

A man with a beard and a woman with long blonde hair are shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The man is on the left, wearing a dark t-shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a white top. The background is dark and textured.

A
Heartstrings
NOVEL

**TRULY
MADLY
DEEPLY
MINE**

KATHERINE JAY

TRULY MADLY DEEPLY MINE

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Contents

Author's Note

Playlist

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Forty

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter Forty-Five

Chapter Forty-Six

Chapter Forty-Seven

Epilogue One

Epilogue Two

Also By Katherine Jay

A Sky Full Of Stars Sneak Peek

Acknowledgments

About Author

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Author's Note

This book contains subject matter that some people may find triggering. A list of the main potential triggers can be found on Katherine's website:

<http://www.katherinejayauthor.com>

Please note, triggers are not listed here to avoid spoilers for the book.

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A
Heartstrings
PLAYLIST



• truly madly deeply • kiss from a rose • perfect • invisible touch • let her go • dance with me • you can leave your hat on • hotel california • please forgive me • pump up the jam • maneater • black hole sun • shake it off • smells like teen spirit • I knew you were trouble • your song • you got it bad

PLAYLIST AVAILABLE ON SPOTIFY

CLICK IMAGE TO LISTEN

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**To anyone who believes they're
not worthy of something better...
You absolutely are. Never settle.**

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Prologue

Wes

My chest tightens as I push myself through the pain. My calves aching, I'm struggling to get air into my lungs, and...what the hell is going on with the wind?

Damn my best friend for being right. Beach running is fucking hard. Why didn't anyone warn me that San Francisco was going to have this weather even though it's California? I'm not saying it would have changed my decision to move here, but a little notice would have been great.

Scanning my watch as I sprint the last few yards, I slow to a walk. A second I reach my goal, before doubling over to catch my breath. If my legs cramp on this shit, I'm fucked. Back in Chicago, I was one of the fittest. Now I'm sure as hell don't feel very fit right now.

When my breathing evens out, I stand tall, pulling my soaked tee over my head before dropping it to the sand. Hands locked behind my back, I stretch out my muscles while kicking off my sneakers, desperate to get into the water to cool down.

I've just removed my socks when a stunning woman appears in front of me, drawing my questioning eyes up to her hesitant ones. Dark golden

wisps of hair blow across her face, and her chest rises and falls like she's sprinting along with me. Beneath the windswept strands, she greets me with a tight smile plastered on her face, as her hand rises to her cheek, brushing hair away.

“Can I—”

“Please hold your questions until the end,” she says, cutting me off by reaching for my hand and intertwining our fingers, a determined expression in place. “Right now, I just need you to kiss me like your life depends on it.”
Huh?

“Uh, what?”

“No questions.”

Without another word, she releases my hand, wraps her arms around my neck and slams her lips to mine. It takes all of two seconds for me to realize her words before I'm gripping her waist and pulling her into me, instinctively matching her intensity. And fuck is she intense.

My hold tightens on her the longer we kiss, and a small gasp leaves my lips. It feels like the perfect moment to slip my tongue in her mouth, but *what the fuck am I doing?* I don't even know this woman. I start to pull away, but her hands come up to cup my face, keeping me in place. My tongue meets mine, drawing my attention back to the moment. And v—
incredible moment. *Stranger aside, this is hot.* Although, it could be a stranger part that makes it hotter.

Bending her back slightly, our bodies align as I deepen the kiss, and I tell myself to be a little crazy for once in my life. But when a cheer rings out behind me, I realize where I am and pull back, staring into a pair of unforgettable blue eyes. Our gazes lock for only a second before she turns away.

she was cutting off our connection as she peers over her shoulder and yells, ‘
e with that back, asshole,’ raising her middle finger in the air.

ing the My eyes flash to the guy she’s cursing out to see him scamper aw
nearby car, and an amused expression takes over my features.

“Want to tell me what that was all about?” I ask, eyebrows ra
before question.

ression “Nope,” she says, popping the p. “But thanks for the help.”
s on it.” *So much for allowing questions after the fact.*

Before I can say another word, she takes off in a skip-like run do
beach without even looking back, only stopping when she reaches
girl sunbathing on the sand.

and my *Well, fuck me.* That was weird, but not at all unwelcome. Maybe
process enjoyed it.

actively If only my ex-teammates could see me now. I’m not the stick-in-t
they thought I was—not only did I leave my team and move to
ves her franchise, but I also made out with a stranger...on the beach...in
l, but...daylight. *See, I can deal with change and spontaneity. Sometimes. Go
o break is my heart racing?*

as her My eyes stay on the woman for longer than they should, trying t
what a sense of what just happened, and when she looks back at me, I’m still
be the She gives me a wave and a shy smile before tucking her sun-kiss

behind her ear and turning away. Moment over. *Right, okay.* I can take
llowing Shaking out my crazy thoughts, I quickly revert to serious mode an
ngs out pretend it never even happened. And with one last peek at my b
pair of stranger, I dash into the ocean and dive headfirst into the crashing
blinks, letting the cool water soothe my joints.

It may not be the sunny California I was expecting, but I could de

'Report get used to a morning beach run and swim.

Especially if I get to see my mystery woman again.

ay to a By the time I get out, she's gone. Vanished without a trace. Like s
never even here. And yet, as our moment flashes across my mind, sor
ised intells me I'm going to have a hard time forgetting her.

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get used to a morning beach run and swim.

Especially if I get to see my mystery woman again.

By the time I get out, she's gone. Vanished without a trace. Like she was never even here. And yet, as our moment flashes across my mind, something tells me I'm going to have a hard time forgetting her.

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Chapter One

Lucy - six weeks later

Letting out a slow sigh, I run my fingers through my thick hair, pulling it up and securing it into a ponytail. After washing my sink my head into my hands and press pause on my life for a second, I have been doing that a lot lately...taking a moment to reset before my mind goes in the wrong direction. The past six months have been a roller coaster, at the least. I finished studying and officially became a certified physical therapist. I somehow secured my dream job working with a college football team, at my alma mater. And I'm finally single for the first time in two years after a string of bad relationships. The latter being the main cause of my current mood.

I made a vow to move ahead and find myself again, to get back to the girl I used to be. I just struggle with it all sometimes. Hence the need to
Let's do this.

Patting my face dry, I look up into the mirror just in time to see my friend Summer enter the room. Her eyes find mine in the reflection and she smiles before arranging her long blonde hair into a messy bun on top of her head. "You ready to go?" she asks when she's done, grabbing the sunscreen.

pulled from my bag and squeezing it into her palm. It's strange to think just over a year ago, she was a complete stranger to me, and now I can't imagine my life without her.

For both my sake and my brother, Dylan's.

Summer and Dylan started dating about ten months ago, and in a short time it's easy to see he'd be miserable without her. To paraphrase Usher...he's got it bad.

"I'm ready," I say, answering Summer and reminding myself at that time. *I'm ready*. For what? I'm not sure but I feel good about it. And I'm ready to place to make a start on whatever *it* is. We're currently sharing a room at a fancy beach resort just outside of San Francisco and about to take advantage of the services offered. I have to be here for a conference this week, and although I live in San Francisco, my work offered to pay for my accommodation so I wasn't the odd one out, with everyone else coming from across the country.

Summer's just here for the ride.

When I booked, they only had twin rooms available, and she called it being my plus one. She's "keeping me company," apparently. It absolutely has nothing to do with my brother—a wide receiver for Denver—also in San Francisco for a game this weekend. Not that he's a starter yet. I know the fun time on the field is amazing to see.

"What time does your conference start in the morning?" Summer asks as we walk toward the pool.

My eyes briefly flash to hers before the beautiful gardens steal my attention. "It starts at ten because a few people are still flying in, but the days for the conference will start at seven." I shiver. The thought of being ready by seven o'clock for an official breakfast each day doesn't thrill me.

ink that “Seven!?” Summer exclaims, making me laugh. “You better not wa
ouldn’tI’m on vacay. I’m sleeping in.” She pouts, but a small smile shines t

She’s not actually on vacay at all. She’s supposed to be in class.

“I won’t wake you, but your ass better be up by the time I get back.”
such a Summer huffs out a laugh. “I don’t need *that* much sleep. Just no
aphrasea.m.”

“I get it. Oh, how I miss being twenty-one and in college.”

ie same “Shut up, no you don’t. You love the real world. Plus you’re only
what a four. Not that much older.”

om at a “I know. I do love it. But I wouldn’t say no to sleeping in.”

vantage “That’s one bonus to not living with your brother yet. I don’t get we
nd even by his early alarms. When I visit Denver, they’re awful.” Her nose c
or my and I laugh. Deep down I know she’d take Dylan over sleeping in a
ning in but I’m glad she’s here rather than there. While it was definitely Dy

brought the two of us together, we’ve become fast friends in our ow
and she’s been a rock for me over the past few months, along with H
dibs on friend, Cory, and our friend Delilah. Not to mention my work col
olutely Dani. I’m still getting used to having so many female friends in my li
o being spent most of my time around guys—having grown up close with Dy
But any his best friend, Joel, and then spending most of my time with
boyfriends and their friends. I always thought it suited me and
asks as questioned it. But now that I know what I’m missing, I don’t think I c
back.

7 focus. When we reach the glass doors leading to the pools, Summer pau
llowing takes a deep breath. “Alright, let’s see if Dylan was telling the truth
for an being heated,” she says as we step into the fresh San Francisco air.

It’s chaotic outside, considering it’s not a particularly warm day,

ake me. sun is shining, and this is a resort, so it's not unexpected.

hrough. Summer and I weave our way through the lounge chairs as we
toward the adult pool, which thankfully, at least looks a little quieter t
' others.

t seven "Okay, are we both doing this?" Summer asks after laying her towe
one of the chairs before kicking off her flip-flops.

"I think that's the best approach," I agree, wriggling out of my
twenty-shorts and tossing them onto my pile of clothes.

When we're both ready to go, we stand by the edge, staring down
glistening crystal water. "It doesn't look heated," I say with a furrowed
oken up Summer laughs beside me. "What were you expecting? Steam? It
rinkleshot tub."

ny day, "No, but I wasn't expecting people to look like they were freezing t
lan that off." I point to a woman who is literally holding herself as she shivers
n right, in point."

ier best "Shit." Summer cringes. "Why did we think this was a good ide
league, why do we believe Dylan?"

fe. I've "I generally wouldn't trust him, but I didn't think he'd lie to you. P
lan and deserve a vacation, and *on* vacations, you're supposed to relax by th
various I'll feel cheated if we don't at least dip a toe in."

I never We're both silent for a beat, processing what we're about to d
ould go Summer sighs. "Okay. It's going to be fine. Let's do this...on one?"

"Yep, three...two...one." I jump into the water and immediately re;
ses and decision. "Shit! Shit!" I'm vaguely aware of Summer's laughter from
about it but can't bring myself to concentrate on anything other than the icy
seeping into my bones.

but the "Jesus Christ, that's cold." I turn quickly to swim to the edge. "D

Dylan's a—"

move *Oomph.* I crash straight into the hard body of someone trying to swim. The impact is strong. My feet come out from underneath me, and I sink down in the water.

Limbs flail about everywhere, but I manage to make out a bare chest as the man spins around under the surface and grabs my arms, lifting me up for air. I flinch at his touch and kick my legs out, wriggling around until he releases his grip, allowing me to reach for the edge.

"Fuck! Are you okay?" he asks as I cough, brushing away the hair plastered to my face.

"I'm ssssooo sssorry," I respond through chattering teeth as my head meets his. *Oh God!* Of all the people in the world, I just swam into the arms of the gorgeous stranger I kissed on the beach. *Great.*

"You're shivering," he says, reaching for my arm, but I don't let him. Taking a step back, I watch as his hand falls to his side and a frown appears on his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeeppp. Jjusst cccolldd," I say, wrapping my arms around his waist before looking for an exit. With no steps in sight, I turn to face the edge of the pool. I try to pull myself out of the pool. *No such luck.* My body has no intention of cooperating. I'm about to give it another go when large hands grip my waist, and they launch me up instead. I flinch again but allow the help, and as my knees hit the hard surface, the hands disappear, and I hear a faint "Sorry," from behind me.

Shaking myself off as I stand, I close my eyes and take a deep breath, feeling okay. *I'm okay.* When I open my eyes to apologize, the guy is lifting me out of the pool, and *my God, he's hot.* The first thing I notice are the veins in his arms pulsing as the muscles bulge with the movement. Next, my

flash to the water running down his body, pooling between the ridges on his past, sculpted abs, and that V—God, that V. I’ve never seen a more drool-worthy both moment in my life. In fact, I subtly raise a finger to my mouth to check that’s not happening.

Behind me, Summer whispers, “Holy shit,” and I have no doubt we both watching the same thing I am. *This man is not only a pretty face, but until hell, he’s ripped.* I can’t take my eyes off him. How I didn’t notice that time, I’ll never know. But that’s all I can focus on now.

I’m not even aware that I’m bouncing up and down shivering until she wraps around my shoulders, snapping me from my daze. I turn around to eyestalk Summer and take in her amused expression. She’s biting her lip into the back a smile, but her eyes say it all. Raising an eyebrow, she tilts her head slightly as though signaling to something behind me, and when I turn to meet him, around I see the god of a man—the man I threw myself at not too long ago appears patiently waiting for me to talk to him.

“Hi,” I say awkwardly, making him laugh. I’d be offended by it if myself laugh wasn’t just as hot, if not hotter, than the rest of him. He runs his hand through his dark, wet hair and then blows out a breath as if he’s embarrassed by our collision. But he shouldn’t be. *That was all me.* “I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t really looking where I was going soon as needed to get out of that ice pit. My brother said it was heated, but I rushed, definitely *not* heated, and—”

“They didn’t tell you at check-in?” he says, interrupting my rant. “Tell me what?”

“That the adult pool isn’t heated. Just the others.”

Fuck! My brows crease as Summer and the god before me burst out laughing.

s of his “They did not,” I say with a fake pout, while a little part of me w
-worthykeep making a fool out of myself so he’ll laugh some more. That is
double-remember this guy was the best kiss I’ve ever had *and* my savior, ev
doesn’t know it. My chest tightens, and my face drops as a memory
t she’spush itself to the forefront of my mind, but I refuse to let it. Puttir
ut holysmile, I wrap the towel around myself and clasp it with one hand, su
his lastacutely aware of how close we are and how little I’m wearing, even
it’s a bikini. “I’m sorry...”

a towel “Wes,” he injects, giving me his name. *And what a sexy name...*
ound to *him*.

to hold “I’m sorry, Wes. I hope I didn’t mess up your swim, and...” I trai
er headrecognition hits me a second time. *Oh shit!* “I know you,” I say, tr
rn backhide my sudden panic over almost drowning an NFL star.

ago— Wes’s eyebrows rise as he smirks. “I was wondering how long it
take you to place me.”

t if his I frown in disappointment. I didn’t think he was *that* kind of guy. “I
a handlittle cocky, don’t you think?”

equally “Is it? How many strangers have you kissed?” *Oooh*.

I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing but lose all contro
}. I justSummer murmurs from behind me, “I am so glad I’m here for this.”

: that is I school my features so I can talk, but it’s a real struggle when all I
do is giggle. “I’m sorry. I recognized *that* version of you the second
you. It took me longer to recognize Wes the famous football player.”

Wes laughs again and then grits his teeth. He’s covered in goose bu
I’m going to guess he’s just as cold as I am. *Shit!*

irst out “I won’t keep you any longer. Go and get warm. I’m sorry agai
good luck with San Fran. They’re lucky to have you.” I nod before

wants to back to Summer.

until I “While I agree it’s fucking freezing, I don’t particularly want to walk around here without at least getting your name,” Wes says, moving around to stand in front of me again. His hands clench slightly by his side before he hides his expression behind his back when he catches me staring. My eyebrows furrow and I suddenly smile before looking up at him.

though “My name is Lucy.”

Wes smiles in return. “How long are you here for, Lucy? You know I can prepare myself for another run-in.”

“A week, so best be on the lookout.”

I nod off as “Noted. Now, as much as I’d love to stay and chat, I’m pretty sure I won’t find my towel soon, I’m heading into frostbite territory. But maybe we can see you again? Third time’s a charm.” He shrugs, suddenly coming across as adorably shy.

“Maybe you will.” I shrug back but can’t hide the happiness behind that’s through my nonchalant expression.

Wes grins as he walks away, shaking his head as he goes, and I can’t keep my eyes off his ass. His red shorts against his tan skin make it impossible when focus on anything else. I’m like a moth to a flame and—

Summer slaps me on the back as she steps up beside me, laughing and wanting to shove me out of earshot. I’ll put every last dollar I have on her knowing I saw where I’m looking.

“Am I allowed to be happy?” she asks, suddenly serious. I only nod and think about it for a second before giving her a giddy nod. Despite my reservations, there’s a slight buzz of excitement coursing through me. And the thought of seeing Wes again, and it’s been a while since I’ve felt that. I’m turning “Oh, thank God,” she says, releasing a breath. “So you’ve been here

secrets?” She bumps her shoulder into mine as the hint of a smile returns away. I can’t help but laugh again at her back and forth emotions, knowing in badly she wants to see me happy. “Yeah, so I kind of kissed Wes.” As they ask them “Kind of?” she repeats as we collect our things, silently agreeing that I did, but I done with the pool. When I look her way, the knowing smirk tells me she sees right through my bullshit.

“Okay, I did. I kissed Wes.” I bite my lip and cringe as I remember that day on the beach. And how out of character I’d acted.

“But you didn’t know who he was?” Summer asks, confusion flashing across her face.

“Not at the time. I ran up to him at the beach and begged him to kiss me. Maybe I’ll month or so ago.” *God, it sounds so bad now that I’m explaining it.*

“You what? Why?” she says midlaugh.

“Stupidity,” I say, and it’s at least half true.

Summer stops midstep, forcing me to halt and look back at her. She shakes her head. “There is nothing stupid about kissing *that man*. I don’t think the image of him getting out of the water will forever be ingrained in my mind. I love your brother, obviously, but damn.”

“I, for one, am happy to hear you love me, even if you are fawning over another guy,” Dylan says, his voice coming from behind us.

“Dylan!”

I turn to see him approaching as Summer drops her things and leaps into his arms. “You’re here!” she cries as he catches her easily. She laughs.

“Hey you,” he smiles, his eyes locked tight on hers.

I sense a moment coming—they don’t get to see each other as close as they’d like—so I try to sneak away to give them some much-needed

ns. time. *And* maybe to avoid Dylan's interrogation. Picking up my pace and
ng how our door, I'm so close to freedom when he calls out, "Don't go too far!
have *that man* to discuss." *Dammit.*

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time. *And* maybe to avoid Dylan's interrogation. Picking up my pace as I near our door, I'm so close to freedom when he calls out, "Don't go too far. We have *that man* to discuss." *Dammit.*

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Chapter Two

Wes

She's here. The girl that's been fucking with my head for weeks *Within reach*. And I walked away without a backward glance...I was cold. I. Was. Cold. *What the fuck, Wes?*

I'm like a fish out of water when it comes to this stuff. For the past football has been my only focus, as it should be, but one random kiss stranger and my focus drifts. Okay, that's not entirely true. Nothing w completely pull my focus, but the mystery brunette who I now know has definitely been giving it a red-hot go. She's been on my mind si second her lips touched mine, and she's completely shifted my th Why? It was just a kiss. I've kissed women before...plural. What's d about her? Nothing, right? Well, nothing should have been, and yet, her again today had my heart sprinting as fast as it does during a w *Fuck!*

I'm almost to my room when I decide it's best if I'm not alone rig Having time to think about Lucy's perfect ass, or the curve of her hip high-waisted bikini, or the way her crystal-blue eyes shine... *Jesu* trying *not* to think about any of this. Especially the way she flinched.

even sure why I felt the need to touch her, but I wanted my hands on her. I know she didn't want to be touched by a stranger. And despite the fact that I can't remember the feel of her tongue in my mouth, I am just that...a stranger.

Bypassing my room, I lightly tap on the door adjacent to mine in the hallway and wait patiently for a response. With the towel still wrapped around my waist, I grab a tee out of my bag and pull it over my head, knowing I'll get a smart-ass comment if I don't. It's another minute before the door rattles, and when it does, I knock again now that I know she's there, but she doesn't answer. It drives her crazy.

is here. "Come on, open up. Jesus, woman," I joke, laughing at the visual of her shaking her head.

decade, "Don't you '*Jesus*' me, young man. For that you can stay outside," she says with a lightness to her tone.

from a "My sincere apologies; please open the door."

will ever Gran pulls the door open and waves for me to enter. "Have at it then," she says as I walk inside. "Did you come straight from the pool? Could you have at least stopped for pants?"

is *Lucy* "I could have, but I was desperate to see you. Don't worry, I'm not dry."

nce the She pinches my cheeks and raises an eyebrow. "If you didn't take good care of me, you'd be off the Christmas card list."

oughts. "Nope, not even then. You love me."

fferent "Huh. We'll see. What brings you over at this time of day?"

seeing *Good question.* I'm not in the habit of lying to my gran, but we've never spoken about women before, so I'm unsure how to approach this.

orkout. "Just saw your door and...thought I'd stop by," I hesitate, correcting myself.

her so smoothly as I can, running a hand through my still-wet hair.

clearly “Nonsense. You’re too busy for that,” Gran calls me out, and I can still *she’s got me there*.

er. “Okay, I have an hour free, and I wanted to visit you rather than go to the hotel, alone with my thoughts.”

and my “I see...and are you going to fill me in on those thoughts?” she’ll get moving into the kitchen to make herself a tea. I stand and follow behind her, handling filling up a glass with water, knocking it back before I answer. Gran raises her eyebrow as she waits for my response.

“Okay.” I sigh. “Sit down, and I’ll tell you what’s up.”

l of her Smiling brightly, she abandons her tea and moves toward the sofa, the spot beside her. “Thank you. I can’t wait.”

le,” she My gran raised me from the age of sixteen after my mom, her dad died of cancer. My dad comes and goes in my life, but he has another life, so it’s mainly only birthdays or holidays that we talk to each other. One day, she’s in the news for something football related, which was rare until my dad was traded. In fact, when news of my trade broke and the media discussed the money I’d be earning, a lot of family and friends came out of the woodwork. But the only one that got a cent was Gran. She’s my world and one of the few people I really trust. I moved her here with me when I was traded, and I’ll make sure to set her up in a nice condo when I find the perfect one. But for now, she’ll have to make do with her hotel mates.

“So, come on, spill,” she says, as impatient as ever. She turns eight and a half this year, but you wouldn’t know it. She’s a regular at yoga and will eventually join me for a swim, if I don’t go at the “ass crack of dawn” as she calls it.

Sitting down beside her, I rest one leg on my knee and drop my head against the backrest behind me.

“I met a girl,” I say with another sigh, rolling my head toward Gran. Her eyes light up right on cue.

“You met a girl? Gah! I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“Thanks,” I say with all the sarcasm I can muster.

“Oh, shush. You know what I mean. You have a one-track mind, and now, the train is destined for a football station, with no indication it will make another journey.” *What?*

I stare at her with a furrowed brow, and she just shrugs. That’s Gran. She loves to beat around the bush instead of getting straight to the point.

“Okay, would you like me to tell you more, or do you have something to say?”

“I’m done...for now.”

“Thank you.” I roll my eyes, and she elbows me in the ribs.

“Anyway, a while back, I—”

“A while back? Why am I only hearing about this now?”

I shoot a glare her way, and she laughs. “Sorry, please go on.”

“A while back, I was out running, and a beautiful stranger needed my help for something.”

“Hmmm.” Gran hums as she taps her cheek in thought. “Did she know I plan to be famous? Sometimes you can’t trust—”

“Gran!”

“Right, yes. I’ll be quiet.” She pretends to zip up her lips and throw away the key.

Resting my elbows on my knees, I grip the back of my neck and hum to myself. “God, I came here to avoid thinking about this. I have a session to the training session in a couple of hours and a big game on the weekend.

to keep my head straight.”

an. Her “So, get it off your chest. I bet you’ll feel lighter.”

“Hopefully,” I mumble.

“You met a girl who needed your help. What kind of help?”

“Just some help. It’s not important... Anyway, I helped her and rightsatisfactorily, and then she was on her way, never to be seen again. I’ll everthought.”

I can feel Gran’s eyes boring into me, and when I look up, she’s frowning at me. Gran for “Are you trying to tell me you had a one-night stand, and she ghosted you at that point. “What?! No!” I choke back a cough and shake my head violently. “I’m not going in else not the direction I saw this conversation going. “No, Gran, we were at the beach. She needed help; I helped. There was no need for any communication, so she left.”

She rubs at her jaw and blinks a few times. It’s what she does when she’s trying to reconcile things in her mind. “Okay, I’ve got that part covered. What happened today?”

I bounce my legs as I answer. “She crashed into me in the pool. She needed my help. In the resort.”

Gran cringes. “Yep, I was right. This has stalker vibes all over it.” I shake my head with a laugh and pull her into a hug, squeezing her. A warm feeling takes over me.

“What was that for?” Gran asks when I finally release her, holding her at arm’s length.

With a bright smile, I shrug. “Just for being you. Never change.” She scoffs. “Well, I’m a bit old for that now, aren’t I?” She frowns, shaking her head. “I need strength she eyes me curiously, no doubt confused about the weird version of me. I need she’s getting. I’m not the guy that gets a crush. Ever. I’m too pragmatic. This is completely throwing me off. I’ve only seen Lucy twice for

sake, and we've barely had a conversation. But God, do I want to
again. I know nothing about her, except that I'm pretty certain she's
stalker.

; quite "You're never too old for anything," I say, moving on from my
Or so I thought. "But in this case, I think you're wrong."

Leaning against the armrest of the couch, I try to explain what ha
owning without giving too much away. "It took her a few moments to recogn
you?" and when I tried to help her in the pool, she flinched. She definitely
This is trying to get closer. Wouldn't a stalker want to do that? Get closer, I m
on the "Not if she's a smart stalker," Gran says, tapping her forehead.
further I pat her leg and stand up. "You watch too many crime shows," I s
a laugh before taking a deep breath and pacing the room. "I don't eve
n she's what it is about her, but I can't get her out of my head."

. What "Hasn't it only been a few minutes?"

"No, I mean since we...since I helped her."

's here. Gran's eyes narrow, and I know she's thinking I lied about the or
stand thing.

"I didn't sleep with her," I clarify, clasping my fingers on top of m
tightly, as my lips thin.

"Good," Gran says with a nod. "That makes it easier if you want
g her as hard to get."

"Gran!"

She raises her hands in the air. "I'm kidding. You're so wound up
e off as this. She must really be something."

me that "We've barely spoken. She can't be something."

atic for "Of course she can. It was love at first sight between your Pa and m
r fuck's She says this all the time, but it's bullshit, and everyone knows i

see her hated each other when they first met. I raise an eyebrow so she knows not about to call her on it, and she laughs. “Okay, but it was *something* sight. We both knew there was more to come.”

That makes more sense, and I like that outlook. Maybe there’s a rift come between Lucy and me. Or maybe there’s not. But it feels like *something* happened. Guess I’ll have to wait to find out.

ize me,

wasn’t



lean?”

When I get home from practice the next afternoon, I’m tired but hyper. I should have stayed at the team facilities to train, but there’s this energy running through me that I need to dispel, without the eyes of my teammates. So, after a quick meal to give me a boost, I head to the hot springs.

It’s surprisingly well equipped for a resort and even has personal training equipment. Stretching out my neck as I push through the door, I freeze when my eyes lock on the very person I was planning to work out of my head. *Lucy*.

ie-night

She’s standing in front of the punching bag like she’s ready to take it. Knees bent, arms raised, she’s about to beat the shit out of whomever she’s picturing in front of her. She pulls her arm back and slams her fist into the bag with incredible force, and the sight of it sends blood pooling to my face.

place I definitely don’t want it to be right now. But fuck if I can take it away. On her next strike, she clips the edge and falters, cursing herself.

her breath before repositioning and trying again. It’s almost like she’s teaching herself to box.

I watch her for another minute until one of the trainers gives me a look. Giving him a nod, I make my way to the weights.

e.”

t. They

With every intention of leaving her be, I work on my upper body at first can barely lift my arms, while Lucy continues to fight the bag. I know because I happen to be facing the mirror, and she *happens* to be in my more to sight. She takes a step back and punches the air over and over in there's succession until her body sags, and she catches her breath.

Without any thought, I drop my weights to the stand and head over, abandoning my plan to leave her alone. *Maybe it's me that's the* "And we meet again," I say as I reach her side.

Lucy jumps in fright before spinning on the spot and throwing a punch at my face. I jolt at the last second, so she barely clips my shoulder, but she packs a decent punch. When our eyes lock, she hisses in a breath as her gloved hands fly up to her mouth. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry, it was barely a tap," I say, trying really hard not to let the dull ache from her hit.

Lucy sags. "You're lucky I missed. What were you thinking sneaking on me like that?"

"Not sure, to be honest. I just wanted to say hi. Turns out, the third time's *not* a charm." I nervously laugh and relish the fact that Lucy's lips finally curl up into a small smile.

"I'm hoping it wasn't me you were picturing with a punch like that, joke, but it falls flat, and her smile fades. *Shit!* Wrong thing to say. "You've got a good technique. Have you been boxing for long?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"I've actually just started, but I'm enjoying it. Do you box?"

I bite my lip and shake my head. "Nope."

Lucy's brows furrow, but the corners of her lips rise back up into the tiniest smirk. "So how do you know that my technique is any good?"

until I She got me there.

ow this “I don’t...really. But it looked impressive,” I admit with a shrug and a line of tries to suppress her surprised laugh and lightly taps my uninjured side with her glove. Everything about her is sucking me in. Her infectious smile, the way she looks up at me through her thick lashes, her voice. Even her hair. *What the fuck is going on?*

stalker. “Have you been here long? Or are you just starting your workout?” she asks, breaking my thoughts as her eyes scan the gym.

unch at I’m not sure of the correct answer here because I can’t tell what she’s still asking. Does she want to know if I’ve been watching her, or is she asking me if I’m done so we can walk back together? She raises her eyebrows in question when I don’t respond, then rolls her wrist, coaxing an answer. “I didn’t know that was a difficult question.”

king up “If I’m being honest, my answer is dependent on why you’re asking.” Lucy laughs again but this time she doesn’t try to hide it. “Why?”

I cringe because I am so bad at this. Maybe I should have left some time in my life to focus on women so I’d at least have better game. I haven’t really pulled anything like this since college, and even then, my girlfriend just kind of fell into my lap, literally. That’s how we met, and it was very convenient. “That,” I say, “I liked her. I even thought I loved her at one point. But I never had time for it. I never wanted to. But now, I suddenly wish I knew everything about how to know about impressing a woman, and what the fuck is that?” “I was curious if you were asking because you wanted to spend time with me,” she says, say, opting for an honest approach. Since honesty is what I live by.

Lucy bites back a smile, her eyes crinkling with humor. “Wes, are you messing with me?” *What?!*

“Why would I be messing with you?”

“In the past twenty-four hours, I’ve seen you on the TV, a billboard as Lucy heard your name mentioned three times. According to hearsay, you’re supposed to single-handedly turn San Francisco’s losing streak around.”

She laughs, “God, whenever I hear that, I usually cringe. That’s not even close to anything true. The team’s in good shape this year, and I’m only a small part of it.” she wishes people would— Lucy starts laughing, pulling me from my thoughts. “What’s so funny?”

“Your face just answered my question. You’re obviously not a whore. Even the mention of it made you look constipated.”

“What?! That’s a horrible comparison.”

“Maybe so, but I’m right, aren’t I? You’re *not* a fame whore.”

“I’m not an *anything* whore. So, do you want to get dinner or something? I say, even though it’s only three in the afternoon.”

Lucy grins and finally removes the gloves from her hands before tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Or something sounds good.”

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Chapter Three

Lucy

The “or something” became early evening drinks at the hotel bar. I’d like to say Wes caught me in a weak moment and that’s agreed, that’s not the case. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him since I saw him again yesterday. And even though I had planned to stop seeing other men for a while, I couldn’t stop myself from saying yes, and really, what harm could a couple of drinks do?

“Alright, lovebirds, I’m off. You know the drill, right?” I ask Dylan and Summer as I head toward the door.

“We do, but I’m still not sure I like this,” Dylan says, peering over his shoulder from the back of the sofa.

I roll my eyes, ignoring him and his overprotective brother vibes. I’ll take care of myself. Mostly. At least, that’s what I’m choosing to do. Summer smiles as she gives me a wave. “Have an amazing time; that’s what you’re here for, heaven.”

“Geez, do you want to go with her?” Dylan huffs as I walk out the door. And when Summer giggles, I have no doubt that conversation is going to end with something I don’t ever want to think about.

When I arrive to meet Wes, he's already there, waiting at the bar, conversation with a kid beside him. He doesn't see me arrive, and although I was fine with meeting him, I'm relieved. The second I laid out to him my heart began to race. I'm on a date. Even if we don't actually have that. And that's something I didn't think I'd be doing for a while.

My ex, Greg, was an asshole toward the end of our relationship. I was possessive and jealous, yet wouldn't give me the time of day if he had other things to do. We'd been together for two years, off and on, and it's only been six months since we broke up. This is supposed to be my single time yet, as I look at Wes, my eyes focus on his inviting smile, his kind eyes, the way he makes my heart flutter, and I suddenly want to throw caution to the wind and see where it takes me.

Inhaling a deep breath, I move toward him, stopping a few feet before getting his attention with a wave, biting back a smile. He gives me a puzzled look but waves back before rising to meet me. "I don't usually worry if that's what you're worried about."

"Nope, I wanted to avoid another run-in. Thought I'd greet you a little distance." I finally let my smirk break free.

Wes laughs as he jokingly rubs his shoulder. At least, I hope he's not. *God, if I fuck up his game...*

"Hey, I'm kidding," he says, seemingly reading my thoughts. "I'm not in any pain at all." He rotates his shoulder to drive his point home, and I feel a sense of relief.

"Okay, good. Who's your friend?" I ask, pointing to the extremely attractive—but young—guy Wes was talking to, as he watches us both with curiosity.

Wes gently presses his hand to the small of my back and motions

deep in him. "I'll introduce you before we sit."

Though I naturally, I stiffen slightly at his touch, but it's so subtle I don't take any noticeable notice, until he releases me and takes a small step away. *Goddammit, I can't call it.* The guy stands when we approach, and smiles. "You must be Lucy and I just met, and yet, I feel like I know you."

He was Wes grumbles beside me while I quietly laugh. "That's me. And you'd better be Grayson. Here to drown my sorrows since getting divorced." I've been "Sorry, what?" I blurt out and then cover my mouth as both Grayson and Wes chuckle beside me. *He looks seventeen; I can't help my reaction.* "Sorry to hit you with the heavy. I thought it was only fair since I know a lot about you."

"Thank you. I guess. But...sorry, I realize this is completely rude. How old are you?"

As me as Grayson's lips pull into a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. *Eighteen.*

Eighteen! God, to be going through something so adult, so young, it's a safe heart break for him.

"I'm sorry."

joking. "Don't be. I didn't mean to bring the mood down. You two go on your date. I've got a meeting with my agent anyway." He pats Wes on the shoulder as he walks past, before giving me a polite nod. And then he's gone and I have so many questions.

"Ahhh..."

tremely "How about we sit and I'll tell you what I know?" Wes says, anticipating my question as he holds his hand up toward a booth.

Holding back my barrage, I nod. I couldn't think of a better idea. toward



think he

Lucy. The bar's pretty quiet, so the waiter arrives to grab our order as soon as possible. Wes
y. Wes down. I ask for a margarita, needing to calm my stupid nerves—*although*
brief interaction with Grayson certainly helped take my mind off things
I are?" *moment*—while Wes orders a water, making me cringe. "Shit. A bar
really a great choice for you midseason."

son and He huffs out a laugh before smiling. "It's perfect, and I'm not really
for the drinks."

new so My chest heats at his warmth, and it's a new feeling for me. I've had
attention. A lot of it. And I've always been sucked into their bullshit
...how don't usually blush. Something about Wes's attention feels different.

"So are you on vacation?" he asks, interrupting my thoughts as he
s. "I'm forward, giving me his full focus. My pulse quickens at his intense gaze
it's not a negative feeling. It's definitely welcome.

ng. My "Before I answer that... Grayson?"

Wes smiles again. "Nice kid, but from the little I got out of him, he
through a lot. Things might be looking up though. He's in a band and
d enjoy just signed with a label here in San Francisco."

tab and "Wow, that's incredible."

smile. "It is. Maybe one day they'll be famous and we can look back on the
time we met their lead singer in a bar."

"Absolutely. I wish I'd known. I would have got his autograph."

icipating Wes laughs, before turning his serious expression back on. "So,
about you."

My smile fades ever so slightly when the topic comes back to me. Luckily our drinks arrive and Wes doesn't notice. "I'm actually here for a conference. One of those *let's put you up in a fancy place so you don't have to leave early* conferences," I joke. Although I'm not really joking. There are really two sessions I want to attend, so if it wasn't here I probably wouldn't have left early.

"Are you living here?" I ask, quickly changing the subject again because I can't comment. I came to that assumption last night while talking to Dylan and Summer, and I'm genuinely curious.

"I am. For now. I'm looking for a place, but I haven't found anything that feels right."

He shrugs as an unsure look crosses his face. It's actually adorable.

"I understand that. I heard you've been contracted for a few years, so you need to be comfortable during that time."

"Exactly!" he exclaims, excited that I get it. "If only my real estate agent understood that. She definitely thinks I'm high-maintenance."

"Are you?" I ask with a giggle as my mind goes crazy with images of what a high-maintenance Wes would look like.

He holds his thumb and pointer finger an inch apart and winces. "Not a little," he says, making me laugh even louder.

"There's nothing wrong with going after what you want," I say when he calms down a little, trying to ease his mind.

Wes stills for a moment before a smile lights up his face. "I'm glad you feel that way. Wise words. Something to live by."

Huffing out a nervous laugh, I steer the conversation in another direction because I'm ninety-nine percent sure we're no longer talking about a trade. "Am I allowed to ask who initiated the trade, or is that inappropriate?"

ne, but “You can ask anything you want...”

e for a “Doesn’t mean you’ll answer,” I finish for him.

’t leave “It doesn’t mean I *have* to answer. But for you, I just might. Act
re only want to.”

would His lips pull into a lopsided grin as he lifts his shoulder, and my head
a beat. The raw honesty isn’t something I’m used to, and I find it endearing
before he But of course, instead of being genuine in return, I joke, “Guess I’ll
lan and start thinking of more interesting questions.”

“Guess you do.” Wes grins, lighting up his whole face while heat radiates
ing that through my chest. There’s just something about him that makes me
much more at ease than I’ve felt in a long time. Maybe ever.

The conversation continues to flow easily, and I find myself
so you enjoying his company. Not that I thought I wouldn’t. But I wasn’t sure
to expect. When my phone buzzes in my pocket, I’m shocked to discover
e agent we’ve already been here for two hours. Rejecting the call, I smile and
for Wes to continue his story.

of what “And then he said—”

My phone buzzes again, and I mentally facepalm, realizing a fault
maybe a plan with Dylan and Summer. We never decided what to do if I *didn’t*
bailout. I sigh and smile apologetically. “I’m sorry, I’ll just be a sec.”

en I’ve Holding my breath, I prepare myself for his negative reaction, but when
smiles without a hint of annoyance, I relax, even though I’m a little shy
lad you My call to Summer connects and I rush out, “I’m good, talk soon,”
moving to hang up.

reaction, “Lucy, wait!” Dylan’s voice comes through the line, but I hang up and
house. Summer will talk him down.

Shoving my phone out of sight, I look up to find Wes’s eyebrows raised

he does nothing to hide his amusement. “Was that what I think it was?”

“Absolutely not,” I lie unconvincingly, only smiling when Wes chuckles. “I guess I should be happy you said you were good.”

“It’s definitely a positive for you,” I agree with a smirk, hoping he doesn’t skip a beat just how positive of a sign it is. How much I’m out of my clearing zone just by being here.

“Anyway, you were telling me a story,” I say, bringing the conversation back to where we left it. On safer topics.

“I was, yes. But it’s not important. I now feel like I’m running a good feel so clock. You may have said you’re okay *now*, but is another call coming don’t know.” He raises his hands in question and sucks his lips in. “I really mouth, a grin trying to break free. Everything he does confirms that it was the right decision in meeting him today.

“That was the only one planned,” I say to reassure him and then I signal when he jokingly wipes at his brow. “Are you always this honest and forthright?” I ask.

“Honest, yes. Forthright, no. I try not to lie, but I’m usually not as forthcoming in my life.” He tries to hide a nervous laugh as he runs a hand through his thick dark hair. “I need a hand and I find myself reaching forward to clasp his arm. Our eyes lock in that moment passes between us. Wes sucks in a breath while my heart pounds in my chest.

“I appreciate the openness. It’s refreshing,” I say, pulling my hand away before breaking whatever strange trance we were in.

Wes smiles softly, as though he understands the significance of what just happened, before he straightens up. “Okay. Can I get you another drink?” he says, changing the subject.

“Thankful for the shift, I offer him a grin, shaking my head. “I’m go-

” not a big drinker.”

ckles. He nods before he heads to the bar, and as he walks away, the st
feeling takes over me. I may barely know him, but there’s just sor
doesn’t about the way he looks at me that makes me feel completely at ea
comfort that’s crazy, right? We’ve just met. Well, if you don’t count the fac
jumped him at the beach that day.

ersation When he returns with water and a beer, Wes slides the water acros
before taking a sip of his beer.

gainst a A laugh escapes me before I cover my mouth to stop it. “Sorry. Do
ning? I you nervous?” I say, motioning to the beer. *Did I do something to push*
nto his drink?

I made Running a hand down his face, Wes laughs before blowing out a
“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

n laugh *Why would I make him nervous? I’m the one that’s nervous.*

est and “You’re right, I do find that a little hard to believe. You’re go
you’re an NFL star, and you’re wealthy. There’s no way you’ve never
open.” to girls before.” *There’s no way they don’t throw themselves at you.*

rk hair, “Oh, don’t worry, there’s been a...few women...here and there,
, and always in the off-season and always *just sex.*” His nose crinkles as
unds in that and an uncomfortable feeling takes over me at that revelation, but
smiling as he continues. “Sorry, I’m not sure why I said that. It’s like

id back no filter around you.” He shakes off his thoughts. “Anyway, it’s been
time since I’ve tried to get to know someone. I’ve never really wanted
hat just shrugs like his words are no big deal, while they hit me square in the c
nk?” he “But...you want to now?” I ask, my voice cracking a little.

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” he repeats, and we laugh, the nervo
od. I’m clear in both our voices. Could that be why he makes me feel comfo

Because, like me, this is all new to him, and we're both just taking the strangest they come, but wanting to try? Whatever it is, it feels right.

nothing "So, how come you avoid women during the season? That's a long season, and go without," I ask, though I'm not sure why I want to talk about his season that I "I'm too focused to even think about it...normally. I live and breathe the game. I still spend time with close friends and my gran, but random women aren't even on my radar."

I want to ask about his gran, but the mention of friends sparks a memory for me. "That's right; your friend Carter was traded too. They talked to him to you being a package deal."

Wes's face scrunches before he speaks and I cringe. I should know better than to trust the media. "Yeah, that's not exactly what went down," I say with a frown. "But it's good to have him here. You seem to know a lot about me for someone who didn't recognize me right away."

I laugh because he's right. "It's actually football in general that I've spoken with. I'm a huge fan. My brother plays for Denver."

"No shit?"

but it's "No shit." I nod.

he says Wes grins before shaking his head in disbelief. "Who's your brother?"

that I keep "If I told you that then you'd know my last name," I say with a little humor to hide the fact that I'm actually worried about that for some reason.

in a long "Right, and you're not ready for that?" he asks without judgment, "to." He has even less of a reason to be worried.

best. "Not quite," I say honestly, twisting my hair between my fingers, and I give him an apologetic smile.

business Wes reaches forward and hesitantly pulls the hair from my grasp, tucking it behind my ear, sending my heart into an erratic beat.

ings as “It’s okay,” he says with a genuine warmth I’m not used to. “I’m
than happy to put in the work and earn that information.” He smiles but
time to it drops and his brows crease. “Although, I’ve only got a week, you see
x life. With a game this weekend, I have even less time.” He runs his hand
the the his face, joking like it’s all too stressful for him, and I laugh.

women “I’ll be at the game. Maybe we can meet up after?” I offer. *What
never going to agree to that.*

memory His hands drop from his face, and a smile brightens his features. ‘
d about for me. And what about tomorrow? Are you free tomorrow?’

Sucking my lips into my mouth, I try to hide my giddy grin but it
v better through. “There’s no playing hard to get for you, is there?”

he says Wes laughs. “I was actually told to play hard to get in case you
t about stalker. All you did was wave, and I fucked that idea right off. Please
you’re not a stalker.”

keep up “I’m. Not. A. Stalker.” I say it robotically like I’m just repeating his
back to him, giving him a cheesy grin when his eyes narrow.

“You’re not giving me much confidence here, Lucy. You keep showing
where I am. You know a hell of a lot about me and football in general
?” you keep trying to get in my pants. It screams stalker.”

le bit of I bark out an obnoxious laugh before burying my face in my
ason. peeking through a gap while I continue to giggle. Wes drops his serious
giving expression and laughs along with me.

“You wish I was trying to get in your pants,” I say with an exaggerated
offering roll.

“Actually, it’s nice that you’re not.” He shrugs and it has an
before calming effect on me. As though in the back of my mind I’ve been
that’s what he wanted but I hadn’t realized it until now.

n more “Good. I’m glad we’ve had that conversation because...” I pause, r
out then what I was going to say. I’m not at all here to get in his pants, and I’m
id. And he’s not trying to get into mine. But I’m not sure what to say becau
s down wants to get to know me. But why? And am I ready to get to know any

Wes reaches out and mimics my earlier affection, gently placing h
?! He’s on my arm. My pulse spikes, but I don’t shy away from his touch. “I l
expectations, Lucy. None. I just want to get to know you. I don’
“Works anything past that.”

His words penetrate my soul, and I believe every one of them. And
t shines may be wrong—I’ve definitely fallen into this trap before—this time,
think I am.

were a The rest of the night flows effortlessly, and when it starts to get lat
tell me walks me to my door. He doesn’t go in for a goodnight kiss or even

Instead, he takes a step back and waits for my move.

s words “Thanks for tonight,” I say and then pause, taking a deep breath b
leap. “I can probably meet for a late lunch tomorrow. If you’re
ving up continue, reaching for the door handle.

ral, and Wes smiles. “I can make a late lunch work. Two p.m.? Same place?”

“Sounds perfect.”

hands, He waits until I’m inside before he starts backing away, and wher
is facial few steps down the hall, I offer him some faith. “My brother’s name is

Dylan Mathers,” I whisper-yell and watch as Wes’s eyes light up
ited eyes smile brightens.

He nods as I move to close the door, and just before it clicks shut,
instant “See you soon, Lucy Mathers,” followed by a soft chuckle.

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Chapter Four

Wes

I can't keep the smile off my face as I walk away, and I'm still smiling at practice the next morning.

"You're acting weird, and I don't like it," my best friend, Carter, is lining up beside me for the next play. He pulls at the scruff under his chin, eyeing me suspiciously as I shake my head with a grin. And when I try to focus back to the field—where it should remain—he frowns at me for giving him an answer.

"I'll get it out of you at lunch," he huffs as our quarterback calls the play.

I take off in a run, prepared to block for our running back who is supposed to have the ball. But he doesn't. They switched up the play. Why? I have no idea. Maybe they're trying to ensure we're all paying attention. And I'm not. *Goddammit.*

"That was abysmal," Carter yells when I run back to my position. It's not right. That was awful. And I should be mad about it, but I'm not.

