the balcony doors and walking outside *naked* to dry off. The sheer white curtains billow into the room with a warm breeze, and thunder growls in the distance. The sun is still shining, but it won’t be long before an afternoon thunderstorm moves through.

I unwrap the towel from around my body and drop it on the floor at my feet while I search through my half-empty suitcase for a pair of panties.

“In there,” Sam says, pointing to the dresser next to the four-poster bed, which is draped in white sheers.

I give him a curious look.

“I washed everything last night while you were snoring, I mean sleeping, on the couch.”

“What? I do not snore!”

He laughs softly. “Only when you’re really tired. I think you were worn out from our hike across the island yesterday.”

I shake my head, but I don’t refute him.

“I put all your clothes away in those drawers,” he says, gesturing to the dresser again. “I figured it was time you stopped living out of your suitcase.” He smirks. His suitcases were promptly unpacked and tucked away in the back of the closet the day we arrived.

I narrow my eyes and pull one of the drawers open to find all my bras and panties neatly folded in little stacks.

Sam wraps his arms around me and presses his now sun-warmed body to mine. “I wouldn’t protest if you skipped putting on clothes altogether, you know.” He kisses my neck beneath my ear.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, but don’t expect me to start running around outside naked with you anytime soon, okay? This isn’t *The Blue Lagoon*.”

“You have a problem with me being naked?”

I fight hard against a smile that turns the corners of my mouth up. “No.” I wrap my arms around his waist and squeeze his bottom. “I most definitely do not have a problem with it. It’s just a little unconventional.”

“That’s what’s so great about this place, Luc. There are no rules to follow. I know how hard that is for you”—he narrows his eyes—“but before we leave, I want to see you throw caution to the wind.”

“You want me to get naked with you?” I say, sighing with inevitable defeat.

“Well, that’s easy.” He grins. “What I want is for you to get naked with me and go swimming, or jump in the ocean, or maybe even roll around in the sand with me,” he says, arching an eyebrow. “Just like in *The Blue Lagoon*.”

“I was pretty sure I heard *you* snoring the other night when we watched it.”

He smirks. “I was awake for the good parts.”

“Okay.” I laugh. “I’ll consider it. But I might need a little liquid ambition before I go stripping my clothes off outside.”

He holds his chin back and says, “I think we can manage that.”

Without warning, the sun disappears and it begins to rain sideways into the room.

“Ahh,” I squeal, running over to the doors to close them. I fight with the wet sheers that wrap around my arms when I try to move them out of the way.

Sam manages to get the doors closed with the curtains on the inside.

“It’s really coming down,” I say, unwrapping the towel from my hair to dry my arms with it before dropping it on the floor at my feet.

Sam picks up both towels off the floor and takes them to the bathroom to hang them up. He returns with his hand extended and says, “How about that drink?”

“You want to have drinks now?”

“What else are we going to do?”

“Okay.” I take his hand and let him pull me through the house, until we’re standing in front of the butler’s pantry in the kitchen, which must hold every kind of liquor there is.

Sam opens a cabinet and pulls down a couple of glasses. “Pick your poison,” he says with smiling eyes.

I glance over my shoulder at the darkened windows, which are still being pelted with rain. *Why not?* I smile and say, “Dealer’s choice.”

Three hurricanes and one Fireball shot later, I’m sprawled across Sam’s legs on the couch, asking, “What’s the coolest thing you did while we were apart? After, you know...”

“Prison?”

“I was going to say after you got famous.”

“Oh. Well, let’s see...I got to meet Rocky.”

I sit up straight, bumping into his hand and sloshing his drink over the side of his glass a little. “You met Rocky?” I ask, ignoring the spill. “Like, *the* Rocky? Sylvester Stallone?”

“Yeah. I’ve met Sly a couple of times.”

“Shut up!” I say, shoving his shoulder. “You call him Sly?”

“Yeah”—he laughs—“that’s his name.”

“Oh my, God, that is so cool. Did you tell him that you’ve loved him since you were a kid? That you wanted to *be* Rocky when you grew up?” I ask dramatically.

“Yeah, I mean, maybe not so enthusiastically, but I let him know he was important to me.”

I slouch against the back of the couch and whisper, “Wow.” I watch the rain coming down and sip my drink. *He’s so out of my league.*

“What about you? What’s the coolest thing you did while we were apart?”

“Nothing like that,” I say softly. “For me, just going to New York City for the first time was pretty incredible. Being exposed to all the culture, the diversity, the food.” I shrug. “I really love New York.”

“I’ve been a few times, but only for work. I haven’t really seen much of the city.”

“Okay,” I say, sitting up again, “we have to go together. I have to take you to the Met. If I end up going to the Aurelia Snow exhibit this summer, you are coming with me.”

“Who’s Aurelia Snow?”

“Only one of the most successful, talented modern artists in the industry. Her gallery is hosting an exhibit this summer that’s featuring emerging artists like me. It’s the one I told you about. The one I hoped my exhibit would land me an invitation to. Not so sure about that now.”

“So, we’ll go to New York anyway. I’d love to see the... whatever it’s called.”

I smile. “The Met?”

“Yeah.”

I finish my drink and stand up. “Come on,” I say, reaching for his hands.

He puts his drink down and stands up. “You want another drink?” he asks uncertainly.

I shake my fuzzy head. I’ve had enough. “No. I want to go swimming.”

“Luc, it’s still raining.”

“So what? The thunder and lightning stopped a while ago. I want to go swimming with you.” I arch an eyebrow and shimmy my shorts down my legs.

He watches me and laughs. “So just like that...all I had to do was get you drunk?”

“Yep.” I giggle and push the glass doors open, stepping out onto the cooled travertine tiles in my T-shirt and panties. “You coming or what?” I ask, leaving the covered patio and stepping out into the rain. I close my eyes and hold my arms out, and spin around.

After a few seconds, Sam catches my wrist and pulls me against his warm chest, which I can feel through the cool rain, and a soft melody begins to play through the outside speakers.

“You put on music?” I ask, smiling up at him.

“Yeah.”

The delicate plucking of guitar strings is the perfect accompaniment to the rain bouncing off the tiles at our feet. Sam holds me close and sways me back and forth to the soft male voice that croons the lyrics, *You were mine, at one point in time...*

My breath catches in my throat and I grip his arms tightly as we begin to slow dance in the rain under a gray-blue sky that blurs the ocean and the horizon into one.

“Sam,” I whisper, squeezing my eyes shut. “I love you,” I say quietly.

He presses his hand to my back and grips my wet shirt in his hand, twisting it up in his fist as he brings his mouth to mine and kisses me slowly.

I kiss him back with everything I am, feeling the buzz of alcohol tingle on my tongue against his. My heart pounds inside my chest as the beautiful lyrics remind me of the pain we both felt without each other. *What do I gotta do, to erase every piece of you?*

We dance for a few more seconds, then he drops his forehead to mine and sings the lyrics softly, “I don’t want you

to go, so I'll just keep on talking slow.”

“Sam.” I blink back tears that mix with the rain falling on my cheeks.

He wipes my face and says, “I used to listen to this when you were gone. It always made me think of you.” He rubs his thumb over my cheek and gazes at me through the rain that’s dripping from my hair and T-shirt. “You’re so beautiful like this.” He smiles and brings my chin up to his. “I love you.” He kisses me softly.

“You know, for somebody who beats people up for a living, you’re pretty sweet. And sensitive.”

“Shhh...don’t tell anyone.”

I smile and reach for the bottom of my T-shirt, and pull it off over my head.

Sam watches me take off my bra and panties with a satisfied smile on his face.

I throw them on the ground and wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my naked, wet body to his. I kiss him again and savor the feeling of his wide hands on my back and bottom. I drop down off my tiptoes and put my hands on my hips. “Well, come on, champ, it’s your turn.”

He grins and tugs his wet T-shirt off, then he pushes his shorts down while I watch. He stands beside me facing the pool and reaches for my hand. “Come on,” he says excitedly, and we jump into the warm water and sink quietly beneath the surface.

“Okay,” I say, catching my breath when we come back up, “there might be something to this.” I kiss him and we sink back down into the quiet water below, where there’s only us, tangled together. No noise, no worry...just peace.

I may never resurface again.

\* \* \*

I lie back in one of the open cabana beds by the pool, gazing up at the twinkling stars that are shining in the dark, indigo sky—one of my favorite things to do here at night.

Sam joins me with a bottle of white wine, two long-stemmed glasses, and a smile. “Thought we should celebrate our last night here.” He sits down beside me and pours me a glass.

“How is it possible that three weeks have gone by already?” I ask, taking the glass from him. I sip the cool, crisp wine and a soft breeze raises goose bumps on my arms. “I’ve finally acclimated to the humidity and now we have to leave,” I pout, rubbing my arms.

“If we could stay here like this forever, I would.” He holds his glass up to mine and says, “Here’s to the most incredible three weeks of my life.”

“Mine too,” I say, clinking my glass with his.

He takes a sip and presses his wine-soaked lips to mine, and I try to etch the moment to memory—the warm, breezy air, the twinkling stars, the glow of the house, the rustling of the palm trees blowing against the night sky, the waves crashing on the salty shore in the distance, and Sam’s full, sweet lips pressed against mine.

He leans back against the pillows beside me and looks up at the sky I’ve been memorizing for the last twenty nights. “I just got off the phone with Miles.”

“Is he lost without you?”

He laughs and nods. “As soon as the doctor clears me, I’ve got to start training again.”

“I figured you would.”

“All this down time’s got me out of shape.”

I raise an eyebrow and glance at his *very* muscular arms.

“Seriously, I’m going to have to put in a lot of time with Tristan when we get back to get ready for the match in LA next month.”

“LA?”

He nods and looks at me with a hint of hesitance in his eyes. “I know it’s soon, but I really want you to go.”

I lower my wineglass and reach for his hand. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.” Especially after what happened in Quebec. It’s going to be hard to watch him fight, taking hits like he did with Beau Ackerman, but it would be agony to watch on TV, not knowing if he was okay.

He smiles and I kiss his hand, grateful that he’s back to good health now.

“I’m going to be pretty busy too,” I say, thinking about everything that’s waiting for me back home. “Sebastian’s been doing what he does best, but I still have a lot of loose ends to tie up at the studio.”

“Does one of them happened to be named Drew?”

A rock lands in the middle of my stomach, and I instantly grow angry at it for interrupting my last night in paradise with Sam. I may have made mistakes, but I ended things with Drew the right way. *So why do I still feel so shitty about it?* I make a mental note to take this up with Sebastian when I get back.

I sigh. “Yes, Drew. He still owns the studio.” I sip my wine and gaze up at the endless sea of stars above us. “I’m just grateful he hasn’t kicked us out yet. At least not as of yesterday when I talked to Sebastian. He’s been trying to get a hold of Drew, but Drew hasn’t returned any of his calls. And he said he’s too scared to call Janice.” I laugh, but the truth is, I don’t blame him.

“Ah, she didn’t seem very scary to me.”

“Yes, well, she was quite smitten with you, but that was before you stole her future daughter-in-law.”

“I’m pretty sure you left willingly.”

“Even worse.” I sigh and say honestly, “I care about Janice. She was like a mother to me for the last couple of years. It’s weird to suddenly not have any contact with her.”

“Well, maybe you should try to call her,” he says, sipping his wine, and I can’t tell if he really wants me to or if he’s just trying to be supportive.



I look at him and admit, “I did call her, before we left Quebec.”

He raises his eyebrows curiously. “What did she say?”

“She didn’t answer. So I left her a message to let her know where I’d be for the next few weeks. I just didn’t want her to worry,” I explain.

He nods, but I see the concern in his eyes. “No one is supposed to know we’re here, Luc.”

“She would never tell anyone. Besides, I only said we’d be in the Bahamas, I didn’t say where.”

“Did she ever call you back?”

“No. I’ve texted her a few times, but I think she’s pretty upset with me. I need to go see her when we get back. Hopefully I can mend things with her in person, or at least apologize.” I shrug. “What’s the worst that could happen? I’m probably going to lose my studio anyway.” I sigh dramatically. “What could be worse than that?”

“Lucy, I told you. I’ll buy you the studio. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Drew will never sell it to you,” I say surely. Not that I would let Sam buy it for me anyway. I drop my head to the side to look at him and link my pinky with his. “It’s okay. I knew what I was risking.” I smile softly and exhale a quiet breath. “You’re worth it.”

He puts his wineglass down and says tenaciously, “I’ll buy you a new studio, then. I’ll buy you anything, Lamb. Just name it and it’s yours.”

I put my glass down next to his and sit up. “Sam, I don’t need you to buy me things.”

“But I want to.”

“No. You’ve worked so hard for everything you have. For this.” I gesture at the house and the spectacular pool we’re sitting next to. “I’m so proud of you for all that you’ve accomplished, but I want to make something of myself too. I

want to make my own way. It's important to me...I think it's what my mom would have wanted for me."

He nods softly. "I want that for you too."

"You do?"

"Yes, of course."

I smile softly at him.

"But I also want to help you. I want you to *let* me help you. The way Drew did. You can always pay me back."

I pick up my wineglass. "Sam, it's different with you."

"Why?"

"Because Drew treated it like a business deal. You would just be doing it because...you love me."

He gives me an impossible look. "What's wrong with that?"

"It's the principle of the whole thing," I say, my voice rising a few octaves.

He lets out a defeated breath and says, "Okay, then. No studio."

"Sam..." I reach for his hand and hold it in my lap. "I love that you want to help me. But I want to figure out how to do it on my own. Especially now." I shake my head and explain, "Everything's different now...I'm different."

He gives me a sincere look and asks, "How?" Before I can answer, he adds, "Besides the fact that you'll freely take your clothes off and run around the beach with me now."

I laugh. "Well, yes, there's definitely that. But, I don't know, I'm just not who I was with Drew. Being here these last few weeks, without distractions, learning new things about you and rediscovering all the things I already loved...about you, about us..." I smile and say, "I'm *me* when I'm with *you*, Sam. Who I always was, deep down. The me who isn't afraid to stand on her own two feet. I want other people to know her too."

“Then they will.”

I smile and lean back against the pillows in the cabana and stare at the sparkly sky.

Sam leans back beside me. “So, besides the studio, are there other stipulations to me spending money on you that I should know about?”

“Sam, I love that you want to give me things and take me to amazing places like this. But I told you, I’m yours, free and clear. You earned your money, not me. I’m not going to let you go bankrupt spending it on me.”

He pulls his eyebrows together. “Luc, I don’t think you understand exactly how much money I have.” He gives me a contented look, but it makes me uneasy. “I couldn’t spend it all in this lifetime or the next.”

“Oh.” My mouth suddenly feels dry. Maybe it’s the wine.

“I mean, I guess I technically could, but I never would. I’m smart with my money, and I’ve made good investments.”

I give a tentative smile. “It’s still *your* money. Not mine.”

He nods thoughtfully and his face grows serious again, but then he reaches for my hand and the corners of his mouth turn up, setting his eyes alight. “Well, I guess I’ll just have to do something about that then.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Sam, I was literally engaged to someone else less than a month ago. We’re not getting married.” I smile and put my hand on his cheek. “Not yet anyway.”

“Well, maybe we could get a head start by you moving in with me when we get back.”

I laugh again, unable to escape the power of his dimples, or the joy that’s filling my chest. “You want me to move in with you already?”

“Yes,” he says certainly.

“Don’t you think we should give it a little more time?”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. To get to know each other again. I mean, we only just got back together. And what would people say?” Thoughts of the media and Drew and Janice bounce around my head, squandering my happiness.

He sits up and drops his elbows to his knees. “Lucy, I don’t care what people say. And what do you mean? We’ve known each other our whole lives. Besides, we’ve technically been living together for the last twenty days.”

“Well, as much as I hate to admit it, I *do* care what people say. People can be judgmental. I don’t need rumors derailing my career right now. The last thing I want is to be known as your gold-digging girlfriend.”

He laughs softly and fights a smile. “So you think moving in with me makes you a gold digger?”

“Well, maybe a freeloader.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you what. If you move in with me, I’ll let Jean-Luc go and you can be in charge of buying all the groceries. It will actually *save* me money.”

I smile softly. “Have you even considered that you might not like living with me? I’m not the tidiest person in the world.”

“I’ve noticed,” he says, cutting his eyes at me.

“Uhh.” I laugh and shove his arm lightly. “We’re on vacation, okay?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “You never did pick your clothes up off the floor, even when we were kids.”

*He really does know me.* It makes me smile. “Well, you’re freakishly tidy, okay. When did that start?”

“Prison. When I got out, I was a lot more careful with my belongings, because I didn’t have anything for three years.”

“Oh.” I drop my head and fight the familiar guilt that squeezes my chest whenever he talks about his time in prison.

He pulls me over to him and wraps his arms around me. “I love that you’re messy. It’s part of who you are. And I want all

of you, Lucy. Even the messy parts.”

I nod against his chest. “I felt like I had to hide the messy parts for a really long time.”

“Not with me. You never have to hide with me, Lamb. I love everything about you. No amount of time *or space* will change that. So, please, move in with me. I want the first thing I see in the morning to be your face...with your messy hair, in our messy room.”

I laugh softly. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

I tilt my chin up and smile at him. “Yes, I’ll move in with you, Sam.”

He kisses the top of my head and hugs me tight. “That makes me so happy.”

“Me too,” I say softly, pushing away encroaching thoughts of the media and Drew and Janice. They’ll all have something to say, but nothing is more important than Sam’s happiness. Or mine.

## Chapter 26

*Lucy*

“Sebastian!” I stand on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck.

“Hello, gorgeous!” He pulls me back by my shoulders and smiles at me. “Seriously, you look amazing.” He takes my hands and inspects my face and arms. “A little Sam, I mean sun, looks good on you.”

I laugh and arch an eyebrow. “Maybe a little of both.”

He sighs and removes his burgundy Burberry scarf from around his neck, which he reserves for the month of November. “You know I can’t wait to hear all about it—I want details—but first, I have one hundred and one things to go over with you.” He hands me a paper cup of coffee and takes my hand. “Come on.”

I sip it as he drags me to the back of the studio, reluctantly lifting the Sam veil I’ve been blissfully hiding behind for the last three weeks. Paradise was wonderful, but it’s back to reality.

I did miss my latte macchiato.

And Sebastian.

I smile when we reach my *very* organized office, which I’ve avoided since I arrived twenty minutes ago. I chose to spend the morning reacquainting myself with my paintings, especially those that technically no longer belong to me since being sold at my exhibit last month. “You’ve been busy,” I say, eyeing my shelves.

“Okay,” Sebastian says, handing me my laptop and several folders that are exploding with papers. “Follow me.”

“What is all of this?”

“Purchase orders mostly. All awaiting your signature. And a contract,” he says casually as he plops down onto one of the giant throw pillows on the floor. He pats the rug beside him

and pulls another pillow over. “Sit.” He purses his lips over a smile he’s barely containing.

I narrow my eyes and coerce my heart to maintain a slow, steady, unexcited rhythm as I swallow down the butterflies I refuse to acknowledge and sit on the floor beside him. “So what’s the contract for?” I ask coolly.

“Oh, just this gallery in Chelsea that’s hosting an exhibit for up-and-coming contemporary realist artists next summer.”

I sit up straight, no longer able to restrain my excited heart. “Shut up.”

“Aurelia Snow or something.” He pulls his mouth to the side and shakes his head. “Something like that.”

“Bas, are you joking?”

He smiles wide. “Nope.”

“Shut up!” I squeal and jump to my feet, blinking back tears. “Oh, my God!”

Sebastian jumps up with me. “I know!”

“Aurelia Snow wants to showcase me? Really?”

“I wanted to tell you so badly, but I decided to wait until you got back so I could do it in person. I’m so glad I did, because the look on your face is priceless.”

“Oh, my God!” I shout and grab his arms.

We proceed to jump up and down together.

“Sebastian?” I stop and look at him, then I wrap myself around him and begin to cry softly.

“Lucy. Don’t cry.” He laughs and rubs my back.

I wipe my eyes. “You were right.”

“Of course I was,” he says, wiping the lenses of his round tortoiseshell glasses. He pushes them back on. “What was I right about?”

“The exhibit. Waiting to break off things with Drew until after it was over. Even though I did actually try to do it

sooner.” I shake my head. “Sebastian, without the exhibit, there’s no way this would have happened.”

He smiles and says, “Thank God. I was kind of going out on a limb with that advice. But it just felt like the right thing to do.”

I sigh and fall back into a sitting position on the floor, feeling like I can finally exhale the breath I’ve been holding since I decided to host the exhibit. “Aurelia Snow wants to display my work in her studio for all of New York to see.” I reach for the contract and start scanning the paragraphs. “What piece does she want?”

“Sam.”

I give him a confused look. “What?”

“She wants *Lionheart*,” he says, sitting on the floor beside me.

“My painting of Sam?” I put the contract down. “Uh—” I huff, but Bas stops me.

“I know how you feel about the painting, Luc. You can always say no. But...” He squints his eyes and shrugs his square shoulders. “It’s not like she wants to buy it. It’ll just be on loan.”

“What if someone at the exhibit wants to buy it?”

“We’ll just have the contract amended to state that it’s not for sale, so it’ll be a nonissue.”

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know? This is your dream, Lucy.”

“It’s Sam, Sebastian. It feels wrong to put him on display for my benefit.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet again.

“What are you doing?”

“Follow me.” He drags me across the studio and stops in front of my painting of the Atlanta skyline that I originally



painted with dime-store paints when I was seventeen. “Tell me about this painting.”

“You already know.”

“I forgot. Tell me again.”

I give him a funny look, but entertain him anyway. He’s obviously trying to make a point. I stare at the painting, thinking of how the colors make me feel, even now. The way the two halves of the canvas are divided by the shadowy outline of the Atlanta skyline that cuts across the crisp cobalt blue sky and drips carefully into the sultry magenta below.

“I was seventeen. Sam bought me some cheap paints and plastic brushes.” I smile thinking of the sweet gesture. “We climbed up on the roof of an old abandoned building in Brighton Park, and this is what we saw in the distance. *Possibility*.” I exhale a quiet breath. “The original was a little more rudimentary, but the colors were similar. I used red to represent love, because it was the only thing we had, and well, I was seventeen...it seemed like a romantic notion.” I laugh softly and point to the bottom of the painting. “We were way down here, stuck in that broken place, dreaming about a better life. And this”—I touch the top of the canvas thoughtfully—“this represented our future. Wide open, just like the sky that day.” I glance up at Bas, who’s studying the painting carefully. “What did I know?” I shrug.

“This is her second choice,” he says, keeping his gaze fixed on the painting.

“What?”

“I sent her a copy of every painting in your portfolio and *this* was her second choice.” He turns to me and lowers his chin, keeping his dark eyes on mine. “Sam is in all of your best work. Don’t you see that? You can’t take him out of it because *he* is what makes you so damn good.”

I release a small breath and nod in silent agreement.

“Sam is part of you, Lucy. Not just now because you’re together, but way back before anyone even knew who either of you were. He was one of the first people to see you for the

amazing, talented artist you are. Isn't it only *right* for him to be part of this?"

I nod and blink back tears of gratitude, for Sam, for everything we went through, for this incredible opportunity, and for Sebastian, who always helps me to see the truth through my uncertainty. "Yes."

"First choice it is then."

I swallow down my hesitation and agree, "First choice."

Bas claps excitedly. "Okay, there's more." He hands me another document that looks a lot like the Aurelia Snow contract. "This is from a gallery in Dallas. It's a little uppity, but they want to showcase you in an exhibit too!"

"Seriously? How did they even hear about me?"

He shrugs. "Your paintings made quite the impression after the exhibit got so much press. I've been fielding calls and sifting through emails since you and Sam left for Exuma. You've been invited to participate in seven exhibits, Lucy."

"What? Really?"

"None of the others are quite Aurelia Snow, but they'll showcase your talent nonetheless." He smiles wide. "You did it, Luc."

"I don't believe it." I smile back. "Thank you so much for handling all this while I was gone. I don't know—"

"What you'd do without me? I know."

"Seriously. I feel like such a slacker. I spent the last three weeks lying on a remote island with Sam, while you were here doing all this for me. I don't deserve you."

"Don't forget you pay me. Quite well." He raises his eyebrows and smirks. "Speaking of lying on a remote island with Sam. Tell me everything!"

I sigh and slouch against his arm. "It was uh-mazing. I want to go back," I whine. "It was like time stopped and the rest of the world just slipped away. We had no agenda, no alarm clock, no interruptions."

“Sounds incredible.”

“It was. The days and nights just sort of blended together. But we spent a lot of the time swimming, because it was hotter than the surface of the sun.”

“Something tells me you did other things too.” He bites the end of his pen and widens his eyes playfully.

“Maybe.” I raise a suggestive eyebrow. “Maybe we did *other* things all over the island. On the beach. In the ocean. In every room of the magnificent house. Want me to keep going?”

“I get it.” He laughs. “You were making up for lost time.”

“Something like that.”

“Must have been nice to have a private island all to yourself,” he says wistfully.

“It was. I mean, it took a little coaxing from Sam to embrace the idea of being able to do whatever we wanted, *wherever* we wanted, but it was pretty freeing once I did.”

“I bet.”

“We did other things too, you know.”

“Like?”

“We just hung out together. We watched movies, listened to music, talked. We talked a lot. It was nice to be able to get to know each other again without any outside distractions. A lot has happened in our lives over the last ten years. It gave us a chance to fill in the gaps. But at the end of the day we’re still who we’ve always been; two foster kids who fell in love and are still crazy about each other. We just want to be together. Always.” I smile. “He asked me to move in with him.”

I can see the hesitation in Bas’s eyes when he asks, “Are you going to?”

“Yes,” I say surely. “I’ve given it a lot of thought and it’s what I want.”

“Good,” he says without judgment. “I’m happy for you, sweetie.” He gives my hand a squeeze, but I see a flicker of

sadness in his eyes when he releases it.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

He sighs. “It’s just Paul. He and I have been fighting lately.”

“What? Why?”

“Because he’s decided that we should be parents now.”

I nearly choke on my coffee. “Oh.”

“That was my reaction too.”

“Sorry, I’m just surprised.”

“You and me both. I mean, we’ve talked about having a family one day, but not anytime soon. I’m twenty-nine—I thought I’d have at least another decade before bringing a baby into the mix.”

“Paul’s ready now?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “He’s thirty-five, which according to him, is when he always planned to start a family—something he probably should have mentioned to me *before* we got married.”

“Would it have changed your mind?”

“No,” he says with an exasperated huff.

“Well, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. He’s been researching options, and it’s a pretty long process. It could take years, whether we decide to adopt or go with a surrogate. And don’t even get me started on the cost.”

“I’m sorry. That sounds really stressful.”

“Well, Paul thinks that if we don’t start the process now, it could be five years or more by the time we actually have a baby.”

I press my lips together over a smile I can’t hide.

“What?”

“It’s just, the thought of you with a baby is kind of awesome. You’d make a great dad. So would Paul.”

“Okay, please don’t tell me you’re teaming up with Paul on this.”

“No.” I laugh softly. “I’m team Sebastian all the way. I’ll support you any way that I can. And provide babysitting services as needed.”

“Lucy.”

“Aunt Lucy.”

“Oh, my God. Stop.”

“Okay, but seriously, how am I ever going to take care of kids of my own if I don’t start practicing? This could be good for me. I don’t know anything about babies.”

“Me neither!”

“Well, sounds like you’re going to find out before I do.”

He narrows his eyes. “I missed you. But only a little.”

I shove his arm. “Mean.”

He laughs, and it chases the worry away from his face. “I really did miss you. A lot.”

“I missed you too. It was a wonderful, unexpected break from reality, but part of me felt off-kilter without you for so long. Especially when I needed some Sebastian-brand therapy.”

He pulls his dark eyebrows together over the rim of his glasses. “What for?”

“Oh, you know, just normal stuff, like realizing my boyfriend has more money than I’ll make in my lifetime. Worrying that I’m going to end up on the cover of *In Touch* magazine. And wondering what my jilted ex-fiancé plans to do with my beloved studio. Nothing quite as life-altering as having a child, but problems, nonetheless.”

He puts his hand under his chin thoughtfully and holds a curved finger over his mouth. “Well, you knew Sam had

money. Why the sudden concern about it? Most people consider that a good thing.”

“I know. It’s definitely a very good thing, for *Sam*. But I’m not really comfortable with him spending it on me so freely. I mean, he wouldn’t hesitate to buy me a new studio altogether, if I let him. Which I won’t.”

“Funny, you didn’t have a problem letting Drew buy this one.”

“That was different. Drew bought it as an investment that we could eventually benefit from, jointly. It was meant to be a source of income for both of us. Sam’s motivation is just... me.”

“Just you?”

I shrug. “He knows how much my career means to me. He just wants to help.”

Bas sips his coffee and narrows his eyes at me. “So now that we’ve got that worked out.”

“No, Bas. I won’t let him buy me a studio. It’s going to be bad enough when people realize I don’t have my own money. Not the kind Sam has, anyway. I can just see the headlines now. *Lucy Bennett... Gold Digger*. It’s inevitable.”

Bas laughs and puts his coffee down. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

“Yes. You know that’s what everyone’s going to think. *Where was she before he got famous? She’s only back with him because he’s got money now.*” I close my eyes and try to drown out the imminent rumors before they consume me.

“Listen to me. You’re no longer just Lucy Bennett. You’re Lucy Bennett, up-and-coming contemporary realist artist *and* Sam Cole’s girlfriend. You don’t get the luxury of filtered thoughts and polite smiles anymore. You’re going to be judged *loudly*, and you’ll be criticized loudly. But you’ll also be loved loudly. Everyone who loves Sam will love you too, because they’ll see how much he loves you and how happy he is with you. Sure there are going to be people who call you a gold digger. But screw those people! You think Sam has only ever

had nice things written about him? No. But there's so much more good than bad. So, starting this very moment, I want you to make a vow to ignore any and all negative things written about you and focus on only the good things instead. Okay?"

I sigh. "Okay."

"Say it. Out loud."

"What? Bas."

He grabs my hand and holds my open palm up in between us. "Repeat after me." He clears his throat. "I, Lucy Bennett."

"I, Lucy Bennett."

"Promise to ignore all the negative, hateful things people might say or write about me."

I pull my eyebrows together and repeat, "Promise to ignore all the negative, hateful things people might say or write about me."

"You can put your hand down."

I drop my hand and give him a small smile.

"Okay, that's two issues resolved. What's left?"

"Drew."

"Well, we've established that Sam will *not* buy you a new studio." He sighs. "So first order of business is buying this one from Drew."

"Even if I can come up with the money, who's to say he'll sell it to me? Honestly, how can I even ask him to, after everything I put him through? I broke his heart. It would just be salt in his wounds."

"He might be more forgiving than you think."

"What do you mean?"

"He finally reached out to me."

"He did? When?"

"Yesterday. Apparently Janice told him where you were. He knew you were on your way back."

“Great.”

“He wasn’t upset. In fact, I thought he was going to ask me to close the doors to the studio, but he didn’t. He just wanted me to tell you that he was working on the building contract with his lawyer and that we should hear from him in a few weeks. He said in the meantime to keep running business as usual.”

“Really?”

“He also asked if I’d tell you something else.”

“What?” I ask, eager for more clues about the fate of my studio.

“That he misses you. And that it’s not too late.”

My shoulders slump. “Yes...it is.” I close my eyes and sigh. “I have to go talk to him. I need to get the rest of my things from his house anyway. Maybe then I can talk to him about buying the studio.”

“You want me to go with you?”

“No, I should go alone. I’ll go tomorrow morning.”

My phone rings, echoing across the studio, and I jump to my feet to answer it. I follow the strumming ringtone to the front of the studio and find it vibrating on the front desk. I’m startled to see a small sea of people standing outside on the sidewalk, staring at me through the glass windows. Several of them are holding professional cameras and others are holding up their cell phones, shouting at me.

*Lucy, Lucy! ...Where’s Sam? ...How was your vacation?*

I suck in a sharp breath and feel the room start to spin around me. I’m only vaguely aware that my phone is still strumming away and buzzing on the desk when it vibrates off the edge and lands on the floor with a loud smack.

“What’s taking so long?” Sebastian asks, walking out of the back of the studio. “Oh, my God,” he gasps, and grabs my arm. “Lucy, go to the back. Now.”



“My phone.” I bend down to pick it up off the floor with shaking fingers and follow him to my office. My phone rings again and I answer it when I see who’s calling. “Sam?”

“Lucy, where are you?”

“I’m at my studio. Sam, there are people outside. They’re taking pictures.”

“Is Sebastian with you?”

“Yes. What’s going on?”

“Just stay with Sebastian. I’m two minutes away.”

“Okay.” I end the call and look at Sebastian. “Google Sam.”

“What?”

“Google Sam,” I repeat.

“Why?”

“One of them asked about our vacation. That no one was supposed to know about. Just Google him. Please. I can’t do it.”

He unlocks his phone and starts scrolling. “Lucy, you’re jumping to conclu—” His face falls and his eyes bounce around his screen. He looks up at me hesitantly. “There are pictures.”

The breath leaves my lungs in a dizzying rush. “Pictures of what?” I fumble for his phone, successfully snatching it out of his hand. “Oh, my, God,” I gasp when I see a picture of me and Sam on our private beach in Exuma. He’s carrying me into the water, kissing me, and I’m wrapped around him, practically naked in my bikini. “How?” I exhale a shocked breath and blink back tears. “How could they get this picture? How did they even know we were there?” I look at Sebastian with disbelief, feeling myself shrink under a cloud of violation.

“Lucy?!” Sam calls from the front of the studio.

“Back off,” I hear Miles shout, closing the door behind them. “Fucking vultures.”

Sam makes a beeline toward me, still wearing the clothes he was training in this morning. “Hey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I give Sebastian his phone back and let Sam envelop me in his arms, as if he can somehow hide me from the prying eyes of the entire world.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I say, fortified by his presence. “There could have been worse shots.”

He lets go of me and gives me a troubled look. “You saw the pictures,” he says cautiously, but it sounds like a question.

“I saw *a* picture.”

Bas holds his phone up and shows Sam the picture, but I can tell by the look on Sam’s face, it’s not what he’s talking about.

“That ain’t the one that’s got everybody so excited,” Miles says over my shoulder, and Sam shoots him an exasperated look.

He turns his attention back to me. “Lucy, there are other pictures.”

I look at Bas, whose thumbs are dutifully scouring the internet for more pictures. It doesn’t take him long, before he scrunches up his face and gasps, “Oh, my God.”

I swallow down the bile rising in my throat. I don’t even want to know what he’s looking at. I look at Sam, whose worried face does little to comfort me. “I’m not looking,” I say to him. “Just tell me what it is.”

“It’s you,” Sebastian says, appalled. “Topless on the beach.”

A quiet breath escapes between my lips, but I keep my eyes on Sam, afraid that if I look at anyone or anything else, I might disintegrate.

“It’s my fault,” Sam says quietly to me. “I’m so sorry. I convinced you that we were secluded there. I thought we were. I was so stupid.”

“Yeah, you were,” Miles says. “You know these parasites find a way.”

“How did they even know we were there?” I push thoughts of Janice out of my mind. *She wouldn't tell anyone.*

“My guess is, they didn't,” Miles says. “They just got lucky.”

I give Miles an incredulous look that's met with one of sympathy.

“Lots of celebrities stay there, sweetheart. They probably cruise the island a few times a week, hoping to spot one.” He points to the tattoos on Sam's arm. “You're not exactly Mr. Inconspicuous. With a telephoto lens, it probably didn't take them long to figure out who you were.”

“Why didn't Jacinda tell us that?”

“Not to run around outside naked?” Miles smirks.

“I wasn't...we weren't...” I sit down on my old leather sofa and drop my face to my hands. “This is my punishment.”

Sam sits beside me and gently pulls my hands away from my face. “Punishment? For what?”

“For you!” I look at him and his face falls. “For what I did.”

Sebastian quickly chimes in. “What Lucy's trying to say is that she knew there would be consequences for leaving her old *boring* life behind, but that you're totally worth it.” He cuts his eyes at me and raises his dark eyebrows. “Right, Lucy?”

“Of course,” I say to Sam. “Of course you are.”

“Are you sure?” Sam asks, raising an eyebrow with worried amusement. “Because you seem pretty upset.”

“I am upset. I'm *very* upset. I'm humiliated.”

Sam's face softens again. “I know.” He drops his chin and I see the guilt on his face.

“It's not your fault, Sam.”

“Guys, look, I’m doing everything I can to get it taken down, at least from some of the smaller sites.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s out there now. For the whole world to see.” I groan.

“Lucy, it’s going to be fine,” Bas says calmly. “There are literally topless pictures of Kate Middleton on the internet. And the whole world still loves her.”

“Last I checked, I’m not royalty.”

“You’re *my* queen,” Sam says, trying to lighten the mood, and I flash him a fleeting smile.

“Have you checked your email lately, Bas?”

“Not in the last hour. Why?”

“Oh, just waiting for Aurelia Snow to rescind my invite to her show.” I throw my hands up. “There goes my career.”

“The exhibit in New York? You got an invite?” Sam asks eagerly.

I give him a small smile and bob my head. “Yeah. I did. And I got invites to six other exhibits too.”

“Lucy, that’s incredible.” He pulls me into a hug. “I knew everyone would want your paintings once they saw how talented you are.” He releases me and says, “I’m so proud of you.”

“We’ll see how many still want them now.”

“Lucy, this will die down in a couple of days,” Miles says. “If you want, we can put a statement out, address the violation of privacy. That can go a long way sometimes.”

“It can also bring more attention to it,” Sam argues.

“No, no statement,” I say, shaking my head. “Sam’s right. I don’t want to bring any more attention to it.” I sigh and stand up. “I should have known better.”

“*I* should have known better,” Sam says. He looks at me like there’s no one else in the room. “I’m so sorry, Lamb.”

“It’s okay.” I smile softly and try to convince myself that my art will speak louder than these junk sites that posted my picture. But only time will tell.

## Chapter 27

*Sam*

I watch the orange glow of the rising sun peek through the high-rise buildings outside the bedroom window, careful not to wake Lucy, who's sleeping peacefully on my chest. I brush the blond hair off her forehead and stare at her beautiful face, trying to memorize the shape of her nose and the curve of her lips. I run my hand over her shoulder—tan from spending the better part of a month in Exuma—and pray that I get to spend every day of the rest of my life waking up like this.

She sighs and wraps her arm around me. “Good morning,” she mumbles.

“Morning.”

She opens her sleepy eyes. “What time is it?”

“Seven.”

“Is there a reason you're awake?”

“I wanted to watch the sunrise.”

“Now that you've seen it, can we go back to sleep?”

“Not that sun.”

She smiles wide and closes her eyes. “I love you.”

“I'm still waiting.”

She laughs and opens her eyes, flashing their brilliant blue that rivals the color of the sky outside.

I tilt her chin up and kiss her, and she moans softly, waking up any parts of me that were still asleep. I sit up and pull her on top of me and gaze into her sleepy eyes, which fill with desire I know all too well now. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she says, parting her lips and inhaling a slow breath that draws my mouth to hers, like a moth to a flame I've been unable to resist since I was fifteen.

\* \* \*

*Sam, Fifteen Years Old*

“Stop it!” Lucy warns, peering at me over the roof of the car she’s hiding behind in the grocery store parking lot.

I smile as I creep around another car parked a few spots away. “Or what?” I challenge, dropping my backpack and leaping over the hood.

She runs between another row of cars, giggling as I get closer. “Sam, stop!” she squeals, pulling her arm out of my grip. “Get away!” She laughs, running a little farther, until she’s off the pavement and on the sparse grass that covers a path to the adjacent park. As soon as she’s on soft ground, she takes off like a bolt of lightning, backpack and all.

I go pick up my backpack and run even faster.

I catch up to her quickly, chasing her onto the empty playground, but she hides behind a rusty old merry-go-round. She wraps her small hands around the peeling red handlebars and crouches down in the dust as I make my way over to her. She watches me with excited eyes as I step up onto the merry-go-round, which creaks under my weight.

“Ahh,” she squeals, giving it a pull and sending me for short ride, before I leap off it and chase her over to the swings.

She holds one of the rubber swing seats in her hands, and the chains clink together as she backs away from me. “I’m going to let go,” she warns, but I step closer to her anyway. She lets go and the swing flies through the air at me, but I dodge it and chase her over to the slide.

She runs up the metal and I wait by the steps, but when she peers down and sees me, she turns around and runs back down the slide, her sneakers squeaking on the slippery metal. When she’s about halfway down, she sits and slides the rest of the way.

I make it around to the end of the slide just in time to catch her. “Hi,” I say, leaning over, gripping the cold metal lip on either side of her.

She laughs and looks up at me. “Hi.” She starts to sit up, but I don’t move, so she lies down against the slide and smiles

up at me.

“You can try to run from me, but I’ll always catch you.”

She laughs and wriggles her legs between mine, but I don’t move. Her chest rises and falls inside her jacket as she gazes up at me and her creamy white skin flushes pink. “Promise?”

I stare at her pale blue eyes, nearly colorless from the bright sun shining down on us. I watch her parted lips move when she draws in a breath, wanting so badly to know what they taste like, and my heart races inside my chest, even faster than when I was chasing her. I lean in closer, unable to resist the pull drawing my mouth to hers.

She closes her eyes and I press my lips firmly to hers. And everything falls away—the slide, the cars in the distance, the smell of the rusty playground. I reach for her face and hold it in my hand as my lips move over hers, pushing and pulling for several long seconds. I exhale a heavy breath, ignoring the way my body is screaming for more, and drop my forehead to hers.

She smiles up at me.

“I may never stop wanting to do that,” I admit.

She winds her hands in my hair and pulls my mouth back to hers. “Good.”

\* \* \*

“Sam...Lucy,” Miles shouts from the living room. “If you’re naked, put some clothes on. I’m coming in.”

I grumble against Lucy’s neck—her smooth, warm, perfect neck—and kiss it softly, tasting her skin on my tongue for a brief second, before she climbs off me.

“Enough people have seen me naked this week,” she says with wide eyes, giving me a salacious smile as she quickly gets to her feet. She fumbles through a large mound of clothes on the floor and pulls out a T-shirt and a pair of her sweatpants.

I get up and pull on a pair of joggers and head to the living room with a very sexy, messy-haired blonde on my heels.



“Miles, you can’t just barge in here anymore,” I say when I see him.

“Don’t look at me.” He glances over his shoulder at Tristan, who has an annoyed look on his face.

“I called you like ten times,” Tristan says, dropping his gym bag on the couch. “Hey, Luc,” he says to her with an unapologetic smile. “How you doing?”

“Hey, Tristan,” she says tentatively.

He looks at me and throws his hands up. “You want to beat Antoine Phillips or not? Because we’ve got to be on a plane to LA in a few weeks, and by the looks of you, you’re not ready for him.”

“Yeah, I want to fucking beat him. What kind of question is that?”

“Then get dressed and meet me in the gym. We were supposed to start a half hour ago.” He picks up his bag and crosses my apartment. “See you later, Lucy. Sorry to wake you up.”

“My phone was in the other room,” I call after him. “I forgot you were coming at six thirty today.”

He ignores me and disappears down the hall.

Lucy looks at me and sings quietly, “Somebody’s in trouble.”

I roll my eyes. “He had to wait thirty minutes. He’ll survive.”

“Well, while you two are working out your differences in the gym, I think I’m going to go get the rest of my things from Drew’s house.”

His name smacks me in the middle of my chest and my shoulders tense reflexively. “Okay, well...I can go with you. We can go this afternoon.”

She presses her lips together and shakes her head. “You two are like oil and water. I think it’s probably best if I go alone.”

“Okay,” I say reluctantly, ignoring every overprotective bone in my body.

“Why don’t you let me come with you, sweetheart?” Miles offers, giving me a knowing glance. “After everything with the media this week, it’s probably better to have somebody with you. Safer.”

“He’s right,” I urge.

“Don’t you have better things to do than be my bodyguard, Miles?”

“Yeah, actually, I do. But none that are more important. And I can spot a telephoto lens from a mile away.”

Lucy smiles softly. “Okay, fine. But you’re following in your own car.” She points at him. “And you’re not getting out.”

Miles looks at me and I shrug. “You heard her.”

She stands on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. “Don’t let Tris work you too hard.”

\* \* \*

“You’re not focused,” Tristan shouts at me over the music blaring through the gym speakers.

“What do you mean?” I hit the punching mitt on his right hand a little harder.

He circles the ring, leading me around the mat. “Since the Sanchez fight at the Garden, your head hasn’t been in it. It’s even worse since Ackerman. I don’t know if it’s because of the concussion or—” He stops himself, but I know what he was about to say.

“You weren’t even at that fight,” I grunt, smacking the other mitt. “So what do you know about it?”

“I know that if I was, you wouldn’t have gotten a concussion in the first place. And you damn sure wouldn’t have needed to take a three-week break on some remote island.”

“Is that what this is about? You’re pissed because I took a vacation?”

“I’m pissed because you’re letting your personal life affect how you fight.”

I hit his mitt and challenge, “Want to elaborate on that?”

“Okay. You got the shit beat out of you in Quebec and nearly lost the fight because you weren’t focused on Ackerman. You were thinking about Lucy.”

“Lucy,” I shout, “is the only reason I won that fight.”

“Yeah, well, like you said...I wasn’t there, so what do I know?” He lowers his mitts and climbs out of the ring. “The new battery in my pacemaker is working great, by the way.”

I drop my gloves and look at him, letting go of my anger. “I’m sorry, okay?”

He turns down the music and grabs a bottle of water. “I don’t need your pity.”

I cross my arms over the top rope. “It’s not pity. It’s just an apology.”

“Well I don’t need an apology.”

“Fine, then I’m not sorry. I’m fucking pissed.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re twenty-seven and you have the heart of an old man.”

He sits down and chugs his water. “Yeah, well, you don’t need to worry about me.”

“Okay, so then why don’t you tell me why the hell you’re so worried about *me*? I know you like to win, but—”

“Lucy.” He gives me a frustrated look. “The way you are with her. It’s ten times worse than when we were kids.”

I feel my blood pulse as he crosses a dangerous line.

“Don’t get me wrong. I like Lucy. She was too good for you then, and she’s too good for you now. She’s a great girl, but—”

“She’s *the* girl.”

“Okay, then. If she is, you have your whole lives together. So just give me the next couple of years, because that may be all I’ve got.”

I climb down out of the ring. “Come on, don’t say that.” I tug my laces with my teeth. “You know I don’t like to hear you talk like that.”

“It’s a fact, Sam. The pacemaker’s just buying me time.”

“Says who? Your doctor?” I look up at him. “We’ll find another doctor.”

“All the doctors. There’s no opinion here. My heart isn’t going to last longer than a few years. If I’m lucky.”

“What about a transplant? You’re on the list.”

“Someone gets added to the transplant waiting list every ten minutes. And about twenty people on that list die each day waiting on a new heart.”

“Then I’ll call somebody. I’ll...get you moved up.”

“You can’t buy your way up the list, Sam. Your money can’t save me.”

A wave of anger rushes through me, leaving through my fist, which I pull back and slam into the nearest punching bag.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asks, jumping to his feet. He lifts up my glove and inspects the loose laces.

“That’s fucking bullshit.”

“Look, I care about winning, because this—you, Joe, the ring—it’s all I have. This is it for me.” He tightens my laces back up. “I just want to see you win a few more belts. The right way.”

“Okay.”

“And it wouldn’t hurt if you knocked out Antoine Phillips.” He looks up at me and laughs. “I hate that cocky motherfucker.”

“That’s the plan,” I say over the tight feeling in my chest.

“You know...I do envy what you have with Lucy. I’m never going to have *the* girl.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Find the girl of my dreams and then kick the bucket?” He laughs grimly. “I would never do that to someone.” He shrugs. “It’s just not in the cards for me.”

“Hey...I’m sorry, okay? And it’s not pity. I’m just sorry. Because I want it for you, brother. I really do.”

“Yeah, well, just because I can’t have *the* girl, doesn’t mean I can’t still have fun. Women love a guy with a heart defect. Especially when they look like me.” He grins.

I tap my gloves together. “Don’t think I won’t hit a pretty boy,” I say, knowing good and well I’d never hit him.

He puts his mitts back on and climbs into the ring. “Come on, then. Show me what you got, champ.”

\* \* \*

*Lucy*

I drive down the familiar tree-lined street to Drew’s house—my old house—pausing in front of it when I see Janice’s car parked in the driveway. I need to talk to them both, but I wasn’t planning on doing it at the same time.

*Maybe I should come back later.*

Miles pulls up behind me in his Escalade and I reluctantly pull into the driveway. *Is that thing supposed to be inconspicuous?* The matte back rims and blackout windows aren’t exactly subtle. I park behind Janice’s car, looking for signs of Drew, but I don’t see his car. Maybe it’s in the garage.

Miles parks at the end of the driveway and rolls his window down.

I get out of my car and give him a small wave, hoping he’ll roll his window back up, but he just nods and watches me walk to the front door. I hold my breath and press my finger to the doorbell, but the door swings open as I push it.

Janice peers over my shoulder at Miles and asks, “Is that your security detail?”

I glance over my shoulder and watch him disappear behind his tinted window. “No. He’s just a friend.”

“I know who he is, dear.” She presses her painted lips together into a tight smile. “I know everyone in this town.”

I bob my head and smile uncomfortably over the uneasy feeling she stirs inside me. I knew this was inevitable and that it would be difficult, but I didn’t know I would suddenly feel like the old me—the person I was with Drew—who I realize now was far less tenacious. *Be brave.* I clear my throat and ask, “May I please come in?”

“May I?” she repeats, raising her thinly plucked eyebrows. “So proper. And here I thought all the manners we taught you had worn off already.”

I pry my tongue off the roof of my dry mouth, but before I can say anything, she leans in and adds, “Maybe it was just those tacky pictures making me think that. I’m sure you can imagine Drew’s reaction when he saw them.”

“No, actually, I can’t,” I manage to say over my pounding heart. It takes everything in me not to ask if she tipped someone off that I was there. *She wouldn’t.*

“You really had us fooled, didn’t you?” She splays her fingers over her chest and puckers her lips. “I suppose it’s a blessing what happened, really. You would have tarnished the Christiansen name eventually. One can only hide their true colors for so long.”

I swallow the hurt she inflicts, briefly wondering if mothers normally talk to their daughters like this—maybe she didn’t care about me as much as I thought she did. I fight the tears that prick in my eyes and stand up straight. “May I come in now? Please.”

Janice steps aside and lets me in, and the familiar smell of the house comforts me in a way that makes my chest ache.

“Is Drew here?”

“No, darling, he’s out of the country.”

“Out of the country? Where did he go?”