"Johnson!" Coach booms, and I flinch, because *he's* definitely making a mistake. "Where's your head today?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Carter mumbles beside me.

Gripping my neck, I smile apologetically before shaking out my shoulders. “Sorry, Coach. Won’t happen again.”

This isn’t me. I don’t lose focus for anything anymore. And I’m still here. I need to prove myself. But fuck, it’s hard to get a certain amount of control of my mind. Maybe the other guys are onto something...hooking up before the season would definitely make it less of a big deal when it happens. It’s a first for me, and it shows.

I pull my head out of the clouds and pay attention to the remaining practice, so Coach lets me off the hook. Carter, however, does not.

“Alright, we’re going to lunch, and you’re going to spill,” he says, walking into step beside me as we walk off the field an hour later.

“No can do,” I say without looking his way, knowing I’ll be getting a kind of death stare in return. “I’ve got plans.”

Carter’s steps falter, and he pulls me to a stop. “Are these *plans* the ones you’re so cheery?”

“Nope,” I lie unconvincingly. “Just having a good day. Aren’t I allowed to be happy?”

“You absolutely are. As long as you tell me why.”

I bark out a deep laugh and shake my head. “I already told you. It’s a good day.”

“I’m calling Grandma Katie,” he threatens with a grin, and I shoot him a glare.

“Fuck off. No, you’re not.”

“Ahh, so there is something. I knew it.” He claps like a giddy schoolboy before his smirk rises.

“You’re such a fucker,” I grumble and then jump away when he slaps me on the back.

oulders. "I know." He shrugs.



till new

ette out After a quick shower, I get changed in record time and make a dash out
during truck to meet Lucy. Unfortunately, I'm not as fast as I thought I
This is Carter's leaning against the driver's door, waiting for me with a huge
his face.

nder of "For fuck's sake, I met a woman," I say, knowing he'll never let up.
falling His smile drops as his eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. "I thought
were going to say you got laid. 'Meeting a woman' sounds much
serious than that."

g some "It's *not* serious, and we haven't even hooked up. At all."

reason His brows furrow in confusion. "When did you meet her?" he says
frown.

owed to His reaction is not what I was expecting. I thought I'd get some
teasing, or maybe he'd even ask to meet her. But this is weird. "Two
ago," I say, massaging my forehead in slight frustration.

"Hmm," he says, but offers nothing else.

s just a "Why are *you* acting weird now?" I ask to avoid punching him like
to.

t him a He gives me a look that screams "are you fucking kidding me" and
shakes his head incredulously. "Maybe because I'm worried about you
you sure you're ready for something like that?"

100lgirl "For lunch?" I ask, playing dumb. I know what he's worried about,
easier to joke than to seriously consider his question.

tries to "Don't be a dick. You know what I mean." *Unfortunately, I do.*

I sigh, running a hand down my face. “I’m just getting to know her all.”

“Nah, it’s more than that. I can tell. I haven’t seen you like this since it to my trails off.

Because Once again, he’s right, but I’m not about to admit that.

grin on “She’s only here for a week...for a conference. It’s just a bit of fun.”

Carter visibly relaxes, and I smile. I should be grateful he’s looking me, but it wouldn’t hurt for him to want me to find someone.

ght you “So can I meet her?” he asks with a cheesy grin now that he feels h more about the situation. Without giving him an answer, I roll my eyes at him off, before jumping in my car. *Bye, Carter.*



with a

I finally arrive back at the hotel at one forty-five, and after a quick I re lightGran—where she once again questions me for stopping by unannour 70 daysmake it to the bar with a few minutes to spare. This time, Lucy’s

waiting. Leaning against the wall near the entry, she has her eyes phone as her thumb flicks across the screen. She’s nibbling on her bot I wantand has the faintest of smiles on her beautiful face. My heart races as

her. Everything about her draws me in, and I can’t bring myself to m nd thenalone look away. So, when her head lifts, she catches me staring.

ou. Are With the most adorable expression, she releases the lip she has between her teeth, and straightens before raising her hand in a wave.

and it’s Walking toward her, I ignore the fact that she busted me checking and smile.

. That's "How was practice?" she asks when I reach her side, not at all affected by my ogling.

e..." he "It was tiring, long, and *slow*," I say honestly, unable to hold anything around this girl.

Lucy laughs, and I add the sound to my memory bank, along with the others, before gesturing to the door. "Should we go in?"

She nods as I hold it open for her, signaling for her to go first.

"How's the conference going?" I ask when we're settled in a booth. Lucy brushes a few loose strands of hair behind her ear, and eyes me with a sassy grin. "It's tiring, long, and *slow*," she repeats my previous comment, and I can't stop my ridiculous belly laugh.

It's hard not to notice that things between us already feel different from they did yesterday. In a good way. I mean, yesterday was great. Even though I felt natural and comfortable. But today...today it feels like we know each other. Like we've known each other for a while. I don't know how I got this feeling from the smallest of conversations, but it just feels right. *God, did I become such a sap?*

Mentally shaking off my thoughts, I ask Lucy about her day and she fills me in intently as she fills me in on all the "boring details" as she calls them. We talk until our food arrives and only stop to take our first bite, then we're back into it.

"So my brother was here last night, and I may have told him I met her." She lifts her fork as she talks, laughing shyly.

I raise an eyebrow in question but smile to ease her nerves. "Oh, yes, I say, trying hard not to give away my own. *What did she say? What did he say? Has he heard rumors about me that he filled her in on? God, there are plenty out there.*

cted by “Yeah.” She laughs. “He reminded me that you play with his friend
What?! So they didn’t really talk about me?”

ng back Luke...Luke... Fuck. Am I supposed to know him? I’m slowly listing
everyone’s names, but there are a lot of them.

with the “Luke?” I ask with a confused grimace.

“He’s a rookie this year. Hothead. Bit of a loose cannon but
player.” Lucy laughs and then adds, “In more ways than one, I’ve heard

My brows crease while I decipher her meaning, and when it clicks
me withplace, I laugh. “Ah, so he’s the opposite of me then?”

answer, “Definitely. There’s no “off-season only” bullshit for him. In fact,
wager when it comes to that rule, you’re in the minority,” she sasses
nt thanlike this new version of her.

rything Tapping my knuckles on the table, I bite back a smirk. “You think
w eachbullshit? Are you saying I *should* be out having sex during the season?”

got that Lucy’s face scrunches before something seemingly comes to mind.
l, *when* smiles wide, her eyes lighting up with mischief. “I don’t know. I

Whatever.” She shrugs, and the cutest blush coats her skin.

d listen I release a held breath and smile. I want to ask why she’s blushing, but
, beforethat it means she wants to explore something with me. Even if it does

ake ourto sex. But whatever her meaning, I’m thankful I didn’t fuck it all up with
mention of sex on the second date. *Date?* Jesus. No wonder Carter

at you.”believe me when I said it wasn’t serious. *I don’t even believe me.*

I open my mouth to ask, but Lucy cuts me off, asking if my chi
eah?” I good, obviously wanting to change the subject. I burst out laughing and

did he my head as she grins. “The pasta is delicious,” she adds with a giggle.
! *know*scase you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” I deadpan jokingly and smile when she laughs. “Believe

Luke.”not, I’ve actually had it before.”

We talk for another hour, right up until I have to leave to get back to the stadium. I’m already pushing it for time or I’d stay longer.

We walk together until we reach the conference rooms, and while the pressure to hold her hand is strong, I ignore it, enjoying the comfortable familiarity instead.

“This is me,” she says, and I take note of the session name on the sign—“Best practice and workplace relations.” Unfortunately, it gives

an indication as to where she’s come from, but I’ll happily suck up any information I can about her. *Maybe next time I see her I should actually say hi,* and I know there will be a next time, my focus shifts back to Lucy.

“Enjoy the session and remember...no matter how boring it gets, I can’t sleep because people *will* notice,” I joke, referring to a story she’s telling me about a colleague falling asleep this morning.

and she laughs. Lucy covers her face in her hands and laughs. “I felt so bad for him. Maybe the red mark on his head was huge. But at the same time, that’s what you get from falling asleep with your head in the palm of your hand...of course, I’m hopeful going to drop.”

“Let’s hope he’s learned his lesson and you have an uneventful afternoon with the team.” “Fingers crossed.” Lucy smiles, crossing her fingers in front of her. “I didn’t even tell you I better go, or I’ll be late.”

“Right, yes. But I’ll see you after the game tomorrow, yeah?” I work to keep my nerves at bay as I await her answer.

She exaggeratedly sighs before rolling her eyes. “Yes, I suppose that’s all arranged,” she huffs before her lips pull up into a grin.

And my answering smile cannot be stopped.

“Can I get your number? You know, so I can text you when I’m done.”

ask, not sure I can last until late tomorrow to talk to her.

Lucy hesitates for a second before pulling her phone from her

“Sure, that makes life easier.”

We exchange numbers and then say our goodbyes, agreeing once

meet up the next day. When I finally jump in my truck, I have

minutes to make the twelve-minute drive. *Talk about cutting it close*

never been fined once in my NFL career, but for Lucy, I don't mind

me not.

up any

ask.



After reviewing opposition tapes, we talk strategy, and I'm mentally

by the time I get home. I practically fall into bed fully clothed, but

sleep? No. My phone is screaming at me to pick it up and text Lucy

maybe it's my brain and not my phone that's wanting that to happen.

either way, I give in, pulling up her number to begin.

get for

Wes: Thank you again for lunch. Hope your session went well

I toss and turn for thirty minutes waiting for a response before

myself and giving up. I'm almost asleep when the bell chimes, signaling

have a text. My eyes shoot open, and I grab my phone, bringing the screen

life...and find nothing. No message. No call. Not even an email to

the tone. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* I'm losing my mind over this

Dropping the phone back to the bed, I smother myself with a pillow and

out in frustration just as the noise sounds again, only louder this time.

out a breath but pick it up anyway, fully prepared to find the screen

once more. Only it's not.

alone," I

Lucy: Thank you. You'll be pleased to know my head is bruise pocket. managed to stay awake

more to Since we've already established I'm not playing hard to get, I text h
thirteen immediately.

se. I've
risking **Wes: Phew! I've been worried**

**Lucy: Your concern is much appreciated :) Did you make it t
team meeting on time?**

**Wes: I did. Just. But even if I was late, it would have been worth
drained**

it can I The three dots appear and then disappear a few times, but i
. Okay, unexpected. It hasn't escaped my attention that she's not a huge fan
en. Buttalking about us in any kind of positive light. Or talking about an
general. If only I knew why. Yes, I could very well ask her, but I know
not in the right place for her to want to share that just yet. But I'm
we'll get there.

cursing The dots stop, and I'm almost sure she's not going to reply when
talking I comes through.

reen to
explain **Lucy: I'm glad you made it all the same. I'm going to head off
his girl. Hope you have a good sleep ahead of the game tomorrow**

nd yell I will now.

I blow
n blank **Wes: Thank you. See you soon. Goodnight, Lucy**

Lucy: Goodnight

free. I My heart pounds in my chest, and all we're doing is texting. What about this girl that has me twisted in knots? And where exactly do I go from here?
er back

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to your

it

it's not

1 of me

“us” in

v we're

hopeful

1 a text

to bed.

My heart pounds in my chest, and all we're doing is texting. What is it about this girl that has me twisted in knots? And where exactly do we go from here?

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Chapter Five

Lucy

Summer and I push through the crowd to get to our seats not long before the game begins. We're running late, which is not uncommon when two of us get talking, but it's annoying all the same.

"Logan called to say he's in Heartwood to see Liam this weekend," Summer says as we sit down, talking about her childhood best friend's little brother he only recently found out existed. "I tried to convince him to come to the game but he said it's too hectic and..." Something catches her attention and she trails off mid-sentence.

When my gaze follows hers, I notice the teams are already warming up. When she waves toward the field, I know she's found Dylan. This'll be the first time I've seen him play in the pros, and I'm pretty damn excited about it...and proud. My little bro. The annoying little shit I used to boss around. The guy that became one of my best friends and my protector. I've always expected big things from him, and he one hundred percent delivered.

"Did you find him, or did he find you?" I ask Summer as I watch Dylan run in our direction.

She bites her lip to hide her grin, and I know the answer. I swear I have a built-in radar when it comes to her. I mean, I know he arranged our seats because he probably has the numbers memorized, but it's also safe to assume I've probably been scanning the stadium since he stepped out onto the field.

"I'm ready for you to be my sister, Summer," I joke because it frees me up a little. "I'm out."

She blushes while shaking her head. "We have plenty of time for this. We don't need to rush."

"Does Dylan feel the same?"

"Stop it." She laughs. "Where's Wes?" Standing up, she makes a point of exaggeratedly scanning the field, changing the subject completely. "Do you know where the new guys are?" she says to the supporters around us.

"Sit down. Geez." I grip her jersey, pulling her into her seat, and she squeals as she falls.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought we were the type of friends that tease each other," she sasses, bouncing her eyebrows.

My lips pull into a smirk as I shake my head. "We are. I just don't want to give him to get his hopes up."

Summer frowns, her expression turning serious. "What's happening, anyway?"

With a sigh, I lift my shoulders in a small shrug. *I have no idea.* "I don't know what I'm doing, Sum. I want to get to know him. I'm completely hooked on him for some reason, but at the same time, I don't think I have anything to offer right now. I don't know how much I can give him."

"I know you've been with some awful guys, but not all of them are assholes, Lucy. Just look at the two people closest to you, Dylan and Jess."

"I know."

ie has a She's right. *If only it was that easy.*

eats, so "He seems nice." She shrugs...and again, she's right, but I'm still r
his eyeswhat to do.

"He is nice. He's doing all the right things and trying to get to kn
aks herWe're, um...actually meeting up again after the game."

"Lucy!" Summer exclaims and pulls me into a hug. I love her exci
nat. Webut I also hate it. I hate the person I've become lately, but I can't s
bring the old me back. I need to try because this isn't the life I want
I'm a strong, independent woman, and I'm getting stronger. I want to
point ofLucy I used to be. Well, parts of her anyway. The Lucy that always
Anyoneasshole boyfriends can stay the fuck away.

When Summer pulls back, she holds me at arm's length and
and she"You've got this. Just take it one step at a time, but judge him for wh
not because he's a guy in general." *Again, if only it was that easy.*

se each



't want
g there,
'I don't
' drawn
hing to
know shines through.

Wes is a hell of a player, and difficult to look away from. In fact,
completely honest with myself, seeing him on that field has me feeling
I wasn't sure I'd feel again anytime soon. My heart races as I watch h
across the field, taking in the power in his legs as he pivots. I flinch v
slams into the opposition but find myself loving his confidence, his for
his strength. The reserved Wes is gone; in his place is a man in full c
And yet, when he takes off his helmet and smiles up to the crowd, th
know shines through.

em are
oel."

It's anyone's game at halftime, and I'm struggling to decide who t
for. San Francisco is my team, always has been, but Denver has

Summer does not feel my pain; she's Denver all the way. "I'm happy not sure return coat. After all, who knows how long Dyl will stay in Denver. My is with him," she'd said as she painted the Denver colors on her face. Something I wouldn't dare do considering where we are, but she seem to care.

As the guys run off the field, I notice Wes scanning the crowd, looking for something, or someone...me. He has no hope considering I never thought to live where I'd be sitting, but he's trying and I almost want to stand up and be the Almost. But I'd prefer not to draw attention to myself.

"Are you still heading home tomorrow morning?" I ask Summer before the second half begins.

"Yeah, sorry. My Monday afternoon class is draining. If I miss too much, I'll lose marks, and I've already missed one after going to Denver for the weekend."

"I get it, and it's okay. It's been fun. I appreciate you coming."

"Anytime." She smiles. "Maybe next time you won't ditch me for a while. I'd worry if I didn't know she was joking. But she absolutely is. Her life has been taken up with Dylan."

if I'm
things
him run
when he



Denver gets ahead late in the second half and manages to stay in front of us. My heart hurts for Wes, but I'm so happy for Dylan. He may have only played a few minutes, but he played, and I couldn't be prouder.

Summer and I meet him after the game for a quick cheer before I sneak away. If Summer wasn't distracting Dylan, I'm sure I would have been questioned, but thankfully, she is.

to be a Wes and I had texted earlier this morning to make arrangements for the game, and agreed to meet at the beach for a walk in a couple of days. Taking my time to get ready, I smile as a giddy nervous energy runs through me. It's a new feeling. All my past relationships have begun after a long time.

Things just kind of progressed without me giving it much thought. Working for this—the excitement...the anticipation...the nerves—it's a first, and I would like it. It's definitely helping me to focus my energy on the good in life rather than the hell I've been living in lately.

I'm halfway through getting ready when my phone starts ringing. Before the Wes's name pops up on the screen, bringing a smile to my face. I don't know why, but I'm confident this is not a call to cancel our plans.

"Can't wait another forty minutes to see me?" I say, instead of a long greeting.

"No, I can't. Are you ready yet? I'm already on my way to meet you."

A huge grin adorns my face as I shake my head. "How? Don't you have the media to deal with?"

"I volunteered to go first. Something I've never done." He pauses, whispering, "I think I made a few of them suspicious."

I start to giggle as a feeling of weightlessness takes over. Everything is so easy with him.

"Okay, what about the lecture from your coach after the loss?"

"Mmm, yep, that was brutal, but it's done. And before you ask me to promise, I showered."

I bite back my next smile even though he can't see me. "You need at least give me twenty minutes," I say as I run the brush through my hair.

"You don't need it. You're always beautiful. I'll give you the two-drive plus some walking time. I'll meet you at the beach in ten."

or after With that, he shocks me by hanging up, and I'm not sure how I feel for hours. That considering the type of guys I've been with. Guys that wanted everything their way. A small pang of unease takes over until my phone rings again. "Fuck! I'm so sorry. The call disconnected. If you need more time, I'll be there in ten." "Whereas okay. You can take it."

kind of I sigh silently in relief and then laugh at the assumption I made rather proven himself to be one of the good ones in a few short days, and yet, I don't trust anyone. *God, I wish I could change that.*

ing, and "I'll be there in ten," I say, abandoning the makeup I'd planned to do. I don't know heading for the door.

"Great. See you soon," he says excitedly as I hear the buzz of traffic in the normal background.

When I pull up in the parking lot, Wes is casually leaning against the wooden railing at the entrance to the sand. He looks up at the sound of my car and squints when my headlights shine in his face. After cutting the engine, I turn the lights off and watch as he blinks a few times, re-adjusting to the darkness before night surrounding us, then smiles when our eyes meet. Jogging over to the door, he opens it before I've had the chance and reaches for my hand.

ing feels "Nine minutes; I'm impressed."

My eyes widen, and as hard as I try, I can't keep the smile off my face. "You timed me?" I say, allowing him to help me out of the car.

, yes, I "Nope, I was counting down."

I push at his shoulder and giggle like a schoolgirl. *What is he doing to me?* "Shut up. There's no way you were doing that."

r. "You're right." He laughs, rocking back on his heels. "I have no idea how long you took, but I'm happy you're here. Now, what are your thoughts on the ice cream?" he says, pointing toward a van that's just pulled into the lot.

l about “Love it.” I practically skip over to the window to order, not even
rything for Wes to follow.

in.

me, it’s



“So, I did some research,” I say after we’ve been walking for a little
e. He’s

The conversation has once again been easy, and I feel so relaxed around
, I can’t

Wes takes a step in front of me before turning around and
backward with his eyes on mine. “Oh yeah, what about?”

ed and “You and Carter,” I say with a raised brow as Wes’s face flashes

intrigue before he smiles, motioning for me to proceed. “I noticed he

c in the get much game time today, so I may have consulted the trusty Internet

what that’s about.”

inst the “You could have just asked me.” He laughs. “I think we’ve established

my car I’ll tell you just about anything.”

ngine, I “We have. And I need to use that to my advantage a bit more,” I joke

he dusk of. “But in this case, you’ll soon learn I’m not the most patient person

to my planet.”

Wes laughs again before moving back to my side. “Guess that makes
of us after my phone call tonight.”

my face. “You’re right. Hmm, maybe we need to cut this relationship off

it’s even begun. We’re too similar.”

Wes’s laughter stops and a warm smile lights up his face. *What’s going
to me?* Ignoring his reaction, I jump back into our previous conversation

“Anyway, as I was saying... I discovered that Carter was actually

lea how before you. And you were a last-minute change to San Francisco’s roster

ghts on

it.

waiting A tiny smirk starts to form before Wes schools his features. “No w
were a package deal. We never do anything without the other. He’s a
just over there,” he mocks, pointing behind me, because that’s pretty
how the media perceive them.

while. I bark out a laugh and lightly punch his abs, abs that I wouldn’t
seeing again.

walking “Hey! Put that weapon away,” he jokes, waving his hand at my
know the power that thing has.”

es with “Well, I wouldn’t have to use it if you hadn’t been lying.”

didn’t “Lucy Mathers, *you’ll* come to learn that I never lie. I may joke,
never lie. Not to you, not to anyone. There’s no place in this world for
t to see

I nod, because he’s right, but I can’t help wondering if there’s a stor

ied that “That aside, you’re correct. While Carter and I have been frie
forever, and would love to always play together, it wasn’t planned th

ke, sort He was traded early and then when San Francisco lost a tight end at
minute, my agent got me a deal. It was luck, but we’re once again
on the same team.”

xes two “That must be nice.”

before “It is; I just wish people would see his real potential. I’m hoping
nurture it here. They seem to be a supportive team.”

oing on My lips pull into a smile, but I try to hide it. “You, Wesley Johnso
good man.”

rsation. “I try.” He smirks, bouncing his eyebrows, before moving in cl
slowly draping an arm over my shoulder, giving me a chance to step av

traded ter.” But this time, I don’t even flinch.



arkness Huffing out a laugh, I pull him to a stop and smile when I see
reached our destination. “I think this was the spot,” I say, nervously n
should on my bottom lip.

act that Wes looks around, confused, until his eyes lock on something beh
head. “You mean *our* spot?”

“Do I? I mean, can you really have a spot with someone you just me
nd you “Hey, don’t lessen our relationship; we met ages ago,” he jokes, pul
closer until our bodies crash together. I flinch on instinct, but only bec
st walk caught me off guard. So when he tries to pull away, I hold on tightly.
th it.” the fact that I made him question his moves.

trigued. Despite my attempt to keep him close, he takes a step back until our
are no longer touching before gently brushing my hair behind r
nd it’s sending my heart into overdrive. “I like you, Lucy. And I’d love to k
ikes me again...more than anything right now. But I’m going to wait for you t
me feel the first move. When you’re ready.” His eyes bore into mine while he
t to the making sure I understand his meaning. I do. One hundred percen
This is letting me set the pace. He knows something’s wrong.

ection I Taking my own step back, I watch our arms stretch between us u
And the too far away and his hand drops. Giving him a small nod in acknowlec
I pause before launching myself at him, slamming my lips to his. Th
nd link lips that were the last to touch mine. Despite everything that’s ha
e as he between now and then.

s. “Just “Fuck!” Wes hisses against my mouth before he recovers from the
ttention and lifts his hands to frame my face, tilting my head up to deepen the k

Keeping one hand on my neck, he moves the other into my hair, l
me tightly in place. He’s strong and yet I trust him completely. I know
I were to try and pull away, he’d release me in a second. But I h

we've intention of doing that. Instead, I lift to my toes slowly, making s
tubbling breasts brush against his chest as I rise.

Wes groans, and when I gasp in return, he sneaks his tongue i
ind my mouth, the feel of it sending my pulse racing. Something ignites wit
that I haven't felt for a while, and my body aches for him.

it?" Our tongues twirl slowly as my hands start to explore his body, i
ling me along the contours of his rock-hard abs before moving up along h
ause he back. My fingers play with the strands of his thick hair at the base
, hating neck, and he groans into my mouth before breaking away, moving his
my neck and shoulder. As he sucks on the sensitive skin just below m
bodies can't stop the moan that escapes me, and I intertwine our fingers, squ
ny ear, his hand, before my mouth seeks out his once more. When I bite down
iss you lip, Wes jolts, pressing his obvious erection into me, and I apparently
o make reason. *Oh, God.* Wrapping my spare arm around his neck, I move
speaks, pulling him down into me as my tongue pushes back into his mouth.

it. He's "Wait, Lucy," Wes murmurs against my lips. "We have to stop."

I freeze instantly—never wanting to do something against his v
ntil I'm anyone's—and step back.

lgment, "I'm sorry, I—"

ie same "You have nothing to apologize for," he rasps, a little out of breath
ppened was *everything*. But if we keep going, I can't guarantee I'll keep it C

and there are a few reasons that shouldn't happen. We're on a public
e shock for one."

miss. My eyes scan the area, and sure enough, there are still quite a few
holdings scattered around, despite the late hour. I laugh nervously as Wes pull
v that if close again with a smile on his face. Palming my cheek, he presses a
lave no

ure mykiss to my forehead. “What the fuck is it about you, Lucy Mathers?
driving me crazy.”

nto my Burying my face into his chest, I audibly sigh, because I know v
hin memean. I barely go a second without thinking of him, and we hardly
each other. *What is this?*

running After making our way to the parking lot, we drive back separately
is solidhotel, but Wes waits beside his car to walk me to my door. This time,
e of hisof taking a step back, he takes my hand in his and moves toward me, p
s lips tohis lips to my knuckles.

y ear, I Without permission, a smile lights up my face as I shake my head
ueezingguy is smooth, that’s for sure. *Please, let this be real.*

1 on his Pulling me closer, he drops his forehead to mine and releases
lose allbreath. “I know I said I’d let you steer this ship, but now that I’ve taste
closer,lips again, I’m not sure I can go back. Please, tell me I can kiss you
and then keep kissing you whenever I get the urge?”

My smile morphs into a smirk. “Is that likely to be often?”

will, or “Most definitely.” He grins with a nod, standing motionless until I s
“Permission granted.”

After rushing out “Thank fuck,” Wes palms my neck and tilts my
1. “Thattoward him, molding his mouth to mine. The kiss is soft and unhurri
3-rated,he’s trying to explore every part of me. It’s a kiss that packs emotion
c beachmy heart pounding in my chest, begging for release. Begging me to
give it a chance to roam. *To trust there are good guys out there.* Because
peopleWes, I want to believe in that.

s me in When we’re once again breathless, he moves away, and I feel t
1 chasteeverywhere. He smiles shyly before taking another step back, ar

You're another, until he's out of arm's reach. "I'm going to go. But I'd love you tomorrow. If you're free."

What he My hand comes up to my lips, and I nod before reaching behind my know open the door.

Wes smiles in acknowledgement and waits for me to step inside, / to the turning and jogging down the hall as I shut the door behind me.

instead I still feel a tingle on my lips long after he's gone, and my mind pressing with what that means. Can I truly move on from everything and put n in Wes? Something tells me I can.

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I still feel a tingle on my lips long after he's gone, and my mind buzzes with what that means. Can I truly move on from everything and put my faith in Wes? Something tells me I can.

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Chapter Six

Wes

Her walls are coming down. Right before my eyes, I can see her from the beach coming back to me. I say that like I know her well, in all honesty, it feels like I do.

The girl I met on the beach appeared confident and carefree, and Lucy definitely has those traits at times, she also comes across more guarded and protective of herself than she was back then. Not that that's a bad thing, it's just different from what I remember.

It also has my mind working overtime to figure out if I just got a different version of Lucy that day, or if something happened between then and now that affected her. Either way, she's opening back up, and it's beautiful to see.

For the past twenty-four hours, I've kept up my promise to kiss her. At least, as often as I can around both our commitments. And she takes every chance we get. When she's with me, I don't question what I'm doing because it feels right, but when we're apart, it's hard to forget the simple fact that she's going home in two days, and I don't even know where her home is.

When the afternoon rolls around the next day, I check my watch a millionth time and groan when I see Lucy still has two hours left

conference for the day. The thought of keeping myself busy for the day pains me, so when a stupid idea comes to mind, I jump at it, not bothering to think it through.

Twenty minutes later, I watch sneakily through the window as the uniform-clad resort employee walks confidently into the conference room and discreetly hands the presenter a note and then backs away with a smile.

As he exits, I slap a twenty-dollar bill in his hand, along with a sign, watching him as he disappears down the hall.

I can't hear what's happening inside, but I watch as the presenter reads the note before signaling for Lucy to collect her things and come forward. I know what the note says—I wrote it—so I expect her eyes to dart to the wires in five, four, three... Yep, there they are, sooner than I thought. Her expression furrow in question, and when the presenter follows her eye line, I duck my head while she looks at me with a guarded and slightly suspicious sight, probably causing more confusion.

Lucy steps outside moments later with her lips pulled into a line, trying to hide a smile, but the corners of her mouth seem to be disobeying my request, lifting up ever so slightly.

At least that's what I thought was happening. But when her lips lower into a very obvious frown, my chest tightens.

"Is it my dog? Did something happen to Mitzy?" she says in a whisper, causing my heart to pound as I take in her words and expression. *Fuck*—it backfired. I'd written a note to excuse her from the remainder of her presentation due to a family issue. She'd told me the last talk of the day didn't really matter to her anyway. I thought I was being funny.

Lucy eyes me expectantly.

"Ah, fuck... I—" Gripping the back of my neck, I grit my teeth and I'm about to spew out some epic apology when she bursts out laughing.

at long *What?*

ot even “Oh, Wes.”

The laughter draws attention, and the presenter turns our way
youngcausing me to duck for a second time. Of course, Lucy laughs even ha
om. He “Stop it! You’ll spoil my plan.”

. She nods, covering her face with her palm until her giggles dissipa
ed cap, turns to the presenter, giving him a terse nod before hurriedly walk
way. When I begin to rise, she pushes me back down and smiles as sh
ads the back through the conference windows.

I know “Okay, you’re good now,” she says after a moment, allowing me to
indow in I’ve just reached full height when she whispers “shit,” links our finger
browstakes off in a hurried walk, pulling me down the hall and scrambling
out of me into a doorway, out of sight.

What is going on here? I feel like I’m a school kid trying to skip
. She’s Lucy peers around the wall and then springs back toward me, crash
ring her body to mine. I’d laugh at how unreal this felt if she wasn’t standin
against me, her breasts pressed to my chest, my cock straining agai
ver into stomach. *Fuck! Don’t think about that. Bad thoughts, bad thoughts. No
Pure thoughts, pure thoughts.*

whisper, “My boss is heading this way; he’s not going to be happy to f
k! This slacking off with you.”

session *That’ll do it.* The thought of getting Lucy in trouble plagues my mi
y apply my brows pull together. “Fuck, Lucy, I’m sorry.”

Her eyes find mine, and her lips pull into a smirk. “I’m not, but yo
to get me out of here.”

I shrug. I huff out a quiet laugh before spinning her around and pressing l
ughing the wall this time. She yelps in surprise, and it’s the cutest little soun

don't have time to think about it. Lucy doesn't need to ask me twice getting us out of here.

again, Gripping her hips, I lean ever so slightly toward the corner around. Sure enough, there's a guy hovering outside the conference room who I can only assume is her boss. He looks down the hall in the opposite direction, and then his head turns our way.

I dart back in and press my body to Lucy's, just like she did mine. She looks her eyelids as she gazes up at me with a sassy grin, and I can't stop from pressing a chaste kiss to her nose and mouth before peeking around the corner again. He's still there.

With time to kill while we wait for him to move on, I link my fingers to get Lucy's and bring her hand up between us.

"You know, I figured out what you do," I whisper, a cocky grin on my face.

"Oh yeah?" she asks, before sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, flushmaking me bite back a groan. *Focus, Wes.*

"Well, at least, I know it's something in the field of fitness and health, right?" "Close enough then," she says, biting back another smile and loving the fact that I haven't quite figured it out.

"How long did you study at college? That might help narrow it down." "I'm twenty-four and I just finished. You do the math."

Twenty-four, huh? I bank that information in my "things I know about Lucy" file and consider her words. Her age doesn't help because she really should have started right away, and—

Ahem.

A throat clearing cuts off my thoughts—alerting me to the fact that the boss is now closer than he was before—and I freeze. "We're going to

ce. I'm run," I say seriously, peering around the corner again, stealthy Wes

Lucy quietly cracks up beside me, and I raise a finger to her lips to
and peer her, getting a suppressed smile and a nod in return. She's loving this.

room, Signaling for Lucy to get ready, I check what her boss is up to on
opposite time and, when the coast is clear, grab her hand and run. *Exactly like*

kids skipping class. Yes, I'm a thirty-year-old professional football
he bats running through the halls of the resort laughing like a school kid. But
myself hell I do. I give it my all. *What is this woman doing to me?*

and the Lucy giggles as we make our escape, clenching my hand tighter, fo
me through the maze of walkways.

ers with I laugh along with her, but it's slightly forced. This moment has m
beating out of control. And it has everything to do with Lucy and th
on my faith she's showing me right now. I wanted to earn her trust, I wanted
be comfortable around me, and in this second, I have no doubt th
mouth, succeeded.

Lucy looks over her shoulder as we turn the corner and then sto
h." laughter bursting out once more.

ing the "Okay, you've broken me free from class, bad boy. What should
now?"

n." I freeze. *Fuuuck.* With her erratic breathing, flushed cheeks, and th
rise and fall of her chest, my mind has no choice but to go where it sh
v about *What should we do now? I'll tell you... We should go back to my ro
nay not can hide you away from the world and slowly peel your clothes fro
body, piece by piece, kissing every inch of your skin, as I—*

"Wes? Are you listening?"

hat her *Fuck! No. "Yes?" At ease down there. You are not getting lucky ton
have to Lucy raises an eyebrow in question, then giggles again. The sound*

in play, so light and carefree that I'm almost taken aback. Sure, she's laughed in silence and she was absolutely in hysterics as we escaped her conference, but this has a softness to it that feels more real than the rest. Like she's finally more ease.

school She clears her throat, and I realize I've been busted lost in thought again. "Sorry, you wanted to know what we're doing?"

run like "Well, yes, but I asked... Never mind." She shakes her head and back a smile. "What's the plan?"

allowing I stare out at nothing, thinking it through before answering. "Can I have you dinner?" I ask with a lift of my shoulder like it's just a random thought when in reality, I've been thinking about getting uninterrupted time with her all day.

and her to Her brows furrow, and she nibbles on her bottom lip, drawing me in that I've there. Not that I let them linger. Now's not the time to be distracted. I wait patiently for Lucy's response, hoping it's a yes but almost certain she won't. She may be more comfortable around me, but I'm not stupid enough to think she'd want to come to my place after only a few days.

we do Her mouth curls up in the corners, and she frees her lip from her teeth. She sighs. "That actually sounds perfect. But it's only four p.m." She says it so quick last bit with some sass, and I have to hold back my own sigh of relief. "I couldn't." "Good cooking takes time. Are you not familiar with a decent dinner?" I joke and then instantly regret it. I know nothing of her life, but I know she's been through something. "Sorry, that was—"

"You may have age on your side. But you did not just challenge me in my kitchen," she says, and I rush out a laugh. *Thank God.*

light. "I don't think I challenged you at all. But I'm assuming by that comment of it is that you're already judging me." My brows pull as I mock annoy her.

before, that it fazes Lucy at all. Her challenging expression remains as I connect this... “Also, I never told you my age.”

Finally at “Google is a wonderful thing, Wes Johnson. And while my brothers have the baking gene, you better believe I can *cook*.”

Right once The sass, the confidence...it’s something she’s given hints to, and finally shining through. My heart jolts as a sense of pride washes over me and holds pride that I helped to bring this part of her back. Because I finally find I’m seeing the girl I met on the beach.

...cook “I guess you can be my assistant then.” I shrug, trying to put off the idea, that I’m not at all affected by the playfulness she’s showing me.

With her “Hmmm. What are you making? Maybe I’ll just watch and mock you.” “So that’s a yes to me cooking?” I say, ignoring her verbal jab.

My eyes “It’s a yes,” Lucy says with a small laugh before a shy look flashes across her face, and she brushes her hair behind her ear.

in it’s a
ough to



An hour later, Lucy moves around the counter and rips the salt from her teeth as she says the words aloud with mischief. The sun gleams through the window, creating a halo effect behind her, and I have to fight myself to concentrate on the present and not on the fact that I want to kiss her right now.

“Give it back, Lucy,” I warn after snapping out of my thoughts, not only making her move a little faster.

“I’m putting it on the table where it belongs.”

“You’re not going to need it.”

“Everything needs it.”

ice, not

continue. We've been arguing over salt for the last ten minutes. Lucy doesn't
me when I say she won't need to add anything extra to this meal. I've
er mayhelping Gran cook since I was a teen.

She shakes her head in skepticism but stops walking, giving me a
but it's to explain.

ver me. "Come here, and I'll prove it," I say, holding up a spoon full of my
eel like famous stir fry sauce. Famous to me, anyway.

Lucy pops her hip, crossing her arms across her chest. "Let me gu
he vibeclose my eyes, ready for a taste, but feel your lips touch mine instead
spoon. I know your kind," she sasses with a flirtatious grin.

u." I almost drop said spoon as I choke on a laugh. "That thought
crossed my mind, but now that you mention it, I like the idea."

s across "Ugh, fine. Give me a taste, but no kiss."

I pout with puppy dog eyes as she walks over, but she remains un
until a smile lights up her face at the very last second. Lifting up on h
she presses her mouth to mine, smiling as she whispers against n

om my "Now, where's this magic sauce?"

er eyes

a halo



issue atWhen we've finished eating, Lucy sits back in her chair and p
stomach. "For the record, it could have used a pinch of something els
ny tonecan't put my finger on what." She stares at the salt shaker on the table
of her as she taps her chin in thought.

My eyes narrow as I watch her, waiting for her to laugh, but sh
strong.

"For the record, I think you're wrong."

believe At that, she laughs. “Agree to disagree?”

ve been “Nope.” I refuse to believe that wasn’t the best sauce she’s ever

“Maybe you need another taste.”

chance “I do, do I?”

“Yep, one sec and I’ll get it.”

gran’s I dash back into the kitchen, and like the corny sucker that I’ve su
become, I spread some of the sauce across my lips before moving bac
ess; I’lltable. Lucy’s brows furrow when she sees the lack of spoon in my har
of thatwhen her gaze lands on my lips, she squeaks out a laugh before cover
mouth to hide her grin.

hadn’t “Okay, I’m ready,” she says with as straight a face as she can muste

I curl my finger in a come hither motion, and my pulse spikes wl
rises from her seat. Now that she’s walking my way, I’m not exact
affectedwhat I expect to happen with this plan, so I stand still and watch it
er toes,When she reaches my side, she pushes me down onto my chair and st
y lips.my lap, her core lining up perfectly with the semi I now have pressed
my jeans.

Leaning back slightly, Lucy stares at my mouth as she runs the tip
finger under my bottom lip, sending a shiver down my spine. I l
physically stop my eyes from closing as she moves closer and whisper
ats her ear. “Is this what I’m tasting?”
e, but I

in front *Fuck!* I almost wish I’d been more creative with the sauce place
give her a nod, unable to form words as I try my hardest to keep my
e holds bay. But when she sticks out her tongue and licks her way across my
before sucking the bottom one into her mouth, I’m done for.

It’s impossible to hold back the groan that rips from within me, bu
the least of my worries. My pants tighten as my length hardens bene

and by the way Lucy jumps, she definitely notices it.

tasted. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” she trails off and moves to stand up.

“Wait! I’m not sorry, unless it makes you uncomfortable.”

Lucy pauses, and her eyes glaze over as if she’s lost in thought, processing her feelings on what just happened. When her eyes meet suddenly notice a spark of something new, something I haven’t seen since we f k to the—fire.

ids, but “I’ve never felt more comfortable with a man in my life,” she says ing hershy smile, her honesty shining through.

Framing her face in my hands, I breathe out an audible sigh r. pressing my lips to her forehead. That one simple sentence holds s nen sh meaning, and I’m not sure what to process first.

ly sure Lucy grips my tee in her hands as her forehead meets mine, and w unfold.sucks in a breath, I hold my own as I wait for her next move.

rattles “You’re not going to hurt me, right?” she rasps, and my heart bre againststhis girl. *What has she been through?*

I could easily assure her, and it would mostly be the truth, but I th of her warrants more than that.

ave to “I’m not going to lie and say I’ve always been a gentleman. I kno s in myhurt people, and I’ve been hurt, but Lucy...” I tilt her face until o meet. “Something about you makes the idea of hurting you feel imp ment. ISomething I can’t even fathom. So no, I’m not going to hurt you.”

cock at Her eyes dart between mine, searching for something, maybe sincer top lip,hold my gaze. Never once wavering. I mean every word. And when sh

me the smallest nod before burying her face in my chest, I know she b it that’sme. I’m stunned for a second, but as soon as I recover, my arms wrap ath her,her, pulling her tightly against me.

I'm not used to this. My life is football, and Gran, and occasionally I've even had a girlfriend before, a serious one. At least, one I thought serious in my earlier years. But this connection, right here, is new to me perhaps I've never wanted to protect someone so much in my entire life mine, I don't even know what I'm protecting her from.

First met Lucy pulls back after a few minutes and straightens in my lap. "I've kept kissing you that day. Instead of running away. I should have stayed with you, kissed you again, and spent the night getting to know you."

My heart pounds in my chest as I try to read the meaning within her expression. But when I can't, I try a different approach. "Why don't you stay a bit longer and get to know me now?" I ask, wanting more than anything to get to know her.

When she Her eyes flash with something like pain, but before I can question her expression morphs into one of calm and she smiles before whispering, "I would love that."

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Her eyes flash with something like pain, but before I can question it, her expression morphs into one of calm and she smiles before whispering, "I would love that."

Chapter Seven

Lucy

We talk for hours about everything... *anything*, and curl up on the couch to watch a movie. I must fall asleep at some point, because the next thing I know, I'm opening my eyes to a dark and quiet room and a blanket over me.

Sitting up in a bit of a daze, I'm trying to decide what to do, when Wes walks back into the room.

"You're awake?" he says with a genuine smile, not even at all bothered by the fact that I passed out on our date.

"Yes, sorry about that," I say with my voice coming out all raspy, of course, I yawn at the end.

Wes shakes his head. "No, it was getting late. I should have walked home hours ago. Come on, I'll take you now."

My chest tightens at his words and a feeling of panic takes over. I'm ready to leave, even though I am tired. I meant what I said about wishing I stayed to get to know him that night. My life would be very different now if I had. I'm not making that mistake twice.

“Is it okay if I stay?” I ask as my fingers pull nervously at the bottom of my shirt.

Wes looks surprised by my question but blurts out “yes,” so quickly it almost looks like a laugh. *Almost*. While the decision to stay here was an easy one, it doesn’t mean I feel completely confident about it.

When his eyes dart between the bedroom and the sofa we’re currently sitting on, I sense he’s about to be the gentleman he claims *not* to be, so I throw him to the punch.

“I’m fine with sharing,” I say, sitting tall. “But we can put a pillow in the middle if you’re worried,” I add, using humor to hide just how nervous I am. I’m not sure what I’m asking by staying over, but considering the thumping in my chest has returned to normal, I know I made the right choice. I trust Wes, completely. And maybe that’s wrong of me, but right now I don’t feel that way.

Wes’s brows furrow as he looks toward the bedroom once more, as if he’s worried by the possibility of hiding something or just not interested in having someone in his space. I mean, it’s not like this is a hotel room for him. It’s currently his home, and he probably wouldn’t want a semi-stranger in my bedroom either.

“Mind if I have a moment to tidy up?” he says with a wince, and I stop the laugh that escapes me.

“I’d welcome it,” I joke and love when his lips thin into a smirk, his eyes crinkling as they do.

“I’ll be right back.”

Barely five minutes pass before the bedroom door opens again and Wes pokes his head out, his eyes immediately finding mine. “Okay, it’s sort of decent,” he says, and I laugh again before following him into the living room, unable to keep my gaze from roaming around, desperate to learn every

ttom ofcan about him. But his room looks a lot like mine. Almost identical from a few minor details. There's no personal belongings, no photo that I only new information I learn is that he seems to like blue, with shades of one, its color scattered around the place. Blue suitcase, blue shirts in his various blue baseball caps.

irrently Wes takes off his watch and gently places it in a box beside his bed. I beat then I remember his sponsorship deal with Tag Heuer and make a note to find out what he really thinks of the brand. I'm always curious. s down When he looks my way with raised eyebrows and a playful expression I realize I'm still standing in the doorway and push off the wall, heading the stepping inside, making my way over to the bed.

choice. "Do you want the pillows between us?" Wes asks, and I giggle now, its shaking my head.

"I don't need them."

Is he He simply nods in answer, before his eyes rake over my body. I frowns, his gaze flashing toward the dresser. "What about something to come. I in?"

"That, I need. I kind of have nothing with me since you kidnapped me from class." I wink, making Wes chuckle as he pulls a tee from the drawer, throwing it my way.

his eyes "You're tiny, so my shorts will swim on you, but we can try and roll up," he says, reaching back into his drawers.

"No, that's okay," I say, and Wes freezes, his hand hovering in the air. Wes "The tee is enough, but thank you."

newhat Somehow the idea of standing in front of him wearing only his tee and room, panties has my heart beating erratically for reasons I didn't expect. I'm not nervous or panicked. The idea actually thrills me.

al apart Wes, on the other hand, looks positively terrified as he visibly swallows. The turning with wide eyes to gaze at the bed. I bite back a smile and walk into the what I assume is the ensuite. “Can I change in here?” I ask, pointing to the closet door.

He nods again but doesn’t meet my eye.

ed. It’s stripping off my clothes is fine, but the moment I slip the tee over my mental head, sans bra, I freeze, suddenly acutely aware of the situation I find myself in. I barely know Wes. It’s been less than a week, and for the first time in my life, I reason, I’m standing in his bathroom half naked. Am I crazy? Yes. I know I shouldn’t have anything to do with this situation. Do I believe Wes when he says he would never hurt me? Also yes, but then again, I foolishly believed that with other ex-boyfriends, right? *Didn’t I?* Come to think of it, deep down I know I did. I just accepted it because on their good days, things were amazing and I worshipped. It was easy to forget the bad.

and he *This* doesn’t feel at all like *that*. Wes hasn’t given me any reason to doubt his words. Not even a single red flag. And I trust him, one hundred percent.

Why? I have no idea. Call it gut instinct, but I do.

ped me Taking a deep breath, I stretch Wes’s tee at the hem, trying to cover my chest with the top skin. But when it doesn’t help, I close my eyes and gather my strength. I can do this. This is my choice. I’m in control.

all them Pushing open the door, I find Wes sitting on the edge of the bed, hunched over with his face in his hands. When the door creaks, his head flies up and his eyes meet mine. For a split second, his gaze drops to my bare legs and then darts back to my face, and when our eyes lock a second time, his are burning with want.

I’m not Now it’s my turn to nervously swallow.

My heart races as I tiptoe barefoot across the room. Why I’m on my

allows, don't know. Maybe it has something to do with the room being so quiet toward not wanting to disrupt that. Or maybe it's something else.

Stopping when I'm next to the bed, I watch as Wes stands, pulling back the covers so we can both get in. "Last chance for the pillows," he jokes, clear as day that he's still secretly hoping it's an option.

I shake my head with a soft smile before making myself comfortable on the mattress, curling my knees up as I face his side of the bed. Wes jolts but keeps his distance, and we're both silent for a beat.

"I'm a sleep talker. Always have been," he admits without looking away, and I laugh out loud, internally thanking him for breaking out of all my tension.

"I've been known to throw a punch here and there," I joke as I get up, I was rewarded with Wes's gaze shooting to mine as he rolls over to face me. "Fuck! I've felt that left hook. I'm regretting this decision right now."

"No take backs."

"Damn. Okay, punches I can handle. You don't kick though, do you need to cover my junk?"

I laugh again, playfully shoving at his chest. "I promise not to touch your junk," I say and instantly regret it when Wes raises a hand in defense.

"Hey! I never said you couldn't touch it. I'm just against kicking," I mumbled, bouncing his eyebrows while reaching out to stroke my arm. *I walked up, and into that one.*

Biting back a smile, I shake my head and ignore the way his touch sends shivers down my spine. Wriggling over, I place a gentle kiss on his forehead before retreating back to my position. "Goodnight, Wes."

Wes laughs, kissing my head in return before we both settle into our spots on the bed, our fingers connecting as we do. "Goodnight, Lucy," I

quiet and before closing his eyes. His actions speak so loudly, I know I can trust
making it easy to fall asleep.

lack the

but it's



Sometime during the night, I feel Wes's hand grip my hip, and I can't
able on I'm dreaming or if it's real. We're walking side by side along the beach
joins me. instead of waves crashing, it's eerily silent. *What's going on?* When he
squeezes, I startle awake, and my eyes flash open. *Dream then.* Although
ing my "Fuck, sorry," Wes whispers, as his hand disappears from my body.
r silent *only half dreaming.*

With lightning speed, I reach behind me and clasp his wrist, worried
and am moving his hand back to where it was. I'm confused between what's real
ice me. what's not, but I know I want him to touch me and I haven't wanted
lately.

Nothing more happens after that, and I slowly drift back to sleep
u? Do I balancing on the edge of a dream once more when Wes's hand twitches
ch your. drops from my body. I feel the loss immediately, so like last time, I reach
ie says, it and secure it back in place. Wes inhales deeply and stills for a
d right. before slowly moving his hand up and down my leg, hesitating every
seconds until I wriggle to let him know I want more, my entire body
to life as I feel his touch everywhere.

His fingers brush against me from my waist down to my thigh
h coats featherlight touch, but there's a roughness to his skin that has me
s cheek breaking out in shivers. And when he moves back up along my
wordlessly repeating the movement a second and third time, I'm convinced
ur sides
he says

ist him, on edge. Especially when on the fourth go, his fingers spread out, hand shifts to the inside of my leg.

My breath hitches as he moves closer to my core, but I don't dare. His caress is driving me wild, and I'm not ready for him to pull away. I can't say if he'll continue on his path as my core pulses with need, and I have to fight to clench. The tips of his fingers dance along my skin toward the apex of my thighs, only stopping when they hit the lace of my panties and he sucks my breath.

Maybe "Fuck, Lucy..." he rasps before trailing off. The sound of his voice sends another shiver through me, further increasing my desire to have him. He's hesitant to go any farther than my panty line, I cover his hand with my hand and take the lead.

ep. I'm Moving our joined hands between my legs, I put pressure on Wes's fingers as we journey over my mound. He groans and shuffles himself closer to me, giving himself extra reach, and then takes back control, sliding my panties to the side before running his finger through my heat.

ery few "Oh, God. Wes." My hips rise off the bed as his fingers explore me. I need to get closer, need more. He's barely touched me and I'm a writhing mess, squirming with a pleasure. And when his finger finally slips inside me, a collective moan comes from the two of us before we both still, our frantic breaths being the only sound to break the silence.

y body y side, Adding a second finger, Wes scissored them inside me, so slowly I almost cry out in desperation. I don't know if he's teasing or worri

and his either way, he has my nerve endings on full alert, the slightest touch sending my body to heaven and my pulse skyrocketing.

He speaks. With his fingers buried deep inside me, he readjusts his position until I do. Hovering on top of me, his weight resting on his elbow. Brushing my hair, hoping my face with his free hand, he gently presses his lips to mine as his cock might not start to pump, increasing the speed as he goes.

“Oh, fuck, Wes...” I’m panting against his lips, not wanting to break the connection but unable to stop the words spilling from my mouth.

Wes sucks on my lip before releasing it with a pop, sending another jolt of electricity through to my core. “I got you,” he says, giving me another kiss. “And I don’t want to let go.”

My heart stills, and I cry out as everything hits me at once. He knows mine even know it, but his touch, his kiss, his words...everything he’s doing is erasing the darkness from my past. And when he curls his fingers into my hair, I’m done for.

“Yes, yes!” I call out as my release rips from within me and my body convulses uncontrollably.

Wes’s movements slow, but he doesn’t stop until I practically beg for him to stop. Until his touch has me thrashing around, unable to take it anymore.

He drops to the bed beside me as if he’s the one who’s spent, and he licks his fingers before wrapping his arm around me.

“Sorry I woke you,” he rasps, and I burst out laughing, rolling onto my side, bringing us face-to-face.

“I’ve never been *less* sorry,” I whisper, my hand on his chest. “Am I not ready for this to be done?”

He smiles, but

sending

until he's

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hide me,

my body

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Chapter Eight

Wes

I never intended to take things that far, but when Lucy's hand landed on top of mine, all my good intentions went out the window. I know her touch was affecting her. I could feel the blood pumping through her veins, pulsating toward her core, the way her skin pebbled with goose bumps, the way her fingertips feathered along her body, and when her breath hitched... *fuck*

I've spent the last few days fucking my hand so I could avoid taking things too far too quickly, but all that went to shit the second she moaned my name.

I need inside her more than I need my next breath, but I also need to know how to initiate it. I'm not blind; I know we have a connection. I've seen the way she looks through her eyes. But I can also see the walls she's erected, the guard she has put up, the hesitancy. I need to be one hundred percent sure she wants more than I can give. I need to show her *exactly* how much I want it.

We're both silent for a moment as her words hang in the air. *She's not ready for this to be done.* Does she mean tonight? Or does *this* mean I'm kinda hoping it's both. She peers at me through hooded eyelids and I'm caught in her gaze. The rise and fall of her chest, paired with her flushed cheeks, has me in a daze. This girl is tugging at my heart, and she

even realize it. I've known her for a week. Actually less than that. No one has ever had this hold on me, and all I know about her is her name. *Basically fucked!*

Breaking whatever trance we're in, I pull her into my arms and press my forehead to her head. "You're so goddamn beautiful, Lucy. Thanks for picking the beach that day."

She giggles and tries to hide a yawn before speaking through it. "Honestly, it was slim pickings. I picked the best of a bad bunch."

"Well, consider me honored," I joke, settling Lucy's head on my shoulder before running my hands through her hair. "You need to sleep."

Her head shoots up in protest, but I gently push it back down. "Sleep now. You can explore more of what you want in the morning. My practice isn't until eleven."

She sighs but gets herself comfortable against me, running her hands through my skin until it rests on my hip before wrapping her leg around my waist. I continue to rake my fingers through her silky strands as I hum a tune, something my mom used to do, and within minutes, Lucy's peacefully asleep in my arms again, with no idea how much having her in my arms is affecting me.

I'm losing my mind, and I can't for the life of me figure out why I'm so different about this girl.



It's not

Why? I'm My internal alarm wakes me at five a.m., and despite having little sleep and I'm well rested. After my middle of the night fun with Lucy, I passed out flushed and slept better than I have in years. Waking with her tiny frame still doesn't into my body and her leg entwined with mine is a place I always want

one has She has her hand splayed over my naked chest and her face tucked i
lly, I'm shoulder. She's so close, her eyelashes brush against my skin as she dr

I don't want to move, but I also want to surprise her with breakf
s a kiss convince her to spend the day here, even though I have to disapp
; me on practice. The idea of kissing someone goodbye and then returning
welcoming me home is something I've never really thought much ab
onestly, right now, I'm almost desperate to make it happen. Which I'm s
everything to do with knowing we're on borrowed time.

y chest I gently lift Lucy's hand and place it on the pillow beside her head
slipping out of bed. She groans in protest, still fast asleep, and the
ep. We sends a message of attention straight to my cock, as if my morning
it until wasn't bad enough. *Looks like I'm going to need a quick shower
breakfast.*

d along Lucy only sleeps for another hour, then joins me in the kitchen
l me. I flipping the last pancake. My chest tightens as I watch her rub her slee
quietly, and brush her messy hair behind her ears, still dressed in only my t
7 asleep college football tee I might add. Something I never even let my
girlfriend wear.

what's She smiles when she catches me staring, and a slight blush bright
cheeks. "You made pancakes?" she asks, licking her lips as she gently
her hem, trying to stretch it to cover her legs. *Don't hide away. Eve
about you is beautiful.*

p, I feel "They'll be ready in a sec," I say, instead of my thoughts. "Take a s
ut cold I'll bring them over."

l curled Lucy lightly pads into the kitchen to join me, ignoring my instructio
it to be. immediately grabs a strawberry. After dipping it into the maple syr
slowly raises it to her mouth, pausing as the liquid touches her. H

into my spark with mischief as she coats those lips in the sugary goodness, just as she did last night.

“I think you need to taste test this syrup. You don’t want to hear for something that isn’t perfect,” she says as the tip of her tongue sneaks to her test a sample.

I bite back a groan and nod. “No, we definitely don’t want that.”

Leaning forward, I run my tongue along the seam of her mouth so that she moves forward as though desperate for more. And when I pull before she dips the strawberry into the bowl again and smears the liquid across her cheek, following the trail with her tongue. Clenching my fist, I bite back another groan and will my eyes to stay open, trying to maintain composure. But when she seductively sucks the strawberry into her mouth and picks up another one, it’s on...

Barely a few minutes later, maple syrup coats my face, neck, and hair. Lucy sucks my finger from base to tip. Gripping her face in one hand, the other from Lucy’s grasp and run a syrupy finger down her cheek and collarbone along to her collar bone as low as her tee allows. I want nothing more than to rip my shirt clear off her and continue my path of destruction. Instead, I opt to lick every inch of her that I can see, loving the taste of her sweetness mixed with her skin. She squeals and tries to pull away, but I’m firm, pulling the neck of the tee she’s wearing down to run my tongue along the top of her cleavage. My hands bunch in the material as she hisses at me, and she breathes and pushes me away.

“Okay, enough. I need to shower.” She giggles, and the sound takes me. I’m already more worked up than I should be, considering I have to get up, she’s shortly for practice, and now there’s talk of a shower. *When did my shirt get so tight?*

st like I Lucy stares at me as she sucks her lips into her mouth, holding
smile. And when she raises an eyebrow in question, I realize I
o serveresponded to her statement.

s out to “Shower...right. Yes, of course. I’ll get you a towel.”

Well, that was smooth. I don’t mean to sound so disappointed, but I
was pretty happy with getting messy, and now she wants to be clean.

lightly Lucy laughs before slowly licking the syrup off her fingers, he
ll back,unfocused, as though she’s lost in thought. It’s so erotic I have to cle
ross myfists again to stop myself from throwing her over my shoulder and tak
te backto bed to devour her. From the innocent look on her face, I’d say she
ain myhas no idea what she’s doing to me, or she’s a damn good tease. I
moutheasily wager it’s the former when she blinks a few times and he
flushes.

ands as With a shy smile, Lucy walks away as I stand frozen for a second, i
l, I pulla moment. But when I hear the shower running, I spring into
nd neckremembering she needed a towel.

g more Towel in hand, I adjust the bulge in my pants and knock on the ba
on, butdoor. “Want me to bring it in or leave it by the door?” I ask, my voice
e of theout raspy.

t I hold “You can come in. I’m decent.”

e along The first thing I see when I walk inside is the mirror, and reflected
:s out ame is a very *decent* and very *naked* Lucy. *Fuck me!*

I quickly look away in case she hasn’t realized I’d be able to see I
es overwhen she giggles again, I know that’s not the case.

o leave I feel her presence behind me before I’ve had the chance to turn, a
orts gether hands wrap around my waist as she kisses the middle of my back
resting her head where the tingle remains from her touch. “I need you

back came,” she says in a sultry tone, and if I wasn’t already rock-hard, I haven’t would have instantly stood to attention.

My eyes close as my body sinks into her. “Need?” I ask.

“More than you could possibly imagine.” *Fuuuck!*

I guess I Detaching her hands from my body, I spin around to face her, not wanting to waste another second. I couldn’t hold back even if I tried.

My gaze Backing her into the shower, I don’t even bother removing my clothes. I follow her in, framing her face in my hands. She’s practically panting, her stare in her eyes, wanting to make sure I understood her meaning—I need either the confirmation. While the desire reflected there should be enough, but I’d slight nod she gives that has me crashing my mouth to hers and pushing my chest back against the tiles as the water cascades over us.

Lucy moans when I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, running my hand over the edge. She grips the hem of my tee and attempts to peel the fabric away from my body but gives up after a few tries, moving to my shorts instead.

I reluctantly release her face and quickly undress, enjoying the breath of fresh air that Lucy gives me.

As soon as I’m naked, my focus returns to her, and I bend to suck her nipple into my mouth, loving the way she arches her back and breathes. She moans as she scrapes her fingers through my hair, pulling me closer. I have no choice but to suck harder.

“Yes, oh, God.” Her raspy voice sends a bolt of electricity straight to my groin, but I manage to hold myself, and it takes everything in my power to stop myself from gripping her. I want to stay there for a long length, wanting for it to be Lucy’s touch that gets me off.

Running my free hand from her shoulder, across her collarbone, and down her chest, I give her other breast some attention, massaging and pinching it. She moans before moving on. She hisses at me when I flick her nipple, but it turns out to be a good thing.

my cockdrawn out moan when I continue my path, only stopping again when the warmth between her legs.

“Fuck, Wes,” she whimpers as I run a finger through her heat, immediately pushing it inside her. *Fuck, alright.* There’s no way I could have waited longer.

After pumping in and out a few times, I’m about to add a second when she grabs my wrist to stop me, making my heart jolt, along with my body. “Fuck, did I do something—”

“No, God no,” she rushes out. “I want more. I...”

She trails off and bites her lip, but I’m almost certain I know what she’s trying to say, so I take a chance on it.

Walking her backward until she hits the bench seat, I thank Christ for the luxurious hotel showers. Her ass hits the tiled surface, and her brows are in a state of confusion until I drop to my knees in front of her, spreading her legs wide instead. Biting my knuckle, I groan at the sight of her stripped bare, glistening cunt in front of me. This feels like a privilege. Having her vulnerable like this is something I will never take for granted. She’s perfect, and in that moment, she’s *mine*.

Lucy stares down at me through lust-filled eyes, her thick hair stuck to her face as drops of water stream down her chest, pooling at the crease of her waist. Everything about her is mouthwatering, and it’s almost my undoing. But I hold strong. This is her moment.

My pulse spikes as I plan my next move, and when I run my palm up the inside of her thighs, toward her core, Lucy’s breath hitches, and she clenches in front of me.

Fuuuck.

Spreading her legs farther, I practically face-plant into her, eliciting

I reachgroan from both of us as Lucy clenches again and her legs tighten around me in a vise-like grip.

Immediately “This...this isn’t what I meant, but oh, God, don’t stop.”

“I wasn’t planning on it, baby. And I knew exactly what she meant, but I wasn’t not ready for that.”

I lick, and suck, and tease her with my fingers until she’s uncontrollably, with her legs locked so tightly around me that I’m lucky my blood’s still circulating. When I look up from my position between her legs, my mouth still working her into a frenzy, she grabs my head in her hair and she screams out in ecstasy. Her cheeks flush, as her mouth drops open and she falls back against the wall.

I groan against her core, and her body arches, squeezing my head against her pull in more as she bucks against me. And fuck, I don’t ever want this ride. Watching Lucy lose control is something I’ll never tire of.

After a few more seconds, she pushes me away and stands up, leaning against the wall to support herself on wobbly legs. “Sit...now,” she demands and I almost laugh at how adorable she is, looking all hot and sated. But when she said *now* and looks all growly, there’s no chance I’m going to take the time to risk pissing her off and missing out on whatever comes next.

Pushing off the floor, I sit as instructed and rest my palms on the seat. Lucy’s gaze moves from my chest down to my hard length, and we both watch as it twitches from her attention. Begging for her touch, anything she’ll give me.

Biting her lip, Lucy closes her eyes and releases a quiet moan as she wraps her hand around me.

“Fuck, Luce. You’re killing me,” I grate out, causing her eyes to flutter. She’s biting her lip, a little dazed, like she’d forgotten there’s a man attached to her.

und meappendage. Without a word, she lets go and crawls onto my lap, running soaked core back and forth on top of me, her eyes focused on our connection. *Yep, she's trying to kill me.*

but I'm Another groan rips from within me, and I almost come on the spot. She's had me worked up since the second she licked my face, flailing off my face, and now I'm ready to explode. And yet, when she groans my length again and lifts herself up, I grip her waist to still her, stopping her legs, her tracks.

nds and "We need protection."

er head Her face falls, and I know I'm an idiot, but I want to keep her safe.

Letting go of her hips, I grab her face in my hands and wait for her to nod. "This is one hundred percent about protecting you. I want to stop more than to fuck you bare, but we should wait until you fully trust that."

leaning Lucy's eyes widen and she nods. "For some unknown reason, I trust you more than I've ever trusted anyone I've been with. I'm on the pill. I want to feel you inside me. *You*, not some rubber."

ake my "Holy fuck, Lucy. I'm all clear, I promise."

I barely get the promise out when she sinks down on top of me, and I groan at my Christ! I groan, once again gripping her hips as she wraps her arms around my neck before we both still for a second, as though both needing a moment to process what's happening.

I've never felt anything like this. I mean, I've never been bare before, but not softly with my exes, but that's not what I'm referring to. Every nerve ending in my body is firing, not just the ones in my cock, and my heart is thumping so hard, I'm pretty sure she can hear it. I've never been a corny motherfucker, but my thoughts are going there... Lucy feels like she was made for me.

ing hertwitch inside her, and she moans, squeezes me back. Both tiny movements but it's enough to end our cease-fire, and within seconds, she's slumped down on top of me while I pump up into her, frantic and needy. It's not how I pictured our first time, but it's fucking amazing, and I wouldn't trade this for anything.

"Fuck, Lucy. I can't get enough of you. I'm buried so deep, but I want you more."

She cries out in pleasure and pulls my face to hers, sucking my lips into her mouth. My body jolts as a spark runs through me, and I have to still her to calm myself down. She laughs as I squeeze her hips, desperately trying to look to come before she reaches her climax for a second time. And when she laughs again, I growl before I start moving, slower this time, shooting me for her. "Stop laughing. You're fucking sexy when you're happy, but it's not helping my cause."

Her eyes brighten, and her laughter stops, replaced by a warm smile as she presses her lips to mine and rocks against me, matching my slow pace.

We continue like that, connected in every possible way until we're both panting. The water flowing over us has long ago turned cool, but neither of us seems bothered by it.

When I feel her tighten around me, I press my thumb to her corner, lifting her up to change our angle, pumping harder as I do. "Yes, this is good."

She pants and moans, cursing until her walls squeeze me so tight that I almost explode inside her at the same time she screams out my name.

"Fuck, Lucy. Fuck!"

She falls into me but continues to pulse as we both come back down to earth. And when I wrap my arms around her, holding her firmly against me, I almost sigh in contentment.

ements, “Thank you, Canada,” I whisper, referring to the maple syrup, and humming when Lucy bursts out laughing.

ot at all Burying her face in my neck, she shakes her head as she whispers change “I’m not sure I’ll ever look at pancakes the same.”

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“Thank you, Canada,” I whisper, referring to the maple syrup, and chuckle when Lucy bursts out laughing.

Burying her face in my neck, she shakes her head as she whispers back, “I’m not sure I’ll ever look at pancakes the same.”

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Chapter Nine

Wes

I race out of my truck, right on time for practice...again. Seconds later I would have been fined. I'm pretty certain Coach will let it slide, as I don't make it a habit, but Carter is going to ream me. He knows I've been through, and he knows the hard work I've put in to prove I'm really the person I was painted to be. That football comes first. The other things always come first. And he's right. Yet, as I walk into the locker room, the ball carelessly tossed over my shoulder, I can't bring myself to care. I know obviously I care, but I made it on time. I'm here. That should be enough.

Just as I suspected, Carter's tapping his wrist when I reach our side-lockers. His expression screams disappointment, but when I simply shrug, it turns to disbelief.

"I don't like this, man," he says as I drop down on the bench seat next to him.

"I never asked for your opinion."

"No, you didn't, but you fucking should. Remember last time? (You need to refresh your memory?)"

I can't stop my eyes from rolling as I pull my sweater over my head. "I was a rookie. A kid. This is different. I won't let it get to me like that."

His eyes widen as he gives me a pointed look. "Is it different? Are you not late because of a girl?"

"I'm not late. In fact, I'm going to be ready before you are." I gesture to the sweatpants he's still wearing as I roll mine down my legs. "And it's completely different."

"I'm just looking out for you."

"I know. But you don't have to worry. She'll be gone in twenty-four hours and then life will be back to normal. You'll have me all to yourself. Because that's what this is really about, right?" I'm talking completely out of my ass. I get him to shut up, but if it works, I'll be happy. Only the words burn in my head. "Twenty-four hours? That's it. Fuck, I feel sick."

Carter eyes me curiously, so I add a wink for extra emphasis, and then he slaps me in the chest. A laugh that's definitely a little forced.

"I have other friends," he mumbles under his breath as we continue to walk. Okay, ready, and his sulking makes me laugh for real this time.

"Of course you do."

by-side hug, it



I'm wrecked when practice is done and dragging my feet as I walk across the parking lot. My head's in the clouds, or more specifically, back on the running through the easy play I kept fucking up. Is Carter right to be worried? He's right about my mind not fully being on the game, but I'm certain because things with Lucy are up in the air. And if I talk to her and sort out my feelings, and hers, it'll be better.

read. “I I’m almost at my truck when a pap shoves a mic in my face, making me jump. “Jesus. Chill, man. If you have a question, asking it from a crowd or you or will get the same result.”

“Really?” he asks, not believing a word out of my mouth. But I’m stuck to the truth. Just not in the way he thinks.

“Yep, really. I’m not going to answer any of your questions, no matter where you’re standing. You can talk to me after the game like everyone else. I keep walking, ignoring his annoyed stare.

“What if it’s about your personal life?”

That pulls me up short. I wish I hadn’t reacted. I wish I’d just kept walking. But that small hesitation, the tiny pause in step, tells him even I know what he needs to know.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Answer my question, and I’ll leave you and your new girl alone.” *Fuck!*

I turn to face him with a bored expression. It’s fake boredom because I’m getting desperate to know what he has to say, but I think he’s buying it. “What question?”

“Are you dating the sister of Denver’s new wide receiver?”

What the actual fuck? This guy’s done his research. Dylan’s not even on the media’s radar yet. I know, because I looked him up.

“I can confidently say that I’m not,” I answer truthfully because I haven’t defined it. If he’d asked if I was sleeping with her, that would have been different.

“Okay, let me rephrase.” *Fuck!*

“Nope. You got your question. I did exactly what you asked.”

“I’ve got photos, man. So we can do this the easy or the hard way.”

My fists clench by my thighs, but my face remains composed. I can

ing mein. No matter what he claims to have. Lucy and I haven't done anything
listancethan kiss in public, and there's been photos of me kissing in public

It's no big deal; it'll blow over. Yes, it's usually during the off-season
tellingstill, a kiss is nothing.

“Write what you have to. I'm sure it will be a lie no matter what I say
matter “But—”

e else.” “Are we all good here?” our offensive coordinator calls out from
us, cutting off the crap about to spew out of the pap's mouth. “Co

Dave. You know the drill. There's a time and place for question
st keptplayers.”

rything *Dave* turns around. “And I usually respect that, but this isn't football
related.”

ou and Coach has his hand on his hips, his bullshit radar on high alert. “*Eve*
is football related. On your way.”

use I'm I'm surprised when Dave listens and heads to his Porsche. The fla
at's thehe probably paid for by ruining the lives of others.

“You too, Wes. On your way.”

“I'm gone,” I say with a nod, definitely ready to be out of here.

ven on I've just opened my door when Coach calls out again. “And whatever
looking for, sort it. I'm not stupid. I know something's going on. Don't

use wefuck up your game.”

ld have After serving him another quick nod, I jump in my truck and out
judging sight. People keep assuming the worst and it's pissing me off

got this. I'm in control. *I think.*



1't give

ing other Lucy doesn't welcome me home like I'd hoped. She never agreed before. caveman plan. But she's knocking on my door, not even five minutes on, but I've walked through, so I'm happy all the same.

"How was practice?" she asks, flopping down on the sofa with her head over the armrest. I smile at how comfortable she's become around me by now. I bit I break down those walls.

behind "Practice was practice. I'd rather hear about you. What did you get up to today?" "Well, I had the farewell lunch for the conference, and now, I'm sitting here, full of decent food and resting on your couch."

"Sounds like fun."

football "It's my idea of a good day. Good food, soft couches, hot men to talk to. No one to complain." She shrugs, closing her eyes in contentment.

anything "Hot men, huh?" Raising my eyebrows, I pull my lips into my mouth. I bite back a smile. Partly because I don't want her to know how much I'm enjoying affecting me, but also because I know she's about to sass me.

"Yeah, this guy at the conference is...smoking!" *And there it is.*

"It's nice to have someone decent to look at while you're working. I mean, that with Carter."

over he's Lucy bursts out laughing as she shakes her head. "Ugh! I don't want to let you go home. I'm not ready."

"Then don't. Stay here..." *Forever, if you want.* Whoa! Where did that come from?

off. I've Lucy smiles, completely unaware of my silent request to keep her.

"Unfortunately, my time is up. I have to check out in the morning. Don't worry. I'm not going to disappear on you. In fact, I have a surprise you're going to love." She's full of confidence until the last word leaves her mouth. After that, her forehead creases, and she worries her bottom lip.

to that releasing it. "At least, I think you will," she continues, this time
es after nervously.

"If it has anything to do with today *not* being the last time I see yo
ier legs I'm all for it." As my words hit her, she relaxes into the seat. I'm r
e, as bit why she's nervous when I've been like a damn moth to a flame arou

Surely she knows I'm not ready for goodbye either. But either way,
ip to?" before pulling her to her feet for a kiss.

stuffed We spend the afternoon lazing around and finish the day off wh
story began.

"Well, this is very romantic," Lucy says as we walk hand in hand al
. Can't water's edge, the sun setting on the horizon. She's not wrong. It's pret

I've lived here for a few months and never once taken the time to app
uth and how truly beautiful it is. Although, the vision beside me is even better.

h she's "I have been known to find it in me, every once in a while. If I di
deep enough."

Lucy laughs, nudging me in the side. "I guess I should thank you th
I've got putting in the effort."

"Only for you, Luce. Only for you." I nudge her right back.

at to go We walk in silence a little farther, ankle deep into the fresh wave

Lucy cries out and practically leaps into my arms. "What was that?"

lid that I fight to hold back a laugh as I catch her. "What was what?"

"Something swam across my foot." She's leaning away from my
searching the water for the culprit, and when she looks back at me, I l
ng. But battle, laughing out loud.

ise that "I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you are not from the be

ves her She jumps out of my arms and positions herself at my side, away fr
) before ocean. "Actually, you're wrong. I grew up pretty close to the beach. I

a littlemean I like things attacking me in the dark.” I feel something brush al
toes and know exactly what she felt. Reaching into the waves, I subtly
ou, thenseaweed into my hand and hide it behind my back as Lucy continues h
not sure“I mean, it could have been anything. And I, for one, don’t want to fin
nd her. “So you’re not interested in what I have behind me.”

I smile Lucy freezes before her hand flies to my chest, stopping me from s
closer. “Don’t even think about it.”

ere our I couldn’t hold back my responding grin if I tried. “But don’t you w
to put your mind at ease?”

ong the “Nope. I’m perfectly happy in my blissful ignorance.”

ty epic. She takes a subtle step back, then another, and when I follow with r
preciatestep, she takes off in a run, giggling as she does.

Holding the seaweed in front of me, I make chase, catching up to h
g downinstant, but letting her stay ahead, enjoying my view from behind he
coming for you,” I joke, trying hard to keep my distance as she calls c
nen, forshoulder.

“Stay back. I don’t want whatever that is near me.”

I laugh out loud as I snap at her heels. “You really should take a lo
s, untilLuce.”

She spins as she moves, continuing to jog backward. It’s dark r
while her gaze is laser focused on the grassy mess in my hand, she
y body,quite figured out what it is. Recognition hits at the same time she stu
lose theand the laughter makes it hard for her to balance. I abandon the seawe
leap toward her, catching her in my arms right before she hits the sand
ach.” “My hero,” she laughs out, gripping my biceps for dear life.

rom the “But also your tormentor.” I laugh back.

Doesn’t Her face turns serious for a second, and she shakes her head. “No

ong mynot you.”

lift the She blinks a few times and then smiles, pushing to her feet. “Tha
er rant.close one.” She laughs again, but this one feels a little forced. “I thi
d out.” had enough excitement for the night.”

I want to laugh along with her, but I’m still reeling from her reaction
teppingjoke comment. *What did she mean?*

“First a sea creature attacks me, then you chase me with seaweed, a
vant mealmost fall... Yep, I’m all beached out.”

“There were no sea creatures,” I chuckle, snapping myself out of my

Lucy shrugs before turning away from the ocean. “Agree to disagree
ny ownsays, reaching her hand back for me to take. I link our fingers and let l
me along, only stopping once we’re on dry sand to tug her back tow
er in anand wrap her in my arms.

r. “I’m “Despite your near death experience, today was fun. Thank you.”

ver her Lucy laughs into my chest, giving me a squeeze. “You’re a goo
Wes.” Running her hands up my body, she secures them around my ne
gaze following the movement until she’s peering up at me through h
ok at it,lashes. “I’m so happy to have met you.”

This feels like a goodbye of sorts, but when I try to ask about it, s
ow, some off. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Just wanted you to know.”

hasn’t I give her a piggyback the rest of the way—to avoid any more inci
mbles,and when we’re back at the resort, we have dinner together again.

eed and Unlike last night, we keep it light, and when it’s done, she decides
. home. With practice scheduled for early tomorrow, plus my need to k
ball in her court, I don’t argue. Though I do insist on walking her
room.

, that’s “You know this is a *see you later* situation, not *farewell*, right?” Lu

as we reach her door. She plays with the ends of her windswept hair. I mentally sigh in relief, not having realized how much I needed to hear her words.

“Glad we’re on the same page. Are you ready to tell me where you want to go, acting the picture of cool even though deep down this question is eating you up on edge. I want this girl. I don’t even want to contemplate not seeing her again. But I’m not a huge fan of long distance, so I’m hoping the travel will be on the shorter side.

Lucy beams up at me as she shakes her head. “Tomorrow, I promise, I’ll share all part of the surprise.”

That’s gotta mean she’s close, right? I could handle Los Angeles or San Diego. Both are beachy, and she mentioned growing up near one.

“Tomorrow then. But at least tell me this...are you flying or driving home?”

“Driving,” she answers quickly.

Fuck, yes! My heart thumps in my chest at the very possibility that everything long may all work out. The car she’s been using must not be a rental because she’s driving. I have a truck. I don’t have a lot of spare time, but we can make the most of it.

“And do you enjoy a good long road trip?” I ask, trying to get a sense of her preferences—clues as possible.

Lucy smirks. “Hate them. I’d definitely opt to fly.” Yes! I don’t even bother to act chill this time as a megawatt smile lights up her face. “Good to know, Luce. Good to know.”

Holding my arms out wide, I love when she steps into them, pulling herself into my chest. “Has that put your mind at ease?” she asks, looking up at me.

r, and I “I was never even worried,” I joke and she barks out a laugh, clear those believing my bullshit.

“So, we’ll talk tomorrow?” she says with a hint of vulnerability, live?” I her teasing.

has me “Just try and stop me,” I reassure her before dropping my mouth to ing here a slow and gentle kiss.

el is on Our lips brush lightly, our tongues tangling, exploring, molding into my hand moves into her hair, cupping her head to increase the p

ise. It’s between us. Lucy moans into my mouth, and my pants once again

Like every sound she makes is my undoing.

or San Gripping my shirt, Lucy bunches the fabric between her fingers, s my lip into her mouth. And the kiss turns frantic. We make out in front

driving door until we’re both desperately in need of a breath, but intake only air to keep going.

Voices get louder in the halls as a group walks our way, and we hat this apart like we’ve been caught doing something wrong. Lucy giggles se she’s fingers brush over her lips, a look of pure lust in her eyes. I smirk back make it my chest rising and falling in sync with hers as we both catch our waiting for the intruders to pass by.

s many The second they’re gone, I pull her into my arms, wrapping her in “Talk tomorrow,” I reconfirm before taking a step back.

“You’ll be begging to get rid of me by the time we’re done,” Lucy j up my she opens her door.

Her glowing smile is my parting gift and something I’ll be picturing perfectly day until we see each other again. Which will be sooner rather than late asks, have my way. Because while she may have said it as a joke, us being not even an option I’m considering right now.

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Chapter Ten

Lucy

Falling back onto the bed, clothes in hand, I groan out loud. The part of me that wants to leave right now. Which I know is because I only live about thirty minutes away. But in the last week I've grown accustomed to being close to Wes, and that's definitely going to change when I'm gone. I won't be able to meet him in the halls or catch up between our commitments.

Pulling out my phone, I shoot him a text because I seem to have an inability to stop thinking about him.

Lucy: Why didn't I get a late checkout, or I guess the better question is why didn't I pack last night?

He replies almost instantly, and I smile.

Wes: You were too busy being romanced

Lucy: I think you mean attacked

Wes: No, I definitely mean romanced

I laugh out loud as I throw my clothes at my bag, watching as half of them hit the floor. Not that I care. My heart is so full and happy that nothing can bring me back down to earth. I didn't think I had it in me to let someone in, especially someone I just met. But getting to know Wes has been the one thing that could have happened. I'm not healed by any sense of the work I'm getting there, and I know he's the one that's going to break down the walls.

The hotel room phone rings, and I jump at the sound. It's the wake-up call I'd set in case I slept through my phone alarm. Which is always a possibility. But this time, I'm up, despite the fact the clock on the bedside table reads seven a.m., and I don't have to check out until ten. Sleep just isn't an option right now with the nervous energy running through me. Staring up at the ceiling, my mind drifts back to Wes as I picture him on his way to practice. He's probably been up since five and feels fresh and daisy...or something. I don't know. Point is...I'm sure he's not feeling like I do.

When my cell vibrates again, I preemptively laugh at whatever he's going to say. I know it's going to be seaweed related. I can sense it. There's no question he's going to let that one go.

But when I look at the screen, it's not Wes, and my heart stops as I read his name in front of me. *Greg*.

My chest tightens, and my stomach churns. I don't want to read this at the same time, I need to know what he's got to say.

Greg: I saw the photo of you and that football player. Is that work left? Or are you still playing hard to get?

of them *Fuck!* I don't even know what to process first. What photo? A
g could won't he leave me the hell alone? My phone chimes again, and it's a
me else an online news article.

the best ***Wes Johnson at it again. Is San Francisco about to lose their ne***
ord, but ***end for a girl?***
own my

What?

cup call There's a photo attached of us kissing on the beach. It's impos
strong make out our faces, but in the small accompanying photo, we're standi
bedside by side, and it's clear to see it's the same people. I'm described as
ist isn't Mathers's little sister. And while they are wrong about their facts, w
this writer is has taken the time to look me up.

him on Sucking in a breath as my heart thuds in my chest, I fight to stop
sh as a from falling apart. Having Greg contact me is bad enough, but this
ig tired makes me feel sick. Not to mention, I have no idea what the headline r

I scan the first few lines of the article but have to stop when it ma
s about feel worse. Sources say Wes is arriving late to practice and messing
no way game. And apparently, it's not the first time. I'm so confused, but I
about to believe an article when I could just ask Wes myself.

read the My thoughts swirl as I try to process it all. Lifting my phone to call
curse when I see another text waiting for me.

s, but at

Greg: I'm coming over

hy you *Oh, God, oh, God.* A chill runs through my entire body as moistu
my eyes. *Don't cry. Don't cry. I'm okay. I'm not at home. He can't f*
It's been over a month since I've seen him. He's been quiet. I thought

and why done. *Why won't he leave me alone?* I don't want to go home. But I don't know where else to go.

Slowly lifting myself up off the bed, I call down to reception and ask to extend my stay. Luckily, it's midweek, so they offer me an extra day.

Picking up my suitcase, I dump everything onto the bed, searching for toiletries. I've got Tylenol in here somewhere, and fuck, my head is hurting.

I feel uneasy and slightly on edge. My mind is whirring, my hands are shaking, and I'm downright jittery. When I finally locate my toiletries,

I step back, tripping over something on the floor. My heart just about lurches

as I imagine someone grabbing ahold of my foot. And I know it's irrational and over-the-top, I can't control the way my head

as I move toward the bathroom, dropping my hands to the sink as I look at myself in the mirror. *I'm strong. I'm capable. I won't let anyone hurt me.*

Mindlessly rustling around in the bag, my eyes lock on my birth control pills and I freeze, with my hand hovering in midair. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

no, no."

Silent tears fall down my face as I stare at my bag, a panic taking over. I've been on the sugar pills. I should have my period *right now*. I should

have been able to have sex with Wes. How did I not notice that? And Wes, I

hasn't it come? Fuck, this can't be happening. I can't even remember my period. Was it last month? The one before?

I'm stressed, and I've only just started with this particular brand of birth control. More than likely it's just my body adjusting. Right? That's it. It's fine.

There are so many possibilities for my lack of period. It's *fine*.

I repeat the words over and over, but the tears continue to fall, and I know I'm lying to myself. *How the fuck could he do this to me?*

I don't rise in my throat, as an aching throb fills my head. And when my body convulses, I drop to the floor, curling up into a ball.

I ask to I cry for what feels like hours, until the need for confirmation takes over.

After pulling myself together for just long enough to focus, I grab my bag and head for the nearest pharmacy.

urting.

nds are



7 bag, I Sink down onto the sand, I bury my face in my hands, letting the sand return. I did a test in the gas station bathroom across the road, and just while I that dirty stall, my life's about to be a mess.

rt races "Are you okay?" a soft voice asks from above me, breaking my thousand stare at frantically wipe my face before looking up into weathered eyes ne. warmth and concern, and my tears once again fall.

control "Not really," I say honestly, jumping slightly when she rests her back! No, my shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze.

"I'm a little old to sit down beside you," she says, unperturbed by my physical reaction to her. "But there's a bench over there if you want, wouldn't about it."

nd why I laugh between sniffles and find myself nodding without giving my last thought, completely out of character for me.

Brushing the sand from my legs as I stand, I smile at my savior pill, so warmly smiling back at me, but I can see the concern etched ne. I'm expression and can only imagine what she sees when she looks at me.

"Come on, let's sit. I'm Katie," she says, motioning the way.

"Thank you, Katie."

nd deep

e? Bile

y body Tears start to well again, but I brush them away before following her
bench seat and taking my position beside her. We both stare out i
as over.ocean, silently listening to the waves crash against the shore, watch
y purserhythmic way the water flows. At least, that's what I'm doing, and t
woman beside me lets me have my moment. She doesn't say ar
doesn't ask me to talk—she's just a comfortable source, patiently wai
me to be ready.

ie tears Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and let the words flow for t
ust like time. "I'm pregnant."

ughts. I Katie pats my leg softly but still doesn't speak, as if knowing there
full of to it, more I need to get off my chest. So I continue. "The baby is n
And he..." I can't say the rest. I can't talk about what happened. I
doesn't need to know the details. The tone of my voice and the tears
and on eyes are enough to tell her this isn't something I wanted to happen.

by my Wrapping me in a hug, she rubs her hands up and down my arms a
to talk letting me completely lose my mind, never once letting go. She w
soothing words of encouragement, and I take it all in. It's the exact r
I'd have expected from my mother if she hadn't distanced herself f
; it any emotionally after my father died, something that I'm sure has led
hardened shell and the fact I don't let anyone in.

. She's Katie stays with me for what feels like hours without me giving l
in her real information. She lets me cry, tells me it's going to be okay, offers
in any way she can. And she's so freaking patient.

She's a complete stranger, and she's giving me more support than r
mother has in years. But I can't keep her here any longer. She has a lif
back to.

I sniff a few times and run my hands down my face, attempting t

r to theaway all the sadness displayed there. Smiling over at her, I'm about to
nto theI'm fine when she beats me to it, shaking her head.

ing the "You've got me for as long as you need me, but is there someone
he kindcall?"

othing, My brows furrow as I consider her question. Dylan's my emc
ting forcontact, my one call from jail, my go-to guy. But he's not ready for tl

I'm not ready to tell him. He'll fly off the handle. He means well, but
he firstsee his anger at the situation overshadowing the need to comfort me. S

would be the next obvious choice, but I can't expect her to keep th
's moreDylan—it's not fair. And she shouldn't have to deal with that fallou
y ex's.those two, Wes comes to mind, and my stomach twists in knots. He
But sheneed this right now. I don't even know what I'm going to do with m
s in mycan't bring someone else into the mix.

When I think of the next person, I don't even hesitate. "My frier
is I cry,He'll be here in a heartbeat," I say, knowing he's the best option.

hispers

reaction



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Just over an hour later, I hear Joel's motorcycle pull into the parking

feel a weight lift. "Lucy?" he calls out in concern as he jogs toward

eyes bouncing between me and the kind soul by my side. As soon

reaches us, he engulfs me in a hug, holding me tightly without asking

I'd probably cry if I had any tears left, but I don't, so what he gets

shaking uncontrollably and murmuring into his chest.

"Shhh. It's going to be okay. I promise you. It's going to be okay

whispers into my hair as he rocks me back and forth, over and over.

tell her I feel so safe in his arms, and while it doesn't change my reality, seem to pull away. But after a few more minutes, Joel does it for me. we can you for... She's gone," he says, searching around for Katie.

What?

emergency My head shoots up to see we're now alone. Katie's nowhere in sight, and stayed until I had someone to look after me, and for that I'll forgive it I can grateful.

summer "Come on. Let's get you home," Joel says, rising to his feet, pulling me from with him.

t. After He walks toward my car but stops when I squeeze his hand. "Actually doesn't we go back to the resort? All my stuff is there."

y life. I When we're back in my room, Joel makes a sandwich as I sit on the bed with my arms wrapped around my knees. He's talking or singing, and Joel know; either way, it's not getting through to me as I stare out into space having a baby. *A baby*. With someone I despise. And no one even notices what he's done to me. I have no fucking idea what to do, and—

"Lucy."

lot, and Huh?

us, his Tilting my head, I shoot Joel a blank stare, not really caring if he tells me what he wants or not.

1 as he "Wes messaged," he says, eyeing me in question, waiting for my response why.

s is me But when I simply shrug, he shakes his head and reads the message forcing me to focus.

ay," he **Wes: Are you home yet? By the way, where is home?**

"What do you want me to say?"

I can't I feel sick as I run Wes's words through my head. I'd been joking. "Thanknot telling him I lived so close, with grand plans to surprise him, but not

"Tell him I'm home safe and leave it at that," I say, ignoring the part of his text as Joel frowns, typing the response. And when he hangs up. Sheback my phone, I throw it across the room, not even flinching when it hits the wall. "Why'd you lie? Or more to the point...why'd you make *me* lie?"

"It's complicated."

Joel shakes his head, his expression difficult to read, but I'd say it's a mix of concern and disappointment. "Don't do that, Luce. Don't push him away. I can't have been on the other end—"

Oh, god... "Delilah! Shit, I'm so selfish. I didn't even think. I just thought calling Dylan was a bad idea, and you're like a brother to me and—"

"Lucy, stop," he says, cutting me off as he drops to the couch beside me. I'm Joel and his girlfriend, Delilah, have been through so much, I knowsshouldn't have called him. *God. How could I do that?*

"It's okay," he continues. "I'm okay. *Delilah's* okay. We're both okay about *you*. And you're right, I think we need to work out a plan before we tell Dylan. He hates Greg. He's not going to like the fact that he's about to be a daddy for your life forever, even if it's just as a baby daddy."

My stomach churns as I think about Greg being in my life in any capacity. *Oh, no, it's...*

I shout aloud, "I'm going to throw up."

I make it to the bathroom seconds before dispelling the contents of my stomach and find Joel right behind me, pulling the hair away from my forehead.

"How long has this been going on? Is this how you figured it out?" he asks, his tone soothing.

"Actually, that's the first time. I'm kind of hoping it's a one-off."

g about Joel chuckles softly, and I manage a smile through my nausea. “
ow... guess that’s wishful thinking.”

second It only takes a minute before my stomach settles, and we’ve just
nds meback to the living room when Joel’s phone starts to ring. He pulls it ou
breaks.pocket, cursing under his breath before silencing it. “Make sure I’r
when you tell Dylan. You’re going to need the support.”

He’s half joking, but if he knew everything, he’d be just as upset
s a mixbrother. One of the reasons it’s best to keep it to myself.

1 away. By late afternoon, I’m ready to go home, or at least check out of the

Joel helps carry my bags as I walk like a zombie to the front desk.

st knew “Why don’t you follow me to my place? You can stay the night. Ou
is pretty comfy,” he says, his face twisted as though he’s trying to h
e me. fact that he’s lying. At least about the couch.

and I I try to smile, but it’s forced. Instead, I nod because what choice do
have? I can’t go home with Greg’s threat hanging over me, and
worriednowhere else.

we tell Joel wraps his arm around my shoulder after I’ve dropped the roo
to be inback and leads me to the parking lot.

When we’re a few feet from the car, he stops suddenly, a resign
apacity.leaving his lips.

“What’s going on? Why’d—”

“Lucy?”

of my *Shit.*

face. My head snaps up, and I step out of Joel’s arms as though I’v
ut?” hesomething wrong, watching with a lump in my throat as Wes pushes
car and steps toward us, a blank expression in place.

“I’d ask if you actually live here, but since you have your bag...”

Yeah, I My shoulders drop at the disappointment in his tone.

“I’m sorry, I…” I trail off because I don’t have an excuse. He’s not walked and deserves better than whatever was about to come out of my mouth. “You lied,” he rasps, shaking his head. And while that’s not what I had in mind thereabout to say, I guess it’s the truth, so I offer Wes a small nod.

“I see.” *He hates liars.*

As my Joel’s hand lands on my shoulder, and my eyes flash to his wrist, he squeezes. “I’ll give you two a minute.”

I resort. My heart jolts at the thought, and I find myself shaking my head.

I don’t know what to say to Wes. I don’t know what I want, but the thought of just couchwalking away right now has me irrationally panicked. I grab his hand, trying to guide themoves, keeping him in place, and feel awful when I notice Wes flinch. He steps forward, and my eyes widen with nerves, hating myself when I realize I really drops at my expression. “What’s going on, Lucy? Has something happened?” I have Joel squeeze my hand in encouragement, but I can’t do it. I can’t do anything to get into this mess. It’s *my* mess.

My keys “I’m fine. I just didn’t expect to see you.”

Wes recoils like he’s been slapped, and his eyes flash to Joel’s, jumping to the wrong conclusion.

“No,” I rush out. “It’s not what you think.”

“What do I think?”

“Joel’s just a friend.”

“Okkkaaay,” Wes draws out, looking away, clearly confused.

I’ve done “But I need to go.”

His eyes snap to mine and narrow as he focuses on my features. “Where are you going? Where’s home?” His voice raises slightly. “When are you ever going to tell me?”

“I don’t know!” I yell, once again lying through my teeth. I had every intention of telling him where I lived, but now...now I honestly think it’s better he doesn’t know.

Wes nods as though he accepts my answer, but I can see the hurt in his eyes.

Holding his gaze just about kills me, so for the briefest moment, my eyes flit to my car behind him. It’s so quick, but he sees it, and his shoulders drop in defeat before he steps aside, no longer blocking the path. “I’ll get out of your way. I don’t want to add to whatever’s going on. I just want you to be okay. I hope to hear from you soon.”

He walks toward the glass doors of the resort without another word, not even looking back, and my stomach drops.

“Wes!” I call out, not ready to say goodbye. But when he turns around expectantly, all I can offer is an apologetic frown. He shakes his head and huffs out a laugh before walking away and out of my life.

The second the doors close, my body gives out, and I fall into Joel’s arms as fresh tears take over. I hate what I’ve just done. I will never forget this moment. But my life’s about to change, and the less complicated it is, the better. This is the right thing to do for both of us. I know it.