“He went to Europe. He was in Barcelona yesterday, but he’s probably in Paris by now.”

I release a quiet breath that somehow leaves my chest painfully tight. “He’s on our honeymoon,” I say quietly to myself.

“It was nonrefundable. It was transferrable, however, so he moved the dates up to get away for a little while.”

“He went alone?” The thought saddens me.

“Don’t be silly. He has several friends abroad.”

“Oh...of course.”

“So, what exactly is it that you need, dear?”

“I, um...” I close my eyes and shake off thoughts of Drew country hopping in Europe without me. “I just need to get the rest of my things. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Of course. Follow me.” She leads me to the garage and points to two plastic bins labeled *Lucy* in black marker.

“He packed my things?”

“I did, actually. At Drew’s request. He said it was too painful for him. You understand.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

“Rest assured,” she points to the bins, “everything that belonged to you in this house is right there.” She smooths her shiny silver hair back and spins around. “Speaking of things you don’t own...”

I pick my heart up off the cold garage floor and follow her back inside, wondering what dagger she’s going to throw next.

She grabs a manila envelope off the kitchen counter and hands it to me. “Drew wanted you to have this. Though, I can’t imagine why.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the deed to the art studio.”

“What?” I ask, shocked and a little confused. “Why?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“No.” I hand it back to her. “I need to talk to him.” I pull my phone out of my bag, but Janice wraps her long skinny fingers around my arm and lowers it.

“No,” she says firmly, placing the envelope back in my hand. “Giving you the studio was his way of letting go. Now let him do that.”

“But I can’t—”

“Let. Him,” she says again.

I swallow hard and blink back tears that fill my eyes, but one escapes and rolls down my cheek. “I can’t. I’m sorry, but I can’t take it.”

“Yes you can.”

“No I can’t. It’s not right. I won’t.”

“Lucy Marie Bennett, you listen to me, because I’m only going to say this once.” She loosens her grip on my arm and the armor falls off her shoulders. “You are one of the most talented artists I’ve ever had the pleasure to know. You have a gift. Don’t let my feelings, or anyone else’s, get in the way of the success you deserve. Take the studio.” She closes her eyes and lets out a sorrowful sigh that resonates through me and tugs hard at my heart. “Please. Do it for me. And do something great with it.”

I press my lips together over the emotions that are sloshing around inside me. “I’m so sorry, Janice. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

She rubs her fingers over her sparkly diamond earring and leans against the kitchen counter. “I know. We never intend to hurt the people who love us.”

I smile weakly over the tears that keep coming. “I’ll never forget everything you’ve done for me. And if you never forgive me, I understand. But...” I shrug and wipe my eyes.



“I’ll always be grateful for you. You made me feel like a part of your family and I’ll never forget that.”

She smiles softly and sighs. “I really wanted you to be a part of it.”

“I know.” I put my hand over hers. “Drew is really lucky to have you.”

“Oh, pfff...I don’t think he would say so.”

“He is.” I give her a sincere look. “Take it from someone who didn’t have a mother growing up. He hit the jackpot with you.”

She smiles over the sadness in her eyes. “Thank you.”

I reach into my purse and pull out my key and garage door opener, placing them on the kitchen counter. “I suppose it will be a little while before I see Drew again. Will you make sure he knows I left these here?”

“I’ll make sure he gets them.”

“And would you please tell him to call me when he gets back?”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Okay. Well, I should probably get going. I’ll just go get my things from the garage.”

“Wait.” She pulls me into a quick hug, wrapping her long, skinny arms around me. “Take care, Lucy.”

“You too, Janice.”

\* \* \*

“Lucy,” someone calls across the parking garage while Miles and I are unloading my belongings from his trunk. I look over my shoulder and see a bouncing brunette walking over to us with a glossy smile on her face. “Lucy, hey!”

“Hi, Molly.”

“Do you guys need some help?”

“We got it,” Miles says shortly.

“Thanks, I think we’ve got it,” I say cordially. “But maybe you could get the elevator for us?”

She smiles and bobs her head. “Absolutely.”

I text Sam to let him know we’re back, and then I pick up one of the heavy bins and follow Miles over to the elevator.

“So does this mean what I think it means?” she asks with curious eyes.

“It means you need to mind your own business,” Miles says to her, and I shoot him an exasperated look.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“You don’t have to apologize, Molly.” I cut my eyes at Miles. “Yes, it does. But please don’t say anything to anyone, for now.”

She presses her lips together and winks at me. “My lips are sealed.”

I give her a tentative smile as we wait for the elevator doors to open, and when they finally do, we step inside. Molly presses the button for the first floor and we begin our *slow* descent to the main level of the parking garage. When the doors eventually open again, I’m surprised to see Sam and Tristan waiting on the other side of them.

“Hey,” Molly and I both say to Sam at the same time.

He looks at Molly and then he looks at me. “Hey,” he says, reaching for the bin in my hands.

“You didn’t have to come down here,” I say to him, but he ignores me and proceeds to carry my things to the building.

“Is this everything?” he asks.

“Yep.”

He glances over his shoulder at me and gives me a small satisfied smile.

“Let me get that for you, Sam,” Terrance says when we walk into the lobby.

Sam smirks. “Thanks, but I think I can handle it.”

“Oh, I know you can, champ.” He walks beside Miles. “How about you, Miles? You need any help?”

“I might be a little thick around the middle, but I can carry a plastic storage bin, okay?”

Terrance laughs and shakes his head. “I don’t know, I see you struggling.”

“Get outta here,” Miles says, and Sam and Tristan laugh.

“I’m Tristan, by the way,” he says to Molly, flashing a big, bright smile at her.

“I’m Molly.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Molly.”

Miles turns around and looks at them over the bin in his hands. “Molly and Sam used to screw.”

“Miles!” I shout at him and he walks backward into Sam, who has stopped in front of the bank of shiny stainless steel elevators.

“Just saying.” He shrugs.

“Say less.”

He smiles and turns back around to stand beside Sam.

“Real classy,” Sam says to him.

“Hey, Miles, why don’t you let me take that from you,” Tristan says, reaching for the bin in his hands.

“Nah, I got it.”

“How about you let Tristan take that from you,” Sam says.

Miles looks at Tris and hands it over. “I got shit to do anyway.” He shoves his empty hands into his pockets and begins to make his way back across the lobby.

“Miles,” I call, and he spins around. “Thanks for going with me.”

His face softens and he gives me a small smile. “Anytime, sweetheart.”

We take the elevator up to Sam's apartment, stopping on the sixteenth floor to let Molly out.

"I'll see you guys later," she says to us. "It was nice meeting you, Tristan." She smiles softly at him.

"I'll see you around." He winks at her over the bin in his hands before the doors close.

When we get to Sam's apartment, Tristan deposits my bin in the foyer and picks up his gym bag. "I've got to go. But we'll start the same time tomorrow. Six thirty."

Sam stacks the bins together. "Yeah, okay."

"You"—Tristan points at me—"make sure he gets up on time."

"All right. I will."

Tristan gives me a wide smile, coaxing an unabashed smile back from me. He winks and turns around for the door. "See you tomorrow."

"Bye, Tristan."

Sam closes the door behind him and narrows his eyes at me. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

He shakes his head and smirks. "You got all girly just now."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did."

I step around him and pick up one of the bins. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You fell for the old Tristan Kelley charm."

I carry the bin to the bedroom and put it down on the floor. "Well, even if I did, so what?" I turn around and look at him. "He's got nothing on the spell you've cast over me."

He reaches for my hand and pulls me close to him. "Is that so?"

I smile and gaze into his watercolor eyes, the brown bleeding into the blue, and willingly succumb to the power they have over me. “Yes.” I drop my eyes to his mouth, which yields its own kind of control over me.

“I need a shower,” he says, releasing me with a knowing grin. “I’ve been training all morning.”

“Okay.” I watch him discard his sweaty shirt and shorts.

He looks at me before he rounds the corner to the bathroom. “You coming or what?”

I bite my smiling lip and begin stripping off my clothes...

When we’re through with our shower, I hold his flushed cheeks in my hands and kiss his wet lips. He groans and says with a satisfied grin, “First shower sex.”

“Um, if memory serves me, we had lots of shower sex in the Bahamas. In lots of different showers,” I add, narrowing my eyes.

“Vacation sex doesn’t count,” he says, following me out of the shower. “This was the first time at home.”

I laugh into a towel, but Sam pulls it away from my face and says seriously, “In *our* home.”

I smile over the unfamiliar thought and try to will Sam’s apartment to feel like home. But first I’ll have to rid myself of the feeling that my home is nestled on the quiet, tree-lined street I drove down this morning for the last time.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I just need to unpack and get settled in, that’s all.” I wrap myself in the towel. “Now that I have the rest of my stuff, I can do that.”

“Speaking of which...” He follows me into the bedroom. “How did it go?”

“Drew wasn’t there, so, fine I guess.”

I see the contentment on his face as he watches me gather my clothes out of the pile in the corner of the room. “So how did you get your stuff?”

“Janice was there. And to say she wasn’t happy with me is the understatement of the year.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Janice Christiansen can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Right now, I’m behind enemy lines.”

“I knew I should have gone with you.”

“It was fine. She actually softened up a little before I left.” I grab the manila envelope out of the bin I put it in for safekeeping. “She gave me this.”

“What is it?”

I plop down on the bed and look at him. “The deed to the studio.”

He furrows his brow and sits down beside me. “He just gave it to you? Free and clear?”

I shrug. “I told you, Drew’s not a bad guy. Janice said it’s his way of letting go.”

“It’s his way of messing with your head.”

“What?” I roll my eyes at the notion—even though I wasn’t planning on taking the studio free and clear—and I start getting dressed. “Is it so hard to believe that he just wants to move on?”

“Okay, let’s say he does. But then how do you move on?” He gets up and heads back into the bathroom.

“What do you mean?” I ask, following him.

“It’ll always be the studio that he gave you. There’ll always be some small piece of him in it. You think he doesn’t know that?”

“It doesn’t matter if he does. I’m with *you*, Sam. I think we’ve established that.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just having a hard time understanding. So he can buy you a studio and give it to you outright, but I can’t?”

“I wasn’t going to take it as a gift. I was already planning on talking to him about buying it...somehow. I still plan to.”

“And you really think he’ll let you do that now? He’s already signed the deed over to you, Lucy.”

“I don’t know. Yes?”

“Luc, please...will you just consider buying a new studio? One that isn’t tied to the Christiansens?”

I chew the corner of my mouth, trying to ignore the turmoil that’s clouding my head. I love my studio. I love that it’s where I met Sebastian and where I held my first art exhibit. It’s where Sam and I found each other again. But it’s also where Drew and I began our first venture together as an engaged couple. We oversaw the renovations together, we opened the doors together, and we celebrated it together. Sam’s right. Drew will always be a part of its history.

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

## Chapter 28

*Lucy*

“He wants me to buy another studio,” I say to Sebastian, who pauses mid-sip and lowers his soy cinnamon dolce latte.

“But Drew gave you this one, no strings attached. It was the best-case scenario.” He takes another sip.

“Sam thinks there *are* strings attached.” I sip my latte macchiato and sigh. “He thinks it’s Drew’s way of keeping me tied to him. I don’t know if it is or not, but it’s really bothering Sam that Drew gave it to me.”

“Well that sounds like Sam’s problem.”

“But, what if I feel that way a little too?” I ask over the rim of my paper coffee cup.

Bas takes my hand and drags me to the middle of my brightly lit studio, gesturing at the walls that are adorned with my paintings. “*You* created this. No one gave this to you. These paintings belong to you.”

“Yeah, and they’re hanging on the walls that Drew paid for.”

He rolls his eyes and marches across the hardwood floor to answer the studio phone that’s ringing on the front desk. “Hello?...No comment.” He hangs up.

“Who was that?”

“Nobody.” He unbuttons the sleeves of his fitted navy blue dress shirt and begins rolling them up on his way back over to me. “Some stupid reporter.”

“What were they asking about?”

He drops his head to the side and gives me a dubious look.

“Well, obviously, but I meant specifically. What did they want to know about me this time?”

“Your due date.”



I choke on my coffee, spitting a little bit of it on Bas's shirt. "Sorry!" I say, pulling my hand to my mouth.

He flares his nostrils and wipes his front buttons with the inside of his wrist. "I assume you don't have anything to tell me."

"Of course not!" I shriek and grab my phone.

I Google Sam's name.

*Sam Cole expecting first child with artist girlfriend.*

*Sam Cole's girlfriend pregnant with ex's baby.*

"Uhh!" I huff, and keep reading.

*Sam Cole trapped by unexpected pregnancy with girlfriend from his past.*

*Sam Cole and Lucy Bennett to marry this Christmas.*

I look at Bas and start laughing hysterically.

The corners of his mouth turn down as he watches me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I say over the giggles that are bubbling out of me like a pot boiling over. "It's so...stupid." I laugh harder.

Bas starts laughing too. "After all these years, you finally trapped him."

"It was my master plan all along."

"And now you're having Drew's baby!"

I gasp for air in between wails of laughter and wipe my eyes, but the tears keep coming, and before I know it, I'm actually crying.

"Oh, honey," Bas says, squeezing my hand. "I told you not to read that crap."

"I finally got my big break with my exhibit and now everything I've worked for could be overshadowed by a bunch of lies. They shouldn't be allowed to write that stuff. And now they're talking about Drew? It's one thing if my career is ruined, but I'd never forgive myself if this affects Drew's. He's

one of the hardest-working people I know. He shouldn't be a newsflash."

"Neither should you."

I nod softly and wipe my eyes. "I'm just glad they're not hanging outside the studio anymore."

"Look, I'll make you a deal. You promise not to Google yourself or Sam, and I promise to keep you abreast of any rumors worthy of a good laugh." He sticks out his pinky. "Okay?"

"Okay." I wrap my pinky around his and he gives it a shake.

"Now, more importantly. Have you found a dress for LA yet?"

"No, but I still have a couple of weeks. I'd like to get my stuff unpacked at Sam's first."

"Sweetie, you live there now. Stop calling it Sam's. And why haven't you unpacked yet? It's been days."

"A week actually. And I don't know. It just doesn't feel like home yet. It feels like I'm sleeping over or something, at a *really* nice hotel."

Bas holds his clean-shaven chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Maybe because you're living in an episode of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*."

"I know, right? It's weird. There's too much space, and everything's so perfect."

"Well, would Sam care if you changed some things around?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know, maybe you could start with a picture frame," he says seriously, and it makes me laugh. "Surely you took some pictures in Exuma."

I raise a mischievous eyebrow. "Perhaps."

Bas rolls his eyes. “One you could display in your living room.”

I grin and pull up my pictures, and start scrolling through them. “What about this one?” I show him one I took of me and Sam on the beach with the turquoise water as our backdrop.

“That one’s great. Now frame it and put it in your living room.”

“Okay. I will.” I put my phone down and follow him to the back of the studio. “Speaking of LA, are you sure you can’t come?”

“As much as I like watching the Lucy-Sam saga unfold, I have my own love life to tend to. It’s our anniversary that weekend, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right. Speaking of your love life, how are things on the baby front?”

“For the time being, we aren’t talking about it.”

“How’s that working out?”

“It’s basically *me* not talking about it and Paul leaving adoption pamphlets on every surface in our apartment, like breadcrumbs.”

“Have you read any of them? Maybe you’ll find something in one that’ll make you feel better about everything.”

“On principle alone, no.”

“Sebastian.”

“Look, I’m not ready to be a parent, okay? And I honestly don’t know when or *if* I ever will be.”

“Have you told Paul that?”

“And crush his dreams? No way.”

“Sebastian, you have to tell him. You can’t just *not* talk about it.”

“I know. He’s taking me on a weekend getaway for our anniversary. Maybe after some relaxation, and a few drinks, I can bring it up.”

“Where’s he taking you?”

“I don’t know.” He twists his pen back and forth between his fingers. “Hopefully not Florida.”

“Why? What’s wrong with Florida?”

“Paul’s family. His mother, specifically.”

“Oh, Sebastian, she can’t be that bad.”

“Let’s just say she’s no Janice Christiansen,” he says, biting the end of his pen.

I roll my eyes. “One is enough.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to reconsider your choice? I’d put up with Drew if it meant we got to keep Janice.”

“Sebastian.”

“Ugh,” he groans, and plops down onto one of the floor pillows. “I’m going to miss her. I should have known she was too fabulous to be true.”

“She wasn’t so fabulous yesterday,” I say, sitting down next to him with my laptop.

“Well, what did you expect? You broke her heart—I mean, her son’s heart.” He smirks and sips his coffee.

“Yeah, well, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m going to miss her too. She was the closest thing I’ve had to a mother since I was little. Probably the closest I’ll ever get.”

He puts his hand over mine and drops his chin. “What I said before was shitty. I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I ask curiously.

“Paul’s mom isn’t that bad. She actually gives really good skincare advice.”

I laugh softly and give him an adoring smile. “So do you.”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “So what you’re saying is that...I’m the new Janice?”

I laugh and narrow my eyes. “You’re just as fabulous, but way cooler.”

He presses his fingers to his chest and inhales a dramatic breath. “I am, aren’t I?”

“And you’re a lot nicer.”

“Well”—he shrugs a shoulder—“I try.”

\* \* \*

After two weeks of shopping for the perfect picture frame, I place the picture of me and Sam on the beach in Exuma beneath the glass, and carefully position it on one of the shelves next to the fireplace in the living room.

I take a step back to see how Sam and I look on display. I turn the frame to the left a little and take another step back. I move it to the shelf on the other side of the fireplace and consider it there. I turn it to the right this time.

“Perfect,” Sam says, walking up behind me.

I turn around and take a step back when I see what he’s wearing—a charcoal suit and matching vest, a crisp blue button-down, and a skinny gray tie. His hair is combed back, and his clean-shaven face showcases the dimples in his cheeks and the matching one in his chin. I reach up to loosen his tie and breathe in his warm, clean scent. “How’d your meeting with the endorsement people go?”

“Oh, you know, same as always. Miles talks, I nod, we all sign.” He narrows his eyes. “Exciting stuff.”

I smile at his indifference, because I know how much his endorsements really mean to him. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“You looked deep in thought,” he says, wrapping me in his arms.

“I wasn’t sure about the frame. It took me a while to decide on one. Do you like it?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Are you sure? I know you don’t really like a lot of knickknacks.”

He frowns softly. “When did I say that?”

“Well, you don’t have any other pictures in your living room.”

“Because I didn’t have any pictures worth framing in my living room, until now.”

I rest my chin on his chest and grin. “Maybe we could give it a friend?”

He laughs and rubs my arms. “Buy all the frames you want. You’ll never have enough for all the memories we’re going to make.”

I smile wide and look over my shoulder at the picture again. “It feels homier already.”

He gives me a curious look. “Homier?” He looks around the clean, contemporary space. “Is that what you want?”

I shrug. “It could use a little warming up in here.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Because I didn’t want to move into your home and start asking you to change everything around. I’ve seen *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*.”

“Lamb...” He smiles softly, showing me his dimples. “This is *our* home now. At least until we find something more permanent. I want you to make it yours. Change every room. Paint every wall. Put knickknacks on every shelf, if you want. I don’t care. I asked you to move in because I want to share *our* home together.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He puts his hand under my chin and says softly, “Just don’t ask me to take care of a love fern, okay? I don’t do plants.”

I laugh. “No love ferns, got it.”

He kisses me softly and I melt into his strong arms.

I move my hands to his waist inside his suit jacket. “I can’t believe you’ve seen that movie.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t by choice.”

“Molly?”

“Yup.”

My phone whistles on the coffee table. I pick it up and read the text from a number I don't know.

Hey it's Molly. Just wanted to see if you've given any more thought to working together. Let me know!

“Speak of the she-devil,” I say, turning my screen around so he can see the text. “How did Molly get my number?”

“I gave it to her,” he says, shrugging out of his jacket. “I figured she could stop bothering me and go straight to the source.”

I pull my eyebrows together and lay my phone back down on the table. “I don't know how I feel about working with her, Sam. Even though it *would* be a great way to get my name out there and showcase my work online. It's just...too weird, to be quite honest. I mean, you two slept together. A lot.”

“It was casual.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better about it?”

“You should give her a chance. Her company has designed websites and created graphics for some pretty big names. A lot of clothing brands.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You should talk to her about it. See what opportunities she can offer you. She can be a pretty good friend too.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding softly. “I'll think about it. But, are you sure it wouldn't be weird for you?”

“Not weird. Molly has far better things to do in her free time than think about me. Like Tristan,” he says nonchalantly.

“Molly and Tristan?”

“Yeah. They've been *talking*.” He fights an amused smile.

“You're funny.” I purse my lips at him. “So it really doesn't bother you that they *talk* now?”

“No. Molly’s my friend. That’s all she ever was,” he reiterates. “If Tristan makes her happy, then that makes me happy.”

“But Tristan’s kind of a player, isn’t he?” I ask, smirking.

“If Tristan could settle down with someone, he would, but he can’t.” He heads to the kitchen and grabs a bottle of beer out of the fridge. “You want one?”

“No, but I’ll take a glass of wine,” I say, hopping up onto the counter. I reach behind me and get a wineglass down out of the cabinet while Sam gets a bottle from the wine fridge.

He uncorks it and fills my glass.

“What do you mean, he *can’t* settle down?” I ask.

He leans against the counter beside me and sips his beer. “Tristan doesn’t think he’ll live long enough to share a life with someone.” He exhales a rough breath through his nostrils and takes another sip of his beer.

“What?” I ask over the shock that’s suddenly squeezing my chest.

“His heart is too weak. Even with the pacemaker.”

I climb down off the counter and stand next to him. “How long does he have?”

“A few years, maybe more if he’s lucky.”

I suck in a horrified breath and blink back tears. “Isn’t there something we can do? What about a transplant?”

“He’s on the waiting list, but he has to wait his turn like everybody else. It could take years.”

I sip my cold wine and swallow it down over the lump in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” He takes another sip of his beer. “Tris won’t ever get to experience what we have.”

“So then, Tris playing the field is really just Tris trying to live as much as he can before he...”

“Something like that.”



“Does Molly know?”

“That’s for them to work out.” He shrugs.

I take another sip of my wine and exhale a breath that’s laced with sadness I can’t hide.

“Don’t be sad, Lamb. Tris isn’t. And he wouldn’t want either of us to pity him.”

“Tris isn’t here.”

He wraps me in his arms and kisses my forehead. “No, he isn’t.”

“It’s going to be okay. Miracles happen.”

He lets go of me and says softly, “Just look at us.”

I give him a gentle smile. “Yeah.”

“If Tristan were here, he’d tell us to stop moping and go pack for LA.” He nods toward the bedroom. “Want to get started?”

“Can I bring my wine?”

“It’s your house.”

I smile and lead the way to the bedroom. “I wonder what LA is like in December? They must have the best Christmas lights with all the rich celebrities that live here,” I say wistfully.

“I’ve never been in December, but I imagine the Christmas lights are pretty good.”

“Maybe when we get home, we can put some up here... outside on the balcony? And...I was thinking it might be fun to put up a Christmas tree and celebrate our first Christmas together.”

“Okay.” He smiles. “I’d like that.”

I grab my notepad off the nightstand and scribble down *xmas tree* and *lights*.

“What else is on your list?” He looks over my shoulder and reads aloud, “Tampons.”

“Sexy, I know. But it’s reality. And I should be starting any day now, so this little honeymoon of ours is going to have to go on hiatus. Just in time for your pre-fight celibacy rule to take effect.”

“Well, you see, that’s not until tomorrow. Tonight, I’m all yours.”

I fight a smile and shrug casually. “Good to know.”

## Chapter 29

*Lucy*

“You ready?” Miles asks me as we pull up to the Staples Center in LA.

Although we’ve arrived at a back entrance of the arena, the SUV is surrounded before the driver even puts it in park. There were paparazzi at the hotel too, but only a few. Not like this.

“No.”

“Okay, we can wait a minute, we have time.”

“They’re everywhere,” I say, glancing up at the tinted windows.

“Look, Grady’s gonna get out of the front seat first. He’ll open your door and keep them all back while we walk in.”

“I won’t let anybody touch you, Lucy,” Grady says in a gravelly voice that resonates from somewhere deep inside his barrel chest.

“Okay.” I tug on the hem of my lacy long-sleeved cocktail dress where it hugs my thighs. Sebastian chose the merlot color for the holiday season. I wish he was here. *Note to self: Add “Must attend all boxing matches with Lucy” to his job description.* Not sure how Paul will feel about that amendment.

“You look beautiful, Lucy. Just breathe,” Miles says calmly.

I inhale a deep breath through my mouth and blow it out slowly.

“They’re going to fire questions at you about Sam. Don’t answer any of them. Just smile and walk to the door. Okay?”

I bob my head, but I don’t move. I can’t.

“We have to get out now.”

“What if I trip? I’m nervous. I shouldn’t have worn these shoes,” I say, glancing down at the shimmery gold stilettos on my feet.

“I’ll be right behind you. I won’t let you trip.” Miles says.

“Lucy, I’m going to get out now and open your door. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Grady gets out and opens my door, and I’m flooded with unfamiliar faces and flashing lights.

*Lucy, how’s the baby?...Did you set a date for the wedding?...Over here!*

I smile and focus on putting one high heel in front of the other, until I’m on the other side of the arena door, which Grady quickly closes behind us.

Miles looks at me and smiles. “See. You did it.”

I nod and blow out a breath.

“You’re not gonna throw up are you? You look a little pale.”

“No.” I roll my eyes. “I don’t think so. I actually do feel a little queasy. I may *have* to resort to watching Sam’s matches on TV. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that.”

He laughs. “Come on, Sam’s around the corner.”

A wave of relief washes over me, reminding me that Sam is worth the media mayhem.

I follow Miles down a long cinder-block hallway that’s peppered with arena staff who are far too busy to pay any attention to me. He takes me into a dressing room that’s filled with faces I recognize from the Quebec fight. Sam is sitting in a chair in the middle of them all, bobbing his head to the beat of whatever rap song is blaring through his headphones. I’m not sure who they all are or what exactly each of them do, but one of them is wrapping Sam’s hands in white gauze and tape while another suited man is marking them up with a black marker. Sam seems oblivious.

I watch intently as they pull his gloves on and lace them up under the watchful eyes of the man I assume is the commissioner. He turns Sam's gloves over and inspects them, before giving his nod of approval and shaking Joe's hand.

I stand against the wall across the room, waiting for the commissioner to leave, but Sam notices me and stands up. He pushes his headphones off his ears and walks over to me. "Give us a minute," he says to his team, and they migrate to an adjoining room.

The determined look of a warrior slides off his face and his dimples make an appearance as he drops his eyes over me. "You look incredible," he says, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"Do they always do what you tell them to?"

"When it comes to you."

I run my hands over his shoulders. "Good to know."

"How was the ride in?"

"Fine. Did you know that I'm pregnant?"

"Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm. The paparazzi outside told me."

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Probably an alien."

"Well, as long as it's healthy."

"We're getting married too. Soon, I think."

"So you said yes then?"

I smile and put my hand on his scruffy cheek. "It's never even been a question."

"Luc, I know you didn't ask for all this, but I'm so proud to show you to the world. Thanks for being here tonight."

"There's no place on earth I'd rather be."

"Sam, we've got to go," Joe says, leading the rest of his team back into the room. He smiles at me and opens his arms.

“Hey, Luc. You look great.”

“Hey, Joe.” I wrap my arms around him and give him a quick hug. “Thanks.”

“Okay, quick introductions.” He points to each person in the room and recites their names, “Leon, Mikey, Jordon, Will, and you know Tristan.”

Tris winks at me and I smile at him over the tugging I feel in my heart.

“Fellas, this is Lucy.”

They all smile and say hello over each other.

“Hey guys. It’s nice to meet you all, officially.”

“Lucy, come with me,” Miles says. “We’ll go take our seats while they finish up.”

“Okay. Bye, champ.” I smile at Sam, whose face hardens as soon as his eyes leave me.

I follow Miles out of the room, and Grady follows me as we head back down the cinder-block hallway to a set of double doors that rumble to the beat of the music blaring on the other side. I should be used to this by now, but a wave of excitement and trepidation washes over me, making me feel light-headed.

I take a deep breath as Miles pushes one of the doors open, and then I’m enveloped by the energy of the excited arena. I follow closely behind Miles, sandwiched between him and Grady, as we walk in between two sections of screaming fans, whose faces are only occasionally lit by the bouncing blue lights that dance around the arena. Staff members with glowing red batons line the walkway and guide us to the brightly lit ring in the center of the crowded floor.

I quickly take my seat beside Miles, who leans in and shouts, “You hear that?”

I notice the sudden spike in applause and shout back, “Yeah. Is Sam coming?”

“No, look up. They’re cheering for you.”

I glance up at the giant monitors over the ring and see my face in ultra HD for the entire arena, and people watching on TV, to see. I smile shyly and lean into Miles again. “What do I do?” I ask, smiling over the mortification that’s showing in my blushing cheeks.

“Just act normal.”

“Right, just pretend my face isn’t plastered across the monitors for everyone to see.”

“You want to be with Sam? This is Sam’s world. You gotta get over it, Lucy.”

I nod and pull out my phone, which keeps buzzing inside my clutch.

**Sebastian:** OMG you’re famous!

**Sebastian:** You look gorgeous!

**Sebastian:** I’m so jealous!

**Sebastian:** I’m coming w you next time!

**Me:** Good bc I’m making it a requirement of your job.  
FYI

**Sebastian:** Best job ever! Best boss ever

**Me:** I wish you were here. I’m freaking out

**Sebastian:** Doesn’t show. You’re doing great

I look up, relieved when they begin to showcase Antoine Phillips and flash pictures of him on the monitors as the announcers highlight his career achievements. I don’t know much about him, other than what Sam has told me. He comes from a wealthy family and has had the best trainers money can buy. There’s a steady roar of applause as the blue and white spotlights bounce around the arena, but when the showcase turns to Sam, the applause turns into thunder, like always, as the crowd cheers and screams and stomps their feet.

I gaze up at Sam in high definition, recalling the first time I saw his highlight reel at Madison Square Garden, and it still overwhelms me. I’ll never get used to the sound of twenty thousand people screaming for him. No longer concerned with

who's watching me, I beam with the same pride I felt that night, thinking about where he started. Where we *both* started. We were just a couple of kids from Brighton Park. And now look at us. He has everything he ever wanted. *And so do I.*

I know Antoine is making his way toward the ring because everyone's attention turns to the far corner of the arena as an entourage of people and flashing lights move through the crowd. My heart flutters with nervous excitement, because in just a few more minutes, Sam will be standing in the ring with him. I push down the worry that always accompanies Sam's matches and smile as the cheers and applause turn to thunder again. Everyone's attention turns to the opposite corner of the arena as Sam makes his way to the ring.

My heart stands at attention when he looks at me and I no longer notice the blaring music or thundering cheers. I only see him, climbing effortlessly between the ropes and taking the ring like the champion he is. He entices the crowd, jumping up onto the ropes and pumping his gloves in the air, and everyone goes crazy. But I no longer see the warrior they see. When I look at his strong body, I see his painted armor differently. All of his thick muscles that protect him in the ring are the same ones that hold me at night, that protect *me*. I have a feeling it's only going to get harder and harder to watch him take hits inside the ring. Especially after what happened in Quebec. Memories of him lying unconscious on the floor of the dressing room fill me with fear that I try to ignore.

I look at the tattoos that cover his chest and wrap around his arm, following the details of the ones that are spelled out, thinking of the day I painted them in my studio. A day that changed the trajectory of our lives. When he raises his gloves up and I see *Lamb* scrolled across his rib cage, I beam with pride and gratitude for the quiet gesture he made, long before our fate was sealed.

The fight begins and the familiar dance commences, leading the thundering roar of the crowd as Sam and Antoine begin to throw punches at each other. Sam takes the first hit, like he always does, and air hisses through my teeth, like it always does.



*Sam Cole taking the first hit of the night...To give Phillips a false sense of advantage...That's right, Cole said recently that he likes to do a little reverse psychology, let his opponent think he's got the upper hand.* The commentators laugh, but I don't find the humor in letting a heavy hitter punch you in the face on purpose. Isn't the idea to block the punches so your brain doesn't turn to mush? I personally like Sam's brain very much and would like it to remain fully functional.

Joe shouts from beside the ring, "Throw the jab, Sam, throw it!"

Antoine hits him again.

*Another hit to the head for Cole and he loses his footing.*

"Keep those hands up, Sam!" Miles shouts.

Sam stiffens his shoulders and throws an uppercut that leaves Antoine disoriented. Then he takes the opportunity to throw several punches at Antoine's ribs and face, pushing him across the ring into the ropes. But Antoine has a sudden burst of energy and explodes off the ropes, returning several punches to Sam's ribs, which had only just healed from the Quebec fight.

"Jesus." I gasp and grab Miles's arm.

"He's all right. He's not hurt."

"You always say that."

"He's not. He's on his feet. He's fine."

I watch the skin that covers Sam's ribs begin to pinken as the blood penetrates it just beneath the surface. *He's not fine.*

By the seventh round, it's clear that he has a broken rib. *Again.* The blood is pooling in a spot beneath his arm, and he's keeping his elbow drawn down to protect the area from another blow. He's in pain, whether or not anyone else can see it. I glance at Miles, who's cheering Sam on excitedly. *Or is willing to see it.*

By the tenth round, Sam isn't the only one who looks like hell. He bloodied Antoine's nose in a hard blow to the face that knocked him to the mat. But it didn't keep him down

long. He was back on his feet before the ten count and ready for more.

Antoine throws a right hook, followed by an uppercut and finally a jab to Sam's bruised ribs that knocks the light out of his eyes.

Sam falls to the mat and I scream behind my hands.

The referee counts, *One...two...three...*

The arena is going crazy and everyone is on their feet.

"Get up, Sam, get up!" I shout, but he doesn't, and I know he must be ravaged by the pain radiating from his ribs. I try not to think of the damage that's been done, but it's holding me prisoner to my seat, where I sit with my face in my hands.

"He'll get up," Miles says to me. "He won't stay down for the whole count."

But by *five*, when he's still not back on his feet, I begin to feel sick.

*Screw the title. What's wrong with him?* "Can't you see he's hurt?!" I scream at Miles, who doesn't argue with me.

"Come on, Sam! Come on, baby," Miles shouts at the ring. "You're the fucking champ. Get on your feet!"

*This could be it for Sam Cole tonight...I'll tell you, after breaking his ribs in Quebec, a fight he nearly lost to Beau Ackerman, this might be enough to keep him down...He's definitely in a lot of pain.*

*Seven...*

Sam pulls himself up on the bottom rope and drags his knee under him, and the crowd erupts again.

*Eight...*

"That's it, Sam. Get up!" Joe shouts from beside the ring.

Sam pulls his feet under him and stands up.

The referee stops counting and my heart begins to beat again. He grabs Sam's gloves and pushes down on them, and

Sam nods to his question. He looks terrible, but he gives me a wink and I can't help but smile back, even if it's fleeting.

*I don't believe it, he did it again...Sam Cole might just be the new comeback kid...Using the term kid loosely, right?...I still think he's got a few good years left in him...I don't know, there's been a lot of talk about his retirement.*

"Retirement?" I say to Miles.

"Ahh, don't listen to them. Sam's not going anywhere. Not yet."

Sam takes his stance in front of Antoine, who immediately throws a punch at his face, but misses. *Thank God.* Sam screws up his battered face and lets out a ferocious roar that somehow settles the fear inside me. He begins throwing punches at Antoine faster than I can count, eventually knocking him off his feet and onto his back in the middle of the mat. The referee starts counting again, this time for Antoine.

*One...two...three...four...five...*

He isn't getting up, and the crowd grows louder with each passing second.

*Six...seven...eight...nine...ten.*

"Yes," I say quietly, closing my eyes with relief as the crowd erupts. When I open them again, all the guys are climbing up into the ring with Sam.

"You did it, baby!" Joe screams.

*Once again, Sam Cole has defended his title as the undisputed light-heavyweight champion of the world!*

Miles puts his hand on my back, and I begin to walk toward Grady, but he redirects me to the ring instead. He shows me a small set of steps and points up to the ring where Sam is hanging over the top rope waiting for me. Grady stands behind me as I carefully climb up the steps and I lean into Sam's heavy arms. "You scared me," I say to him, wiping his sweaty face.

“I’m sorry.” He smiles and the people in the ring swarm him, but he kisses me before they pull him away. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Come on, Lucy, I’ll take you back.” Grady reaches for my hand and helps me down the steps, and I follow him to the dressing room, sandwiched between him and Miles, ignoring the voices shouting at us from the encroaching crowd.

When we reach the dressing room, I’m grateful for the silence. But it’s fleeting. As soon as Sam and his rambunctious team enter the room, it’s anything but quiet. A win for Sam is a win for all of them, but for crying out loud, he’s hurt. Badly.

“He needs a doctor, Miles. Not a party.”

“Okay, fellas, settle down.” Miles says, and Sam falls stiffly into a chair.

“You did good tonight, champ, but you’re hurt,” Joe says, standing beside me and Miles. He kneels in front of Sam and lifts his arm off his bruised ribs, making him groan. The blood pooled under his skin is turning purple.

I pull my hand over my mouth, because what I want to say will have to wait until we’re alone.

“You’re not going to be able fight for a while. Not after this.”

Miles rubs his hand over his chin. “He’s under contract, Joe.”

Joe gives him a hard look. “Is that all you care about? How he’s going to make you your next million?”

“I care about his legal obligations. I care about *his* financial well-being. He signed a three-fight contract that begins in January.”

“Oh, fuck the contract, Miles. Don’t act like it can’t be renegotiated. Start it in April. March, even. He needs time to heal properly. We’ll get a physician to attest to it.”

“And how do you think that’s going to look with these retirement rumors swirling?”

“Knock it off,” Sam says weakly, the adrenaline leaving his body.

“Sam, look—”

“Shut up, Miles.”

“All right, we don’t have to make any decisions tonight,” Joe says. “Let’s just get you looked at. You ready for the doc to come in?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll go get him. Come on, everybody in the other room, you know the drill.”

I begin to follow the group, but Sam calls my name, “Lucy.”

I stop and walk over to him.

“Not you. Stay here. Please.”

I glance up at Miles, who nods and says, “Doc’s gonna come in and check him out. He’ll tell us what the damage is.”

“Okay.”

“After you get a shower, we’ll do the press conference,” he says to Sam.

Sam looks up at me. “I want you to come with us.”

“You want *me* to go to your press conference?”

He gives me a crooked smile. “Yes.”

“Why? What do you want me to do?”

“Sit on the panel. Answer some questions.”

“Sam...I’m not qualified.”

“You’re as qualified as the other bozos that sit up there with him,” Miles says, giving me an encouraging smile. “Might be a good chance to set the record straight. Put some of these crazy rumors to rest.”

“Okay.” I nod thoughtfully. “I’ll do it.”

Sam smiles softly and mouths, *thank you*.

\* \* \*

Sam wraps his arm around me despite his broken ribs and leads me to the media room for the panel interview. We stop outside the door and he smiles down at me. “You ready?”

“No.”

He laughs and takes my hand as we follow Miles into the crowded room, which is much smaller than I thought it would be. He shows me where to sit and then takes the seat beside me behind a table fixed with stationary microphones. Joe and Miles take the other two seats next to Sam, and Tristan stands behind us with the rest of his team.

“Everybody calm down,” Miles says to the buzzing room. “I know you’re all excited about my new suit. I’ll give you the name of my tailor after the interview is over. Okay?”

The intimate crowd laughs, and it helps ease my nerves, especially when Sam looks over at me with a beaming smile and accompanying dimples.

“In all seriousness, though, we have a new member of the team we want to introduce you to tonight. This is Lucy Bennett,” he says, gesturing across the table to me. “One of the most exceptional artists and kindest human beings you’ll ever have the pleasure to meet. I expect you to treat her with the same level of respect she gets from all of us. And if you don’t...well...” He laughs. “That’s at your own risk, because Sam is very protective of his girlfriend.”

My cheeks blush against my will, which is working desperately to keep them creamy white. I look up at Sam, who smiles and gives me a wink.

Miles points at one of the female reporters. “First question. And I’ll bet I can guess what it is.”

The crowd chuckles again and I can’t help but admire the effortless way Miles took control of the room.

“As much as I’d like to prove you wrong, Miles, I have to ask”—she looks at me and raises her perfectly arched eyebrows—“how did you land boxing’s most eligible

bachelor?” She holds her phone out to record my answer. “You’re certainly not the first to try.”

The other reporters laugh quietly behind her.

Sam leans into his microphone to answer the condescending question, but I put my hand on his shoulder to stop him. A lifetime of certainty about who Sam and I were long before any of this happened fortifies my answer. I lean into my microphone and say confidently, “Actually, I *was* the first.”

“How did you meet?” another reporter asks out of turn, and Miles grumbles at him.

“In foster care,” Sam answers anyway. “I’ve known Lucy for most of my life. She’s my day one,” he says, glancing over at me, and I smile at his sweet words.

When the next reporter is prompted to ask his question, my smile wanes. “Lucy, you grew up in Brighton Park, correct?”

“Yes, I did.”

“But you’re trying to make it as an artist now. I understand you recently hosted an art exhibit in Atlanta.”

“Is that a question?” Miles asks irritably, but I beam with pride anyway, delightfully surprised that he knows about it.

“Yes, I did. It was very successful. Thank you for mentioning it.”

“So, how is it that you got into the art community?” he asks with a blank look on his face.

“I’m sorry, I’m not exactly sure what you mean.”

“You grew up in poverty. You didn’t exactly get exposed to the arts in Brighton Park.”

Sam leans into his microphone and says, “Lucy’s a born artist. The community found her. And yeah, we had a hard start in life, there’s no denying that. But Brighton Park made us who we are. It’s the foundation of my career, and Lucy’s.” He glances over at me again. “Hopefully one day, we can do something to give back.”

I smile at him.

“She’s a fighter like you, then.”

“Absolutely.”

“She must be,” he says, taking his seat.

“I’m sorry, what exactly does that mean?” I ask as my nerves take a back seat to my defenses.

“Just that with such a rough background, it’s got to be hard making it as a real artist.”

“She is a real artist,” Tristan says from the back, defending me.

“I’m sorry,” Sam says, laughing without an ounce of humor in his voice. “Can you just elaborate on her rough background?”

“Just leave it alone, Sam,” I say, away from the microphone.

The reporter stands back up and looks at Miles, who does little to help him. “Well, you grew up in the most impoverished suburb of Atlanta, which is known for its high crime, drug use, and poor education. That’s pretty rough,” he says carefully.

“You think those things pertain to her?”

“I don’t see how either of you could have escaped them. Sam, you’re a fighter, which that environment primed you for. But it’s not one that lends itself to the arts. I imagine it casts a pretty big shadow that will be difficult for Lucy to escape, no matter how talented she is. Especially with the negative media attention she’s been getting lately. Do either of you care to address any the headlines you’ve been making?”

“Yeah, they’re all bullshit,” Sam says.

“Look,” Miles interrupts, “the only headlines you need to worry about are the ones that highlight Sam’s win tonight.”

“Is there a particular rumor you’d like to ask me about?” I ask the reporter, who insinuated that my career isn’t going



anywhere. If what he said is true, I don't have anything to lose anyway.

“Okay. I'll be frank.”

“Oh, were you not being frank before?” I ask, and soft laughter fills the room.

“I didn't mean to offend you,” he says, exasperated.

“Funny. I'm pretty sure you did.” I shrug. “So, shoot. Which rumor would you like me to address? The one where I'm only with Sam because of his money? Or was it because he's famous? I can't remember.” I shake my head and smirk at Sam. “I bet it's the one where I trapped you with a surprise pregnancy.”

Sam crinkles his eyes and laughs.

“Oh, wait, it's not even your baby. According to that super reputable magazine that published the fake story,” I say, looking at the reporter again.

“Okay, you've made your point,” he says, appearing unamused as he crosses his arms and sits back down in his chair.

“I'm sorry,” I say to him. “I didn't mean to offend you.”

The room fills with light chuckles again.

Miles winks at me and leans into his mic. “Obviously the rumors are just that, rumors. I don't think we need to waste any more time talking about them. Next question. And make it about the fight.”

## Chapter 30

*Lucy*

“So, how was your anniversary trip to Savannah?” I ask Sebastian, who’s standing beside me in the store aisle gazing at boxes of Christmas lights stacked five shelves high. “Did you and Paul get a chance to talk about kids?”

“Yes. And it went okay, surprisingly.”

“Really? That’s great. What did you decide?”

“That we’re going to start researching options together, so that when we’re *both* ready, we’ll be prepared and know where to start. But no pressure.”

“Oh, Sebastian, that’s great.”

“You know what they say, marriage is all about compromise.”

“I think that’s a good compromise.”

“Paul and I had a great time, but our weekend wasn’t nearly as exciting as yours,” he says with wide eyes. “I still can’t get over how you put that asshole reporter in his place. I just wish I could have seen it in person.”

“I don’t know. It felt good in the moment, but I really hope I didn’t make things worse.” I stand on my tiptoes and stretch for a box of white lights.

“Are you kidding? It was incredible. I mean, what decade is that guy living in? Overcoming adversity is something that deserves praise. Your story is inspiring.”

“I hope so.”

“Believe me. It is.” He glances up and down the store aisle, which is adorned with blow-up Santas and snow globes. “You could put one of those tacky things on your balcony.”

“Do you think it would fit?”

He stares at me for a long second. “No.”

“Can you”—I stretch—“reach that?”

Sebastian reaches above my head and grabs the box of lights with ease.

“Thank you.”

“What about a tree? I saw it on your list. You’re not going to get a real one are you? The pine needles get everywhere.”

“I wanted to get one with Sam, but he’s not supposed to lift anything heavy. Doctor’s orders—which he *has* to follow this time.”

“How’s he doing?”

“They think his ribs didn’t heal properly after the Quebec fight because he did too much in Exuma, so he’s reluctantly taking it easy.”

“Isn’t that why you went to Exuma? So he could rest and get better. What the heck was he doing there?”

I raise my eyebrows and give an innocent shrug.

“Lucy! You could have at least waited until the second week to start the honeymoon.”

“I tried! But he can be very persuasive. And athletic.” I laugh softly and bite my bottom lip.

“Oh, my God, Lucy. That’s...actually pretty hot,” he says, picking up a box of lights. “But no more athletic bedroom antics until he’s better, or he won’t be able to keep fighting.”

“Are you saying this is all my fault?”

He shakes his head, but before he can get a word out, I groan, “Ugh, it is my fault. This rift between Joe and Miles is because of me, isn’t it?”

“What rift?”

“Since Sam got hurt again so soon, Joe wants him to stay out of the ring for a while. He wants him to take a real break from boxing.”

“And Miles wants his paycheck.”

“Well, I think it’s more than that. I think Miles is thinking about the longevity of Sam’s career.” I look at him and ask, “Is that really what you think?”

“Well, isn’t that what most sports managers want?”

I shake my head, considering it, but that’s not Miles. “Miles loves Sam. He’s just worried about the perception it’ll give off if he’s out of the ring for too long, because of the retirement rumors.”

“I like these, get these,” he says, handing me another box of twinkle lights. “So, are they just rumors?”

I give Bas a preposterous look. “He’s not going to retire, Bas. He’s twenty-seven.”

“Yeah, and in the boxing world, that’s practically an old man.”

“What? No. That’s crazy.”

“Not when you’ve been taking hits to the head since you were a teenager. You want him punch-drunk by the time he’s forty?”

I try to ignore the worry Bas has painted all over me, but it sheens my skin in the form of dewy sweat.

He looks up from the box he’s reading and stares at me for a moment. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head. “I feel like I...” I pant and swallow the saliva pouring into my mouth. “I think I—I think I’m going to be sick.”

I throw the boxes of lights back on the shelf and run down the aisle, which thankfully has a *Restroom* sign hanging in the middle of it. I make it to a stall just in time to throw up.

“Hi. Pardon me. Sorry, my friend’s in here,” I hear Bas saying to the ladies walking out, who are mumbling under their breath. “Sweetie? Are you okay?”

I wipe my mouth and stumble over to the sink, where I proceed to wash my hands and face. I dry them with a paper towel. “I’m fine. I feel better now.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you. Geez. I wasn’t expecting that reaction.”

“I think I’m just feeling a little overwhelmed by everything right now. I wanted this, Bas, I did. I do. But it’s a lot to take. Between the media constantly making up stories about me and Sam—”

“Which you dispelled during the LA interview.”

“And the paparazzi splashing topless pictures of me across the internet. And Sam’s ex-whatever-she-was pressuring me to work with her. And that stupid reporter insinuating I’m too uncouth to make it as a real artist.” My eyes start to well up. “And Sam getting beat to a pulp for a living.” The tears spill over and run down my cheeks. “Now he’s going to be punch-drunk?”

“Lucy,” Bas says softly, approaching me with caution.

“I just want to have a house that’s mine and decorate it with Christmas lights and a stupid Christmas tree,” I sob against Bas’s shoulder, which is pressed firmly against my cheek now. “So much for having a nice, normal life.”

He holds me and uncharacteristically lets me cry in his arms for several long seconds.

I step back and look at him with pathetic, watery eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I say into the rough paper towel in my hands that scratches my puffy eyes.

He pulls his dark eyebrows together and says, “Nothing’s wrong with you. You’ve just had a lot to deal with lately. It’s going to get better. The media will settle down, it’s inevitable. One minute you’re news, the next no one cares. Sure, there will be people who make stuff up about you and presume to know things about your life, past or present, but that’s true of anyone. And Sam isn’t going to get punch-drunk, because you won’t let him.”

“Let him? Have you met Sam? When he wants something, no one can deter him.”

“He wants you, Lucy. You’re probably the only one who can deter him, which I know you would only do to protect

him. So you have to be the voice of reason when that time comes. He'll listen to you. And only you."

I bob my head and wipe my nose. "How did you get so smart?"

He shrugs. "One of my many gifts."

I inhale a deep breath, discard the tear-soaked paper towel in my hand, and splash some more water on my face. I pat it dry and look at my pink nose and watery, pale blue eyes with matching pink rims.

Sebastian snaps a picture of me with his phone and I spin around.

"What are you doing? Delete that."

He shows me the picture. "Paint this."

"What?"

"Paint this. It's...a moment."

I pull my eyebrows together and drop my chin. "What should I call it? Bathroom Breakdown?"

"Stronger."

"Stronger?"

"Stronger," he says seriously. "Because you'll only get stronger from here."

I press my lips together and nod at his poignant interpretation of a painting I haven't even created yet. "I love you."

"I know. Now..." He glances around the bathroom with disdain. "Can we please exit this public lavatory?"

"Yes."