So why does it feel so wrong?

Chapter Eleven

Lucy – Summertime, almost five years later

“Come on, Katie. Uncle Dylan will be here any minute, and if I’m late, we’ll miss out on ice cream.”

I hear her rushed footsteps down the hall as she runs toward me. *Of course, ice cream got her moving.*

“I’m heeeere! Where is he?” She stands before me with her shoes in her hand and an expectant smile on her face. “Quick, Mommy. Put these on,” she says, shoving the pink boots in my direction.

I raise an eyebrow, and she laughs. “Pleeease.”

As soon as I bend down to help her, there’s a knock on the door, and Uncle Dylan pokes his head through without waiting for a response. “Where’s my little girl?” he says with a beaming smile.

“Uncle Dylan!” Katie screams, jumping to her feet, shoes abandoned. She takes off in a run and throws herself into his open arms, snuggling into his chest. He was traded to San Francisco last year, and the move has been a godsend. We’ve loved having him closer to home.

When Katie was first born, Joel kind of took on the father figure role for her, without even being asked. He was there for me from the second

him, and his support has never wavered. On top of that, Delilah and S have been my guardian angels. They're always showing up randomly reason or another, making sure we're both good. Even after Summer to Denver, she'd still help as often as she could. Then I've had Log Dani, and Cory and Nate. And Thomas...

But Dylan and Katie...they have a special bond that can't be rival like Dylan and I had when we were kids.

"Hi, little bug. Are you ready for a fun day?" Dylan asks, bending c talk to Katie face-to-face.

f we're She nods dramatically as she grips Dylan's shoulder, giving him th she's reserved just for him, letting it light up her features. "Is Aunty S coming?"

course, Dylan ruffles her hair. "Not today, bug. She's resting. But your coming with us."

s in her Katie shrugs, unfazed by that information—she could take it or lea n," she and I can't help but laugh. This beautiful little soul is my whole wor she'd rather be with my little brother. *Kids*.

l Dylan "Can you please go and get your water bottle?" I ask Katie, then w favorite she runs away. "You're going to have to stop calling her your favorite

I whisper, turning to Dylan with a stern expression, arms folded in t ed. She me.

ier face Dylan mimics my stance, crossing his arms over his chest as he sta ove has "Actually, I'm not. She'll remain my favorite girl for a while yet," I fighting a smirk, and his meaning hits me.

role for My hands fly to my mouth as tears prick my eyes. "It's a boy?"

I called "It's a boy." He nods.

Unable to hide my excitement, I squeal and pull Dylan into

summersqueezing him so tightly that he pushes me away. He and Summer
for one married a year ago after deciding to try for a baby. It wasn't all
moved sailing, but three months ago, it finally happened, and I couldn't be
gan and for them both. And for Katie. Even though she's got plenty of other
her life, she's going to love having a cousin.

ed. Just “Oh, Dylan, I can't wait to meet your little man. How's Summer fe
I ask, reading between the lines of his earlier “she's resting” comment.
lown to “She's still struggling, but says today's better than yesterday, so
bonus.”

e smile “It definitely is.”

summer Katie runs back into the room with her water and backpack in
pushing my legs toward the door. “Let's goooo!” she whines, like
mom's fault we're still standing in the doorway, never mind the fact she
without shoes.

ive it— “Okay, little bug, let's go.” Dylan smiles and nods, always letting
ld, and away with everything.



atch as

soon,” Ice creams in hand, we pull up at Katie's favorite park, and Dylan coll
front of football from the truck. He's been teaching her how to play, and
obsessed, telling me regularly that she wants to be a football play
nds up. Dylan when she grows up. And she very well could be, because I
ie says, admit, for a four-year-old, she's pretty freaking good.

I curl up on the grass with my latest read and listen to the sounds
me. I don't need to be here. Dylan's more than capable of looking after
a hug,

ner got alone, but I'm catching up on lost time. We've always been close, and smooth Dylan in Denver was hard for me, especially when Katie came along. happier Although, at least that meant he was in another state when I told kids in news about my pregnancy and the anger that Joel and I predicted hit w force. That wasn't a fun day. *And he doesn't know half of it.*

eling?" While I may not have seen him as often as I liked when I moved fr hometown to the city, he was still only an hour away. It wasn't th that's a when *he* moved, and now, sometimes, I just need him around. He settle

The sun dips as the afternoon rolls on, and I'm just about to call i when my phone rings, and Dani's name flashes on the screen. She and n hand, been friends since we both worked together for Heartwood Univ it's our football team years ago. While I left to have Katie, she's still workin e's still She's also married to Logan. It's a long complicated story, but desj warning Dani to stay away—with Logan being Summer's playboy bes her get at the time—Dani was apparently his undoing and he completely chan ways.

"Hey, Lovely, are you back from your vacation?" I ask with a sm and Logan headed to Australia for an action-packed getaway. Loga there for six months during his time as a pro surfer and talks about it ect's the time. So, of course, now we all want to visit there. *Maybe one day.*

Dani huffs out a laugh and sighs. "What vacation? I spent the w er like catching up on laundry, and today, I'm back at work. It feels like i have to happened."

I frown even though she can't see me. "That's a shame. I was really around you'd come back relaxed, despite how much you had planned."

"Me too," she laughs again. "Maybe next time. And maybe if we warmer weather. Anyway, I want to catch up with you properly, b

having now, my call regards work.”

Sitting up straighter, my brows furrow as my book falls from my lap. “Okay,” I say, curiosity lacing my voice.

“How do you feel about coming back?”

My breath hitches, and my chest fills with a mix of nerves and excitement. This is something I’ve been thinking about and debating for the last few months. Katie’s starting preschool at the end of the summer, so I’ll have more time. And I could definitely use the money. *And the adult interest* But at the same time, it makes me nervous to think I won’t be available as often as I am now. I’m currently only working casually for the university’s clinic, when someone’s free to watch Katie, and it worries me to come there more. I’m all she’s got.

“Ummm.” I hesitate.

“You don’t have to decide right away, but you should give Aaron a call and at least go in for a chat. They’re in need of someone urgently, and his name has been thrown around multiple times.”

“Why didn’t Aaron call me himself?” It’s odd that Dani’s the one who lived me this, considering she’s in the marketing department and I worked with all the fitness team. Aaron was my boss when I worked for the college before he was born. We got along well, so there’s no reason he couldn’t just pick up the weekend phone.

“His wife told him not to bother you. Said that you’d contact them when you were ready.”

I huff out a laugh as I run my hand through my hair. Lola always draped her arm over my back. She took one look at me when I announced I was pregnant, grabbed me in a hold of my hand, and dragged me into a spare room. She sat me down and told me that if something was wrong or I’d been hurt, she’d help

justice. After telling her that wasn't necessary, I shared more with her than I've told anyone, though not everything. Not the part I feel sorry about. Not the part that hurts the most.

Since that day, she's been checking in on me regularly. She sweet-talks me. Aaron doesn't know a thing. And since my family doesn't either, I've been trying to push it from my mind. *Mostly.*

I've a bit "I'll call him now. It's the least I can do if they're desperate."

reaction. Dani sighs. "You don't owe them anything, Lucy. You had a baby. It's not your fault for that." I know she wants to say more, but she's holding back. I deliver my usual response.

I admit to "They took a chance on me with that promotion, and a few months ago I told them I was pregnant. I owe them."

"Do I need to get into equal opportunity and all that?"

I get a call, "Nope, you don't. I'll call them. And I'll make a decision based on what's best for me and Katie, not them. Will that make you happy?"

"Very much. Thank you." I can practically hear in her voice the grateful smile she's undoubtedly displaying.

with the She hangs up, and my body tenses at the thought of what I'm about to do. Katie needs to calm down. It's just a phone call. And yet, it feels like a life-changing decision. I haven't really kept up with the Heartwood U Football team

than the things I've heard through Dylan or his friends. And while Dani and I catch up to date on some things, mostly gossip, we tend not to talk about the things we catch up. We have other things on our minds these days, and most of the time we have two kids running around between us.

grabbed Aaron's phone goes to voicemail when I call, and because I'm still in a hurry and what I want to say, I hang up without leaving a message. He calls back and I get

ner thatthan a minute later and doesn't even let me speak before he's talking.
o stupidtell me you're ready?"

I laugh as I watch Dylan swinging Katie around in the air. *The*
ars that*million-dollar question, isn't it?* "I'm ready to at least *talk*, if that's w
en ablemean."

"I'll take it. Come in any time you like. I'll drop everything."

He's lying, but I appreciate the enthusiasm, so we lock in a time fo
No onevisit the following day.

ack, so "What's with the smile?" Dylan asks as we walk to the car a sho
later. Lifting my hand to my mouth, I check, and sure enough, there's
later, Ithere. I hadn't even realized. *Maybe I want this more than I thought.*

"I have a meeting with Aaron tomorrow, about potentially going
work."

what's Dylan's eyes light up, like they always do whenever I'm happy. He
me at my worst and never wants me back there. "That's great, Lucy.
e proudknow what I can do. Summer and I can help with Katie, and you
Delilah will offer the same."

to do. I I'm certain she would, but she's got enough on her plate right now v
angingand Joel looking into fostering a child.

n, other "Cory and Nate are on summer break now too, so you've got their
ii keepsyou need it," Dylan adds, referring to our teacher friends. I have op
p whenknow I do. I just need to decide if going back to work full-time is t
t of thething for me and Katie right now.

not sure



ick less

“PleaseWhen Katie’s in bed later that night, I draw myself a bath and cont
my future as I sink down into the bubbles. Going back to work isn’t
it’s the decision, but it has its benefits, especially financially. We get by,
hat you never without, and heaven knows Dylan spoils us both, but he’s about
his own little family to take care of, and maybe it’s time I did someth
me.

r me to I love being a physical therapist; I wouldn’t have spent six years s
if I didn’t. I’ve missed it like crazy. Well, I miss it when I have the
ort timethink about it. Katie keeps me busy, but she’s a good kid. I’ve never h
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“Can I do this?” I whisper to myself before closing my eyes and
back tomy head under the water, letting my mind swarm with thoughts, p
cons and every little thing it can conjure. I don’t move from the bath u
’s seenwater turns cold, and by the end, there’s one thing clear as day. *I think*

Let me

I know

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with her

help if

tions; I

he best

When Katie's in bed later that night, I draw myself a bath and contemplate my future as I sink down into the bubbles. Going back to work isn't an easy decision, but it has its benefits, especially financially. We get by, Katie's never without, and heaven knows Dylan spoils us both, but he's about to have his own little family to take care of, and maybe it's time I did something for me.

I love being a physical therapist; I wouldn't have spent six years studying if I didn't. I've missed it like crazy. Well, I miss it when I have the time to think about it. Katie keeps me busy, but she's a good kid. I've never had any concerns with her.

"Can I do this?" I whisper to myself before closing my eyes and dipping my head under the water, letting my mind swarm with thoughts, pros and cons and every little thing it can conjure. I don't move from the bath until the water turns cold, and by the end, there's one thing clear as day. *I think I can.*

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Chapter Twelve

Wes

I throw the clipboard across the table and drop my head into my hands. “Are you fucking kidding me? Why did I sign up for this?”

Four sets of eyes flash up at me, and I realize that probably wasn’t the best thing to say. To these people, this team is their life. But I just started my new role and all I know is the information presented in front of me. The coach is telling me our best player, our quarterback, just transferred to another college...for a girl. *A fucking girl*. Well, it doesn’t say that’s the reason, but it’s common knowledge. Good luck to him, I say. Yes, I’ve let girls fuck me before, but come on...she’s just going to break his heart into a million pieces and he’ll miss out on a championship. *Trust me, I know*.

“Is there any way we can talk him into staying?” I ask, hoping they can change his mind. Our offensive coordinator raises his eyebrow and gives me the expression the answer I need. It’s done. There’s nothing we can do but move on.

I want to call him a dick, but he’s actually a nice guy. They all are on a good team and that pisses me off even more.

I huff out a sigh. “All right, what options do we have?”

“Your ex-teammate’s little brother could step up?” one of the guys acting like he knows me.

But what?! “Who?”

I get a glare from the team manager and it’s probably deserved. I know the entire roster by now and I mostly do. I just don’t have their names memorized.

“Bennett,” he says with a pointed look.

Bennett. Now that I picture the kid, it all makes sense. I should have known the two of them were related. First time I saw him he had his hands around two girls, something I’ve seen several times with Luke.

“Okay. One for the list. Anyone else I should look at?”

It should be as easy as moving our backup into the position, but he’s not ready. He’s great but he’s not a superstar. We lost a superstar, and we need a replacement.

After bouncing ideas around for a while and getting nowhere, another recruitment head suggests we seriously consider the freshman wide receiver. I’ve secured, but I’m not sure a seventeen-year-old is the right choice. Nonetheless, I add him to the list, and by the end of the meeting, I’m

What a fucking mess. All for a girl.

we can
now, his



As soon as I get back to my office, I drop down onto my chair and throw my feet up on the desk, the motion sending paperwork flying to the floor. It’s at that point that I worry with my care factor set to zero right now.

Closing my eyes, I lean back until I’m pretty sure the desk chair is at its breaking point and sigh. This was always my plan after retirement. I

Wes says, wanted to coach. Sure, I'd planned on spending my time as the head coach, not the head coach, but it's coaching all the same. And Heartwood is a good college with a great football team. *Why can't I be happy?* I should be. I'm lost in thought when my office door slams open and I flinch, my chair to crash to the floor. "Jesus Christ!" *I am going to murder someone.* Rubbing my head, where it just connected with the wall behind me, I wince at the pain. "This better be good. I've had a shit start to my day and—" I should have known. "That's a bad word," a little voice says from somewhere in the room. My arms freeze. *What the fuck?*

Scrabbling to my knees, I look over the desk and see a tiny little girl staring back at me. "I won't tell." She shrugs.

Who's not? *Who the fuck let a kid in?*

I need a moment. I stare at her in bewilderment, not really knowing what I'm supposed to do. Am I meant to report a missing child? Do I have some sort of duty here, somewhere? Or can I politely tell her to leave?

She just smiles over at me, rocking on her heels with her hands locked behind her back, and I soften...a little. Because even I have to admit it's over it. Adorable, and anyone that doesn't think the same would have to be heartless. I have a heart; it's just frozen over at the moment.

My lips pull up into a grin, and when she notices, her eyes light up and she opens her mouth to talk.

"Katie, where are you?" Dani, our marketing manager, calls out, popping her head into the room, her words sending me reeling. "Awww, sorry, Wes. Katie, please say goodbye to Mr. Johnson and come work for us. Your mom will be done in a few minutes."

Always. "Bye, Mr. Johnson," she repeats with a tiny wave before skipping out the door. I wave back absentmindedly even though she doesn't see it. Dani

receiver though, and she offers me an apologetic yet confused grin.

As soon as she closes the door behind her, I fall into a heap on the floor, my head crashing back into the wall. *Katie. Fucking Katie.* My eyes start watering, causing me to rub them, before shoving my fists in the sockets to stave off anyone threatening to come. I do not need this now. Or anytime, really. *Could my day get any worse?*

and I



Why the fuck would I ask myself that question? Of course it can get human and it did. On top of everything else, I've got the university president's phone to complain about some scandal between a player and one of our older trainers. *Fuck my life.* And with that in mind, they're going to end to do ban on dating within the workplace, including players dating staff—of care—and staff dating staff, because, and I quote, “we need to set an example behind some shit. I personally don't care, but I'm pretty sure my department coordinator is going to have a thing or two to say about it since rumor fucking he's dating our travel planner. *Can't wait to see that blow up.*

The rest of my day runs somewhat smoothly by comparison, but when time I get home, I'm in desperate need of a beer. The only bonus along as she longer playing professional football—I don't have to worry about my alcohol intake.

I'm sure I'm just overly stressed because I never signed up for this crap. responsibility. When I signed my name on the dotted line, I was accepted with me. role as the receiver coach for the Heartwood University Lions, nothing

But of course, shit happens and now I'm the interim head coach. out the everything is fucked-up.

ni does

Thank God my private life is lacking because I don't have much more floor, space for anything else.

ing as I Beer in one hand and chicken salad in the other—because okay, I motion think about my food intake a little—I fall onto the couch and sigh.

uld this It's been one hundred ninety-two days since I blew out my knee during a championship game. If I wasn't so close to retirement, I would have kicked my ass off to get back on that field, but considering I was already pushing my limits, it ended my career. I'm certain I only had a year left, maximum, I wanted to go out on my own terms. With all the retirement fanfare and glory. Instead, I hobbled off the field, never to return again. *And it's worse, sucked.*

t on the I've had a shit year all around. Quite a few shit years if I really force a complain. It's like I'm continuously losing things—my job, my mind, a given But losing my gran, Katie, was hard. *One* of the hardest things I've ever ple," or through, and I'm definitely not over it.

offensive *Katie. Fucking Katie.* I'd been doing so well to not lose my cool at work or has it on top of everything else. Actually, scrap that, I'm constantly losing it by the at work, but I've never been emotional. Today I came close. Hearing about no little girl's name had my heart lurching in my throat. Obviously, I know food or are other people out there with the name Katie, but it's the first time I come across one since my gran passed away. And I was not at all ready

for this
tempting a



g more. I don't know what to do with myself for the next hour, so I alternate between ch and working out and vegging out. Both have their positives and negatives.

re headneither put me in a good mood. Nothing has lately. I don't want to get
big *woe is me* spiel, but I could use a break from things fucking up in
do still My leg muscles burn as I squat down, balancing the weighted bar
my shoulders. I can already tell that my fitness levels are dropping
luring amotivation to train like I used to just isn't there. But I push through
workedfinish up my last rep with a grunt.

ing my Dropping to the floor, I take a deep breath before starting my next
s, but I—the one I fucking hate, the one I'm pretty sure everyone hates—b
l all theI'm busting out my thirty-seventh rep, already exhausted from the res
*fucking*set, when my phone vibrates on the counter. I ignore it, knowing that
someone important they'll call back. I've never been one to rush
want tophone. I don't give a fuck if your house is on fire, you've called the
d...*her*.person.

er been The vibrations stop as I drop down into my next move, but the
buzzes again, seconds later, stopping after one ring. *Dammit*. Pausing
work...I stare at my phone with a scowl, waiting for what I know is coming
ny coolright on cue, the phone vibrates again. *Fucker*. I have no doubt in my
ng thatthat it's Carter. He knows that the third time is usually a charm for r
w therehe's trying to cheat the system.

ne I've Jumping to my feet, I take my time moving to the kitchen, and ans
y for it.the last ring. "Yup." I puff into the phone, unable to give him anything
until I catch my breath.

Carter laughs. "How was your day, sweetie?"

etween "Fuck off. What's up? We spoke yesterday."

res, but "You know I can't go a day without speaking to you."

"Carter," I warn.

He chuckles to himself, and I hear the phone rustle as he moves

it into a “Okay, okay. I want details on the QB? All you texted was ‘I’ve my life. quarterback.’”

across I drop my head back with a sigh, running a hand through my matted hair. “It’s a fucking nightmare. He’s moved for a girl and now I’m scrambling to find his replacement. I’m running some plays with a few guys tomorrow to see who’s the best fit. But if I’m being honest, I don’t think we’ll be playing in any championships for a couple of years. That kind of sucks, but it’s what we’ve got. We’ve been fucked by the league.”

of the “Damn, what about Bennett’s little brother?”

it if it’s “What the fuck? How do you know about him?” I ask incredulously. “He’s the son of a bitch who got drafted by the Browns. He’s a damn good player.”

wrong Carter still plays for San Francisco and is set to have his best year coming season. He’s a little younger than I am, so probably has a few more years left. Something I’d be jealous about if he wasn’t finally getting the mid-repand recognition he deserves.

ing. And He barks out a laugh at my realization of Luke’s bragging. “You know what I mean?”

ne, and “Luke will be pleased. He never shuts up about the fact that he’s coaching his little bro. What’s he like?”

swer on My mind bypasses football because I know that’s not what he’s talking about. “Worse than Bennett from what I’ve seen.”

“Big call, man. Big call.”

I never knew Luke in college, but I think it’s safe to say he hasn’t changed much, and his brother seems to be following in his footsteps. But as long as he doesn’t give me trouble, I don’t care what he does with his personal life. That’s all on him.

around. Carter’s car starts in the background and I huff quietly, thinking

got nowhere he might have been. Probably a training session at the team gym. The thought makes me sad. Even though I just finished my own workout, I feel already the same. That team became my family and I miss them, even Luke.

"So what else is new?" Carter asks, as "Eye of the Tiger" plays through the phone. I'm so lost in the song that when he repeats the question I don't think I can answer honestly instead of keeping my mouth shut.

"I met a little girl named Katie today," I say and immediately wince. "Ah fuck," Carter curses under his breath but loud enough I hear it. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I don't know why I told you that."

"Because it affected you," he says, his jovial tone long gone.

"You're probably right. Life fucking sucks."

"I agree *that* sucks. Losing Katie sucked hard. But your life is not my support. You're just a grumpy bastard. A grumpy bastard that shouldn't be here tonight."

"I huff out a laugh, shaking my head. "You and I both know there's no chance I won't be alone."

Carter groans with a laugh just as keys jingle in my front door and the door slowly opens. "You're right. I should have known."

My lips pull into a grin as I turn around and relish in the smell of coffee from my new favorite diner. "Took you long enough," I say, hanging up the phone.

changed

long as

nal life.

g about

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Chapter Thirteen

Wes

I *hate* Monday meetings with a passion. As if Mondays were enough just by existing.

“Are we done? I have things to do,” I bark out before biting my tongue. It’s been almost a week since we lost our quarterback and we *still* don’t have a replacement. Rising to my feet, I move to leave—“Actually, one more thing”—and drop back down with a groan. Will this ever end?

Our fitness director, Aaron, keeps talking despite my clear annoyance. “We’ve got a new physical therapist starting tomorrow—well, she’s really new,” he drones on as I rest my face in my hands, waiting for the announcement to be over while trying really hard not to walk out mid-sentence. I’ve been told that’s rude, but sometimes it’s necessary. “Some of you might remember her, so if you see Lucy in the halls, please make her feel welcome.”

“*The fuck!*” My head shoots up and I glare his way. This has to be the worst. The world is trying to mess with me.

“What do you mean ‘the fuck’?” Aaron asks, an uncharacteristically stern look on his face. This guy is always nice, but from day one it’s been c

we weren't going to get along—there's just something about him. Probably because he's *too* happy. I don't know. I don't care.

"I'm a little put off by the fact that I *just* started as interim head coach and the team seems to be falling apart. First you lose your coach, hence hire a QB, a trainer, and now a physical therapist? What's going on?" I'm not crazy, I know. But I'm not wrong.

"We haven't lost any trainers," Aaron says with a frown, before announcing, "Meeting adjourned."

Since he doesn't actually have authority to make that call, no one listens until the big man in charge repeats his statement.

What?! That was weird. I'm not going to argue though. Pushing back my chair with a loud screech, I stand to leave. Again.

"Not you," Aaron demands, motioning for me to sit. My fists clench, ready to argue, but when my boss gives me a nod, I'm forced to comply. *Fucker.*

When the room has cleared out, Aaron taps his pen on the table and continues. "We haven't lost a trainer. It was our PT caught with one of our players."

I don't like the way he says "your" but I let it slide. Maybe this guy is as nice as he seems.

"Right, okay. So you hired *another* female to replace her. Isn't that a little bit of trouble?"

Aaron's eyes flare, and he slaps his palms on the table. If I were a joke, I'd be six feet under. He's about to tear me a new one when the boss steps in.

"Come on, Wes. Since when are you sexist?"

Uh. Since never. I just popped my sexism cherry, and I feel pretty

robably about it. Not that I admit that. Instead, I square my shoulders and f
with both of them.

ach and “Since I have my defensive coordinator threatening to quit if he’s fo
re, then choose between his job and his girlfriend, now that the bullshit no dati
1 acting is in place.” *And since you decided to hire a girl named Lucy and I’m
pissed about it.*

bruptly Fuck my life.



moves

“Run it again,” I yell at the two guys I’ve been working to the bone. W
ack my a decision by the end of the day. Summer training is about to start,
rather not have to admit we’re missing a crucial player.

i beside “That’s it, Mini B. Nice one.” I clap his performance and nod
omply. offensive coordinator, Sean. This kid is good.

Mini B’s eyes narrow as he jogs back to position. They all think
ole and asshole, yet I always give credit where credit’s due. Compliment asic
of your not a huge fan of the nickname I’ve given him now that I know his l
but I’m sure it’ll grow on him. Or I’ll tire of it. Either way, he’s fine.

isn’t as “Alright, Rookie. You’re up.”

We’re down to the rookie and Mini B for the starting quarterback p
: asking Rookie is fucking phenomenal for his age. He has raw talent that c
rivaled, at least in speed and skill. Calling the plays though... He’s sti
uld kill bit to learn. I have no doubt that after a year as a backup, he’ll be the
ss man one player on everyone’s radar. The scouts were right.

Mini B, on the other hand, has a mind for this game. Despite being
receiver, his ability to call plays and predict movement is up there wit
y shitty

face off of the best, and he has this *born leader* feel about him. But he's also a fuck, so I'm torn.

We practice for another hour before calling it a day. The boys smiling rulewalk off the field, but I know I pushed them hard and they'll be cursing *fucking* the locker room.

Sean joins my side and we both sigh in unison. It's weird but neither comment.

"What are you thinking?" he asks, looking my way.

"I hate to say it, but I think we have to go with Mini B."

Sean laughs. "I think you're right. I mean, Trevor *is* amazing." *He* *ve* need *and I'd* *Rookie*. "But I'm not sure he's ready."

"Same sentiment, different shirt," I say, shrugging a shoulder walking toward my office. Sean laughs a little hesitantly as he follows like he's never heard me joke before. *That was a joke, right. Because I'm wearing different shirts? Uh whatever*. "Let's sleep on it," I say on a shoulder. "But I think we've got our QB," I add and then disappear on sight. *brother,*

Carter calls when I'm on my way home later that day. I haven't answered his call since we spoke last week, and judging by the voicemails he's not happy.

He pranks me twice and then lets the third one ring until I answer.

"You've got a dependency problem," I say as a greeting.

"Fuck off. You hung up on me midcall because your *lady friend* called and then haven't answered the phone all week. I was worried you'd murdered in your sleep and we'd never find the body."

I laugh, because while I haven't answered his call, I've texted, so he's not that's not true.

ucky as “No such luck,” I joke. “I’m— What the fuck was that?” I yell, blai
horn when some fucker cuts me off.

as they “How’s the QB hunt going? Random outburst aside, you don’t s
g me in pissy as usual, and you answered your phone.”

“I think we found our guy.”

er of us “Thank fuck. Tell me it’s not Ryan.”

“Who’s Ryan?”

Carter sighs. “Jesus, Wes. Do you know any of your players’ names

“I know surnames.” I’m completely bullshitting him because I l
: meansannoys him. Ryan and Mini B are one and the same.

“Ryan Bennett.”

before “Ooooh, yeah, sorry, it’s him.”

ws me, I smirk to myself when he groans, knowing Luke is going
e we’reinsufferable, and Carter will have to put up with it. But it’s nice th
ver myproud.

it of his We’re still talking when I pull into my driveway and notice a famili
idling down the road.

iswered “Any lady friends over tonight?” Carter asks jokingly, like he alway
e’s left, knowing there’s only one other person that would ever be at my p
could be an asshole, but it’s been a couple of weeks since we’ve actual
each other, so I do the right thing and give him the answer he wants.

“Nope, my best friend’s coming over. In fact, he’ll be here any minu

ne over “You better mean me, asshole.”

’d been “I can see your truck, fucker. Get inside.”

: knows



ing my Carter and I drink until the early hours, taking advantage of the off-
even though I have work in the morning. I'm on my third shot—*God*
eem as *why we moved to shots*—when Lucy comes up in conversation. Cart
to torment me with her every now and then, and I usually laugh it
today it hits too close to home.

“Trust me, you do *not* want to mention her name.”

Carter raises an eyebrow and leans in close. “Why, is it your anniver
?” something?” he whispers and then laughs. The fucker laughs and I
know it deck him.

“No, asshole. A new girl starts tomorrow who happens to be named

“Get out of town. A Katie *and* a Lucy, within a week.”

“*Get out of town?*” I say, leaning back with a smirk.

to be “I also could have gone with *shut the front door.*” He shrugs as I
at he's grateful for the small respite.

“You're funny, but they both suck, and so do you. As does new Luc
ar truck Carter pauses for a second before looking to the ceiling. He's see
lost in thought until he has some kind of epiphany and starts click
/s does, fingers in front of me.

place. I “Did that hurt?” I ask before he can fill me in on his excitement.

lly seen “What if *new* Lucy is *old* Lucy!” he exclaims until he realizes he sh
be excited by that prospect and his brows furrow.

ite.” I have to admit, the thought crossed my mind.

After everything went down all those years ago, curiosity got the
me, and I looked Dylan up online. He attended Heartwood U. Grew up
town. If Lucy had still lived here when I met her then she'd only hav
an hour or less away from our hotel. And yet, I never contacted her.

Sure, she may have moved since college, or high school. But did

season,my laptop across the room in annoyance anyway? You bet I did.

l knows “I considered that for a second. But then someone mentioned t
er likessurname was Kelly, and my theory went right out the window.”

off, but Carter raises an eyebrow as he stares me down, clearly waiting fo
catch up on his thoughts. Umm... *Oh Fuck, unless she’s married. A*
pang runs through me, and I almost grip my chest from the pain. God’s
rsary orit’s been years. *Get the fuck over it.*

almost



Lucy.” I’m on edge the next day, because despite spending most of the night
to convince myself it was a coincidence—that this Lucy wasn’t the s
my Lucy—I failed. Of course she’ll fucking be the same. That’s the s
[laugh, my life.

I should have marched my ass over to the therapy rooms first thi
y.” morning, but I’m too chickenshit to find out the truth. I’d rather live in
mingly Fuck, that girl really did a number on me. To think I had trust issues
ing his meeting her, and now...

Running my hands down my face, I shake off my thoughts and
concentrate. Unsuccessfully. For hours.

ouldn’t My boss raps his knuckles on my partially opened door in the
afternoon and gives me a pointed look. I pretend to finish read
document in front of me, then look his way. “What’s up?” I ask as
best of he’s interrupting, when in reality, I have no idea what the document
in *this* could very well be a takeout menu.

ve been “I want an update on the QB issue. You’ve got five minutes. I
coffee first.”

I throw

He disappears down the hall as I roll my eyes. He was the one who had been missing from the meeting when we collectively made the decision.

I'm not bothered to check his email he'd get the answer, but he's the athletic director so I follow him anyway.

A sharp knock "I've already emailed you about this," I say, walking into the staff lounge behind him. "We've decided to go with—" I freeze.

Oh, hell no.

Sitting at the round table in the center of the room is my worst nightmare and dream come true. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* I was really hoping I was wrong. "Nope, no. Uh-uh. I'm done. I'm taking a personal day. Bennett's taking over as quarterback. Check your email. I'm outta here."

With that I turn around and storm out, needing to put as much distance between myself and that room as physically possible.

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denial.
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I try to

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Chapter Fourteen

Lucy

I'm frozen, sandwich raised halfway to my mouth, shocked to see Wes standing in front of me on my first day back at work. When my vision finally catches up with my vision, a soft smile starts to form. That is when he speaks.

"Nope, no. Uh-uh. I'm done. I'm taking a personal day. Bennett's taking over as quarterback. Check your email. I'm outta here."

With that, he's gone and I can't breathe. *What the fuck just happened?* Why is he here? My eyes flash to the other man in the room. He's so familiar, but I can't place him. He frowns as he looks between me and the door Wes just vacated, almost as confused as I am.

I'm about to apologize, though I've done nothing wrong, when it hits me. Wes is here.

My chair falls to the floor as I aggressively push it back before running for the exit. *Wes is here.*

"Wait!" I call out as I round the corner, coming to a screeching halt to find the hallway empty.

Did I just imagine that? That was Wes, right? I mean, it's been time, but his face is still at the forefront of my mind. I *know* him. Although it'd be difficult to forget with all the billboards anyway.

Someone taps on my shoulder, and I jump, completely lost in my thoughts. "Jesus, sorry. What are you doing?" Dani asks, her forehead crinkled with concern. I must seem frazzled as I frantically look left and right, searching all directions, unable to move.

"Do you know Wes Johnson?" I ask, without looking her way. "Of course you do. Everyone knows him. But do you know that he's *here*?"

I whisper the last part and Dani laughs.

"Yes, to both. He's the interim head coach here. Didn't you know that?"

My eyes widen in shock. *Why didn't I know that?* I knew he'd had a career-ending injury. I saw it happen. But... "How did I miss that?" Whether to Dani or myself, I don't know.

"No idea. It's been all over the media. Why are you being weird?"

Dani doesn't know about my time with Wes. Only a few people know. An article Greg sent me back then never saw the light of day. A reporter had told him about it, but somehow it disappeared, as though it never existed. As though our time together *never existed*. And while I was a little relieved, fuck, it hurt.

"I...I've just always been a big fan," I lie. Dani and I are close friends. I tell her most things. But this is Wes's workplace, so until I talk to her, it's best if I keep things on the down low.

I'm sure Dani picks up on my strange tone, but she doesn't say anything. Instead she smiles. "Well, you're in for some luck because it's impossible to miss him around here. But you know what they say about meeting your idol?"

a long “Don’t?”
though, “Exactly.”

What does that mean?

oughts. A colleague calls Dani away, and she heads toward her office, leav
kled inalone with my thoughts. I’ve met Wes; he’s completely different fr
hing infootball player persona but in a good way. Why would she hint at sor
bad?

orry, of
”



I wander the halls on my way back to our rooms. Since training does
at?” until next week, I’ve got a bit of time on my hands, and despite Wes
l had a he’s going home, I seek him out. It’s not in his nature to sh
” I say, responsibilities like that. At least that’s what he once told me, so I’m
certain he’s still here.

And I’m right.

do. The When I pass by the coaches’ offices, a voice booms inside the one v
r friend name taped to the door. “What the fuck do you mean?” Wes yells, an
existed. no response I’m going to assume he’s on the phone.

eved... “I don’t need this today. Where?”

More silence.

iends. I “Ah fuck, okay. I’m on my way.”

im, it’s The door slams open before I’ve had a chance to step away—I
expecting him to move so quickly. Jumping back, I press myself aga
ything. opposite wall and flinch.

almost Wes stills, and his eyes lock on mine before raking over my entir
y about causing a chill to run through me. I’m wearing my favorite skintight l

and a team-issued polo. Nothing special. And yet, the way he looks at
way he drinks me in, you'd think I was naked *and* beautiful. My heart
in my chest and I stop breathing.

ring me “Wes?” I whisper without moving a muscle. Scared that even the s
rom histwitch will have him scampering away.

nothing His eyes snap back to mine, flashing with anguish before he sha
head and scoffs. “I’ve got to go.”

I expect him to rush off then, but he doesn’t move a muscle until
tentative step forward.

rn’t start “Fuck,” he hisses before running a hand through his dark messy h
saying walking away.

irk his “Wes, wait!”

almost He pauses but doesn’t look back. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Is something wrong?” I say, taking another step toward him with
in my throat.

with his Wes’s shoulders stiffen, and he finally turns around, anger in his ey
nd with you care?”

I flinch at his comment and my chest aches. “Always,” I croak, m
clogged with emotion. It’s not a lie. I care. I cried for days after v
away from him, and only half of it was because I was pregnant. Th
half—him.

wasn’t Wes huffs out a laugh and departs without another glance my
inst the consider leaving him be. I do. But I’ve never been a hold back kind of
“Wait!” I call again as I run after him.

e body, He pushes through the glass doors to the parking lot before I’ve
eggings him and continues to ignore me as he approaches his truck. The same
remember.

me, the “Wes, stop, please.”

pounds Pausing with his hand on the door handle, he peers over his shoulder with a scowl. “*What, Lucy?*”

lightest “You look worried. Can I help somehow?”

I’m not sure what I’m asking. Or why. But I can’t walk away without making his offering something.

He spins then and stares at me blankly, stepping into my personal space. I take a “No, Lucy. You can’t help. This is a personal matter and we’re practically strangers.”

air and *Ouch!* My chest burns from the lack of emotion in his expression. I almost believe his words until he blinks and his eyes remain closed a beat too long.

“I’m sorry. I’ll leave you be,” I say as he jumps in his truck and slams the door before pulling out of the lot. It’s not until he’s out of sight that I realize I’ve held my breath. Can I blame him for being angry at me? No. But perhaps I should. “Dowe’re strangers isn’t going to work. Not when I still have his touch, his smell etched into my mind. I’ve never regretted walking away that day. I’ve only wished I had. I’ve only wished I had done what was best for both of us. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t regretted it. I’ve only wished things could have worked out differently. I’m just not sure where to go from here.”

I’m about to head back inside when someone calls my name. My heart jumps, thinking Wes has come back, but it’s not even his voice.

girl. When I turn around, Greg’s best friend is jogging toward me. My heart pounds again but for a different reason entirely. I’ve had nothing to do with Greg since the day he sent me the article about Wes. I changed my number, I moved, for God’s sake. Seeing his friend *now* makes my spine curl.

“Bry, how are you?” I play nice, even though I want to throw up.

“Lucy, it’s been so long. Are you back working here?” Brighton asks with an internally cringe. Do I lie? And why the hell is he here? He lives a mile away.

“Potentially, we’ll see. I’m just putting the feelers out.” That would have been the truth if he’d seen me last week so we’ll go with that.

Brighton smiles. “Nice one. My brother’s kid is on the cheer team. I found her picking her up from practice.” *Guess that answers my question.*

“Oh, perfect. It’s a great college.”

Brighton smiles but doesn’t say anything back. He blinks a few times, and I realize he doesn’t believe I’m actually standing in front of him, and that’s understandable. “Well, it was good to see you. I’ve gotta run or I’ll be late,” he says awkwardly, pointing toward the doorway, making Bry snap out of his weird mood he’s in.

“Yeah, yeah. Me too. Good seeing you, Luce.”

My lips pull into a forced smile before I walk away from our awkward conversation. When he’s out of sight, my skin covers in goose bumps, and an uncomfortable feeling swirls inside me. I’m not sure if anything will come of this interaction, but if it does, it won’t be good.

go from



stupid. Within ten minutes of finishing work, I arrive at my local gym. The first thing I do is work out and physically hit something is strong. The negative energy that’s been building up in my heart through me needs to go. As soon as I’m changed, I head over to the pickup game area, grab the bags and find Joel and Delilah stretching beside them. Joel’s hands are on the bag and there’s a pair of gloves at his feet, making me eye them suspiciously.

ks and I “Summer thought you might need company since she can’t be here an hour here to work out, and I’m here to box.”

Summer and I completed a self-defense course together just before I would have been pregnant. Actually, it was after I became pregnant but just before I knew I was.

From there I developed a love of boxing and now spend most of my free time honing those skills. Summer often joins me when she wants a sweat session but hasn’t been coming all month.

“It’s been weeks since she last came, Joel. I’m okay.”

Joel says like “Maybe we want to get fit.” He shrugs. Raising an eyebrow, my eyes are drawn over his ripped arms busting out of his tight tee, before moving to Delilah’s equally fit body.

Delilah says “Yeah, I’m sure that’s it.”

Delilah cracks up laughing as Joel shakes his head. “You’re right, we’re full of shit. We wanted to talk kids. More specifically babies.”

My face alights with surprise and I bite back a smile, trying not to look awkward and unexcited when I could be wrong in my assumption.

“Go on,” I say, waving a hand toward them.

Joel laughs. “Delilah and I got approval to be foster parents. We’re on the list.”

“Ahhh!” I throw my arms around them as tears well in my eyes. It’s a long road to get them to this point, and my heart fills at this news.

Taking a step back, I clap my hands together and grin. “What do you need to know?”

“You talk and box. I’m going for a run,” Delilah says, squeezing my hand as she walks away with a smile on her face.

Joel and I do just that. We box and talk until it’s physically impossible to do either, and we breathlessly fall to the floor. I think I’ve discovered

Del's about myself and raising a child than Joel has, but hopefully something out of our chat.

When I got "I think you broke me," he says from the floor beside me. He's an asshole, but I'm not sure he's referring to boxing.

My time Letting my head fall to the side to look at him, I respond with as much effort as possible. I'm just as fucked. "I could say the same about you, asshole." "I didn't know you could box."

"I'll let you in on a secret if you don't tell anyone."

My brows furrow as I nod.

Delilah's "Summer asked me to do this last week. I didn't want you to show up. So I've been coming every day since she mentioned it."

I laugh because that's such a Joel thing to do, although it's not like Joel's Delilah he'd be messing with.

"I don't know how Delilah puts up with you."

"Me either. I'm one lucky son of a bitch."

"Hey, your mother is lovely," I sass, knowing he doesn't mean it literally.

"She really is," Delilah says, joining us again. We both turn to look at her, but neither of us move. We can't.

"It's a figure of speech, Luce." Joel rolls his eyes and I laugh, but I've been turning serious.

"You're going to make an amazing foster dad, Joel. I have absolutely no doubt. And Delilah...ah, you're going to be perfect. I'm really happy about both."

Joel's lips pull into a warm smile as he flops a hand over his face. "I'm nervous as anything, but excited for it all. Except for that shit excuse you decided to mention...*in detail*. That doesn't sound fun."

"Wow, you really have no clue, Joel," Delilah adds, shaking her head.

"I'm just a little bit confused."

he got “Yep, sometimes you have to laugh or you’ll cry,” I joke, although really funny. I’ve cried a lot. Being a mom has been the hardest and ybsoluterewarding thing I’ve ever done. And, while it took me four of tl months to get used to the idea of being pregnant, the second Katie as littlethis world, she was my everything. Would it have been nice to ha” I hufffather in the picture? Of course. But I wasn’t going to let that happ didn’t deserve me and he definitely doesn’t deserve her.

“Well, I’m glad that little bug grew out of that stage. Especially sin spending the day with her tomorrow.” me up. I want to say a smart-ass comment. He’s left it wide open for one can’t. Instead I pull him into an awkward floor hug and press a kiss: ormallycheek, before rising and hugging Delilah.

I don’t think I could have done this parenting thing without my : They’ve all treated Katie like one of their own, and I couldn’t b grateful. I’m often asked if I’m a single mom—when people don’t see rally. or hear me talking about all the things Katie and I do as a duo—anc k at her technically I am, I always say *no*. I have so much love and support in r that I’ve never once felt like I was doing this alone.

before Looking a little less disheveled after a shower, we’re all smiles as w to our cars. “I’ll see you in the morning when you drop Katie off,” Jo itely noas he waits for me to get in mine.

for you Delilah snorts. “Actually he won’t. He’s never up early if he doesr to work. But I’ll be up and can’t wait to see Katie.”

Me too. I smile. “Either way, I really appreciate it. I’ll have everything sor plosionby next week.”

“No rush. We love spending time with her. And what else am I goir d. on my day off?”

it's not I could list a hundred things for him to do, but I don't, because I'm ;
et mosthe's choosing to help me. They both are. With this job being so last-m
ne ninehasn't been easy to get my shit together, but I'm getting there. My li
enteredbe a mess, but it's mine and I wouldn't change it.

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I could list a hundred things for him to do, but I don't, because I'm grateful he's choosing to help me. They both are. With this job being so last-minute, it hasn't been easy to get my shit together, but I'm getting there. My life may be a mess, but it's mine and I wouldn't change it.

Although as I drive away, an image of Wes springs to mind and I have to wonder...maybe sometimes a little change isn't a bad thing.

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Chapter Fifteen

Wes

The clock ticks over to nine-oh-eight and I need to get my ass into the office. I have a nine fifteen meeting with my staff, but I can't bring my truck. I'm sensing a pattern where Lucy is concerned. On time I'm not pushing the boundaries so I can see more of her. No, this don't want to see her at all.

My chest tightens at the memory of running into her yesterday—kitchen, that's a complete blur. But when I opened my office door to r and found her there, all doe-eyed and panicked, I couldn't look away as perfect as I remember. If not more so.

The swell of her breasts peeking out of her unbuttoned polo and th of her hips completely sucked me back in. I knew it was wrong couldn't stop myself from running my eyes over every inch of he needing to get my fill after all this time. Allowing my heart that one r to pound as I watched her shallow breathing and the subtle clench of h

Knowing I affected her just as much as she did me was really satisfying. I took in as much as I could in those few seconds, drinking same long golden-brown hair falling in waves over her shoulders, her

sun-kissed skin and perfect freckles, her bare lips, her...lack of a wedding ring. Yeah, I checked. Not that it matters, I just needed to know. *But that means she's divorced? Why the name change? And why do I care?*

Shaking off my thoughts, I stroll into the meeting at nine twenty-oh and nobody seems to notice. They're all getting settled and talking about bullshit like their kids or a TV show they binged the night before. And though I'm the one that's late, I make a big deal out of it.

"Let's start? We're already ten minutes behind."

As usual, the meeting goes over the allotted time—*who schedules these things?*—and I'm itching to get out of this stuffy room. I love the coaching, and I'm excited to start with the team, but the meeting politics, I can do without.

"And last, Aaron asked his new staff member to pop her head in and introduce herself—"

"Is that really necessary?" I bark out but he ignores me.

"She should be here any... Ah, Lucy, hi."

Fuck me. I groan louder than I mean to and bury my face in my hand. These guys know I hate meetings so will assume I'm pissed due to the person standing in the doorway. The person I can't get out of my fucking head.

"Hi, I'm Lucy. I recognize a few of you from when I was here almost a year ago, and..."

She keeps talking but I tune her out, my mind drifting back to when we first met. Did she work here then? I'm guessing yes, as it was about a year ago. At least I now have confirmation of how close she really lives to the office. I could have easily made things work. Only an hour drive to see each other.

Wedding easy commute if I spent the night. Hell, I could have even lived here
but does she fuck, Wes? You knew her for a week!

A week! I knew her for a goddam week and she caused irreparable
damage. Imagine what any longer will do.

Lucy waits in the doorway as everyone departs, shaking hands
and even passing. I hang back, hoping she'll leave when she sees I'm the last one,
wishful—or stupid—thinking.

“Wes, right? The head coach? Nice to meet you,” she says as I approach.
Is she kidding me with this?

I stare at her blankly, waiting for her to laugh, but she holds
her hand out in front of her, ready for me to shake. *Not happening.*

“I’m Lucy,” she continues.

“Excuse me, I have another meeting to get to.”

I move around her to exit, but she grabs my arm as I do, digging her
fingers into my skin, leaving her mark. *As if she hadn't already done that.*

“I’m going to have to start over, now that we’re working together,” she
says, holding my hand with a fake smile in place.

“We don’t *have* to do anything,” I say, staring at the tiny hand
of mine wrapped around my bicep, refusing to look her in the eye.

Of course she argues. “It will make our life easier.”

“Will it? Enlighten me.”

I don’t look up, but I sense her rolling her eyes. “Neither of us
needs tension. We can be civil. We’re both *professionals*.”

Damn. Pulling out the big guns. “Fine. Nice to meet you, *Lucy*.”

I pull my arm free and walk away, not once meeting her gaze, and
when I’m in my office, I breathe. My arm burns from her touch, and I wait

2. What it off but at the same time, I welcome it. *How does this woman still af so much? And why?*

versible I pace the room, wearing a line on the carpet until the offensive cool arrives for our meeting, snapping me out of my mood. “Bennett’s he as theyou ready to make his year?”

but it’s “Yeah, let’s do it.” Anything to distract me from my beautiful night

each.



For the next few days, I avoid Lucy like the plague. If I see her in the strong, turn around. If I hear her name mentioned, I hum to block out the ning. Usually something like “Maneater” by Hall & Oates or “Black Hole S Soundgarden, because my brain clearly likes to fuck with me and th the songs that pop into my head. *Talk about issues.*

er nails On the odd occasion I can’t avoid her, she smiles and cheerfully say “We’re to which she usually gets a nod in response, and once I even grunted.

hispers, I don’t want her in my space. I’m finally starting to feel like myself after Gran died and my career ended. I don’t want something else : she has with me. *Thank you, universe.*

When the weekend finally rolls around, I’m out of there without : back. Several people invite me to Friday night drinks, but I can’t do it to separate myself from this place for the entire weekend. After all, eed this last full weekend I’ll get off. The air in the building has been stifling need a break. So from Friday evening until Sunday night I chill, I res drink myself stupid...alone.

as soon

at to rip



fect me I'm hungover as fuck when I wake Monday morning, but I have to survive and be at work in a little over an hour. Stumbling toward the kitchen radiator double take when I pass by the living area.

re. Are Facedown on my couch is a very naked, very fit looking woman with her ass in the air. Her long blonde hair hides her face, but I'm pretty certain I've never seen her before.

She starts to stir and rolls onto her side, giving me a full view of her legs. And while I'm sure she's very nice to look at, I groan before turning away.

halls, I *I do not need this right now.*

noise. I know I was plastered last night, but I don't think I was *that* drunk. "Sun" by forget going out and hooking up. Which can only mean one thing... "Where are those are Gray, where the fuck are you?"

The toilet flushes, and I'm blessed with my second naked human. s hello, day. *Yay, me.* He scratches his head as he walks, swaying with each step he takes. I might be hungover but Grayson is still drunk...or *son*

lf again *Please don't let it be something.*

fucking A million things run through my head, but there's three that stand out. Why am I always the one they call? Why do his bandmates insist on drinking looking him at my door? And why the fuck did I give him my key?

. I need I watch him move toward me—like he doesn't even realize I'm here. it's the when he next stumbles, his eyes roll into the back of his head and he hits the floor. My heart stops, but the rest of me springs into fight mode, and I over to catch him before his head hits the tiles.

t, and I I lift him quickly, but almost drop him again when I hear a loud bang. the blonde cries out. *This is too much.*

Ignoring the naked woman now on my carpet, I try to rouse Gray. I only care about one I care about in this scenario.

ck it up “Grayson. Grayson, wake up.” He doesn’t move. “Come on,
, I do aYou’re scaring me.”

I slap him a few times until he finally begins to murmur, and m
with herstarts beating again. This is so much worse than I thought. We are w
ain I’vethe point of me being able to help him.

“What’s wrong with him?” the blonde asks, now awake after h
r body.Unfortunately for her that means she’s getting the brunt of my anger.
way. “What the fuck did you give him? What did he take?”

“Ha, if he’s taken anything, it never came from me. He’s the rin
runk towhere that’s concerned.”

Alright, *What? Jesus! I thought we were past this? How have I been so blind*

I instruct her to keep him awake while I quickly dress. I don’t ev
for thethe time to piss. I can’t afford it if I’m right and he’s taken something.
tep that When I walk back into the living room, he’s sitting up unassisted,
nothing.with the girl’s hair. My entire body deflates as the tension leaves m

okay. *Sort of*. But he’s about to meet my wrath as my concern
d out...morphs to anger now that he’s fine. “You’re going to rehab,” I demand
opping We’ve been here before. He beat it last time; he can do it again.

Gray laughs as though I’m joking, and I want to pummel him.
re. Andcourse I don’t, because then he’d never listen to me.

falls to “I’m not kidding, Gray. You told me you were clean. I know you di
runningmuch, but I’ve ignored it, thinking that’s better than the alternative. Th
me. But I can’t ignore *this*. You can have all the sex and rock ‘n’ r
ang andplease, but I draw the line at drugs. You need help.”

“It’s a one-off; it’s not like last time,” he tries to bullshit me.

ie’s the My naked house guest laughs and shakes her head, confirming I
Never thought she’d be on my side against the famous rock star, but I

fucker.it.

“You need to talk to someone. You’re already on thin ice with your
y heart Gray scoffs. “They need me more than I need them.”

ay past I hate that he’s right. It makes it hard to get my point across. But I’m
to argue anyway when my phone rings. I know it’s going to be someone
er fall.the media team asking where I am. But despite the fact that I’m supposed
be sitting down with some journalists in thirty minutes, I don’t answer.

“I have to go. Stay here. I’ve got plenty of food. We’ll talk when
gleaderback.”

The blonde looks at me expectantly and I groan. “Look after him
l? you?”

en take She nods with a smile as I walk away, instantly regretting my choice
leave.

playing

e. He’s



quickly By the time I get to my office, I’m a disheveled shell of my usual self
l.

in and called one of Grayson’s bandmates on the way here. This guy
good head on his shoulders, not that Grayson doesn’t—he just lost his

But of for a while. I have no doubt that Zach will look after him. He’ll be an
he’ll be there. I just can’t expect him to take full responsibility. After

ink too Gray, he’s practically a kid.

at’s on The newspaper interview is harmless, but I’m on edge the entire

oll you When I’m finally able to check my phone, I relax, seeing a message
Zach to say that Grayson’s okay. While I might be relieved, I’m

fucking angry at the situation. *What are you thinking, Gray?* I hate

his lies.

I’ll take

strongest urge to knock some sense into him, if only I could guarantee it would work.

I've just rounded the corner to my office, intent on grabbing my keys and hitting the gym to work off this frustration, when I come face-to-face with Lucy. In a dress. Looking so beautiful it hurts. *Not now, Lucy. Please.*

My chest tightens as I scowl. "Whatever you're selling, I ain't buying," I say, moving around her.

"Wes—"

"No, Lucy. If you need to talk to me, as the *head coach*, you make an appointment," I bark, completely unnecessarily, before walking away.

Chapter Sixteen

Lucy

“**W**hat’s your problem?” I whisper-yell, chasing Wes down the hallway. There’re a few office doors open, so I try hard not to draw attention to us. Not that there is an *us* anymore. And maybe there never was. Wes doesn’t respond. He just tosses me a look over his shoulder that says “are you kidding me with that question” and continues on his way. I know the conversation is over. But boy is he in for a shock. I get that things didn’t work well with us, but it takes two to tango. He never called, never messaged, never walked away that day and never looked back. Something he wishes he could do now.

As he storms into his office, pushing the door closed to shut me out, I jam my foot in the gap to stop it and let myself in, slamming it behind me.

“Do you mind? I’ve got shit to do.”

“I don’t really care how busy you are. We work together, Wes. I’m not putting up with this attitude for the foreseeable future.”

“Colleagues don’t have to be friends, Lucy. We may need to swap out players from time to time, but we don’t need to discuss our weaker

about the weather, or anything else outside of our specific roles. I'll tell you how I treat everyone else, and you can treat me how you want. Deal?"

"No." Plain and simple. I'm not letting him get away with this shit.

"No? Just like that?"

"Just like that." I smile innocently, trying hard not to laugh at the surprised expression on his face. This is a side of him I've never seen before, but I suppose I only knew him a week, and yet I act like we had some epic affair and I'm jaded.

I sigh and change tack. "Look, I know things ended strangely with us in the hallway. I don't think either of us is to blame—"

"I fucking hate liars," Wes states, slamming his fist on his desk, cutting me off. "I was honest with you about that from the start. Lying is and always

has been a deal breaker for me." He pauses but I don't say a word. The pain etched on his face tells me he's got more to say. More he needs to get off his chest.

"My dad told me nothing would change between us when he left—I thought my first agent said he'd always have my back—lies. My college girlfriend lied with practically every word that came out of her mouth. Even my best friend told me she wasn't *that* sick, and she fucking died, Lucy. She *died*..."

"People sugarcoat everything thinking they're doing the right thing for who? *Who* does it benefit? Certainly not the person being lied to."

He pauses again and this time I can't speak, even though I want to. I'm not

know what to say. "For some fucked-up reason I thought you were different," he says after a moment. "And in hindsight that was a ridiculous discussion because I barely even knew you. You told me all that shit about a secret

and...actually, I guess that wasn't a lie, because God, did you surprise me? If you want to know my *problem*, think back to our time together and you spilled. You'll get your answer. Now get the fuck out of my office

eat you I don't move. I can't. I stare at him in shock as my pulse races, trying to unpack everything he just admitted. I'm angry at him, *for* him. My chest pounds with rage while it shatters with heartache. He did tell me he was a liar, and I lied by omission. But he never gave me a chance to explain myself. Wes stares back at me until it becomes apparent that I'm not going to leave.

amic love "Fine, I'll go," he says, moving around me toward the door. The door creaks as he pulls it open and I panic. I have to say something. I turn around, words spill from my mouth. "I was *hurting*, Wes. You know something was wrong and you left. You *left*." My voice wavers as the door slams shut. *But is he in or out?* "I saw it written all over your face. I know your days will continue. You even *asked me* if something had happened." I know he's looking at me but I don't stop, hoping like hell that I'm not talking to an empty room but too nervous to turn around and find out. "You were right. My just had some news and I was dealing with it. Or at least, trying to deal with it. I shouldn't have lied to you, Wes. But I cared about you. A lot. If only you'd bothered to check in with me, I would have eventually told you everything. We both fucked up. Don't make working here hell just because of our past." When the last word leaves my mouth, I glance over my shoulder and see he's still standing there facing the door. One hand on the door handle, his back hunched over as his other hand clenches by his side. "Different," "Wes—"

notion "Fuck it!"

surprise He snaps out of whatever moment he was locked in and turns to face me. He abruptly storms toward me. He looks positively mad with his eyes narrowed and lips pulled into a frown, so I take a few steps back until my legs hit his desk. "Fuck, Wes. I'm—"

ying to He grabs my face in his hands and slams his lips to mine. It's
y heartreaction I was expecting, nor should it be, but I can't for the life of r
e hatesmyself from kissing him back.

. Gripping his shirt, I pull him into me, leaning back against t
oing tomahogany as Wes groans before running his tongue along the seam
lips, begging for entry. Entry I grant him easily, needing him just as m
hinges When our tongues touch, a spark runs through me, straight to my cc
WithoutI have to fight to stop myself from grinding against him. Especially w
u knewhardness presses into me. But I can't stop my moans. It's been too lon
ne doorI've been touched like this; I can't control it.

face," I With another groan, Wes runs one of his hands along my neck and i
Silencehair, clenching the strands in his fist as he angles my head to deepen t
g to anA strangled squeal escapes my mouth, and I buck into him involu
ght. I'dcausing us both to cry out. When Wes rips his mouth from mine, I'm
al withI've just broken the Lucy trance he was in, until he grabs my waist a
And ifme up, setting me on the desk. My legs fall apart instinctively and m
old yourises up to reveal my *soaked* satin panties. Wes's eyes darken, and l
ause ofhis lip as he stares between my legs, fixated on my core.

ver my It's been a million years since someone looked at me like that—lo
ests onme at all—and the last person to do it is standing right in front of me,
le. me melt.

He blinks a few times before stepping closer and taking my lips in
bruising kiss. He leans into me until I have no choice but to rest back
around,palms and wrap my legs around him, wanting him as close as phy
is eyespossible.

ntil my We kiss like that for a while, our tongues exploring, our bodies
moving in rhythm until I'm a writhing mess. *I can't take it anymore.* S

not the Wes's lip into my mouth, just like I did all those years ago, I internally stop at the effect I have on him. He grunts as though he's in pain and grinds his thighs, pressing his fingers into my skin before sliding me to the edge of the desk and sinking down on top of me. I don't even wait for him to stop moving before I grind up into him, seeking the friction I so desperately need. I moan when Wes grunts again.

More, and I'm not sure how long we stay like that before Wes repositions us when his allowing room for his hand to roam high up my dress, to the thin strap of my panties. Twisting the elastic in his fingers, he continues to grind into me. He pulls tightly on the material causing it to rub hard against my core. The pressure and motion cause so much friction that I cry out in ecstasy. My head falls back against the wood. "Fuck, Wes. Yes."

Internally, He groans with his speed increasing until the desk starts to move. He pounds against me. Changing the pace once more, he kisses his way up my chest, nipping gently at my cleavage, making my body flush. My breathing rate increases beyond what should be physically possible, and I'm ready to bite my tongue when he bites my neck. I know how much more I can take as my legs clench in anticipation. I'm so close to my release, I can feel the tingles shooting through me. I just need a moment. I look at "Oh god!"

making Wes leans forward, and the rough denim of his jeans rubs me where I want it. "Yes, that. Keep going."

another He bites my bottom lip, and the spark it causes sends me flying out of my seat.

Physically I clamp a hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming just as the office phone rings behind me.

subtly I've never seen someone move as quickly as Wes does when he's sucking away from our moment, almost ripping my panties as he goes. The

y cheersnaps back and I flinch, ready to say something until I sit up and
rips myexpression. Suddenly that little sting is the least of my problems.

e of the With both hands in his hair and his face contorted in pain, he squees
to starteyes shut, as though he’s trying to block out the world...or specifically
y need, “That shouldn’t have happened,” he rasps, and it would hurt, if I
expecting it. “I need to work. You should go.”

lightly, He moves toward the phone, but my hand shoots out to stop him. “
p of mywhisper, my heart skipping when his eyes meet mine and his gaze soft
me, as “I’m sorry. I lost my mind for a moment. It won’t happen aga
re. Thehuskily whispers as he lifts the handset of the phone, finally shutting
r as mynoise.

“This is Wes,” he states plainly, void of emotion, until he hears w
e as heother person has to say.

y down *And that is my cue to leave.*

[y heart “Again? Fuck! How did that shit get out?”

not sure I leave quietly as Wes yells down the line, and if I’m looking
close topositives from that call coming in, then at least I know he’s grumpy
little...world; it’s not just me.

exactly



I only make it a few steps away from his office when I remember I or
over the had a purpose for being there and curse. Running my hand through n
my fingers get caught in the knots and I panic to think of the state it’s
t as his state *I’m* in. Too bad. He’s the one that caused it, so he can deal.

Wes is still on a call when I enter. He’s got the phone in one han
! jumps the other massages his temple. *Ugh! That’s not a good sign.*
elastic

see his His eyes shoot up to mine and his brows furrow as I walk toward th
grabbing a pen and paper before settling into his chair so I can write
izes hisHe subtly adjusts his jeans as he watches my every move, continu
y, me. conversation. A conversation that suddenly becomes one-sided wi
wasn'tdishing out uh-huhs, yeses and nos. I don't even think he's paying th
attention.

Wes," I When I've finished listing the players we need to discuss, I put eve
ens. back in its place, pushing the chair under his desk. And without a ba
in," heglance, I leave the room, not even giving him the satisfaction of
off thegoodbye.

I, however, get a lot of satisfaction from feeling his gaze follow me
that the



When I get back to my office, Aaron is waiting for me. I startle at the
him, my face flushing red when I remember what I've just done and
for any haven't been to the bathroom to clean up. *Can he tell?*

at the He smiles apologetically and waves a piece of paper in front of me.

"Sorry, you look like you rushed to be here for this. I was just invit
to a dinner we're hosting at my place this Friday. These are the details.

"We?" I ask with a smirk.

iginally "Okay, Lola. I'm just there for support."

ny hair, I laugh out loud, probably louder than necessary because I'm a
in. Theuncomfortable with the current situation. "That's what I thought," I s

subtly pull at the end of my dress to make sure it's sitting properl
d while*didn't I check that before?* "Tell Lola I'd love to come but I'll have to

ie desk,by ear. I'm already asking a lot of my family, so it might be hard to
a note.sitter.”

ing his Aaron's smile doesn't waver. “Bring her with you. My two will
th Weskeep her company.”

em any My brows furrow as I consider it for a second. Katie's not shy, but
never met Aaron's kids. Wanting to keep an eye on her will definitely
rythingme, but at the same time, it can't hurt to get out more. “Let me think a
ckwardCan I let you know in the morning?” I smile as Aaron walks over and
wavingon the shoulder.

“Take all the time you need. I'll count you as coming, but if you ca
out. no big deal. We can rain check.”

A throat clears loudly behind us, and we jump apart for no reason
that it came out of nowhere. Aaron's subtle eye roll at whoever's beh
sight of draws my attention to Wes. The last person I'd expect.

d that I He's standing in the doorway, casually leaning his shoulder agai
frame with his arms folded across his chest. He raises an eyebrow w
catches my gaze and pushes off the woodwork, walking toward us.

ing you “You done? I need Lucy.”

” Aaron frowns. “Actually, can you wait a moment—”

“Nope, things to do.”

Wes turns to leave and I mentally curse him. When did he become
tiny bit asshole? I hate that we legitimately have things to discuss, and it need
ay, as I before training camp starts this week. “Wes, wait!” I call out before
y. Why to Aaron. “Was that all, or do you need me to come and see you wh
) play it done?”

“That was all,” he says with a smile before walking away, makin
for Wes to enter and get himself comfortable in my chair—just like I

to find a— with a cocky smile in place. That's new, and it's hot as hell. I'm not
sure how I feel about it. He's got the air of confidence, and for a brief second
I easily he crosses his ankles in front of him, I get a glimpse of the easygoing
guy I once knew, causing my heart to flutter.

But she's "Okay, hit me with it," he says, pulling me from my reminiscence
and distract should I be worried about?"

about it.

He pats me

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But it's

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and me

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such an

is to be

turning

when I'm

in the room

and did his

—with a cocky smile in place. That’s new, and it’s hot as hell. I’m not sure how I feel about it. He’s the air of confidence, and for a brief second, when he crosses his ankles in front of him, I get a glimpse of the easygoing Wes I once knew, causing my heart to flutter.

“Okay, hit me with it,” he says, pulling me from my reminiscence. “Who should I be worried about?”

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Chapter Seventeen

Lucy

Wes is somewhat civil over the next few days...
“Get the fuck out!”

...At least he is with me.

It's day two of our training camp, and lying on my table is one of our wide receivers, injured after what I'm told was a stupid mistake. And I just found out.

“Seriously, everyone get the fuck out. I need to talk to Lucy and alone.”

Trey Silvers, the player in front of me, grimaces at Wes's tone, and blame him. Wes is a big guy so can be intimidating *without* the big voice. That's an added bonus. Right now, he's taking up a large percentage of the doorway, and his posture alone demands attention. And he definitely gets it. From me anyway. I have to fight to take my eyes off him, until I notice attention is on Trey and I'm free to drink him in. He's every bit a coach in his tight team-issued tee and black sport shorts. His tone would usually catch my eyes, but it's the ball cap that gets me. It's pulled on his face, casting a slight shadow over his features, and the tips of his

hair curl out of the sides, like it's a haphazard mess underneath. I never
I found that sexy until this very moment, and suddenly I want to rip
cap and run my hands through it, gripping it in my fists, just like he did
mine. *Dammit.* I blink a few times to rid myself of *that* visual, and swallow
lump in my throat, just as Wes's focus shifts to me.

"Tell me this is an easy fix, Luce," he asks, calmer than I expected.

I smile and thank my lucky stars that I can give him the answer he
"It's a mild..."

I pause when I catch Wes glare at the word mild, letting him sweat a

"Very mild sprain. He'll be good in a week tops."

"A week!" he yells before taking a deep breath and repeating himself
reasonable decibel. "A week...okay. Is that the best we can do?"

our key "It's worst-case. Let me do my job and we'll see."

nd Wes He nods before walking out the door, cursing at someone in the
Trey's eyes flash to mine and his brows furrow. "I expected a lot
yelling," he says, despite only knowing him for a few days.

Silvers I shrug by way of answer before getting back to work. *So did I, I
did I.*

I don't When I'm all done with Trey, I switch on my music and start tidying
ooming

stage of "I Knew You Were Trouble," by Taylor Swift comes on and I
around the room, letting my mind drift with the music. When the chorus

ely has I raise my fist to my mouth and mime the lyrics like I'm Tay. Like this
tice his

football song. As one of my favorite pastimes, nothing beats losing myself
addictive tune to get the heart pumping. Except maybe boxing. Boxing

ed legs always be my favorite escape.

led low Waving my arms in the air, I close my eyes and sway my hips as the
is dark

takes control of my body. It makes me want to go out. Hit up

er knew something I haven't done in years.

off the The song ends and "Perfect," by Ed Sheeran comes on, con-
lid withslashing my vibe. Don't get me wrong, I love this song, but I c-
allow aromantic love songs at the moment. They all remind me of a love lost
I never even got to experience and all the choices I've made.

Bending over, I drop my elbows to the table and sink my face i-
wants.hands, taking a few deep breaths. My life is good. I have Katie, a
friends, the job I've always wanted. But there's also this underlying he-
a little. and worry that I fear will never go away. And I shouldn't be letting i-
me.

self at a Standing tall, I change the song, swiping through a few until
something I can handle. "Smells Like Teen Spirit," by Nirvana pops
I'm one hundred percent down for it, rocking out until my next appoi-
e halls.is due.

it more Aaron pops his head in around lunchtime, a hesitant expression on h-
"Is the kid from this morning okay? I don't need another reason for
rey. So come at me."

"He'll be fine... but why is that?" I ask, curiously.

g up. "Why is what?"

I dance "Why does Wes 'come at you'?"

us hits, He sighs, shaking his head. "Doesn't he do that to everyone? I didn-
s is myI was special."

f in an I cough out a laugh because he's right. "No, I suppose you're
ng willappears to be a trend." *But is it the real Wes or is there more to it?*

My lips morph into a frown as I process that notion. He's like a con-
e musicdifferent person from the Wes I knew before. But maybe he's not. M-
a club.just caught him on a good week.

I work on a few more players in the early afternoon, in a pre-
completely capacity, and also spend some time watching and taping the team pra-
an't do like knowing the players, seeing how they move and anticipating if w
, a love have issues. It helps me to be ready.

My day flows quickly, and while I'm exhausted by the end of it, I
into my feeling on top of the world. God, I missed this. I spent six years of
mazing training for this very thing and barely got to experience it.

partache I'm packing up for the day when there's a knock on my door. *Damn*
t get to so close. Looking up from my position on the floor, I catch Wes's eyes
ass before they quickly move to my face, and I no longer mi-
I find interruption. My cheeks flush at the intensity of his stare, and my hear-
up, and but I try to ignore it.

intment "Hi, Wes. How was your day?" I say, standing up with a smi-
noticed that the nicer I am, the more it annoys him, and I kind of get
his face out of that.

Wes to "Tiring, and stressful, and...it doesn't matter. I just wanted to chec-
Silvers. Now that he's not here, has your response changed?"

I mentally roll my eyes and sigh. "Nope. He'll be as good as ne-
week. I've got to say I'm surprised it took you this long to ask. E-
question has been burning a hole in you."

't think His lips twitch like he wants to smile but he doesn't. "He's not n-
player, Luce. I've got other things to do."

not. It "Yes, I know. You're busy busy. Are you going to Aaron's dinne-
tonight?" I say, though I shouldn't have asked. I know he's not.
pletely couldn't help myself.

Maybe I Wes glares at me and he scoffs. "We both know I'm not. Are you?"
"I'll be there, yes. It's nice to spend time with colleagues out

ventiveworking hours. You know...to bond a little.”

actice. I “I couldn’t think of anything worse.”

e might My eyes narrow as they bounce between his, trying to find any inkl
he’s joking, that he hasn’t really turned into such a bitter man. But
’m also nothing there. It’s not some ruse or act that he’s trying out. He r
my life grumpy.

Wes visibly shakes as though he’s affected by my scrutiny before
1, I washis cap off and running a hand through his hair, settling it at the back
s on my neck. His lips purse for a second and then he shakes his head again.
ind the fun *bonding*, Lucy. Hopefully, I’ll have no *need* to see you tomorrow.’
t races, I huff out a laugh, completely understanding his meaning. If o
delivery was different.

le. I’ve “Thanks, I hope I don’t see you either,” I lie...again. Even though I
t a kick it. Only this time, I’m pretty sure he thinks it’s the truth.

I’m still staring at the doorway long after he’s gone, completely
k in on thought, wondering what it would have been like to have seen Wes
these years and not have him hate me. Would something have ha
ow next between us? Something more than a quick—fully clothed—romp on h
bet that It pains me to think that I’ll never know, that in another world, maybe
could have been different.

ay only My phone rings, breaking me from my thoughts to see Logan’s
lighting up the screen. He must be here. God, I’m lucky to have suc
er party friends. I laugh off my craziness and snap myself out of my daze
. But I answering the call. “Are you out front?”

Logan laughs. “I am. I tried to call Dani, but she’s not answering. C
detour via her office and tell her to get her sweet ass down here?”

side of Logan and Dani are a total opposites attract couple. If you met the

individually, like I did, you would never expect them to work. But they

I smile at the frustration in Logan's voice and decide to leave it alone. "How's Katie?" Logan picked Katie up from my mom's so she can come with me to Aaron and Lola's tonight. I decided not to ask anyone to watch her, hoping she gets along with Aaron's twins.

"Katie's fine," Logan says, and I picture him rolling his eyes. "Why don't you come out and see for yourself? She's currently chatting up a player of his."

"Have I toss out a small laugh. "I bet she is." That girl will talk to anyone. Hopefully he's a patient kid. "I'll be right there."

"After getting Dani," Logan reminds me.

"Yes, *after* Dani," I confirm and hang up, heading toward Dani's office. She hates



lost in Ten minutes later, Dani and I exit the building with tears of laughter after all eyes. She walked in on one of the players in a state of undress and happened finished describing it in detail. It seems to be a habit of hers. is desk. "I thought they were all gone," she cries out between breaths, and things frazzled as I laugh some more.

"Mom! Mom!" Katie runs toward me and leaps into my arms as she joins us with a questioning look. I move out of earshot so Dani can repeat her story without little ears listening in, but can't stop my chuckle just before about it.

As we approach my car a truck revs beside it. A familiar one that I can't see there the entire time I've been outside and yet I'm only just seeing. So my eyes lock on Greg sitting inside his metallic-blue Ford pick-up, and I'm both

my feet completely rooted to the ground. It's not until he smirks at me alone. "My instincts kick in and I move back to Logan, placing Katie in his arms. "I'll get the car started. Can you get her in her seat?" I whisper as he looks at me curiously. Something on my face must convince him not to ask any questions because he walks toward my car without another word. As soon as I don't immediately start tickling him, none the wiser that she has anything to do with the football game concerned about, while inside, I'm on the verge of a panic attack.

Greg jumps out of his truck as I approach my driver's door, and runs to my side. "You're here. I didn't believe Bry. But there you are. In the field."

"Yep, I'm here. But I really have to go."

"Wait!" He reaches out and grabs my forearm, his fingers digging into my skin. "I'm holding you in a bruising hold. "We need to talk."

"I have nothing to say."

His eyes flash to my back seat and he smirks again. "I beg to differ."

When my eyes follow his stare, I see Dani helping Katie into her seat. Logan joins my side. I should have known he wouldn't leave me alone.

"Greg, good to see you again. Everything okay here?" he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulder with a polite smile in place.

"Everything's great," Greg says, taking in the size of Logan's truck. "I'll be off, but we'll talk soon, okay?"

Getting back in his truck, he drives away without waiting for an answer. I'm left reeling.

"What—"

"Thanks, Logan," I say, cutting him off before stepping out of his truck. "I know he has questions, but I don't have any answers right now. "We need to go so we're not late." I need the distraction.

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Logan
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Chapter Eighteen

Wes

“**N**o, run it again!” I yell before blowing my whistle and re myself. “Again!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Silvers hobble out of the tunnel leaving Lucy’s office with a frown still in place. *Shit!* Is it worse than I said? I could ask him directly, but something tells me he’ll lie. Inst soon as I get a small window, I rush off to Lucy’s room, needing to know the truth. A week I can handle, a month would be bad, but not the end of the world. Anything more and we’re fucked. With a new quarterback and our best receivers.

Music plays as I round the corner to Lucy’s office. Her door’s ajar, I peek through the opening instead of making my presence known. The sight is breathtaking.

She’s dancing to some Taylor Swift song and she’s absolutely stunning. I’m struck motionless, mesmerized by the way her body moves with the music. Hypnotized by the sway of her hips, the curve of her body, and the way she runs her hands through her hair, giving me flashbacks of when I did the

With her lips pulled into a smile, she's playful, happy, and *free*. A part of Lucy I wish I'd seen more of.

Leaning against the doorframe, I watch like a creep until the song ends. "Perfect," by Ed Sheeran comes on next. Lucy freezes, snapping me out of my daze, as her head falls into her hands on the table, giving me the view of her ass. An ass I now desperately want to slide between. My muscles tighten, and I have to clench my fists to stop myself from moving toward and doing just that. *This fucking woman*. What I wouldn't give to have her naked again, spread out before me, begging me to take her. *Fuck!*

Scanning the halls, I quickly adjust myself in my shorts before I move back in the room, trying to focus on something else, anything else. It's pointless. I'm drawn to her in more ways than I'd like to admit. I'm fucking addicted. Have been since the first time our lips touched. Always, my eyes seek her out, but this time when I see her, I really see her and I'm no longer worried about *my* feelings. She's not hunched over taking her breath like I first thought. She's taking deep breaths and quivering with an exhale, clearly lost in thought. I want to go to her. I want to engulf her arms and protect her from the world. But I don't. I'd rather not get caught in another emotional roller coaster that comes with caring for Lucy McCallister or Lucy Kelly as it may be.

I'm about to sneak away when she suddenly stands tall and darts across the room, stopping the song in its tracks. The opening notes of a few more songs begin but she skips them all until she finds "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana and visibly relaxes before starting to dance once more.

I release a held breath, push off the door, and walk away, suspecting she needs this moment to herself. I'll come back after to check on Silvers.

version The rest of the day runs relatively smoothly. The boys start to groove, and I find myself yelling less. *Slightly less.* Some of the ynds andreceivers even step up in Silvers's absence, obviously wanting to e out ofthemselves while he's out. And while that's somewhat of a relief, I st perfecthim to be game ready as soon as possible if we have any chance of w / shortsHe's one of our best.

ard her I'm on my way to my truck after departing Lucy's office for the thi ave hertoday and once again, I didn't want to leave. Especially knowing s going to Aaron's house. I don't know why, but that guy rubs me the ry gazeway. He's too happy and... *Ah shit!* I'm fucking jealous. It's got not lse, butdo with Aaron at all. I'm jealous because that jerk-off and Lucy have nit. I'meazy relationship without a complicated past, while I flip between hat nd likeand wanting to pull her into a goddam hug, forgetting everything see herhappened. Something I'm actually trying to work through.

to catch I'm almost to my truck door, pissed off at the realization I've just c g on thewhen I feel a small tug on the end of my shirt. Turning around, I find t r in myintruder who busted into my office last week. *Katie.*

ught up "Remember me?" she asks with an expectant grin. She's all dresseed fathers,though she's heading to a party, and I've gotta say, she's cute. H strawberry blonde hair falls in ringlets over her shoulder, and she's gri ross thelittle handbag that hangs across her body. She almost looks familia e songscan't place it.

rit," by I squat down until we're eye level and nod. "Katie, right? How forget you and your beautiful name?"

ing she Katie beams up at me, and I can't stop my return smile. *Smile. Fuck was the last time that happened?*

"My mom named me after a lovely lady with a big heart." Katie si

t into a last part, clearly proud of her moniker. My heart clenches and I swallow a lump in my throat as she smiles brightly. This little girl has no idea how much she's affecting me.

will need "My grandmother's name was Katie," I admit. "And she's *exactly* like the woman you're describing."

Katie bounces on her toes in excitement, as a man on the phone behind me—presumably her dad—gives me a funny look. Not that I blame him for the way his daughter *is* talking to a stranger.

is wrong I'm distracted by his glare, so it takes me a moment to process Katie's question, but when I do, my heart almost breaks. "Can I meet her? Please." Such a *shit!* A tight feeling swarms my chest as a shiver runs through me. I'm about to answer, or at least I'm about to change the subject, when Katie's dad calls out. "Katie, come on. We've got to meet your mom near the door."

Her smile widens and she runs toward him, jumping into his arms. I come to, throwing me a quick wave over her shoulder.

the little Slowly lifting myself from the dirt, I head to my truck and slide into the driver's seat while trying hard not to let my feelings take over. My head falls back against the seat and I close my eyes with a sigh. I can't think of a single person who would ever have introduced Katie to my gran. I don't even know how it happened, but it would be nice to think that I could.

r, but I



could I Despite telling Lucy that I hoped not to see her the next day, it's now the next day and I'm purposely seeking her out. For no reason. It's eight fifteen, *when* morning, so it's unlikely she'll have any new information for me, but

ings the

allow alay awake for hours last night with visions of her running through my
ea howknow I won't be able to concentrate unless I stop by. So here I am.

Rapping my knuckles against her door, I wait approximately two s
ike youbefore pushing it open, "Lucy, I just..." I trail off when I find her l
daze. She's staring out the window, completely in her head, having n
iind herheard my knock. It would probably be comical, if her face wasn't pul
n sincea grimace and her eyes weren't wide with panic.

"Lucy, what's wrong?" I move into the room without waiting for
e's nextanswer and join her side. It's not until I lightly touch her arm that she f
ase." and jumps away from me, bringing me back to when we first got to
ne. I'meach other.

ie's dad "Fuck, sorry. I just wanted to see if you were okay?"

." Lucy's brows furrow and she frowns. Her gaze is still unfocused
before rubs her arms like she's cold, only it's really fucking warm today. Her
state is actually scary, especially after having to deal with Grayson for
e in, allfew days.

to the "Lucy. What's going on?"

reason I Her office phone rings and she jumps again, the only difference bei
ier. Butthis time she jumps toward me, not away, tucking herself into my che
her arms locked tight around her body. A feeling of rage hits me
scared. She's fucking scared. But of who? "Lucy, I want to help, but I
know what's wrong."

he next Her face snaps to mine and her eyes widen before she steps away, s
n in the her head as she huffs out a laugh, her face flushing a light shade c
since I "God, sorry. I had a late night at Aaron's and I'm tired. I obviously dr
much. Maybe I'm still drunk." Her shoulders lift in a shrug as my bro
together. She doesn't look hungover or drunk. Tired, maybe, but her e

mind, I clear and she looks pretty well put together. Still, I'm not about to question her on it and cause further embarrassment, so I nod and accept her seconds. That being said, I'm not leaving until I know she's okay.

lost in a Her phone rings again, and she glares at it for a second before making not even way over. Her hand shakes as she picks up the receiver, and my led into tightens with worry.

“Lucy speaking.”

her to The person on the line responds and Lucy lets out a sigh of relief. Her flinch sends her demeanor changing. “Hi Dyl, you're up early. To what do I come to know pleasure?”

Her brother. *Thank fuck.* A wave of tension leaves my body as I was relax. I'd heard Dylan had been traded to San Francisco after I left. I was as she to know she has someone nearby who cares for her. It definitely puts my current mind at ease.

the last They chat back and forth for a minute, and by the end, Lucy's call is still reluctant to leave, but I feel a little bit better than I did before.

After hanging up the phone, Lucy turns my way. Her eyes flash with something when she sees I'm still standing by the window. “Oh, Wes, I'm sorry, I probably wanted me for something, right? Is it one of the players?”

. She's “No, well, yes...no.” Lucy frowns in confusion, understandably needing to have not come up with an excuse for being here yet and now I don't even know what it was.

shaking “The players are fine. At least, they were when I left them yesterday. I'm still here because you looked a little spooked when I first came in.”

thank too She starts shaking her head before I've even finished speaking and I pull to speak herself. “Like I said, I'm just a bit off after a late night. But my eyes are

question you for the concern. You've got things to do, I'm sure. No need to worry about an excuse. good."

I bite back a groan because she's clearly lying, despite knowing how she's feeling. I fucking hate it. And now, I'm going to spend my day fixated on figuring out who she's trying to protect with her bullshit. Is it me? Is it her? Or is it someone else involved? Once again, I don't move, causing Lucy to nervously giggle. Except I don't think she realizes it comes across as nervous. "I'm fine. I promise. Go, do your thing. We can talk later if you need to." "Does that mean she needs to?"

I nod as I make my way to her door, and I'm about to turn back when Aaron arrives, moving around me to get in. "Good morning. Don't tell me you've had more injuries already?" he says with a look of concern. "Nope, Wes was just checking in for an update," Lucy says, smiling but not quite meeting his eyes. *Fuck, is it him?* I take a step toward him. My fist clenched by my side but freeze when Lucy gets my attention, subtly shaking her head. *It's not him.* I relax my hands and nod in shock before walking away.

While it's a relief to know that Aaron's not the cause, my heart is still racing knowing that there is someone out there that's hurting her.

And I want to burn the world down to find out who.

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you for the concern. You've got things to do, I'm sure. No need to worry. I'm good."

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Does that mean she needs to?

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"Nope, Wes was just checking in for an update," Lucy says, smiling at him but not quite meeting his eyes. *Fuck, is it him?* I take a step toward him with my fist clenched by my side but freeze when Lucy gets my attention, ever so subtly shaking her head. *It's not him.* I relax my hands and nod in return before walking away.

While it's a relief to know that Aaron's not the cause, my heart aches knowing that there *is* someone out there that's hurting her.

And I want to burn the world down to find out who.

Chapter Nineteen

Lucy

Wes walks out the door and I almost double over. Since the moment he snapped out of my thoughts and realized he was in the room, I've been on edge. The tension is wound so tight, I'm on tenterhooks waiting for it to snap. I'm not stupid, I could see that he'd figured something had happened, so when he took a step toward Aaron, fist rearing for action, I had to stop him. I had to admit he was right, even though I desperately wanted him to believe everything was okay.

My nod seemed to work, and thankfully, Aaron is none the wiser. He picks up a book on my desk, no doubt waiting until he knows Wes is out of earshot before he speaks.

"I think you can guess why I'm here," he says when the coast is clear. I offer him one word, curious to see how much he knows. "Lola."

"She's worried as hell but won't tell me why."

Nothing then. That's good.

"Tell her I'm fine. Actually you don't need to. I'll call and tell her. Honestly, I'm okay. It was silly. I'm fine."

Aaron's brows furrow and his lips pull into a line before he releases and speaks. "I know I'm a guy and we're not supposed to know these but Lola's clued me in on the fact that *fine* does not actually mean *fine*

I roll my eyes and laugh, though it's fake. "I promise, I'm good. No *good.*"

I'm actually neither. I'm not *fine* at all and I'm definitely not *good* can't think about that until Aaron walks away. He eyes me suspicious moment and then shrugs. "Good enough for me. I did as asked. I checked If you want to talk about it, please call Lola."

oment I I exhale quietly and a sense of relief takes over. "Thank you. I will."
m with Aaron departs, and I practically fall in a heap. It's nice to have
erhooks checking up on me, and since Lola knows a little about my past with
red out she's probably one of the better people to talk to. But I spent a long
ady for trying to move on from what happened. It took all that I had to bury n
ough I The last thing I want to do is talk about it. I'm secretly hoping it will a
over, but as I think about last night, I'm not so sure that it will.

r as he I should have known that Brighton would tell Greg about me. I
s out of have prepared myself for that. But I didn't. And seeing him there put
strange mood for the rest of the night. So instead of having fun at the
rr. party, I wanted to curl up and disappear. I couldn't shake the weakness
all over again, the pain radiating through my chest. From. One. Look.
all it took to send my world crashing down. I knew we couldn't hide t
and yet I did nothing to prepare for it. This is all my fault.

myself.



as them My day's busier than yesterday, so when Dani stops by on her way to work, I already have a player with me, giving me an excuse not to talk to her. "I can't guarantee she's checking up on me too. As soon as I saw Katie secure the car seat last night, I drove away, leaving Dani and Logan staring at me."

Then I refused to discuss it at the party. So of course she's here now.

1. But I And she's not the only one worried about me. Wes happens to wander by for a several times throughout the day but never once comes in. I start to eeked in, though, and every time I hear word that they're taking a break on the wait for him to appear.

' By the end of the day, I'm once again wrecked and ready to go home. I feel worse than I've felt in a long time, but I guess emotional exertion with Greg, that to you. The look in Greg's eyes when he grabbed me hasn't left my mind for even a second. And as I pack up my things to leave, the panic grows past dark out, and most of my colleagues would have left for the day. Dani will blow off hours ago for an event, and even Aaron's long gone.

Taking a deep breath, I open the office door and my heart leaps as I should my hand flying to my mouth. I'm not alone. Wes leans against the door in a opposite my room, with his phone in hand and his ankles crossed in a dinner him.

ss I felt He looks up from his typing when he hears me and pockets his keys. That's before pushing off the wall, spinning his keys around his finger. "Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

With that, he sets off toward the parking lot, only pausing once to fall into step beside him.

We walk silently, side by side, with our hands occasionally brushing. Neither of us draws attention to it. A warmth fills me as my heart beats in my chest. Wes is walking me to my car. The guy who just last

ay in, I wanted me gone, *figuratively*, is now my protector. And that means I
r. I can't come than he'll ever know.

d in her When we reach my door, he stays close, waiting for me to get
the car before taking a step back. I open my mouth to thank him, but he sha

head like it's no big deal and offers me a weak smile. "Goodnight, Lu
ler past says as he backs away, only turning around after I've started my ca
xpect it *about mixed signals*.

field, I I don't want to leave. I want to get out of the car and talk to h
instead, I drive away with a thankful smile on my face.

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The journey home is uneventful, but when I pull into my driveaway,
and run my hands down my face. Summer's waiting patiently
doorstep, with her hands in her lap, undoubtedly ready to fire ques
me. She looks beautiful with her radiant pregnancy glow and tiny b
definitely suits her.

My lips pull into a soft grin as she looks my way and stands. I sh
thankful that she's the one greeting me instead of Dylan, but either
know I'm going to have to spill.

Katie's at Mom's again today. She's having dinner there and
watching a movie before Mom drops her home. A calculated move
part. I wasn't sure what today would bring, and didn't want to risk
seeing me if I came home an emotional mess. Which I would have, if

Wes.

Taking a deep breath, I step out of the car and walk straight into Su
open arms. She hugs me tightly, rocking me back and forth, as I an

more to what words are about to come from her mouth.

“Heads up, your brother and Joel are inside.”

seated, *That was definitely not it.*

likes his I groan again, and bang my head on her shoulder a few times
icy,” he pulling away.

er. *Talk* “Guess we should get this over with.” I sigh.

Summer grabs my arm as I move, pulling me back toward her. “You
im, but have to tell them anything. Logan called me and said he was worried
you after something happened before the dinner party. Unfortunately
on speaker in the car, with both of the boys there. I’m sorry. All he said
that Greg showed up, so naturally we’re worried about you.”

I groan My shoulders drop and I blow out a breath. “I probably should have
on my you all the full story,” *or most of it*, “a long time ago. I’m sorry.”

tions at “You know we’re here for you, Lucy. And while I think I always
ump. It there was more to it, none of us would ever push you to share more than
want to.”

ould be When I’d first found out about Katie, I told everyone that Greg
way, I threatened me verbally, but nothing more. That was my reason for wanting
join a self-defense class too. They all seemed to buy my lie so easily
they’re liking Greg to begin with, so I let it go and tried to move on.

on my I’m not sure what to say to them now as I walk inside, but I have
k Katie something. I’m not sure I can avoid it anymore. Especially if he’s back
not for life.



Summer’s
anticipate

Dropping onto the couch, I press the heel of my hand to my eyes and try not to cry as I think about what went down. Taking a deep breath, I think about my friends what happened.

before “I saw Greg last night. At work.”

“Motherfucker,” Joel says from beside me, making me giggle even though it’s not funny.

You don’t know. Somehow I’d managed to walk out of our building last night without aboutseeing a truck that would have once gained all my attention. The very day, I was that Katie was conceived in. I should have seen it the second I stepped out into the night. Bile rises in my throat just thinking about it again now.

I’ve become so complacent lately.

I’ve told you “Seeing him was so unexpected that I kind of froze and probably had a little rash.”

She knew “What did the fucker do? Did he say anything?” Dylan practically demands to know like I’m holding back.

“Nothing happened. He just said hello,” I lie. I can still feel the burr of Greg had his fingers wrapped around my arm, and my heart still pounds from that meeting to encounter.

Why, never “So why is Logan worried?”

“Probably because I got nervous and practically threw Katie at him. I wanted to say in the hope Greg would think she was Logan’s daughter.”

It’s back in my mind “Why don’t I believe you?” Dylan asks as Summer and Joel look at the two of us.

I pause, not knowing how much to tell them about the past. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Greg. He shouldn’t still hold this power over me. But I’d love to say I’m over it—that I’ve moved on, that I’m stronger and more confident now—after last night, I’m not so sure. Greg knows I’m hiding

ry hardknows where I work. And I'm ninety percent sure he's going to u
tell myinformation to force me to talk to him. I should tell them that but it
show them my arm.

Dylan jumps up immediately. "I'm going to fucking kill him. I don'
thoughfuck what happens. He's a dead man walking." He doesn't even let
into any detail; the bruise is enough. Summer grabs his hand and pu
withoutback onto the couch, trying to calm him down as I look to Joel for hel
y truckto find his eyes just as murderous.

ped out I give him a soft smile but he shakes his head. "I have to agree with
v. Howon this one, Luce," he says with a huff.

"You're being stupid. Both of you," Summer says as she rolls he
acted a"Neither of you are going anywhere near him. You should be focus
Lucy, not that fucker."

growls, All eyes flash to Summer's when the word fucker leaves her mou
never swears. Looking at her stomach, she grimaces and pats her baby
1 where"Sorry, little man, but it was necessary."

om the Dylan visibly softens, and a small smile touches Joel's lips. When n
locks with Summer's, she gives me a sympathetic grin and winks, let
know she has my back when it comes to the guys.

Maybe I knew they'd react this way, despite neither of them being fight
why I never told them what really happened back then. But I do now
etweenmost of it anyway, except about the night Katie was conceived. Th

something I'm prepared to talk to anyone about. But I tell them about t
n yearsGreg treated me before we broke up, and that he kept contacting me
it whilemet Wes, and when I finally get to finish my story, which actually end
d morebeginning, Dylan stares at me in shock. "You knew Wes befo
ere. Heconference?" he asks, trying to get his head around everything.

use that “Not really, no. But I *had* kissed him, so I guess you could say we’re not just strangers.”

Joel huffs out a laugh as Summer sighs. “I really wish things had worked out with him, but I understand why you left without pursuing it.”

“You know my thoughts on that,” Joel adds. “But if I’d known the whole story, I probably would have been easier on you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was scared and I don’t know, maybe ashamed.”

That gets Dylan raging again. “Ashamed! Lucy, that fucker... He hurt me and I...” his voice cracks as he trails off, rubbing his hands into his eyes.

My own eyes fill as I rush toward him, pulling him into my arms. “God, Lucy, I’m sorry. So sorry I wasn’t there,” he whispers into my hair.

“What can we do now?”

“There’s nothing we can do. We just have to hope he doesn’t find out about Katie.”

“But he saw her last night?” Summer asks, her face white with panic. “He did, but it was from a distance, and then she was with Logan. I’m only hoping he doesn’t think more of it.”

“We won’t let anything happen to either of you, Luce. You know that, right?” Dylan says, making sure to lock his eyes with mine so I really believe him. “Well, I nod because it’s true. I have a lot of people looking out for me; I know they’ll always feel safe. And yet, why am I surrounded by so much unease?”

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“Not really, no. But I *had* kissed him, so I guess you could say we weren’t strangers.”

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“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was scared and I don’t know, maybe a little ashamed.”

That gets Dylan raging again. “Ashamed! Lucy, that fucker... He hurt you and I...” his voice cracks as he trails off, rubbing his hands into his eyes to stop the tears. My own eyes fill as I rush toward him, pulling him into a hug.

“God, Lucy, I’m sorry. So sorry I wasn’t there,” he whispers into my neck, his voice full of emotion. “What can we do now?”

“There’s nothing we can do. We just have to hope he doesn’t find out about Katie.”

“But he saw her last night?” Summer asks, her face white with panic.

“He did, but it was from a distance, and then she was with Logan. I can only hope he doesn’t think more of it.”