\* \* \*

I adjust the lights in my studio and position my paint cart next to my easel, which I lower a bit so I can reach the top of the four-foot canvas that it's holding. I gauge my blank workspace, but before I begin, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

“Hey,” I answer.

“What are you doing?” Sam asks, and I smile automatically.

“Painting. I was about to anyway, before you called.”

“You didn’t have to answer.”

“Yes, I did.” I smile and tell him, “I’ll always answer when you call.”

“Good.” He laughs softly. “It’s getting late. You coming home soon?”

I look at the time on my phone. “It’s six fifteen.”

“It’s after dark.”

“I won’t be too long.”

“Want me to bring you dinner?”

“You’d do that?” I ask happily. I’m starving, and Sebastian left hours ago.

“Of course. What do you want?”

“Chicken biryani,” I say without hesitation. I’ve been craving it all day.

“That’s very specific. Care to tell me where I can find that?”

“It’s Indian. You’ve never had it?”

“No. Can’t say I have.”

“Well, you’ll love it, it’s spicy. There’s a really great Indian place around the corner from your—I mean, *our* apartment.”

“Okay.” He laughs. “I’ll ask Terrance. Be there soon.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Lucy,” he says, making me pause before I end the call.

I put the phone back up to my ear. “Yes?”

“Is the alarm on?”

“Yes. And the doors are locked.”

“Good.”

I push my lips together over a small smile. *Always the protector.* “Remember the code to get in?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, hurry up. I’m hungry.”

“Okay.”

He hangs up and I slip my phone back into the pocket of my painted, tattered cutoffs and my stomach growls loudly. I grab my water bottle off my paint cart and take a sip, but it does little to assuage my hunger. My mouth begins to water, so I take another sip, but it doesn’t stay down for long. I run to the bathroom and heave over the toilet.

I close my eyes as the nausea leaves me and get up to wash my face. I rinse my mouth with mouthwash and make a mental note to not skip lunch again.

I walk over to the couch on wobbly legs and sit down... *just for a minute.* I lean against the worn leather armrest and pull my feet up on the cool cushion.

*Lucy.*

...

*Lucy.*

...

“Baby, wake up.”

I crack my eyes open and see Sam hovering over me with a small, concerned smile on his face. “Hey.”

I sit up quickly and catch myself on his arm.

“You okay?” He laughs softly.

“Yeah.” I pull my hand to my face and rub my eyes. “I guess I fell asleep. Sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”



“I don’t know. I just...didn’t mean to fall asleep. What time is it?”

“Almost seven. You couldn’t have been out long. I did get a little worried when I called a few minutes ago and you didn’t answer.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and see his missed call. “I didn’t feel it vibrate.”

“You were out cold. You sure you’re feeling okay?”

“Yeah. I feel okay. I got sick after we hung up, but—”

“You threw up?” His hand goes straight to my forehead, and it reminds me of when we were kids. We always took care of each other when one of us got sick.

“Yeah, but I’m not sick. I just went too long without eating. I skipped lunch today.”

“Oh.” He makes a funny face. “Well, don’t do that again.”

“I won’t, believe me.” I breathe in the delicious smell of the warm, spicy chicken and rice and my mouth waters again. “Let’s eat.”

We sit on the couch and eat our biryani, which Sam soon discovers he loves as much as I do. When he’s full, he throws his paper bowl back in the bag and waits for mine, which I scrape clean before handing it to him.

“That was so good. Thanks for bringing it to me.”

He props his elbow on the back of the couch and looks at me.

“What?”

“I don’t know, there’s just something about being here.” He grins. “Seeing you in those shorts.”

I wrinkle my nose at my ratty old cutoffs.

“Reminds me of that day we kissed, right over there.” He glances at my easel.

I smile automatically, recalling how he made me drop my paintbrush. “I remember.”

“Our first kiss.”

“Not the first.”

“The first one of the rest of our lives,” he says, inching closer to me until our knees are touching. “I wanted you so badly. It took everything in me not to take you right here on this very couch.”

I look in his eyes and fortify my defenses.

“I still want you just as much as I did that day.” He wraps his hand behind my neck and leans in to kiss me. “Right here. Right now.”

“Sam, we can’t.”

“Why?” he asks, caressing my neck with soft, warm kisses.

“The doctor said you have to heal, correctly this time.”

He sits up and rolls his eyes.

“Don’t you want to be able to fight again?”

“Not if it means I can’t be with you.”

I drop my head to the side. “Fighting or no fighting, you have to heal this time. I want you too, but preferably in one piece.”

He gazes at me with his beautiful eyes and reaches for my hand. “I have been healing. I’ve been wearing the wrap every day since the fight, just like the doctor told me to.”

“I’m not really in the mood,” I lie, and the look on his face sends my heart plummeting.

“Oh.” He pulls his hand back. “Okay.” He forces a small smile.

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind right now.” I put my hand over his. “That’s all.”

He flexes his fingers beneath mine and laces them together. “Like what?”

“You, my career, the fate of my studio.” I glance around and sigh heavily.

“Well you can take me off that list.”

“Are you kidding? You’re in bold, caps, and highlighted in yellow.”

“Why? I’m fine.” He gives me a serious look. “You don’t have to worry about me. Nothing is going to happen to me.”

An incredulous laugh escapes quietly between my lips. “The fact that you think that is what worries me. You’re not invincible, Sam.” I hold his stare until he looks away. “Look at me,” I say, squeezing his hand. “You are all I have.”

He looks at me and says, “I know. You’re all I have too.”

“Then protect yourself. For me.”

“What is it that you want me to do, Lamb? Just say it and I’ll do it.”

I stare at him for a moment, trying to lift the weight of his words off my shoulders. “Listen to Joe. He loves you like I do, and he knows what’s best for you. Take a break from boxing.”

He inhales a slow, deep breath through his nostrils and stands up.

“Just for a little while.”

He studies me for a few seconds and then puts his hands on his hips and says, “Okay.”

*Okay?*

I stand up and he wraps his arms around me, and I hide beneath them, afraid to face the fact that I’ve just become a wedge between Sam and the other love of his life—boxing. But Sebastian’s words echo in my ears, and I know that it’s the only way to protect him.

“You ready to go home?” he asks, releasing me.

“Yeah.” I’m not really in the mood to paint anymore.

We lock up the studio and ride to the apartment together in unusual silence.

I lied when I said I wasn’t in the mood, because I wanted to protect him. I asked him to take a break from boxing,

because I wanted to protect him. But what's the good in protecting him if I'm just hurting him in other ways?

"I'm sorry," I say, reaching for his arm.

He looks at me and then slows the car to a stop on the side of the road.

"I shouldn't have asked you to stop boxing. I did it because I'm scared, and I knew that you'd take a break if I asked you to. But it was selfish and I'm sorry. I want you to do what *you* think is right. And I'll support your decision, no matter what it is, because I love you."

"I know you do." He reaches for my face, tucking my long hair behind my ear. "You don't have to be sorry."

"And I lied."

He pulls his chin back and looks at me curiously.

"When I said I wasn't in the mood before. I lied."

He laughs softly.

"I just don't want you to hurt yourself again."

"Lucy, making love to you is not going to reinjure my ribs."

"What about last time? In Exuma."

"I wasn't careful in Exuma, because I was so freaking happy to finally have you all to myself."

I smile softly, recalling how he could barely wait to undress me in the Bahamas.

"We'll just be more careful for now, okay?"

I unbuckle my seatbelt and lean across the middle console, until I'm practically in his lap. "Okay." I shove my hands in his caramel hair and kiss his full lips, finding his tongue with mine. He groans against my mouth and rocks his hips up, then slowly pushes me back by my shoulders, until our lips are no longer touching. "Maybe we should wait until we get home. I'd probably injure more than my ribs trying to do it in this car."

I laugh and fall back into my seat. “Good point.”

I buckle back up and the engine purrs as he pulls back out onto the road. “I have a surprise for you,” he says casually, watching the road, but the smile he’s trying to hide bubbles excitement inside me.

My eyes light up with intrigue. “What kind of surprise?” I ask, like a child, and he smiles openly.

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

\* \* \*

Sam blocks the door to our apartment when I try to open it.

“What are you doing?” I ask, looking up at his excited face.

“Close your eyes,” he says, watching me until I do. He takes my hand and asks, “Are you ready?”

“For what?”

He opens the door and pulls me several feet into the apartment. “Okay, open your eyes.”

I open my eyes and gasp when I see a beautiful Christmas tree glowing in the middle of the living room adorned with sparkling white lights and shiny glass bulbs. There’s a fire crackling in the fireplace beyond it and more white lights twinkling on the balcony outside.

“Sam...how did you do all this?”

He follows me into the living room. “Sebastian, as it turns out, is *very* good at this sort of thing.”

*Of course.* It looks like he hired a professional.

“He and I worked on it this afternoon while you were at the studio.”

I turn around and carefully wrap my arms around him. “I love it. I love *you*. It’s beautiful.”

“I wasn’t sure about the tree—it’s not real—but Sebastian insisted. Is it like you wanted?”

“It’s more than I wanted. It’s perfect.”

He smiles and kisses the top of my head. “I saved a few boxes of ornaments so we can finish decorating it together.”

I look up at his one-of-a-kind eyes, silently scolding myself for being so selfish back at the studio. “I don’t deserve you.”

He pulls my face to his and kisses me softly. “I think you’ve got that backward.”

We spend the next half hour hanging the rest of the ornaments on the tree, and it fills me with a sense of normalcy that erases all of the worry and stress from earlier in the day.

I reach for Sam’s hand and pull him into a hug in front of our beautiful Christmas tree, but his phone starts buzzing in his pocket, vibrating against my hip, before I can tell him how happy I am.

He pulls it out of his pocket and grumbles, “This better be important, Miles.” He listens for a few seconds and then his face grows serious. “Okay, I’m on my way. Tell Joe I’m on my way.”

He hangs up and my heart races inside my chest. “Sam, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Tristan. He’s in the hospital.”

“Is he okay?” I ask, knowing he must not be if he’s in the hospital.

He shakes his head, but doesn’t answer. “I’ve got to go.”

I follow him across the apartment to our bedroom, but he turns down the hall and goes into the gym instead.

“Sam, what are you doing?”

He goes straight for a punching bag that’s suspended from the ceiling and punches it hard.

“Sam! Stop!” I shout, and he freezes. “You can’t do that.”

He puts his hand on the bag and stops it from swinging, and then drops his head against it.

I stand behind him and put my hand on his back. “It’s okay.”

He turns around and wraps his arms around me.

“Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay,” I say to him.

“He’s not okay,” he says against my shoulder.

“I know.” I lift his head and look in his worried eyes.  
“Come on, I’ll go with you to the hospital.”

## Chapter 31

*Lucy*

“One latte macchiato,” Sebastian says, handing me a cup from the coffee shop across the street.

“Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do after that pompous curator in Dallas dropped you from his hoity-toity exhibit. That you didn’t want to be a part of anyway,” he says, rolling his eyes behind his clear-framed glasses.

“I never said I didn’t want to be a part of it.” I sigh and put my coffee down on my desk.

“I added that part in, but let’s just go with it, okay? Besides, would you really want to work with a gallery that considers artists based on where they grew up, instead of their extraordinary, unmatched talent?”

“I just hope it’s not an indication of what’s to come.”

“Lucy, it doesn’t matter where you grew up.”

“Well, it obviously does to some people,” I say, swiveling my chair from side to side.

Sebastian sits on the corner of my desk and says, “Those who mind don’t matter, and those who matter don’t mind.”

“What?”

“You still have six other invites from galleries that think your *work* is amazing, including Aurelia Snow. That’s what matters.”

“I know. You’re right.” I sip my coffee. “Hey, can you mail this for me today?” I hand him a sealed envelope that contains a lengthy letter I wrote to Drew.

He takes it from me and eyes Drew’s name and address scrawled on the front. “What’s this?”

“A letter for Drew.”



“Okay, is this nineteen eighty? Who sends a letter?”

“Well, if he would return any of my calls, I wouldn’t have to.”

“Maybe he’s still in Europe.”

“We planned a two-week honeymoon. He should be back by now. And I know Janice told him I stopped by while he was away. She promised she would tell him to call me when he got back.” I shrug. “He’s obviously still upset.”

“Can I ask what’s in the letter?”

“Everything. An apology. A thank-you. Well wishes. And my plan to sign the deed to the studio back over to him...*after* I figure out a way to buy a new one.”

“Well, your sales are through the roof right now. By the end of the month, you won’t have a single painting left in this studio to sell. Besides *Lionheart*,” he says, tapping his fingers together.

“It’s not for sale, Bas.”

“Just checking to see if you changed your mind. I bet you could get even more for it now with all the media attention on you and Sam.”

“I haven’t changed my mind,” I assure him.

“A shame. It would pay for a new studio and a bonus for your amazing assistant.”

“Noted.” I laugh. “Hey, have you looked into the dates for the other exhibits that I’m *still* invited to? We probably need to start making travel arrangements.”

“Yes, but they’re all next winter and spring. The only one before then is Aurelia Snow in June. Which is actually kind of perfect, because if everything goes well in New York, the price tag on your paintings will soar for the other shows.”

I nod pensively. “It will also give me time to focus on finding a new studio. And time to rebuild my dwindling portfolio.”

“Speaking of which, how’s the painting coming along?”

“I’m making progress. But it’s been hard to focus since we got back from LA. Between getting my invite rescinded, everything that’s going on with Tristan, and worrying about Sam, it’s been hard to stay motivated. I’ve just been so tired lately,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

“How is Tristan?”

“He’s better. He’s at home now, but he’s not going to be able to help Sam train anytime soon.”

“Train for what? I thought Sam was taking a break.”

“He is, for now. They renegotiated his contract to start in March, instead of January.” I give him wide eyes and shrug. “At least they pushed it back a couple of months. But he has to start training again after the new year with some new guy.”

“Speaking of Sam, what did you get him for Christmas?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Lucy. It’s in two days!”

“I know! I just haven’t really been in the mood to shop. It would help if I could shake this stomach bug.”

“What stomach bug?” He stands up and makes a disgusted face. “How long have you had it?”

“Since the store incident. That was the start of it.”

“Well, have you thought about going to the doctor?”

“It’s not that bad. It sort of comes and goes. I just get these waves of nausea. But after I throw up, I feel better.”

“That doesn’t sound right. Have you been losing weight?” He drops his eyes over me.

“No, I don’t think so. Probably because when I’m not puking, I’m eating everything in sight to make up for it.”

Sebastian’s face falls and he carefully gauges me for a few uncomfortable seconds.

“What?” I ask, shrugging a shoulder to fend off his intrusive look.

“Lucy Marie Bennett, tell me it hasn’t crossed your mind at least once that you might be pregnant.”

I stand up quickly. “Um, no, actually. Why is that always your go-to diagnosis?”

“Oh, I don’t know, have you had sex with Sam?” he asks sarcastically.

I roll my eyes and insist, “I never miss my birth control pill, Bas. Ever.”

He reaches for my hands and holds them between us. “Honey, birth control isn’t one hundred percent effective one hundred percent of the time. That’s like sex ed 101.”

I’m thankful he’s holding my hands, because I suddenly feel weak in the knees. And nauseous. “My period’s late,” I whisper, and he presses his lips together into a thin line. “I thought it was from all the stress I’ve been under.” I let go of his hands and take a few wobbly steps back. “Oh, my God, I’ve been *so* nauseous, Bas. I’m nauseous right now.” I walk aimlessly out of my office and fall onto the couch. “I’ve been starving and emotional.” I look up at Sebastian, who’s squinting his eyes as if to somehow reject the inevitable conclusion. “I think I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, my God.” He sits on the couch beside me. “What do we do?” He scans me from head to toe and then reaches for my feet. “Here, put your feet up,” he says, pulling them up onto the couch.

“Sebastian, I need to take a pregnancy test.”

“Right. Good plan. That’s what my sister did. It was a first something...First Watch?”

“I don’t know, but they’re always right next to the tampons. Seems contradictory,” I muse.

“Okay, let’s go get one.”

“What? No way.”

Bas gives me a confused look.

“Bas, I can’t go into a store and buy a pregnancy test. Someone will tell someone and before you know it there’ll be another rumor swirling that I’m pregnant with Sam’s baby.”

“But you are pregnant with Sam’s baby.”

“We don’t know that.”

He rolls his eyes. “Okay, we’ll just stick with the whole stomach bug that acts exactly like a baby theory and see what happens.”

I drop my head to the side and ask, “Will you please go buy one for me?” I press my palms together in front of me. “Please?”

“Fine,” he says, getting to his feet. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“Okay.” I get up and walk behind him. “What should I do while you’re gone? Should I paint? Can I paint? Can you paint when you’re pregnant? Shit, Sebastian, I’ve been painting every day.”

He smiles. “Can I see the painting?”

“Focus, Bas.”

“Right, okay. First Watch, on its way.”

Sebastian leaves me in an ocean of anxiety with a strong undertow, but I fight against the current. *What am I going to do? What am I going to tell Sam? Will he be happy? What if he’s upset?*

I fall back onto the couch and take slow, deep breaths.

*How can I have a baby?* I don’t know anything about babies. I don’t know anything about being pregnant! I thought I had a stomach bug. I’m like one of those ladies who has their baby on the toilet because they didn’t know they were pregnant.

I get up and pace around the studio for the next ten minutes.

*Oh, God. I’m not cut out for this. I can’t do this.*

I pass the painting I've been working on and stop pacing when Bas's words echo in my head. *You'll only get stronger from here.* I close my eyes and inhale a deep cathartic breath, my hands moving to my stomach as if by their own will. *I'll be strong for you.*

"I'm back," Sebastian shouts from the front of the studio, and my hands fall to my sides. I turn around and see him walking toward me with a white plastic bag in his hand.

"That was fast," I say, wishing it had taken him a little longer.

"I went to the drugstore on the corner. There wasn't a line." He pulls a pink box out of the bag and hands it to me. "I'd offer to help, but..." He makes a funny face that reflects my own.

"I'm good, thanks." I take the box from him and hurry to the bathroom, closing the door behind me. I don't know what's worse, being pregnant or wondering if I'm pregnant. Or knowing that Sebastian is standing on the other side of the door, waiting for the answer.

I take a deep breath and open the box with shaking fingers. Inside, I find two paper-wrapped pregnancy tests, like little Russian fertility dolls, and tear them open. I place them on the counter while I carefully read the instructions and then follow the accompanying picture guide.

When I'm through, I wash my hands and exit the bathroom, leaving my fate to be determined on the back of the toilet.

"What did it say?" Sebastian asks, quicker than his mouth can move.

"I didn't look. The directions said it takes a few minutes to work."

"Oh." He nods and paces a few times. "Okay."

I reach for his hand and pull him over to me. "I need a hug."

"Me too," he says, wrapping his arms around me.

“What am I going to do if I’m pregnant, Bas?”

“You’ll rock it, like everything else in your life.”

“What are you going to do if I’m pregnant?”

“I’ll support you and throw you a kick-ass baby shower.”

I squeeze him tight, inhale a fortifying breath, and release him. “Okay, let’s check.”

He looks at me and bobs his head. “Okay, let’s do it. I’m ready.”

I turn around and tentatively open the bathroom door, but Sebastian crooks his neck over my shoulder and pushes me inside. I fight my self-preserving instincts telling me not to look and pick up one of the tests.

“Oh, my God,” Sebastian says, looking at me.

I stare quietly at the tiny digital screen for several long seconds.

“Pregnant,” I finally say over the pounding in my chest. “Sebastian”—I look up at him with disbelief—“I’m pregnant.”

“Are you sure it’s not wrong?” he asks, looking at the other test still laying on the back of the toilet. He presses his lips together and shakes his head. “Nope,” he answers his own question. “You’re pregnant.”

“I’m pregnant.”

His eyes widen and a tentative smile stretches across his handsome face. “You’re pregnant.”

“Yeah,” I say, bobbing my head, and my eyes mist over.

“Oh, my God!” He wraps his arms around me. “You’re going to have a baby! I’m going to be an uncle! I’m much more comfortable with this scenario.” He releases me and pulls me over to the couch. “You need a doctor. And prenatal vitamins. And folic acid.”

“What’s folic acid?”

“I don’t know. But I read about it in one of Paul’s surrogacy pamphlets. You need it.” He pulls his phone out of

his pocket and starts tapping the screen with his thumbs.

“Bas,” I say, pulling one of his hands away. “I have to tell Sam first.”

“Right...of course.” He stares at me expectantly.

“Not right now, Bas!”

“Why not?”

“I can’t tell him this over the phone. I may never see him again.”

He rolls his eyes and drops his head to the side. “You’re procrastinating. And being a little dramatic.”

I look at my hands in my lap and exhale. “I know. Sam’s talked about having a family since we were kids. I just...I want to tell him in person, Bas.”

He presses his lips together over a small smile and says, “I think you just found his Christmas present.”

\* \* \*

“It’s like the whole city has shut down tonight,” I say to Sam, stepping out onto our snow-covered balcony. I rub my bare arms and peek over the edge at the empty streets below.

“Well it’s not every day we get snow in Atlanta,” Sam says, wrapping me in the blanket draped over his shoulders. “Let alone on Christmas Eve.”

I turn around in his arms and snuggle up against his warm body. “Remember that time it snowed like this when we were kids? You turned the garbage can lid over and pulled me down the street on it with a jump rope?”

“Yeah, Maxine was pissed because we put a hole in the lid. Couldn’t have been more than an inch or two of snow on the ground.” He laughs and rests his chin on the top of my head. “Our kids will have the best sled money can buy.”

My heart jumps and races inside my chest, but before I can pry my tongue off the roof of my mouth, he pulls my lips to his and ignites a fire within me that warms me all the way to my bare feet, which I’m pretty sure have frozen solid.

“Sam,” I mumble against his lips, but he pulls me back inside. “I have to tell you something,” I manage in the three seconds it takes him to drop the blanket and slide the glass doors closed.

He looks at me with fire in his hungry eyes, as warm as the flames crackling in the fireplace.

“It can wait.” I reach for his handsome face and his dimples cast tiny shadows on his cheeks in the glow of the Christmas tree. I wind my fingers into his wavy hair, which has grown longer in the last couple of months, and press my body to his.

He exhales a heavy breath and reaches for my waist to pick me up, but I grab his hands and push them away. “Sam, no.”

He grumbles against my neck and presses me against the wall with his warm body. “It’s been two weeks,” he growls against my ear. “I’m better.”

I shake my head and pant, “You can’t pick me up. You’re still healing.”

“Fine.” He gives me a salacious smile that makes me giggle. “Have it your way.” He spins me around and holds my hands against the wall while he slowly kisses my neck. He presses his hips against my bottom and groans softly as he snakes his arm around my stomach. But when he squeezes my tender breast through my thin silk pajama top, I let out an unintentional yelp.

“I’m sorry,” he says, turning me around with a worried look on his face. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” I say, ignoring my throbbing breast.

“Yes I did.”

“Sam, I’m fine.” I press my hand to his concerned face, trying to ease the worry in his unusual eyes, wondering if our baby will have them too. “I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?” His voice is laced with unnecessary concern.



I swallow hard and force myself to confess the secret I've been holding in since yesterday. "I'm...pregnant." I pull in a deep breath with no indication of when it might be released.

"You're what?" he asks, unable to hide the shock in his voice.

"I'm pregnant." I press my trembling lips together and nod. "We're going to have a baby." I stand frozen against the wall and wait for him to respond, but when he doesn't, I begin to wonder if maybe it wasn't the right time to tell him.

After a long silent second, he takes a step toward me and reaches for my face. He looks at me with watery eyes and then kisses me hard.

I laugh softly over the tears that spill onto my cheeks. "Does this mean you're happy?"

He drops his forehead to mine and says huskily, "Yeah. I'm really happy."

"I know it wasn't supposed to happen like this, Sam, but —"

"Yes it was...we just didn't know it."

I swallow down the emotion that's flooding me and nod. "Yeah."

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. "I'm sorry I was rough before. If I had known..."

I smile and reach for his handsome face. "I'm fine, Sam. My boobs are just a little sore, that's all." I laugh softly.

"When did you find out?"

"Yesterday. I wanted to wait until tomorrow to tell you. It was supposed to be your Christmas present."

He takes my hand and pulls me over to the couch, and we sit in the warm glow of the fire. "Lamb, you've already given me everything I've ever wanted." He gazes at me and says, "You." He puts his hand on my stomach and rubs it softly. "This baby...our baby"—he pulls his eyebrows together over his stormy eyes—"is more than I could have asked for." He

looks up at me and says with awe, “We’re going to be a family.”

“Yeah.” I nod over the lump in my throat. “We’re going to be a family.”

He pulls me into his arms and I curl up in his lap.

“Look”—he points to the dark windows that surround the living room—“it’s snowing again.”

I look outside and see little white snowflakes floating gently through the night sky. “It’s so beautiful.”

He looks down at me and brushes my hair off my forehead. “Since you gave me my Christmas present early, I guess I can give you yours.”

“You got me something?” I ask excitedly.

He pulls me to my feet and over to the Christmas tree. We stand in front of it and I admire the beautiful ornaments glowing against the white lights.

“Lucy, you’re the first person who loved me. Did you know that?”

I look up at him and smile softly.

“I’d never even heard that word spoken to me, until you said it for the first time.”

I nod over the crack that shoots across my heart.

“But I knew I loved you long before that. I could feel it inside me like a force of nature.” He smiles softly. “As the days and years passed, it became as necessary as oxygen. When it was gone, I couldn’t breathe. I tried to, but without you...” He traces my face with his fingers and tucks my hair behind my ear. “I was half alive. I never want to feel that way again, Lamb.”

I inhale a shaky breath. “You don’t have to.”

He looks at the Christmas tree and reaches for one of branches. “I got you this,” he says, pulling a small ribbon off the tree. He holds up a diamond ring that’s tied to the end of it

and I suck in a stunned breath. “Marry me, Lamb. Be with me for the rest of our lives. Stay with me forever.”

I nod and cry, “Yes. I’ll marry you, Sam.”

“Yeah?” He exhales and blinks his watery eyes.

“Yes,” I cry. “Of course.”

He reaches for my left hand and slides the sparkly ring onto my finger.

“I’ll never leave you, Sam. I’m yours. Forever.” I put his hand on my stomach and vow, “We’re yours.”

## Chapter 32

*Lucy, Three Months Later*

I hold Sebastian's arm so I don't topple over in my high heels as we make our way ringside behind Miles.

Miles stops and says something to one of the announcers seated in front of a laptop and a microphone.

He looks up and smiles at me as I pass him.

"What was that about?" Bas shouts in my ear over the music blaring through the arena speakers. The bass echoes off the cement floors, reverberating all the way up through my body and vibrating through my chest.

"I don't know." I shrug and follow Miles to our seats. I want to sit down, but the buzz of the crowd keeps me on my feet. Everyone is clapping and cheering with excitement, including me. I smile at Sebastian, who has a giant grin on his face.

"Okay, *these* are the best seats we've ever gotten," he says, looking up at the ring. "Paul's going to have to up his game."

"I think we might have a new in." I laugh. "Is he feeling any better?"

"What?" Bas shouts, dropping his head to mine.

"Is Paul feeling better?"

"He's fine. He's a total baby when he's sick. I still can't believe he passed this up." He smirks and turns his attention back to the ring, where two tall bikini-clad models are posing and blowing kisses to the camera.

"Haven't we moved past this as a society?" I ask, watching them strut around in their sparkly bikinis.

"Ring girls have been a part of the glitz and glam of boxing since the sixties," Bas answers. "I mean, if they didn't hold up signs indicating the next round, how else would anyone know?" He laughs and I roll my eyes.

“They’ve got nothing on you,” I say, glancing at his burgundy slim-fit tuxedo jacket.

He straightens his black bow tie and runs his fingers down the middle of his pleated white shirt. “It does say old Hollywood, doesn’t it?”

“It has Gene Kelly written all over it.”

“The fact that you know who he is makes me immensely happy,” he says seriously.

The girls leave the ring and the lights dim, igniting the crowd. They hoot and holler and clap even louder as red and blue spotlights move around the arena to the beat of the music. When I hear the intro to Eminem’s “Phenomenal” begin to play, I know that Sam is entering the arena. Apparently so does everyone else, because the entire arena goes crazy, shouting and screaming in unison.

Sebastian gives me excited eyes. “This is crazier than Madison Square Garden!”

“Sam said when he fights in Atlanta the crowd is on another level.”

“How you doing? You all right?” Miles asks, checking on me.

“Yeah.”

“Sam’s coming,” he says, pointing up at the monitors over the ring.

“I know.” I look up and watch him move through the crowd with Joe and the rest of his crew. Except for Tristan, who’s in the hospital again. Thankfully Molly is there with him.

Leon and Mikey hold up two of Sam’s belts, showing them off to the excited crowd, and they shine in the spotlight that’s following them to the ring.

*Defending titleholder Sam Cole is making his way to the ring through the excited crowd as his beautiful fiancée, Lucy, cheers him on.*

Sebastian nudges me, barely containing his excitement, and I smile over the butterflies that suddenly fill my stomach. I look at Miles and he gives me a wink.

*Like Sam, she, too, is a product of the foster care system here in Atlanta...You can definitely hear the excitement in this hometown crowd tonight...Joe Maloney, his longtime coach, encouraged him to take a few months off after he reinjured his ribs during the Phillips fight at the end of the year, but I'll tell you, he looks stronger than ever...He sure does. Andre Ricci has his work cut out for him tonight.*

Sam climbs into the ring and my heart races on cue, like it always does when he's about to fight.

\* \* \*

*Lucy, Thirteen Years Old*

“What did you say?” Sam says to the boy who just called me a snowflake.

The boy crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the chain-link fence that surrounds the basketball court at our school. “I wasn't talking to you.” He looks at me and winks, and it ties my stomach into knots.

“Sam, don't,” I plead when I see his shoulders tense, but he ignores me and lunges toward the boy like an unstoppable freight train.

He grabs his shirt and pulls him off the fence, shoving him back several feet down the sidewalk. When the boy gets his footing, he charges Sam like a bull, but Sam catches him and shoves him off, throwing a right hook at his face that cuts his cheek.

“Sam, stop!” I shout, but he hits him again.

My heart pounds in my chest, but there's nothing I can do to stop him.

A crowd quickly gathers around us, and they shout with encouragement.

“Stop it!” I scream at them, but I might as well be invisible.

The crowd jumps up and down like heathens, egging them on.

The boy hits Sam in the mouth and a small cut begins to bleed, but Sam doesn't seem to notice. He hits the boy hard, knocking him to the ground, and grabs his shirt. "Don't you ever look at her again. You hear me?"

"Hey, hey, hey!" a man shouts, breaking through the crowd, and they all scatter like roaches. He grabs Sam's arm and pulls him up, but Sam yanks his arm away.

"Get the fuck off me."

"Hey!" he shouts at Sam, shoving him against the fence. "You don't know me. Don't talk to me like that."

"You don't know me!"

"Oh, I know you. You're what, fourteen, fifteen years old? You want to beat everyone up who looks at you or your girl the wrong way. I *was* you." Sam tries to move, but the man holds him against the fence. "Listen to me. You like to fight?"

"I don't like to fight. I have to fight," Sam grits through his teeth.

"Nah, that's an excuse. I know you like to fight. I can see it in your eyes."

"So what if I do?"

"Then fight like a man, not like some dog on the street."

"What?" Sam struggles against his hold.

"I own a gym. It's not far from here. I teach kids how to box. Kids like you, who love to fight."

Sam stares at him and relaxes a little.

"I can teach you how to fight like a man."

"Why do you give a fuck about me?"

"Watch your mouth. You want to fight like a man, you have to act like a man."

"Why do you care?"

“Because I’ve seen what kids like you can be. You want to waste your life away in the Park, getting into street fights, getting into trouble, maybe even going to jail...be my guest. Or you can come by my gym and let me teach you how to fight for real, show you how to earn respect for knocking people out.”

Sam stares at him for a few seconds and then nods. “Yeah...okay.”

The man takes a step back. “My name’s Joe. Joe Maloney.” He stretches his hand out in front of Sam and waits for Sam to do the same.

Sam reaches out tentatively and shakes his hand. “I’m Sam.”

“Nice to meet you Sam. You got a mean left hook.”

“Thanks,” he says warily.

“You all right, sweetheart?” Joe asks me.

“Yeah.” I inhale a shaky breath. “I’m okay.”

“What’s your name?”

“Lucy.”

“You like seeing him fight like that, Lucy?”

“No,” I say, keeping my eyes off Sam.

“I didn’t think so.”

I glance up at Sam, who’s looking at the ground.

“Boxing isn’t like that. There are rules, protective gear. You come by the gym with him, so you can see, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You come by tomorrow,” he says to Sam. “I open at six a.m. on Saturdays.”

“Okay.” Sam looks up at him.

Joe looks him up and down and nods. “Don’t let me down, Sam. Don’t let her down either,” he says, looking at me.

Sam gives me apologetic eyes. “I won’t.”



\* \* \*

I sit on the couch in Sam's dressing room with my feet in Sebastian's lap, watching a live stream of the interview Sam's doing in the next room.

"You sure you don't want to make a surprise appearance?" Sebastian asks, straightening his cufflink.

"One appearance tonight was enough," I say, folding my hands over my tight stomach. "I'll be shocked if no one noticed the newest member of Sam's team tonight."

"The dress should have thrown them off. No respectable woman in her second trimester would wear something that smoking hot." He cuts his teasing eyes at me and winks.

"Sebastian!" I smack his arm. "You picked this dress out."

"Yeah, well, your boobs look fantastic in it."

I glance down at them. "I think they've gotten bigger since last week. How is that possible?"

"You're four months pregnant, it's normal. So I hear."

I narrow my eyes at him and smirk. "You've been reading the baby books again, haven't you?"

"Well, Paul asked me to. And I need to know what's going on with you." He closes his eyes and shrugs a shoulder. "It's my job."

"So, are you and Paul any closer to crossing into baby territory?"

"Well, I'd like to say your unexpected news didn't spark the baby bug in me, but it did a little," he says, pinching his fingers together.

"Really?" I ask excitedly.

"Yeah. Now that I've gotten used to the idea, I think we might start seriously looking into adopting."

"Sebastian!" I smile. "That's great news."

"Well, it could still take a really long time."

“Sam, tonight was your twenty-sixth win, but it was another shaky match,” a reporter says to him, and we both turn toward the TV. “You were on the ropes a lot.”

“And he got off them,” Miles says.

“You’ve taken a lot of hits lately, Sam. Have you given any thought to these retirement rumors?”

“They’re just that...rumors,” Miles interjects again. “And they’re gonna stay that way. Sam’s not going anywhere.”

“I’m not giving my title up anytime soon.” Sam smirks.

“But you do have a wedding coming up, right?” the reporter asks.

Sam leans into his microphone again. “We haven’t set a date yet.”

I look over at Sebastian. “Because I’m not going to be able to fit into a wedding dress in the foreseeable future.”

“Which is exactly why you need to do it sooner rather than later!”

“Bas, I know you want us to have a wedding, but honestly, there’s something about planning two weddings in one year that just feels, I don’t know, *wrong*.”

He waves his hand at me and rolls his eyes.

“Have you even thought about what that would do to Drew? Or how hard all this must be on him?”

“Um, no, not really...because you’re not with Drew anymore. And for all you know, he’s already got another wife lined up.”

I’d say the thought hasn’t crossed my mind, but when he didn’t reach out to me after my letter, I couldn’t help but wonder if a woman was the reason why. And I couldn’t help but feel a little hurt by his silence. Still, I don’t want to cause Drew any more pain than I already have.

“Seriously, Sebastian. Do you realize the baby is due a week before Drew and I were supposed to get married? That’s going to be a hard enough pill to swallow, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” he says, swallowing one of his own.

“What did he just say?” I ask Sebastian, after one of the reporters says something about Sam taking another break before his next match.

Bas shakes his head, but Miles chimes in again. “Champions don’t take breaks. As soon as that eye heals, he’ll be training for his next match.”

I roll my eyes and exhale a worried breath. “Two more matches. And then this contract is up, the baby will be born, and Sam will have to take another break. I don’t care what Miles says.”

“Don’t worry about Miles, Lucy,” Joe says, joining us in the dressing room. “Sam will do what’s right for his family. There’s nothing more important to him than you and the baby.”

I sit up and nod.

“He asked me to take you home. He’s going to be at least another hour. You ready?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for the rest of the interview?”

Joe gives me a knowing glance. “I just want to be his coach. I’m not interested in his PR. I leave that up to Miles.”

I smile and yawn. “I am pretty tired.”

Sebastian looks at his watch. “I should get going too. It’s almost midnight.”

“Wouldn’t want you to turn into a pumpkin,” I tease.

“It’s a good thing the match was in Atlanta. I’ll be home before the clock strikes twelve.”

I laugh and give him a kiss on the cheek. “Drive safe, okay? Call me when you’re home.”

“Will do.”

“Give Paul my love. Tell him I hope he feels better.”

\* \* \*

I yawn and slouch against the passenger door in Joe's car as he pulls out of the arena parking lot.

"How ya doing?" he asks me.

"Just tired."

"That's not what I mean." He glances over at me. "How are you, Luc? How are you handling everything?"

"Great," I say, giving him a small smile.

He laughs softly. "I've known you for over half your life. Now you're going to lie to me?"

I pull my eyebrows together and look at him. "I'm not lying."

"I've seen that look before. Not since you were a kid, but you're scared. I just can't figure out if it's because of the baby or Sam."

I nod slowly and admit, "At the moment, Sam."

He exhales a heavy breath. "Yeah, I'm worried about him too. I don't like what I saw tonight. I don't like what I've seen the last few fights."

"You have to talk to him, Joe. I can't be the only one. I've tried that before, but...I can't be the wedge between Sam and his career. Even if he won't admit it, he'll resent me. I know it."

He looks over at me and smirks. "So you want me to be the one he resents?"

"Of course not. It's just...he thinks of you like a father. He'll listen to you. He's always listened to you."

He stares at the road in front of us. "I watched that kid grow into a man. And then become a champion. I can't imagine a father more proud of his son than I am of Sam." He shakes his head and smiles softly. "Now he's going to have a kid of his own." He glances over at me. "He has a family to support now. It's not just about the fight anymore, Lucy."

I put my hand on my stomach. "What good is money going to do us if he's punch-drunk?"

“I won’t let that happen.” He looks over at me again. “You have my word.”

I bob my head and watch the headlights of the car behind us grow closer in the side mirror. “Who is that?” I ask, looking back out of the rear window of his SUV. “I can barely see their headlights, they’re so close.”

We stop at a red light and another car pulls up beside us. The driver gets out with a camera.

“Joe.”

“Damn paparazzi. That’s who you should be afraid of.”

I grip my phone and shrink in my seat, trying to ignore the man outside my tinted window.

When the light turns green Joe floors it. “I can lose them.”

“Joe, you don’t have to. Jimmy won’t let them inside the parking garage,” I say, tightening my seatbelt down around my hips.

“You really want them to know where you live?”

“No.”

“We’ll go around the next block a couple of times. There’s a one-way street I think I can lose them on.”

“Just please be careful,” I say, gripping the door handle.

Joe turns left at the next block and speeds down the street between rows of parked cars. I call Sam, but like I expected, he doesn’t answer. He’s still talking to the press.

*Hey, this is Sam. Leave a message.*

“Hey, call me when you’re done. There’s stupid paparazzi following us home. Joe’s trying to lose them, but at this rate, you’ll get there before we do. I just wanted you to know. Love you, bye.”

Joe takes a sharp right that shoves me into my door. “Joe!”

“I think I lost them,” he says, glancing in his rearview mirror as we near the end of a narrow tree-lined street that’s lit by a glowing green traffic light. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. But I’ve never seen you drive like this.” I laugh nervously.

“Yeah, well, I’m not usually being tailed.” He keeps his foot on the gas. “I can make the light.”

I look over at him and nod, but as we approach the intersection, I’m blinded by headlights that are glaring through his window. I barely have time to squeeze my eyes shut and wrap my arms around my stomach before I’m pulled by a force unlike anything I’ve felt before. It shatters the windows and bends the steel in a crescendo of screeches and cracks that resonate through my elastic bones, which no longer feel a part of me, until—just as suddenly as it began—everything falls silent and still.

There’s no noise. No motion. Just the putrid smell of burning rubber and the blinding pain that’s radiating down my leg and wrapping around my torso.

I cry out, but when I breathe in, my lungs fight against me and my chest screams like it’s on fire. I lift my heavy head and see the glowing blue lights of the dashboard flickering on and off through the powdery smoke that fills my nose and blurs my vision. “Joe,” I whisper, without enough air in my lungs to speak any louder. But there’s only silence.

Something buzzes on the dashboard, lighting the cracks that stretch across the windshield, and I see Sebastian’s face reflected in the broken glass.

I lift my arm over the deflated airbag and reach for my phone, but my seatbelt is pinning me to the seat. I try to unbuckle it, but it’s locked in place. I stretch my arm out as far as my seatbelt will allow, and scream with frustration when I can’t reach it.

I fall back against the seat and close my eyes and tears leak onto my cheeks. “Joe?” I croak, but he doesn’t answer. I look over and see his head hanging. I lift my arm again and reach for his shoulder. “Joe,” I cry, shaking him gently, and he groans. “Joe,” I say, relieved, and cry softly. “You’re okay. We’re going to be okay.” I pull my hand back and put it on my tight stomach. “We’re okay,” I whisper, trying to move my

seatbelt down, but it's squeezing me so tight. I wiggle my hips a little, but the pain is excruciating. "Ahh," I cry, and it takes my breath away.

"Stay...still..." Joe mumbles, and I cry harder.

My phone buzzes again and I see Sam's face reflected in the cracked windshield. "Sam," I cry, desperately trying to reach my phone, but the pain is excruciating.

"Tell him...I love him," Joe says, and the tears run in rivers down my cheeks.

"Don't say that. You're fine."

"I love you...too."

"You're fine!" I shout at him.

"Tell...Tristan."

"Joe, no...just talk to me. Just keep talking to me." I hear sirens echoing down the street. "Do you hear that? Help's coming. You're going to be fine. Joe, do you hear me? Joe?" My head pounds and my heart feels like it's going to beat through my chest. I inhale a shallow breath, but it does little to ease the dizziness inside my head. I close my eyes, but I can't fight against it.

\* \* \*

### *Lucy, Sixteen Years Old*

"Do you really have to practice on your birthday?" I ask Sam, following him into the gym.

"I have a match next week, Luc. I have to be prepared. And it's training, not practice," he says, narrowing his eyes.

"Is there a difference?"

"You practice to win a game. You train to be a warrior." He winks and throws his gym bag over his shoulder.

"Okay, Maximus." I purse my lips together over a smile as we head to Joe's office in the back.

"Where is everybody?" Sam asks, looking around the empty gym, which is usually buzzing with energy and

dripping with testosterone.

“I don’t know,” I say coyly, spotting Joe and Tristan over his shoulder.

“Happy birthday,” they shout in unison, charging toward him.

I squeal and jump out of the way as they tackle him to the floor.

Joe gets to his feet and reaches for Sam’s hand. “Come on, we’re going out for pizza.”

“Pizza? What about training?”

Tristan wraps his arm around Sam’s shoulder and pats him on the chest. “You want me to kick your ass around the ring, or you want to go get some pizza?”

Sam laughs and drops his chin. “Pizza. Definitely pizza.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Come on. It’s my treat,” Joe says, grabbing his keys off his desk.

Sam looks at me and I turn my palms up and shrug innocently. “I may have mentioned that it was your birthday.”

He smiles and wraps his arm around my neck, and we follow Joe and Tristan outside.

“You’re closing up early?” Sam asks Joe, who’s locking up behind us.

“Yeah, it’s a special occasion.”

“You don’t have to,” Sam says, shaking his head.

“I know I don’t. But I want to.”

Sam smiles and takes my hand, and we follow Joe to his car.

“Everybody buckled?”

“I am,” I say, giving Sam a disapproving look.

He reaches for his seatbelt. “All right, all right.”



“You should always wear your seatbelt.” I reach for his hand. “It could save your life one day.”

“Who needs a seatbelt with Joe behind the wheel?” He smirks and Tristan laughs.

“Oh, you guys think it’s funny to drive safe?” Joe asks them.

“Well there’s driving safe and then there’s just plain driving. Are you sure your foot’s even on the gas?” Tristan teases, and I can’t help the smile that turns the corners of my mouth up.

“You see all these nut jobs?” Joe asks, pointing to another car rolling up to a stop sign across the street.

“The old lady who can barely see over the wheel?” Sam asks, shaking his head.

“Yeah, well that old lady might just roll right through the stop sign.”

Sam and Tristan give each other an amused look and then laugh in unison.

“It’s called defensive driving,” Joe says, shaking his head. “If you’re lucky, I’ll teach you two knuckleheads when you get your own licenses.”

“Which at their rate will be never,” I say, looking at Sam with wide eyes.

“What’s the point?” he asks, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s not like I’m going to get a car anytime soon.”

“Kid, you’re going to have a car someday, trust me,” Joe says, looking at him in the rearview mirror.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

I give Sam a small smile and squeeze his hand.

“If I ever get a car, I’m going to drive right out of this shithole and never come back,” Tristan says, gazing out of his window at the rundown buildings that line the street. You

wouldn't know they're open for business with their torn-up signs and covered windows.

"Never say never," Joe says to Tris, watching the road in front of him.

"You know, I never understood why you came back here," Tris says to him. "I mean, you can't really care that much about helping kids. Did you lose all your boxing money in a bet or something?"

Joe smiles and shakes his head. "I wouldn't expect you guys to understand. Not for a few more years anyway."

"I've been told I'm mature for my age," Sam chimes in, and Joe smirks.

"My father raised me just a few blocks from here," he explains.

"You're father?" Sam gives him a confused look. "I thought you were raised in the system, like us."

"I was. But not until I was older, maybe sixteen."

"My age," I say, intrigued.

"What happened, did he run out on you or something? Did he go to jail?" Tris asks, but Sam and I both listen quietly from the back seat.

"No, nothing like that. He was a good man. Firm with his words and quick to set me straight when I mouthed off. He taught me to be a man. Taught me to believe in myself, and to believe in something better, something more than this," he says, glancing at the neglected houses outside. "He used to tell me about what it was like when he was growing up here. Not like it is now. It was a lot different back then."

"No drug dealers back in his day, huh?" Tristan says.

"Maybe not standing on the street corners hawking to kids, but there have always been drugs of some sort, as far back as history tells. It's the people who were different. They cared about their community and education for their kids. Houses were kept up and business was booming."

“Come on?” Tris says, dropping his head to the side.

“No, really. Brighton Park used to be one of the most popular neighborhoods in Atlanta back in the fifties.”

“No kidding,” I say, fascinated.

“So when did it all go to hell?” Tristan asks.

“Not until the eighties. But before that, it was a different place, far from what it is now. It was safe for kids, and the streets were clean.”

“I bet the men wore suits and the ladies wore hats and dresses, just like in those old black-and-white TV shows,” I say, smiling.

“Yeah, like that one Maxine always used to watch,” Sam says, pulling his eyebrows together. “*Leave It to Squirrels*...or something like that.”

“You mean *Leave It to Beaver*?” Joe laughs. “Yeah, my dad loved that show.”

“You think that’s what it was really like?” I ask, captivated by the thought.

“Maybe something like that.” He smiles at me in the rearview mirror.

I look out of my window and imagine families walking up and down the sidewalk. The mothers are lovely in their white gloves and knee-length dresses and the fathers tip their hats and shake one another’s hands. Little boys and girls chase each other around their parents’ feet, while their mothers tell them not to ruin their new clothes in the freshly cut grass.

“I wish I was born in the fifties,” I say quietly to myself, and Sam reaches for my hand.

“Where does that leave me?” he asks softly.

I smile at him. “I think you’d look pretty cute in a white T-shirt and a leather jacket.”

He laughs quietly and shakes his head.

“So what happened to your dad?” Tristan asks.

“He got cancer. Died just a few years after my mother passed.”

“Joe, I’m so sorry,” I say, glancing up at him in the rearview mirror. “That’s terrible.”

“Ahh, I was one of the lucky ones,” he says, winding the steering wheel and turning into the Pizzeria parking lot. “My parents didn’t choose to leave me.” He parks in the shade of the pointed red roof and looks at us over his shoulder. “There are still good people left in Brighton Park. People like my father. That’s why I came back here.”

Sam reaches for Joe’s shoulder. “You’re one of those people, Joe. You’re one of the good ones.”

Joe smiles. “Come on, knuckleheads, let’s go eat.”

\* \* \*

“Lucy, can you hear me?”

I blink at the glaring light in my eye and try to move my tongue, but my head feels like it’s underwater, caught in a strong current.

“Her pupils aren’t dilated, but her BP’s climbing.”

“We’ve got to get her into surgery.”

The dull pain radiating down my leg suddenly stabs all over my body and I let out a scream that brings my back off the bed.

The man and woman hovering over me press their hands to my shoulders and hold me down. “Lucy, Lucy...look at me,” the woman says. “I need you to be still. Okay? I know it hurts, but we’re going to help you.”

I feel a sharp stick in my arm.

“We’re going to give you some medicine that will let you sleep for a little while, so you don’t feel it anymore.”

“No. No.” I turn my head from side to side, searching for Sam. “I want Sam. Where’s Sam?” I struggle against the fading pain and let out a weak cry. “Sam.”

## Chapter 33

*Sam*

“You ready?” Miles asks me, and I lean back in my chair, exhausted from listening to the reporters’ questions.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

“Okay, that’s it for tonight, guys,” Miles says into the microphone, getting up from his chair.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and see a missed call from Lucy. “Hold on,” I say to Miles. “Lucy left a message.” I hold my phone to my ear and listen to it.

*Hey, call me when you’re done. There’s stupid paparazzi following us home. Joe’s trying to lose them, but at this rate, you’ll get there before we do. I just wanted you to know. Love you, bye.*

“Dammit.”

Miles gives me a curious look, but I ignore him and call Lucy.

Her phone just rings and rings. “Come on, Luc, answer the phone,” I say through my teeth, trying to keep my worry under control.

“Sam, what’s the matter?” Miles asks.

I shake my head and call Joe, but his phone goes straight to voicemail.

“Sam! Sam!” Leon shouts from the back of the room, holding his phone to his ear. He waves me over, ignoring the alarmed reporters who are staring at him with the same concerned look on their faces as I have on mine.

Miles pulls his phone out of his pocket and answers a call. “Yeah?...What?” He turns sheet white, and my heart spikes with a sudden burst of adrenaline. “Where are they?”

“What is it, Miles?”

He doesn’t answer me.

“Tell me what the fuck is going on,” I say, but he keeps his phone to his ear.