“We won’t let anything happen to either of you, Luce. You know that, right?” Dylan says, making sure to lock his eyes with mine so I really listen.

I nod because it’s true. I have a lot of people looking out for me; I should always feel safe. And yet, why am I surrounded by so much unease?

Chapter Twenty

Wes

Getting my legs to work and walk away from Lucy, when I was convinced something was wrong, had been fucking hard. Just like I had been hard in the parking garage almost five years ago. I'd know that something was wrong, and yet, I'd let my stupid pride stop me from calling her and checking in, even though I thought about her all the time. I categorized her as a liar, just like everyone else in my life, and never gave her a chance to explain. Not that she ever tried.

But now...*now* it's different. And knowing I'm not going to see her on Monday is eating me alive. I think it's safe to say I'm not over her. Yet I continually tried to tell myself she's out of my head, like she's out of my mind, but my fierce need to protect her would suggest otherwise. Seeing her with fear in her eyes, took me straight back to that day in the pool when she flinched away from me and to the subsequent times following that. Several nights were spent contemplating why she'd reacted that way, and no matter how many times I wanted to find another reason, I always came back to the same one—someone had physically abused her, and it had definitely happened recently...back then. So now, I'm left wondering if this is something new

that *someone* is back in her life. Either answer kills me, making me keep her close to chase the fears away. A clear contradiction to how I felt about her last week.

I'm still angry. Angry at the way things ended between us. Angry that she's back. But a little part of me is coming around to the fact that I'm partially to blame. After all, I didn't even *try* to contact her after she went away. I've thought about her often since that day. It's safe to say she's the only one that ever made her way into my soul. And I barely knew her because while I hated her for lying, I still fucking cared. Like now. What

I was
t like it
care?

When I'm still wide awake at four a.m., with no sign that sleep will come, I throw on my workout gear and run to the local gym. Lately I've been working out at the stadium whenever I have time and giving myself some time off, but today it's necessary. Not only to wear me out enough to sleep, but to burn this weird energy I have running through me—before I use it on *something*, or rather, *someone* else.

My quads burn as I push against the leg press for my third set. I need to do this more often or my muscles are going to disintegrate. *Fast*. Especially with all the extra junk I've been putting into my body since I was injured. What the hell is *anyone* going to do about it?

"Pump up the Jam," by Technotronic fills the room as I look around. There are only a few people working out at this hour on a Sunday, so I'm the only one left alone. But when the clock ticks over to six a.m. it's a different story.

"No way! Johnson's at my gym." A kid, probably around nineteen, approaches while I'm cooling down. He has long, dark hair pulled up in a man bun and a thick gold chain around his neck, but that's not what

want to stop to pay attention. It's the fact that he's wearing a jersey with my name on it. To the gym. At six a.m. on a Sunday. *Am I being punked?* My eyes dart around the space but I can't see any cameras. Not that I'm trying to be reassuring. This can't be real.

may be "I can't believe you're here, man. Look what I'm wearing."

walking He spins around to show me his back, not realizing he's standing in front of a mirror. I'm about to respond with some kind of dismissal when he says, "There we go."

for years "Is it really you?" he whispers in awe, and that's enough to change my mood. I bark out an incredulous laugh, shaking my head. These are the moments that make everything worth it. The excitement in his eyes. The passion I once used to love this. When did I become so bitter about it? About everything? A trainer walks between us, breaking my thoughts as he calls out to the receptionist.

, but to "Can you put Lucy K down for a boxing sesh at two thirty?"

he says to me *That gets my attention.*

"Done. You gonna finally ask her out this time?"

and to do *What?* A feeling of unease takes over as my chest tightens. *Fuck it.* I'm with one of the reasons I'm so bitter. It all started with Lucy, and yet not with her. *Pizza,* shooting daggers at some guy who may or may not want to ask her out.

"Man, that fall. I've never seen anything like it. I prayed you'd get it. There we go. We could use you this season," my number one fan continues, completely unaware of my inner turmoil. I almost tell him to shut up and go home. I hear the guy's response, but I don't. Instead, I plaster on a fake smile and give him the chat he so clearly wants—and deserves since he's still wearing my jersey.

has me *Looks like I'll be back this afternoon.*

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At two twenty I sit in my truck like a stalker, suddenly wondering what hell I'm doing. How did I go from wanting Luce out of my sight, creeping on her from inside my truck? A truck that she'll easily be able to recognize.

Nope. I'm leaving.

Aggressively throwing the gears into reverse, I raise my hand to touch the passenger seat just as someone knocks on my window, scarcer fucking life out of me. Slamming on the brake, unnecessarily, my hands out to brace myself as though I'm expecting an impact. *What the fuck* about fight response. I side eye my window and groan when I see her standing there with a big smile on her face, completely different from the woman I watched drive away yesterday.

Still facing forward, I roll down the window and sigh.

"Lucy."

"Whatcha doin'?" She laughs.

"Practicing in case I'm ever in a collision," I say as I turn to finally face her.

"I got that part, but what are you doing *here*?"

"A workout. What else?" I'm blunt but it's better than her discovery that I was stalking her.

"Finished one or about to go in?"

Now's my chance to leave. Tell her I'm finished and drive away with my dignity intact.

"About to go in." *Dammit.*

Lucy bites her lip and stares off into space before her eyes light up with a smile. “How’d you like to be my punching bag today, Wes?”

That’s exactly why I’m here. “Couldn’t think of anything worse.”

What the
to now
able to



She’s kicking my ass. Literally. Okay, not literally because it’s boxing that’s an illegal move but *technique* wise, she’s beating the shit out of me back while Mr. *I might ask her out* flirts at every opportunity.

“Hold up. I need five,” I say reluctantly as I hunch over with a hand on my forehead. While I will say there are moments where I’m going easy on her, most of the time it’s just pain is due to her talent. It didn’t take long to realize that the girl who accidentally punched me in the arm five years ago now has some skills. The girl serious skills.

“I’ve gotta say it’s an honor to have you in my ring, man,” the guy says, moving to Lucy’s side. “But you really suck.” I shoot him an annoyed look but he ignores me, instead focusing on Lucy and adding, “Like really suck. Just to drive his point home. He’s bullshitting of course. I’m not that good. I just lack the finesse that Lucy has. I take more of a haphazard approach. I don’t argue though.”

“I get it, thanks,” I say with a fake smile. “I never had much need for boxing during my NFL career. Funny that.”

Lucy and the douche-face laugh together as I groan, straightening up to go again. “Come on. Let’s do this.” I bounce from foot to foot like I see them do on TV and wink at Lucy when she smiles. Pulling her arms up to her face, she hides a blush behind her hands.

with agloves, making my pulse spike. Take that, douche, you're not getting on my watch.

As if reading my thoughts, he wraps his arm around Lucy's shoulder and her face scrunches, visibly uncomfortable. Not that the dick notices. "I got this," he says, awarding him a scowl from me as I open my mouth to argue. Lucy shakes her head again, just like she did with Aaron, and I wince. Douchebag continues on.

"Alright, you two. Try again. Remember we're only sparring. You little murderous there, Johnson."

I'm sure he's not wrong considering what I want to do to him, a girl who about to show him *exactly* how well I can throw a punch when Lucy lands me one in the left shoulder.

"The fuck, Luce. I wasn't ready."

She bites her bottom lip with a flirtatious grin and peers at me all do and glare, "Oops, my bad." *Is she playing this up for dickwad?* I don't even care to suck," is.

I try to bite back a smirk, but fail. She looks so fucking sexy trying to roach. I all innocent, it makes me want to throw her over my shoulder and spank. *Fuck!* Now is not the time for that thought.

"You ready this time, Wes?" Lucy asks, distracting me from inappropriate thoughts.

"I'm ready."

We spar for another ten minutes with Lucy's fists connecting side at Lucy compared to my four, all of which were hesitant as opposed to her mind her punches.

Taking our time walking toward the changing rooms, Lucy laughs at one of the numerous moves I pulled to hide from her swing. I silently

the girls she animatedly recalls my flinch in great detail, enjoying the way he sparkle while her lips pull into a grin and the way her hand grips my fingers and stays there as she talks. She's the most carefree I've seen her since you've started at Heartwood U, and it makes my heart swell. Especially after I witnessed yesterday.

retreat. What I wouldn't give to see her like this every day, even those days when she's gone.

I look at her. She releases her hold on me as we reach the doors, but when she steps away, my hand shoots out instinctively, grabbing her wrist to pull her toward me. She yelps in surprise but allows it to happen. And when my lips are pressed against her, my spare hand sinks into her hair, guiding her head toward mine. Lucy sighs as I groan into her mouth while connecting my fingers. It all happens in an instant, moving from soft to heated so quickly I couldn't stop it if I tried, and the next thing I know, I'm moving us through the men's changing rooms and into a shower stall, never once breaking a kiss.

g to act Blindly flipping the lock on the door behind us, I spin around until my back is to the wall and take a step toward her. But she's having none of it. She shoves at my chest until I break away and then drops to her knees on my tiled floor.

Nope, no. That's not happening. I move to lift her up, but she wriggles out of my grip and yanks down my athletic shorts and compression pants several times, watching my length spring free. I close my eyes and groan, powerless to stop her in her pursuit and tossing her a towel. "If you insist on staying down there, at least make yourself comfortable," I grumble quietly as I watch her about the one hurting.

Lucy peers up at me through her lashes, smiling as she lifts her knee

er eyesslides the towel beneath them. The look alone has me twitching
y biceps shouldn't. I shouldn't want this again. But fuck, I do.

nce she Leaning forward, she runs her tongue along the ridge of my length
what I across the tip before sucking me into her mouth without warning. I bite

on my knuckles to stop myself from grunting, not really sure if w
s I wish company. And thank God I do, because in the next second I'm hitting

back of her throat at the same time the door swings open and some man
takes a talking as they enter. I groan around my fist, and it's not at all quiet

pull her can't stop it. When I try to pull out, assuming we'll stop now that
n she's obviously not alone, Lucy grips my ass and locks me in place with a

lips to grin on her face. *Who the fuck is this girl?*

ers with She deep-throats me again, and I can't hold back a curse, glaring c
ickly, I her to knock it off. Making eye contact is the wrong move because I

ough to explode like a teenager at the visual. *Almost.* Her playful expression is
ing there replaced by so much heat and desire, my balls tighten as I lock the

away in my memory bank, for obvious reasons. *She's enjoying this.*

Lucy's Losing my mind, I pump into her over and over, watching as she cl
ie of it. eyes and moans before digging her nails into my ass. *And I'm fuck*

s on the been a while, and the fact we could get caught is surprisingly thrilling
going to..." I trail off my whispered words—she gets the point—and v

gles outh to pull off. But she doesn't. She sucks harder with her hand also p
s in on me, until I see stars and lose all control.

before When I come back down to earth, Lucy stands and wipes her mouth
n being sleeve before picking the towel up off the floor. She throws it back
s if I'm bag and leans forward to whisper in my ear. "And they say chivalry is

I shake my head as the smallest smile appears on my lips, making
es, and eyes light up in happiness.

and it The bathroom is now eerily quiet, and I have no idea when that happened
too caught up in my release.

Lucy reaches for the lock but I stop her, my brows furrowed in quiet
Does she think we're done here? Not a chance.

She laughs silently as I reach for her pants, shaking her head before
ing theup to my ear once more. "Now we're even," she whispers. "Thanks
en startworkout session."

With that she's gone. And I'm left wondering who the hell that was
t we're what the fuck just happened.

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Lucy's

The bathroom is now eerily quiet, and I have no idea when that happened, too caught up in my release.

Lucy reaches for the lock but I stop her, my brows furrowed in question. *Does she think we're done here? Not a chance.*

She laughs silently as I reach for her pants, shaking her head before lifting up to my ear once more. "Now we're even," she whispers. "Thanks for the workout session."

With that she's gone. And I'm left wondering who the hell that was and what the fuck just happened.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Lucy

As soon as I get to my car I take a deep breath and squeeze r together. I lost my mind in there, completely reverting back to *need to please*” version of Lucy. The version I had no idea existed until I was pregnant and reflecting on my relationship with Greg.

The only difference between then and now is that this time I *enjoyed*

Where I’d usually be counting down the seconds and praying my boyfriends would quickly find their release, with Wes, I got off on thinking about him falling apart. He makes me feel powerful. Like I’m one hundred percent in control. And I was. He was at my mercy. And when he saw the end... *my heart*.

So, why did I run? I can only guess it’s because of my fear that it would come *crashing* down.

I still haven’t moved from my spot in the parking lot several minutes when my phone vibrates with a text from an unknown number. My heart spikes, higher than it already is, and this time it’s not a good thing.

Holding my breath, I unlock the screen, preparing for it to be Greg.

Unknown: You’re killing me, Luce. Why do I still want you so f

badly?

My heart stops. While that could easily be Greg, I know deep down it isn't, and my lips automatically form a smile. I take a chance, and hope I'm right.

Lucy: I don't think you are allowed to look up staff phone numbers for personal use

Unknown: How do you know I haven't kept it all these years

my legs *Because I changed it.*

to the "

til I was **Lucy: I just know**

Quickly saving the contact to my phone, I drive out of the lot, despite the rain. I take a shower since I never took one at the gym. I'm more sweaty than usual, wearing a three-quarter sleeved top to hide my bruises. But when I get home to see three more messages, I abandon that idea.

hundred

niled at **Wes: Always so smart**

will all **Wes: Why'd you run? You can't tell me it shouldn't have happened**

Wes: Because I'm finally thinking it should

es later

My pulse I drop onto the couch, sweaty clothes and all, and slowly release a breath I don't know what to make of that. Have I thought about a second chance with Wes over the years? Yes. But it was a dream. Something that was never going to happen. I have Katie now. She's my priority, and I'm not sure I'm

stuck

ready to start dating, or whatever he wants. I'm not sure I'll ever be
know he's impossible to stay away from. And if anyone is going to m
n that it
pe that
take a chance on a relationship, it's Wes.



mbers Katie arrives home from her swimming lesson with Dylan as I'm
getting out of the shower. *Perfect timing.* He always took her swi
when he came to visit and asked if he could take her to her lessons w
and Summer moved back. At least until the season starts, although ob
we'll have to change her day so we can go to his games.

"Hi, Sweetie. How was swimming?" I ask, bending down for a hug
runs into my arms before looking over her shoulder at Dylan.

rate for
al from
I arrive
"Uncle Dyl had to dive in."

What? My eyes flash to his as he grimaces. "They had a new ins
She hadn't really worked with three- and four-year-olds before, I've
been told. But she kind of ran this activity that had the kids holding
noodle to float, with Katie in the middle. And it sank. Four kids
noodle. Is she insane? I'm so..." His gaze moves to Katie's when he
"We can talk about it after."

ned... My eyes flit over Katie's entire body, checking she's okay, but sinc
beaming up at Dylan like he's a hero, with a big smile on her face, I l
held breath as I nod.

sigh. I Though, I can see Dylan's really worked up about it. Understand
ce with would have been murderous if I'd been there. I'm a little murderou
s never now. But she's okay. The swim school, on the other hand, is in for a
e if I'm lashing.

2. But I “You’re okay, right, bug?” Dylan says, kneeling in front of her.

ake me She nods and finally turns back to face me. “I went under the Mom.”

That doesn’t really answer Dyl’s question and freaks me out even m

“Did you cough?” I ask, trying to remain calm.

finally “Yes, Uncle Dyl made sure I did.” *That’s good.*

imming “And did you keep swimming or get out?”

hen he She’s already shaking her head before I finish asking the questio

viously make a note to ask Dylan whose call that was. Is she going to be scare water? Or was it Dylan that kept her out?

3. Katie “How about we go for ice cream?” I ask, dropping the topic. *For no*

“Yeah!” Katie cheers, jumping up and down at my offer of a treat.

a strict mom, but I try to limit the sweets. It’s how Dylan and I were ra

tructor. I’ve kind of just continued it.

e since Katie’s scare though...definitely calls for ice cream. I just wish

a pool how worried I should actually be.

on one Summer arrives not long after Dylan and Katie, and we spe

pauses. afternoon and evening together. After a long wind down period, I fin

Katie to sleep and walk back into the kitchen to find Dylan’s head

ie she’s hands and Summerstroking his back with a concerned expression.

et out a “happened?” she mouths when she sees me.

“Dylan?”

lably. I He peers up at me with a look of complete exhaustion. Like it’

is right everything he has to keep himself together until now.

tongue “What if she’d drowned, Lucy? What if I hadn’t been there? T

went down and the instructor grabbed the other kid.”

Summer gasps as her gaze shoots to mine. They obviously

discussed what happened. And while I have to fight to keep it together, water, okay. Because of Dylan.

“You were there, Dylan. She’s okay.”

ore. “But what if I wasn’t? What happens when the season starts or when a little guy comes along and I don’t have as much free time. It’s just you. You’re on your own.”

I can’t help but laugh as I realize why all this is getting to him, so I worried about both of us. His family. It’s a fear he’s always had since the father died when we were young. He’d always been concerned that if I went pro with the NFL he wouldn’t be around when we needed him. Like a footballer father. But he shouldn’t be worried.

I’m not “Dylan, I’ve been doing this by myself for years while you’ve been raised so Denver. Well, not entirely alone because I’ve had our found family. But by. It’ll be okay. Thank you for being there today though. And for just I knew in.”

Dylan shakes his head. “It’s not okay yet, Luce. She says she’s fine and she knows because she’s your daughter and that’s what you do. But she will get back in the pool.”

I in his My face scrunches because I was afraid of that, and also, he’s not “What I’m acting that way right now when in reality my heart hasn’t stopped thumping since he first told me what happened. But if I make a mistake around Katie, it will become bigger in her mind. And if I make a mistake taken around Dylan, he’ll feel worse. I’ll have to take her again soon so it remain a fear. But for now, I’m just happy Dylan was there.

vo kids “We’ll get her back in. You did good, baby bro.”

Dylan huffs out a laugh as he burrows into Summer’s shoulder, and haven’t look she gives me eases my mind. She’s got him. He’ll be okay.

r, she's A short time later, when Dylan takes out the trash, Summer approaches
in the kitchen. "Dylan struggled a lot in Denver, being away from you
Katie. I never wanted to tell you because there wasn't really anything
when our could do about it, but you know what he's like...he loves to hold on to
it, Lucy. And now he's nervous about becoming a dad himself. Keep an eye on
but don't worry about Dylan. We've been through this before; we
n. He's through it again."

nce our My heart breaks for my little bro, and like always, I thank the world
ne went being so lucky to have him.

our pro "Maybe he should talk to someone. I'm sure Joel can
recommendations."

been in "He is. He'll get there," she says and I think she's finished until I
ut I get smile turns wicked. "You know...if he knew you had Wes, he'd pr
umping feel better."

I scoff, because I've given her no details on anything Wes related
ne; you that I work with him. Also... "That's a bit sexist."

ouldn't "I'm kidding, Luce. I was trying to see if there was a...*you and Wes*
tell me nothing these days. But I've noted that you didn't deny it."

wrong. I huff out a laugh. "I'll tell you when there's something to say."

stopped Summer nods with a smile. "Good. I'll be waiting."

big deal

big deal



doesn't

I'm late to the office Monday morning because Katie refused to go
mom's. Not that I blame her; it's been a huge adjustment for her. She
from spending almost all her time with me to only seeing me morn
and the night. And the guilt of that is doing a number on me. Add to that, yest

thes mepool incident... If I'm being honest, I didn't really want to leave he
ou and either.

ing we It's just one of those days, and hopefully once she starts preschool
o guilt. feel better. *Hopefully*. At the very least, she won't notice I'm gone as r

1 Katie, I'm tired and emotional when I finally walk through the glass door
e'll get the parking lot. The image of Katie's crying face is etched into my mi

it's a struggle not to let my own tears fall. I want to turn around, get
orld for my car, and pick her up. To spend the day at the zoo or museum. To

paint, or sing. Anything she wants. But I signed up for this. I need to b
offer Aaron's walking out of his doorway as I pass, but I barely ackno

him. I just want to fall in a heap at my desk until my first appo
ner soft arrives. But no such luck.

robably "Everything okay?" he asks, and I know he's thinking about Friday

"Everything's fine, just the typical Monday morning exhaustion."

except He laughs, seemingly believing me. "I'm with you there. Listen,
want to bring this up," he says, taking a step toward me. "But I saw y

es. You Wes walking to your car Saturday night when I came back to ge
paperwork."

I frown, unsure where this is going because that particular interacti
innocent.

"You know there's a nonfraternization policy, right?"

What?!

to my "I never read that," I say and then grimace. That was not what shou
's gone come out of my mouth. "Not that it matters because I have no plans to

ing and relationship with anyone here. Especially Wes."

erday's "I know, I know. Your daughter is more important. I just thought
you."

r today “Thanks.” *I think*. “I appreciate it. Although you might want to tell
add it to their contracts because I just signed one and it wasn’t there.”

l she’ll “Agreed. I’ve been told it’s a work in progress.”

nuch. I nod before walking away, pulling out my phone before he’s even
rs from office.

nd, and **Lucy: Did you know about the nonfraternization policy?**

back in

o draw,

e here.

wledge

intment

Lucy: (Laughing Emoji)

Wes: Yep

Okay, then. So what? He just doesn’t care?

night. **Lucy: I think some might consider what we’re doing to be frate**

One of our linebackers knocks on my door as soon as I’ve pressed s
I don’t I don’t get to check Wes’s response until after he’s gone. But the sec
ou and leaves the room; I pick up my phone, smiling in anticipation.

t some

Wes: Won’t happen again. You can relax

ion was

What?! My insides twist at his words before I’ve even processed
would say it. We hooked up yesterday, and while I wasn’t convince
happening again, he definitely alluded to it. What’s changed betwe
and then? Or is this hot and cold attitude he has the real Wes, and no o
ld have knows which version they’re gonna get?

o have a

I really thought I was making progress, but obviously not.

I’d tell

l HR to

left my

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ne ever

Chapter Twenty-Two

Wes

W*hat. The. Fuck?*

Lucy has a daughter? I stand frozen, just outside her door. Aaron's words run on repeat through my mind. "*Your daughter is important.*" *What?!*

Lucy. Has. A. Daughter.

Since when? She's never *once* mentioned that. Maybe she *was* married maybe she *is* married...and doesn't wear her rings. I've been trying to get the surname change out of my mind, in fact... *Holy Shit!* Dylan's brother-in-law is Thomas Kelly, Seattle's quarterback. *Thomas Kelly*. Did she marry Thomas? Is he married? Jesus, I've never wished to have kept up with the gossip sites more than I do right now.

With one hand running nervously through my hair, I snap out of my daze and walk away, reaching for my phone. Bringing up my search engine and typing in *Thomas Kelly's wife* and am about to click go when it occurs to me that *doesn't fucking matter*. Husband, no husband. She's lying *again*. Yes, she lies by omission, but at this point, that's enough. I don't have the energy

energy to waste my time on people like that. Especially after how I fucked me up last time.

God, I wish I hadn't walked past her office. I could have stayed blissfully unaware. Then again, I guess it's better that I know.

And she has the nerve to text me about the nonfraternization policy she's not hiding a huge fucking secret.

I can't do this again. I'm spiraling, just like I did years ago. And the same woman involved. *Fuck my life.*



floor, as I spend the rest of the day on the field with the team, and by the time it's more finishing up I'm well and truly ready to crash. But I can't. The big guy, the athletic director, a.k.a Bossman called another meeting for six p.m. *P.M.*—and my teeth grate as I storm to the room, loudly dropping into my seat.

to push “We have a fundraiser at the end of the season and...”

ther-in- Bore. Major bore. I don't plan on being the head coach by the end of the fucking season so I don't need to pay attention here. He's talking...alright, up with beneficiaries and...I'm out. I might be required to be there at the event

since the guy filling in for my proper role isn't here, I know I will probably be required to help when I'm back in my original receiver coach position. Instead of listening, I picture all the ways I could be spending my time elsewhere that is better than this hellhole.

s, it's a I'm on a beach in Hawaii surrounded by white sand, beautiful view, optional land... loud as fuck, drunk teenagers. *Nope that won't work.*

badly it I'm running down the field toward the end zone. The crowd roars almost to victory...until I'm hit from the side. *Fuck, that won't work effectively* Relaxing in a bar for a drink... *nope*. Watching Netflix... *nope*. *Damn hell no.*

y. As if "... He has this built-in ability..." The AD's still waffling on but that's a song.

it's the "Invisible Touch" by Genesis, one of my favorites. I could be rocking in my living room, singing it loudly, out of tune... *also nope... that reminds me of Lucy.*

Lucy... Lucy... My time could be spent pushing her against a wall, stepping between her open legs. I could be gripping her long ponytail, angling her head to accept my kiss. I could be inside her. I could... *fit in.*—Six My shorts tighten to the point of being uncomfortable, and I have to adjust myself. That spiraled quickly. I don't even *want* to be doing this a spare of it. I just want to get the fuck home and be done with today.

"Is this meeting really necessary...in August?" I snap out of nowhere. All eyes turn to me and Bossman scoffs, "Got somewhere to be, Weini and "Yep. Home. It's been a long day. The team's struggling, and I need fucking rest if I'm going to function tomorrow." on't be "You're free to leave," Bossman says with his arms folded over his chest, like he's challenging me, like I'm not actually free at all. Too bad I don't want a shit. on. So, a shit. ;, rather

"Thanks, Boss." I throw him a half wave and hightail it out of the room, already pissed about that time I'll never get back.

Women, Wallet, phone, and keys in hand, I head straight for the parking lot to grab a beer and carbs. Loads of carbs.

When I reach the exit, the guy I saw with Katie the other night is e

... I'm with another kid. This one looks to be about ten, and the two of them look at me. They shuffle around me. I grab the door they just came through right as it's closing... shuts and hear my name before I get the chance to exit.

"Was that Wes Johnson? Can I talk to him?" the boy asks, obviously nervous. I wait, his tone.

I keep walking without even listening to the man's response, something I've never done before. Is it rude? One hundred percent. But I'm done for the day. I know that one doesn't really want to risk snapping at an innocent young kid if he keeps asking me questions. So, out the door I go, pretending not to hear him.

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to do, because not even an hour later I'm sitting on the sofa with my feet up and a text comes through.

Uuuuck.

Lucy: What the hell, Wes? That boy you ignored WAS one of my biggest fans at. Any

Fuck my life. Of course Lucy knows that guy and his kids. He probably went to Aaron's staff dinner party. They probably all hang out on weekends?" Fuck!



For the rest of the week, I avoid Lucy like the plague. In fact, I don't give anyone unless it's absolutely necessary. So by Saturday night, I have a headache breathing down my neck.

"Open up, dickhead. We're going out." He's pounding on my door. I know he won't give up until I let him in.

"I'm not in the mood," I grumble as I open up, standing aside to let him enter through.

ugh as “Well, get in the mood. We’re going to Jaded.”

ht as it *Ugh! Big night then.*

I groan but reluctantly move toward my bedroom to get ready. I could have waited, but I know Carter, and he’ll just drag me there if I try.

When I’m somewhat decent looking, I find him waiting for me in the kitchen, two whiskeys in hand. “Pre-game?”

. And I I’m not a huge drinker—past few weekends aside—but I’m going to ask it to get through tonight. I wasn’t joking when I said I wasn’t in the

What am I thinking?

ur later, “Too late,” Carter says, as if reading my mind. “Drink up and let’s go.”

I knock back the drink in two gulps—bad idea—and then follow Carter to the waiting Uber. I’ll give him two hours, tops, and then I’m done.

of your



robably Three hours later, I’m still out and I’m not even mad about it. Jaded is a popular hangout for those of us who like to be seen in public eye, because the guy on the door is under strict instructions to only let in people he lets in. Having said that, it’s one of those establishments you have to know about to actually find. From the street it looks pretty dark and

I avoid so they don’t often get walk-ins. But with the candlelight style lighting and Carter’s deep-red accents, it’s a nice place to relax and get lost in.

Carter’s off flirting with some chick he met five minutes ago, while I’m talking to the bartender who is so freaking lovely. *Lovely? What the fuck!* Well. He is.

let him “And then she waltzes back into my life like she’s meant to be there *dammit!* because she probably is, but I was finally starting to forge

her.”

He wipes the bar top in front of me—where I just spilled my whiskey—half yelling dammit—and smirks. “Did you really start forgetting her, or are you just telling yourself that?”

I huff out a laugh. “The latter for sure. Man, if you saw this woman bite my knuckles with another groan before spinning on my swivel stool to need been doing this every few sips just to check in on Carter, and sure enough, mood hasn’t moved. I’d say he’s going to be stuck to this chick all night.

The stool moves slowly back to its starting position, something catches the corner of my eye and my jaw drops. “Fuck me, am I drunk?”

Pushing off again, I do a second loop, ignoring when my new friend says “yep,” and search the crowd. Sure enough, Lucy’s sitting in a booth with a group of girls, laughing. *Laughing.*

I twist my head to keep watching her while I continue to turn, only to find I’ve ended up back at the bar in the last second.

“That was weird,” the bartender says as he mixes a cocktail for me next to me, and I nod, because he’s right. *What are the chances?*

I take a quick look over my shoulder and smile. “Hey man, I thought you’d dingy, make this one a double.”

ing and



“You should go over there,” the bartender says, signaling toward the woman. I don’t look where he’s pointing because I’ve hit stalker level already.

I first noticed her. *She has a kid. Why isn’t she home looking after her kids here and you could chat with the lovely lady approaching you now,* he adds, pulling me from my thoughts.

Subtly rolling my eyes, I hold back a groan as a woman sits down
ey afterme. “Wes Johnson in the flesh.”

or were “That’s me. And you are?”

“I’m Lucy. My friends and I were just talking and—”
an...” I “I’m sorry, what?” My eyes almost bug out of my head, while the
ol. I’vefreezes, her eyes flashing away, clearly confused. Her face tinges pin
ugh, healmost feel bad. “What did you say your name was?”

As my “I...uh...Lexi?”

in the “Lexi?” I repeat.

“Yep?”

nd says *Why the question?*

with a “Maybe because you’re being a douchebag,” my bar friend says,
me to the fact I’d said that out loud and I’m definitely acting like a dou
looking Lexi walks away without another word, and this time, I do feel
little. *But come on! The world is clearly messing with me... Or I’m jus
the girlhearing.*

When I turn back to the bar, I notice my man has graced me with
ink I’llwhiskey, and fuck do I need it.



I drink doubles for the next thirty minutes and I feel amazing.
Lucy. I “I’m going over there,” I announce and almost fall off my chair
since Ithrow my hands in the air.
er? “Or “Uhhh. Are you sure that’s a good idea? Isn’t she pissed at you, af
pullingwere a dick to that kid?”

Fuck, I told this guy everything.

beside “Guess we’ll find out.”

Mr. Barman laughs, and I realize I really should have gotten his name. It’s too late now. Lucy, here I come.

I approach slowly because it definitely makes me look cooler and more like a woman as I move. Dressed in a black, off the shoulder dress, Lucy looks beautiful as she laughs along with her friends, something that strikes me in the second they see me.

“Ladies. How are you this fine evening?”

Now that I’m here, I recognize the blonde as the girl from the hotel. I don’t know the others. They’re all smiling at me, except Lucy who looks positively mad. “We’re great. We were just discussing how big of an alerting are to little kids.”

ouch. *Ouch!*

bad. A “Fair call. I deserve that.” I shrug as I lean against the booth for support. *bad at* Lucy crosses her arms over her chest and frowns. “What are you doing here? Why are you here?”

another “Here, here?” I ask, pointing to my position on the floor. “Or are you just Jaded?”

She rolls her eyes while her blonde friend chuckles. “What do you mean Wes?”

“You,” I say plain and simple, because it’s true. I’ve never felt anything so badly in my entire life. *She has a kid.* Fuck if I care right now when I

“You told me we’d never fraternize again,” Lucy says, throwing my words back in my face. Technically, I didn’t say that, I texted it. But either way, after you

“I lied.” *Fuck!*

“You. Lied.” *Yep. What a hypocrite!*

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Let me make it up to you.” I have an idea.

Lucy eyes me suspiciously as I back away, waving at her like a
me, but school girl. I'm not entirely sure what I'm doing, but I'm too drunk to

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Lucy eyes me suspiciously as I back away, waving at her like a giddy school girl. I'm not entirely sure what I'm doing, but I'm too drunk to care.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Lucy

Summer bursts out laughing, while Delilah and Cory just stare in the same direction. They wanted to take me out for a girls' night, trying to get me out of my funk. I was reluctant to come, and now I'm convinced I should have. Thank God Dani couldn't make it because she actually knows Wes. I can picture her reaction.

"Ahh, who was that?!" Delilah asks, practically standing in her seat. "More of him."

"That was Wes Johnson. He and Lucy had a thing," Summer says, filling the others in on what went down. Well, the parts she knows any

Burying my face in my hands, I shake my head. God, he looks hot! His muscles are bulging in the button-down shirt that he's *rolled up* sleeve, and his hair...it's all mussed like he's been running a hand through it and all I want is to do the same. *But I hate him, right?*

He's a grumpy asshole who told me we're done for no reason and in front of little kids. Yep, I hate him.

So why the hell am I all smiles as he shimmies toward me while "With Me," by 112, starts to play. I have to suck my lips into my mouth

stop myself from laughing. *I'm mad, remember?* But when all three friends dissolve into giggles and Delilah wolf whistles, I'm done for.

Wes mouths the words to the song as he dances in front of me. The side of him I've never seen before. I mean, I didn't even think he drank if Wes is a funny drunk, rather than his usual grumpy self, I'm here for

He holds his hand out when the chorus hits, and I place my palm in it, even pretending to hesitate. I want to be close to him, desperately.

"You go, girl!" Summer calls out as Wes pulls me to the dance floor. I bury my face in his chest as I laugh.

Grabbing my waist in one hand, he pushes the other into my hair, getting me my gaze up to his. "None of our shit matters right now, Luce. It's just you and me. And you are a fucking vision."

My heart races and I nod, despite his words confusing me. The way he's staring at me, like I'm the only one in the world, makes me want to tell him everything too.

His splayed hand moves around to my lower back, pressing us together as his head rests on mine. There's some deeper meaning in his words. I can sense it. But I feel so good in his arms that I choose to ignore getting lost in Wes instead.

We dance like a couple of drunks after our little moment, even though one of us is drinking, and when the girls announce they're leaving, Wes asks me to stay.

Pulling out my phone to check the time, I see a message from an unknown number waiting for me.

Unknown: We need to talk.

I swallow a lump in my throat and inwardly curse. I shouldn't be here. I should be at home, protecting Katie. "I don't think that's a good idea.

of my to get home to my..." I trail off, taking a step back but keeping our
connected. "You said we were over," I add, because suddenly I'm sh
his is a backtracking. I've just been grinding against Wes for an hour, and n
nk. But thinking things through. Where was my rational brain earlier?

it. Wes frowns as he stares down at my phone. He shakes his head
his, not pulling me in close and whispering in my ear. "You're right, I said th
you're better than a quick fuck. Have a good sleep, Lucy."

or while He steps back and releases my hand. *What?*

"Is that what this was? Is that what you wanted all this time?"

forcing "Isn't that what this is? Isn't that what *you* want? After all...you
ust you admitted that you have someone waiting at home. Is that who the n
was from?"

ay he's *What?*

o forget "Is that what you really think of me?" I ask, quickly looking o
shoulder to make sure the girls are a distance away.

o closer Wes sighs, running a hand through his hair, exactly what I want
to his earlier. "Wouldn't it be great if I could say yes," he admits. "Wou
gnore it, make our lives so much easier if I believed that?"

What is going on?

gh only "Wes, I—"

es asks "Go and look after your daughter, Lucy. I'll see you on Monday."

Holy shit! A shiver runs through me as Wes turns and walks away,
another me frozen to the spot. *He knows.* He knew that entire time? Was he r
with me? Or too drunk to care? God, what must he think of me for l
that from him. *I'm a liar.* After everything he confessed to me, tell
here. I everyone he's ever cared for lied to him, I do it anyway. Granted, I
. I have reason to bring Katie up in conversation, but considering me being p

fingers with her was part of the reason things didn't work out back then, I probably should have at least mentioned it. How the hell am I supposed to follow I'm now?



before
at. And I purposely avoided Wes on Monday, but today we have a full team now. So, while I can pretty much guarantee Wes will be shitty about attendance has no choice. He's the head coach. *At present.*

After arriving early to prep my office for the day, I make it to the room all but five minutes before it begins. When I'm still alone at nine a.m., I receive a message wondering if I messed up the time, until the door slams open and Wes storms in.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Where is everyone?”

I gaze in his direction with a blank expression and offer no reply. I never my we're back to being mad at each other. Although, I'm not really mad, I did to do I now realize I might be the one in the wrong.

Wes drops into a seat on the opposite side of the room and leans back, his front legs lift up off the carpet. “There better be a good explanation for this,” he mumbles to himself as I continue to ignore him. Instead, I focus on filing my nails. I really need a manicure. I wish I could do that dip stuff...my fingers do it and wow, it's just—

“Lucy?”

leaving Oops, guess I was focused a little too much on my hands. “What, Wes is messing “Did. You. Get. A. Notification. About. A. Time. Change?” He says slowly as if I need help keeping up.

ing me “Obviously not or I wouldn't be here.” I roll my eyes and pull out my phone, checking my texts and emails. *Shit!*
had no
regnant

robably “Actually...there’s one here. It’s been pushed by fifteen minutes.
ice himeveryone will be arriving soon.” I shrug with a smile, watching as Wes
and crosses his arms over his chest.

For five minutes we sit in silence and it’s deafening. I can see Wes
working while he broods. His eyes occasionally flick to mine, but just
think he’s going to speak, he huffs and looks away.

reeting.
ling, he “Okay, let’s get it out in the open. Yes. I have a daughter.”

“I don’t care.”

neeting
have to “Are you sure about that?” I laugh because I’m so nervous, I don’t
what else to do.

mps in. “Positive.”

Great. This is going to be fun.

. Guess
because “She’s wonderful. Thanks for asking. She may only be four but she
huge personality and...why are you looking at me like that?”

ck until
tion for Wes stares at me with a puzzled expression before shaking his head
frowning. He begins to say something but pauses before starting again.

“Why didn’t you mention her?”

ocus on
y friend *Good question.*

“I guess I was warming up to it.”

“And she’s *four.*”

“Yeah, she’s—”

es?”
says it A few people stagger in, including the AD’s personal assistant. She
when she sees us both settled in our seats, and a look of horror crosses
face. “Oh no. Are you two early or did you miss the memo?”

out my Wes almost growls. “What do you think?”

She cringes and looks my way.

“I got the email but hadn’t checked it. It’s fine. Please don’t worry

. Guessit,” I say, hoping to wipe the panic from her expression.

as huffs Wes continues to scowl as the others walk in and get seated, and w
meeting starts, the first thing on the agenda is the nonfraternization
's mind *Oh shit!* I huff out an incredulous laugh, as Wes's face falls into his ha
when I



Wes avoids me the rest of the day Tuesday, and I find myself g
anxious about it. I want to call him out on his reaction to finding ou
't know Katie. He's being childish, and I have the strongest urge to be childi
back, until we can both laugh about it. But at the same time, I
probably leave him alone. I need to focus on Greg right now. I c
distracted by Wes when he's back in my life.

ie has a By Wednesday lunchtime I'm sick of being alone with my thought
since I don't have any players scheduled today, I'm going insane
ad and trying many things to distract myself, I pop my head into Aaron's o
the hope of finding something to do. "Anything to report?" I ask as I e
office.

He looks up from the papers he's rustling through and smiles. "No
smooth sailing here. How about you?"

I internally deflate but manage to plaster a smile on my face. "A
with me. Just wanted to check in," I lie.

pauses "Good to hear. Lola said you haven't called her and actually asked
ses her stop by your office. This saves me the trip."

My shoulders stiffen as he indirectly mentions one of the topics I'n
to get out of my mind. I don't want it to be a big deal. Because if othe

y about

it's an issue, it becomes an issue. I still haven't responded to Greg's text when the last thing I need is to have more people worried along with me.

policy. "Please tell her I'm all good and I'll try and catch up with her on Monday lunch breaks this week." I walk backward toward the door as I talk, that I can escape before he asks more questions.

"Okay, Luce. I will. Enjoy the rest of your day. Here's to it remaining injury free."

Is it wrong that I hope someone needs me? Yes, it absolutely is. Either I raise my crossed fingers as I depart, and when I arrive at my room should be empty. *Damn.*

an't be



ents, and I settle at my desk and check my phone—yet another avoidance technique. After and see three missed calls from my mom. Panic courses through me because she never calls me at work, and she's with Katie.

enter his I call back immediately, and the fifteen seconds it takes her to answer is excruciating.

hope. All "Lucy, thank God."

"What's happened? Is Katie okay?"

It's good Mom sighs. "Honestly, I don't know who's more dramatic, you or your brother."

I'd like to My face scrunches. "Excuse me?"

"Katie's fine. I would have texted or left a voicemail if she wasn't."

I'm trying *That's reassuring.* Mom's been great. I shouldn't complain. Everyone thinks I'm relaxed on the whole mothering thing after Dad died, so I do worry about how she'd react if she was ever in a situation she wasn't prepared for.

Next. The “Okay, that’s good, but you’re calling me at work?”

“Oh yes, I’m on my way to drop Katie off.”

One of my “Where?”

hoping “At your work.”

My head drops back and I look to the ceiling, taking a deep breath before I can respond. “Why?”

“Sam got off early from work and wants to take me to the city center way, afternoon. He forgot I had Katie, but he works so hard. He deserves a break, it’s break.”

Ah, what? I only dropped Katie there a few hours ago. “But I’m not watching Katie because I’m at work.”

I should have known something like this would happen.

Unique— “I know,” Mom continues, like my statement was obvious because meaningless. “Katie’s a good kid. I’m sure she’ll just color quietly in the corner.”

I almost bark out a laugh because she can’t be that clueless, right? I raised Dylan and me. We were four once. Instead, I massage the bridge of my nose, closing my eyes, trying to bring about calm. I can do this. “Okay, I’ll see you soon.”

For your “You will. I’m just pulling up.”

She hangs up before I can respond, and that’s probably a good thing because she would have definitely heard my overdramatic sigh and commented on it.

But she I quickly rearrange my room to give Katie a play space and text A
y about let him know what’s going on. *With a little white lie.*

Lucy: My mom has to help out a family member unexpectedly dropping Katie here. Hope that's okay?

Aaron: Of course, the guys will love it

Lucy: Thank you. I promise not to make a habit of it

Aaron: I know you won't

Hmm, not sure what that comment means but I don't have time to it because Mom starts calling again. I'm guessing she's finally realized you're has no idea where my office is, nor is she on the approved security list.

"I'll meet you at the front desk in five," I say instead of a proper hello then hang up, rushing off to meet her.

us but

r in the



ht? SheAt five p.m. I'm exhausted and so is Katie. I've got to admit, despite the e of mymy mom was crazy for suggesting she'd play quietly, she actually c; Mom.little angel.

"You've been amazing today, Katie. How about I pack up my things then we go and see your favorite person?"

d thing Her little face lights up and she bounces in the seat. "Del?"

gh and I can't help but laugh. I was actually thinking about Dylan, but her favorite person does change on a regular basis.

aron to "I'm sure I can arrange that."

The company Delilah is working for just designed their very own children's clothing line, and Katie loves getting to play dress-up

y, so samples Del brings home. She often asks to wear the dresses when she plays football so she can “look pretty while playing.”

“Yes!” she cheers as she rises from her seat.

“Wait, can you stay there for ten more minutes while I pack up?”

Her face falls as though ten minutes is a lifetime, but then she flops down and goes straight back to drawing.

Today could have been a nightmare, but thankfully it wasn't. Let's hope it doesn't happen again.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Wes

I'm ready to leave for the day when my phone buzzes on my desk, but it doesn't me startle. Like always, I ignore it and continue packing up my things. But after it rings another two times, I give in and answer. "Yep?"

"Son, we need to talk," my father says, completely ignoring my rudeness. I clench my fist and inwardly groan. *What now?*

"I'm kind of in the middle of something. Can I call you—"

"Now, Wes."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a deep breath and sigh because I know exactly why he's calling. "How much do you need?"

Dad huffs. "I hate doing this. You know I do. But I just don't have anything to give."

So it's not him that needs it? Ever since I was traded to San Francisco, when my earnings were released, Dad's been asking me for money. I used to say no, but when Gran died, I gave in.

"What's it for, Dad?" I ask, wanting him to admit it.

"Does it matter?"

I huff out a laugh because at the end of the day, he's right; it doesn't at all. "I hate this."

"What else am I supposed to do?" *Treat me like a son, instead of a l*

My free hand runs down my face and I sigh. "Okay, Dad. What need?"

"I reckon ten thousand should do it for now."

My hand drops. "For now? What the fuck, Dad?"

"Hey, watch your mouth."

"Who's asking whom for a favor? I'll say whatever the fuck I like out with my voice now louder than it needs to be. My gaze flies to th making things. but thankfully it's shut.

"Can you help or not?"

I feel for my old man, I really do. He's the only one left in my fam eness. I has ever given me the time of day. His wife—my stepmom, I guess—kids have never bothered with me. Despite the fact that they actually grow up with my father around them, they're pissed because they b I know somehow lucked out with my genes, when in reality I worked my as play football when my mom could barely afford the gear. All because 't have —*who financially supports them*—paid the bare minimum in child s But we made do. There was no luck about it.

"Yep. I always do," I tell my dad, because it's true. sco and

I donate a fair chunk of my money each year to various charities. I' l to say rather the ten grand go there, but Dad would just end up taking on ano or remortgaging his house, and I can't let him do that knowing I h cash to help.

He sighs in relief. "Thank you."

"No sweat."

It matter “No, I mean it. I love you, son.”

“Yep. Love you too.”

Thank. *If only you dished out those words more often, maybe then I’d do you them.*



I take a moment to calm myself down before leaving. And as I move through the halls, I walk past Lucy’s office with my phone raised to my ear, “I cry pretending to be lost in conversation. Suffice it to say this isn’t the final door, I’ve done this; it works well to avoid having to talk to her.

I round the corner to the safe zone, just as Lucy’s voice stops me near the door. There’s an edge to it, a fact she seems to be trying to hide.

“You can’t come here. It’s my work.”

She pauses as I take a few steps back toward her office just to make sure she’s okay. She’s in the hallway now, pacing back and forth, so lost in her call that she doesn’t even notice me a few feet away.

“No, you don’t need to do that. She’s not even here.”

Just as she says the words, I hear giggles coming from her office. I have to wonder if that’s the “she” Lucy is referring to. Because if I had my chances are the caller did too. Lucy’s eyes slam shut and she mumbles something before hanging up and immediately dialing someone else.

“Where are you?” she says, clearly panicked this time.

“Sorry, hi. Where are you? I need you to come and get—”

She runs a hand through her long brown hair and drops her head, staring at the ceiling. “Okay, shit.”

Her head then rolls forward to her chest, and she sighs before straightening up, her eyes flashing toward her office. “It’s okay. I’ve got this,” she believes before hanging up.

I move to walk away—*she said she’s got this*—but I pause again wracked with guilt. “Ah, fuck.”

Hearing Lucy move back into her office, I take off in a run to catch the door before it shuts completely.

“I know something’s wrong. How can I help?” I say, stepping into the room.

Lucy’s eyes widen in surprise and flash toward something on the wall before coming back to me. “Wes, I—”

“Hello, again,” a familiar voice says from behind me, cutting Lucy off.

I turn toward the voice and freeze. There in front of me is Katie. *Katie*, the little girl with the same name as my grandmother, the little girl who had to be four years old, the little girl who on close inspection has *my* light eyes.

Fuck. *Fuck!* I feel sick. I’m going to throw up.

“Wes?” Lucy asks in a small voice, just above a whisper, but I don’t look at her. I can’t. It at least snaps me out of my downward spiral, though I do what I have to do, for now.

“I heard you on the phone. I’m happy to wait here if you—”

“No! Ah, no, that’s okay.” Her eyes flash to Katie’s again. She’s worried, but it’s clearly forced. “We’ll be fine.”

Nothing about this situation is fine. She’s not fine. But something tells me it’s Katie she’s worried about. *Why?*

“Is it Katie’s...” I mouth the word “dad” at the end and tense up as she shakes her head. *Of course it’s not. Because I fucking am. Shit, shit, shit.*

htening Swallowing a lump in my throat, I put on my best smile.

he says “Katie, your mom still has some packing up to do. I was thinki
might want to come and see my office. I’ve got lots of football stuff.”
hen I’m because what four-year-old is interested in football? “Or we can
something...”

itch the Her huge, cartoon-like *brown* eyes widen, just like her mother’s *bl*
did, and she smiles brightly. “I love football!” *Guess I was wrong.*

nto her Lucy’s entire body deflates as though all the tension just left it
mouths “thank you” and then starts the charade of actually packing up.
my left “Uhh...we’ll be in my office until you’re ready.”

Lucy kisses Katie on the head before we both walk away, leav
off. completely alone, waiting for God knows who. And that doesn’t sit rig
tie. Theme. I have to do something. I shoot off a quick text before we reach n
happens and pray to God he comes through for me.

t brown



“So this is my office,” I say awkwardly as Katie’s eyes bounce arou
1’t look room. When she spots my signed footballs, her eyes light up.

1, and I “These are my prized possessions. A couple are signed, and a
championship ball. Over here I have my...” I pause because I’m tal
her like a tour guide showing her around. Gripping the back of my
smiling take a deep breath. *I can do this.* “What I mean is that...yeah, this
stuff.” I shrug.

ells me Katie walks over to the balls and grabs one in her grubby little
without even asking. “Don’t do that!” I rush out, and she freezes with
is Lucy

t.

midair before releasing her grip, the ball and her gaze both dropping
ng youfloor. *Shit! Shit! Goddammit. Fuck!*

I wince “I’m sorry. It’s fine. We can play with this one,” I say, picking it up
watchcarpet. “How about catch?”

Katie’s eyes rise to mine and she gives me a small yet slightly wary
ue onestry to meet her smile with as big a grin as I can muster, but apparently
funny because she bursts out laughing. Laughing is good. *Right?*

as she We play catch for a while. And even though my teeth are clenched
entire time, praying nothing happens to my precious ball, Katie does w
to me. And she has a pretty good arm for a kid.

ing her “Are you sure you’re only four?” I ask, in awe of her skills.

ght with “Four and a quarter,” she states matter-of-factly, causing my c
y doortighten and my entire body to break out in a cold sweat. Four and a
quarter. *Holy shit.*

I have to consciously make an effort not to study her too closely
don’t freak her out—but that’s exactly what I want to do. Well,
und the freaking out part. But I want to see what similarities or differences I c
I mean, the natural talent she’s displaying should be a giveaway, bu
one’s a also Dylan Mathers’s niece so I can’t lay sole claim to that. Or any cla
king to yet. But it can’t all be a coincidence, right? *Fuck!*

neck, I I want nothing more than to storm down to Lucy’s office and dem
s is my tell me the truth, but I’m also terrified to know.

Katie seems like a good kid, but then again, it’s been five minutes,
e hands could I possibly assume that? I don’t know what she’s like with he
the ball and... Wait, didn’t I see her with her dad last week? Is that her step
am I just fucking delusional? I could ask her, but then what if I’m not

g to the and he died or something? *God, someone slap me, please.* My thoughts
out of control.

off the “Can we draw?” Katie asks suddenly, pulling me out of my
thoughts.

y nod. I “We can do whatever you want,” I blurt out foolishly, trying to con
y I look wandering mind.

Katie’s eyes crinkle in happiness as a smile lights her face. And wh
hed the adorable...fuck, I should know better than to offer a kid the world if
arm up plan on delivering.



hest to I don’t know how long we’ve been playing when I hear a commotic
fucking down the hall. “You need to leave!” Carter’s voice booms, and I take
run until I remember my purpose and skid to a halt.

y—so I Katie’s laughing at the drawing I did for her when I return, like she
not the even hear the yelling or notice me run off. So after squatting down
an find. her, I chuckle like I never left. “Yeah, it doesn’t look much like a horse
it she’s it?”

im just On the outside, I’m calm and collected, playing with Katie like no
wrong. But in reality, I’m on edge.

and she Lucy wants me here. Katie needs me here. But fuck, *I* want to l
Lucy. *I* need to know she’s okay.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Lucy

My heart clenches as I watch Katie and Wes walk away. The same man who managed to overcome all those years ago rises to the surface of my mind. The hell couldn't he have been her father? Why didn't I stay and get to know Wes the day I first kissed him? Why didn't I tell him everything after that? Why have so many years passed without Wes being in my life? There's something telling me he's meant to be there? And while I'm at it, why the whys... Why the fuck is Greg on his way here now?

After Katie's been gone for a few minutes, I step into the hallway, to listen for any clue as to how she'll be with Wes. His office isn't that far, but considering most people have gone home, it's dead silent in the building so I'm hopeful. As if hearing my prayers, Katie's laughter travels the corridor to my ears, and I sigh in relief. At least that's one less thing to panic about. The second, though, should be here any minute.



As soon as I push through the door to the foyer, I see him. He's pacing back and forth with his hands moving around animatedly, like he's delirious.

some big speech, and I huff out a laugh. If he thinks he can talk his way into my life...

Slowly moving forward, I'm standing in his direct line of sight with spots me, a smile adorning his face.

"Lucy," he sighs like I'm a sight for sore eyes, while I wish him good

Rolling my eyes at his bullshit, my hands settle on my hips as I appear confident. "Why are you here, Greg?"

"Why do you think I'm here, Lucy? You have a daughter. She's focused on the math."

idness I "You're not the only guy I've ever slept with, Greg. And you know the fact I was with someone else. You confronted me about it."

e. Why Greg's eyes narrow as his teeth clench, but then his gaze flashes up to know second-floor offices, and he smiles. *What the fuck?*

I found "Please, Lucy. No more games," he says, taking slow steps toward me, when with his hands raised in the air. "Have you done a DNA test with the football player?" he asks, saying the words *football player* like it pains him.

trying to I want to say yes. I want to tell him Katie is Wes's, but guilt swirls around me and I can't. It was one thing keeping Greg from his daughter when I t close, lost touch, but straight-up lying is a lot harder.

uilding, "I haven't," I rasp and cringe when I see that my answer gives me a distance much pleasure.

about. "So, it's possible that she's mine?" His face lights up and he reaches out to touch me but thinks better of it when I flinch away, my eyes flashing. A security guard near the office entry.

"I guess it's possible."

ing back Greg drops to his knees in front of me and grabs my legs. His grip is livering enough that I can't move without risking a fall on my ass, but also

ay backenough that it wouldn't be considered as a negative gesture. Even th
is. *It one hundred percent is.* And I feel sick to my stomach.

hen he “Get up, Greg,” I say, my voice void of emotion.

Greg shakes his head. “I don't care if there's only a fifty percent
ie. she's mine. I will be there for her and raise her like she is. Give me a
I try toto prove myself to you both, Lucy. Take me back so we can be a famil
stomach churns at what he's asking. Is he really that messed up to thi
ir. I didwould ever be a possibility?

“Get up, Greg,” I whisper-yell through my teeth, my skin pricklin
w for adisgust.

Greg shakes his head again, more violently this time. “Not until yo
o to ourto let me see her.”

“Please, Greg. Just stand up.”

ard me “Where is she?”

football His grip tightens but he's still smiling, portraying a romantic to the
world.

s inside “Get up,” I repeat, much louder this time. I'm trying so hard not to
en we'dwords *let go*, as though asking him to do that is like admitting that
he's the one in control.

him so Greg's eyes flash with impatience before he schools his feature
more. Then he laughs. Like this is some big joke. “I'm not moving u
s out toagree to give me a chance.”

g to the He runs one of his hands up the inside of my thigh, stopping just as
to my skirt. The feel of his hand so close to my core sends a shiver dc
spine as my skin crawls. Yep, I'm going to be sick. The instinct to
is tightself-defense training kicks in and my knee itches to move, but I hold b
o loose

ough itlong as he's focused on me and Katie's with Wes, I'm okay. I can
this. *God, I hope she stays with Wes.*

"It's not going to happen, Greg. Katie and I are fine on our own."
chance "You named her Katie? *Fuck!*" he yells the last part, finally losing h
chancethough I don't know why. Closing my eyes, I mentally curse my:
ly." Mygiving him too much information as I contemplate what to do next.
ink that Both our voices start to rise after that, and I chance a look to the
level of the foyer, hoping they haven't carried up into the offices. Th
ng withlast thing I need.

When no one peers over the balcony I figure we're safe. Although,
u agreeknow why I'm worried; no one's here and I'm hoping Wes is too foc
Katie to notice.

I'm about to try to wiggle free from Greg's grip when it tightens
seconds before Carter freaking Williams steps into my peripheral v
outsideexpect him to walk on by, but when he stops, I'm shocked.

"I think you need to let her go and walk away," he says calmly, a
use thecan think is *what?*

I think Greg scoffs but finally releases me before standing up. "This is r
your business, man."

as once Carter takes a step forward, and Greg tries not to cower. *I almost*
ntil youHe's a huge guy—not The Rock huge but he's close. And intimidating

"Lucy's a friend. So it's one hundred percent *my* business. I don't
he getscause trouble. I just need you to walk away," he says calmly again
own myhave to stop myself from reacting. *We're friends?* I mean, I'm not a
use mycall him out on it, but we've never even met.

ack. As "We're just having a conversation, and don't think I don't know w
are. You're Carter Williams, one of San Francisco's offensive tackl

hand-friend to Wes Johnson. You're the guy that after all these years might get a shot. *You should walk away. You don't need bad publicity.*"

Carter laughs, and I have to admit he sounds a little unhinged. "V is cool, you making threats if it's just an innocent conversation?"

self for "It's just the kind of guy I am."

"So I gathered."

second Greg gets up in Carter's face, and to his credit, Carter doesn't even flinch. He's rattled as Greg spits out, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Instead, Carter takes a subtle step in my direction, placing me behind him. "I don't—" "You should leave."

used on Greg stands his ground. "I'm not going—"

"You need to leave!" Carter yells, and even I jump at the demand in his voice. My eyes shoot to the second story once more.

vision. I Looking over Carter's shoulder, Greg meets my eyes and his features soften. *That's weird.*

and all I "Can we talk soon? Please?" he asks, with a relaxed tone.

I say yes because I don't know what else to do, and then watch as he walks out of the building.

Carter turns to me the second Greg is out the door and sighs. "A cover okay?"

;. "Yeah, I'm fine. He didn't hurt me." *This time.*

want to Carter stares at me for a minute, probably trying to see if I'm lying, and then ever so slightly nods before walking to the glass sliders leading about to parking lot. "I'm going to double-check he's gone. You head on up.

the approved visitors list."

who you I return his nod and walk as fast as I can toward the elevator, suddenly desperate to see Katie.

: finally



Why are
When I reach Wes's office, he's huddled on the floor with Katie intensely drawing. Leaning casually against the frame of the door, I look at them for a moment, enjoying the peace, until Wes looks my way.

"Are you—"

en look "It's all good." I wave him off, preferring to stay in this new reality

Wes and Katie have some kind of relationship.

nd him. Katie looks up at that moment, and I smile. "Hi, sweetie."

She smiles but immediately goes back to her drawing, leaving me to

Wes.

l in his "So Carter's lovely. If not a little over-the-top."

features Wes huffs out a laugh. "Shit, I thought you needed help. What did I
His eyes flash to Katie's for a second before coming back to mine, like he's checking she's okay. I may be back in the room, but he's still keeping his eyes on her.

e stalks "He was fine," I say, when I have his attention again. "I just didn't

him to come in guns blazing. Actually, I didn't expect him at all. Then

Are you Carter appears at that moment with a megawatt smile. "My eyes are
burning."

ng, and Wes rolls his eyes, and when he meets Carter's stare, Carter flashes
with a look of something I'm not expecting...pity. *What's that about?*

g to the I look toward Wes at the same time Carter moves across the room

I'm on Katie on the floor, drawing my attention away. "You must be Katie. I'm
mom's friend, Carter. It's nice to meet you."

iddenly

Katie says hello and starts showing Carter her drawings, while Wes and signals for me to join him in the hall, out of earshot. *We need to talk*

I let out a slow breath and flop back against the wall opposite his door, resting my head against the brick. “Okay, say what you have to say.”
He doesn’t look happy about whatever it is.

“Are you ever going to tell me what’s going on? Or do I need Carter? I’m sure he has more information than I do now.” His tone has a bite than it did seconds before, and I’m confused as to why, but...

“Now’s not the time.”

Running a hand down my face, I give him a soft smile, trying to make it appear genuine but not convinced that it actually is.

Wes blows out a breath and scratches his head. “I just have one question, but can you promise...no more lies?”

My eyes close for a second before I school my features and nod. I don’t say that. *Maybe? I hope...*

Wes is about to speak when Katie calls out, “Mom!” interrupting our conversation.

I frown apologetically. “Wes—”

“Never mind,” he says, cutting me off. “Go. Something tells me you wouldn’t have been honest anyway.”

What?

My shoulders drop as he walks away—actually *sulks* away is probably more accurate—and with a fake smile in place, he thanks Katie for the drawings with him before lightly grabbing Carter’s arm. “Let’s go.”

I watch them both leave, unsure about what just happened but too busy with other things to do anything about it now.

es rises

lk.



s office

ay.”

to ask

is more

ke sure

question,

When I finally get to bed that night, I’m wrecked. Physical and emotionally. Physically because it’s late—on top of being worked so hard today. I’m unable to sleep myself, Katie was up late for the same reason, too. I want to ask her to sleep after her excitement at meeting two famous football players today. It’s so emotionally because I’m desperate to know what Wes was trying to say. And why he got so mad. Does he want to know about Greg? No, that’s not my business. He seemed upset about it, like it directly affected him. Maybe he’s just pissed off about my lies. Either way, I’ve wasted enough time trying to figure it out, and I’m done. If he wants to be moody, that’s his problem. But I’m not putting up with it any longer.

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ne you

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playing

razzled

Wes spends the next day snapping at me any chance he gets, and it doesn’t take long until I’m at a breaking point. I haven’t even had a hint of what’s going on since he left Katie and me in his office while practically dragging an apologetic looking Carter out the door, and I need answers.

I’m making a cup of late-afternoon coffee in the break room when Wes walks in. As soon as he spots me, he sighs before running a hand down his face in frustration. I put on a smile and continue my personal pledge to please him with kindness. “Good afternoon. Lovely weather we’re having.”

“I’ve been looking for you,” Wes replies, completely ignoring my pleasantries. “We need to talk.”

Ugh! When he says it like that it no longer interests me, especially when I’m just going to get barked at. But I agree anyway. And as I step through

door, Wes holds it open for me, only releasing it when I'm completely
harm's way.

ly and "Look, I'm happy to talk, but I can't deal with this hot and cold any
up and Wes stares at me in complete confusion. "When was I hot?"
vired to I almost laugh, but bite my lip to hold it off. *He's serious.* "Just no
ay. And held open a door for me. Plus you looked after Katie yesterday, and
ask me. you were worried about me. That's confusing. And, let's not for
can't be Saturday night."

e's still "Okay, I get it. My life is fucking confusing. Half the time I don't l
o figure I'm coming or going, but I do know this... I might be pissed at the m
I'm not but I can't stay the fuck away and I still fucking care. *A lot.* So, it is wh
And that's all I'm saying on the matter."

Alrighty then. Why the hell does that make my heart skip a beat.
stupid heart.

Wes turns on his heel and walks toward his office, assuming I'll
doesn't And of course I do. Because having him pissed at me is driving me
a smile Despite the fact that I enjoy pushing his buttons, I'd really prefer to jus
sing an past whatever hang-up he has.

A little part of me wants to push back, prove to him that he pisses
then he just as much. It's what I'd do if it was Dylan. But another part
own his desperately wants him to pull me into his arms and tell me it's okay.

to kill After closing his office door behind me, I lean against it and conte
my next move. How do I play this? Do I smile and flirt? I've never bee
ng my at flirting, so maybe that's a bad idea. Maybe I should stamp my foot a

"So, Archer says the PT is working, but he still doesn't look great
/ if I'm field. I've noticed he occasionally flinches when his left foot moves a
ugh the way. And as much as he thinks he's hiding it, he's fooling no one."

out of *Huh?* Wes eyes me curiously when I don't say anything and then con-
on. "What I need to know is do we need different treatment, or is he
more." shit about being ready?"

Again, huh? Did he really drag me here to talk about work and
w. YouWe're not going to finally clear the air? My deer in the headlights sta-
I knowgive away my confusion because he clenches his jaw and his nostril
get lastOops.

"Are you even listening to me? Luce, I need my players to be game
know ifI'm not blaming you. I just want to know what's going on. Is that too r
moment,ask?"

at it is. *Fuck!* That snaps me out of my daze.

"No, it's not too much to ask at all. And Archer is definitely no
Stupid,ready, no matter what he says. In fact, my report to the offensive coord
clearly states that he should be on a lighter training schedule for
follow.another week and—"

insane. "For fuck's sake. Does anyone take shit seriously around here?
st moveexpecting too much? Yes, my college days were a while ago, but I de
feel like we had a lot more structure and processes that had to be fo
me offFuck!"

of me He runs his hand through his hair and down to his neck, and I fol-
movement because it's easier than looking into his eyes. Eyes that I kr
emplatebegging me for answers. About this, about us.

an great "I haven't been here long enough to really make an assessment, but
ind— that things are slipping through the cracks because of the staff turnover

on the Wes nods, seemingly agreeing with me, so I continue, "I know yo
certainsee yourself as an interim coach, but you could really make a diff

Despite pretending otherwise, it's obvious you care. And the guys need

continues I peer up at his reaction and find him staring back at me with a look talking difficult to decipher. It's sort of a cross between appreciation and dis you can show those at the same time. Wes sure can.

not us? "And if I don't want the role?" he asks, but it's not in the bitter re must would have expected.

ls flare. "No one is forcing you. I just happen to think you'd be great at it.

role you took on in life." I shrug because I'm not really sure what I'm e ready. Wes sinks into his chair and drops his face into his hands. He's qui much to moment until he looks up at me with a look of pure anguish. "That Luce. I appreciate the update on Archer. I've got it from here."

In other words, you're dismissed.

ot game Pulling open the door, I'm out of the room in record time, without dinator word. I don't want to say any more in case it's something I regret. Bu at least I'm a few steps down the hall, I hear Wes curse out loud and stop, su pissed off. Why did I walk away? Wes is the one guy I've felt like ' Am I around. The only guy that's ever let me speak my mind and been proud finitely It's time he got a bit of that now. Turning quickly, I stalk back tow llowed. office, ready to give him a little dose of no-bullshit Lucy.

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I agree

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ference.

d that."

I peer up at his reaction and find him staring back at me with a look that's difficult to decipher. It's sort of a cross between appreciation and disgust, if you can show those at the same time. Wes sure can.

"And if I don't want the role?" he asks, but it's not in the bitter tone I would have expected.

"No one is forcing you. I just happen to think you'd be great at it. Or any role you took on in life." I shrug because I'm not really sure what I'm saying.

Wes sinks into his chair and drops his face into his hands. He's quiet for a moment until he looks up at me with a look of pure anguish. "Thank you, Luce. I appreciate the update on Archer. I've got it from here."

In other words, you're dismissed.

Pulling open the door, I'm out of the room in record time, without another word. I don't want to say any more in case it's something I regret. But when I'm a few steps down the hall, I hear Wes curse out loud and stop, suddenly pissed off. Why did I walk away? Wes is the one guy I've felt like myself around. The only guy that's ever let me speak my mind and been proud of it. It's time he got a bit of that now. Turning quickly, I stalk back toward his office, ready to give him a little dose of no-bullshit Lucy.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Wes

God, she's so infuriating. Why can't she just tell me I have a kid without me having to ask her? Without me having to make up stupid excuses to see her, hoping she'll spill. "Fuck this."

My chair rolls back, crashing into the wall, as I push it away to start a mad dash to the door. "Lucy, stop!" I call out, pulling the door open right as she barges in, yelling "I've had enough!" and crashing straight into me.

I try to stop myself from propelling forward, but I'm too late, and we almost fall from the impact. My hands grip her shoulder and the doorframe to steady us before I take a step back. An unwarranted scowl is on my face.

"What, Wes? What do you want? I don't care about your work issues now. I—"

"I don't give a shit about that either. I want you to finally tell me about Katie."

Confusion flashes over Lucy's features before it's replaced by anger. "You have a daughter, Wes. Is it really so hard for you to wrap your head around that?"

"No, that part is crystal clear. It's the rest that's messing with me."

“The *rest*? You’re going to have to spell it out for me because I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Is she mine?” I demand, my hands flexed at my sides.

“What?”

“Is. Katie. Mine?”

“What?” she repeats.

Is she kidding me? Pinching the bridge of my nose, my face scrunches up and I speak through gritted teeth. “For fuck’s sake, Lucy.”

“Is that a joke?” she says with her head tilted to the side, a look of bewilderment crossing her features.

“Why would it be a joke?” I ask, although I’m beginning to doubt based on her reaction. Except... “She has my eyes.”

Lucy huffs out a laugh. “She *doesn’t* have your eyes, Wes. Come on, she trails off and I can see her mind working right up to the moment she realizes I’m right.

Her eyes widen and she shakes off whatever thoughts she had when she looks at her head. “Her eyes are brown, Wes. Half the population has her eyes, but I promise, she’s not yours. That’s why I left.”

“What?”

“I found out I was pregnant the last day you saw me, and I panicked because I lost all ability to make rational decisions. I lost my mind, Wes. And even though I’ve been thinking clearly, you didn’t need that in your life. Someone was able to publish an article that said you were falling back into some old pattern because of me and I don’t know... I was struggling. It was a lot for me to go through that process and then you...”

“I what?”

Lucy looks to the ceiling before her eyes meet mine again and she

have now whispers, “You just left.”

My heart aches as I step forward and pull her into my arms, needing her close to her. She’s right; I left. And while I’m pissed at her for lying, I’ve regretted it every day since. What am I doing?

“I’m sorry, Luce. I’m so fucking sorry.”

I press a kiss to her head but she pulls away, staring at me with her blue eyes.

“You thought I would keep that from you?”

“I don’t know, Luce. You make me crazy. I overthink *everything* that comes to you. I’ve been like a fucking detective trying to piece together myself of your life in the years since I last saw you. I had no idea why you left. I guess, I just needed to find a reason.”

“But why would I leave? If she was yours, why would I leave?”

She has a point, and I hate myself for not thinking of that. “I’m sorry, Lucy. I...” I trail off as she blinks up at me, hooked on my every word. I’m not sure why I keep fighting this when I know I have feelings for her. That’s never going to change.

“Luce...” I breathe out causing her eyes to close as she nibbles my bottom lip.

Seconds later, our mouths meet, and I’m not even sure who moves first. Lucy moans as she grabs my shirt, pulling me closer, while my hand runs from her waist to her face, tilting her head toward me.

Still thinking about her bottom lip, I suck it into my mouth and run my tongue along the seam, until she opens up and allows me to explore.

For the next few minutes we make out like our lives depend on it. Tongues swirling, hands roaming, bodies molding.

My fingers run through her hair, gripping her ponytail as she slowly

grinding against me. "Fuck, Lucy." I groan against her lips before v
ig to beher backward to the wall.

ig, I've *Bad idea.*

The second her back hits the bricks, she pushes me away, trying t
out of my hold with a dazed expression on her face.

ocean- I spring back immediately, panic coursing through me. "Are you o
ask, my chest tight with nerves.

"What?" she whispers, unfocused, as though still under some kind c
when it*Fuck*, what did I do?

er clues "Are you okay?" I repeat louder, seemingly snapping her out of it.

it, and I "Yes, I'm fine," she says, standing up a little straighter. "Yes," she

again, with more conviction as a confident expression replaces her dc

look. "I stopped because I shouldn't be kissing you. I struggle to resis

1 sorry,times, but you were an asshole over something that wasn't even true
rd. I'mneed some time. And maybe you need to work for it."

her and With that she pushes off the wall and walks straight out my do

confident sway of her hips has me wanting her even more, but I can't l

on hersmall smirk that rises to my face as my eyes follow her out. She's

fucked up and I should work for it. But I've never worked for anythin

ed first.it comes to women. Never wanted to. Maybe it's time I forget ab
s moveoutside bullshit and focus on what's important...because when I do

have no doubt that she's the only thing that'll come to mind.

run my Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I bring up Lucy's contact and s

For thea text. The first of many.

wirling,

Wes: I'm sorry

y starts

walking **Wes: But also...you lied. So you need to give me a slight pass attitude**

o break I'm only half joking with the last text and I know she'll read it ex:
intended.

kay?" I **Lucy: Okay, you can have a small credit**

of spell. **Wes: Appreciated (wink emoji)**

**Wes: Do I get bonus points for the door opening and general c
your well-being, too?**
repeats

de-eyed **Lucy: Don't push your luck**

t you at

2. I just A smile pulls at my lips because while I may try to pretend otherwi
girl is under my skin, and I'm no longer sure I want her gone.

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help the

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Wes: But also...you lied. So you need to give me a slight pass for the attitude

I'm only half joking with the last text and I know she'll read it exactly as intended.

Lucy: Okay, you can have a small credit

Wes: Appreciated (wink emoji)

Wes: Do I get bonus points for the door opening and general care for your well-being, too?

Lucy: Don't push your luck

A smile pulls at my lips because while I may try to pretend otherwise, this girl is under my skin, and I'm no longer sure I want her gone.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lucy

It takes Wes one attempt at “working for it” for me to realize he’d had to do it before. His text messages last night should have clued me in, but I wasn’t exactly thinking straight because... *what the hell?* He told me Katie was his daughter? That I would have run off and kept that information from him—all this time, even after seeing him again. What kind of person would do that? *Oh right...me.*

My chest tightens as the guilt takes over, and I once again feel sick to my stomach. In fact I’ve kept Katie away from Greg. But these are two completely different situations. Apart from being a moody asshole at times, Wes is a wonderful man. The kind of man anyone would want as the father to their children. Greg... I can’t even put into words how much that man unnerves me. The thought of having him near Katie terrifies me. I know it’s not exactly fair to have kept them apart; I’m not stupid. But Katie is my number one priority and right now, I don’t trust him with her.

The situation with Wes is different. And despite Wes’s attempts to get back into my good graces being a bit comical, this isn’t a joke. I asked him to work for it because I wanted him to actually stop and think about v

wants. I have a daughter. He seems to be pissed off at me on a regular basis. And as much as I've tried to convince myself otherwise, I have feelings for him. It's not as easy to just mess around and see what happens. I need to get Katie into consideration and can't afford to be moping around with a heavy heart.

So here I am, staring at Wes with a confused expression on my face because he just handed me a coffee and said, "Are we good now?" *Yep, that's one of his attempts.*

Pair that with the donut he left on my desk this morning with an "I'm sorry if I made you mad" note, and you've got yourself the Wes Johnson groveling.

"Well?" he asks me when I don't answer.

"Well, what?"

"Are we good now?"

I can't help it; I burst out laughing before walking away. We're in the kitchen for God's sake, and there's a nonfraternization policy in place.

Wes follows me, just like I assumed he would, and when he enters my office he has a smile plastered on his face, though it's definitely fake. He's trying hard not to be grumpy, so I guess I should give him credit for that.

"Are we here to make out?" he says after closing the door, shocking me. The hell out of me. My eyes bulge until the corners of his lips pull into a wide grin, and he subtly bounces his eyebrows, making me laugh again. "Oh Wes, I know, I know. I'm not very good at this. I'll keep trying."

"What are you trying to achieve exactly?"

"Huh?" He takes a step forward, forcing me to step back.

"What is it you're trying to get out of this?"

Stepping forward again, he moves into my personal space and I

r basis.close. “You.”

ngs for Cue the butterflies. I am absolutely swooning right now. But he
to takened to know that.

broken “Okay then,” I say, pushing him back. “We’re not quite there yet.

you were.” I somehow manage to keep a composed expression, watc
ay faceWes chuckles before walking away without another word. And it’s n

), *that’s*the next day that I get his third attempt. And that one involves ca

definitely knows I like food, but I need something more. Something de

m sorry

guide to



We have a practice game on Saturday, meaning the day is so busy, I do
Wes at all. I may be finding his daily attempts to grovel hilarious, b
grown attached to them, and if I’m being honest, I’m a little off tod
not only missing the attempts, I’m missing him. And I hate that. *Ugh*
he staff *did I allow those feelings to seep back in?*

At five thirty, Logan arrives with Katie, after taking her and Liam
ers my the day. Liam has Katie’s hand tightly in his hold as they enter my offi
e. He’s I can’t help but smile at the protectiveness he’s already showing at nin
at. old. Just like Logan does for Dani and even me in some ways.

ing the “Lucy, can I take Katie to find Dani?” Liam says with an excited s
a smirk his face. “I know the way.”

.” I pretend to consider it for a second before giving him a smile and
It’s not far to Dani’s office, so I have nothing to worry about. I *hope*.

Katie squeals as Liam leads her away, and despite not needing
worried, I stand in the doorway and watch them until they round the
toward the marketing rooms.

eans in

“She’s fine,” Logan says from behind me, drawing my attention. “L doesn’t cautious kid. He’s not going to let her run off or anything.”

“I know, I’m just...never mind.” I smile as I walk back into the But, as busying myself at my desk.

hing as “You’re worried about the douche,” Logan says, reading between th

ot until “Yes.” I sigh. “I know he can’t get in here, but he’s always on my m

ike. He “Understandably, but you know we’d never let anything happen to

eper. Katie. Dani and I are just around the corner; Dylan and Joel are only .

away. Actually I should say Summer and Del because I’m pretty sur

two would kick his ass for you. Maybe more than the guys would.”

on’t see “You’re right. Especially about the girls. Summer would even kic

out I’ve ass if I told her to.”

ay. I’m I wink as I continue to pack up my things.

l, when Logan laughs. “No doubt. In fact, she’d take great pleasure in th

aside though, you’re safe.” He pauses for a second before adding,

out for hear there’s a certain ex-NFL giant who’d do just about anything for y

ice, and My jaw drops as my eyes flash to Logan’s mischievous grin. *How*

ie years *does he know anything about Wes?*

“Summer,” he laughs, answering my silent question.

mile on I’m about to play down our relationship when Katie comes barreli

the room, practically bouncing off the walls in excitement. “Wes w

l a nod. take us to the park to play football tomorrow, and then out for ice crea

we go, Mom? Can we go?”

g to be I bite back a nervous smile as I shake my head. *Of course he doe*

corner *played, Wes, well played.*

”You know Uncle Dylan loves playing football with you,” I say l

playing football isn’t a new thing for her.

iam's a "But he's not Wes, Mom. He's just Uncle Dylan."

Technically she's not wrong but poor Dylan.

room, "What about swimming? You promised we'd try again this week."

Katie pauses and gives me a look that almost breaks my heart. "Can
e lines.next week?"

ind." *Ugh.* I have to get her back in the water, but forcing the issue isn't g
you orwork.

an hour "Okay, sweetie. I'll talk to Wes."

e those "Yes!"

She hugs my legs and then takes off running again, back where sh
ck *your*from, and like before, I watch her until I see Dani walking her way
then do I relax.

"What were you going to say about Wes?" Logan says knowingly,
t. Jokesmy gaze away from the hallway. "Or should I say *deny* about Wes?"

"Plus I "Ha ha. There's nothing going on. He's just a nice guy who hap
ou." know that Katie likes football."

the hell "If you say so," he says with a smirk.



ng into As soon as Logan is gone, I dial Wes's number, fumbling when he a
ants to on the first ring with a simple hello, as if he *wasn't* expecting my call
m! Can *right.*

"You answered that pretty quickly."

s. *Well* "Why wouldn't I? I'm hopeful that this call might hold some goo
for me."

because

“Or it might be me putting you in your place for using my daughter
what you want,” I deadpan.

There’s silence until Wes curses under his breath, forcing me to hold
we try a laugh, waiting to see how this plays out.

“Fuck, I’m sorry. It wasn’t premeditated or anything. She popped in
going to office and started talking about football, and I genuinely wanted to talk
mean, getting to see you is a great bonus, but that’s not why I asked. I
to all this kid stuff, but I’m trying.”

He’s trying? My heart. Now I feel bad.

“It’s lovely, Wes. And Katie’s very excited. We’d love to go with you
y. Only He releases a breath, and I can picture him running his hand through
thick hair. “Thank fuck.”

“Tomorrow then?” I say and my heart races like I’m agreeing to a
know that’s not what this is, because this is about Katie, but I’m desperate
to excited to be spending any nonwork time with Wes.

“Yes, tomorrow,” he says and when I’m just about to hang up, he
“You could have walked over to say all this. I would have liked to see
My lips pull into a giddy smile—something that Wes seems to elicit
me—but I fight it.

“You’re right, Wes. I could have. Have a good night.”
l. Yeah, “You too, Lucy.” He chuckles as I hang up the phone.



Katie and I wait for Wes in front of the house the next day, with her
at my feet. Even though he offered to pick us up and take us out, I still
like it’s a chore for him to do it, so I’m trying to make it as easy for

r to get possible. I know I shouldn't feel like that, but I already get so many hugs from family and friends that I feel guilty whenever people do something good back for me.

Wes pulls up in his truck and immediately jumps out to meet us. I can't help but take in his appearance until he's walking our way, and when I see her. I'm locked in place as desire runs through me. *Kill me now.* He's wearing 'm news sweatpants that mold to his muscular thighs—and almost have me drop a fitted black tee, and a San Fran baseball cap. *Um, what?!* Is he trying to mess me up in front of my daughter?

ou.” I can't stop myself from staring as he approaches. The way he moves is enough to mesmerize me, and I'm struggling to concentrate.

When he reaches our side, he lightly flicks me underneath my chin. I then squat down to Katie's height, handing her a kid-sized football. She finally says hello. She's got a hundred of them at home, but she still lights up like my heart does. I'm giddy again, and it's not until Wes's eyes meet mine that I realize what just happened... Was he closing my dropped jaw? “You.” That's embarrassing.

When his laughter touches his eyes, I know he's read my thoughts without saying a word about it, he helps carry our things to his truck with a smile in place. And I'm not complaining about that.

“Do you want me to install the seat?” I ask after he lifts it into his truck. His forehead creases as he stares at the contraption, seemingly unsure of what to do.

car seat “Nope, I'm good,” he says after a beat, and sets out to get it done.

till feel Fifteen minutes pass and it's not only me laughing at Wes's frustration, but Katie's joined in too. “Why don't they make these things easier to install? Must be missing a part. Is it still in your car?”

andouts “Nope,” I say, pulling my lips into my mouth.

ng nice “Okay, so do you know what I’m doing wrong?”

“Yep.”

I don’t “Are you going to tell me?”

do, I’m Pushing between his rock-hard body and the door of his truck, I w
ng graymagic and have the seat installed in a couple of minutes, all whi
oling—watches me with great interest.

ying to “Now if you could just pull this as tight as you can, we’ll be on our
hand him the tightening strap and step out, biting back my triumph
ves hasuntil Wes grumbles and my laugh escapes me.

“I’m going to beat it next time,” he huffs out.

hin and “It’s not a competition.” I laugh in return.

ll as he

up, just



et mine True to his word, Wes devotes most of his attention to Katie through
' Jesus! day, and he should—he absolutely should—but I’m sure she wouldn
if he threw a tiny bit my way. And neither would I. Instead, I watch c
hts, but the sidelines—where Katie relegated me to—and try not to embarrass
with a by openly drooling again.

My phone vibrates on the grass as Wes throws Katie in the air, a
s truck. laughing as I reach for it, completely unaware of the pain it’s about t
cessing me.

**Unknown: Can we talk? This is my work number. I’m doing
ion, butwell for myself and I’d like to support you and Katie. Greg
install? I**

My heart jolts. I'm not sure why I keep thinking he'll give up. I married a man who tried to insinuate Katie wasn't his, but he's not stupid. I should have expected this.

I don't respond, and the phone continues to vibrate until I have two missed calls and another text.

le Wes

Unknown: Please, I just want to get to know her, and make up for my lost time and my lack of support

nt grin, What is he even saying? Does he want to pay child support? I ignore the message again and avoid looking at my phone for the rest of the day, determined not to let it get me down on an otherwise perfect afternoon.

After playing catch, Wes and Katie drop down on the blanket I've laid out and both go for their water bottles. Wes sighs dramatically after taking an abnormally large gulp, and I have to bite back a laugh when Katie mimics every move.

't mind "You're really good, kid," he says, smiling at Katie, and from the light gleam in the corner of his eyes, I can tell he's holding back a laugh too.

myself "I'm going to play when I get big," she says, stretching her arm up as if it will go, and then adds, "This was way better than swimming."

nd I'm Wes's confused eyes briefly flash my way before they're back on the ground. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to do swimming and Mom said I could skip it."

His eyes meet mine again, and this time there's a hint of concern. I shake my head to tell him it's fine, but his brows furrow for a moment before he smiles. "I love swimming. Why don't you want to go?"

ay have “I just don’t like it anymore,” Katie says with her arms crossed in d
xpectedher. In other words...conversation over.

Wes nods and replies, “Okay, good enough for me.” But I can tell h
missedto ask me about it.

“Who’s ready for ice cream?” he adds, changing the subject and
when Katie’s mood instantly lifts.
for the



ore hisWe eat way too much ice cream and get take-out sushi on the way ho
vowingidea of balancing out the good with the bad. Katie starts fading as soon
plate is clean, and even though you’d think that would mean an easy t
laid outfor her, it won’t. It’s like she gets a second wind as soon as the worc
king anmentioned.

nic his “All right, Katie. Say goodnight to Wes.”

“But Mooommm.”

ft in the “No buts. You’ve had a big day. It’s time for sleep. Wes is going
now. Aren’t you, Wes.”

as high He widens his eyes almost comically, clearly not expecting me to s
but when he sees my expression, he recovers. “Yep, I’m off. I’m so tir
Katie.says with an exaggerated yawn, as he raises his hands over his head.
shirt rises and a sliver of skin peeks out along with that V.
mouthwatering, I have to fight to keep my eyes on his face. “I had a
there. Iday. Thanks, Katie,” he continues, completely unaware of the effect
t beforeon me. “Can we do it again?”

Katie yawns right back at him, as do I—those things are contagious
she nods. “Yes, please.”

front of “Perfect. I’ll plan it with your mom. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

e wants We head off toward the bedrooms, and even though I thought myself clear that I didn’t want him to leave, I throw a quick glance o smiling shoulder to make sure that he hasn’t.

As soon as our eyes meet, he smiles and nods, putting my mind at ease. I need him here tonight, for so many reasons, and that smile is every



me, my

1 as her When I finally finish getting Katie off to sleep, I find Wes staring oedtimekitchen window. “Sorry about that,” I say as I approach. “Katie wanted to help. It took some bargaining to win her over.”

He spins around quickly with a furrowed brow, as if processing my question before shaking off his thoughts and smiling. “Sorry, I was in my head. What did you say?”

g home Releasing a breathy laugh, I move around him, pouring myself a glass of water. “It doesn’t matter. Thank you for today. It was fun.”

ay that, “You’re welcome. Katie’s a great kid.”

ed,” he “She has her moments. But I’ve always instilled it in her to behave like the others. So, at least we know she sometimes listens.”

It’s so “Meaning she only gives *you* hell?”

1 lovely “Something like that.” I smile.

he has “Sounds exactly like how her mom is with me,” he jokes, and I smile. A thought comes to mind.

s—then “I still can’t believe you thought that I’d keep her from you, Wes, but I’m bringing down the mood but feeling the need to talk to him about it.

He grimaces before running a hand through his hair. "I didn't believe it. But Luce, I barely trust myself anymore, let alone other people. I made "And why is that? Why do you have trust issues? You've mentioned never mybit but—"

"Going straight to the big questions, huh?"

I smile apologetically, biting my lip with a nod.

"Okay, fine. But if I'm stripping, then you're stripping."

"What?"

"We're both going to bare our souls."

I swallow a lump in my throat because, God, that makes me nervous. I got so much bottled up, but at the same time, this talk is needed. If we're going to move past everything that went wrong between us then we have to figure out why. "Okay," I say with a nod.

"Okay."

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glass of

around

ile until

" I say,

He grimaces before running a hand through his hair. “I didn’t want to believe it. But Luce, I barely trust myself anymore, let alone other people.”

“And why is that? Why do you have trust issues? You’ve mentioned a little bit but—”

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“Okay.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wes

Now that I've suggested we share all our secrets, I'm at a loss for to start. It's not that I have lots of them, but it's a part of me don't usually talk about.

Lucy leans back against the counter with her water to her lips, pees at me through her lashes. Her telling me I had to work for it—for her—made me stop and think about what I wanted, and she's it. She's what I've just been struggling with how to move forward from all the shitty life.

When the silence between us shifts toward awkward territory, I clear my throat and look down at my hands, clenching and unclenching fists. "I know I've mentioned this before, but I despise liars. I seem to despise liars for some reason, and it just got to a point where I had to say enough that I deserved better, and refuse to let those people into my life. My aside—I just..." I look up to see Lucy's remorseful eyes and her lip between her teeth as she nervously bites it. *Shit*. I probably should clarify. "This isn't about you. Not yet, anyway."

She huffs out a laugh. "Even so, I'm sorry for lying."

“Thanks, but you weren’t the only one to mess up back then,” seriously, very aware that I walked away first.

Lucy laughs but it’s a little forced. “You’re right, but let’s not p
blame game,” she says with a soft smile before motioning for me to go

“I had a girlfriend in college,” I start after giving Lucy a quick s
return. “For all of college, actually. She was always really supportive
football career, and understanding of my, uh...obsession with it. At
thought she was. But not long after I was drafted, I found out she’d
on me with another player on the team, and—”

r where “Bullshit!” Lucy exclaims, cutting me off, and I laugh at her reaction

y life I “Nope, that happened. And then I found out she’d actually been c
all through college. Kind of hedging her bets on who would make it
earn the most money. I—”

ring up “Are you fucking kidding me?” she says, cutting me off again. “Wh
—really of a person does that? I hope you dumped her ass there and then. The
I want. If I could... What? Too much?”

t in my Her question snaps me to attention and I realize I’ve been staring
finally with my jaw on the floor. My pants also feel a little tighter beca
ing my God...

o attract “Badass, protective Lucy is hot. So fucking hot. And you could n
ough... too much. Don’t ever think that.”

y father Lucy blushes, which only makes her more beautiful, something I
trapped think was possible. She brushes her hair behind her ear, giving her
arify... chance to briefly look away with a shy smile. I’m not even sure what I
on her reaction, but I can’t stop staring at her.

“Protective Wes is pretty good too,” she says when she looks up
causing me to laugh.

"I say "You ain't seen nothing yet," I joke. "Actually, in honesty, I wasn't I'd ever been protective." *Out loud.*

lay the "And that makes it so much better. But I've seen it a few time on. shrugs as though it's no big deal, but it is. I'm glad I've made h mile inprotected, because I have no doubt, I'd do pretty much anything for he e of my "I care about you, Luce," I let her know in case it's not obvious. No : least how pissed I was at her, I've never stopped caring.

cheated "I know. I've never once questioned that."

She knows. I feel an ache in my chest that I almost want to rub. I h n. idea what's causing it, but I think it's safe to say it has something to heatingthe iridescent blue eyes staring back at me and the incredible wom. big andbelong to. A woman I've foolishly been pushing away. I almost want t at how stupid I've been, pretending she doesn't affect me. And I'm a at kindsay something to that effect when she gets in first.

e nerve. "Anyway, sorry. We were talking about your ex."

Yup, we were, but I'm definitely happier now that the conversat ; at hermoved on...

use my "You broke up with her immediately, right?"

...but Lucy clearly needs answers and she deserves them.

ever be "I did." I sigh, running my hand down my face. "Even before I fo about the college stuff. But that wasn't the end of us."

I didn't Lucy hisses, and I chuckle despite this part of my life being anyth self thefunny.

rought "Her family started making my life hell. Suggesting that becaus been with me through college—before I got 'too big for my own g) again,they put it—that she was somehow owed money or something. They a said she'd settle for fame. As if that was something I could give her.

t aware “It got to the point of being borderline threatening. Her brother was waiting for me before practice, or her father would be blowing up my house.” SheThe coaching staff agreed to let me start late and leave early, to see if I could get a feel down without having to call in authorities, or the media circus that would follow. But the media found out anyway which only encouraged my family even more.”

Lucy gasps, her hand flying to her mouth. “Jesus. So you were actually in trouble with the team?”

“No. I mean, yes, it affected my game, but they were understanding and did what they could to do with it.”

“Why didn’t the media know that? The article I read painted you in a bad light.”

I blow out a breath because she’s not wrong. The writer of that article did not fact check.

“The media did. At least, they found out pretty quickly. Once our PR team got involved, the stories died down after only a day or so. The article was one guy latching on to a story he must have read years ago. That’s why it was never released. Though I still don’t understand how you got hold of it.”

“I’d like to know that too. My ex sent it to me, but it’s not like he was out with anyone in the media. At least, he wasn’t when we were dating.”

I shrug, because even though it’s a loose thread that’s been driving me crazy, I don’t have any answers.

Lucy looks to the ceiling before biting her lip again, hesitation clearing her face.

“What is it?”

“That explains why the media thought you were having issues back then but what about with me? Why were they saying you’d fallen back in

ould be pattern?”

phone. I grimace and rest my face in my hands, subtly kneading my temples. It died is the part no one knows. The part I’ve kept hidden from everyone.

“I lost *some* focus again, briefly, but I knew I’d eventually find a way to balance my ex’s between you and football, so I was fine with it. I wasn’t letting it slip down like last time.”

“You lost focus?”

“Yeah.” Taking a deep breath, I push off the counter and grip the edge of my neck. “I have trouble quieting my mind. It’s been that way since I was a kid. It’s why I try to focus on one thing. Dedicating all my time and energy into my football. When something else comes along it can take me a while to find cohesion in my head, but as soon as I do, I’m fine. It’s why I struggle to do anything else. I did back then, and it’s why word got out that I was struggling again with you. I just didn’t have you long enough to reconcile it all before it was over.”

Taking a breath from my outpouring of information, I glance at you and find her staring back at me with glassy eyes, her lips sucked into a tight line, as though she’s staving off the tears. *Dammit!* I do not want to see her like this. “I’m sorry, Lucy. I’m sorry.”

“Lucy, I didn’t tell you that so you’d pity me or feel bad, I—”

“No, that’s not...” She reaches out and grabs my hand, linking our fingers. “I don’t feel either of those things. I...have you ever spoken to a therapist about it? Maybe seen... God, I don’t know. I treat the body, not the mind. I’m sorry about her—”

“Thank you,” I interrupt, giving Lucy’s fingers a squeeze as I smile. “My mom took me to see a psychologist as a kid, but back then they blamed it on me being a boy and having a small attention span. These days I imagine I would have been diagnosed with something. After a bit of research, I’d guess it’d li-

ADHD. But that's not the point. I'm sorry if that article led you to
es. This you were messing with my life, because that's not the case. I was mo
happy to have you in it."

balance Lucy looks away and sniffs before her gaze comes back to mine. I h
get me I'm hurting her. It wasn't my intention, but once I started there was n
back. It's as if her knowing everything will somehow make all my
away.

back of "I'm sorry too," she says, mimicking my hand squeeze. "I coul
I was a handled that situation better. I was freaking out, and I didn't want my
energy become yours."

beat to "Oh, but what a wonderful mess she is," I say with a wink and
ruggled Lucy's entire face lighting up.