I run to the back of the room, shoving reporters out of the way to get to Leon. “What happened?”

He gives me a look that punches me in the gut. “It’s Lucy and Joe. They were in an accident.”

“What?”

Miles shoves his way through the reporters surrounding us. “Come on, we gotta go. Come on!” he shouts, pushing the reporters back.

I run next to Miles and Leon, feeling my heart pound painfully against my ribs. “What happened?” I shout at Miles as we hurry to the SUV outside the arena.

“I don’t know. But they’re at the hospital. That’s where we need to go,” he says to Leon, who climbs into the driver’s seat.

“Which one?” Leon asks.

“Emory.”

I get in the passenger seat and close the door, ignoring the reporters shouting questions outside. I pull my phone out as Leon tears away from the arena parking lot and I call Sebastian, who answers quickly.

“Hey, Sam. Is everything okay? I’ve been trying to call Lucy, but she’s not answering her phone.”

“You haven’t talked to her?”

“No. Not since Joe took her home.”

“Fuck,” I whisper into the phone.

“Sam, what’s going on?”

“They were in an accident. Lucy and Joe were in accident.”

“An accident? Oh, my God. Are they okay?”

“I don’t know, we’re headed to Emory hospital right now.”

“The hospital? Oh, God, the ba—”

“Sebastian, please...I can't think about anything besides Lucy right now or I'll fucking fall apart, so please don't say that. Okay? Just...don't say it.”

“Okay, yeah. Okay,” he says with a trembling voice. “I'm leaving. I'm leaving right now. I'll be right there.”

I hang up and look at Miles in the back seat, who's been on his phone since we left the arena.

“Let us out at the emergency room entrance,” he says to Leon, and hangs up his phone. “They were T-boned, Sam. The other driver ran a red light. They were both going too fast. It's not good,” he says dismally.

“No. Don't you do that. Don't you fucking look at me like that. They're fine!” I shout at him. “They're going to be fine.”

“Sam—”

“You don't know shit! Okay? You don't know anything. So get that fucking look off your face.”

“You're right Sam, you're right. Let's just get inside and talk to someone who can tell us what's going on.”

I turn back around and close my eyes, but it does little to calm me down. The fresh cut above my eye throbs as my blood pulses through my veins and my heart aches inside my chest, which tightens around it with every tortured breath. My mind moves from thoughts of Lucy to thoughts of Joe to thoughts of my unborn baby, and I feel each one of them slipping out of my grip.

*I'll never leave you, Sam. I'm yours. Forever...We're yours.*

I feel the oxygen leaving my body, but I fight hard against it. *She's okay...she's okay*, I repeat over and over in my head, like a mantra.

Leon pulls up in front of the emergency room, and Miles and I jump out.

“Ignore them, Sam,” Miles shouts as we make our way through a small sea of reporters who have already gathered

outside the hospital. “Ignore them!” he shouts again, and it takes everything in me not to knock them out of the way.

When we get inside, I run over to the nurse behind the counter, who promptly stands up.

“Where is she?”

“Where is who?” She looks me up and down.

“Lucy Bennett,” I say desperately. “Where is she?”

She puts a fisted hand on her hip and eyes the stitches over my eyebrow. “And you are?”

Miles steps in front of me. “I apologize. He’s just upset. He’s Sam Cole.” He waits for her to react, but she just stares at him with the same unenthused look she gave me. “He’s a boxer. He had a big match tonight over at the Philips arena... that’s why he looks a little beat up. And it’s the reason for all the reporters outside,” he says, glancing over his shoulder. “Lucy Bennett is his fiancée and Joe Maloney is his coach. They were in a car accident on their way home from the match. We just need to talk to somebody to make sure they’re okay.” He glances up at me, giving me a reassuring look.

She pushes her lips together and reaches for a clipboard hanging on the wall. “I’ll need some identification.”

I grab my wallet out of my pocket and hand her my driver’s license.

“Yours too,” she says to Miles, who holds up his finger.

He answers his phone and speaks quietly to someone on the other end of the line briefly, before hanging up. “You might want to get that,” he says to her, dropping his phone back in his jacket pocket.

She gives him a funny look, but then the phone on her desk rings and he gestures for her to answer it. She picks up the receiver and speaks quietly into it. “Yes...Okay...Okay, thank you.” She hangs up the phone and looks at us. “If you’ll wait here, someone will be down to escort you to the surgical waiting area in just a moment.”

“Surgery? Who’s in surgery?” I ask, panicked.



“I’m sorry, I don’t have those details.” She hands me back my driver’s license and sits down behind her desk.

“Mr. Cole, Mr. Angelo.” I look up and see a suited man walking over to us with his hand extended. “I’m Jason Hernandez, the hospital president.”

I reach out and shake his hand. “Sam Cole.”

“I’m a big fan, Sam. I’m so sorry to hear about what happened tonight, but I want to assure you, your loved ones are in good hands.”

“Where are they? Are they okay?”

“I only just arrived. I haven’t spoken to the physicians yet. But why don’t we head upstairs so you can speak to the teams taking care of Joe and Lucy. They’ll be able to tell you much more than I can.”

“Sam!” Sebastian calls across the waiting area. He runs over to us with Paul on his heels and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Is she okay?”

“We’re about to go find out. Why don’t you come with us.”

He inhales a shaky breath and wipes his red-rimmed eyes. “Okay.”

\* \* \*

“Lucy’s in surgery. She has a fractured hip and a few other scrapes and bruises, but she’s going to be okay.”

I drop my head and grab Miles’s shoulder, and he wraps his arm around me. “She’s okay,” he says, pulling his hand to his eyes.

“What about the baby?” Sebastian asks, choking back tears, and I steel myself for the answer.

I close my eyes and recall the moment Lucy told me she was pregnant—the joy I felt, the joy I saw in her eyes, and the promise of a family we never had. *I have to be the one to tell her.* I’m going to have to look in her pale blue eyes and shatter

her heart into a million pieces. I feel mine begin to splinter and break apart in my chest.

“She’s fine,” the nurse says, and the air rushes out of my lungs. “We’re keeping a close eye on her.”

“She?” I ask over the quiet cries I hear coming from Sebastian, and suddenly, without warning, I’m hit by a wall of emotion that slams into me like a tsunami, taking me to my knees.

“Mr. Cole, are you okay?” the nurse asks, reaching for my arm.

I get one foot under me, drop my elbow to my knee, and cry into my hand.

“I’m so sorry, I thought you knew.”

I look up at Miles, who’s grinning at me. “I’m having a girl,” I say to him, and he pulls me to my feet.

“Yeah, you are.” He pulls me into a strong hug.

I look at Sebastian, whose face is partially hidden as he leans into Paul. “She’s going to be so happy.”

“Mr. Cole,” she says, watching us.

I give her a small, grateful smile. “Just Sam.”

“Sam. I need to talk to you about Joe.” The look on her face pushes aside my gratitude. “His injuries are far worse than Lucy’s.”

“How much worse?”

“He took the brunt of the impact from the other car. He has internal injuries, and there was quite a bit of bleeding, but they’re working hard to repair the damage.”

“They can fix him, right?”

“They’re doing everything they can. I just...want you to be prepared.”

“Prepared?”

“Injuries like his are not always repairable.”

“Wait, what are you saying? You’re saying he’s not going to make it?”

“I’m saying there’s a chance he might not make it out of surgery. So if there’s anyone you want to call, you should do that now.”

I pull my hand to my pounding head and look at the floor, feeling the room spin around me. “Go tell Tristan,” I say to Miles. “He needs to know.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Sam?”

I look up at Miles. “I don’t really know, but Tristan deserves to know.” I take a deep breath. “Is there a bathroom?” I ask the nurse, who nods and points across the hall.

I shut the bathroom door behind me and drop my head back against it. But I can’t stop the sick feeling racing through me, so I hang over the toilet and give in to it.

I splash some water on my face and look in the mirror.

Joe’s dying and Lucy’s in surgery. *How the fuck did this happen?*

\* \* \*

“Sam, Lucy’s out of surgery,” Sebastian says, rounding the corner of the snack room, where I’m getting my third cup of coffee. “The doctor wants to talk to you.”

I leave the cup and rush back into the waiting area, where I’m greeted by a doctor in green scrubs.

“Mr. Cole?”

“Yes.”

“Lucy’s out of surgery and she’s doing great. She’s still a little groggy, but she’s awake and she’s asking for you.” He smiles contently.

I exhale a relieved breath. “Is she okay?”

“She has two shiny new screws in her hip and she’ll need to stay off her feet for a while, but otherwise, yes. She’s doing fine.”

“Can I see her now?”

“Yes, come with me.”

I put my hand on Sebastian’s shoulder and give it a squeeze. “I’ll tell her you’re here.”

“Okay. I’ll just be in the waiting room with Paul,” he says, and I give him an appreciative nod.

“Right this way, Mr. Cole.”

“You can call me Sam.”

“Okay, Sam. Just around this corner.”

I follow him into the room and see Lucy lying in a hospital bed connected to an IV and several monitors. One must be a fetal monitor, because I can hear the rapid swooshing of the baby’s heartbeat, just like at our checkups.

She gives me a weak smile when she sees me and inhales a shallow breath. “Hi.”

I drop my head and fight hard against the tears that rush to my eyes, but when I sit on the edge of the bed and reach for her small hand, I fall apart. I lean over her, hugging her through the sheets and blankets draped over her.

“Careful,” she croaks, and I sit up.

I stare into her pale blue eyes, unable to ignore the scrapes on her cheek and neck. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

“I’m okay,” she says quietly.

I reach for her hand again, unsure if I’ll ever be able to let go. “I thought—I didn’t know if—”

“I know,” she says, squeezing my hand weakly.

“What would I do if something happened to you?”

“I’m okay,” she whispers, and smiles softly.

“Are you in a lot of pain?” I ask, scanning her.

“A little. The medicine’s helping.”

“Is it okay for the baby?”

She smiles and nods. “You hear that?” She looks over at one of the monitors.

“She’s got a strong heart. Just like her mom,” I say, squeezing her hand.

She gazes at me with a puzzled look on her face. “She?”

I smile softly and pull her hand to my mouth. “It’s a girl.”

“What?” She smiles and a tear falls from the corner of her eye.

“I wanted to be the one to tell you,” I say, brushing her hair off her face.

“Sebastian will be so happy.”

“He is.”

“Sebastian’s here?”

“Yeah, he’s in the waiting room with Paul. Miles is here too. But he’s updating Tristan right now.”

Her smile disappears and worry falls over her face. “About what?”

I close my eyes and shake my head, unsure what to tell her.

“It’s Joe, isn’t it?” she whispers, and tears fill her eyes.

I swallow the hard lump in my throat. “It’s not good. He has internal injuries. They don’t know if he’s going to make it out of surgery.” I choke on a sob that fights its way out.

“What?” She starts to cry and her heart rate goes up on one of the monitors.

I drop my face to hers. “Shhh...shhh...” I hold her face in my hand and whisper, “It’s going to be okay, Lamb. He’ll be okay.”

\* \* \*

“Sam,” Miles whispers, shaking my shoulder.

I look up at him from the chair I fell asleep in next to Lucy’s bed. “What is it?” I whisper, trying not to wake her.

“You gotta come with me.” He waves me out of the room after him. “Come on.”

I get up and follow him out into the hall.

“Sam, I’m Dr. Bernard,” a doctor I haven’t met says, greeting me outside Lucy’s room.

Miles stands next to him with his arms folded, looking down at the floor.

“Hi,” I say tentatively.

“I was Joe’s surgeon tonight.”

“Oh.” My eyes and ears perk up. “Is he okay? How is he?”

Miles looks at me with red-rimmed eyes and I try to convince myself that it’s because it’s so late.

“Sam, some colleagues of mine were hoping to speak to you about Joe’s condition. Do you mind coming with me?” he asks, gesturing down the hall.

“Yeah, okay.”

He leads us down the hall into a small windowless room, where I’m greeted by a team of doctors who promptly get up from the table they’re seated around.

“What’s going on?” I ask, eyeing Joe’s doctor.

“Sam, I’m so sorry to tell you this, but...Joe didn’t make it.”

My heart pounds inside my chest and the blood pulses behind the cut over my eye. I blink at him for several seconds, vaguely aware of Miles’s hand on my shoulder.

“He asked that his heart go to Tristan Kelley,” one of the other doctors says, and I look up at him, confused. “He’s being prepped for surgery now.”

“Joe’s dead?” I ask, working hard for each breath.

“I’m so sorry, Sam,” Miles says, but he might as well be in another room.

“Where’s Tristan?”

“He’s being prepped for surgery,” the doctor says again.

“Tris is gonna get Joe’s heart,” Miles says, unable to hide the emotion in his gravelly voice.

“Joe found out that he was a match a few years ago,” one of the doctors says. “He designated himself as a donor for Tristan. It’s in his medical records.”

“He did that?”

The doctor gives me a small smile and nods.

“No.” I shake my head. “Joe’s fifty-five.”

“Well he must have taken good care of himself, because he had the heart of a young man,” another doctor chimes in.

“He ran six miles nearly every day.” I close my eyes and say quietly, “He was running for Tristan.”

“Tristan’s very lucky.”

“Lucky? The closest person he’s ever had to a father just died. You call that lucky?”

“I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Upset? Why would I be upset? Joe had to die for Tristan to live. That’s fair, right?”

“Sam, come on, let’s take a walk.” Miles says, reaching for my shoulder.

“I don’t want to take a fucking walk, Miles.” I blink back tears. “I want to see Tristan. Where is he?”

“I’m sorry, that’s not possible. You’ll have to wait until he’s in recovery,” one of the doctors says. “We have to act swiftly in these situations. Time is of the essence.”

I sniff and nod. “How long is the surgery?”

“Around four hours. Then he’ll be moved to the ICU, where he’ll stay for several days.”

“He’s not out of the woods yet, Sam,” Joe’s doctor says. “He’s going to need all the friends he’s got.”

Miles pats me on the back. “Why don’t you go be with Lucy. I’ll let you know when he’s out of surgery.”

I look at Miles, whose face is worn and weary from the night. “Yeah, okay.”

He gives me a small smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Thanks, Miles.”

“Anytime, champ.”



## Chapter 34

*Lucy, Three Weeks Later*

I wake in the dark to Sam sitting down on the bed and jostling me a little, which causes my hip to throb. I groan, and Sam stands up.

“You okay?” he asks, walking around to my side of the bed.

I look up at his silhouette in the dark and I’m reminded of nights when he would come into my room to comfort me when we were living in foster care together. “Yeah, I’m okay.” I look at the alarm clock on the night stand. It’s two a.m. “What are you doing?” I ask, seeing him a little more clearly in the dim light that’s coming from the bathroom. He’s wearing workout clothes and his shirt is soaked with sweat.

“I was just in the gym.”

“Sam, it’s the middle of the night.”

“I know.”

I slowly sit up, grimacing at the dull pain that shoots down my leg when I move.

“Careful,” he says, putting his hands on my back to help me. “Lucy, you should go back to sleep.”

“No.” I shake my head, which has been filled with worry since the accident. “Not until you tell me why you were working out in the middle of the night.”

“I wasn’t working out. I was just hitting the speed bag.”

“Okay, well...why were you hitting the speed bag in the middle of the night?” I ask carefully, because I already know the answer.

“Lucy, come on, do we have to do this right now?”

“Joe?” I push, because he’s barely spoken his name since the funeral.

His jaw clenches tight, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Sam.” I ignore the little voice in my head telling me to leave it alone and say, “I think you should talk to somebody.”

“What, like a shrink?”

“A therapist, yes. Someone who deals in loss and grief. It’s not healthy for you to keep it all pent up inside.”

“I’m not keeping it pent up,” he says, pulling his sweaty shirt off and throwing it in the hamper.

“Taking your emotions out on a punching bag is not the same thing as talking about it with someone.”

“Lucy, I’m not going to talk to a stranger about Joe,” he says firmly, “so stop pushing me on it, okay?”

I press my lips together and bob my head. “Well, then... maybe you could just talk about it with me?”

He sits down on the bed at my feet, drops his elbows to his knees, and pulls his hands to his chin. “I don’t want to talk about it, Lucy. Not with anybody,” he says, looking at me.

I blink back tears and swallow down the hurt. “Well, maybe you don’t, but I do.”

He drops his hands between his knees and huffs. “What do you want to talk about? Huh? That I lost the closest person I had to a father? That Joe died because of the fucking paparazzi? Or that the only reason the paparazzi was even there is because of me?”

I shake my head and swallow the hard lump in my throat. “Sam? You think this was *your* fault somehow?”

He stares at me, but he doesn’t say anything.

“What happened to Joe is not your fault, Sam.”

He wipes his watery eyes and says, “Lucy, if it wasn’t for me, none of this would have happened. Joe would still be here and you”—he drops his head to his hand and rubs his tortured face—“you wouldn’t be lying in this bed with a metal pin in your hip.”

I want to comfort him, but I can’t reach him where he’s sitting. “Sam, come here.”

He stares at me with a face of stone, and I see how hard he's working to fight back the tears.

"Please," I say, barely containing my own emotions, "come here." I pat the edge of the bed beside me.

After a few seconds, he gets up and kneels on the floor beside the bed, reaching for my hands, which I quickly wrap around his. He pulls them to his mouth and says, "I'm sorry." He looks up at me and a tear rolls down his cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"Sam." My heart squeezes inside my chest. "You don't have anything to be sorry for. You didn't do anything. This isn't your fault. What happened to Joe. To me. It was just an accident."

He's quiet for a few long seconds.

"It is not your fault, okay?" I say again, praying he believes it.

He lifts his head and looks at me. "I miss him, Lucy."

"I know you do. I miss him too."

"He was a good man. He should still be here."

"He was." I nod. "And he'll always be with us. In our hearts. And with Tristan. He's a part of him now. He's still with us, Sam."

He drops his forehead to my hand, and I run my fingers through his wavy hair. "It's going to be okay."

He puts his hand on my stomach and looks up at me. "I don't know how I would live if something happened to you too."

"We're okay," I whisper over the ache in my heart that won't go away. I close my eyes and exhale a quiet breath. "We're okay."

He sniffs and stands up, but I hold on to his hand.

"Sam, I know you don't want to talk to a professional, and that's okay, just promise you'll talk to me," I plead, afraid that he's going to drift further and further away from me if he

doesn't. I fend off the fear of that thought and say, "I want you to tell me when you feel sad. Or angry. Or happy." I smile softly over a sob that's trying to get out. "Because you're all I have in the *entire world*," I say through clenched teeth to keep the sob inside.

He stares at me with his stone face and whispers, "I know."

"I need you right now, Sam. *We* need you. Okay?"

"Okay."

\* \* \*

### *One Week Later*

"Are you comfortable?" Sam asks, leaning over my wheelchair.

"Yes. But is this really necessary? I think I can stand long enough to take the elevator a few floors down to Molly's apartment."

"Better to be safe than sorry," he says, guiding me into the foyer. "I'm just glad Tristan decided to recover at her place. His apartment is all the way across town."

"I'm just glad he has Molly to take care of him."

"Me too. I don't know how I would have taken care of both of you." He laughs softly, but the thought makes me sad. Sam is Tristan's only family now. That's something that we have in common.

We take the elevator down to the sixteenth floor, and Sam pushes me down the hallway to Molly's apartment.

Sam knocks on the door and she answers it quickly. "Hey," she says with a bright smile.

"Hey, Molls," Sam says, pushing me inside her apartment.

"Hi, Molly." I smile at her.

"Lucy. Oh, my gosh." She leans down to give me a hug. "How are you feeling?"

“I’m actually much better. I really don’t need this wheelchair anymore,” I say, glancing over my shoulder at Sam. “Can I get up now?” I ask him.

He locks the wheels in place and helps me stand up, and I ignore the dull ache in my hip.

“Well, look at you,” Tristan says, greeting me with open arms and a big, beautiful smile. He looks better than I expected, just a little thinner than usual.

“Tristan.” I smile at him, but as soon as he wraps his arms around me, the weight of the last month comes crashing down, knocking my emotional floodgate open. I feel Sam’s hand on my back, but he doesn’t say anything. Neither does Molly. They just wait while I get it out.

Tristan releases me and puts his hands on my arms. “Hey, it’s okay, Luc.” He inhales a deep breath and blows it out slowly. “We’re all okay.” He rubs my arms and hugs me again.

I nod and wipe the tears from my face. “I’m sorry, it’s just...”

“A lot.” He smiles softly. “I know.”

I press my lips together and nod. “Yeah.”

“Come on,” Sam says, taking my hand. “Let’s go sit down.”

“Yes, please”—Tristan puts his hand on his chest—“before I pass out.” He laughs and it lightens the mood a little.

We follow him and Molly into the living room and sit down on the couch.

“Molly, I love your apartment,” I say, glancing around the open space that’s splashed with bold pops of color, black and white pillows and curtains, and white walls that are adorned with vintage artwork.

“Thanks. It’s a work in progress.” She shrugs and says unapologetically, “I redecorate a lot.”

“She means, she gets bored easily,” Tristan teases, and she rolls her eyes playfully.

“Well, you definitely have an artistic eye.” I smile at her.

“Thank you,” she says, then she lightly shoves Tristan’s shoulder.

“Hey. Injured over here,” he says to her, and she pushes her lips into a small pout.

She drops her head and kisses his shoulder. “Sorry, pumpkin.”

“Oh, my God,” Sam says, getting up from the couch. “You guys are going to make me sick.”

Tristan gives him a wide grin that matches Molly’s, and it makes me giggle.

“Got anything to drink in the kitchen, Molly?”

She squints her eyes and shrugs. “Bottled water.”

“Water’s fine.” He looks at me. “Want a water, Luc?”

“No, I’m okay. Thanks, pumpkin,” I say before he leaves the room.

He spins around and says seriously, “No.” He smiles at me and his dimples go straight to my heart—dimples I haven’t seen for far too long. “Do not call me that.” He laughs freely and it makes my heart swell.

I smile at him as he leaves the room. *Maybe he’s starting to feel better.*

“Lucy, how’s the baby?” Molly asks.

“Good. She’s about the size of a banana now.” I shake my head at the comparison. “That’s what all the websites say anyway.”

“I just can’t wait to meet her,” she says sweetly. “You know we’ll babysit anytime.” She looks at Tristan, and he shakes his head at her.

I put my hand on my small bump and laugh. “How are *you* feeling, Tris?” I ask, surprised that he’s already up and around.

“I feel pretty good, actually. Tired, but that should go away soon. Molly’s been taking good care of me.” He winks at her.

“I’m tired too, but because of the baby, I think. And from lying around doing nothing all day,” I grumble at Sam, who returns with a bottle of water.

He sits down beside me and says, “That’s literally the definition of bed rest.”

“I just can’t wait to get back to work and use my brain before I lose all my creativity.”

“Not possible,” Molly says. “I’ve seen your work.”

“Thanks. I hope you’re right. I’ve got a dwindling portfolio that’s waiting to be filled with new artwork and several exhibits that I need to get ready for.”

“Molly’s right,” Sam says, squeezing my hand. “You’ll see, as soon as you get back at it.”

“Lucy, Sam told me you’re looking for a new studio,” she says curiously.

“Oh, um, yes, I am.” I glance over at him. *What else has he told her?*

“Any luck so far?”

“No, not yet. Everything’s sort of been on hold since the accident. And I’m going to have to sell a few more paintings before I can make an offer on something.”

“Well, I know you’ve turned me down before”—she winks—“but I might be able to help you make a little extra money.” There’s a glint of excitement in her eyes, and I smile over my hesitation.

“Really? How?”

“Okay, don’t tell anyone, because this isn’t public information yet, but I just landed an account with Rock Love Threads.”

“The clothing brand?”

“The clothing *mecca* for ages eighteen to twenty-eight. They have stores in every mall in every major city in the country. And a few others.”

“Molly, that’s fantastic.”

“What’s fantastic is that they want me to do an entire graphic T-shirt line for them. If you jump on board and provide the drawings, or even digital copies of some of your paintings, we can put your artwork on T-shirts in stores across the nation.”

“Wow. That would be pretty incredible.”

“And the best part is, you can do it from your apartment.”

“It might help pass the time until you’re back on your feet,” Sam says encouragingly.

“Lucy, do it,” Tristan says. “Maybe then, Molly will stop talking about it.”

She fights a smile and gives him a knowing look.

“Seriously,” he adds, “you’re crazy talented. With Molly in your corner, your career could really blow up.”

I press my lips together over a hopeful smile and look at Sam.

“I think you should do it,” he says surely.

“Okay.” I look at Molly and nod. “I’ll do it.”

“Ah!” she squeals and claps her hands together. “Let’s get started.”

“Right now?”

“No time like the present. Also, I meet with their marketing team tomorrow. We can work out the details while these two hang out,” she says, gesturing at Tristan and Sam.

“Okay.” I give Sam a concerned look, which is met with a small smile.

“I’ll be right back.” Molly jumps up from the couch. “I’m going to go grab my laptop.”

\* \* \*

“Molly, can I ask you something?”



She looks up at me from her computer screen. “Yeah, anything.”

“Has Sam talked to you about what happened?”

“You mean, the accident?”

“And Joe.”

She presses her glossy lips together and leans back in her chair. “No.”

I nod silently.

She leans forward, puts her elbows on the kitchen table, and rests her chin on her folded hands. “Are you worried about him?”

I shrug. “He’s just been kind of distant lately.”

She frowns softly. “I wish I could tell you why, but I haven’t talked to Sam very much since the accident. He’s been focused on taking care of you, and I’ve been focused on taking care of Tristan.”

“I know. And he’s been taking great care of me. It’s just that sometimes when he’s there, he’s not really present, you know? Like his mind is somewhere else. But he won’t tell me where.”

“Yeah. Tristan gets like that every now and then too.”

“He does?”

“Mm-hmm. I’ve tried to talk to him about it, but he’s quick to remind me that I didn’t know Joe like he did.” She shrugs.

“Well I did. So what’s Sam’s excuse?” I close my eyes and say, “I lost Joe too.”

Molly reaches across the table and wraps her hand around mine. “I’m really sorry, Lucy.”

I press my trembling lips together. “Thanks.”

“I know it’s hard right now.” She squeezes my hand. “I can’t imagine what you’ve been going through. But I know one thing. You are tough as hell.” She leans in and says

quietly, “Tougher than those two out there on the couch.” She winks and it makes me smile. “It’ll get better with time.”

“You think so?”

“I do. But in the meantime, if you need to talk about it, I’m only a few floors away. I’m a pretty good listener,” she says, smiling lightly.

“So I’ve been told.”

She sits back in her chair and spins her laptop around to show me the screen. “You know, I think this is going to be a really good distraction for you.”

I inhale a hopeful breath. “I could sure use one.”

## Chapter 35

### *Lucy, One Month Later*

I sit on a wooden stool in front of my painting, staring at the brushstrokes that highlight my pink-rimmed eyes and matching pink nose. My blue tear-filled eyes reflect the sadness that's been looming over me for the past two months.

My doctors told me that when a bone is broken, it heals stronger than before the break. But they didn't make any promises about my heart. It's been two months since the accident, and I can still feel the broken pieces, like the jagged, uneven sidewalks I grew up on. Most of the cracks are for Sam, who may never get over losing Joe, some are for me, and a few are for Tristan. But the one that hurts the most, the one I can't seem to jump over no matter how hard I try, runs right down the middle of me and Sam.

"It's perfection," Sebastian says, standing behind me.

"It's sad."

"It's beautiful."

"It's broken. Just like me and Sam." I inhale a shaky breath and blink back tears that burn behind my eyes.

"You and Sam aren't broken. You're just a little cracked, that's all."

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes, there's a difference," he says, dropping his head beside mine. "Breaks don't always go back together, but cracks usually heal." He spins me around to face him. "What's the matter? I thought you were feeling better since you were cleared to start working again. Aren't you glad to be back out in the world?"

"Yes. And I was feeling better, until last night. Sam and I got into a fight." I drop my head and pull my paint-covered hands to my face. "What if things never go back to the way they were, Bas? What if losing Joe was too much for him? Joe was the only constant thing in Sam's life. He was there for him

when I wasn't." I slide off the stool, and Bas grabs my hand as I stand up. "Sam made sure to remind me of that last night."

"He's just hurting. And he's probably going to be hurting for a long time." He turns me around to face my painting again and puts his hands on my shoulders. "Look. You are stronger than you were that day, Lucy. And you're stronger now than you were two months ago when that asshole ran a red light. Now *you* have to be stronger than Sam."

I turn around and look up at him. "I'm trying, but he keeps pushing me away."

"Then push harder," he says firmly. "Joe was there for him when you weren't. Now it's your turn to be there for him when Joe can't."

I nod softly.

He takes my hand. "Come on." He pulls me over to the sink in the back of my studio. "I want to show you something. Wash up."

I turn on the water and begin scrubbing the paint off my fingers.

When I'm through, Sebastian reaches for my hands and holds them up in front of him. "Really, Luc, you've got to stop using your fingernails as painting tools," he says, appalled.

"They're the best tool I've got."

"Well you have a big day coming up and your nails are not up to the occasion. If it means no more painting until after Aurelia Snow, then so be it."

He musters a small smile out of me and I pull my hand back. "It's still six weeks away. And don't worry, I think I used the last of my energy on that one." I glance back at my self-portrait drying on the easel behind me and drop my hands to my paint-covered overalls. I pat my swollen tummy and walk over to the couch. "She's officially sucking all my energy out of me." I sit down, sprawl my arms and legs out, and drop my head back against the couch. "I don't know why everyone says the second trimester is the easiest."

“Because most women aren’t healing from a hip fracture in their second trimester. Or dealing with—”

“Sam?”

“I was going to say everything you’re dealing with, but if you want to narrow it down to Sam, I’ll support that.”

I laugh softly.

“Is that a smile I see?”

“A small one.” I purse my lips. “It’s hard to keep them from you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant as one.” I inhale a deep breath and close my eyes. “Honestly, I spent the majority of the last two months on bed rest. How can I possibly be this tired?” I sit up and try to get comfortable, but there’s a small basketball in my lap that’s permanently affixed to my stomach.

“Maybe because you haven’t had a latte in six months.” He arches an eyebrow.

“Shh...don’t say the *L* word.”

“What about the *C* word?”

I raise a curious eyebrow.

“Coffee.” He makes a funny face and shakes his head. “What about the *W* word?” he asks, slouching against the arm of the couch. “It definitely can’t help matters that you have zero coping devices right now. One glass of wine and you’d probably feel a lot better.”

“You know what would make me feel better? A fiancé who doesn’t immerse himself in boxing to hide from the pain he won’t talk about.”

“Yes, well, we’ve established that.”

“It doesn’t help that he’s trying to prepare for a fight without Joe *or* Tristan. He’s never had to do that before.”

“I’m sure they’re not easily replaced.”

“No. He’s been really frustrated.”

“Why doesn’t he just wait until after the baby’s born? That would give Tristan time to fully heal and then he can coach Sam.”

“Because he’s still under contract. Miles already had it amended once, and that was only because it was deemed medically necessary by Sam’s doctor. The only thing he can do is withdraw, and he’ll never do that.” I roll my eyes. “Miles would never let him do that.”

Bas gets up and reaches for my hands and pulls me up off the couch. “I have something that will cheer you up.”

“What is it?”

“Dresses for New York. I got two for you to try on,” he says, disappearing into my office. He returns with a couple of garment bags and lays them over the arm of the couch. He unzips one and pulls out a long, flowy, creamy-white dress with a delicate crocheted top. “It will be warm in New York. I thought this would be perfect with the open back and your hair swept up.”

I stand up and hold it out in front of me. “It looks a little like a wedding dress, Bas.”

“Pfff...not *your* wedding dress. I’ve got much bigger plans for that.”

I shake my head. “You’re not going to let it go, are you?”

“Nope. Now go.” He waves his hands. “Try it on.”

I carry the dress to my office and change into it, glad to find that it’s fairly easy to get on by myself. I slide my arms through the thin spaghetti straps and adjust the crocheted top. I pull my long hair up into a loose bun and walk back out to show Sebastian.

“Oh, my God, it’s even better on.”

I turn around and show him the back.

“I love it,” he gushes. “You look like an angel.”

I drop my head to the side and give him an incredulous look. “A pregnant angel? When did I get kicked out of

heaven?”

“Stop it, you look beautiful.” He reaches for my bun and messes with my loose locks of hair. “Maybe we can add some delicate little flowers or something...give you a Mother Earth vibe.” He looks at me and says, “Kind of fits your current situation, don’t you think?”

“What’s in the other bag?” I ask, not feeling the vibe.

He drops his hands and reaches for the other garment bag. He unzips it and pulls out another creamy-white dress, but this one is simple and elegant. He holds it up and I know without even trying it on that it’s the one I want to wear to the Aurelia Snow exhibit next month.

“This one is chiffon,” he says, handing it to me. “I thought the airy material would be good for warm weather.”

“I love it,” I say, taking it from him. I hurry to my office to try it on, and it literally slides over my body like a slip. The top dips into a soft V just above my newly developed cleavage. And the light, airy material flows over my round stomach and falls gracefully to my feet with room to grow. I turn around and look at the back. The straps are an inch or so wide on my shoulders like a tank top, and it dips down into a U just above the small of my back.

I gather the material in my hands and hurry out to show Bas. “What do you think?” I ask, smiling.

“Turn around,” he says, and I follow his instruction.

After a few silent seconds I turn back around. “Hello?”

Bas pulls his fist away from his mouth and crosses his arms over his chest. “I think...you really are an angel.”

“Bas.”

“It’s like it was made for you. You have to wear this one.”

“Do you think it will still fit in six weeks?”

He tugs on the loose material that’s covering my stomach. “Yes, you have plenty of room.”

I pull my shoulders up excitedly and smile. “I love it. It’s beautiful but, more importantly, comfortable. You did good.”

He presses his lips together and nods. “Guess what the color is,” he says, and then he presses his lips together again.

“Um...” I look down at it again. “Cream?”

He shakes his head, keeping his lips tightly sealed.

“I don’t know.” I laugh. “Ivory? Off-white? Vanilla?” I shrug. “I have no idea, Bas. Just tell me.”

“Wedding cake!” he finally says, putting his hands over his mouth.

I can’t help but smile at his excitement. “Tell you what, freak. You can pretend that this is my wedding dress, because it’s the closest you’re going to get to the real thing anytime soon.”

“I’ll wear you down eventually. And if I can’t, I’ll get Sam to.” He raises his eyebrows and gathers the garment bags off the arm of the couch.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He pauses and looks up at me. “Wouldn’t I?”

“Not if you’re not speaking to him,” I say, crossing my arms.

“Slow down, killer. Who said anything about not speaking to Sam? I support you and I want him to get over his funk, because it affects you, which ultimately affects me. But that doesn’t mean I’m not a fan. I’m *always* a Sam Cole fan.” He narrows his eyes and whispers, “Always.”

I purse my lips over a smile. “Figures.”

\* \* \*

“Something smells good,” Sam says, walking into the kitchen. He grabs a bottle of water out of the fridge and chugs it down.

I smile tentatively at him over the ruminating ache in my heart left over from our fight and say, “Jambalaya.”



He walks up behind me and reaches around my stomach, pressing his hand to my bump. “I’m sorry about last night,” he says, kissing my neck.

“It’s okay.” I pull my shoulder up to my jaw. “You’re sweaty.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” He leans against the counter and watches me sauté the diced onions and green bell peppers.

“Did you have a good workout?” I ask, glancing up at him.

“It was okay. The new guy just isn’t Tristan. He’s got my circuits all switched up and it’s really throwing me off. I just want to get back to my old routine.”

“Looks like you worked hard,” I say, eyeing his sweat-soaked T-shirt.

“He’s kicking my ass, just not the way I like.”

“Well, maybe it’s a good thing. A new challenge. Can you hand me that bowl?” I ask, pointing to the little bowl of garlic I chopped up.

He hands it to me and I add the garlic to the pot. As soon as it hits the heat, the aromatic scent fills the kitchen.

“What all goes in jambalaya?”

“Chicken, smoked sausage, onion, celery, peppers, garlic, tomatoes, spices...”

“It’s making my mouth water. I’m starving.”

“Good.” I smile softly at him. “But it’s not going to be ready for another half hour or so, so you’ll have to wait. You have time for a shower,” I point out.

“I think I’ve proven that I’m pretty good at waiting,” he says, showing me his dimples, and it makes me grin.

“Yes,” I say, pushing the onion and peppers around the pan, “you have.”

“Luc, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

I look up at him tentatively. “Okay,” I say, but it sounds like a question.

“I want to buy a house. For us.”

A hopeful smile spreads across my face. “You do?”

“Yeah. I think it would really help things.”

*Help things.* As in, fill the void Joe left, not move past it.

I nod and work to keep the smile on my face. “Yeah.” I tend to my pot, trying to keep my emotions corralled.

“Would you like that?”

I press my lips together and glance up at him. “Mm-hmm,” I squeak, trying to appreciate the gesture, even if it’s for the wrong reason.

“Good, because I talked to a realtor today.”

I look up and see him smiling at me with excited eyes, and for the first time in weeks, he looks *happy*. I smile and ask, “Well, what did they say?”

“That it’s not going to be easy to find a house with room for a gym and an art studio.” He laughs and shakes his head. “First world problems, I know.”

I shrug. “Well, just skip the studio then.”

He gives me a funny look. “Where will you paint?”

“At my studio.” I try to sound casual, because I know where this leads.

“You mean the studio you’re giving back to Drew?”

“Until I can find a new one, yes,” I say, minding the pot.

“You know, I’m starting to wonder if you’re ever going to give it back to him.” He laughs softly, but I don’t think he’s amused.

“I honestly haven’t given it very much thought since the accident. I’ve been a little preoccupied.” I turn the heat down under the pot, so I can tend to our conversation instead.

“Don’t do that, Luc.” He closes his eyes and drops his head back.

“Do what?” My heart shudders as my hormones break through the gate and run rampant inside me. “Point out that I couldn’t walk for weeks? Or that I’ve been worried that the baby has some kind of damage from the accident the doctors just haven’t been able to see yet? Or that you’ve been so consumed by your next match that you’ve barely even noticed.”

“Barely noticed?” he says, putting his hands on his head. “I know how long you couldn’t walk, Lucy. Because I was the one who brought you food, who bathed you, who got up in the middle of the night to help you to the bathroom.”

I close my eyes and exhale a quiet breath, corralling my hormones back inside their gate. “I know, I’m sorry. You did so much for me.” I reach for his arm. “I wasn’t trying to discount that.”

“I don’t need recognition for taking care of you, Lucy. It was a privilege. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t kill me to see you like that. Or that I could ever forget what it felt like to watch you struggle just to stand up, while carrying our baby, for God’s sake. And don’t think I haven’t had those same thoughts. I just care about you enough to keep them to myself.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. “Sam—”

“You and the baby are the *only* thing that’s consumed me since the moment I heard you were in an accident.” He slams his hands down on the counter, making me jump. “The only thing!”

“Not the only thing.”

He looks at me and sighs. “What do you want me to say, Lucy? That I’m devastated because Joe died? I am, okay?”

“I know you are.”

“And you can say it’s not my fault all you want, but I will always feel responsible. *Always*. And not just for Joe.”

“Sam.” I reach for him again, but he doesn’t look up.

“Do you know what it was like to think you were dead, to think that the baby was dead? Because when I walked into that hospital, I was preparing myself for the worst.” He swallows down the emotion he can’t hide. “When I found out you were okay, as overjoyed as I was, I prepared myself to tell you the baby was gone, because I didn’t think I was lucky enough to get to keep you both. And I saw your heart shatter in my hands—I played it in my head again and again,” he says, smacking his fist into his other hand. “It was so fucking real that when they said she was okay, it took me to my knees. I still don’t believe it.”

“Sam.”

“I watch your belly getting bigger and I know she’s alive, growing inside you. *That’s* why I want to win this match. Because I want to take care of her. And every penny I earn ensures that I’ll be able to do that. She’s the reason I’ve been working so hard. I want to win for her, okay?”

“Okay.” I wipe the tears from my cheeks and wrap my arms around him, and he lets me. “I’m sorry.”

“I almost lost you, Lamb,” he says hoarsely.

I look up at his stormy eyes, watching the waves settle. “You didn’t lose me. I’m right here.” I reach for his scruffy face and pull his mouth to mine, letting his soft lips heal the cracks in my heart and consume the sadness that’s cleaved to the broken pieces for the last couple of months.

He winds his arms around me and holds me close as he pushes and pulls my lips with his. I savor the way his tongue moves over mine, moaning desperately into his mouth, but he pulls away. “We shouldn’t.”

“We should,” I say, pulling his mouth back to mine.

“You’re still healing,” he mumbles against my lips.

“It’s been eight weeks, I’m all better. The doctor cleared me.” I pull his shirt up and rub my hands over his chest, then I drop them to his pants.

“What about the baby?”

“The baby doesn’t know.”

“I haven’t showered.”

“I don’t care,” I groan, needing so badly to be close to him.

“What about dinner?”

I reach for the knob on the stove and turn the heat off. “It can wait.”

He grabs my bottom through my leggings and squeezes it in his strong hands. “It’s been so long,” he groans against my neck, kissing me up to my jaw.

“Too long.”

He takes my hand and practically runs to the bedroom, dragging me behind him.

“Sam!” I laugh as we fall onto the bed and the duvet fluffs around us.

He pulls his shirt off and climbs over me and I gaze up at him. *Has he put on more muscle?* I don’t have long to ponder it. He pushes my shirt up over my stomach, kissing it softly as he makes his way up to my breasts. He releases them from my shirt, which lands somewhere on the floor, and kisses them softly, gently squeezing them in his hands. “Does that hurt?” he asks, unnecessarily concerned. They haven’t been sore since my first trimester.

“No.” I shake my head and he drops his mouth to them again, giving them the utmost attention.

He rubs his hand over my stomach and the baby kicks beneath it. He pauses and looks up at me.

“We missed you,” I whisper.

He brings his face back to mine and I gaze into a calm sea of blue and brown. “I missed you too,” he says, kissing me softly, “so much.”

I melt beneath him, savoring the weight of his body, which he carefully holds on top of me as his lips move down my neck. I moan softly as fire sears beneath my skin and the flames lick places inside me that have been asleep since the

accident. He reaches for my pants, pushing them down a little, then he sits up and slowly tugs them over my hips, exposing the six-inch scar that runs along the side of my bottom. He leans down and kisses it softly, then he tosses my pants—and his, which he removed with lightning speed—onto the floor.

He crawls over me again and I reach for his face. “Make love to me, Sam,” I plead against his lips, desperate to feel the connection between us that’s been patiently waiting in a shadow of sadness, desperate for him to heal my aching heart, and desperate to heal his.

## Chapter 36

*Lucy*

I wake to the smell of coffee and bacon, and it puts a smile on my face. I stretch my arms and legs out in the middle of the bed and look outside at the bright blue sky. May is my favorite month in Atlanta. The mornings are cool, the afternoons are warm, and all of the trees are full and green again. I exhale a contented breath, throw the duvet back, and look at my growing bump, which has worked its way out of my pajama top. “Good morning,” I say softly, and she rolls under my belly button, making me smile. “Can you hear me?” I ask louder, patting the spot, but she doesn’t move. “Baby,” I sing, gently pushing on either side of my stomach, but she stays still.

Sam walks into the room, looking freshly showered, carrying a tray of pancakes, bacon, and coffee. “What are you doing?” he asks, watching me with a concerned look on his face.

“Trying to get her to move”—I sit up—“but she’s not cooperating.”

He puts the tray down on the nightstand and sits on the bed beside me.

“You made me breakfast?” I ask with adoring eyes.

“Well”—he leans over and kisses me softly—“I decided to take the day off. I was thinking that maybe you could too.”

I smile and nod. “Okay,” I say without an ounce of hesitation.

He puts his hand on my tummy and rubs it softly, and the baby bumps it twice. He smiles with wide eyes and rubs it again.

“Maybe she was waiting for you.” I glance up at him. “Tell her good morning. She knows your voice now.”

He gives me a wary look, but leans down and says softly, “Good morning, baby.”

I smile and lie down again. “A little louder.”

He puts both of his hands on my protruding stomach, hiding the entire bump behind them, and says again louder, “Good morning, baby.”

She rolls and kicks hard against his hand.

“See,” I say over the tight feeling in my chest, and he laughs. “She knows you.”

He rubs his hands back and forth and leans down again. “I have a surprise for your mom today. But I think you’re going to like it too.” She kicks again and he looks up at me. “We’re going to go see a house.”

I sit up and pull my shirt down over my stomach. “We are?”

“The realtor called this morning. She has one she wants to show us. She said it has potential...” He narrows his eyes.

“Potential is good.”

“It has to be great. This is the house we’re going to raise our kids in.” I smile at him and he hands me a cup of coffee. “This one’s decaf.”

“Thank you.” I can’t stop smiling. For the first time since the accident, everything feels *right* again. I take a sip and look up at his freshly shaved face. “Hey.”

He looks up at me from his coffee.

“I love you.”

He smiles and puts his coffee down on the nightstand. “I love you too.”

“It’s been a while since we had pancakes,” I say, eyeing the tray.

He reaches for a plate and hands it to me. “It’s been a while since we did a lot of things. But I want to change that.”

My heart bubbles with hope. “Last night was a good start.” I bite my smiling lip and it’s instantly greeted with his.



“It most certainly was.” He kisses me and scoots back against the pillows, stretching his legs out beside me. “I want to make a deal with you.”

I narrow my eyes. “What kind of deal?” I ask, smiling over my mouthful of pancakes.

He laughs and wipes the corner of my mouth with the back of his finger. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking this morning and…” He inhales a deep breath and exhales it slowly. “I’m going to retire.”

I choke a little on my pancakes.

“You okay?” he asks, patting my back.

I swallow and clear my throat. “You what? Sam, have you really thought this through?”

“Actually, I’ve given it a lot of thought over the last couple of months,” he admits. “I’m going to be twenty-eight soon. I’ve been fighting for over a decade. I’ve had a great career, and that’s how I want to be remembered. As a champion. Not as some guy who didn’t know when to quit.”

I reach for his hand and hold it in my lap, feeling a strange ache in my heart. “Are you sure?”

“Boxing was all I had for a really long time. But now I’ve got you. And you,” he says to my tummy. “It’s time.”

“Sam, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything yet, because there’s a but… and I still haven’t told you your side of the deal.”

“Okay,” I say tentatively.

“I want to finish out my contract. Joe worked too hard to get me this far to stop now. And if I break it, I walk away from seven figures for each fight, I’ll lose my endorsements, and I’d pretty much be handing my title over to Carey Valentine.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask, trying to keep my voice light.

“Because he’s the new me.” He looks at me and sighs. “That’s what everybody’s been saying.” He drops his head

back against the headboard. “He has almost as many knockout wins as I do, except that he’s five years younger and in the prime of his career. People love him. He’s practically forcing me into retirement, whether I want to go or not.”

“People love *you*. I see it every time you’re in the ring. They go crazy for you, not the other guy.”

“That’s because the other guy hasn’t been Carey Valentine. Wait until I go up against him, you’ll see who they love more.” He laughs softly, but I can’t find the humor. If this guy is as good as Sam says he is, I don’t want him anywhere near Sam.

“Go up against him?” I ask, suddenly fraught with concern. “When?”

“August. Fight three in my contract is against the one and only Carey Valentine.”

“Right before the baby’s born,” I say softly.

He laces his fingers with mine, and I see a storm brewing behind his beautiful eyes. “I don’t want you to worry, Lamb. I know how good he is, which is why I’m working so hard to be even better.”

I press my lips together and nod over the lump in my throat. “And then you’re done? No more fighting?”

“What better way to go out than beating the *second* best fighter in the WBA?” He gives me a sideways glance and winks.

I ignore the fear that’s slithering through my mind and whispering quietly in my ear, *He’ll get hurt right before the baby’s born*. “Okay.”

“Now for your part of the deal,” he says, narrowing his eyes, and I look at him expectantly. “Sell the studio. Or give it back.” He reaches for my hair and tucks it behind my ear. “I don’t like that he gave it to you, Lucy.” He shrugs unapologetically.

I inhale a slow, quiet breath and consider it payment for Sam. I can get another studio. I can’t replace him. “Okay, I’ll sign the deed back over to him this week,” I agree, surprised

by the relief it gives me to finally make a decision about it. If I wait to find another studio, it could be months before I do it.

He smiles softly and rubs his thumb over my cheekbone. “Whatever house we pick will have room for a home studio. You can paint all hours of the night, if you want.”

“That would be nice.”

“And there are plenty of available spaces downtown for a new storefront. You and Sebastian can pick whichever one you want. You could even buy one in New York, if that’s what you really want.” He brushes his thumb across my chin. “Whatever you want. Wherever you want.”

I shake my head. “I want to be wherever you are. And I’m still not letting you buy me a new studio.”

He grins and nods in agreement.

“I think between all the paintings I’ve sold and what I’ll make off my contract with Molly, I should be able to buy something soon.”

He smiles softly. “I know it’s hard to give it up, Lamb,” he says, staring into my soul. “When something’s been a part of you for so long, it’s just...” He closes his eyes and exhales. “If you can give it up and start over”—he looks at me again—“I know I can too.”

I look into his vulnerable eyes and say with certainty, “You’ve got yourself a deal, champ.”

He smiles and pulls me into a hug. “I couldn’t do this without you.”

I close my eyes and relish the feeling of unity between us, knowing that no matter what the uncertain future holds, we’ll face it together.

“Think you could tell Miles for me?” he asks.

I sit up and give him a sympathetic grin. “You’re on your own there.”

“Maybe he can go work for Carey Valentine,” he says, reaching for his coffee.

I grab my plate of pancakes and give him a dubious look.

“Miles always says, if it makes money, it makes sense.”

I smirk. “Did he get that from a movie?”

“Probably.”

“What about Tristan?”

“I figure he’ll start working with some of the up-and-comers. But what I’d really like to do is open a gym with him in the Park. Maybe find some kids who need a chance.”

“Like Joe did with you?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

I pull my eyebrows together and chew the corner of my mouth. “Won’t that be kind of dangerous?”

He gives me a small smirk. “I survived eighteen years there. I think I can handle it.”

“You didn’t have money back then. Have you forgotten what happened with Molly?”

He shakes his head. “Do you remember that story Joe used to tell us about what the Park used to be like a long time ago? Back when his dad lived there?”

Images of *Leave It to Beaver* pop into my head. “Yeah.”

“Well, what if we could make it like that again?”

I give him a reluctant smile, because I think I know where he’s going with this. “Sam, I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“Not all at once. I mean, it might take years, decades even. But what if we started with a community center? A safe place for families to go, where I can teach kids how to box and you can teach them how to paint. We could hire good people from the community and give them a safe place to work.”

I smile and nod. “I think that would be pretty incredible.”

“I want to give our daughter the world,” he says, putting his hand on my stomach. “But I also want her to know where we came from.”

I put my hand over his. "Me too."

\* \* \*

I hold Sam's hand as we walk across the shiny marble floor in the lobby, catching a glimpse of my reflection in a mirrored wall. Sam convinced me to show off the bump, something I've yet to do, so I put on a white tank top and my stretchiest pair of black skinny jeans, which are riding low on my hips, under my tummy. I tied a flannel shirt around my hips for reinforcement, pulled my hair up into a ponytail, and threw on my comfiest pair of Chuck Taylors, because the realtor called with a few more houses she wants to show us.

Sam looks effortlessly stylish in a pair of worn in gray jeans, a black V-neck T-shirt, and a black Atlanta Falcons hat.

"Well, look at you," Terrance says, eyeing my stomach. "Baby's getting bigger, huh?"

"Hey, Terrance." I smile and nod. "She's definitely growing."

"Won't be long before she's keeping you up all night, like mine." He gives an exhausted smile.

Sam laughs and shakes his hand. "How are you doing today, Terrance?"

"Not as good as you." He smiles and puts his hand on Sam's shoulder. "I see you got a little extra pep in your step I haven't seen in a while. What are you up to?" he asks, eyeing us suspiciously.

Sam laughs and tells him, "We're looking to buy a house."

Terrance drops his head and grabs his chest. "Don't tell me that, Sam. Don't tell me the champ's leaving the building."

"Not for a while probably. We just want to get a head start before the baby gets here."

"Well, I sure will be sorry to see you go."

"Thanks, Terrance."

"You need me to get the car for you?"

“No, we’re going to take a walk and get some lunch first.”

“Okay. Well, let me get the door.” He pulls the heavy glass door open and we walk outside.

“See you later, Terrance,” I say as we step out of the shade of the building into the sunshine.

I throw on my Ray-Bans and Sam does the same. He takes my hand and I lean in and whisper, “We totally look like a celebrity couple.”

“Lucy, we are a celebrity couple.”

I laugh quietly and say, “You are a celebrity. I’m not. Let’s get that straight.”

“Well, technically, I’m not either. I’m a professional athlete. It’s not quite the same thing.”

“Close enough,” I say, letting him lead me down the sidewalk.

I look up at the bright sun that’s shining in the blue sky, warming my exposed shoulders, and reflecting off the mirrored buildings that line the street.

Sam tugs my hand and pulls me close, and I see a homeless man approaching us. His shirt is tattered and dirty, and his pants, which are hanging off his hips, are torn at the knees. He mumbles something and scratches his long wiry beard.

Sam stops and stands in front of me. “How ya doing?” he asks the man, reaching for his wallet. He pulls a few bills out of it and hands them to him. “Make sure you get a good dinner tonight, okay?”

“God bless you,” the man mumbles, taking the money in his blackened hand. “God bless you.”

Sam pulls me beside him again and we continue down the sidewalk.

“Sam, that was really sweet. How much money did you give him?”

“I don’t know, eighty bucks.”

I scrunch up my face. “Eighty bucks?”

“Now he can eat for the rest of the week.”

I wrap my hand around his arm and look up at him. “You’re a good man, Sam Cole.”

“Hey!” Someone calls from behind us. “Champ! Hey, champ!”

Sam turns around and a man reaches for his hand with a big smile on his face. “What’s up?” Sam says, shaking his hand.

“I was at the fight at the Garden last year. I saw you knock out Mario Sanchez.”

I have to remind myself that I wasn’t the only one there that night.

“I had shit seats, but that was one of the best fights I’ve ever been to. You’re a fucking beast.”

Sam takes my hand again. “Thanks, man.”

We turn around and start walking again, but the guy reaches for Sam’s shoulder.

“Hey,” Sam says, shrugging him off. He lets go of my hand and stands in front of me. “You don’t need to put your hands on me, man.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry.” He holds his hands up and looks at me. “That’s your girl?”

Sam’s shoulders tense and my lungs begin to work a little harder. “Yeah, that’s my girl.”

“That your kid in there?” he asks, looking at my stomach, and I move closer to Sam.

“Yeah, that’s my kid, so how about you back up a little, all right?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. I didn’t mean any disrespect. I was just wondering if I could get a picture with you, that’s all. I’m a huge fan.”

Sam's shoulders relax and so do mine. "Yeah, all right." Sam nods and watches him pull his phone out of his pocket.

"I'll take it," I offer, but Sam gives me a firm look. "It's fine," I say, taking the phone from him. Sam stands next to him and holds his fist up and the guy does the same. "Smile," I say, but neither of them do. I take the picture. "Okay." I hand the phone back to him.

"How about one more of the two of you?" he says, holding his phone up to take a picture.

"Nah, man." Sam pushes his phone down. "You got your picture."

"Damn. Take it easy," he says, looking at his phone.

"Your phone's fine, I just don't want you taking pictures of my girl."

I reach for Sam's hand. "Come on, let's go." I pull him away and we start to walk down the sidewalk again.

"It's not like I asked her to take her top off," the guy says under his breath, and I close my eyes.

I squeeze Sam's hand, but it does little to stop him. He turns around and closes the space between them. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"Sam, stop it," I say, pulling on his shirt. "Let's just go."

He ignores me and asks again, "What did you say?"

The man stares at Sam, seemingly regretting his words. "Nothing, man. I didn't say anything."

"Why don't you go ahead and delete that picture."

"Oh, come on, champ. Don't be like that."

"You want me to do it for you?"

"No," I say, reaching for Sam's arm. "He doesn't." I give Sam a pleading look. "Let him keep his picture. I'm sure he's very sorry. Right?" I give the guy a sharp look.

"Yeah," he says, nodding. "Yeah, I'm sorry."



“Come on.” I pull Sam away and take his hand again. “Let’s go, I’m hungry.”

I glance over my shoulder as we walk away, and I see the man tapping away on his phone. I’d love to know what he’s writing, but I’m sure I’ll hear about it soon enough. I’m just glad Sam is retiring soon. Hopefully then, the attention from the media *and* rude fans will die down.

\* \* \*

“So, what do you think?” our realtor, Kaitlyn, asks in her bubbly southern accent as we exit the second *mansion* she’s shown us this afternoon.

“Honestly, I think it’s too big,” I say to Sam. “I don’t know if I could be comfortable in that much space. How would we even keep it clean?”

“You would hire a maid, of course,” Kaitlyn says, looking at her phone. “One sec.” She holds up a pink acrylic fingernail and answers a call.

“Sam, could we maybe try to find something a little smaller? And a little less, I don’t know...shiny?” I glance up at the fancy glass doors and bronze fixtures.

“Lucy, this house is beautiful. It’s got everything we need. Room for a gym, a studio for you. And look at this view.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and we look out over the rolling green lawn that’s speckled with tall, leafy green trees that cast shadows on the driveway that winds through them all the way to the front gate. “I know it’s big, but isn’t that what we want? Something we can grow into?”

I turn around and hold my head back. “How many kids do you think we’re going to have?”

The corners of his mouth turn up and he crinkles his eyes. “At least five.”

“Ha!” I laugh and shake my head. “You must have me confused with someone else. Two is my quota. *Maybe* three, if you’re lucky.”

“Y’all are never going to believe this,” Kaitlyn says, hurrying back over to us on her skinny high heels. “A house just went on the market a few blocks from here. It’s much smaller than this, at around nine thousand square feet, but still has everything you’re looking for...a gym, a music studio that can be converted to your art room, a pool, a four-car garage, and a nursery built right off the master suite,” she says, touching my arm. “What do you say? Do you want to head over and take a peek?”

I look at Sam and shrug. “Okay.”

We follow behind her silver Range Rover as she leads us down a tree-lined street to the other house. The dappled sunlight shining through the branches throws shadows on the windshield and reminds me how much I miss suburban life. I’ve been in the city so long, I forgot how comforting it is. “I miss this,” I say, looking out of the window at the manicured lawns and houses we pass.

“What?”

“Trees. Grass.” I look over at him. “I like this neighborhood.”

“Me too.”

“I still think this house is going to be too big, but maybe it could work.”

Kaitlyn turns down a driveway and stops in front of a closed wrought iron gate that’s flanked by jasmine-covered white brick walls. She lowers her window and enters a code on the keypad, and the gate slowly opens. Sam winds the steering wheel and his engine purrs as he turns into the driveway and follows behind her.

We drive up the paver driveway and park in front of a cozy two-story white brick home that’s adorned with modern black carriage lights and dark wooden garage doors. Green jasmine is climbing up a few of the walls. A set of arched, walnut-colored double front doors are situated in the middle of a wide front porch that’s covered in varying shades and shapes of gray slate tile. Two oversized, cushioned white wooden swings

are hanging in front of the windows behind the tall white columns, adding to its charm.

“I like this house,” I say, getting out of the car.

Sam smiles at me over the roof of the car and shuts his door.

“Okay, y’all, what do you think?” Kaitlyn asks, walking up the steps to the front door.

“I think it has tons of character,” I say, walking up the front porch steps behind her. I squat down and touch the half-inch grout between the stone tiles. “This is beautiful. Sam, look at this craftsmanship.” I stand up and look at the glass inserts in the front doors, appreciating the straight, clean lines.

“These doors were custom made,” she says, unlocking them. “Aren’t they gorgeous?” She smiles and waves us inside behind her. “Well, come on, y’all.”

I walk in before Sam and I’m enveloped in clean white walls, textured wooden floors, and vaulted ceilings that are adorned with weathered wooden beams and large glowing light fixtures that warm the entire space.

“The seller is calling this farmhouse chic,” Kaitlyn says, walking through the house. “Everything you see was designed by one of Atlanta’s top interior designers.”

“What kind of farmhouse looks like this?” Sam asks, shaking his head.

“Come on, let’s go check out the kitchen.”

We follow her into the open kitchen, which is nestled in the back of the house and surrounded by windows that overlook a sparkling blue pool and a large green lawn that’s bordered by thick trees.

“Look,” I say to Sam, pointing to the far corner of the yard. “A playground.” I turn around and see him smiling, leaning against the white marble counter that cascades down the side of the island, and I know...*we’re home*.

“I like it,” he says to me.

“Me too.”

“You’ve got white uppers,” Kaitlyn says, looking at the tall cabinets that encase the kitchen. “But these dark lower cabinets will be great for hiding little fingerprints.”

“I love the contrast.” I look around the open space and touch the shiny white backsplash. “Especially these tiles.”

“So, you don’t think it’s too big?” she asks, raising her eyebrows over a small smile.

“No.” I shake my head and look at Sam. “It actually feels really cozy. I like it.” I bite my smiling lip. “A lot.”

He turns his hat around backward and looks at Kaitlyn. “We’ll take it.”

“Sam!” I laugh.

“Don’t you want to see the rest of the house first?” She looks at him like he’s crazy. “At least let me show you the gym. And the nursery!”

“Yes,” I answer for him, wrapping my arm around his waist. “We’d like to see the rest of it.”

## Chapter 37

*Lucy, One Month Later*

“I love this town,” Sebastian says, standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows in my and Sam’s suite looking down at the Las Vegas strip that’s glittering below.

“Too bad Paul is missing it,” he says, shaking his head. “But duty calls.”

“Well, I’m just glad he’ll be your plus-one for the Aurelia Snow exhibit later this month. It’s been a while since we all hung out...Ahh”—I shake my hands out in front of me—“every time I mention it, I get butterflies now. It’s like the closer it gets, the more nervous I get.”

“That’s because it’s everything you’ve been working for since I met you. New York is your endgame.”

I put my hands on my growing stomach and shake my head. “I’ve got a new endgame now.”

“Just don’t forget that as soon as she’s out, you’ve got five other exhibits to start preparing for.”

“I know,” I say confidently, even though I have no clue how I’m going to balance the baby with my growing career.

Sebastian notices my uncertainty. “Hey, do you know how many working moms are out there kicking ass right now? You’ve got this. And, lucky for you, you can bring your baby to work.”

“To where? I still have to find us a new studio, remember?”

“Yes, I’m aware. But let’s just worry about getting you and Sam moved into your new house first, okay? Still the end of the month, right?”

“Yeah, right after we get back from New York. And after we get settled in the new house, I’m not doing *anything* until after the baby’s born,” I declare, though it’s not likely. I’ve

still got to get everything in my studio moved out and into storage.

“Don’t forget that you need to actually give the deed you signed back to Drew *to Drew*,” he reminds me.

“I know. It’s been in my bag for weeks. I’m just, not ready to see him...like this,” I say, looking down at my tummy.

“Lucy, it’s been months. I’m sure he’s moved on. And it’s not like you have a cold that’s going to go away anytime soon. You need to get it over with.”

“I know. I’m going to do it when we get back.” I look up at the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the two-story living room of our suite and say, “I love this room.”

“This”—he glances around the open space, which is encased in glass, clean lines and rich colors—“is not a room, it’s an apartment. For like, famous people.”

I laugh. “Like Sam?”

“Yeah, and I hear he has this really cool, really fun, really pretty fiancée who’s staying here too.” He taps his finger against his chin. “Lucy something.”

“Want some help with your tie?” I ask, ignoring him.

“What’s wrong with my tie?”

I reach up and start tugging it into place. “It’s crooked.”

“Oh.” He stands still while I adjust it.

“I’m surprised no one’s come up with a couples name for you and Sam yet.”

“A couples name?”

“You know, like Bennifer or Brangelina.”

I scrunch up my face. “That’s because we’re not famous. At least, I’m not. And also because that’s stupid.”

He looks up to one side and I can see the wheels turning in his head. “What about Sucky?”

I roll my eyes, refusing to entertain him.

“Samucy? No, that sounds too much like Shamu,” he says to himself. “Lusam...Lum...Lam!” he says with excited eyes. “Lam,” he repeats.

“Absolutely not.”

“Lam, the new it couple.”

I ignore him and smooth his lapel. “I think all the Vegas glitz and glam has gone to your head.”

“But it’s perfect. Isn’t that what Sam calls you anyway?”

“He calls me Lamb,” I say quietly, as if someone besides Sebastian—the only other person in the room—might hear. “With a B. And you cannot call me”—I shake my head—“or us that. Like, ever. Okay? It’s weird.”

“Okay, okay.” He holds his hands up. “I’ll come up with something else.”

“No you won’t.” I point at him.

He grins and narrows his eyes. “I think this pregnancy is making you feisty. I like it.”

I sigh and put my hands on my stomach. “It’s not the pregnancy. It’s this fight. I’ve been on edge since the moment we arrived here.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” he whispers.

“Really? Is it that obvious?”

“Well, maybe not to everyone else, but I know you. And I know when something’s wrong.” He gives me an expectant look. “So are we going to talk about it?”

I look up at him and admit, “I just have a bad feeling, Bas. I don’t know why, maybe it’s some kind of weird pregnancy intuition, but I can feel it in my bones, like a loud warning vibrating through me.”

“Warning you about what?”

“Tonight. The fight.” I close my eyes and exhale an anxious breath. “I know I sound crazy.”

“You think Sam’s going to lose?”

I shrug. "I don't know. I just don't feel good about it."

"Lucy, Brody Crawford is good, but Sam is better. Far better. He's not going to lose tonight," he says confidently.

"I'm not worried about him losing. I'm worried about him getting hurt."

He gives me an empathetic look and puts his hands on my arms. "You've always worried about that, Luc. But that's why he's been training so hard. He'll be fine."

"He was upset this morning, Bas. He barely spoke on the flight here. I think going into the ring under the lights for the first time without Joe is dredging everything back up. I could see it in his eyes, festering away inside him. I just don't know what to expect tonight."

"You think he'll lose his edge?"

"No. I think it'll be ten times sharper."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Sebastian, before Joe, Sam used to get into fights all the time, usually over me. I know what happens when he fights with his heart instead of his head. He's careless."

Someone knocks on the door.

Bas hesitates, then crosses the room to answer it. "Hey, Miles."

"You guys ready?" Miles asks, walking inside. His eyes light up when he sees me, but concern quickly takes over. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lie. "I'm ready." I give him a small smile and grab my clutch off the couch.

He stares at me for a second. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You look great. That's a hell of a dress."

"She looks like a pregnancy goddess," Bas gushes, taking my hand. He spins me around to show Miles the back of my simple, backless black dress. It wraps over one shoulder and



hugs my belly, which is no longer concealable, and falls all the way to my strappy stiletto-clad feet.

Miles raises one of his dark eyebrows and gives a subtle nod, but seems far more interested in the time. “Come on, we’ve gotta go.”

“You make seven months pregnant look hot,” Bas whispers to me, and I smile over my apprehension. He wraps my hand around his arm and we follow Miles out of the room.

\* \* \*

*The crowd is alive tonight at the legendary MGM Grand in Las Vegas...The younger, quicker fighter, Brody Crawford, vying for a belt he’s yet to claim...He’s got a hard fight ahead of him tonight...Sam Cole, the more seasoned boxer, is not ready to relinquish his title just yet...*

*He’s not ready to retire yet either,* the other announcer says, and I give Sebastian a knowing look.

The arena rumbles with cheers and my chest vibrates from the music echoing off the walls. I mindlessly rub my stomach, wondering if the music’s vibrating her too.

*His pregnant fiancée, Lucy, is looking anxious for the fight to begin.*

“Camera’s on you,” Bas says to me, and I smile reflexively.

*Sam has said that he can’t wait to be a father...I sure hope it’s not a girl.* One of the announcers laughs. *God help the boy she brings home.*

I try not to smile at the thought I’ve had a hundred times, but the corners of my mouth turn up defiantly.

The lights dim and the spotlights cascade across the crowd like rays of sunlight filtering through the dark. They move from one corner of the arena to the other, lighting each section to the beat of the music, which grows louder. My heart grows louder too, pounding away inside my chest against my will. I take slow, deep breaths and try to relax. *He’s going to be fine,* I repeat like a mantra, again and again.

Sebastian reads me and says, “He’s going to be fine.”

I nod and fight back the fear that retaliates when Sam begins to make his way toward the ring. My pulse races and pounds behind my ears when I see his new coach leading him through the crowd, and suddenly I’m caught in an unexpected storm of grief and anxiety. I work hard to keep it off my face, but it’s so strong I could drown in it. “This isn’t right,” I say to Sebastian, who gives me a worried look. “He’s never fought without Joe.”

“He’ll be fine,” he says, but it does little to reassure me.

*Sam Cole is being led by his new coach, Chris Torino, following the death of his lifelong coach and mentor, Joe Maloney, in March...Our hearts go out to him and his fiancée, Lucy, who was also involved in the tragic car accident...She was lucky to come out of it with only minor injuries.*

“Minor injuries?” Bas scoffs.

*Tonight will be the first time Sam has entered the ring without him.*

*Or Tristan Kelley, the other announcer adds, his longtime trainer and friend...He has his work cut out for him tonight. We’ll see how he does without them.*

“I don’t feel good about him,” I say to Miles, eyeing Sam’s new coach as he climbs up into the ring after him.

“You don’t like him because he’s not Joe. You’d feel that way about anybody right now.”

“He doesn’t care about Sam, he barely even knows him.”

“He’s a good coach, one of the best. And he cares about winning. He’s good for Sam.”

“Is that what you care about?” I ask, clapping numbly with the crowd. “Winning?”

“Hell yeah, I care about winning. How do you think he got this far?” He gives me an incredulous look.

“It’s not just about winning, Miles.” I look up at Sam, whose face is frighteningly calm. His whole body is calm, a

stark contrast to the energy that usually exudes from him before a match. He's not cheering or enticing the crowd, he's not bouncing from foot to foot. He's saving every last ounce of it for the fight, like an animal before it attacks its prey.

"You think you'd be moving into that beautiful house if he didn't win? You think you'd be staying in that suite or wearing that dress?"

"You know I don't care about any of that," I shout over the noisy crowd.

"Easy to say now."

"God, Miles, do you even care about Sam?" I yell at him over the announcers, who are talking about Brody Crawford as he approaches the ring.

"Do I care about Sam?" He raises his eyebrows and gives me an exasperated smile. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"It's a simple question."

"Lucy, that's enough," Bas says. "Now's not the time. Cameras, remember?"

But I don't care about the cameras. Sam is about to go into battle without his brothers, and Miles looks happy about it.

"Lucy, you know I love you," Miles says, swinging his arm around my neck. He kisses my cheek. "I love Sam too." When I don't respond, he looks at me and says earnestly, "Yes, I care about Sam."

"And when he loses...will you care about him then?"

He pulls his arm away and claps with the crowd. "I thought you knew me better than that."

"I do."

"No." His face is a mix of disappointment and hurt. "If you knew me, you wouldn't be asking me that."

"You're right, I'm sorry." I reach for his arm. "Hey..." I tug on it until he looks at me. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah"—he gives me a halfhearted nod—"okay."

“Half of his family is missing right now, Miles. I’m just a little protective. And worried.”

“I’m worried too, but it won’t do him any good if he knows. So put a smile on your face, please.” He glances up at the ring and I see Sam looking at us.

I smile at him over the anxiety that’s now cemented around my heart and see the animal inside him subside for a fleeting moment. But when Brody Crawford takes his stance in front of him, I watch it return.

I hold my breath as the fight commences.

Crawford throws the first punch, but Sam blocks it and returns a jab and a fast left hook.

*We might be seeing something new from Sam tonight...He isn't wasting any time...Ohhh!!*

Sam takes a punch to the face that happened so fast I barely saw it.

*Brody Crawford is making sure we remember just how fast he is...I don't think anyone saw that coming, including Sam.*

The referee steps between them for a moment, then they begin again, returning punches back and forth, until they’re dripping with sweat. Neither one of them is letting up, and neither is the crowd.

“There you go, baby!” Miles shouts when Sam throws a left hook that leaves Brody stumbling backward.

But seconds later Sam takes a hard blow to the jaw, and I watch the light leave his eyes for a moment. When it returns, he inhales a deep breath and explodes at Crawford, giving him everything he’s got, but Crawford gives it right back.

I proceed to watch the next several rounds between my hands, praying that each one is the last.

By the eighth round, they both look as horrible as I feel. Brody is bleeding from his mouth, and Sam’s left eye is completely swollen shut. He’s taken too many hits to count.

“Get your gloves up! Protect that eye, Sam!” Miles screams at him.

When the bell rings, I drop my face to my hands and exhale.

“Are you kidding me?” Bas screams when the ref gives the round to Crawford.

*Sam Cole is looking the worse for wear...*

*Brody Crawford wins the round, but he doesn't look much better, the other announcer says. I don't know if anyone expected Crawford to last this long, especially not Sam...This is not the Sam Cole we're used to seeing...You can't help but wonder if the loss of Joe Maloney is taking its toll on him tonight.*

When the ninth round begins, the baby starts rolling around inside my stomach, reminding me of everything that's at stake. I close my eyes and pray, *Please God, don't let him take another hit.*

*By the looks of it, Crawford has won most of the rounds tonight...And that's another hit to the head for Cole!*

The air rushes out of my lungs on an emotional wave that rushes up to my eyes. I pull my hands up to my face and hold my breath until it goes away.

Miles leans over and says, “He's all right. He can take it.”

“Well, I can't.” I turn to Sebastian, but Miles grabs my hand. “You gotta be stronger than that, Luc. He can't see you upset right now. You gotta be strong for him, okay? You hear me?” he shouts over the crowd.

“Yeah, I hear you,” I shout back. I inhale a shaky breath, sit up straight in my chair, and force myself to watch. “Come on, Sam!”

*And that's the end of round nine, going to Sam Cole this time...By the looks of them, I can't believe either one of them is still standing.*

Sam falls into his corner and slouches on a stool while they tend to his eye and give him water. When he spits it out,

it's full of blood.

Sebastian takes my hand and squeezes it in his. "He's okay."

"Sam," I call, and he looks up at me with his good eye. *I love you*, I mouth.

He stares at me for a long, silent second and then he gets to his feet again. He stands across from Crawford on tired legs, his overworked blood vessels stretching across his exhausted muscles like roads on a map. He turns his head to the side and spits blood out of his mouth.

"I can't watch this," I say, looking at Sebastian.

"Yes!" Bas shouts when Sam blocks a jab.

*Sam Cole might be getting his second wind...I didn't see that coming, but he sure did.*

Sam throws a left hook, a right hook, and another left hook that leaves Crawford hanging off him. Sam pushes him back against the ropes.

"There you go, Sam, there you go!" Miles screams. "Show him who the fucking champ is!"

Crawford pushes off the ropes and throws two punches at Sam's ribs, but Sam lowers his elbow and protects himself. "That's right, baby," I whisper beneath my hands. But Crawford punches low, connecting with Sam's hip near his groin.

*That was a low blow for Crawford!*

Sam stumbles back and Crawford takes the opportunity to hit him again before the referee intervenes. The ref grabs Brody's arm and pulls him over to the side of the ring, giving Sam space and a minute to catch his breath. "That's one point. Low blow. One point," he says, holding up his gloved finger.

*One point for that low blow. Crawford is losing a point.*

The ref puts his hand on Sam's shoulder and asks, "You all right, you ready?"

Sam nods and puts his gloves up in front of him again.

“Okay. Time in, let’s go.”

Sam stands across from Crawford and the energy in the arena swells. But the cheers and jeers of the crowd turns to white noise in my head when they start throwing punches at each other again. After a few seconds, they bear-hug each other, waiting for their energy to return, until the ref breaks them apart. Then suddenly, like two sharks attacking each other, they explode with wild energy, throwing punches back and forth so fast, I can’t tell who’s punching who, until Crawford connects with Sam’s face so hard it sends him flying backward onto the bloodstained mat.

Everything falls silent as I watch the referee stand over Sam and start counting. I see his mouth moving, but I can’t hear him. Sebastian squeezes my hand and I glance up at his horrified face. I look to my left and see Miles screaming, the blood vessels in his red neck bulging with every word I can’t hear.

The baby kicks hard and the sound of the electrified arena rushes back into my ears, forcing the air out of my lungs.

*Sam Cole is not getting up. I don’t believe it. Cole is not getting up, ladies and gentlemen...This might be it.*

The referee keeps counting, *Seven...eight...*

*This is a sad moment if you’re a Sam Cole fan...And a scary moment for his fiancée, watching from beside the ring... He is out cold.*

“Ten!” the referee shouts, and it rings through my ears like a gun firing. The accompanying cries from the crowd pierce through me like the bullet it released.

*And that is it. The belt goes to Brody Crawford, the new light-heavyweight champion.*

The doctor rushes over to Sam and puts his hands on his shoulders, but Sam doesn’t move. He puts one of his gloved fingers inside Sam’s mouth and removes his mouth guard.

Miles rushes to the ring and climbs up between the ropes. “Get her back to the dressing room,” he shouts at Grady, who promptly takes my arm.

“No!” I shout, watching them hold smelling salts under Sam’s nose and pat his cheeks before Sebastian drags me away.

\* \* \*

I pace around the dressing room in my bare feet, practically drowning myself in a bottle of water. “I told you I had a bad feeling, Bas. I knew it was too soon for him to be fighting again after losing Joe.”

“It was the way he fought,” Bas says, shaking his head. “He put everything into those first few rounds.”

“Why would he do that? He never does that.”

“That wasn’t him. That was the coach. Joe would have never let him do that. He would have tired Crawford out first and then finished him in the last few rounds.” He drops his head back against the wall he’s leaning against.

“Lucy,” Miles calls, walking into the room, and I rush over to him.

“How is he?”

“Doc’s finished with him. He says he’s all right.”

“As in, he has another concussion, all right?”

“No, no concussion this time. The doctor said he was lucky. He likened it to hitting your funny bone. Said it was temporary nerve trauma near the base of his skull, but it’s fairly common with knockouts and relatively benign.”

Tears fill the rims of my tired eyes. “He’s really okay?”

He shakes his head. “This one really messed him up, Luc,” he says disheartened, and the disappointment is reflected in Sebastian’s eyes. “The only person he wants to see right now is you.”

I hurry to the adjoining room, leaving Bas and Miles behind me.

“Grady will wait outside until you’re ready to go back to the suite.”



“Okay,” I say over my shoulder, closing the door behind me.

I walk into the messy room and find Sam slouched in a chair with his head hanging. “Sam?” I walk over to him and he slowly lifts his head, but barely enough to look at me. He mumbles something, but I don’t understand him. “What?” I bend down and put my hand on his face, and he groans softly. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, and he mumbles something again, but I can’t make out what he’s saying. “Sam, hey, look at me,” I say, squatting down in front of him, and he looks at me with one eye. The other is swollen shut and purple all the way to his temple.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles.

I grab a nearby towel and lift it to his mouth and wipe the blood and saliva dripping from it. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about, Sam. I’m so proud of you.”

He tries to take the towel from me, but he can barely lift his arm.

“What is it, baby? What do you need?”

“I need to take a shower,” he mumbles, trying to stand up.

“Okay.” I hold his arms. “Careful,” I say, praying he can stand up, because there’s no way I can lift him. “Want me to get Grady?”

“No...no.” He gets to his feet and I wrap my arm around his waist. I walk with him to the shower and turn the water on.

“Want me to help you get your shorts off?”

He drops his hands on the counter, but doesn’t answer.

“I’m going to take your shorts off, okay?”

He stands still while I pull his bloodstained shorts down, noticing every bruise and red mark on his body.

He lifts his head and looks at himself in the mirror. “Fucking disgrace,” he says quietly.

“Come on, baby.” I help him into the large walk-in shower and he sits down on the tile floor. “Sam.”

He leans back against the tile wall and slowly shakes his head. “Just wait out there for me,” he says, closing his eyes.

“No, I’m not leaving you.”

“You don’t need to see me like this.” He pulls his knees up and his head hangs down to his chest.

“Want me to wash you?” I ask, ignoring him, but he doesn’t answer. He just sits in the streaming water with his head hanging.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, and his shoulders rise up and down. He holds his hand up and I quickly wrap mine around it. “I didn’t mean to let you down.”

“Sam, you didn’t let me down.” I fight back tears that are battling their way to my eyes and sit down in the shower next to him, ignoring the water that’s pelting me and soaking my dress. “You didn’t let Joe down either,” I say, dropping my head to his shoulder.

He lifts his head and drops it back against the wall and I watch a silent tear roll down his flushed cheek.

I reach for his tortured face and hold it in my wet hand. “You are the most important person in the world to me.” I put my hand on the slippery, wet material covering my stomach. “To us. Tonight *we* won, because we still get you. That’s all that matters. And we’ll take you any way we can get you. Without titles, without belts, without the fame or money that comes with it. Because none of that matters if we don’t have you.”

He looks at me, but doesn’t say anything.

I wrap my arm around his stomach and put my head on his shoulder, and we sit together in the dressing room shower until the water washes away the blood and sweat and tears of the night.

## Chapter 38

*Lucy*

I wake to the Nevada sun shining through the windows that encase our suite. It glows pink over the dark outline of the mountains on the horizon under a clear blue morning sky. I sit up and stretch my hands over my head, nearly forgetting about last night, until I look over at Sam and see him lying in a small pool of blood, which has stained the pillowcase under his mouth. He's snoring softly, so I don't bother to wake him while I do an inspection of his injuries.

His eye isn't as swollen, but it's still purple, and blood bruises have appeared on his back that look like rug burns. His hands are red around his knuckles and the short stubble around his mouth is stained red with dried blood.

I get up and go downstairs to the living room and dial the concierge. "Good morning, I'd like to order room service... Um, just one of everything...Okay, thanks...Oh, and some coffee please. Regular and decaf...Okay, thank you." I hang up the phone and head back upstairs when I hear the TV on in our room.

*I mean, look, the guy is at the end of his career. If you don't want to admit that...I'm not arguing with you. I'm just saying that last night shouldn't define his entire career. Sam Cole is still one of the greatest boxers of our time...No one's saying he isn't. The guy has twenty-six wins and twelve knockouts. He's had a longer run than any of the boxers he started out with. But now he's going up against guys who are younger and quicker. He can't keep up!...Well, Carey Valentine's banking on that. He said recently that he's ready to show the world who the new champion is...Carey might get the chance when he goes up against Brody Crawford next month. But I'll tell you, Sam Cole won't lose a match at the Garden. It's where he got his first belt and, if rumors are true, it's where he'll get his last...So your money's on Sam, whether Valentine takes the title from Crawford or not. Is that what you're saying?...That's what I'm saying...Can I get you to say it to the camera?...Hey,*

*I'm a Sam Cole fan through and through. My money's on Sam. He'll beat Carey Valentine...You heard him, ladies and gentlemen. If you want to lose your hard-earned money, place your bets on Sam Cole in August when he goes toe to toe with Carey Valentine at the Garden.*

Sam is sitting up in bed, holding the remote, staring at the TV.

“Hi.” I walk over to the bed and sit down next to him. “Why are you watching that?”

“I wanted to retire on my terms. Not theirs.”

“You are.” I scoot over to him.

He turns the TV off and puts the remote down. “I’m a fucking joke now.”

I look at his beautiful eyes through the bruises. “Sam, you are not a joke.” I push his hair off his forehead. “You lost. And that’s okay. Because it shows that you’re human, despite what some people think.” I smile softly. “You’re flesh and blood, like everyone else, and you can fall like everyone else. It’s how you get up that defines you.”

“I have to beat Carey Valentine,” he says resolutely, and my skin pricks with quiet fear.

I take the pillow from behind him, and start shimmying off the bloodstained pillowcase. “You don’t have to prove anything to anyone, Sam.”

“Yes I do.” He gives me a disconcerted look and gets up, groaning quietly as he stands.

I grab a bottle of water and the ibuprofen off the nightstand and shake a couple into my hand. “Here.” I hand them to him. “Take these.”

He swallows the pills down and gets up to look at himself in the mirror. “Fuck,” he says, inspecting his face. The doorbell rings and Sam looks at me in the mirror.

“I thought you’d be hungry, so I ordered room service.” I head back downstairs to get the door.

By the time Sam comes down to join me, the dining room table is covered in steaming breakfast plates, from waffles to omelets and everything in between. He looks at the table and then looks at me. “Is the whole crew coming for breakfast?”

“No, I just didn’t know what you’d want and I didn’t want to wake you. That obviously didn’t pan out.”

He sits down at the table and reaches for an omelet.

“Want some pancakes?” I ask, holding the plate up.

He shakes his head and grumbles quietly, “Not in the mood.”

*Okay.*

I sit down across from him and pick up a piece of bacon, but I can barely swallow it by the time I’m done chewing. Sam is staring at his plate, silently eating his omelet without looking up.

“The baby was cheering for you last night,” I say, forcing a smile when he looks up at me. “She was kicking a lot.” I shrug. “I think she liked the music. Or maybe she hated it, I don’t know.” I laugh softly.

He puts his fork down on his clean plate. “Probably isn’t good for her,” he says impassively and stands up. “I’m going to go take a shower.”

“Okay.”

I finish my coffee alone with my thoughts, then I grab another piece of bacon and take my phone out onto the terrace that overlooks the mountains and the quiet strip below. I inhale the cool morning air and walk over to the edge of the glass balcony wall. I gaze out at the orange sun climbing over the mountains in the distance, ignoring the city below me, and listen to the occasional call of a bird.

My phone buzzes in my hand and before I even look at it, I know that it’s Sebastian, the only person who would call me this early.

“Hey,” I answer, holding my phone to my ear. “I was just going to call you.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Um...” I press my lips together and shake my head. “He’s not good. Last night was rough. And judging by this morning, I’m not sure today is going to be any easier.”

“Well, whatever you do, don’t let him turn on the TV.”

“Too late.”

“Is he watching right now?”

“No, he’s in the shower. Why, what are they saying?”

“That they think it’s time for Sam to retire. They said he should have beaten Brody Crawford hands down.”

I drop my face into my hand and groan softly. “Bas, if he couldn’t beat Crawford, how is he going to beat Carey Valentine?”

“Thanks for the encouragement,” Sam says, surprising me, and a small part of me considers flinging myself over the glass.

“I have to go,” I say, hanging up on Bas. “Sam, that’s not what I meant.” I follow him back inside, dragging my heart behind me.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, sitting down on the couch.

“Sam, please, you know that’s not what I meant.”

“It’s fine, it doesn’t matter.” He folds his hands together and pulls them up to his mouth.

“Yes, it does matter.” I sit down next to him. “I’m sorry.” I reach for his arm. “I know that’s the last thing you needed to hear right now.”

“If that’s how you feel, it’s how you feel. I said don’t worry about it.” He stares blankly across the room.

“Don’t worry about it?” I huff. “All I can do is worry about it. All I can do is think about you fighting Carey Valentine in *two* months.” I drop my head to the side and look at his bruised face. “Look at you,” I cry, shaking my head.

“So, what, you don’t like the way I look now?”

“It’s not funny, Sam. Do you even know how many hits you took last night? Because I couldn’t keep count.”

He closes his eyes and drops his head back against the couch.

“Two months,” I say again. “That’s all we have left. Then everything changes, everything’s different. It’s not just about us anymore.”

“You think I don’t know that?” He looks at me and stands up. “You think I don’t know that?” he asks again, louder.

“I know you’re going through something right now, but—”

“What?” he shakes his head.

“You don’t have to admit it, because I know it.” I get up and stand in front of him. “I know you, Sam. Even if you wish I didn’t right now, I do. And I know you’re still dealing with Joe’s death. I know you haven’t been able to get past it. And I know that last night, it was all you could think about, because he wasn’t there. That’s why you fought the way you did.”

“The way I fought? The way I fought was to win. The way I fought was for everything I’ve worked for my whole fucking life. The way I fought was *for* Joe!”

“No...Joe wouldn’t have let you fight like that.”

“Let me fight like what?”

“Like you had nothing to lose,” I cry.

He pulls his hands to his head and runs his fingers through his wet hair. “I had everything to lose last night. Everything! My whole fucking career in one night!” he shouts, slapping his hands together.

“Your career,” I whisper, watching him drift further and further away from me.

“Do you know what it feels like to have everything you’ve worked for stripped away in a single moment? A moment that will be played for the world to see over and over and over again. A moment that will overshadow every accomplishment, every record, every title I’ve ever held. One moment”—he

holds his finger up—“that destroyed everything. Do you know what that’s like?”

I blink back tears that sting my guarded eyes. “No, I don’t know what that’s like. But I know that it’s not everything.”

He puts his hands on his hips and drops his chin. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

I exhale a shocked breath. “Enlighten me.”

“Last night was what, the fifth fight you’ve been to? You haven’t been a part of this long enough to understand the magnitude of what losing the way I lost means.”

I release an incredulous breath and lock my armor into place. “Thanks for that reminder,” I say, blinking up at him. “I almost forgot that while you were out there building your career, I was watching through a microscope. I watched you win, I watched you get famous, I watched you sow your wild oats for the whole world to see.” I cross my arms over my round stomach and shake my head. “I’d almost completely forgotten about that.”

“That’s what you want to do right now? You want to compare lives while we were apart? All right, let’s talk about the fact that you almost married someone else. Let’s talk about that!” he shouts in his deep voice.

I turn around and stalk up the stairs.

“What, you can give it, but you can’t take it?”

I stop halfway up and put my hands on either side of my stomach. “Is this not enough for you? I’m carrying *your* child,” I cry. “Yours! Not Drew’s.” He stares at me and I stare back, and I wonder how we got here. “Maybe all this would be easier if I wasn’t.” I regret saying it as soon as the words leave my mouth.

“What did you say?”

The baby rolls inside my stomach and the guilt settles on my shoulders like a lead blanket. “I didn’t mean that.” I grip the brass railing and close my eyes. *I’m sorry*, I say to her, making a silent vow to never let anything come before her



again. Including Sam. I can't protect him from himself, but I can protect her.

"Yeah, well, maybe it would be."

I open my watery eyes and force my heavy feet to carry me the rest of the way up the stairs, silently wincing through a Braxton Hicks contraction that turns my stomach into a tight ball.

Sam climbs up after me. "Lucy."

"I think I'm going to stay with Sebastian for a little while when we get home," I say, wiping my cheeks. "If Paul's okay with it."

"What?" He stares at me, but I can't look at him.

I open my suitcase and start sorting through my clothes. "I think I just need some time to myself...away from everything for a little while."

"Away from me?"

I steel my heart and look up at him.

His face is unreadable, but his chest is heaving up and down.

"Away from the stress. It's not good for the baby," I say honestly, choking back tears. "The house will be ready in a few weeks. Maybe it can be a fresh start."

"A fresh start? You want to stay with Sebastian until we move?"

"It's only a few weeks."

"What about New York? The exhibit?"

"I think you need time too, Sam. I think...maybe I should go alone."

He runs his hand through his hair. "See, that's where you're wrong...I don't need time."

"Yes you do, Sam."

"No I don't," he says firmly, reaching for my arm. "I don't need anything...except for you. Please, Lamb, don't do this,"

he pleads.

My stomach tightens again, but I ignore it. “I love you, Sam. I just need some time to catch my breath.”

He lets out a heavy sigh and his hands fall away. “Yeah,” he nods and looks at the floor. “If you think it’s best.” He looks up at me again with empty eyes. “Whatever’s best for the baby.”

I swallow hard and nod. “Okay.”

\* \* \*

I lift my heavy head and turn my pillow over and cry into the other side. The early morning light that’s peeking through the covered window in Paul and Sebastian’s guest room tells me that I’ve cried myself into a new day. I pull the silky sheet up to my face and wipe my tears, but more come.

“Lucy,” Sebastian says softly, cracking the door open. I peek up at him and he walks into the room and sits on the bed beside me. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head and squeak, “No.”

“Come here.” He pulls me up off the pillow and into his arms.

I lay my head on his shoulder and cry into his T-shirt. “What am I doing, Bas?”

“You’re taking a break.” He rubs my back. “You just needed a break.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“I’m a mess.” I sit up and wipe my face on my shirt. “A hot pregnant mess.”

He pulls a few tissues out of the tissue box on the nightstand and hands them to me. “You’re allowed to be a hot mess right now.”

“Do you think I did the right thing, Bas? He’s so vulnerable right now.”

He gives me an earnest look. “I know Sam’s going through a lot right now, but so are you. Aside from the exhibit coming up and recovering from a car accident, you’re growing a tiny human. And she needs you.” He smiles softly. “She needs you healthy and strong and ready to be the best mom you can be for her. That’s why you’re taking a break. For her.”

“She needs her father too.”

“It’s just a break, Lucy, not a breakup.”

“It hurt him, Sebastian. What if he doesn’t forgive me?”

“For doing what’s right for his daughter? Sam Cole loves two things: you and the baby.” He closes his eyes and says, “Okay, three things. Boxing is obviously important too.”

I close my eyes and the tears come again. “He was so broken after the fight. I’ve never seen him like that before.”

“He’s human. He’s going to break from time to time.” He hands me the box of tissues. “So are you.”

“I just want everything to go back to normal.”

“Normal?” Bas laughs. “Nothing about you and Sam has ever been normal. Your life has been a whirlwind since the second he came back into it.”

“Is it too much to ask for a gentle breeze from time to time?”

“Breezes are boring. Breezes are *Drew*. Sam is a storm, filled with thunder and lightning. But isn’t that what you love about him?”

I nod and let go of the idea of a quiet life, because I know I’ll never have that with Sam. “I’m sorry I woke you up. Did I wake up Paul?”

“No, he’s still snoring away.” He rolls his eyes and laughs softly. “Hey, I know something that will cheer you up.” He gets up and opens the curtains, and soft sunlight fills the room. “Let’s go shopping for the new house.”

I sniff and smile at him. “Okay.”

“Get up, get a shower, brush your teeth.” He pulls me up by my hands and I stand in front of him. “You’ll feel better, I promise. I’ll go make some coffee.”

“Okay.”

He leaves the room and I gather my clothes off the back of the green tufted armchair in the corner. I choose my stretchy gray Henley dress and my comfy white sneakers.

After my shower, I dry my hair and pull it up into a messy bun on the top of my head. I grab my bag and my sunglasses and meet Sebastian in the kitchen.

“Ready?” he asks, handing me a to-go cup of coffee while looking effortlessly casual in a scoop-neck black and white striped T-shirt, navy blue slacks, and crisp white sneakers.

“Yep.”

We drive through the city, going from store to store, and I follow Sebastian around as he picks out furniture and various pieces of décor he thinks would be perfect for my and Sam’s new house.

“I like this,” I say, rubbing my hand over a faux fur blanket that’s draped over the back of a leather chair. It’s marbled with beige and brown and gray lines that blend together.

“Looks like wolf fur,” Bas says, and I move my hand away.

“Then Sam wouldn’t like it.”

He pauses and looks at me. “Why?”

“He has a thing with wolves.”

Bas gives me a funny look, but I only notice it for a moment. My heart takes off in a sprint when I see who’s behind him, and my stomach tightens under my dress.

“Lucy,” Drew says, making his way around a large wooden table that’s separating us.

Sebastian’s eyes widen and he mouths, *Is that Drew?*

I ignore him and keep my eyes on Drew, afraid that if I look away I might not be able to stop my feet from carrying me to the nearest exit.

“Hey,” he says, standing in front of me, and something about his familiar voice resonates deep inside me.

“Hi, Drew,” I say, sounding as surprised as I am.

Sebastian turns around and looks at him. “Hello, Drew. It’s nice to see you,” he says cordially, and I give him a quick glance.

“Hi, Sebastian. How have you been?”

“I’ve been well. Thanks.”

“That’s good to hear,” Drew says, looking at me again, staring for a second too long. “You look...you look great, Luc.” He glances down at my stomach and shakes his head. “Wow.” He smiles softly and it tugs hard at my heart. “It’s a good look on you.”

I press my lips together and tuck a stray piece of hair behind my ear. “Thanks,” I say quietly.

He eyes the engagement ring on my hand. “So when’s the big day?” He smiles over the sadness in his eyes, and I see the life we were supposed to have reflected in them.

“We, um, we haven’t set a date yet.” I smile uncomfortably. “Maybe after the baby’s born.”

He puts his hands in his pockets and looks at my stomach again. “I can’t believe you’re going to be a mom.”

“Me neither,” I say with wide eyes, trying to pretend that a piece of my heart isn’t breaking for him.

“You’re going to be really great,” he says sincerely, and it squeezes my heart so hard I can barely breathe.

“Lucy, wasn’t there something you were meaning to talk to Drew about?” Sebastian says, looking at me expectantly.

“What?” I blink up at him and he gives me a knowing look. “Oh, right,” I say, finding my way out of the emotional

rabbit hole I fell into. I look at Drew. “Drew, I um, I don’t know if you got my letter or not, but—”

“If this is about the studio, Lucy...it’s yours. I wanted you to have it. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Is that why you didn’t call?”

“I got your letter,” he says, dropping his chin, “but I just didn’t know what else to say.”

“Drew, I know you want to give me the studio, and I’m so grateful, but...” I reach into my purse and pull out the deed that’s been burning a hole in it for the better part of a month. “I can’t accept it.” I hand it to him. “I signed it back over to you.”

“Lucy.”

“We can be out as soon as you need, but if you could give me a few weeks, that would really help.”

He gives me a look that tugs at my heart. “Take as much time as you need.”

I open my mouth to thank him, but before I can get any words out, a tall, pretty brunette with a bright white smile walks over to us. “There you are,” she sings in a soft southern accent, putting her hand on Drew’s back. “I thought I lost you.” She looks at us and smiles. “He hates when I drag him around from store to store like this.”

Drew looks at me and says, “Lucy, this is Katherine. My girlfriend.”

The word catches me off guard and although I have no right whatsoever to feel any kind of jealousy, I do. “Hi,” I say over the feeling in my chest, and reach out to shake her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.” I smile at her.

“Lucy? *The* Lucy?”

I give Drew a curious look. “I guess so.”

“I’m sorry, I just never expected to actually meet you. Now that you’re famous and all.”

“It was bound to happen eventually,” Drew says to her.

“I’m not famous,” I say quietly, shaking my head.

“Just look at you,” she says, eyeing my stomach. “How far along are you?”

“Oh, um, around seven months,” I say guardedly, and I feel Sebastian tense beside me.

“Well, you didn’t waste any time, did you?” She smiles over the insult disguised by her pleasant voice.

“So, who are you, what do you do?” Bas asks, dropping his head to the side.

“I’m Katherine Campbell.” She smiles and reaches out to shake his hand. “Second vice president of the AWC.”

He shakes her hand and squints his eyes. “I’m sorry, I don’t know that acronym.”

“The Atlanta Women’s Club.”

“Ahhh. Okay.” He presses his lips together and bobs his head. He smiles at me, then smiles at her. “Makes sense,” he says, crinkling his eyes.

“You must be Sebastian Ford. Lucy’s assistant, right?”

“I am, yes.”

“Not today. Today, he’s just my friend.” I wink at him.

“Aren’t you lucky to have him to do this sort of thing.” She glances around the store. “I bet Sam hates shopping.”

“Um...” I shake my head, unsure what to say and annoyed by her presumption.

“We should get going,” Drew says, giving me a small smile.

“Yes, we don’t want to miss our lunch reservation. I’m starving,” she says, putting her hand on her flat stomach.

“Okay,” I say, watching her wrap her long, skinny, French-manicured fingers around his arm.

He pulls away and leans in to give me a hug. I reach around him and awkwardly pat his back. But he squeezes me in his arms and says quietly, “It was really good to see you.”

“You too,” I say to him before he releases me.

“Nice meeting y’all,” Katherine says, pulling Drew away.

When they’re gone, Sebastian falls into an oversized chair and pulls me into his lap. “Oh, my God.” He puts his hand on my stomach and speaks to the baby, “Don’t worry, you never have to see that mean lady ever again.”

I laugh softly. “She wasn’t that bad.”

“She totally insulted you, and what was with that smug look? *I’m president of the AWC*,” he says in a high-pitched voice.

“Second vice president. Get it right.”

“Oh, pardon me.”

“Janice must *love* her,” I say, widening my eyes dramatically.

“Oh my God, Drew’s going to marry his *mother!*”

“What? Who said anything about them getting married?”

“Oh, as if Drew could escape those claws. It’s inevitable.”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “You’re probably right. But good for him. He deserves to be happy.”

“You’re right. He deserves her,” he says, smirking.

“Sebastian. You just never liked Drew—Ow!” I put my hand on my stomach, which is promptly followed by Sebastian’s.

“What is it?” he asks, alarmed.

I inhale a deep breath and put my hand over his. “Do you feel that?”

“Yeah, your stomach is like a rock.”

“It’s a contraction.”

His eyes get big and he sits up straight, moving me with him. “It’s too early for contractions,” he says, panicked.

“It’s just a Braxton Hicks, not the real thing. I’ve been getting them a lot lately. The doctor said stress can bring them



on.” I raise my eyebrows at him.

“Oh. Well, I thought shopping would decrease your stress level, but clearly I’ve steered you awry. Let me make it up with lunch?”

I smile at him. “Lunch sounds good. But nowhere that takes reservations, okay?”

“Made-to-order tacos it is.”

## Chapter 39

*Sam*

Tristan leans over and puts his hands on his knees for a few seconds to catch his breath.

I stop walking and put my hand on his shoulder. “You okay, you need to take a break?”

He shakes his head and stands back up. “No.” He starts walking again. “Doctor said I have to push myself.”

“Okay.” I walk beside him.

He smiles wide and laughs. “Who would have ever thought a walk around Piedmont Park would be pushing myself.”

“It’s been a couple of miles. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

He puts his hand over his heart and says, “Come on, Joe, we can go a little farther.”

I look over at him. “It’s weird, isn’t it? It’s like he’s still here or something.”

“Tell me about it. I love the guy, but when Molly wants to take my clothes off, I feel like he’s in the room with us.”

“Ahh, she probably wouldn’t mind.” I smirk.

“Hey, now, don’t talk about my girl like that.”

I hold my hands up. “Sorry, sorry.”

“Speaking of girls, what’s going on with you and Lucy? You guys work everything out yet?”

“No. She’s still staying at Sebastian’s.”

“It’s been a few days now, hasn’t it? You’re okay with that?”

“No, I’m not okay with it. But what am I going to do about it? She wants some time to herself, so that’s what I’m giving

her. She says stress isn't good for the baby, and that we can start fresh when we move at the end of the month."

"The end of the month? What about New York?"

"She said she wants to go alone." I shrug over the disappointment digging into my heart.

"But you're still going to go, right?"

"Not if she doesn't want me to."

"Sam, you have to go. She wants you to, believe me."

I exhale a heavy breath and shake my head. "I've already messed things up enough with Lucy. I don't want to overshadow her big moment in New York by making my first public appearance since the fight. Any media attention she gets should be about her, not about me losing to Crawford, especially when all anyone wants to do is give me crap about it. She doesn't need that kind of negativity right now."

Tristan stops walking and stands in front of me. "That sounds like an excuse to me."

"What?"

"You lost a fight, Sam. Get over it already. Everybody else has. Including the media." He gives me an unapologetic look and shrugs. "Shit happens. But it's over now. You know why you lost that fight. You didn't have Joe, you didn't have me, you let that Torino guy get inside your head, and it fucked you up. But he's gone now. Now you've got me," he says confidently.

I look at him and ask, "You sure you're going to be ready? You've been away from the ring a while."

He waves me off and starts walking again. "You don't worry about me, all right? It's what's in here," he says, pointing to his head. "And here." He points to his heart. "Me and Joe got your back. You're going to beat Carey Valentine. And you're going to retire like a fucking champ." He holds his fist up and I hit it with mine.

"Lucy's not going to like it."

“She agreed that you would finish out your contract, right?”

“Yeah, before Las Vegas. Now she thinks I’m going to be punch-drunk before the baby even gets here.”

“Well,” he says, “after that fight, can you blame her?”

“No. I guess not.”

“Look, I just got a new heart. I plan on being around a long time, and I plan on my best friend being around with me. I don’t want to see you punch-drunk either.” He looks over at me and holds his hand up to his chin. “Drool all coming out of your mouth, rambling on about the weather.” He laughs and so do I. “I’m not going to let that happen. You tell Lucy that. You’re going to be ready for Carey Valentine. You’re going to beat him, and you’re going to do it the right way, the way Joe would’ve wanted you to. Without getting punched in the head too much, understand?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll start training tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

We walk a little farther, until we get to a bench where Tristan can sit down, and I sit down next to him.

“It’s fucking beautiful, isn’t it?” he says, looking at the lake and the green trees reflecting on its surface like a mirror. The tall buildings in the distance frame the view.

“Yeah. A lot different than where we grew up.”

“Now look at us.” He grins at me. “Kings.”

I huff and ask, “Of what castle?”

“Dude, you need something to cheer you up. You want to go get a tattoo or something?”

“Today?”

“Yeah, why not?”

I look at my blank forearm, a stark contrast to the sleeve on my other arm. “I’ve been thinking about getting a new one,

but I haven't made an appointment with Pete yet."

"You're Sam Cole, you don't need an appointment."

"I'm glad you think so, but Pete Masters is the best tattoo artist in the city. He's always booked solid."

"You're Sam Cole," he says again. "One of the best boxers of all time. I think he'll fit you in."

\* \* \*

I lie back in the black leather chair in Pete's studio with my eyes closed, listening to the buzz of the tattoo gun as he carefully paints Lucy's face on my forearm.

"Holy shit," Tristan says, and I open my eyes. "That's incredible."

Pete stays focused on his work, oblivious to Tristan standing over him as he layers shades of gray ink on my arm, replicating a picture of Lucy that I showed him. I took it one morning when she wasn't looking. Her face is turned to the side and her blue eyes are lit by the morning sun coming in our bedroom. Her blond hair is falling around her face in loose waves, and her full lips are parted slightly. It's my favorite picture of her.

"I thought Lucy was the best artist I knew, but"—he shakes his head—"Pete's giving her a run for her money."

"So how does it look?" I ask, pointing at Tristan's chest.

He pulls up his shirt and shows me the initials he had tattooed over his heart, next to the long scar that now runs down the middle of his chest. *JPM*.

"Joseph Patrick Maloney."

"The one and only," he says, lowering his shirt. "Hope he's smiling about it, wherever he is."

"It's Joe we're talking about. You know where he is."

He pulls up a chair, sits down beside me, and watches Pete work. "You think he's with his parents?"

I nod, ignoring the sting of the tattoo needle scraping across my skin. “Yeah, I do. I think he’s in a good place.”

“Me too.”

## Chapter 40

*Lucy*

I watch the familiar New York City skyline come into view as we descend through the clouds and approach JFK airport. I recall the last trip I made to the city to watch Sam fight Mario Sanchez at Madison Square Garden. I put my hand on my stomach and gaze out at the buildings and skyscrapers that fill the horizon, reflecting on how much my life has changed since then.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Sebastian says, leaning over my shoulder to look out of the window.

“What?”

“Everything that’s happened since the last time we were in New York.”

I give him a suspicious look. *How is he always inside my head?*

“Who knew that the Cole-Sanchez fight would change my life,” he muses, and I laugh. “I don’t think anyone in the world could have convinced me that less than a year later, you’d be pregnant with Sam Cole’s baby.” He sighs and rests his chin in his hand.

“Me neither.” I shake my head and frown. “Or that we’d also be fighting.”

“You’re not fighting. You’re taking a mutual break.”

“That’s what people do before they get divorced. And we’re not even married yet.”

“People get divorced because they don’t know when to take a break. It was the right thing to do. You’ll see.”

“Bas and I took a break before we got married,” Paul says, joining the conversation.

“What? You did? You never told me that,” I say to Bas.

“It was a long time ago. Paul wanted to move to Florida, and I wanted to stay in Atlanta.”

“So what happened?”

“I went to Florida,” Paul says. “For a little bit anyway. And then I realized that no matter how much I missed my family and wanted to be near them, it wasn’t worth losing the most important person in my life.” He wraps his hand around Sebastian’s, and it tugs at my heart.

“He also realized that the music scene was bigger in Atlanta than Orlando,” Bas adds with a smirk.

“I should have asked Sam to come. It feels wrong going to the Aurelia Snow exhibit without him.”

“It’s probably for the best, Lucy.” Paul shrugs. “He’s taken a lot of crap from the media since the Crawford fight. Being in New York would only exacerbate it.”

“Hey, Lucy?” Sebastian says with wide eyes. “Guess what!”

I give him an apprehensive look. “What?”

“We’re going to an Aurelia Snow exhibit.” He grabs my hand and bites his lip. “Which is featuring your painting!”

I laugh. “I know.” I squeal quietly and pull my hand to my mouth, which Sebastian promptly pulls away from my face.

“Do you know how many germs are in this petri dish?” He glances around at the other passengers on the plane. “Don’t put your hands near your mouth, sweetie.”

Paul rolls his eyes. “You are a germaphobe.”

Sebastian looks at him and says, “Yes, and?”

I laugh and rest my head back against the seat as we approach the airport, racing over the water below. I close my eyes as the wheels of the plane skid along the runway, keeping them shut until we eventually come to a stop on the tarmac.

“Luc, I’m going to need my hand this weekend,” Bas says, and I release my grip on it. He shakes it out in front of him and mouths, *Ow*.



“Sorry.” I give him apologetic eyes. “You know how much I love landing.”

“Or taking off, or turbulence of any kind,” he teases.

I nod once. “Correct.”

When the pilot gives the okay to exit the plane, Paul stands up, but Grady gets up from his seat directly in front of us and holds his hand out. “Wait a minute,” he says to Paul, who sits back down. Grady says something to the steward, who then stands at the back of the first-class seats while we gather our bags from the overhead bin, and I’m reminded of the biggest change since we were here last.

I fumble through my purse for my sunglasses and throw them on, keeping my eyes on the back of Grady’s shoulders as we exit the plane and walk into the busy airport. I doubt anyone would recognize me without Sam, but the thought is still unnerving. I put my hand on my stomach and the baby moves beneath it, kicking and rolling a knee or a shoulder, and she bumps my hand up and down.

When we get to the baggage claim, someone shouts at us from nearby, startling me, and I curse under my breath. A camera-toting man approaches us, but I do my best to ignore him. A few passersby glance up at him, but most are too busy to care why he would want a picture.

“Come on,” Grady says to us. “Let’s go to the car. I’ll come back in and get your bags.”

“When’s the baby due, Lucy?” the man asks, like he knows me.

“None of your business,” Sebastian snaps, and Paul quietly scolds him as we hurry toward the exit.

When we get outside, Grady leads us to an awaiting SUV with tinted windows, and I quickly climb into the back seat, eager to disappear behind them. Sebastian and Paul climb in after me.

“Can you please turn up the air?” I ask the driver.

“You okay?” Bas asks, gauging me.

“Yeah.” I rest my hands on my tummy and look over at him. “If you say I’m out of shape, I’m going to hit you.”

“I wouldn’t dare say that to a pregnant woman. Especially not one evading the paparazzi.”

“Honestly, Lucy, you can’t even tell you’re pregnant from the back,” Paul says, winking at me.

I lay my head back against the seat rest and pat Sebastian’s knee. “Please don’t tell me you’re taking us on another tour of Manhattan, because I don’t think I can keep up this time.”

“Unfortunately, no. The only thing we have time for this trip is work.” He checks his phone. “I need to call the studio and confirm our arrival time.”

“What time does it start?” Paul asks.

“Six. But I want to get there earlier.”

\* \* \*

Sebastian walks into my hotel room and smiles at me. “Just like an angel.”

“Can you help me?” I ask, handing him my necklace.

“Sure.” He takes it from me and clasps it behind my neck. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I say, staring at myself in the mirror, grateful that my dress still fits almost as well as it did six weeks ago when Sebastian picked it out. There’s just a little less room in the middle, but otherwise it’s still just as comfortable. I straighten my gold bar necklace over the V neckline and adjust the soft white material that flows over my growing stomach all the way down to my strappy blush-colored stilettos. “Is my hair okay?” I ask, looking at Sebastian, who’s standing behind me.

“It looks gorgeous,” he says, spinning me around by my shoulders to see the layers of loose waves that are cascading down my exposed back.

I reach for the delicate gold bracelet on my wrist that Sam gave me when I was seventeen and sigh.

“What’s the matter?” he asks, dropping his head to the side. “You look serene and beautiful. You’re ready for this.”

“I don’t feel ready. Not without Sam. He should be here. I should have asked him to come. I know he would have.”

“Yes, he would have. But I’m here,” he offers. “And I know I’m not Sam, but I’ll support you any way that I can today.”

“I know you will.” I smile softly at him in his snug black suit. “You look very handsome.”

“Thank you.” He smiles and holds his elbow out for me. “Shall we?”

I wrap my hand around his arm and he escorts me to the awaiting car downstairs.

I check my phone for the umpteenth time while we sit in unmoving traffic between towering buildings that block what’s left of the afternoon sun, hoping for a missed call or text from Sam.

“Still nothing?” Bas asks.

I shake my head and call him...again. But it just rings and rings, until it goes to his voicemail.

*Hey, this is Sam. Leave a message.*

“Hey, it’s me. We’re headed to the show. I just wanted to talk to you. I love you, Sam...I miss you. Bye.”

“Lucy, maybe when we go home you should go see him. I think it’s been long enough, don’t you?”

“I guess I’ll know when I talk to him,” I say, fidgeting with the sparkly engagement ring on my left hand.

Sebastian looks at his watch. “Is there any faster way than this?” he asks the driver, who shakes his head.

“Relax, Bas. It’s only four thirty,” Paul says to him. “The show doesn’t start for an hour and a half.”

“Which at this rate is what time we’ll show up. That’s unacceptable,” he says with wide eyes. He looks at the traffic

map on his phone and starts suggesting alternate routes to the driver, who I'm pretty sure is ignoring him now.

Bas exhales an exasperated breath through his nostrils, and it makes me laugh.

"I'm so glad I provide you so much amusement," he says, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Bas, I love you. Have I told you that lately?"

"No, actually, you haven't. But it's nice to hear," he says, shrugging a shoulder. "Finally!" he shouts, when we start moving again.

Nearly an hour later, we arrive at our location, and Sebastian practically leaps from the car. I wait for Grady to open my door and he holds my hand while I get out. "You look great, Lucy. You sure you don't need me to come in?" he asks, leading me around the SUV.

I pause and look at his kind face above his thick muscular neck. "Thanks, but that's okay. I think it would just cause unnecessary attention."

"Okay, well I'll be right outside."

"Oh, Grady, you don't have to wait. Really, I'm fine."

"Sam hired me to keep you safe, Lucy, which makes you my top priority. I'll be right outside," he reiterates.

"Okay." I look up at the inconspicuous storefront situated between two large sliding garage doors on the first floor of a four-story red-brick building.

"Lucy," Sebastian says impatiently. He grabs my hand and pulls me across the sidewalk, but there's a line of people waiting to get in.

"Bas, let's just get in line."

He gives me an impossible look.

"It's fine," I say, noticing the glances we're getting. "We can wait like everyone else."

He gives me an exasperated look and says, “Absolutely not.”

“Sebastian”—Paul gives him a stern look—“you are crazy if you think we’re cutting in front of that line. Lucy’s right.”

Bas presses his lips together and pivots on the heel of his shiny black shoe. “Fine,” he says under his breath.

We get in line and Sebastian crosses his arms over his chest. But after a few minutes, he looks at me and says, “No. It’s too hot, you’re pregnant, and you’re a featured artist in the show.” He pulls out his phone and makes a call. “Hi, this is Sebastian Ford.” He turns around and speaks quietly into the phone. “Yes...Mm-hmm...Okay, great. Thank you.” He hangs up and steps out of the line. “Are you guys coming or what?”

“Sebastian.”

He leads us up the sidewalk to the door, where we’re promptly greeted by a suited man with a clipboard. “Sebastian Ford?”

“Yes, and this is Lucy Bennett. An artist in tonight’s show,” he says loud enough for others to hear, and I close my eyes.

“Welcome. It’s a pleasure to have you. If you’ll step right this way”—he gestures us inside the air-conditioned studio—“Aurelia will be out to meet you in a moment. In the meantime, feel free to look around.”

“Thank you,” I say, following Sebastian inside.

“Oh, my God, look at this place,” he whispers.

The two-story room is surrounded by white walls that are adorned with colorful paintings and a floating staircase that stretches across the space, twisting as it curves up to the second floor. There are paintings beneath it that follow its curve, some you have to look up to see.

“Wow,” I say, staring up at it. I look at the paintings, letting each one pull me in a little further.

“Lucy!” someone calls, and I turn around. A thin woman with short black hair and straight-cut bangs smiles at me. Her

lips are painted red, contrasting her fair skin, and she's wearing matching red suspender pants over a sheer black button-down shirt.

"Aurelia," I say, smiling at her.

She opens her arms and puts her hands on my shoulders, bringing me in to kiss my cheek. "It's so wonderful to finally meet you. Such a talent."

"The pleasure's all mine. It's honestly a dream to meet you. Your gallery is incredible," I say.

"Thank you. It didn't happen overnight, that's for sure. But I'm quite proud of it." She looks at Paul and raises her eyebrows. "You must be Sebastian."

"Oh, no, actually, I'm his husband, Paul." He glances at Sebastian, who's waiting patiently to say hello.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Bas says, reaching for her small hand.

She gives it to him and smiles. "Nice to finally meet you, Sebastian."

"I am so impressed by everything you've done. You truly are an inspiration."

"Thank you. I aspire to be." She smiles at me and says, "We're going to open the doors in just a few minutes. I want everyone to have some time to look around, get a drink, relax, and then I was hoping to have you and the other artists take a few minutes to talk about your work. Okay? It really helps people connect to the painting when they understand the meaning behind it and what the artist was going through when they painted it."

"Oh, um—" My skin suddenly feels clammy.

"Of course that would be okay," Sebastian says for me.

I smile over the unexpected wave of anxiety I'm now riding. "Yeah. Sure."

"Great. I'll come find you when it's your turn." She winks at me and spins around. "No, no, Michael, that doesn't go

there.”

“Sebastian,” I say through my teeth. “I can’t give a speech. I don’t have anything prepared.”

“It’s not a speech. It’s just talking about your painting. You do it with me all the time.”

“That’s different. Talking about my *private* feelings with you isn’t quite the same as discussing them with a room full of strangers.” I glance at Paul, whose worried look is plastered onto his face. “You might as well ask me to take my clothes off in front of them. As a matter of fact, that would probably be easier.”

Sebastian takes my hand and holds it between his. “Lucy, just breathe. Just take a deep breath.”

I squint over the contraction that’s taken over my abdomen and inhale a slow, deep breath.

“Just relax.”

I exhale as the contraction passes and look up at him. “What am I supposed to say?”

“Don’t worry about that. When it’s your turn to speak, you’re going to look at me and tell me about the painting. Like you’ve done a hundred times before. Can you do that?”

I nod reluctantly. “Yes.”

“Okay.” He smiles at me, but it does little to ease my nerves. “You’ve got this.”

I close my eyes and think of Sam. *I need you.*

As the next hour passes, Paul and I follow Sebastian around the gallery, watching him schmooze his way through the crowd, eliciting smiles and laughter wherever he goes. I lean in to Paul and say quietly, “He has his own gravity.”

Paul smiles. “Don’t I know.”

“Lucy...Lucy,” Aurelia calls my name, waving me over to the staircase.

Sebastian turns to me and gives me a gentle push. “Go, go.”

We follow Aurelia up the stairs to the second floor, which we haven’t explored yet. When I reach the top, I pause and gasp. My painting is floating in the middle of the dimly lit room, suspended from the ceiling by nearly invisible wire, lit by several small spotlights. But it’s not the painting of Sam I was expecting. It’s the painting of *me*. I look at Sebastian, who pulls his mouth to the side and shrugs. “I thought it was your turn to be in the spotlight.”

“Sebastian.” I shake my head and begin to say that he shouldn’t have offered up my painting without asking me, but as I look at it and think of everything I’ve been through to get to this moment—the struggles and the successes—I realize it’s the perfect painting to commemorate this milestone in my career.

Paul walks toward it, stepping in front of the people standing around it. “Sorry, excuse me.” He stares at it for several seconds, then he looks over his shoulder at me with watery eyes. “It’s beautiful.”

Sebastian looks down at me with a small, apologetic smile.

“Lucy, come on,” Aurelia says, waving me over. She stands next to the painting, while everyone gathers around her.

“Knock ’em dead,” Sebastian whispers.

I look up at him and nod, then I make my way over to Aurelia and stand next to my painting.

“Okay, everybody.” She presses her hands together in front of her. “I’m so excited to introduce you to this next artist. She’s one of the most talented contemporary realist artists I’ve ever had the pleasure to know, and lucky for us, she chose to unveil her latest piece, *Stronger*, here tonight.” She looks at me and smiles. “Lucy Bennett.”

I smile at the crowd, full of unfamiliar faces. Some are smiling back and others are staring at me blankly. “Um...” I glance up at my painting and then back at the people in front of me. “As Aurelia said, the painting is called *Stronger*.” I



smile nervously, wishing Sam were here, and search for Sebastian. When I find him I keep my eyes on him as I say, “I, um, I’ve never done a self-portrait before, and I certainly never thought I’d do one like this. It wasn’t my best moment.” I laugh softly and so does the crowd. “But it was real.” I look at the painting again. “There are storms we have to weather in life.” I smile tentatively at the crowd, thinking of Sam and everything we’ve been through this year. “This was one of those times. But I had a dear friend help me through it,” I say, finding Sebastian again. “Sebastian Ford, you are the reason I painted this. And your friendship has made *me* stronger.” Everyone looks at Sebastian and he beams at me. *Thank you*, I mouth to him.

Everyone claps as Aurelia steps beside me again. “Thank you for sharing that, Lucy. I know everyone here feels the emotion you felt that day. It truly is a breathtaking piece.”

“Thank you, Aurelia.”

She gives me a warm smile and then disappears into the crowd, and I’m enveloped in Sebastian’s arms. “You did so good.”

I look up at him, relieved that it’s over. “I meant what I said.”

“I know, and I’m sucking up every ounce of emotion right now, so please don’t say anything else.” He kisses my forehead and releases me.

“Lamb.”

My breath catches in my throat and my heart races.

I look up and see Sam surrounded by several surprised faces, who whisper to each other as he passes them. But they might as well be invisible. All I see is him, dressed in a navy blue suit that’s tailor-made, staring at me with beautiful, sad eyes. His hair is impeccably styled and his flushed cheeks are freshly shaven.

I fight back tears that rush to my eyes. “Sam? What are you doing here?”

He pulls his eyebrows together and says quietly, “I know you didn’t want me to come tonight, but I had to. I’m sorry, I just—”

“Stop.” A worried look falls over his face, but it disappears when I reach for his hand. “I’m so happy you came.”

“You are?”

I nod and a tear rolls down my cheek. “I’m really happy.”

He pulls me into his arms and his words come out in a quiet rush. “I’m so sorry, Lamb, for everything. I was messed up after the Crawford fight. But that wasn’t me.”

The warmth of his strong embrace reaches places inside me that only he can get to. Places that have been cold since I left him in Las Vegas. “I know it wasn’t.”

“I want you to come home, Luc. Please. I was wrecked after Joe died, but without *you*...I don’t know what to do. You and the baby are my entire world, my whole future. I’m lost without you.”

I nod, but can’t say anything over the emotion I’m trying to contain.

“I promise I’ll never lash out at you like that again. I know you were only trying to help.”

I shake my head and say quietly, “I shouldn’t have underestimated how hard the loss was for you. I’m sorry. And I’m sorry that I left.” I press my lips together and shrug. “After being on my own, that flight-or-fight mode is really hard to overcome.”

He holds me tight and says, “I just want you to come home, Lucy. Please...I need you.”

“Okay.”

He gives me an uncertain smile. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” I smile softly. “I need you too, Sam.”

He exhales a relieved breath and reaches for my face. “I missed you so much,” he says, looking into my vulnerable eyes. Then he kisses me softly and rights all the wrongs in the

world. He looks down at my round stomach and drops his hands to either side of it. “I missed my girls.”

“We missed you too.”

“How is she?”

“She’s good.” I laugh and wipe a stray tear from my eye.

“She’s gotten bigger.”

“It’s only been two weeks.”

“I know, but I can tell.”

I scrunch up my face and laugh. “Are you trying to say that I look bigger?”

He shakes his head and gives me a sexy smile. “No. You look...” He pulls his hand to his mouth and rubs it over his chin. “Sexy as hell.”

“Sam,” I say, glancing around at the people around us.

“Seriously.” He holds my hand up and drops his eyes over me. “You’re so beautiful,” he says softly, showing me a glimpse of his dimples.

I press my hands to his chest and whisper, “You’re not so bad yourself.”

He grins, putting his dimples on full display for everyone to see, and I could swear I hear a few hearts dropping. He reaches for my hand, holds it against his chest, and says, “Come dance with me.”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s dancing here, Sam,” I say, glancing around as he pulls me over to a dimly lit area of the room, and wondering where Sebastian and Paul disappeared to.

“Says who?” He pulls me close and wraps his arm around my back. “I like this song.” He begins to rock me back and forth to the slow rhythm of Dua Lipa’s “Homesick,” and the lyrics settle over me like a warm blanket when Sam whispers them in my ear. “You give me a reason, something to believe in, I know, I know, I know...You give me a meaning, something I can breathe in, I know, I know, I know.”

I look up at him, and he's the only other person in the room.

"Do you know how much I love you?" he asks.

"As much as I love you."

"It's not always going to be easy, Lamb. I won't promise that. But I can promise it will be easier together. You and the baby are the most important thing to me. Even when I'm feeling sorry for myself and acting like a jerk. Okay?"

I inhale a shaky breath. "Okay."

"The painting, your painting...why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I didn't know Sebastian volunteered it for the show tonight."

He nods softly and asks again, "Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I don't know."

"Lucy, I want *all* of you. The good parts and the bad."

"I know."

"Tonight I listened to you tell a bunch of strangers about a storm you were weathering that I didn't even know about. Was I the storm?"

"No, it wasn't you. I mean, it was, but it wasn't *you*. It was everything. It was you getting hurt, it was Tristan and Joe, it was the baby, even though I didn't know about her yet. I was just caught up in it all and Sebastian happened to be there. I guess you could say he was my life raft that day."

"Well, I'm happy he was there for you." He rocks me slowly to the music. "But I wish you'd shown me the painting." He stops dancing and looks at me. "It's really amazing."

"Thank you."

"You better not let anyone buy it."

I laugh softly. "I won't."

“Lucy, I love you. Whether you’re mad or happy or scared or sad. I know it’s not always going to be perfect between us, and we’re probably going to have to weather a lot of storms over the years. But I want to be your life raft. And want you to be mine.”

I look at his handsome face and admit, “Sometimes it’s hard for me to tell you when I’m feeling scared or insecure, especially about us. You’ve been dealing with so much lately. But I promise I’ll be up front with you from now on. I won’t ask for your heart without giving you mine in return, completely and honestly.”

He pulls me close again. “That’s all I want.”

“What is this, a dance party?” Bas asks, making his way over to us as the music changes to another Dua Lipa track. He snaps his fingers to the up-tempo beat of “Be the One” and slowly rocks his shoulders from side to side as he closes the space between us. “Hey, Sam.” He grins. “When did you get here?”

I look at Sam, then I look at Bas. “Wait. Did you know he was coming?”

He sways from side to side and turns his palms up. “Guilty.”

My mouth pops open and I give him wide eyes. “You let me mope for the last two days!” I smack his arm and he laughs.

“Well, I couldn’t ruin the surprise.”

“You were moping?” Sam asks, smiling softly.

“Of course I was. I hated the idea of being here without you.”

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. “I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t want to miss something this important to you.”

I look up at his sincere eyes and kiss him softly. “Thank you for surprising me.” I look over at Sebastian. “Is that why you were such a freak on the way over?”

“Well, he was supposed to surprise you before the show, but his flight was delayed.”

I shake my head and laugh. “Did you know?” I ask Paul.

“Nope. This was one of the many Lucy secrets I wasn’t privy to.” He narrows his eyes at Sebastian playfully.

Sebastian waves him off and keeps swaying to the music. “He’s still mad that I didn’t tell him about you and Sam when you first got back together.”

“Or that you were pregnant,” Paul says to me.

I wrap my arm around Bas’s waist and press my cheek to his shoulder. “That’s because he’s the best friend anyone could ask for.” I give Paul an apologetic look.

Sebastian smiles and takes my hands, and swings my arms back and forth as he sings, “Oh, baby, come on, let me get to know you, just another chance so that I can show that I won’t let you down, oh no...No, I won’t let you down, oh no.”

I laugh and sway back and forth with him to the music, until he gives my hand to Sam, and he takes Paul’s. I smile at them dancing between paintings and people who are watching and smiling too. Sam lifts my hand and I spin under his arm, but I quickly yank it down when I see an unfamiliar shadow of ink inside his sleeve.

“Did you get a new tattoo?” I ask, pushing his jacket up his arm.

He unbuttons his sleeve and shows me the tattoo on his forearm, and I gasp when I see *my face* taking up a rather large section of his skin.

My mouth falls open, but all I can say is, “Sam.”

He smiles softly. “Do you like it?”

I bob my head and put my hand over my mouth. “I can’t believe you had my face tattooed on your arm,” I say, blinking back tears.

He looks at me and says, “I didn’t want to go another day without seeing it.”

I release a quiet breath and say softly, “You don’t have to.”

He wraps his arms around me, and I hug him tightly.

“Hey, what do you say we stay in the city for a couple of days?” he asks, putting a wide smile on my face.

“Really?”

“Yeah. You can show me around like you wanted to. We can see the sights.”

I press my lips together over an amused smile. “You want to go sightseeing?”

“I mean, it might be cool to see the city from the top of the Empire State Building.”

I nod softly. “I’d love to do that with you, Sam.”

“And maybe you could show me that art museum you like so much.”

“The Met?”

“Yeah.”

My excitement quickly wanes when I think about what Paul said. The paparazzi will be worse here. “Do you think it’s a good idea? I mean, with how the media’s been lately.”

He holds his head back and grins. “You worried about me?”

“Always.”

He shrugs. “People can say whatever they want about the Crawford fight. They’re going to do it anyway, whether I’m here or in Atlanta. But this might be our last chance to get away for a while.”

I inhale a slow breath and gaze up at him, relishing the moment and the promise of the next couple of days alone in the city with Sam. “Okay.”

## Chapter 41

*Lucy*

I love the Met for five reasons. One: it's old. Nearly 150 years old. Two: it's massive. You can spend an entire day in it and not see it all. Three: it sits on the edge of Central Park. Sometimes when you're inside, you forget that you're in the city, because all you see from the windows is green. Four: the art. From Georgia O'Keeffe to Claude Monet, the Met is home to some of the most extraordinary art in the entire world. Five: afternoon tea.

The midafternoon sunlight filters into the café through the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook Central Park, reflecting off our teacups. I dunk my peppermint tea bag in the hot water a few times while it steeps and Sam does the same. He holds his teacup between his strong hands and I giggle softly. "You're so cute."

He studies the sandwiches and scones on the three-tiered silver plate stand and grabs one of the egg salad sandwich wedges. "How am I supposed to fill up on these?" he asks, popping the whole thing in his mouth.

I grab one of the cucumber wedges. "You're not. It's afternoon tea. It's just a snack."

He picks up a lemon raspberry tart and flicks the raspberry off onto his plate. "Is this supposed to be dessert?"

"Yes." I laugh.

He leans across the table and says, "Tonight, we're going somewhere good." He winks and leans back in his chair.

"Where?" I ask curiously.

"It's a surprise."

I purse my lips over a smile. "Okay. But first, I want to show you one more painting."

He grabs another sandwich wedge. "Okay."



We finish our afternoon tea and meander through the sprawling galleries for another hour, until we reach *Woman with a Parrot*. I stare at the painting, recalling the last time I was here with Sebastian and Paul, laughing quietly to myself at Sebastian's interpretation.

"You wanted to show me a naked woman?" Sam asks, giving me a sideways glance.

"No. Well, yes. But not because she's naked. Because I love this painting. I love how uncontrived it is. It was very provocative for its time."

"Because she's naked?"

"Because of her *ungainly* pose and *disheveled* hair," I say, quoting an article I read about its early reviews. I shrug. "It was the eighteen hundreds. But what I really love are the shadows and light. So realistic."

He crosses his arms over his chest and studies the painting. "Like on her hair." He points and drops his head to the side. "The way the light reflects off her curls."

"Yeah." I smile up at him. "Exactly like that."

"I see why you like it." He wraps his hand around mine and pulls me closer to him. "Thanks for showing it to me."

"You're welcome," I say, yawning.

He gives me a small smile. "You ready for a nap?"

"Yep."

\* \* \*

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror in our suite with my arms above my head, trying to pin my hair up in an intentionally messy yet somewhat dressy updo, which is no easy task.

Sam walks up behind me in a fitted black suit with a cream button-down shirt that's open at the collar, and it takes everything in me not to turn around. But I've *almost* got it.

"Can I help?" he asks, taking the bobby pin out of my hand and assessing the situation.

“Sure.” I drop my tired arms and lean on the marble counter while he pushes the pin in place. I hand him another one. “Can you put one on the other side too?”

He studies the back of my head for a few seconds and then, with a very serious face, slowly pushes the bobby pin in. “Okay...” He holds his hands out a few inches from my head and assesses his work. “Done.”

“Yeah?” I tilt my head from side to side to make sure it feels secure, then I grab my mirror off the counter and turn around to inspect his work. “It looks good,” I say, smiling at him. “Thank you.” When I lower the mirror, he’s staring at me.

He drops his eyes over my blue, tummy-hugging scoop-neck dress, which I purchased today out of necessity—my suitcase ran dry a few days ago. I paired it with strappy silver high heels that wrap around my ankles.

Sam puts his hands on the silky material over my stomach, then he looks at me and says, “You are stunning pregnant. Have I told you that?”

I shake my head and gaze up at him.

He pulls his eyebrows together and says, “I used to imagine us having a family one day, and I’d have these visions of you being pregnant, but they didn’t compare to this.” He rubs his hand over my stomach, and I feel a familiar heat begin to smolder beneath my skin.

“Maybe we should skip dinner tonight,” I say, biting my smiling lip.

He wraps his arms around me and pushes me back against the counter, enveloping me in his warm, clean scent as he presses his full lips to mine. He kisses me softly and says, “As tempting as that is, we’re not skipping dinner.” He laughs softly and releases me. “Come on.” He laces his fingers with mine and pulls me behind him.

“That wasn’t nice,” I say, pouting at him as he leads me out of our suite.

“You should have fed me a real lunch.”

I stop in front of the foyer mirror and straighten the dress over my bump, turning from side to side.

Sam watches me with an amused smirk on his face and his dimples go straight to my heart...and other parts of my body I'm trying to ignore. He drops his head and puts his hands in his pockets, then he looks up at me with a grin that sends my heart sprinting. "You ready now?"

My eyes follow his handsome face down to his tailored black suit and shiny tobacco-colored dress shoes, and I begin to second-guess my outfit. "Are you sure this dress is okay?"

"It's perfect for where we're going."

"And where is that again?"

He laughs and takes my hand, then pulls me out of the suite and down the hall to the elevator, where Grady is waiting for us.

"You two look great," Grady says when we reach him.

"Thanks, so do you." I wink at him.

He tugs on his suit jacket. "What, this old thing?" he says in his deep voice before he presses the button for the elevator.

"I appreciate you sticking around for the last couple of days," Sam says to him.

"Anything you need, champ."

When the elevator doors slide open, Grady ushers us inside. He presses the button for the first floor and we drop forty-eight floors to the lavish lobby below.

Sam holds my hand as we walk through the freezing lobby, ignoring the subtle glances and whispers that follow us wherever we go. Once we're outside, the warm summer air erases the goose bumps from my arms, and we climb into the back of an awaiting SUV, disappearing behind the tinted windows.

I look up at the glittering skyscrapers that tower over the street we're driving down, admiring the way the lights shine on the city below like a moon, even on a cloudy night. Each

time we come to a stop, I listen to the sounds outside—people talking, some shouting, music playing, horns honking.

“I love New York,” I muse.

Sam grabs my hand and pulls it into his lap. “I like it a lot more now,” he says, smiling at me.

We come to a stop in front of Central Park, which is lit by the orange glow of the streetlamps that line its paths. The driver gets out and I give Sam a curious look. “Are we here?”

“Yeah.” He opens the door and reaches for my hand. “Come on.”

I take his hands and step down onto the pavement, glancing up at him curiously as he leads me around the SUV. When I see the horse-drawn carriage, I pull my hand to my mouth and laugh nervously. “Is that for us?”

“What better way to look like a tourist than with a carriage ride through Central Park?” He laughs and pulls me over to it. He climbs up after me and we sit down.

Grady takes the seat next to the driver and the horse begins to slowly trot in front of us, carrying us into the dimly lit park.

Soon, the faint sounds of the city are drowned out by the click-clacking of the horse’s feet against the pavement, and a warm breeze blows through the trees above us, rustling the leaves that glow in the warm, ambient light of the streetlamps, contrasting with the twinkling skyscrapers that tower in the distance. I hold Sam’s hand and snuggle up next to him. “I’ve actually never seen the park at night. It’s really pretty.”

After a few quiet seconds, the horse passes gas, and we both start laughing.

“Super romantic, right?” Sam says, shaking his head.

“So romantic.”

He drops his head and looks over at me with a crooked smile. “Sorry.”

I put my chin on his shoulder and kiss him softly. “This was actually a really great surprise.”

“This isn’t the surprise.”

“What?”

“Well, it was part of it, but there’s more.” He looks through the trees and points to the glowing lights in the distance. “That’s where we’re going.”

I give him a curious look, but he doesn’t offer any more clues, until we arrive at Tavern on the Green, where we’re promptly greeted and escorted to a private table outside under a ceiling of twinkle lights.

I squeeze his hand across the table and whisper quietly, “Now this is romantic.”

\* \* \*

Sam traces his fingers over my arm, waking me from a light sleep.

I roll over and look at him lying beside me in the early morning light that’s pouring into our suite. “Hi.”

“Good morning.”

“Why are you always up so early?”

He laughs softly. “We have a flight to catch.”

I groan and roll over and clutch my pillow. “But this bed is so comfortable.”

He reaches around me and rubs my stomach, and I love the feeling of him holding me, holding *us*, close to him. He drapes his heavy arm over mine and reaches for my hand. “You have to get up,” he says, rolling me onto my back.

“But I’m so tired. I’m pregnant. I need sleep.”

He puts his mouth on my neck and groans softly. “I know a way to get you up.” He pushes my shirt up and rubs his hands over my round stomach, and the baby kicks hard. He leans over and says, “Good morning to you too.” He kisses the spot gently and then works his way up to my breasts, pushing my shirt off them and massaging them in his hands.

I close my eyes and run my fingers through his thick hair, moaning softly.

“I see you’re awake now.” He sits up and grins.

I grab his hand and pull him back to me. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“We have a flight to catch.” He laughs.

I sit up and tug my shirt off over my head and climb onto his lap. “Don’t we have just a few minutes?” I rub my hands over his round shoulders and down his chest. He smiles, but he doesn’t move, so I put my mouth by his ear and kiss the sensitive skin beneath his earlobe. “Please?” I take his hand and put it on my breast. “Pretty please?”

He squeezes it softly and grumbles, “How can I say no?” He looks at me with eager eyes and a big, bright smile that makes me giggle. “You asked for it,” he says, laying me back against the bed and making me squeal at the quickness with which he kisses me. He tugs my bottom lip between his teeth and sits up, pushing the covers out of the way and tossing the pillows off the bed. He yanks his pajama pants off and kneels next to me naked, and the sunlight shines on his painted body.

“Stop,” I say, sitting up to appreciate the work of art before me. He freezes and I watch his chest rise and fall. I reach for his hand and turn it over and look at the new tattoo on his forearm. “I still can’t believe you had my face tattooed on your arm,” I say, rubbing my thumb across it and appreciating the work of his tattoo artist.

“It’s not just any face. It’s the most beautiful face in the entire world.” He brings his lips to mine again. “One I plan on seeing every day for the rest of my life.”

I smile softly and say, “I like that plan.”

“Since we’re in agreement,” he mumbles against my lips, “where were we?” He kisses me deeply, massaging my tongue with his until my fingers are digging into his arms. He lays me back against the bed and drags my panties down my legs, kissing my thighs and tummy as he makes his way back to my mouth.

He kisses me for another long second, before he falls back on his heels and kneels between my legs. He wraps his wide hands around my thighs and pulls my bottom onto his lap, leaving my back on the bed as he carefully pushes into me, leaning forward slightly until his sculpted stomach is pressed against my tummy. He lets out a small groan and then reaches under the small of my back to support me as he begins to move. He slowly rocks in and out of me, and I grip the sheets in my fisted hands, moaning softly at the heavy, full sensation that travels all the way down to my toes.

I look up at his scruffy face, full of intensity, and watch the muscles in his torso flex each time he moves, accentuating the V that points to the source of pleasure between my legs, sending flames racing to every single part of my body each time he falls back on his heels, stroking me in just the right spot. I close my eyes and feel Sam's hand move over my swollen breasts. He rubs them softly, then he leans over me and drops his mouth to my sensitive nipples, taking turns with them as he pushes deeper inside me, and I feel myself beginning to unravel.

I hold my breath as the flames blissfully incinerate every fiber in my body, then I exhale and gasp for a breath that resonates through me and fans the smoldering embers, half aware that Sam has wrapped his arms around my back. He holds me up off the bed a little as he moves, squeezing me and groaning as he pushes into me one last time.

After a few silent moments, he lifts his head from beside mine and pants, "We're going to be late for our flight."

I give him a satiated smile and exhale a labored breath. "It's not my fault that you don't have any willpower."

"Only when it comes to you." He kisses me softly and climbs off me. "Tristan will kill me if I'm not back in time to train this afternoon."

I drop my worried eyes and nod.

"Hey," he says, lifting my chin. "It won't be like last time. I promise."

I push down thoughts of Las Vegas and try to convince myself that he's right. *It's his last fight. And he has Tristan this time.* I swallow down my worry and say, "Okay."



## Chapter 42

*Lucy*

“Well, that’s all of them,” Bas says, wiping his hands together as the movers carry what’s left of my paintings to a truck outside my studio. “Your paintings are on their way to a dark, desolate storage unit.” He puts his hands on his hips and sighs.

“Well, I hoped I could store them in my home studio, but the contractor still needs a few more weeks for the renovations.” I swivel from side to side in the chair behind the front desk. “I’m just happy Sam and I got everything unpacked so we can start getting ready for the baby.”

He raises his eyebrows and smirks. “That’s got to be some kind of record for you. It’s only been, what...a month and a half since you and Sam moved in?”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “I think I’m nesting now or something.”

“Speaking of which, did you and Sam pick out furniture for the nursery yet?”

“Actually, we’re going to later today.”

“What about *Lionheart*? Did you hang it yet? I’m dying to see how the painting looks on the wall in Sam’s gym.”

“Not without you. I need you there to supervise.”

“Probably best,” he says seriously. He opens his calendar on his phone and asks, “So how long should I plan I keeping the rest of your paintings in storage?”

“I don’t know. Maybe three months?”

He presses his lips together and gives me a disapproving look.

“I promise that after the baby’s born, we’ll find a new gallery and they’ll see the light of day again.”

“And what am I supposed to do until then?”

“Hello.” I get up and walk around the desk. “Find us a new gallery. And try to sell the rest of my paintings to help pay for it.” I laugh and his eyes light up.

“You’d really trust me to do that? Find a new location, I mean.”

“I’d *only* trust you to do that. I actually think it would be the perfect assignment for you while I’m on maternity leave. In addition to coordinating everything for the remaining *five* exhibits I agreed to participate in before I knew I was going to have a baby.”

“You know, it’s not required that you attend them all in person to participate. Your name alone should get the paintings a lot of attention now that you have Molly branding you and splashing your artwork on T-shirts across America.”

“It’s kind of full circle isn’t it? Molly was the reason people started talking about me when Sam and I got back together, after our run-in on the elevator. And she’s the reason people are talking about me now.”

“Except now they’re talking about your talent, *not* Sam.”

I give him a dubious look.

“Okay, they’re talking about your talent *and* Sam. But mostly your talent.”

“Well, soon they’ll have something else to talk about,” I say, putting my hands on either side of my belly. “Honestly, I may never leave my house again after she’s born.”

He gives me a worried look.

“I’m serious, Sebastian. I don’t want anyone taking pictures of my baby.”

“Well, you’ll have to come out of hiding eventually if you plan to attend any of the exhibits. But you can leave the baby safely at home.”

The thought of leaving my baby, who isn’t even here yet, fills me with unexpected anxiety. I rub my stomach and say, “I think maybe you’re right—we should pick the top three and

only attend those. And by top three I mean whichever ones are the furthest out on the calendar.”

“Don’t worry about the exhibits, Luc. I’ll get everything lined up while you’re on maternity leave, just like you said.”

“I nod and let go of the unnecessary worry.

“How long do you think that will be exactly?”

“I don’t know. How long does it take to return to one’s previous state after pushing a tiny human out of their body?”

He gives me a pained look. “I can’t believe you’re actually going to have to do that in a few weeks.”

I chew the corner of my mouth. “Me neither.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Yep.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be. Women have done it since the beginning of time, and you have something they didn’t. An epidural.”

“I don’t want an epidural.” I ignore the way he’s looking at me. “I’m not worried about how much it’s going to hurt, Bas. I’m worried about Sam *seeing* everything.”

He narrows his eyes and nods slowly. “Okay, well, have you mentioned this irrational concern to Sam?”

“It’s not irrational. And, no.”

“Why not?”

“What am I supposed to say? *Hey, Sam, I’m really worried that after I push the baby out, you’ll never be able to look at my vagina the same way.*”

He shakes his head. “Yeah, you probably shouldn’t lead with that.”

I drop my chin and say seriously, “I don’t think I want him to see it.”

“You don’t want him to see the birth of his child?” He gives me an incredulous look.

“Not really.”

“Okay, now you’re being irrational. You can’t really mean that.”

“Yes, I do! Look at me, Sebastian,” I whine, putting my hands on either side of my giant belly, which has consumed the middle part of my body. “I look like an alien.” I scrunch up my face and ask, “Do you even know what happens during the delivery? It’s humiliating.”

He pulls his dark eyebrows together and says, “Unfortunately, yes. Paul and I watched a birth video when we were researching surrogacy. Which we immediately regretted,” he says quietly. “Some things you can’t unsee.”

I pull my hands to my face and groan loudly.

“Oh, come on, it’s the miracle of giving birth,” he says, pulling my hands away.

“That’s what people say to make women feel better about losing their dignity.”

He laughs and pulls me into a hug. “Lucy, Sam loves you. Just like all the men around the world who’ve watched their wives give birth. He’s not going to care.”

“I’m not his wife.”

“*Yet*. And that’s not the point. The point is, he loves you.”

“But it’s *Sam*. I’d rather you watch than him.”

He shakes his head and releases me. “Well, that won’t be happening.”

I open my mouth and shove his arm.

“What?” He laughs. “I love you, but that’s Sam’s department.”

I groan. “Maybe he won’t want to watch either.”

“Lucy, you are *crazy* if you think Sam isn’t going to want to see his daughter come into this world.”

I close my eyes because I know he’s right. “He just better stay up by my head.”

“I don’t think you’re going to care where he is, as long as he’s there to hold your hand during contractions. And if I know you, which I do, he’s the *only* one you’re going to want doing that.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Of course I am.” He grabs my hand and pulls me to the middle of the empty studio. “So...” He glances around the open space. “Are you ready to say goodbye?”

I look at the bare walls, remembering everything it took to get here and all the hard work that went into my exhibit. Most of the memories involve Drew in some way, which only adds to the distance between them. It feels like a lifetime ago, yet I can still remember the feeling of walking inside for the first time—trepidation mixed with pride and determination.

“So strange,” I muse.

“What?”

“How different everything is now. How different I am. How much my life has changed since opening this studio.” I look at him and smile. “I didn’t even know you yet.”

“That is strange.”

“I thought I’d be sad about letting it go, especially today, but I’m not. I actually feel really...hopeful.”

“Hopeful?” He smiles.

“Yeah. I mean, if anything, this last year has taught me that life is full of surprises. You just never know what’s around the next corner.”

“Like maybe...a fabulous two-story loft gallery that rivals Aurelia Snow’s?”

I laugh and drop my chin. “Maybe.”

He smiles and takes my hands in his. “To hope.”

I swallow down the emotion that moves through me, not because I’m sad, but because I’m overcome with gratitude and faith. The future used to be this giant question mark. And in

many ways it still is. But one thing is certain now. A future with Sam. “To hope.”

\* \* \*

I sit on the paper that’s covering the examination table in my doctor’s office with an equally uncomfortable paper blanket draped over my naked lap, kicking my slightly swollen feet together.

Sam smiles up at me from the chair he’s sitting in. “I’m going to miss these appointments after the baby’s born.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Why?”

“It’s kind of fun watching you squirm around on the table and get paper stuck to your butt.”

I narrow my eyes. “Funny.”

“Very, actually.” He stands up and walks over to me with a grin. “You sure you’re going to be okay while I’m gone?”

“Hmm...” I look up to one side. “Will I still be pregnant when you return?” I look at him and nod. “Most likely. Will I be okay watching you fight Carey Valentine from eight hundred miles away?” I shake my head and look down at my bare feet. “Probably not.”

He stands between my knees at the end of the examination table and puts his hands on my thighs. “I’m ready this time, Luc. It won’t be like the Crawford fight.” He lifts my chin and looks into my eyes. “I promise.”

There’s a knock on the door. “How’s my favorite patient?” Dr. Fletcher asks, walking into the room with a smile. He pauses when he sees us. “Everything okay?”

Sam reaches out to shake his hand. “Just giving Lucy a little reassurance about my match tomorrow night.”

“Ahh, that’s right.”

“Now, I just need you to give *me* a little reassurance about the baby. Still three weeks, right?”

“Well, let’s take a look and see. Lucy, why don’t you go ahead and lie back?”

I'd rather no one be poking around my lady parts, but I've come to realize it's a necessary part of having a baby. And I've also come to love Dr. Fletcher. He has five children of his own and the patience to prove it. He always takes his time with me and never makes me feel like I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing. Which I don't.

"How have you been feeling, Lucy? Any contractions?"

"Just Braxton Hicks," I say, trying to get comfortable on the crinkly paper that covers the padded table. "Same as the past few months." I pull my shirt up over my stomach, which is now the size of a beach ball, and Sam reaches for my hand.

Dr. Fletcher puts his hands on either side of my stomach and pushes gently, but it feels like he's rearranging my organs. "She's head down now," he says, pressing down hard.

"That's good, right?"

"Very good. Breech babies don't come out very easy," he says.

"Breech. What's that?" Sam asks.

"Bottom first. That's not what we want. But not to worry, your baby's bottom is right here," he says, pushing on the top of my stomach again. "Feel right here," he says to Sam.

Sam puts his hand on my stomach and pushes his fingers against the spot. "That's it? That's her bottom?" he asks fascinated, and I smile. I don't think I've ever heard Sam use the word *bottom* before.

"Yep." Dr. Fletcher reaches for Sam's wrist. "Push a little harder," he says, pulling his fingers down the side of my stomach. "Feel her back?"

"Yeah."

"And that?" He pushes Sam's hand against my lower stomach. "That's her head."

"Wow," Sam says. "That's incredible."

Dr. Fletcher grins. "Cool, huh?"

"She's so big now," Sam says, smiling at me.

“I’d say she’s about six pounds,” Dr. Fletcher says, pulling out his measuring tape. He stretches it across my stomach. “Right on track for thirty-seven weeks.”

Sam squeezes my hand and I smile at him, until Dr. Fletcher raises the dreaded stirrups and locks them into place. “Okay, let’s see what’s going on inside and then—since you are my favorite patient—I’ll do an ultrasound just to be sure,” he says, redeeming himself.

“Okay.” I scoot my bottom down toward the edge of the table and prop my feet up in the stirrups. “Sam,” I say, tugging him back a little.

He stands by my shoulder and waits patiently for the verdict.

“Well, Lucy, you’re not dilated at all,” Dr. Fletcher says, pulling his gloves off. “As far as I can tell, you’re still two to three weeks out.”

I exhale a relieved breath and so does Sam.

“It’s your first baby, they usually take their time. In fact, I don’t want you to be discouraged if you’re still pregnant on your due date.” He grabs a pamphlet and hands it to me. “I want you to read this. It explains the stages of labor, so you’ll know when it’s the real thing.”

“Okay,” I say, taking it from him.

“Now, are you ready to take a look at your baby?”

I bob my head and smile. “Yes.”

Sam smiles at me while Dr. Fletcher turns on the ultrasound machine and squeezes warm jelly on my stomach. “How does that feel? Okay?”

“Mm-hmm, it’s fine.”

He presses the wand to my stomach and the fast swooshing sound of the baby’s heartbeat echoes through the room. “That’s a great sound, isn’t it?” he says, smiling at us.

“The best,” Sam answers, and I squeeze his hand.



“There she is,” he says, pointing to the black-and-white monitor. “See her face?”

“I see it.” I gasp, watching her open and close her mouth.

“Is she sucking her thumb?” Sam asks, astonished.

“Yeah. Look, you can see her whole hand.” He freezes the frame. “Five perfect fingers.”

I stare at the screen with awe. “She’s perfect.”

He moves the wand around some more and takes a few measurements. “Everything looks really good.”

“Could you maybe just check her heart?” Sam asks, and I glance up at him, because I know he’s thinking about Tristan.

“Sure, let’s take a look,” Dr. Fletcher says, clicking something on the computer that lights up the screen with red and blue. “This shows her blood movement. See it in the umbilical cord?”

“Yes,” I say, feeling Sam tense beside me.

“You can see it moving through her heart,” he says, pushing the wand around on my stomach. “And it’s doing exactly what it’s supposed to. Her heart looks great.” He smiles at Sam. “Nice and strong.”

I look up at Sam. “Just like her dad.”

Dr. Fletcher prints a few pictures for us and turns off the ultrasound machine. “Everything looks great, guys. A few more weeks and you’ll get to meet your baby girl.”

“Thanks, Dr. Fletcher,” Sam says, shaking his hand.

“My pleasure.”

“Dr. Fletcher, you’ll definitely be the one delivering the baby, right?” I ask, sitting up.

“I only have one other patient due this month, and she’s being induced tomorrow. After that, I’m all yours, Lucy.”

“Okay,” I say, smiling. “Just making sure.”

“I’ll see you next week, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and champ?” He holds his fist out in front of Sam. “Knock his ass out tomorrow.”

Sam smiles and hits Dr. Fletcher’s fist with his. “You got it, Dr. Fletcher.”

\* \* \*

“What do you think about this one?” I ask Sam, who reaches for the tag on the cream-colored crib and begins reading about its safety features.

He puts his hand on the side rail and gives it a tug to test its durability. “Looks good.”

“It’s really beautiful, isn’t it?” I ask, touching the floral applique on the front of the crib that matches the one on the back.

“It’s all hand-sculpted,” a salesperson says, joining us. She smiles and asks, “When are you due?”

“Oh, um—”

“A couple of months,” Sam answers, and I smile along with the lie. Even though people know I’m due soon, he doesn’t want the media catching wind of my exact due date.

“Well, this particular piece would have to be ordered, but it should arrive well before your little one. And it’s on sale,” she says exuberantly, gesturing to the four-thousand-dollar price tag that I didn’t see before.

I look at Sam and suggest, “Maybe we should look at a few more before we decide.”

“Okay, well, let me know if you have any questions,” the salesperson says, before leaving us.

“Sam, this crib is four thousand dollars,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s too much.”

“Not for our daughter. If this is the crib you like, let’s get it.”

“Let’s just look at a few more, okay? We don’t even know if this crib would arrive in time.”

“Well, what about that one?” he asks, pointing across the showroom to an antique white crib that has tufted upholstery on the back with arched molding that resembles a beautiful headboard standing about a foot higher than the slats in the front. It’s the perfect mix of vintage and modern.

“Oh, Sam, I love that one,” I say, crossing the showroom to go look at it. I’m delightfully surprised when I see that it’s priced much lower than the last one we looked at.

I wait while Sam inspects the safety features.

“What do you think? Should we get this one?” I ask, hoping he likes it as much as I do.

He smiles and puts his hand on the mattress, rubbing it over the pink sheet that’s covered in tiny white flowers. “Yeah, I can see her in this.”

I beam at him, feeling like my heart might explode. “So can I.”

“Let’s get this whole set,” he says, gesturing at the coordinating dresser and changing table, which together costs a small fortune.

I nod over the sticker shock, like I have a hundred times since we started buying furniture for our new house, and ask, “Are you sure?”

“Lucy, stop worrying about the price tag. This furniture’s going in our baby girl’s room. I want the very best for her.”

I smile softly over my reluctance. “Violet is one lucky little girl.”

“No, no, no. Her name is Caroline.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I thought you like Ava.”

“I don’t know, I think Caroline has a nice ring to it.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see what sticks when we see her.”

“Okay.” He laughs. “I’ll go get the saleslady.”

“Okay.”

I look at the crib again, admiring it, and spot a plush white glider in the corner of the display with a matching ottoman. I walk over to it and sit down, and I’m instantly enveloped in its comfort. I put my feet up and start rocking backward and forward, and my eyes close automatically. *Oh, yeah. That’s the stuff.*

“We’ll take that too,” Sam says, and I peek my eyes open at him. He’s got a big smile on his face that’s accompanied by my favorite pair of dimples.

I smile at him and say softly, “Thank you.”

## Chapter 43

*Lucy*

“Good morning,” Sam says, joining me in the baby’s nursery. “What are you doing up so early?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” I say, folding a small white onesie and putting it away in the dresser, which Sam had delivered yesterday, just hours after we bought it. He wanted everything to be done before he left for New York today.

He pulls the folded onesie out of the drawer and holds it up between us. “I can’t believe she’ll be this small.” He lays it on my stomach and it stays in place.

I fold it again and put it back in the drawer. “If she’s so little, why am I so big?” I groan, bending over to get another onesie out of the laundry basket.

He laughs and wraps his arms around me. “You aren’t that big.”

“I feel like a whale.”

“Well, you don’t look like one,” he says, kissing the top of my head. He releases me and I pick up another onesie to fold. “Luc, I have to leave soon. My flight’s in a couple of hours. Tristan and Miles are on their way over.”

“Okay,” I say, glancing up at him.

“Hey.” He reaches for my hand. “It’s *not* going to be like last time.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You were right.” He pulls me close. “I shouldn’t have fought Brody Crawford. I wasn’t ready. But I’m ready now, Lucy. I’ve never been more ready.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod. “Okay.”

“Lucy, if you don’t want me to do it, I won’t do it. Okay? I won’t go...if that’s what you really want. Because as much as I want to win tonight, it’s not more important than you.”

I close my eyes and put my head on his chest, ignoring the contraction that's slowly moving across my stomach. "No, Sam, that's not what I want."

"Do you mean that?"

I rest my chin on his chest and look up at him. "I want you to win too. I want it *so* badly for you. And I know how much you need it. Especially since it's your last match. I'm just worried. I can't pretend that I'm not."

"You don't have to worry this time, Lamb."

"That's what you always say."

"I know. But I'm asking you to trust me. It's going to be different this time."

"Just promise me you'll fight smart. Promise me you won't get hit in the head a lot."

"I'll do my best." He laughs softly.

"It isn't funny, Sam."

He closes his eyes and falls into the glider in front of the window. "I know."

"No, you don't. You don't know what it was like to see you after the last fight. You could barely speak," I say, recalling how frightening it was to see him like that. "You could hardly lift your head up."

"I know, Lucy."

"Please stop saying that, because you *don't* know. You don't know what it was like for me."

"Come here," he says, holding his hand out. I take it and he pulls me down into his lap. "Come here," he says again softly, wrapping his arms around me. He rocks back and forth. "I don't know what that was like for you. But it must have been pretty scary."

"Yes...it was."

"My number one job is to protect you. From anything that might hurt you, including moments like that. I'm sorry I didn't

do my job that night.”

“Your number one job should be to protect yourself. I need you here with me, okay? Our baby needs you here. In one piece. Promise me you’ll fight smart tonight.”

“I promise. I’ve learned my lesson, Lucy. I wouldn’t be going into this match if I wasn’t sure I could beat Valentine.”

“How are you so sure?”

“I don’t know how to explain it, I just feel it inside. I think maybe...maybe its Joe. I think that maybe he’s watching out for me.”

I swallow down the emotion that’s suddenly choking me. “I’m sure he is.”

“And I’ve got Tristan this time. He was pretty upset after the Crawford fight. He was pissed, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He said he plans on being around a long time and doesn’t want to see me punch-drunk either. He wants me to fight smarter.”

I smile softly. “Because he loves you too.”

“Yeah, he does. So I’m pretty damn lucky to have him in my corner tonight.”

I nod against his chest and sigh. “I’m sorry I can’t be there.”

“What are you talking about?” He presses my hand to his chest over his heart. “You’re in here deep. Where I go, you go.”

I smile over the fear that’s pulsing through my veins. “I love you, Sam Cole.”

“I love you too, Lucy Cole.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Not yet.”

“See, I’ve been thinking about that, and I’m not sure I’m okay with it anymore.”

“Sam, if you think I’m putting on a wedding dress before this baby is born, you have another thing coming.”

“I’m not asking for a wedding.”

“Well what are you asking for?”

“Lucy, I don’t want our baby’s last name to be Cole if yours isn’t.”

I smile softly. “The baby won’t know the difference.”

“I want us to be a family.” He rubs his hand over my tight stomach. “The Cole family.”

“You want me to change my name?”

“I want to get married, Lamb. We don’t need a wedding. I don’t care about that.”

“Me neither,” I say, wrapping my hand behind his neck. “I never even wanted a wedding.”

“Well, it’s settled then.” He holds my face and rubs his thumb across my cheek. “We’re getting married.”

I smile and drop my forehead to his. “Nothing would make me happier.”

“Sam, you up there?” Miles calls from downstairs.

“You know, I really thought we’d take the keys away when we moved,” I say, shaking my head.

Sam kisses me and stands up, bringing me to my feet with him. “We’re getting married!” He swats my bottom and it makes me laugh. “Miles,” he calls down the hall, “we’re getting married!”

I follow him downstairs, but not nearly as fast. By the time I get there, he’s already outside talking to Tristan. “Hey, Miles.”

Miles holds his hands out and looks at me. “Luc, you’re getting bigger every time I see you.”

“Gee, thanks, Miles.”

“I meant the baby,” he says, pulling me into a hug. “Come on.”



“Did I hear somebody say they’re getting married?” Tristan asks, walking through the front door with Sam.

“Hey, Tris.” I laugh. “I guess so.”

“When exactly is this happening?” Miles asks.

“Tomorrow. As soon as we’re back,” Sam says excitedly.

“How about next weekend? We need to find somebody to do it.”

“Okay. Next weekend it is.”

“Now that we’ve got that worked out, you want to go get your bag?” Miles asks, looking at his watch. “We gotta go.”

Sam gives me a firm kiss, then he bends down and kisses my belly. “I’ve got to go, baby.”

I laugh and watch him run up the stairs to get his bag. But as soon as he’s gone, the fear returns, weighting my shoulders. I look at Tristan and Miles and plead, “Please don’t let this be a repeat of last time.”

“Lucy, you don’t have anything to worry about,” Miles says unconvincingly.

“Are you kidding me right now, Miles?”

“Lucy, I’ve known you and Sam most of my life,” Tristan says, putting his hands on my shoulders. “I love you both. I am not going to let that happen, okay?”

I duck my head and blink back tears that I’ve been holding in all morning.

“Come here,” he says, wrapping his strong arms around me, and I’m comforted to know that he’s in good health again.

“Are you sure *you’re* ready?” I ask him.

“I’m more than ready. Tonight’s our night, Luc.” He holds up his fist. “This one’s for Joe.”

\* \* \*

My phone rings on the kitchen table a few feet away from me, but I’m too busy gripping the kitchen counter to care. I inhale a slow, deep breath as a contraction passes, and turn off the

faucet over the sink, which I abandoned when the contraction snuck up on me. I turn around and lean against the counter and close my eyes, but my phone rings again, demanding my attention. I go grab it and answer it. “Hey, Bas.”

“Are you going to come answer the door? I’ve been standing here knocking.”

“Yeah,” I say, making my way across the house.

I hang up and open the front door. Sebastian is standing on my front porch in the dark, lit by the glow of the carriage lights. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you knocking.”

He bats away a bug and grips the takeout in his hands. “Well I suppose it’s hard to hear all the way across your giant house.”

“Ha. Ha.” I step aside and he walks into the foyer.

“You okay?” he asks, giving me a concerned look. “You look flushed.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I close the door behind him and lock it.

“Well, I hope you’re hungry.” He holds up the bag in his hand. “I brought Indian.”

“Hunger is sort of a constant state with me these days,” I say, following him to the kitchen. “So...yeah.”

He laughs and puts the bag down on the kitchen island. “Have you talked to Sam?” he asks excitedly.

“Yeah, just a few minutes ago. But the commissioner was coming in so he had to go.”

“Oh, my God,” he groans, squeezing his eyes shut. “This could be the last fight of his career. I can’t believe we’re not there.”

“This *is* the last fight of his career,” I confirm. “And please don’t rub it in. I’ve been stressed about it all afternoon.”

“Sorry.” He gives me a small shrug, “I won’t mention it again. This is a stress-free zone,” he says, waving his hands over the counter and food. “It’s not good for the baby, remember?”

I inhale a deep breath and blow it out slowly. “I know.”

“He’s going to be fine.”

“Yeah,” I say, trying to convince myself.

“How did he sound when you talked to him?”

“Good. Ready.”

“Tonight’s going to be different. I can feel it.”

“I hope you’re right,” I say, trying to let go of my worry.

“I usually am.” He winks. “Come on, let’s take our plates to the living room so we can watch the preshow before the fight starts.” He rubs his hands together excitedly.

“Okay. You want something to drink?” I ask, on my way over to the fridge.

“Water’s fine.”

I open the fridge to get him a bottle of water and another Braxton Hicks contraction squeezes my stomach. I pause and close my eyes and wait for it to pass, but my eyes pop open when it squeezes me harder, forcing the air from my lungs with a quiet breath.

“You okay?” Bas asks, waiting for me to turn around.

“Mm-hmm,” I say. “Just looking for some water.”

He pulls the other refrigerator door open. “It’s right there,” he says, reaching over my shoulder to grab it.

“Oh...” I release my grip on the door handle as the contraction passes. “I guess I didn’t see it.”

“Hey,” he says, putting his hand on my arm. “Sam’s going to be fine.”

I inhale a deep breath and exhale it quietly. “You really think so?”

“Yeah, I really do. Now, come on, let’s go watch.”

“Okay.”

We take our food to the living room and sit on the couch in front of the ridiculously large TV Sam had mounted above the

white brick fireplace between the built-ins that go up the wall on either side.

“This is incredible. It’s like we’re there,” Bas says, staring up at the giant screen.

*We welcome you to our live coverage at Madison Square Garden, where tonight we’ll see current titleholder Carey Valentine and former champion Sam Cole battle it out in the light-heavyweight title showdown...I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a crowd quite this excited. Carey Valentine fans are ready to see him prove that he deserves the title he’s defending tonight, which he took from Brody Crawford just last month...Which, of course, many say is a title Crawford himself didn’t actually earn—a title Sam Cole carried for a few years, not months... Look, we all know you’re a Sam Cole fan, but some small part of you has to think he’s met his match. Heck, some would argue that he met his match in Las Vegas when he lost his title to Brody Crawford...Brody Crawford? No way. Crawford’s a great fighter, but he’s not Sam’s match. That loss had more to do with Sam and less to do with Brody...You’re saying Sam beat himself that night...That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’ve talked to Sam and I believe wholeheartedly he wasn’t in a good place that night...Mentally, you mean?...That’s exactly what I mean. The loss of Joe Maloney took its toll on him, and he wasn’t ready to be back in the ring...Do you think he’s ready tonight?...I talked to Sam about twenty minutes ago. The Sam Cole we’re going to see tonight isn’t the same fighter we saw in Las Vegas...I sure hope you’re right. That would mean one heck of a show for this New York crowd.*

I put my plate down and squeeze Sebastian’s hand as the commentator introduces Sam, articulating every syllable as he says slowly, *Ladies and gentlemen...Sam...Cole!*

“Lucy...Lucy! Ow!” Sebastian says, pulling his hand away.

I ball my empty hands into tight fists and squeeze my eyes shut through another contraction.

“Lucy, what are you doing? Sam’s getting into the ring.” He wraps his hand around my arm and shakes me. “Hello?”

Earth to Lucy.”

I exhale loudly and open my eyes as it leaves me, sucking in another breath. “Sorry,” I pant.

“What is happening?”

“It was just a contraction. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“I’ve been getting them for months. I’m fine,” I say, turning my attention back to the TV. I watch Sam bounce from foot to foot inside the ring, cheering on the excited crowd as “Phenomenal” blares through the arena speakers. I smile softly as my anxiety begins to subside. “He looks like himself tonight.”

“Yeah, he does,” Bas says, bringing a forkful of rice to his mouth as he watches intently.

The camera zooms in on Sam’s face, and he looks into it and says, “You watching, baby?”

“Oh, my God,” Bas says over his mouthful, bumping my arm with his.

I smile and nod. “We’re watching,” I say quietly.

*For those who don't know, Sam is going to be a father soon...Very soon. In fact, his fiancée, Lucy, wasn't able to make it tonight because she's too far along to leave their home in Atlanta...No doubt, she's watching this on TV and rooting for Sam...We wish them both the best.*

“Ahhh,” I groan, leaning over.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Bas asks, but I can’t answer.

“Another contraction,” I grit through my teeth.

“Lucy, are you sure these are Braxton whatever?”

I nod and breathe through it, until it goes away. “Yeah, the doctor just checked me yesterday. He said I had at least two more weeks. I wasn’t dilated at all. I think I just need to get some more water. I probably didn’t drink enough today. I’ll be

right back.” I get up and go to the kitchen to pour myself another glass of water.

“Hurry up,” Bas calls from the living room. “They’re about to start.”

“Be right there,” I say as another contraction grips me. I lean over the sink and suck in a lungful of air, but it’s forced out with a loud, “Ow.”

“Lucy?” Sebastian walks into the kitchen and sees me hugging the kitchen sink. “Are you having another contraction?” I nod, but don’t answer. “What can I do?”

“Nothing,” I say. “I’m fine. I just need to sit down.” I take my glass of water back to the living room and Sebastian follows me.

I sit back down on the couch and stare at the TV as Sam and Carey circle each other inside the ring. Sam waits for Carey to throw the first punch, but he dodges it and follows with a fast right hook. At the same time, my stomach tightens under my shirt again.

“I have to pee.” I get up again.

“You can’t hold it?” Sebastian asks, glancing up at me quickly before turning his eyes back to the TV.

I shake my head and walk down the hall, slowly pacing up and down it, until the contraction passes. But before I reach the living room, another one wraps around me, squeezing tight. “Ahh,” I cry, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Oh, my God,” Sebastian says, finding me holding on to the wall. “I’m calling the doctor.” He pulls his phone out of the pocket of his joggers. “What’s his name?”

“No.” I shake my head. “You don’t need to do that. It’s just Braxton Hicks. I’m not in labor.” I catch my breath and walk back into the living room.

“Are you self-diagnosing right now?”

“Look at the stupid brochure,” I say, pointing to the *Stages of Labor* pamphlet on the coffee table. “Women think they’re

in labor all the time. It's normal to have contractions like this at the end."

He picks it up and quickly skims over it. "Yeah, when they're in labor!"

"Sebastian, I am not in labor. Do you hear me? Sam is eight hundred miles away right now, fighting Carey Valentine," I say through my teeth, looking up at the TV. "I am *not* in labor."

He puts the pamphlet down and presses his lips together. "Yeah. Okay." He pushes a button on his watch and sits back down on the couch.

"What are you doing?"

"Timing your contractions."

"Why?"

"The brochure says that when you have contractions five minutes apart for an hour, you're having a baby." He holds his wrist up. "Time's started."

"I'm *not* having a baby," I say, leaning against the arm of the couch.

"I sure hope not," he says, glancing over at me, unable to hide the concern in his voice.

I put my hand on my stomach and take a slow, calming breath before sitting back down. *I am not having you tonight, do you hear me?*

"Yes!" Bas shouts when Sam knocks Carey back against the ropes.

*This is definitely not the same Sam Cole we saw in Las Vegas, I'll give you that... Carey Valentine fans did not like that hit, but Sam seems pretty happy about it.*

Sam dodges several punches that Carey returns and then he throws a left hook at his face.

"Hell yeah! Show him who the fucking champ is!" Bas shouts, and I give him a surprised look.

“You’ve been hanging around Miles too much.”

Sam throws another left hook that leaves Carey with a bloody nose.

“Wooo! Yeah!” I shout, sitting up and clapping, but another contraction soon takes control of my body, making every muscle tighten. *No, no, no, no, no!* I lean back against the couch again and close my eyes.

*And this is why Sam Cole is such a dangerous boxer. There aren’t many southpaws in history that can hit as hard as he can.*

“Lucy, what are you doing?”

I shake my head back and forth. “Mmm-mmm.”

“Mmm-mmm, what?”

“Shhhh. Don’t talk.”

“Are you having another contraction?”

I don’t answer.

“How long have you been having it?”

I still can’t answer him.

“Lucy Marie Bennett.”

After a few more seconds, I open my eyes and he resets his watch. “Tell me when the next one happens.”

I inhale a deep breath and sit up. “Okay.”

*Sam Cole wins the second round.*

“Yes!” Sebastian makes a fist and I smile. “He’s going to win tonight, Luc,” he says excitedly, and I can’t help but feel the way I used to feel when Sam fought, before the Crawford fight. *Hopeful.*

*Carey Valentine looks unfazed by the first two rounds as they make their way back to the center of the ring. Sam has done a great job protecting himself tonight, especially after the beating he took in Las Vegas.*

I tap Sebastian’s arm and he looks at me. “What?”



I nod and close my eyes.

“Another one? Already? Shit, Lucy.”

I ball my fists up and press them against my thighs as my stomach turns into a tight ball that seems to be squeezing my organs and uterus together.

“Thirty seconds,” Bas says, and I grab his hand. “Forty seconds,” he says, and I squeeze it harder, trying to will the contraction away. “A minute.”

“Shit!” I say, keeping my grip on Bas’s hand. I huff loudly and fall back against the couch when it finally passes.

“A minute and ten seconds. Lucy—”

“I’m not in labor,” I pant, shaking my head back and forth.

*And Sam Cole has won another round.*

I open my eyes and see him sitting in the corner of the ring, covered in sweat, but there’s no blood that I can see. “He’s winning, Bas,” I say, smiling.

He glances at the TV and nods, then he looks at me again. “Lucy, if you have another contraction in the next two minutes, I’m calling the doctor.”

“I won’t.” I give him a weak smile. “I promise.”

He gives me a doubtful look.

“I promissssss,” I say through my teeth as another contraction pulls me up off the couch.

He huffs. “You promised!”

“I’m *not*...in labor,” I grit through my teeth.

He stands up and pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Oh, my God. We have to tell Sam. I have to call Miles.”

I hit his hand with my balled-up fist and knock his phone to the floor. “Don’t you dare.”

He picks up his phone and puts his hand on his hip. “Lucy, if you’re in labor, he needs to know.”

I look at him like he's grown a second head. "Are you kidding?" I ask, looking up at the TV. "He's in the middle of a fight. A career-defining fight. And I am *not* in labor," I say for the hundredth time. "It hasn't even been an hour. They're going to go away." As soon as I say it, another contraction grips me.

Sebastian helps me back to the couch and he sits beside me quietly, until it passes.

"I'm not in labor," I cry, accepting that I might actually be. "I *can't* be in labor. Dr. Fletcher said that we still had time. He told Sam to go to New York."

Bas nods and takes a deep breath. "Honey..." He wraps his hand around mine and says softly, "I know what your doctor told you, but I think you're in labor. And it's going to be okay." He smiles softly. "We're not going to panic and we're not going to freak out, because everything's going to be fine. We just need to breathe." He blows out a slow breath. "We both just need to breathe."

I nod and swallow down the fear that's racing through my veins. "Okay."

"I need the number to your doctor's office. Where's your phone?" he asks calmly.

"It's in the kitchen."

"Okay, I'll go get it." He gets up slowly and smiles softly. "Just stay calm and try to relax."

As soon as he's gone, another contraction wraps around me all the way to my back.

I don't hear Sebastian return, but I feel his hand wrap around mine. "You're doing great," he says, holding my hand until it's over.

I open my eyes and look at him. "They really hurt."

"I know. You have to breathe through them, okay?"

"I'm trying."

“Okay,” he says, handing me my phone. “Let’s call your doctor.”

I scroll through my contacts searching for the number.

*Sam Cole takes a hard hit to the face.*

My head snaps up.

“He’s fine, Lucy. It’s the fourth round and he’s blocked almost every hit. I need you to focus and find your doctor’s number.”

“Okay,” I say, pulling it up.

Sebastian takes my phone and holds it to his ear. “Hi, this is Sebastian Ford. I’m calling for Lucy Bennett, who’s a patient of Dr....”

“Fletcher.”

“Dr. Fletcher...She seems to be in labor...Yes, we’ve been timing them...They’re less than five minutes apart, actually... Okay, thank you.”

“What did they say?”

“They’re paging him. She said they’d call back if he wants you to go to the hospital.”

“If,” I say, sighing with relief. “See? This is normal. It could just be a false alarm.” I stare at him, no longer able to breathe or blink because another contraction is twisting my torso.

“Lucy?” He waves his hand in front of my face. “Lucy, are you having another contraction?”

“Mm-hmm,” I squeak.

*And the bell marks the end of the fifth round. By the looks of things, I’d say Sam Cole has won this round too.*

“I think I need to stand up,” I say, getting to my feet.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Yeah,” I say, waddling to the kitchen.

I put my hands on the cool marble counter and walk laps around the island, while Sebastian watches me. “This is better,” I say, ignoring the way my cami has rolled up over my belly. It feels better not binding me. “I think maybe a bath would feel good.”

“A bath? Right now?”

“Yeah.” I make my way over to the stairs.

“Okay,” he says hesitantly. He follows behind me as I slowly climb the stairs.

I pause halfway up and grip the banister. “Ahh,” I cry quietly as a contraction squeezes me.

“Maybe a bath isn’t a good idea, Luc.”

“I want a bath. It’ll relax me.”

“Okay.” He follows me to my room and turns the TV on while I undress in the bathroom.

I dim the lights and pour some bubble bath into the tub, then I light the candles that surround it. When it’s full, I step in and sink beneath the water, just in time for another contraction to strike. I sit up and put my hands on the sides of the tub, wincing through the pain. When it subsides, I lean back in the water and sink beneath the bubbles.

After ten minutes and several more contractions, Sebastian shouts from my room, “Sam just knocked Carey Valentine to the mat!”

I close my eyes and smile.

“He’s getting back up, but Sam looks great. He’s still got a lot of energy.”

I press my lips together and nod over tears that suddenly sting my eyes. “Please don’t come yet,” I whisper, putting my hands on my stomach. “You have to wait for your daddy to get back. I can’t do this without him.” Tears run down my cheeks as another contraction wraps around me.

“Lucy,” Sebastian says softly through the cracked door, “can I come in?”

“Yeah,” I squeak over the contraction.

“Are you okay?”

“No,” I cry.

He kneels on the floor next to the tub. “I know you’re scared right now. It’s okay.”

I pull my sudsy hand to my eyes and cry into it. “I can’t do this without him, Bas. I need Sam.”

“I know you do.”

“Wait until the fight’s over, then call Miles, okay? Maybe he can get a flight home tonight.”

He bobs his head. “Of course. I’m sure he’ll be able to. Don’t worry.”

“If he doesn’t, will you promise you’ll stay with me? Because I don’t have anyone else,” I say, looking up at him.

“Oh, Lucy. You don’t even have to ask.” He reaches for my hand. “I would never leave you. We’re in this together, whether we want to be or not.” He smiles and I nod over the tears rolling down my cheeks.

Another contraction grips me, squeezing me beneath the water, and I squeeze Sebastian’s hand.

“Okay, just try to breathe, you’re doing great.” He inhales a deep breath and blows it out slowly, and I do my best to copy him. “See, you’re doing it.”

I nod and squeeze his hand harder.

“It won’t last too much longer, just keep breathing.”

When it passes, I open my eyes and let go of Sebastian’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry.”

“I think maybe I should get dressed now. Has anyone from Dr. Fletcher’s office called back?”

“No, not yet. Want me to get you a change of clothes?”

“Maybe a pair of yoga pants and a tank top?”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

I step out of the tub and grab a towel, hurrying to dry myself off before another contraction renders me useless...and naked. I wrap it around me and stare at myself in the mirror. *You can do this.*

Sebastian walks back into the bathroom, unfazed that I’m wearing nothing more than a towel that barely wraps around my stomach.

“Oh, *SHIT*,” I say with wide eyes.

Sebastian’s face falls. “What, what is it?”

“I think my water just broke,” I say, afraid to look down at my wet feet, which I just dried off.

Sebastian looks down and gasps. “Either that or you just peed on the floor.”

I look down and see a puddle around my feet, but I don’t have long to fret over it. A contraction stronger than I’ve felt before moves from my front to my back, practically squeezing me in half. “Shit,” I cry, putting my hands on the counter and leaning over it.

“Screw the doctor, I’m taking you to the hospital.”

## Chapter 44

*Sam*

*Carey Valentine is bleeding from the right eye as he retreats to his corner following a brutal tenth round...That eye looks pretty bad, but the doctor is looking at it now...If he sees a problem, he'll stop the fight...It looks like he's okay.*

“Listen to me,” Tristan shouts, crouching down in front of me, while I sprawl my tired arms and legs in the corner of the ring. “You’ve got to make him miss. He can’t get a straight left hook on you. Don’t let him hit right. Keep making him use that left hand, okay?”

“I’m trying. He’s fucking fast.”

“So are you.” He wipes my forehead with a towel. “Slow him down, he’s getting tired.”

“I am too.”

“Just watch his right, that’s where his strength is. Keep on him, tire him out, stay on his right side. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” I shrug off Mikey, who’s trying to give me water. “I’m good,” I say to him, barely able to hear myself over the crowd.

“Look at me, Sam,” Tristan shouts, grabbing my attention again. “This is your night. He’s not going to take it from you. We’re not going to let him. *We* got you,” he says, patting his heart. “It’s your night. Now go take it.”

He jumps down out of the ring and I stand up on my tired legs, forcing my heavy feet to carry me to the center of the mat.

*Both fighters looking tired as we enter the eleventh round...While Sam appears to have won most of the earlier rounds, it looks like the last few went to Carey...It's going to be a close fight to the finish.*

Carey stands across from me, holding his gloves up, but I see his arms swaying a little. *I'm not that tired.* I drop my head

from side to side and wait for the bell. When it rings, I throw a left hook without hesitating that takes him by surprise.

“Use your speed, Sam, use your speed!” Tristan shouts from beside the ring.

I throw another left hook and a right hook that connects with Carey’s face, but he swings his arm around me to keep from stumbling back. “Get off me!” I growl over my mouth guard, punching his shoulder with my right glove, but he pushes me across the mat into the corner.

“That’s holding!” Tristan and Miles shout in unison. “He’s holding!” Tris yells again.

Carey punches me several times, hitting my shoulder and neck and jaw, so I go to body shots, hitting his ribs a few times, before the referee pulls us apart.

“Get off, get off.” The ref pushes Carey across the mat and I follow him back to the center of the ring. “You good?” he asks me, and I nod.

I take my stance in front of Carey and square my tense shoulders.

“He’s no champ!” Miles shouts, and Carey smiles over his mouth guard. He takes a swing, but I dodge it.

“There you go,” Tris says, circling the outside of the ring with me. “Keep moving those feet, keep moving, Sam! Move your head.” Carey punches left and I miss it. “Good!”

He dodges my right hook, but I inch closer and throw a hard left hook that smacks the side of his face and resonates through my arm all the way up to my shoulder. Carey stumbles back, but I stay on him.

“Apply that pressure, Sam! Apply the pressure,” Tris shouts at me, and I feel the energy from the crowd behind him buzzing through the arena. But Carey comes back with a fast right hook that connects with my face, and it pauses the world around me for a second. I blink as the arena comes rushing back into my ears, but Carey’s glove connects with my face again.



“Come on, Sam! Watch his right!”

I move my feet and watch him circle me.

“You can’t beat me!” he screams through the blood and sweat pouring down his face.

The bell rings in my ears over my pounding heart.

*I don't believe it! I don't think anyone thought we'd see twelve rounds tonight...Both fighters look tired...Carey Valentine definitely looks worse off with that cut over his eye, but I don't think he's ready to give up yet...Can you blame him? He's got a lot to prove...So does Sam. A whole career and a much talked about retirement. He is not going to go quietly into the night...Maybe Carey was a little too confident agreeing to this match.*

Tristan climbs into my corner and crouches in front of me while Mikey gives me water. “You’ve got to punch and get out of the way, Sam. Just keep moving.”

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do all night?”

“Yeah, well, just keep doing it. Stay focused. This is the last one, okay? This is it. This is your moment. Now you get back up and you take it. Don’t let him steal it from you, you take it! Take it for me and Lucy and your baby girl. Take it for Joe.”

\* \* \*

*Sam, Eight Months Earlier*

“Sam, what’s eatin’ ya?” Joe asks, watching me hit the speed bag.

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“You’ve said three words all morning. You’re not fine.” He sips his coffee from a paper cup. “Did I do something?”

I stop hitting the bag and look at him. “No, Joe, you didn’t do anything. I’m sorry. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“So I noticed.” He raises his thick eyebrows and asks, “Are you going to tell me what it is?”

I drop my head and catch my breath for a few seconds. “Lucy’s pregnant.”

His eyes widen a little, but he does his best to hide his shock. “She’s pregnant?”

I bring my gloves up and begin hitting the speed bag again. “Yeah. She found out last week.”

He nods and sips his coffee again. “Well, that’s...a surprise.”

“Yep.” I keep hitting the bag.

“Is it a good surprise?” he asks carefully, and I drop my gloves again.

“Yeah...it is.”

The corners of his mouth turn down and he gives me a concerned look. “But you’re worried.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I’m happy about it, I really am,” I say, smiling over the worry that’s consumed my every thought I’ve had since I found out. “I’ve always wanted kids with her. But now that it’s happening, I’m just, freaking out a little. I don’t know anything about being a father. I guess I’m just worried that I’ll mess it up somehow.”

He walks over to a chair and sits down. “You remember your first match?”

“My first amateur match?” I ask, sitting next to him.

“Yeah, what was his name? Bryant something?”

“Danny Bryant.” I nod over a small frown. “I hated that kid.”

“You were scared of that kid,” he clarifies.

“Yeah.” I laugh. “I was.”

“You were scared of him because he was good. He was really good.”

“Yeah, way to take it easy on me for my first match.”

“I put you up against him, because I knew you were better than he was. You just didn’t know it yet.”

“I won that match.”

“Yeah, and almost every other one after it.” He holds his head back and turns his palms up. “Now look at you.”

“So what are you saying? I was scared for no reason?”

“No, you had a good reason. Everyone was scared of that kid.” He laughs. “Just like every parent is afraid of screwing up. It’s normal to have doubts about becoming a father, Sam, but...I think this kid is pretty damn lucky.”

“You do?”

He puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “You’re going to be a great father, Sam.”

I smile and hold my glove out. “Well, I’ve had a pretty great role model.”

He smiles and hits my glove with his fist. “Come on, Rocky, we’ve got work to do.”

\* \* \*

“Protect yourself, Sam! Keep those hands up,” Tristan shouts from beside the ring.

I bring my shoulder up to my ear and block a punch that Carey throws at me.

*Look at that defense. I’ll tell you, this is the work of Sam’s longtime trainer—and coach tonight—Tristan Kelley, who worked alongside Joe Maloney for years.*

“Good! Good!” Tristan shouts.

Carey punches me again and I fire back with a strong right hook.

“Protect yourself!”

“Finish him, Sam, finish him!” Miles screams.

I throw a left hook and an uppercut to his ribs, pushing Carey back against the ropes, but he pivots and gets around me, pushing me against them instead.

“Get off the rope! Get off the rope!”

He punches me hard and the arena goes quiet again.

*Come on, Sam,* Joe growls in my ear, *show him the lion inside you.*

I push off the ropes with a loud roar. “Ahhhh,” I yell, hitting Carey hard.

*It’s a fight to the finish...Sam Cole is firing away.*

“Yeah, baby,” Miles screams. “Show him who the real champ is!”

“Southpaw, Sam, southpaw!” Tristan screams, and I pull my left arm back, releasing it with all the power I’ve got left.

*Southpaw uppercut and Valentine goes down!*

The mat shakes under my feet and the ref runs over and begins counting over Carey. *One...two...three...four...*

*He is not getting up. This might be it, ladies and gentlemen. Carey Valentine is not getting up.*

Carey pulls his knees under him and falls over again.

*Seven...eight...*

“He’s done, he’s done!” Miles shouts, charging the ring.

*Ten!* the referee shouts, and the arena goes crazy, flooding my ears with screams and cheers.

*The fight is over and Sam Cole has regained his title as the light-heavyweight champion of the world!*

I close my eyes and drop my head, feeling Miles and Tristan’s arms around me. “You did it, baby! You did it!”

I lift my heavy arms and hug Tristan. “This was you, it was all you.”

*Ladies and gentlemen,* the announcer says over the arena speakers, *from Madison Square Garden in New York City, at three minutes and two seconds into the final round, your winner by knockout, the light-heavyweight champion of the world...Sam...Cole!*

Everyone shouts and crowds into the ring around me. Miles holds my arm up, and I put my gloves in the air as

Mikey and Leon wrap the heavy belt around my waist. The cameras move in, getting close-ups of me, and I can only think of one thing. *Lucy.*

“Call Lucy,” I say to Miles over the noisy crowd and the pounding inside my chest. “Call Lucy!”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and makes a concerned face when he looks at it. He looks up at me and Tristan. “Come on, let’s get to the dressing room. Move,” he shouts to the people around us. “Sam, come on,” he says, leading me and the rest of the team down out of the ring.

I hold my gloves up and smile for the cameras that follow us through the arena, until we’re alone in the dressing room.

Miles closes the door behind us.

“What is it, Miles?”

“Hold on,” he says, holding his phone to his ear. “I couldn’t hear out there. I got a message from Sebastian.” He listens with the same concerned look on his face.

Tristan grabs my sore shoulder and squeezes it. “They probably couldn’t wait to congratulate you.”

Miles lowers the phone and gives me a panicked look. “Lucy’s in labor.”

I blink at him a few times and shake my pounding head. “What? No, that’s not right. She can’t be.”

He puts the phone on speaker and plays the message again.

*Miles, it’s Sebastian. When the fight’s over, I need you to have Sam call me. Lucy’s in labor. We’re on our way to the hospital now...*

*Not until the fight’s over,* Lucy says in the background, and my drained heart races inside my aching chest.

*After the fight, have him call me,* Sebastian reiterates.

“Get these fucking gloves off me now,” I shout to anyone within reaching distance. “Come on!” I shout, holding my gloves out. Tristan quickly begins to unlace them. “Call him back now,” I say to Miles. “Put it on speaker.”

Miles calls him and holds the phone out in front of me while it rings. “Miles?” Sebastian answers.

“Sebastian, it’s Sam. What’s happening? Where’s Lucy?”

“Sam, thank God. You need to come home. Get a flight as soon as you can. I think she’s going to have this baby tonight.”

“How long has she been in labor?” I ask, shocked.

“Since before the fight. Her water broke during the fourth or fifth round. I can’t remember, it’s all running together.”

“Her water broke?” I ask, panicked.

“Yes! We’re on our way to the hospital now. She’s been having really strong contractions.”

“Put her on the phone.”

“Hold on.”

“Sam?” Lucy cries into the phone.

“Hi, baby. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she says unconvincingly.

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have left. If I had known—”

“You won.” I hear the smile in her voice, which resonates deep inside my aching chest. “You did it, Sam. I’m so proud of you.”

I close my eyes over the conflicting feelings of joy and angst. “I’m coming home, Luc, just try to hold on for me. I want to be there so bad.”

“I know. I want you here too.” Her voiced trembles.

Tristan tugs my gloves off, and I take the phone in my wrapped hand and hold it up to my ear. “I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

“Just try to hurry.” She stifles a cry. “I need you.”

I swallow the guilt that’s choking me. “I will. I love you, Lamb.”

There’s silence.

“Lucy?”

*Ahhhh*, I hear her cry away from the phone.

“Lucy?”

“She’s having another contraction,” Sebastian says, and my heart pounds inside my chest.

“Sebastian...”

“I know. Just...hurry, okay?”

“Okay.”

I hang up the phone and hand it back to Miles. “You have to find us a flight now. We have to leave.”

“Yeah, okay.” He makes another call.

I look at Tristan, who’s as shocked as everyone else in the room. “We have to go now, where’s my bag?”

Miles holds his phone away from his mouth and says, “This is going to take a few minutes, go get a shower.”

“I don’t care about a shower!”

“Go take a shower.” He nods toward the bathroom. “You can’t meet your baby girl looking like that.”

I exhale a frustrated breath and hold my hands up in front of Tristan. “Cut the tape off.”

He pulls me over to a chair and sits me down, then he works to get the tape off. “You’ve got to get checked by the doctor before we go. It’s regulation.”

“Well, where the hell is he?”

“I’ll go get him.” He finishes cutting the tape off my hands and then goes to get him.

I open and close my sore fingers a few times, eyeing my red knuckles.

Leon grabs my face and turns it from side to side. “Your cheeks are a little red, but your face looks okay. I don’t see any swelling.”

Tristan returns with the doctor, who steps beside Leon and says, “Why don’t you let me take a look?”

“Hey, doc, I feel fine,” I say, eager to get in the shower, but he takes his time with the examination. He looks in my eyes and ears, he checks my reflexes, he feels my ribs. Finally he looks at Tristan, who’s watching intently, and says, “All clear, he looks good.”

“Thanks, doc,” Tristan says, shaking his hand.

“Much better than last time,” he says to me, giving me a slanted look.

“You should have seen the other guy,” I groan, getting up.

“I did.”

I roll my eyes and head for the shower.

“You need any help?” Tristan asks.

“No, I’m good. I’m tired, but I feel okay.” Besides the sudden burst of adrenaline and anxiety that’s still pulsing through my veins.

“All right, I’ll get you some ibuprofen and some water. I’ll put it on the counter. Take it when you get out.”

“Okay.” I take off my shorts and look at myself in the mirror. My hair is wet with sweat and there are red marks on my face and chest, but no blood or cuts. I close my eyes and inhale a slow breath. *This is not how I wanted to meet my daughter.* I open my eyes and turn on the water. When it’s barely warm, I step in.

I shower in record time, trying to keep my thoughts off Lucy, but it’s impossible. I struggle between the guilt of not being there, the fear of something going wrong, and the regret I’ll never be able to erase if I miss our daughter’s first breath. I get out and dry off, eyeing the bag that’s hanging on the back of the door, which is holding my suit for the press conference.

“Miles,” I shout, and he comes into the bathroom. “You’re crazy if you think I’m doing the conference.”



He shakes his head. “Obviously you’re not doing the conference. Relax. But what the hell else are you going to wear?”

“I’ve got his bags,” Mikey shouts, carrying my duffle bag into the bathroom. “I called the hotel and had them bring everything over.” He smiles. “You’re lucky the hotel is only a few blocks away.”

“Thanks, Mikey.” I open it and search for my joggers and a T-shirt. When I find them I get dressed and find my sneakers.

Miles walks back into the bathroom. “Sam, I couldn’t get a flight in the next hour.”

“Then keep looking.”

“So I chartered a private jet.”

“Oh...you did?”

“Yeah, it’s ready to go when we are. We just have to get to Teterboro.” He looks at his watch. “Traffic shouldn’t be too bad at this hour. Get your shoes on.”

“How long is the flight?”

“About two hours.”

I close my eyes and exhale a worried breath. “What am I going to do if I miss it, Miles?”

“You’re not gonna miss it. I’m not gonna let that happen, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, knowing he has no more control over the situation than I do.

“But hurry your ass up. You ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“Let’s go!”

## Chapter 45

*Lucy*

I lay my head back against the seat rest in Sebastian's car and close my watery eyes, but tears roll down my cheeks.

"He'll make it, Lucy, don't worry," Sebastian says, driving much too fast.

I grip the door handle nervously. "Please slow down."

He gives me a worried look that's mixed with empathy and takes his foot off the gas a little. "Sorry."

"We have time. I'm probably not even dilated yet."

*Ow! Shit!* I grip the door handle again as another contraction squeezes my stomach. My fingers curl around it tightly as it pulls harder and harder. "Shit!"

"Just hold on, we're almost there. It's not too much farther."

The contraction releases its grip on me and I rejoice for the minute it allows me to catch my breath before another one hits. I reach for the door handle again and grit through my teeth, "I had no idea it would feel like this. It burns."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. We're almost there. Just a couple more streets." I look up at the downtown buildings that glitter in the night sky and tower over the one-way streets that lead to the hospital. I stare at them, thinking fondly of our apartment, surprised that I actually miss it a little. When I see the hospital, I inhale a deep breath, feeling only slightly better.

"Okay," Sebastian says, pulling through the circular drive in front of the main entrance. "We're here." He gets out and runs around the car to open my door, which I practically fall out of into his arms, because as soon as my feet hit the pavement, another contraction strikes. I hold on to him and cry against his chest, squeezing his arms tightly, until it's over. When I loosen my grip on him, he looks down at me and says, "Okay, I now have a totally different opinion about those moaning pregnant ladies you see in the hospital on TV."

I give him a worried look. “Was it not quiet?”

He pulls his mouth to the side and shakes his head.

“Sorry.” I pout. “It hurts.”

“Sweetie, you can cry and moan as loud as you want.” He rubs my back and grabs my things. “Come on, they’re waiting on you.” He pulls me inside to an awaiting wheelchair and a man wearing gray scrubs.

“Lucy Bennett?” he asks, greeting us with an enthusiastic smile.

I look up at Sebastian and say softly, “It’s supposed to be Cole.”

Sebastian gives me a funny look and answers for me. “Yes, she’s Lucy Bennett. She’s a patient of Dr. Fletcher.”

“Okay, Lucy, why don’t you go ahead and have a seat.” He pushes the wheelchair toward me, which I happily fall into. “How are you guys doing tonight? Are you ready to have a baby?” he asks excitedly.

“Oh, um...” Sebastian smiles and shakes his head. “I’m not the father.”

“Oh”—he gives Sebastian a firm nod—“well, good for you.”

“No, I, um...” He looks at me and then looks at the man and says simply, “Thank you.”

I smile and take his hand as the man begins to push me, squeezing it tightly as another contraction works its way around my stomach.

“Her contractions are getting pretty strong,” Sebastian says, wincing with me.

“How’s your pain level, Lucy?”

“On what scale?” I grit.

“Let’s just go with a solid seven?” Bas offers.

“Okay, well we can help with that. After we get you upstairs, we can have the anesthesiologist come talk to you.”

“I don’t want an epidural,” I say to Sebastian, catching my breath.

“Mm-hmm.” He presses his lips together and nods over a concerned smile. “Let’s just see how you feel once you get settled in and then you can decide.”

The man wheels me into the elevator and we ride up to the maternity floor in uncomfortable silence, until the doors open and I’m greeted by two nurses in blue scrubs. One has short blond hair that’s pushed off her face by a stretchy white headband and the other has long curly brown hair that’s pulled back into a ponytail.

“Hi, Lucy, I’m Sarah,” the blonde says, giving me a welcoming smile.

The brunette brings her hands to her hips. “I’m Meghan. We’ll be your nurses tonight.”

“Hi,” I say, glancing up at them.

“Okay, Lucy, I leave you in their capable hands,” my wheelchair driver says, smiling at me. “Good luck.”

I reach for Sebastian’s hand as another contraction squeezes me, and he looks at the nurses expectantly. “Is her room ready?”

“Yes, right this way,” Meghan says, leading us to the far corner of the floor, away from the elevators and the nurses’ station. “Here’s your suite,” she says, walking into the spacious room.

Sebastian pushes me across the hardwood floor to the bed. “Is this where she’ll have the baby?”

“Yep,” Sarah says, closing the blinds over the large windows that overlook the city. “This is where she’ll labor, and when the time comes, we’ll give the room a bit of a clinical overhaul so that Dr. Fletcher can deliver her right here.”

“Is he here?” I ask hopefully.

“Yes. But he’s currently prepping for a C-section.”

“Right,” I say, remembering that I’m not his only patient. “How long does that take?” I ask selfishly.

Meghan looks up from the various devices she’s checking around the room and says, “Don’t worry, Lucy, he’ll be here.”

“Are you expecting anyone else?” Sarah asks, helping me up onto the bed, which is surprisingly soft.

“Yes, my fiancé. He’s flying back from New York right now.”

“Oh, good,” she says. “We were worried he wouldn’t make it back in time.”

“You know who he is, then,” Sebastian says.

“Yes. But don’t worry. Your privacy is our *second* highest concern,” she says, winking at me.

“What’s your first?” Sebastian asks, putting my bag down.

“Mom and baby, of course.”

“Oh, right,” Sebastian says.

“Speaking of which,” I groan, and close my eyes.

“Okay, just take deep breaths,” Sarah says calmly as the contraction wraps around me. She puts her hand on my back and says again, “Deep breaths.” I try to breathe in and out as she rubs my back through the contraction. When it passes, she smiles and says, “Good job.”

“Lucy, why don’t you go ahead and get changed,” Meghan says, handing me a soft open-back hospital gown, reminiscent of my days after the accident. “We’ll be back in a few minutes. Everything off, ties go in the back.”

They leave the room and Sebastian gives me an empathetic look, as if he’s watching my dignity jump right off me, one traitorous piece at a time. “Want me to step out?” he asks, while I gather the gown in my hands.

“No, just turn around. I wouldn’t want to scar you for life with my alien body.”

“You know I really don’t care.”

“My dignity is abandoning me by the second. I’d like to hold on to as much of it as possible for as long as I can.”

He laughs and turns around and patiently faces the wall while I change into the gown.

“The nurses are young,” I say, yanking my yoga pants off my ankles.

“Yeah, but they seem to know what they’re doing.”

I pull my shirt off over my head and say, “As long as Dr. Fletcher is here, that’s all I care about.”

“That’s *all*?” he asks, turning his head toward his shoulder.

“Well, obviously that’s not all I care about.” I tie my gown behind me and sit back down on the comfortable bed, feeling slightly better to be out of my binding clothes. “Okay,” I say, scooting back against the pillows. “You can turn around.”

Sebastian turns around and sits on the edge of the bed. “Reminds me of the last time I saw you in a hospital bed.” He pulls the warmed blankets up over my legs and stomach. “How’s that?”

“Better.” I close my eyes and exhale softly.

“Of course, you weren’t smuggling a beach ball under your blankets back then.”

I laugh, but another contraction squeezes me, pulling me up off the pillows. “Ow,” I cry, gripping the rail on the side of the bed.

“Okay, just breathe,” he says calmly.

“I’m trying,” I cry.

“He’s right, you have to breathe through them, or they’ll hurt a lot worse,” a new nurse says, walking into the room.

I look up at her stern face and the wiry gray hair that surrounds it.

“Did you take any Lamaze classes?”

“No,” I say, grimacing.

She gives me a disapproving look. “The hospital offers them for a reason.”

“Actually, many would argue that Lamaze is a dated technique and the rhythmic breathing can worsen the pain,” Sebastian says confidently.

I smile at him as the contraction releases its grip on me. *The baby books.*

“Well, they probably haven’t delivered as many babies as I have,” she says to him.

“Will you be delivering *mine*?” I ask, trying to sort through feelings of concern and confidence.

“No,” Meghan says, walking back into the room. “Her shift just ended.”

“I just came to get an update for Dr. Fletcher.”

“Oh,” I say, glancing between them.

“Lucy, I’m going to go ahead and check you now,” Meghan says, and Sebastian springs to his feet. “We’ll see how far dilated you are.” She smiles and pulls on a pair of gloves.

“Okay.” I push the blankets off me and scoot down a little, but another contraction burns across my stomach. “Ow!”

“Okay, just breathe,” she says calmly, waiting to check me until it’s through. “Just tell me when it’s over.”

When it passes, I gasp, “It’s over.”

“All right, let’s see how far dilated you are.” She does a quick examination and I pray that I’m not dilated very far. She looks up at me and pulls her gloves off. “You’re about three centimeters.”

“That’s good right?” Sebastian asks hopefully. “That means we have time?”

“Yes, she has to get to ten centimeters before she can push.”

“And how long will that take?” he asks, giving her a serious look.

“Good luck,” the older nurse says to Meghan, and then leaves the room, in exchange for Sarah, who returns with a smile.

“Don’t worry about her,” Meghan says. “She’s always cranky at the end of her shift,” she whispers.

“But she’s delivered a lot of babies?” I ask, wondering how much experience Meghan and Sarah have.

“Yes. But so have we,” Sarah says confidently, and I exhale a comforted breath.

She reaches around me. “I’m going to get you hooked up to a fetal monitor now and then we can call the anesthesiologist.”

“Oh, but I don’t want an epidural.”

“Okay,” she says, helping me sit up. “Well, you don’t have to decide right now. Just let us know if you change your mind.”

“Okay.” She fastens the monitor around my stomach and it fills the room with the fast swooshing sound of the baby’s heartbeat. “I love that sound,” I say, falling back against the pillows.

“Is that the baby’s heartbeat?” Sebastian asks, and I realize he’s never heard it before.

“Yeah.” I smile up at him.

“It’s so fast,” he says, pulling his dark eyebrows together.

Meghan pats his shoulder reassuringly. “That’s a good thing.”

“Dr. Fletcher said her heart’s really strong. Just like Sam,” I say quietly to myself.

Sebastian reaches for my hand and sits beside me on the bed again. “He’s going to make it, Lucy.”

“We’ll be back soon. Just let us know if you need anything,” Sarah says, following Meghan out of the room.



“Want some of these really yummy-looking ice chips?” Sebastian asks, picking up a small plastic cup.

“Sure.”

He hands me the cup and I let a few small pieces of ice fall into my mouth. As they melt, the cool water runs down my throat and it actually makes me feel a little better. “Can I have some more?”

“Yeah.” He shakes a few more pieces into the cup and hands it back to me, but I almost crush it in my hand when another contraction wraps around me, squeezing me hard. I feel Sebastian take the cup from me. “Just breathe. Inhale... Exhale.”

When it’s over, I drop my head back against the pillows and pant, “Maybe I should just get the epidural.”

“Okay. If that’s what you want.”

“I’m just so tired,” I say, wondering how I’m going to endure this for hours.

“Do you want me to call the nurse?”

“No, not yet.” I close my eyes. “I can keep going. If I can just sleep for a few minutes, I think I can keep going.”

“Okay.”

I fall into a reprieve of sleep, but minutes, or maybe seconds later, another contraction jerks me awake. “Ow!” I cry, squeezing Sebastian’s hand, which is still wrapped around mine. I close my eyes again and take deep breaths, bearing the pain until it passes. Then I fall back asleep for a few minutes.

This goes on for a while.

“Lucy, I need to check you again,” I hear Meghan say, and it pulls me out of the light sleep I’d just fallen back into.

I open my eyes and nod reluctantly. “Okay.” I scoot down on the bed a little.

“Did you get some sleep?” she asks, pushing my knees apart.

“A little,” I say, wincing as another contraction strikes.

“Five centimeters. You’re moving quickly.”

“What?” I groan with what little air is left in my lungs.

“Already?” Sebastian asks, unable to hide the worry in his voice.

She looks at the paper that’s feeding out of the monitor beside the bed. “You’re having strong contractions, Lucy. They’re moving you along quickly.”

I give Sebastian a panicked look. “Call Sam. See how much longer.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and holds it to his ear. “The call won’t go through. Maybe they’re in the air.”

“Try Miles.”

“Don’t worry, Lucy. Even though you’re progressing quickly now, sometimes labor will stall.”

“Same with Miles. I’ll try to send a text.”

“We don’t get great reception in the hospital,” Megan adds, giving him an apologetic look.

Sebastian raises his eyebrows and asks, “Why don’t they put *that* on the brochure?”

I look at my stomach and say firmly, “Stay. In. There.”

Meghan laughs. “Just hang in there, he still has plenty of time. I’ll check on you again soon.”

“Bas, text him the room number.”

“I’m trying, but it won’t go through.” He picks up the hospital phone. “Maybe I can get through with the landline.” After a few seconds he says, “It’s going straight to voice mail.”

“Leave a message.”

“Okay.”

A short minute later, another contraction pulls me up off the pillows. I lean over and put my feet on the floor.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian asks.

“I need to walk.” I reach for his hand and slowly walk around the bed, groaning and crying through the pain. “Ow!” I groan, dropping my hands on the bed. “This fucking hurts!”

Sebastian waits for it to pass before saying, “Lucy, I really think you should get the epidural now.”

“Mm-hmm,” I squeak, climbing back into the bed.

“I’ll go get the nurse.”

“Mm-*HMMMMMM*.” The air rushes from my lungs as another contraction burns through me.

“Another one?” he asks, pausing at the door, but I don’t answer. “Nurse! Meghan...Sarah...somebody!” he shouts from the door, and then rushes back over to me.

“I want the epidural. I want the epidural,” I cry, gripping the bed sheets in my hands.

“Lucy, what’s going on?” Sarah asks, hurrying over to me.

“I need the epidural. I need it now. Please,” I cry.

“Okay, I’ll call the anesthesiologist. Just hang in there, you’re doing great.”

I try to focus on the swooshing of the baby’s heartbeat, but it slows down when the contraction squeezes me harder. “Did you hear that?” I ask Sebastian. “The baby’s heartbeat slowed down.”

“I didn’t hear it.”

“Get the nurse again.”

Sebastian calls for Sarah again and she comes back into my room. “The baby’s heart rate is slowing down,” he says to her.

She checks the paper feeding out of the monitor beside the bed. “Yes, it did drop a little, but it’s nothing to worry about. It happens with contractions because they’re pushing on the baby too.”

“Are they hurting her?”

“No, she just feels the pressure, kind of like a firm squeeze.”

“Okay.”

“Lucy, I’m Dr. Mooney,” an unfamiliar man says, entering the room. “Dr. Fletcher asked me to come check on you. I’m the attending physician.”

“Is he still in surgery?” I ask, trying to remember that the other mother needs him more than I do right now.

“Yes.” He gives me a warm smile. “But he should be here soon.”

I nod and exhale an anxious breath. “Okay,” I say quietly. “It’s going to be okayyyyyyy!”

“You’re having another contraction,” I hear him say, but I’m too lost in the pain to look up. “This graph shows her contractions,” he says to Sebastian. “You can see how strong they are and how quickly they’re coming. She’s not getting much of a break in between them.”

When the contraction passes, Dr. Mooney asks, “Lucy, would it be okay if I checked your progress now? I want to see how these contractions are moving you along.”

I nod and drop my knees to the side and tug Sebastian back by my head.

Dr. Mooney looks up at Sarah and asks, “What was she at last?”

“Five centimeters, about thirty minutes ago.”

“She’s at seven now.” He pulls his gloves off. “You’re progressing quickly, Lucy.”

“But I don’t want to progress quickly. I’m waiting on my fiancé. He’s flying in from New York. Is there something you can do to slow it down?”

“Sometimes the epidural slows it down a bit,” Sarah says.

Meghan walks back into the room, followed by a man in green scrubs, who I pray is the anesthesiologist.

He smiles at me. “Lucy, are you ready for your epidural now?”

I nod over the contraction that’s burning across my stomach. “Yes,” I say through my teeth, balling my hands into tight fists.

“Lucy, it was a pleasure to meet you,” Dr. Mooney says, before leaving the room. “Please tell Sam congratulations for me. We were all rooting for him.”

I nod and give a strained thumbs-up.

“Okay, Lucy, I need you to sit up and let your legs hang over the side of the bed.”

I inhale a deep breath and blow it out slowly, then I sit up and scoot to the edge of the bed. “Like this?” I ask, dangling my feet over the side.

“Yes, but...” He looks at Sebastian and asks, “Do you get light-headed easily?”

“Oh, um, no.” He shakes his head and gives me a curious look.

“Okay, I need you to come stand in front of her,” he says, positioning Sebastian in front of me. “Lucy, I’m going to move you to get you in the right position, but then I don’t want you to move. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He puts his hands on my back and bends me over my knees, squishing my stomach against my legs. “Keep your head down” he says, running his latex-covered finger down my spine, and I do as I’m told. “Keep her in this position,” he says to Sebastian. “No matter what. Do not let her move.”

“Okay,” Sebastian says, and I hear the concern in his voice.

“Lucy, you cannot try to sit up. Understand?”

“What happens if she sits up?” Bas asks.

“She’s not going to. Right, Lucy?”

“Right.” I hold my breath through the sharp pinch I feel in my back. “I’m having another contraction,” I groan, unable to breathe in this position.

“I know,” he says calmly. “But it should be the last one you feel. Just don’t move.” A rush of cool burns beneath my skin. “Almost done.”

“You’re doing great,” Sebastian says, smiling at me, but his face is a shade lighter than normal.

“Okay, you can sit up.”

“You’re done?” I ask, lifting my head tentatively.

“Yep. You should feel better in a few minutes.”

“Thank God,” Sebastian says quietly, letting go of me. He turns around and inhales a deep breath.

“You okay?” I ask him.

He turns back around and pulls his fist to his mouth. “Mm-hmm.” He nods. “I’m great,” he whispers.

“Okay, well, can you come back?” I ask, noticing that my legs suddenly feel like there are cement blocks tied to them.

He raises his eyebrows and approaches me with caution.

“I can’t move my legs,” I tell him.

“That’s the idea,” the anesthesiologist says. “You won’t feel anything from about your chest down.”

“Really?”

“Look,” he says, pointing to the monitor beside the bed. “You’re having a contraction right now.”

“I can’t feel it.”

“At all?” Bas asks.

“No, not at all.” A huge smile spreads across my face.

“Oh, thank God,” he says, sitting on the bed beside me. He falls back against it dramatically. “I don’t know how much more I could have taken.”

I laugh and try unsuccessfully to move back on the bed. “Could you help me?”

He sits up and helps me scoot back against the pillows. “Seriously, I’m going to kill Sam.”

“Sebastian.”

“Actually, I’m going to kill your doctor for telling him it was okay to leave. And then I’m going to kill Sam.”

“It’s not Dr. Fletcher’s fault.” I watch the contraction on the monitor and exhale a joyful breath. “It’s nobody’s fault,” I say, momentarily blissed out.

“Okay, Lucy, why don’t you try to get some rest now,” the anesthesiologist says. It won’t be long before you have to push.”

*Push? I can’t push until Sam gets here.*

Sebastian tries to hide the worried look on his face. “He’s right. You should just try to get some sleep.”

\* \* \*

I wake to a dimly lit room and Sebastian, whose face is glowing in the light of his phone. “Any word from Sam?” I ask him, trying to sit up.

He gets up from the couch across the room and pulls a chair up next to the bed. “No, not yet.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s late. You’ve been asleep for an hour.”

“Really?” I ask, thankful that more time has passed.

“Nurse Meghan was in here a few minutes ago, but she didn’t want to wake you. She said you’ll need your strength to push.”

“Well…” I exhale a determined breath. “I’m not doing that without Sam.”

He presses his lips together and says, “Just try to get some more sleep.”

“I’m not tired now. I just wish Sam would get here.”

“I know.” He puts his hand on mine and gives it a small squeeze. “Me too.”

“Did you sleep at all?” I ask him.

“Yes. No. Not really,” he admits. “I was updating Paul in the waiting room.”

“Paul’s here?”

“Of course. He came as soon as he got my message.”

I exhale a heavy breath and drop my head back against the pillows. “I’m sorry you had to fill in for Sam tonight. But I’m really glad you’re here.”

He gives me a tired smile and sighs. “This isn’t exactly how I saw your birth story going, but I’m glad I’m here too.” He glances up at the screen that’s monitoring my contractions. “Woah, that one’s off the charts. You can’t feel it?”

“Nope,” I say, shaking my head. “I just feel the pressure.” I look down at my contracting stomach and take a deep breath. “A *lot* of pressure.”

“You thirsty? I can offer you ice chips or”—he shakes the cup—“ice chips.”

I laugh and reach for the cup, but when he hands it to me, I freeze. “I have to get up,” I say, giving it back to him.

“What?”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I say again, unable to ignore the overwhelming urge. I put my hand on Sebastian’s arm and try to scoot to the edge of the bed.

“Lucy, you can’t get up,” he says, reminding me that my legs are no longer connected to my brain.

“I have to. You have to help me.”

“Hold on!” He runs to the door and calls down the hall for the nurse.

*Oh, God.* I can’t stop it. I push into the sensation.

“Lucy? What are you doing? Are you pushing?”

“No,” I say, trying to stop. But. I. Can’t. Stop. Pushing.



“Stop!” he orders. “Don’t push. I’ve got to get the nurse.”

“I can’t,” I grit through my teeth.

“Lucy, what’s going on?”

“She’s pushing!” Sebastian exclaims.

“Okay, I’ll go get Dr. Fletcher.”

The sensation leaves me as quickly as it came, and I gasp for air. “You have to stay in there,” I cry to the baby. “Please. Just a little longer. Your dad will be here any minute,” I say, trying to convince myself.

“Where’s my favorite patient?” Dr. Fletcher asks, walking into the room a few seconds later.

I burst into tears as soon as I look at him. “You’re here.”

He walks over to me and reaches for my hand. “I’m so sorry, Lucy. I never would have encouraged Sam to go to New York if I thought you’d be going into labor so soon.”

“I know...it’s okay.” I smile over the tears and worry. “He won.”

“I know.” He gives me a small smile and pats the back of my hand. “How are you holding up?”

“Okay,” I lie.

“Well, let’s take a look and see what’s happening.”

“I don’t want to push until Sam gets here.” I groan as the urge comes back with no way for me to ignore it. “How. Do. I. Stop?”

“You can’t, Lucy. You have to do what your body’s telling you to do.”

“No.” I shake my head and tears run down my cheeks. “She can’t come until Sam gets here.” I drop my head back against the pillow and try to fight it, but it’s a losing battle.

“It’s going to be okay,” Sebastian says, holding my hand while Dr. Fletcher examines me, but I see the worry in his eyes too.

“Okay, Lucy, push against my hand.” I do, but not by choice. “I can see the top of the baby’s head,” he says. “You’re fully dilated.”

I exhale as the urge leaves me again. “You can see her?”

“Yep.” He smiles. “She’s got a head full of hair.”

“She does?” I cry, conflicted with feelings of awe and angst.

Sebastian pulls his hand to his mouth and his eyes mist over.

Dr. Fletcher looks at me and says, “Lucy, I know you want to wait for Sam to get here. I want him here too. But your baby is ready now. She’s not going to wait. I need you to help me deliver her, okay? I can’t do it on my own, unless it’s in the OR, and I know you don’t want that.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head.

“Okay then. Every time you have a contraction, you’re going to feel the urge to push. I need you to listen to your body and push into that feeling.”

“Okay,” I cry, nodding over the tears that keep rolling down my cheeks.

“You can do this, Lucy,” Sebastian says, squeezing my hand.

\* \* \*

“Lucy, here comes another contraction, it’s time to push again,” Meghan says, but I can barely lift my head.

“I can’t, I’m too tired.” I shake my head and cry, “I can’t push anymore.”

“Yes you can,” Sebastian says, putting his hand behind my neck. “Come on.” He lifts my head and helps me curl my shoulders forward.

“You can do it, Lucy, just a little more,” Sarah encourages.

I close my eyes, squeeze every muscle in my body, and push as hard as I can.

“Push, Lucy, push!” Sebastian and Meghan say in unison.

“I’m pushing!”

“You have to push harder, Lucy,” Dr. Fletcher says, looking up at me. “I need your help, remember?”

“I can’t,” I cry, falling back against the pillows. “I can’t do it anymore.” Tears leak from my eyes, dampening the strands of hair that are sticking to my sweat-sheened face. “I need Sam. I can’t do this without him. I don’t want to do this without him,” I say to Sebastian.

“Lucy, listen to me,” Dr. Fletcher says, sounding unusually firm. “You’re having very strong contractions and you’ve been pushing for over an hour. If the baby’s heart rate keeps dropping, I’m going to have to do an emergency C-section. I don’t know how much more she can take.”

“What? No.” I cry harder.

“I know that’s not what you want, but if you don’t deliver soon, I won’t have a choice.”

“Look at me,” Sebastian says, squeezing my hand tight. “I know you need Sam right now. I know you don’t want to do this without him. I don’t want that either. But what we want doesn’t matter right now. The only thing that matters is getting the baby out safely.”

“I need you to give me just a few more pushes, Lucy,” Dr. Fletcher says. “But they have to be strong.”

Sebastian looks at me and says, “Be strong for her, Lucy. You can do this.”

I nod my heavy head and close my eyes, anticipating the next contraction. *I can do this*. I inhale a deep breath and blow it out slowly.

“Lucy!”

I open my eyes and see Sam rushing over to me. “Sam!” I cry, feeling my overworked heart beat faster inside my chest. I look up at his weary face through my watery eyes. “You made it.”

He reaches for my face and kisses me. “I’m sorry,” he kisses me again, “I’m so sorry. I tried to call when we landed.”

“Poor cell service,” Sebastian says, with a look of exasperation and relief.

“It’s okay.” I laugh through the tears that are running down my cheeks.

“I love you,” Sam says, kissing me again.

“I love you, too,” I cry with relief as the cloud of worry and sorrow vanishes.

“I thought I was going to miss it.”

“You almost did,” Dr. Fletcher says, giving him a tentative smile. “I just need Lucy to give me a couple of strong pushes.”

Sam quickly assesses me. “Are you okay? Are you in a lot of pain?”

“She got an epidural,” Sebastian answers. “But she’s been pushing for over an hour. She’s exhausted.”

“Okay, Lucy, it’s time to push again,” Meghan says from the other side of the bed.

“Make this one count,” Dr. Fletcher says.

“Okay.” I lift my head and push into the contraction that’s squeezing me—and the baby, I’m reminded.

“Hold her shoulders,” Sebastian says to Sam.

“Like this?” The feeling of Sam’s familiar hands on my back gives me a renewed energy, and I push harder.

“Good,” Dr. Fletcher encourages. “Keep pushing.”

“I’ll be right outside,” I hear Bas say through the pulsing in my ears.

“No,” I grit through my teeth.

“Lucy, focus,” Dr. Fletcher says.

“Keep pushing, baby,” Sam says softly, and I push harder.

“Good,” Dr. Fletcher says again. “Just like that.”

I exhale and fall back against the pillow. “I need a break,” I pant, feeling the pressure of the contraction leave me.

“Okay, but I want another push like that with the next contraction.”

I nod at Dr. Fletcher. “Okay.”

“You’re doing so good,” Sam says, pushing my hair off my face.

I look over at Sebastian, who’s standing near the door. “Hey,” I call to him, stretching my arm out.

He walks back over to me and takes my hand, and I give him a conflicted look. He smiles softly and says, “This is your time...for you and Sam.” He squeezes my hand. “I won’t be far.”

“Thank you,” I say, giving him a weak smile.

“Anytime.”

Sam puts his hand on Bas’s shoulder. “Thank you, Sebastian. For everything. I don’t know what we...what I would have done if you weren’t here.”

“My pleasure,” he says, giving me a sincere look. “Oh, and Sam?” he says, before leaving. “Congratulations on the win.”

“Thanks.” Sam smiles, but gives me a remorseful look.

“I’m so proud of you,” I say, squeezing his hand, but another contraction forces me to start pushing again. I lean forward and Sam puts his hands behind my shoulders again, pushing me forward. I squeeze every muscle in my body, groaning through my clenched teeth.

“Okay, Lucy, the baby’s crowning,” Dr. Fletcher says, and my heart beats faster.

I feel Sam leaning over me to look, and as much as I want to yank him back and tell him *no*, I can’t. Especially not when I hear him say, “Oh, my God, she has hair.” The awe and emotion in his voice dissolves every trivial concern I had.

“Keep pushing,” Dr. Fletcher says. “Don’t stop.”

Sam drops his head to mine. “We’re about to be a family.”

“Push, Lucy, keep pushing!” Meghan shouts, and I curl my shoulders into the contraction.

“Okay, Lucy, here she comes.”

“Keep pushing, baby, keep pushing,” Sam says, squeezing my hand, and I search for the last ounce of strength inside me. I push as hard as I can...and then everything slows to a quiet still around me.

My heart pounds inside my chest, echoing in my ears as I watch Dr. Fletcher work in slow motion. I look up at Sam, whose eyes fill with tears that spill down his cheeks, and the world disappears.

I look at the tiny pink baby in Dr. Fletcher’s hands, holding my breath, afraid that if I exhale, I may never be able to inhale again. My head spins and I close my eyes, but when I open them again, the world rushes back to me with the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard.

My baby crying.

I let out a joyful sob and Sam drops his forehead to mine. “She’s okay?” I ask Dr. Fletcher, who lays her on my chest.

“Yes, you have a healthy baby girl,” he says, smiling. “She just needed a little help getting the fluid out of her lungs.”

I look down at the tiny pink screaming creature on my chest and put my hands on her warm back. “I love her already,” I say to Sam, awed by the quickness in which my heart has grown to make room for her.

He puts his hand over mine and kisses her forehead. “Because she’s perfect.”

“Shhh...” I say against her head, kissing it softly. “Don’t cry, baby.” I rub her back and her puffy eyes peek open at Sam. She goes quiet and gazes at him, blinking a few times.

He smiles and cups her tiny head in his hand. “Hi, little lamb,” he says to her, and new tears fill my eyes.

“I need to take her for just a minute,” Sarah says, scooping her off my chest too soon.

Sam follows her to the warming table and watches her take the baby’s measurements. “Six pounds, seven ounces,” she reports, and I smile at Sam. He puts his finger in her little hand and my heart swells when she curls her tiny fingers around it. Sarah cleans her up and wraps her up like a burrito before handing her to Sam, and for a moment everyone else in the room disappears. All I see is Sam, holding our baby in his arms, gazing at her with a look of love and wonderment. He kisses her forehead and bounces her softly as he carries her over to me.

He places her in my arms and sits on the bed beside me.

“What are you going to name her?” Meghan asks, adjusting the pillows behind me.

I look at the little burrito in my arms and smile softly. “Josephine,” I say to Sam, who gives me a small, surprised smile. “After her grandpa Joe.”

He rubs his hand over his mouth and nods, but doesn’t say anything.

“I like that,” Meghan says. “She looks like a Joey.”

I reach for Sam’s hand and he says huskily, “He would have really loved her.”

I blink back new tears. “Yeah.” I touch her velvety cheek and run my hand over her soft caramel brown hair. “Joey,” I say softly.

## Chapter 46

*Lucy*

I open my eyes to the daylight that fills my hospital room and carefully roll over in my bed, thankful that I can feel my legs again. I look at Joey's bassinet, but it's empty.

"Hey," Sam says quietly, smiling at me from the chair across the room. His feet are propped up, and the baby is curled up on his chest, asleep.

I smile and try to sit up a little. "You look comfortable."

"Yeah, she's been keeping me company," he says, rubbing his hand over her back. He drops his chin and kisses the top of her head. "She was fussing a little bit, but I wanted to let you sleep."

I exhale an emotional breath. "Thanks."

She lets out a little cry and he pats her back. "I think maybe she's hungry." He gets up and walks over to me and I adjust my pillows, pulling one into my lap to prop my arms on. He hands her to me and she nuzzles my chest, opening her tiny mouth and mewling softly as she searches for my breast.

"I guess so." I laugh, pulling her close so she can find it.

Sam sits on the edge of the bed beside me and rubs her tiny head. After a few seconds, he looks at me and says, "You're amazing."

I stare at her tiny face and watch her nurse. "She's doing all the work."

He reaches for my face and I look up at him. "*You* are amazing. I'm so sorry I wasn't here," he says, unable to hide the guilt in his eyes.

"You were here for the most important part." I look down at her and smile softly. "That's all that matters."

"If I had known"—he shakes his head—"I wouldn't have gone. I would have forfeited the fight to be with you."



“I know. But I’m so glad you didn’t have to,” I say, smiling at him.

“Really?”

“You won,” I say, unable to hide my pride and belated excitement. I reach for his face with my free hand and repeat, “You won, Sam!”

He smiles. “Yeah, I did.”

“Let me look at you,” I say, inspecting his face.

He touches his forehead. “I think I got a bruise here,” he says, rubbing the spot.

When he moves his hand, I look at it. “It’s just a little red.” I turn his chin from one side to the other. “Your eyes look good.”

He gives me a heartfelt look and says, “I tried really hard not to get hit.”

“You did a good job.” I pull his mouth to mine and give him a soft kiss.

“It was hard. Carey Valentine is as good as everyone says he is.”

“He’s not as good as you.”

He drops his head and gives me a small smirk. “Did you get to see any of it?”

“The first few rounds. Between contractions.” I close my eyes and shake my head, recalling last night’s events. “Thank God Sebastian was there.”

He wraps his hand around mine. “You have no idea how bad I wanted to be here. When Miles told me you were in labor...” He pulls my hand to his mouth and exhales a heavy breath. “It was torture.” He rubs Joey’s soft little cheek with the back of his finger. “If I had missed it, I would have never forgiven myself.”

“But you didn’t,” I say, crinkling my eyes at him.

He smiles and says, “Thanks to Miles.”

“Why, what did he do?” I ask, giving him a slanted look.

“There weren’t any commercial flights available, so he chartered a private jet.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. He said he wasn’t going to let me miss the second biggest moment of my life.”

I give him a curious look. “Second? What was the first?”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out my engagement ring. “When you said that you’d marry me.”

I open my mouth and widen my eyes. “When did you get that?”

“I had Miles go get some of my things from the house. He said it was laying on the bathroom counter.”

I give him apologetic eyes. “I took it off to take a bath, but then my water broke, and, well...”

“I know. Sebastian told me.” He slides it back onto my finger. “Speaking of getting married.”

“I know how important it was to you to get married before she came.”

“Actually”—he laces his fingers with mine—“it’s not too late.”

I look down at the baby asleep on my breast. “Um, if you haven’t noticed.”

“It’s not too late for the birth certificate,” he says, smiling.

“Oh...what?” I ask, covering myself back up.

Someone knocks on the door and cracks it open. “Lucy?” Sebastian calls from the other side of it, and my heart swells.

“Come in,” I say, eager to see him.

“Hey,” he says softly, walking into the room with Paul. His eyes bounce between me and Sam and the baby, but ultimately land on the baby. “Oh, my God.” He leans over her and gasps. “I just can’t get over how precious she is. Can I hold her?” he asks tentatively.

“Of course.”

Sam carefully scoops her out of my arms and hands her to Sebastian. “Careful,” he says, cupping her head as Sebastian takes her. “You have to hold her head up.”

Sebastian cradles her in his arms and stares at her with awe. “She’s perfection,” he says, putting his finger in her tiny hand. “I’m your uncle Sebastian.” Paul looks over his shoulder and touches her little cheek. “We are so having a baby,” Bas says to him, and Paul smiles adoringly. Bas looks at Joey again and says softly to her, “You nearly gave me a heart attack last night.”

“I’m sorry.” I laugh, shaking my head.

“You were worth it,” he says to me. “And so were you,” he whispers to the baby, carefully laying her in the bassinet beside my bed.

“Sebastian.” Sam reaches for him and pulls him into a hug. “I can’t thank you enough for what you did last night.”

“Oh.” Sebastian pats his back. “It was an honor.” Sam releases him, and Sebastian goes on to say, “But if you ever do that to me again, I may never forgive you.”

Sam laughs. “Fair enough.”

“Don’t worry, if I ever get pregnant again, he’s going to be chained to me the whole time,” I tease.

“If?” Sam pulls his head back and smirks. “More like when.”

I smile and shake my head, but someone else knocks on the open door. “Can we come in?” Tristan asks, poking his head into the room.

“Yeah, come in,” Sam says to him.

Tristan walks in, followed by Molly, whose eyes fill with tears as soon as she sees the baby.

“Hey guys.” I smile at them as they walk over to me.

Tristan leans down and gives me a hug. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. And, thanks for looking out for Sam last night,” I say quietly.

“I told you I would.” He winks at me and stands up.

He glances over at the baby and smiles. “You sure picked one hell of a night to go into labor.”

“Tell me about it,” Sebastian says.

“It’s definitely one that none of us will ever forget,” Sam says, folding his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, because we were on the flight from hell,” Tris says, rolling his eyes dramatically.

“Why? What happened?” I ask glancing between them.

“Nothing happened. I was just a little anxious about getting back here.”

“Anxious? Is that what you call it?” Tristan shakes his head.

Molly leans down and squeezes me in her arms. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Molly.”

She releases me and makes her way around the bed, giving Sam a quick hug before turning all of her attention to Joey. “Oh, my gosh, she’s so precious,” she gushes, touching Joey’s cheek with the back of her finger.

Tristan walks over to Sam and looks at the baby asleep in the bassinet. “I guess I would’ve been freaking out too.”

Tristan puts his hand on Sam’s shoulder. “So, this is Joey?”

Sam smiles and nods. “Want to hold her?”

Tristan squares his shoulders and pulls his hand to his chest. “Oh, no, I don’t think I should,” he says, shaking his head.

Sam rolls his eyes. “Sit down.” He pushes Tristan down into a chair. “Now hold your arms out, like this,” he says,

showing him. He leans over and picks the baby up out of the bassinet and hands her to Tristan.

“Careful,” Molly says, hovering over Tristan’s shoulder.

“What if I drop her?”

“Don’t,” Sam says seriously, and I tense with concern. “Hold her head,” he says, putting Tristan’s hand under her head.

Tristan holds her against his chest and covers her back with his wide hand. “She’s so little and warm.” He smiles and drops his cheek to the top of her head. “Look at her snuggling up to me.”

“You look good with a baby in your arms,” I say, smiling at him.

“You really do,” Molly adds.

“Oh, no.” He shakes his head. “This is the closest I want to come, right here.” He kisses the top of her head and smiles again. “You’re never going to be allowed to go on a date, you know that, right?” he says softly to her.

There’s another knock at the door. “Hey,” Miles says, walking into the room with a giant smile on his face.

I look up at Sam. “He really doesn’t understand the concept of knocking, does he?” I laugh and Sam shakes his head.

“Is the little princess ready to meet her uncle Miles?”

“Hey, Miles.”

He bends down to give me a hug. “Hey, sweetheart. You doing okay?”

“Yeah.” I squeeze him and say softly, “Thanks for getting Sam back here in time.”

“I wouldn’t have let him miss it for anything in the world.” He kisses my cheek and stands up. “Okay, let me take a look at her,” he says, crossing the room. He leans over Tristan and stares at her. “Wow,” he says with a big smile on his face.

“Now that’s a good-looking kid.” He stands up and pulls Sam into a hug.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Sam smiles proudly.

“Yeah, just like her mom. Thank goodness she didn’t get your ugly mug.”

I shake my head and Sam laughs.

“You can hold her,” I say to Miles, just to watch him squirm like Tristan did.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Sam says, and Miles reaches down and scoops her up from Tristan without pause.

I tense for a moment, but he cups her head and holds her carefully as he brings her to his chest. “Hey, pretty girl,” he coos, bouncing her up and down gently, and she peeks her eyes open at him. “Well, hello.” He smiles at her.

After a few seconds, he notices the surprised looks on our faces. “What?”

“Nothing,” I say, stifling a confused laugh.

“Sorry to break up the party,” Meghan says, walking into the room. She hands me a clipboard with a piece of paper and a pen attached to it. “I just need you to fill this out for the birth certificate.”

“Wait,” Sam says, taking it from me. “Not yet.” He narrows his eyes at me. “We have to do something first.”

\* \* \*

“Sebastian, is this really necessary?” I ask, sitting on my hospital bed in front of him, while he blow-dries my freshly washed hair. “You’re going to wake up the baby.” I look over at her asleep in the basinet beside the bed.

“She’s fine, she’s in a milk coma.” He continues tugging my hair with a round brush.

“I guess you can add hairstylist to your resume now,” I tease.

“I’m not sure I’ve quite got the hang of it,” he says, blowing my hair all over my face. “But you only get married once. And call me crazy, but I think you’ll want a picture to commemorate the occasion. And I don’t want you looking back at it one day, wishing you’d washed your hair.”

“Okay, okay.” I laugh. “You’ve made your point.”

He grabs my makeup bag off the side table and plops it in my lap. “Or wishing that you’d put on a little makeup.”

I laugh again. “It’s killing you, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“That we’re not having a real wedding.”

He pauses and clears his throat. “I’ve come to terms with it.”

I reach over my shoulder and put my hand on his. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

“It does help ease the pain a little.”

I laugh and pull out my mirror. “I could use a little concealer.”

“And maybe some gloss. And a little mascara.”

“Bas, I just had a baby, let’s not call a dandelion a rose.”

“And let’s not call a rose a dandelion. *Rose*.”

I smile and put on some makeup while he finishes my hair. By the time we’re both done, you’d never know I’ve only had a few hours sleep in the last forty-eight hours.

“Okay, here are your options,” Bas says, pulling things out of my bag. “Stretchy black yoga pants or...loose gray yoga pants.”

I lean across the bed and reach for the loose gray pants.

“White shirt, no arguments.” He throws it at me. “Go change.”

“Okay, watch the baby.” I get up and walk to the bathroom, taking much too long to change. When I return, I find Sebastian sitting in the rocking chair in front of the

window, rocking the baby. “She was crying,” he says, patting her back.

“She seems pretty happy now.”

“Yeah.” He smiles at me. “You look great. Ready to get married in your hospital room.”

I laugh and sit back down on the bed. “Thanks.”

“Hey.” Sam walks in and I drink him in. He’s showered and shaved and his caramel-colored hair is perfectly styled. He’s wearing dark gray jeans, his brown leather utility boots, and a fitted white T-shirt that shows off the tattoos on *both* arms now. I wonder how long it will be before Joey takes up a spot on his skin.

“Hi,” I say, smiling up at him.

He leans over and kisses me. “You look beautiful.”

“You’re sweet.”

Miles, Tristan, and Molly follow him in, each carrying a large vase that’s overflowing with white lilies, hydrangeas, and orchids.

“What is this?” I ask, happily surprised, as they place them around the room.

Sam sits on the edge of the bed and reaches for my hand. “It might not be a big wedding, but you should still have flowers.”

I smile at him and squeeze his hand. “They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

“One more,” Paul says, carrying in a beautiful arrangement of pink hydrangeas and white roses. He hands me the small card attached to them, which simply says, *Congratulations. All my love, Janice.*

I smile and let go of the last thread of guilt that held me to my past. I tuck the card away and look up at Sam. All I can see now is my future.

A large man walks into the room with a warm smile on his face.



Sam stands up. “Lucy, this is the chaplain.”

“Hi Lucy, I’m Pastor O’Brien.” He reaches out to shake my hand.

“Hi.” I shake his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And is this the little one?” he asks, making his way over to Sebastian. “Miss Josephine?”

“Yes.” Sebastian smiles and stands up.

The chaplain puts his hand on Joey’s back and says something softly that I can’t hear. But it makes Sebastian smile. He turns around and looks at me and Sam. “Are we ready?”

Sam looks at me and I nod. “I should stand,” I say, putting my feet on the floor.

“No need,” the chaplain says, putting his hand up. “It works just as well sitting down.”

I give Sam a conflicted look, but he sits down next to me and says, “You just had a baby. Don’t get up.” He reaches for my hands and holds them in his.

“Okay.”

“Are there rings to exchange?” the chaplain asks.

I shake my head, but Sam smiles at me and says, “Yes, there are.” He looks at Miles, who reaches into his pocket and pulls out two shiny white gold rings.

“What?” I ask, smiling as he hands me one of the bands.

Sam looks at me and says, “I hope they’re okay. I know they’re simple.”

I nod and put my hand on his face, and he kisses me.

“Not yet!” The chaplain laughs, and we sit up straight. “Okay, Lucy, put the ring on Sam’s left hand and then repeat after me.”

“Okay.” I smile at Sam and slide the thick, shiny band onto his left ring finger, careful of his knuckles, which are still red from the fight. Then I repeat the words that the chaplain says.

“I, Lucy Bennett, take you, Sam Cole, to be my husband.” He smiles at me and my heart swells inside my tight chest. “To have and to hold from this day forward...for better or for worse...for richer or poorer...in sickness and in health...to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.” I swallow down the lump in my throat as our entire life flashes before me.

*I'm Sam, by the way. Sam Cole...Kids like us have to stick together, Lucy...We're going to get out of here one day, Luc. I promise...Marry me, Lamb. Be with me for the rest of our lives.*

Sam reaches up and wipes a tear from my cheek.

“Okay, Sam, put the ring on Lucy’s left hand.”

He slides the band onto my left ring finger and holds my hands in his. He repeats after the chaplain, “I, Sam Cole, take you, Lucy Bennett, to be my wife.” He smiles wide and new tears fill my eyes. “To have and to hold from this day forward...for better or for worse...for richer or poorer...in sickness and in health...to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.” He reaches up and tucks my hair behind my ear. “One more thing,” he says, gazing into my soul with his beautiful eyes. “Lucy, I’ve loved you since I was twelve years old. We didn’t have much back then, but I had everything, because I had you.”

I nod over my tears, because I felt the exact same way.

“And then I lost you.” He shakes his head and wipes my cheek. “I had everything I ever dreamed of, but I still had nothing, because I didn’t have you.” He shrugs. “The wins, the money...none of it matters without you.” He holds my face and I wrap my hand around his wrist. “I give it all to you, Lucy. Everything I was, everything I am, and everything I want to be. It belongs to you...I belong to you. And you belong to me.”

I wrap my hand behind his neck, blinking back tears that spill onto my cheeks. “I want it all. The good parts and the bad. I want you, Sam, forever.”

He pulls my face to his and kisses me hard.

“By the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife,” the chaplain says exuberantly, and everyone cheers and claps loudly.

The baby cries and I look up at Sebastian, who’s sniffing and wiping his face. Sam gets up and takes her from him, then he sits back down on the bed beside me. He holds her against his chest and she quiets down. “We’re a family now,” he says softly to her, and I bite my smiling lip.

I reach for his face and kiss him again. Then I drop my forehead to his and whisper, “The Cole family.”

He puts Joey in my arms and holds her tiny hand in his. “I have two lambs to protect now.”

I rub her soft cheek. “She’s the luckiest little girl in the world.”

He exhales an emotional breath and whispers, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For taking a risk on me.”

“Oh, Sam, you were never the risk. You were the reward.”

He smiles softly over the emotion he can’t hide and shows me the dimples in his flushed cheeks. “I love you, Lamb.”

“I love you too. Now and always.”

## Epilogue

*Lucy, Four Years Later*

“Can I have four?” Joey asks, standing beside me in the kitchen, holding her plate up.

“Four?” I laugh. “You can’t eat four pancakes.”

“But I’m four,” she says, smiling up at me with her caramel-colored curls hanging around her face. Her light blue eyes crinkle as she smiles, and her dimples go straight to my heart.

“Okay,” I say, scooping the pancakes out of the pan and sliding them onto her plate.

“Thank you,” she says, carrying her plate over to the table.

“Don’t forget the bacon,” I say, taking her a piece.

“Mommy?” she asks, lowering her milk, leaving behind a milk mustache.

I wipe it with a napkin. “What, baby?”

“Do I have a grandma?”

“Um.” I pull the chair out next to her and sit down.

“Because Maddie said that everyone has a grandma.”

“Well, no, not everyone. You don’t have a grandma or a grandpa.”

“But why?”

“Well,”—I tuck her soft curls behind her ear—“because my mommy, who would have been your grandma, died a long time ago.”

“She did?”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “She would have loved you though.”

“Well, what about your daddy? Did he die too?”

“No, but I didn’t really know my daddy.”

She gives me a concerned look. “That’s sad.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Who took care of you?”

“Well, when I was little, like you, I had foster parents that took care of me. But when I got older, I met your daddy and then he took care of me.”

She smiles over a mouthful of pancakes. “Just like he takes care of me?”

“Yep,” I say, touching the end of her nose.

“There are my girls,” Sam says, walking into the kitchen. He makes his way around the table and kisses the top of Joey’s head. Then he leans over my shoulder and kisses my cheek.

“Mmm, you smell good,” I say, letting him pull me up out of the chair and into his arms. I run my hands over the lapel of his dark suit jacket. “You look good too.”

“Big day today.” He widens his excited eyes and leans down to kiss my round belly. “Morning, baby.” He gives my stomach a little rub and I follow him over to the coffee.

“Daddy?” Joey calls across the kitchen.

“What, baby?”

“Did you live with your mommy and daddy?”

He gives me a curious look and I quietly explain, “She’s very curious about her grandparents. Or lack thereof.”

“Oh.” He makes a cup of coffee and carries it over to the table, and sits down beside her. “Well, baby girl, no. I didn’t live with my parents.”

She gives him a worried look. “Am I going to get to stay with you?”

“Of course.” He puts his hand on her cheek and smiles softly. “We’re a family. Families stay together. And when your little brother gets here, he’ll be part of our family too.”

She smiles and puts her hand on his face. “Good. I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, little lamb.”

“I just wish I had a grandma, like Maddie.”

He sips his coffee and sits back in his chair. “Did I ever tell you about your grandpa Joe?” he asks her, and she widens her blue eyes.

“That’s my name.”

He smiles. “Yeah, that’s who you’re named after.”

“But Josephine’s a girl’s name,” she says, shaking her head.

“Yeah, but Joseph was your grandpa’s name. Joseph Patrick Maloney. We called him Joe. He was kind of like my daddy.”

“Did you live with him?”

“No, but he took care of me for a really long time.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. He’s the one who taught me how to box.” He makes two fists and holds them up in front of Joey, and she hits them with hers.

“When you wear the funny red gloves on your hands?” She giggles.

“They’re called boxing gloves,” he says seriously, and I laugh. “He really wanted to meet you,” he says, leaning in close to her. “But he’s not here anymore.”

“Where did he go?” she asks innocently, and it tugs at my heart.

“He went to heaven, baby,” Sam says, and I swallow the unexpected lump in my throat.

“Oh.” She looks down at her plate and nods, but when the doorbell rings, she looks up and says excitedly, “Uncle Miles is here!”

I look at Sam. “It’s about time you took his key away,” I say, smiling over the sadness that quietly echoes inside me.

“I didn’t,” he says, getting up from the table. “That’s probably Tristan.”

“Joey, you might not have a grandma, but you have way too many uncles,” I say to her. She follows Sam to the front door, and I clean up her plate.

“Something smells good in here,” Tristan says, following Sam back into the kitchen.

“Hey, Tris.” I give him a hug. “I made pancakes and bacon. Make a plate.” I smile over his shoulder at Molly. “Oh, my gosh,” I say to her when he releases me. “Look at you!”

She gives me a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. “Six months today.” She puts her hand on her stomach. “Just a couple of months behind you.”

“You weren’t showing the last time I saw you.”

She shakes her head and laughs. “I know, he’s definitely getting bigger now. He’s been kicking like crazy too.”

“That’s because he’s going to be a fighter, like his dad,” Tristan says, swinging his arm around her neck. He kisses her cheek, and she bats him off.

“Sorry”—she widens her eyes—“you’ll have to excuse my husband.”

Sam stands behind me and puts his hands on either side of my stomach. “We all know who the fighter’s going to be.”

“Um...” I pull my head to the side and look up at him. “You better think again, champ.”

He laughs and gives Tristan a knowing look.

“Jo-Jo,” Miles calls across the house, letting himself in.

“Uncle Miles!” she squeals and runs to greet him.

He walks into the kitchen a few seconds later with Joey on his shoulders. “You guys ready to go or what?”

“Just waiting on Sebastian and Paul. Sebastian was meeting with a buyer at the gallery this morning.”

Miles looks at his watch. “Okay, but we’ve gotta go in a few minutes. We can’t be late for the grand opening.”

“What’s a grand opening?” Joey asks, holding on to his forehead.

He reaches up and flips her down off his shoulders, making her laugh. “What’s a grand opening?” he asks, giving her wide eyes.

She smiles and shows him her dimples.

“A grand opening is when you open something for the very first time.”

“Like a present?”

“Kind of like a present, yeah. Except that it’s a building.”

“A building?” she says with wide eyes.

“Yep. And today we’re opening a very special building. A community center that your daddy helped build for kids just like you,” he says, poking her stomach.

“What’s a community center?” she asks, stumbling over the word.

“It’s a place where kids and their families can go to play and have fun, where they feel safe.”

“Like a home?”

“Kinda like a home, but for lots of families, not just one.”

Sam kneels down next to Miles and asks Joey, “Do you know what we named it?”

She shakes her head and her little curls bounce around her face.

“The Joseph P. Maloney Community Center.”

“Oh,” she says seriously. “Is that where heaven is?”

I laugh over the tears that prick my eyes.

“No, baby. We just wanted to remember Grandpa Joe, so we named it after him.”

“Oh. That was nice of you, Daddy.”

He pulls her into his arms. “Come here,” he says, standing up with her.



“Sorry we’re late!” Sebastian shouts across the house. “Sorry we didn’t knock. It was open.” He walks into the kitchen with Paul on his heels. “Oh, well I see Miles is here, so no need to knock.” He laughs and so do I.

“Hey, Bas.” I reach for his neck and give him a hug. “How did it go this morning?”

“Well, the buyer couldn’t decide on a painting.”

“Oh,” I say, disappointed.

“So he decided to buy three.”

I gasp with excitement. “Three? Good job!”

He closes his eyes and bows. “You’re welcome.”

“Girl, you are on fire,” Molly says with excited eyes. “Between your gallery and the new baby line for Rock Love Threads, I think it’s safe to say you’ve made it.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I’m not sure I’ll ever feel like I’ve made it.”

“That’s what makes you great,” Paul says, winking at me.

“Thanks for hurrying over,” I say to him and Sebastian. “I know it isn’t easy with a baby in tow.”

“Are you kidding?” Paul says, swinging the car seat hanging on his arm. “We wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

I lean down and look at baby Liam asleep and snug in his seat. “Well, when you have the best baby in the entire world,” I say softly.

“Ha!” Bas throws his chin up. “You wouldn’t say that if you spent a night at our house.”

“He’s got a point,” Paul says.

Sebastian steps around him and looks at my dress. “I love this dress.”

“You should, you picked it out.”

“Huh, I thought it looked familiar.”

“Uncle Bas,” Joey says, and Sam puts her down. She runs over to Sebastian and he kneels down to give her a hug. When she releases him, he holds his head back and gasps. “You’ve gotten bigger since last week.”

Her smile lights up her face. “Do you like my dress?”

He presses his lips together and nods. “I do. You look so pretty.”

“Mommy said I can only wear it on special occasions.”

“That’s right,” I say, wrapping my hand around Sam’s. “And today is definitely a special occasion.”

Sam gives me an excited smile and says, “Let’s go.”

I look around the room at my chosen family, the one that I dreamt of as a child, and see Sam at the center of it all. His dimples light up my heart, which is so full, I sometimes wonder how much more joy it can hold. But then my baby rolls inside my tummy, reminding me that this is just the beginning of a lifetime of memories and moments like this, with a family that I love.

I reach for Joey’s hand and look up at Sam, feeling my heart swell inside my chest when he looks at me with his beautiful eyes. “Okay,” I say to him, “let’s go.”

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## About the Author

Robin is a published author who spends her time raising kids, writing books, and balancing a career in no particular order. She is an extroverted introvert with a healthy dependency on her horoscope and a knack for plotting emotionally charged love stories. She loves the ocean, thunderstorms, coffee, wine, and Steel Magnolias. She hates turtlenecks, chunky jewelry, kitchen gadgets and high heels, though she begrudgingly wears them often. Robin lives in Florida with her husband and three children.

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