1 you. I "She's more than wonderful. She's my world, and while I'm not s
' do anything differently if I was faced with the same choices, I sti
look at about what I missed out on because of how I handled things
ed into specifically what we missed out on."

want her My lips curl into a smirk as I pull Lucy closer, until our bodies
"You thought about me?"

"Yeah, I thought about you," she whispers as her spare hand gr
fingers. waist, lighting me up inside. From the moment her lips first touche
omeone Lucy's every touch has awakened me, and this is no different. Being
ind, but her is not an option anymore. In fact, it's never been an option, so v
fuck did I take so long to realize that?

le. "My Letting go of her hand, I lift her up and seat her on the counter
ed it on stepping between her open legs. Her breath hitches as I brush a lock
gine I'd away from her face. "You're so beautiful, Lucy. And while I may
kely bewish things had turned out differently between us, I'd never want

believe change a thing either. Katie's perfect; you're perfect. And I want to
re thank know both of you properly. Catch up on the last few years. I want to
everything. At least, anything you're willing to share."

ate that Lucy nods as a lone tear escapes, running along her slightly flushed
o going until it hits her lips. She wipes it away and then shocks me by push
hurt go back and dropping her feet to the floor. "I'm sorry, I know I said I'd b
soul if you did, but I can't. I...I don't want you to think less of me."

ld have "What?" *This took a turn I didn't see coming.* "Lucy, that's not g
mess to happen. Unless you're about to tell me you've been lying about
paternity and she really *is* mine."

I relish That gets me a tiny laugh, but I can tell she's still nervous.

"No, she's definitely not yours. But I have been lying about her, jus
sure I'd you. Don't you hate liars in general?"

ll think *Fuck!* I'm not at all happy about my truths making her panic ab
. More own. "No, I don't hate *liars*. I hate *lying*. There's a difference an
depends on context."

o touch. Lucy blows out a breath and closes her eyes. When she opens them
see the moment she decides she's going to tell me. And the pain that
rips my from that breaks my heart. I can't stand seeing her upset like this.

d mine, "I was—"

without "Lucy, stop." Reaching out, I clutch her shoulders and pull her
why the protective hug. "You don't have to tell me anything. It's okay."

She mumbles something into my chest until I move back and g
before some breathing room.

of hair "You're right; I don't. But I want to. You stripped, and now it's my
always Swallowing a lump in my throat, I nod, suddenly nervous. Maybe
you to ready for this.

to get to “When you found me in the parking garage that day, I’d just found out I was pregnant,” she begins, unaware of my worry. “Something you don’t know. But what you don’t know, and the reason I wasn’t handling it so well was because...” She pauses and an unease takes over me, fearing what she’s about to say. I have a feeling I know, but fuck I hope I’m wrong. My stomach clenches in my chest as I wait for her to continue, but when she doesn’t, I step forward and pull her into my arms once more, silently rocking her back and forth until she takes a deep breath and steps back.

Katie’s “My ex and I had a complicated relationship. I recognize now that he was really good at emotionally mistreating me but then building me up to make me feel that I never noticed, even when people were pointing it out. And I hate that I’ve always thought I was a strong woman but I let him...” She trails off, and I feel like the air’s being squeezed out of my lungs, as I watch this beautiful woman have a soul break in front of me.

and it all “Anyway, we had broken up a couple of months before Katie conceived.”

again I She pauses again, and her gaze drops to the floor.

comes “I swore I’d never sleep with him again, but I...”

My heart lodges in my throat. Her posture and expression—those features I can see—scream guilt, and though it pains me to think she’s fallen back into that manipulative asshole, we’re all allowed moments of weakness.

Stepping forward, I lift her chin until she looks up at me, and my heart gives her stops when her eyes once again well with tears.

“Lucy, you did nothing wrong. You—”

turn.” “I didn’t want to.”

I’m not “What?”

“I said no.”

id out I “What!”

already Grabbing her face in my hands, I sink down until we’re eye level, n
so welllocked on hers. “Lucy, did he force himself on you?”

at she’s “No, no. It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t rape if that’s what you’re th
ly heartWe’d slept together many times before. I just didn’t want to do it *that t*
t, I step *The fuck?*

ack and “Lucy, that’s *rape.*”

I want to fucking murder this guy, but I also never want to leave
he wasside.

enough She shakes her head back and forth, over and over, fear in her eye
ite that.it’s not. We were in a relationship before then. He just—”

off and “Lucy, he *raped* you.”

autiful “No. No. No.” She shakes her head frantically before burying her
her hands. “It’s my fault.” *Fuck!* Maybe that wasn’t the best way to
ie wasthat.

After stilling her, I press a kiss to her forehead and lower my voice
to sound somewhat calm while I really just want to rip some fucker ap.

“No, Luce,” I say, just above a whisper. “Nothing about this is you
ell, theAnd even if you don’t classify it as rape, he still hurt you and th
ie wentfucking okay. I’m guessing this means you didn’t report it?”

ness. “They wouldn’t have done anything. I had no proof.”

y world I hate that she’s probably right. They wouldn’t have done anythi
someone should. *Her ex is a dead man.*

“Did you have bruises? Anything you could have shown them?” I’n
so hard to keep it together but it’s killing me inside.

Lucy shakes her head again as the tears start to fall. “I let him,” s
through sniffles, clearly trying to fight it. “I didn’t want him to hurt r

let him do it.”

my gaze My heart shatters into a million pieces, and the fragments cut me
blade.

inking. Without another word, I lift her into my arms and carry her to t
ime.” before sitting down and locking her tightly in my hold. “I’m so sorry,
hate that you have such an awful memory for what should have
beautiful moment.”

Lucy’s “I can’t even regret it,” she whispers, burrowing her face into my sh
“I know,” I whisper back, and we stay like that in our comforting e
s. “No,—for hours or minutes, I don’t know—until she pulls away.

“Sorry, I don’t know why I got so emotional just then. I’ve mov
this. I’m good.”

face in “Lucy, you don’t have to apologize, and you definitely don’t have t
handlepast it. Fuck, I don’t even know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I shouldn’t still be thinking abo
, tryingIt’s not like I have permanent scars.”

art. “Not all scars are visible, Luce.”

ir fault. With a quivering lip, her chin drops and she shies away from me.

at’s not Reaching forward, I tentatively lift her face with a single finger, a
lets me. “Your strength blows my mind, Lucy. Don’t ever hide awa
who you are, because I happen to think you’re incredible.”

ng. But She sniffs again, as a hint of a smile graces her lips.

“Thank you. You’re a little bit alright yourself.”

1 trying My mouth pulls into a crooked grin, wanting to smile but also nee
ask one more question.

he says “Sorry to keep talking about him, but do you see him at all?”

ne, so I Lucy wipes the tears from her face as she shakes her head. “I’ve on

him twice since it happened—after work on the night of Aaron’s
like a party, and when he came to the stadium. He’s also messaged a few times
to see Katie.”

he sofa “What?!” I recoil, a sick feeling taking over. “That was him? But
Lucy. I there. You said it wasn’t Katie’s dad... I left you alone with him. *Fuck*
been ahead drops back to the sofa and I take a deep breath. Lucy doesn’t
n
going crazy right now. “I’m sorry, I just... I would have gone with you
loudly known.”

mbrace She blinks her eyes as fresh tears glisten there, then frames my face
with
hands, giving me a smile. *A smile*. “You did one better, Wes. You protected
Katie, and that means more to me than you’ll ever know.”

Actually, I think I’m starting to understand.

o move But still that brings me no comfort. I want to protect them both. I want
my
man gone.

ut this. Lucy snuggles into me after that, as though we’re about to watch a
movie
when in reality she just tore me apart. I feel sick, I feel murdered
mostly, I feel like I’ve let her down. I should have been there for her
when
she found out she was pregnant. I should have *never let her go*.

and she As I mindlessly run my fingers up and down her back, I think
of
y from everything we’ve shared tonight. We both let go of so much heavy
burden
and I feel a deeper connection to her because of it. She’s one hundred
percent
ingrained in my soul. I never meant for that to happen, and I’m not
ready
when it occurred, but now that it has, I don’t ever want it to change.

ding to *Fuck!* This moment feels life-changing.

My hand stops moving, frozen in midair as realization hits. This
moment
is
changing.

ily seen Lucy gazes up at me with a puzzled expression, seemingly awa

dinner something just happened, without knowing what. Our eyes lock as
times to figure out how to put it into words. What could possibly be enough to
every feeling I've got building up inside me. Nothing comes to
..I was until... "Can I kiss you?" I ask, breaking our silence.

"k!" My Lucy's lips pull into a soft smile as her brows furrow. "Since when
eed me ask?"

u if I'd *Since I realized your kiss means so much more to me than I thought
and I'm not sure you feel the same.*

e in her "Since you told me I have to work for it. We may have talked, but
otected than that, I'm not sure if I've done enough," I whisper to her instead
actual thoughts.

Lucy's breath hitches and her fingers find their way into my hair
ant that she lowers her face to mine. "Kiss me," she whispers, her eyes shining
need.

movie, So I do.

us, but Our lips brush once before I cup her jaw and pour everything I have
r when the moment.

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< about

uggage,

percent

lly sure

is life-

are that

something just happened, without knowing what. Our eyes lock as I try to figure out how to put it into words. What could possibly be enough to convey every feeling I've got building up inside me. Nothing comes to mind, until... "Can I kiss you?" I ask, breaking our silence.

Lucy's lips pull into a soft smile as her brows furrow. "Since when do you ask?"

Since I realized your kiss means so much more to me than I thought it did, and I'm not sure you feel the same.

"Since you told me I have to work for it. We may have talked, but other than that, I'm not sure if I've done enough," I whisper to her instead of my actual thoughts.

Lucy's breath hitches and her fingers find their way into my hair before she lowers her face to mine. "Kiss me," she whispers, her eyes shining with need.

So I do.

Our lips brush once before I cup her jaw and pour everything I have into the moment.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Wes

This kiss feels different from any other we've shared. It's unhurried, explorative, and it's taking over my body and mind. Lucy's legs are spread sideways across my lap and while I love it, I need to be closer to her. It isn't enough. I'm about to break our connection to reposition her when she lifts up, twisting her body around until she's straddling my legs, and she sinks down on top of me, never once separating our lips—like she controls my mind. My hips rise involuntarily as I groan into her mouth.

Massaging her tongue with my own, I push my hands into her hair, cupping her face so I can deepen the kiss, as my thumb runs along her jaw, my fingers curling into her possessively. *Possessively. Shit.* I loosen my grip and let her to drop my hands until Lucy whimpers and forces them back where they came from, grinding into me at the same time. Fuck, this woman blocks my mind, but this isn't how I wanted tonight to play out.

Despite Lucy's objections, I release my hold on her face and move my hands under her ass, lifting us both off the couch. Moving toward the hallway, I look out for any sign that I've found her bedroom while she holds on for dear life, as if there's even the slightest possibility I'd do

There's not. Right now, I can't even fathom there being a reason big for me to ever let her go.

"Where are we going?" She giggles against my lips as her fingers curl over my shoulders. "I can walk."

Yeah, that's not happening.

"I have no fucking idea," I say honestly. "But this moment is bigger than any quickie on your couch."

Lucy's breath hitches as her legs clench around me, and I've got to admit that's a pretty awesome reaction.

"Next door on your left," she breathes out hurriedly, angling her head so she can watch where I'm going.

I push through the partly open door and pause, needing to take a moment; this isn't like this is our first time, but it's our first time in almost five years and I want to savor it.

"Do you need further direction?" Lucy asks before sucking her lip into her mouth. My length twitches at the tone of her words, and I loosen my grip until she lowers enough to feel what she does to me. Sucking in a breath, my head drops back slightly, making me twitch again. I'm not one for giving direction. But with Lucy it's different, and I need her to know that she never has to do something she doesn't want to. In or out of the bedroom, she's always in control, Lucy. Even if I have you pushed up against the wall, slamming into you from behind. *You. Have. Control.* Don't ever forget that.

"For you, I'll do anything. If you want to drive this, drive it. You're always in control, Lucy. Even if I have you pushed up against the wall, slamming into you from behind. *You. Have. Control.* Don't ever forget that." Lucy gasps before crashing her lips to mine and mumbling "bed" into my mouth. True to my word, I do as she says, lowering her to the ground before moving to lie on top of her. She pushes me back and sits up, crossing her arms in front of her. Something I was not expecting.

enough “Get naked,” she says, taking the *control* thing very seriously. It’s
it’s going to take some getting used to. I like to lead. This will be a cha
dig into “Get naked,” she says again, motioning for me to stand before del
the words that are music to my ears. “And then I’m handing you th
Every part of me is yours.”

r than a *Holy fuck!* Those words don’t just hit my ears or my cock, but m
Having Lucy’s trust is everything.

otta say I take my time peeling my clothes from my body, watching Lucy th
time, reveling in the way her crystal-blue eyes darken as she squirms
body sobed. And when I’m down to my briefs, I pause, waiting to see if h
travels or stays locked on my face. It travels. And it doesn’t move fro
moment. until I’m pumping my length in my hand and moving over her, suck
e yearslip she was nibbling into my mouth.

“Your turn,” I say, hovering above her, chuckling when her eyes
into herher body and then back to me, her brows furrowing adorably.

ny grip “Do you want me to undress myself?” she asks, uncertainty in her v
ath, her “Absolutely not. I’ve been waiting to do this for too long. I’m g
to take my time until you’re writhing beneath my touch. Begging me for
e won’t Lucy visibly swallows and nods, giving me the permission I so desp
m. need. And then my lips are back on hers, not wasting another second
/ou arethe waistband of her leggings down, letting my knuckles brush agai
is wall, skin as I do. She shivers at my touch, and I harden more than I thoug
t that.” possible. Taking my time is going to be a test for both of us, but wo
againstthe end.

nattress Sitting up, I pull her along with me so I can lift her tee above her he
rossinglips immediately go to the swell of her breasts, pushed up by her ba
lace bra. Her chest flushes the most beautiful soft pink, contrasting

hot but with the icy color of the lace, and it's an image I'm almost certain I'll challenge. get out of my head.

livering Laying her back gently, I release one breast from the cup of her reins, sucking the pebbled nipple into my mouth, as my hand squeezes the loving the feel of her filling my palm.

my soul. Lucy moans, and her chest rises as she quietly cries out. "God, yes stop."

the entire *Not a chance.*

is on the After giving the same attention to her other breast, I kiss my way down her gaze stomach, leaving her bra in place. She shivers again as I feather them there along her skin. She's so reactive to my every touch that it takes everything in my power not to skip ahead and push myself inside her. But I hold steady at least until I've pulled her leggings and panties completely down her legs. I flash to left her lying breathlessly in nothing but the lace of her bra.

My eyes rake over her entire body, needing to memorize it all, no voice. I'm convinced that something else isn't waiting around the corner to tear us apart. She's so fucking beautiful with her flushed ivory skin pebbled in more." bumps, her hair billowing around her, and her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. Being here with her is like a dream, something I thought would happen. And I never want this moment to end. Especially when she blushes again, hiding her face behind her hands. Her vulnerability has my heart beating out of my chest, knowing what it in the moment means to us both.

I press a kiss to her core, enjoying the giggle it gets me, before moving on. My hand on her body and taking her hands away from her eyes, pressing kisses to her blue palms.

directly "Please don't hide away. I'm staring at you because you're breath

ll never Lucy, and you shouldn't be shy about that."

"Oh yeah, my mom body and caesarean scar are perfection," she says, sarcastically, thinking she's joking. And yet, they're exactly my thoughts. "Everything about you is perfect, Lucy. *Everything*," I reassure her, running my fingers gently across the areas she just mentioned to make sure she knows I'm including them. "You couldn't be more perfect if you were mine. Actually, that's a lie. You'd be more perfect if you were *mine*."

Her gaze softens and she opens her mouth to say something, but I shut her down with my lips. Yes, I want her to be mine, but that's not a discussion for now. Right now, I need inside her more than my next breath.

Reaching for the condom I left on the bed, I quickly sheathe myself in it, lining up with her entrance. When my eyes lock on Lucy's, she's nodding, as though anticipating my silent question. *Yes, she's ready.*

I push into her in one quick movement—I'm unable to go slowly at all—but when she cries out, I pause. "Fuck." She's so tight that I'm struggling to focus on anything except the vise-like grip she has me in, but that sound like a happy reaction, and I can't proceed until I know. "Are you hurt? Did I hurt you?"

"No. God, no." Lucy shakes her head and half sits up, palming my chest in her hand. "It hurt, but you didn't hurt me. And I was expecting that. It's been a while for me."

"How long is a while?" I rasp as Lucy takes a breath, pulling me down until her lips meet my ear.

"You," she whispers and I almost explode on the spot. *Jesus Christ.*

"Shit, Lucy. Are you sure you want to do this? Are you r—"

"God, yes! Please."

She falls back to the bed, pulling me down with her until my elbows

mattress beside her. After wrapping her legs around my waist, she breathes into me, the angle giving us a deeper connection.

Pumping into her, I follow her cues, listening to her moans and words to guide my speed and intensity. When I feel her walls tighten like sureme, more than they already were, I grip her legs, pushing them toward my chest before slowly rocking my hips, hoping the new angle and friction is enough to send her flying.

I have my answer in seconds, when her body jolts against the bed and she quietly cries out my name before wrapping her arms around my neck, forcing my weight down on top of her. Abandoning my grip on her legs, I pump hard a few more times until my body stiffens and I follow her to the edge, sighing into her ear as my body comes down from the high.

“As. I. Was. Saying...Perfection.”

Lucy giggles and the sound hits me straight in the chest. I don't let her as I roll to her side. Instead, I bring her with me until she's snuggled under my arm.

We're both silent—for how long I don't know—and I want to spend the night here, but I know that's wrong. Katie doesn't need to wake up by cheektaking over her space. We need to do this the right way and—fuck! Katie's pain. As if I've woken her with my thoughts, she calls out “*Mom*,” making me jump so quickly, I fall off the bed. *Oomph!* My gaze springs to the doorway, but her head is still closed. *What the fuck?* Her voice definitely came from the room. Lucy's soft laughter fills the silent space as her head peers over the edge of the bed, and she looks at me with an amused expression.

“Whatcha doin'?” she asks, her grin widening.

“Where's Katie?” I rush out, panicked, ignoring her apparent delight. She hits the stress. *How is she laughing right now?*

icks up “Ah, in her room,” she says like it’s an obvious answer
disappearing from my sight.

ispered “But...what—”

around An object flies into my lap, cutting off my question as Lucy reappears
ard her “You really *do* only focus on one thing in life. Are you actually co
ion are right now?” she asks with a lightness to her voice, clearly mocking me

I look down at the screen in my hand as it comes to life and Katie c
and she again. A fucking monitor. I know what they are. *God, I’m a dumbass.*

ack and “Apparently so,” I joke as Lucy laughs again before jumping off l
’ legs, I and pulling on her panties and a silk robe.

over the “I’ll be right back,” she says, motioning to the hallway. “There’s an
through there if you need it.” She looks down at my junk as she poi

her shoulder toward the door she’s referring to, and it’s my turn to la
at go of *myself*. Because I’m a fucking mess. What a way to end a beautiful mo

uggled I’m just walking back into the room, half-dressed, as Lucy gently p
door closed behind her and moves to my side.

end the “I’m sorry.” She sighs. “I wish you could stay.” She runs a finger
to me down my chest, following the motion with her eyes until I lift he
tie. forcing her to meet my gaze before giving her a chaste kiss.

ing me “I completely understand. We need to figure out what this is before
oor, but Katie involved. We didn’t wake her, did we?”

’ room. Lucy giggles. “No, not at all. She wasn’t even awake; she calls ou
side of sleep sometimes. And thank you. You’re right about needing to figure
out, but I do want to say that I’m—”

“Can I take you on a date?” I rush out, cutting her off. “Just the tw
it in my Before you say what you were about to say.”

A shocked expression briefly crosses her face, but she recovers ar

before again. "I'd love that. I'll just need to arrange someone to watch Katie."

"Take all the time you need. Any nonwork time I have is yours."

I brush a kiss across her forehead and then step back, reaching for my keys. Lucy watches my every move with her finger between her teeth, making it very difficult for me to depart.

We say our goodbyes and I head to my truck, taking my time as I pull out until I'm seated inside that I realize I still have unanswered questions about her. Her surname for one, and whether or not the asshole supporting her bed working full-time can't be easy on her and Katie, so my guess is he can't.

All questions that will have to wait for our date.

But if she thinks I'm keeping my distance at work until then, it's over absolutely mistaken. I've waited too long for this; staying away is enough. A option.

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id nods

again. “I’d love that. I’ll just need to arrange someone to watch Katie.”

“Take all the time you need. Any nonwork time I have is yours.”

I brush a kiss across her forehead and then step back, reaching for my tee.

Lucy watches my every move with her finger between her teeth, making it very difficult for me to depart.

We say our goodbyes and I head to my truck, taking my time as I do. It’s not until I’m seated inside that I realize I still have unanswered questions about her. Her surname for one, and whether or not the asshole supports her. Working full-time can’t be easy on her and Katie, so my guess is he doesn’t. All questions that will have to wait for our date.

But if she thinks I’m keeping my distance at work until then, she’s absolutely mistaken. I’ve waited too long for this; staying away is not an option.

Chapter Thirty

Lucy

I barely sleep after Wes leaves, with my mind too wired after everything that happened during the last few hours. Wes's confession and I completely threw me. I don't know what I was expecting him to say, but I definitely didn't think he'd open himself up like that and leave himself so vulnerable. My heart broke for him. To lose your girlfriend and to be harassed like that. To be moving through life knowing your mind works differently to others but never being given the tools to deal with it. I know he's coping. He's an amazing man. But would his life be easier if he had my help?

Then there was my confession and Wes's reaction to it. The emotion in his voice made me feel like he wanted to take on some of the responsibility for what happened, even though I didn't know him back then. The pressure he put on me, the vibe he threw out had my heart racing, and when he handed me the keys to the car, I almost died. He's nothing like any of the guys I've been with before. I have to wonder why that is. I can't help questioning what I did to attract the wrong men when I was younger. And how I managed to finally attract the right one, only for it to be the wrong time.

We have a second chance, and for the first time in what feels like forever I actually want to take that leap of faith, to risk my heart being broken because if I don't, I may end up worse off. But at the same time, I'm not sure I want to bring him into my mess with Greg.

When Monday comes, I'm slammed with work and don't get to see him all, which seems to be happening too often for my liking. But since I'm hunting him down on the field, there's not much I can do.

On my drive home, I call Dylan with a giddy nervousness running through me, but when he answers, all that subsides.

“Brother from the same mother, how are you?”

He laughs and I picture him shaking his head. “Sometimes I worry about you, Luce.”

“Aww, I love you too, baby bro.”

“Alright, what do you want?”

I knew he'd be on to me, but having him ask makes it harder for me to chicken out.

“I was wondering if you and Summer wanted to try an overnighter with a child before your little one comes along.”

“A child?”

“More specifically, *my* child.”

Dylan huffs out a laugh and then he's silent for a beat. And that kills me. *Why? Why is he silent?*

“That's pretty huge, Lucy.”

Shit!

“I know. Sorry, it was a long shot. It's okay; you've got a lot going for you.”

“No, Lucy. I meant that's pretty huge for *you*. Won't it be the first time

rever, I I sigh because yes, it will be. But I was hoping he wouldn't bring
ken justso the guilt didn't take over.

terrified "Yes, and it is huge. Maybe I shouldn't..."

"Lucy, you absolutely should, and we'd love to spend the night with
Wes at You know that. Don't overthink this. I only have one concern."

hort of I swallow a lump in my throat as there's a good chance his concern
make me change my mind.

through "Is this for Wes? And do I need to have words with him before
out?"

I'm so tense that when I burst out laughing I almost swerve off the
y about "Nope, definitely not. You are not having words with anyone."

"But it is Wes?"

"Yeah, it is," I admit quietly.

"Good. I'm okay with that. Just promise me you'll take things slow
r me to careful. You're strong, Lucy. Always have been. But..."

"I know. And my days of choosing the wrong guy are over. I promise
: with a Dylan laughs. "That's not where I was going with that, but yes,
made some questionable choices. Although, at least you never dated
despite his attempts."

"There's still time," I joke and am blessed with my little brother's
ills me. laughter. He's always acted like a protective *big* brother. Ever since we
young. And I love him to death for it.

"Thanks, Dyl. Talk to Summer and let me know what night works
fit in with you."

on and "Will do. Love ya, Sis."

"Love you too."

me?"

that up



I'm rushing back from a morning meeting the next day, already short
1 Katie. for an appointment, when Wes appears in the hallway in front of me,
in his eye. *What's he up to?*

1 might "Wes, I don't have time. I have to—"

He pulls me into his arms and cuts me off with a bruising kiss, right
you go open, where anyone can see. And God, does it have my heart racing
mind in a puddle on the floor. *What was I doing again?*

ie road. His hands cup my face as his tongue pushes into my mouth, molding
mine and sending a shiver right through me. His kiss is so intoxicating
want it to stop, but somewhere deep in the back of my mind I
should...for some reason. Something to do with—

and be *Shit!*

I push him away and take a step back, scanning the halls as I do. "W
se."
you doing?" I whisper-yell, with my hands on my hips as though I'm
you've when not two seconds earlier I was ready to jump him.

1 Luke, "Saying hello." He shrugs like it's no big deal.

"Your *hello* could get us both fired."

relaxed "Let them try. They can't fill the job I currently have, remember
ve were need me more than I need them. And as for you? If they fired you, I'd

Ugh! I want to stay mad at him but it's hard when he says nice s
i. We'll that.

"What about the players? You'd be letting them down."

Wes's head drops back, and he grunts as though that realization
him. "Damn those fuckers for growing on me."

I can't help but laugh until I remember the other reason I shouldn't have been kissing him.

of time "I've got to go, but set up a meeting and we'll talk."

a glint Wes gives me a look that screams "you're kidding me, right?" then I

"Okay, Lucy. I'll book a time."

And with that he's off, leaving me frozen on the spot, needing a moment in the process what just happened. He said he wanted a date, but are we and my now?



ng with

I don't know The morning flies by, and when I finally check my phone at lunch, I know I message from Dylan.

Little bro: How's Thursday night?

What are A giddy feeling takes over me.

I angry,

Lucy: Perfect. Thank you

Thursday night. Only two days away. Butterflies flutter around my stomach as a small smile plays on my lips. I feel like a schoolgirl with her first crush. It's been so long since I've felt this nervous anticipation. A part of me wants to quit. Wes is really the only guy to ever elicit these feelings. And we're back on track. Finally. *I hope.*

When the last of my duties for the day are done, I start cleaning my workspace until I hear the rap of knuckles on my door, Wes's silent announcement. He pokes his head through the open space before I've even answered, and his small smile almost takes my worries away.

i't have "You didn't accept my meeting request. Too busy for me now?"

He raises an eyebrow as he walks farther into the room, and I bar
laugh. The contrast between this Wes and the one from last week can
laughs. described as black and white. He's a completely different person. M
the guy I met all those years ago. I'm about to tell him just that wher
ment toenters the room, not even bothering to knock.

a thing "Lucy, do you have the report on Easton, I... Wes." He nods by
greeting before his eyes shoot to mine, a look of annoyance cross
features. *Wes really has no friends here.*

"Don't you knock?" Wes demands, and I have to bite back a smi
have a *that's why.* Guess he hasn't changed as much as I thought.

"Do you have a reason to be here?" Aaron counters, causing Wes to
"Same reason you have. I wanted Easton's report."

He's full of shit, sort of, but I've got to hand it to him for thinking
feet *and* for not telling Aaron why he's really here, since he said he
give a shit about his job.

"Wes, thanks for stopping by. I'll have the report ready Th
evening." My eyes lock on his, hoping he understands my meani
nd mywhen his face lights up with a smile, I know that he has.

with my "Thursday is perfect. I'll pick it up then."

ctually, "Thank you."

ack on He turns to Aaron and his smile morphs into a smirk. "Aaron, al
pleasure. Bye, Lucy."

y work With that he disappears out the door, whistling as he goes. *Whistlin*
gnaturea little shit because no one would be that happy about a report on a
re I'vethat's barely injured, and since Aaron is staring at me like we've both
minds, I think it's safe to say he's definitely on to us.

“Thursday, really? Why’s it going to take so long?”

“I’ve got some patients who have more pressing injuries and I need only their reports done for third parties.”

Aaron nods and departs, because that’s a plausible excuse and a complete lie, even though I will definitely have the report done by tomorrow afternoon at the latest.

With Aaron gone, I finish packing up and head to my car feeling unsure about the direction my life’s heading right now. It’s only as I hit the summer evening air that I check my phone. *Big mistake.* I never respond. And Greg, and now it’s too late.

Unknown: I’m here. See you when you finish work

sneer.

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“Thursday, really? Why’s it going to take so long?”

“I’ve got some patients who have more pressing injuries and I need to get their reports done for third parties.”

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With Aaron gone, I finish packing up and head to my car feeling happy about the direction my life’s heading right now. It’s only as I hit the fresh summer evening air that I check my phone. *Big mistake*. I never responded to Greg, and now it’s too late.

Unknown: I’m here. See you when you finish work

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Chapter Thirty-One

Lucy

My heart stops as soon as I see my car. Greg's leaning against the driver's door, looking calm and collected in fitted jeans and a sweater. I'll always find him attractive, only now when I look at him my insides squirm and my skin prickles—and not in a good way.

“I know she's my kid, Lucy,” he says, not wasting any time with pleasantries. “And like I said in my text—I just want to get to know her. From what I've seen, she seems like a good kid. You've done a good job raising her for me, but you won't have to anymore.”

What?! My panic spikes and I scan the parking lot hoping we're not being watched. We are, but there's a camera pointed right at me, so if anything happens security guards will see. *Won't they?*

“How do you know anything about her?” I ask, trying to sound unaffected.

“I was driving by your mom's and she was out front. She's adorable and looks just like you, but I had the same hair color when I was younger.”

“Nobody drives past my mom's place. It's not on the way anywhere

Greg's brows furrow and he frowns. "Sorry, this is coming out wrong. I'm not saying any of this as a threat." *Feels like it.* "I just... I want to know her. Ever since finding out I have a child, I can't get her out of my head. And since you're ignoring me, I wanted to see her. That's all."

I sigh. That calms me a little, though it probably shouldn't. He's sincere but then again, that's how Greg works. He always managed to get me in, one way or another, in the past, so I need to stay alert when it comes to him.

"You can't just show up where she is, Greg. Even if she was your daughter, you can't do that to her."
inst the —"

a black "She is."

im, my "Even *if she was*, you can't do that to her. She needs to be eased into it."

hellos. "So can I see her? To ease her into it."

at I've Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. *It's okay. Katie's okay. I'll be rational.*

without "You know we'll never be a family, right?" I ask, instead of answering the question.

t alone. "Maybe not. But I still deserve the chance to be her dad."

ens the Ugh, unfortunately that's true. It doesn't matter what he's done to her. I don't have no right keeping her from him, especially now that he knows she's his daughter.

appear "How about we plan a time together? I'll bring Katie, *and* Dylan, and you can meet her."

le. She "Why does Dylan have to be there?"

," "For Katie. He comes or she doesn't."

," He nods as a smile lights up his face, coming across as genuine. *Please be genuine.*

"I'll text you on your work number. But maybe sometime next week."

ng. I'm "I'd prefer sooner, but I'll take what I can. Thank you, Lucy. I'm g
o get to show you that you can trust me again. I will."

of my "You better hope so, because Katie will only be in your life if you d

Greg presses a kiss to my cheek before walking away, and as soon
seems back is turned, I exhale, my body deflating as I wipe all traces of hi
to suck my face.

comes to This is my worst nightmare coming true. I have to believe that he'
hurt Katie, but I'm terrified that he will.

daughter Falling back against my car, I blow out a breath and still myself, u
pulse returns to normal. I don't want her to know him. But keepin
apart is not really my decision to make. The last thing I want is for hi
o it." the custody route, because then anything could happen. *I could lose he*

I'm lost in thought, my mind dangerously close to reaching i
Just be personal hell, when I hear someone calling my name. It takes me a m
but when I eventually look up from the ground, Dani's at my si
ring his expression full of concern.

"What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Yep." I nod, still processing everything.

o me; I "And..." She raises her eyebrows, encouraging me to talk.

exists. I run a hand down my face and sigh, not wanting to voice the tr
and you knowing I have to. "Katie's dad is back and he wants to see her."

Dani's hand flies to her mouth as Wes appears in my line of sight.

"The fuck?" he demands. "That's not happening. Where is he?" H
around, scanning every inch of the parking lot as Dani's eyes narrow, :
ease let back and forth between the two of us.

"He's gone," I state plainly, not wanting him to see my concern.

κ?" "But he was here?"

going to “Yep.”

“Talk to me, Luce. I’m worried.” Wes steps forward but stops
o.” subtly shake my head.

1 as his “It’s fine.”

m from “It’s not fine.”

Dani throws her hands in the air, a look of confusion on her face.
d neveram I missing? Is there more to it, Lucy?”

“Nothing,” I blurt at the same time Wes says, “We’re dating.”

ntil my “Wes!” I exclaim before burying my face in my hands.

g them “What? Dani’s your friend. She’s not going to say anything.”

n to go Dani gasps, and I see her megawatt smile through the slits of my

r. “Yes! I knew it. Why didn’t you tell me? I mean, Summer let a little s
ts ownwe didn’t know it was serious.”

moment, “It’s not,” I say, finally looking up at her.

de, her “It definitely is,” Wes adds from beside me, and I huff out a laugh
being such an ass right now.

“It’s *not*,” I repeat. “Wes is taking me out on Thursday night for c
date. And we’re keeping it hush-hush.”

“At Lucy’s request.” He shrugs.

uth but “So we don’t get fired,” I counter.

Dani laughs at the two of us while I just stare at Wes in disbelief.
this guy? His cockiness is so hot, but now is not the time for that.

le spins “Well, I think it’s great,” Dani says with a grin, trying hard not t
movinghow excited she is at the prospect. I have no doubt she’ll be calling
soon as we’re both in our cars.

“Now we have that sorted. Did you say hell no to that manip
fucker? He’s not seeing Katie, right?”

“I can’t really stop him. He has rights.”

when I “Where’s he been for the last four years then? You said you’ve only seen him twice. He abandoned her. Why’s he back now?”

My face reddens as a pain hits me in the chest. “I, um...I never told Wes freeze, his eyes widening in shock, while Dani wraps her arms around me sympathetically, already knowing this information.

“He hasn’t done a paternity test though, right? So he doesn’t know for sure?” she says, trying to make me feel better.

I nod with a sigh, because this is getting a lot bigger than I need it to be. I haven’t even processed it internally yet. “Technically you’re right, but I’m not stupid. He’s seen her. They may not look exactly alike, but they’re a close match, but she apparently has the same hair color he had as a kid.”

Wes huffs. “That means nothing. Come on, Luce. You can’t be serious.” I’m about to object when Dani puts her hand up between us before she can say anything. He’s looking at me. “Wes is right too. If his only ‘proof’ is hair color, you don’t need a DNA test to see her.”

our first “But what if he petitions for custody or something? You of all people know how that can turn out.”

Dani sighs and nods, pain in her expression, knowing that all she can do is wait. She’s about to speak when Wes grabs my hand, curling my fingers around his. “Who is she?” “We won’t let that happen, Luce.”

I huff out a breath, because it’s not that simple. “I can’t afford to fight him to show Wes. He says he has money. What if he does and I don’t win?”

; me as “If money’s the only thing standing in your way, it’s a non-issue. We can’t let that happen,” he repeats before pulling me into a hug.

ulative I push him away, conscious of the fact that people are still leaving the building every day, and we’re standing out in the open. I can see he wants to argue.

instead he nods and steps back, always doing the right thing.

ly seen “Thank you,” I say. “You’re right. It’s not going to happen. Because
going to let him see her. It’s going to be fine.”

him.” Dani reaches out and squeezes my hand just as Wes mumbles a bur
er armsexpletives under his breath. He means well—I know he’s trying to pro
—but he doesn’t get it. I’m terrified Greg will try to take her from me
ow for can’t risk it. If he says he’s genuine, then for now I have to give him
benefit of the doubt. *For now.*

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Thursday rolls around, and before I know it, it’s time for my date. We
have passed in the halls a few times since the parking lot, but we’ve
been surrounded by colleagues so have only ever exchanged a polite
smile. And now that our date’s almost here, I’m nervous about it. W
we’ve both changed so much that we have nothing to talk about
Katie as a buffer? What if the spark we have turns out to be sexual
and doesn’t actually translate to a relationship in everyday life? Or wh
discovers he no longer likes me? I’m spiraling, I know I am, but for
five years he’s the only guy I’ve thought of, and I never expected to
chance with him again.

At exactly five on the dot my phone buzzes on my desk. Thou
almost certain it’s Wes, my pulse still spikes, worrying it could be Gre
left me alone since we last spoke. And I can only assume—and hope
letting me set the pace. But if there’s another reason for his silence,
know what I’ll do.

Luckily, this time it is Wes, so I can relax.

Wes: Time to pack up, Luce. I'll be at your place for that report

use I'm

I smile into my hand, as an instant calm takes over me. Stressing
unch of going to ruin our night. I need to let it play out.

tect me

Lucy: I'll be ready, report in hand

e, and I

aim the

I rush home to get changed, thankful that Katie's already settle
Dylan and Summer's but missing her all the same, and I've just hung u
calling her to say goodnight when my doorbell rings. Giddy antic
takes over me again and only worsens when I open the door and s
standing there looking absolutely delicious in dark fitted jeans and
shirt, with his sleeves rolled up once again.

es and I

always

hello or

What if

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at if he

almost

get this

He has one arm braced above his head on the door frame, making th
in his forearm stick out, while the other holds flowers. *Flowers*
simultaneously making me swoon and want to drop my panties at th
time. Screw the date. Other than last week, I've had a five-year d
we're staying inside.

Curling my fingers into his shirt, I drag him through the door, n
bothering to say hello. He chuckles but lets me pull him along
argument, an amused expression in place.

gh I'm

g. He's

e—he's

I don't

Taking the flowers from his hand, I gently place them on the
counter with a rushed "thank you" before launching myself at h
crashing my lips to his.

He catches me easily, his fingers digging into the flesh of my ass,
beneath the dress I conveniently wore.

He groans as he squeezes, his hand roaming my cheeks before pullin
from our kiss. "Fuck, are you not wearing panties?"

at six I huff out a laugh and roll my hips into him, smiling against his lip
he rewards me with another guttural groan.

is only “I am,” I say between kisses. “They’re just tiny.”

Wes grunts as he lifts me higher and positions me on the counter, pulling
my dress up to my waist. His eyes darken as they lock on my white silk
before he rips the thin material from my body and throws it away, making
my insides clench with need. “Oh, God.”

Dropping to his knees, he spreads my legs wide, immediately running
his tongue through my heat. “Holy shit, Wes. *Jesus.*”

A groan rips from deep within him before he stands up and leans over
his lips barely a breath from my own. “As much as I want to worship

you, especially here,” he says, teasing my mound with his
lips. “I’ve been thinking about taking you again, every second since I
met you. He’s inside you, and I need it... now.”

I clench again at his words as my head drops back. *God, I need it tonight*
brought; “I’m good with that. Take me.”

Wes wastes no time sheathing himself before pushing inside me
with quick movement. This time all I feel is intense pleasure, not a hint of
what I felt last week. We fit. It’s perfection. He’s meant to be inside me
mine. Just like he wanted me to be his.

We both cry out as we start to move, and he sinks deeper and deeper
into me every push. I want to match his power, but I can’t get enough movement
in my current position. And I need it.

Lying back until I’m resting on my palms, I lift one leg on to the
counter and use it to help with traction, to pump harder and faster until I
have my back grinding my name.

“Fuck, Lucy. You feel so good. Always so good.”

is when He grips the counter edge with one hand, lifting my ass with the other. The new angle has me unable to hold back a scream. “I can’t. I...of Wes.”

pushing I try hard to hold out, loving the connection I’m feeling, but when he leans forward, a spark runs through me and my orgasm hits, catching me by surprise. My insides contract and pulse, squeezing Wes’s cock as he grunts. His hand gripping me tightly. “Jesus Christ!” Pumping a few more times, he curses the world before falling on top of me in a huff.

We’re both silent for a few seconds until Wes sighs in contentment over me, Lucy Mathers, were made for me.”

pushing every Wrapping my arms around him, I huff out a laugh and then sink my fingers into the counter, my head landing on top of the flowers. *Oops.*

was last I feel Wes’s body move as he chuckles above me, and a satisfied smile graces my lips. I could stay here all day. But...

o. “Now, can I take you to dinner?” he huffs out, whining as though I’ve ruined his plans.

in one I giggle as I push him away so I can stand, straightening my dress. He pain “That would be lovely. I’m ready. Are you?”

. To be Wes’s eyes move to my crotch and he grunts, knowing I now have my hand beneath my dress. “You better be ready,” he mumbles as he walks toward the bathroom to clean up.

ment in

OceanofPDF.com

counter

ve Wes

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Wes

I'm in a world of pain knowing that Lucy's sitting across from me in a busy restaurant...with no panties. Somehow, I'm keeping up with the conversation, but fuck, it's a struggle.

"And then he finally moved back," Lucy says, talking about her brother Dylan. "Pity you never played together. I think you'd have gotten along better."

I nod, because she's right. We do get along. "We spoke a few times at events, but I could never bring myself to ask about you."

Lucy's eyes widen before confusion masks her shock. "You spoke?"

"Yeah, we shared a sponsor so I saw him a few times. Why do you look so mad right now?"

She crosses her arms over her chest and huffs dramatically like she's having a tantrum. "Because he never told me."

I almost laugh at the adorable look on her face until her words register.

"Would you have wanted to know?" I'm not sure what I want her to be. Is it easier to know she wanted to find out about me, or better if she didn't...so I don't feel like we missed out.

"Yeah, I think I would have."

Fuck! The latter was definitely better. Years wasted.

“But I wasn’t ready.” She sighs, as her hands drop to her side.

At least that’s something.

“And now you are?”

A smile lights up her face making me want to reach across the table to kiss her. Even more so, after she answers, “I am.”

Pulling my lips into a grin, I nod and shelve that conversation for another time. “You know, the last time I saw your brother he’d just gotten married. He was so high on life I thought he was drunk.”

Lucy laughs out loud before covering her mouth with her hand. “That’s Dylan. The love he has for Summer is infinite. And I thought that was his happiest the day they said their vows, but you should have seen him when he found out Summer was pregnant.”

“They’re having a baby?”

“Yep, a little boy due around Christmas.”

Well there you go. Good on him. “I bet Katie’s excited.”

“Over the moon.” She smiles and then her nose crinkles in a playful manner. “Although, I don’t think she’s prepared for Dylan’s attention to someone else.”

“Nothing ever prepares us for that.” *And I know exactly how she’s going to feel.*

“I suppose you’re right,” Lucy laughs, obviously not sensing the melancholy in my voice.

“And Summer is Thomas Kelly’s sister, right?” I ask casually. As if she hadn’t just brought up this very topic hasn’t been on my mind for a while.

“That’s right. I guess you probably know him too?”

“Not really. I mean we’ve played against each other, but that’s it.”

well do *you* know him?”

Lucy’s brows furrow at my questions, probably due to the slight rise in my voice, but she doesn’t falter.

“I know him pretty well. We see each other on the holidays and I come to the house on the weekend here and there. He’s a great guy.”

A great guy. “And you have his surname?”

Lucy gasps but recovers quickly, turning it into a laugh. “Oh. Yeah, I’m married. She grimaces slightly before biting her lip as a pensive expression

crosses her face. I’m not sure whether to ask more or if that short answer means she’s . “Yep, supposed to drop the subject, so I nod, lifting my glass to my lips, needing the moment to decide. But Lucy continues.

“Since I already saw Summer as family, Thomas suggested I use his name after I decided I didn’t want to put Mathers on Katie’s birth certificate. I guess you could say he lent me their name.” She laughs nervously. “I registered Katie as Kelly and changed my name at the same time.”

“Lent it to you?”

“Yes. I’m hoping one day I’ll be able to change it again. To my husband’s name.” She shrugs as though it’s a passing thought, but the words hit

me like a gut punch. The feelings they conjure up are unlike any I’ve felt before. *Joining to Husband.* I’ve never really thought about marriage. Actually I have, but

it’s always thought it to be a bit of a sham. That little piece of paper does nothing to define the relationship. One party can still walk away at any moment and

start a new family with no consequences whatsoever. And yet, when I think about a husband, why do I suddenly want that person to be me?



t. How

After we've finished dinner, I desperately want to take her home to be e of mydon't. She deserves the full dating experience. *Not that I know w doing.*

the odd But I want it to be special.

To try.

For her.

I do.” As we walk silently through the lit-up streets of San Francisco, a crossesfeeling of comfort takes over me, and I need to be touching her. Reach ant I'mher hand, I entwine our fingers and squeeze, pulling her closer u eding ashoulders touch as we walk. We both remain silent, but it's impos: miss the moment Lucy's lips lift and a shy smile appears. For some se theirbadass, it's like she doesn't see her worth. Doesn't realize how amaz tificate.is.

isly. “I When it comes to sex, she's this confident woman, but romance another story, and I want to change that for her. I want her to s amazing she is. If only I knew how to do this romance stuff myself. T sband'sthing I do know is how I feel, and it's about time I told her.

me like Lifting our joined hands to my lips, I softly kiss each knuckle before.pulling her closer to whisper in her ear, wanting to make sure she he out I'veloud and clear. “I like you, Lucy. A lot. I've wanted this for a long tin nothingwanted *you* for a long time. You're so fucking special and I don't eve l start ayou realize it. The wait was worth it.”

y talks Lucy's breath hitches and she tilts her head back to look in my ey before she can say anything, I reiterate my words. “*You* were worth the

I catch the flash of a smile before she burrows her face into my wrapping her arms around me. She's still for a moment until she look me again, blinking through her long lashes. “I'm yours,” she says, a

chest tightens. I never wanted any of this until Lucy first came along. Now that I know that she's back in my life, I'm prepared to fight anyone that stands in my way.

Conversation starts up again, after our moment, and as we joke and laugh, I keep her hand firmly in my grasp, never wanting to let her go.

When it hits ten p.m., I invite Lucy to my place for dessert, just as my suddenphone rings in my pocket—three times—distracting me from my question: *Ugh, why do my friends know me so well?*

Until our "You should get that. They obviously want to speak to you," Lucy's possible topatting me on the arm. I know it's going to be one of two people: someone who has earned themselves an ass kicking.

After finally pulling the phone from my pocket, I see that it's Grayson, and a message comes through.

Oh, that's

see how

The one

Grayson: At your place. See you when you and your woman get

Dammit! I groan because there goes my plan.

Lucy's brows furrow as she watches me, and when I roll my eyes, she laughs before

ears me "That was Grayson. You might remember him from our very first date."

ne. I've "was the eighteen-year-old kid, recently divorced."

in think Lucy's face lights up and she claps her hands together. "Of course I remember Grayson. You kept in contact with him?"

remember Grayson. You kept in contact with him?"

yes, but "I did. And it's a long story, but he's at my house," I say with a lif

wait." shoulder like it's no big deal, but that's not true.

chest, "How long of a story?" Lucy frowns, her expression full of intrigue

ss up at fill her in. As we walk, I tell her all about Grayson and how he's come

and my

ng, and ingrained in my life. She gasps in some moments, laughs in others, h
s in our locked on me the entire time.

“So in conclusion...he’s at my house. Meaning my plans for the res
l laugh, evening are foiled.”

Lucy nibbles on her bottom lip and grins. “And what exactly wer
: as my plans?”

question. “Like I said, my place for dessert.” I fake pout.

Lucy laughs out loud. “And what exactly were we having?”

She says, “Chocolate cake for you... *You* for me.”

le, and Her laughter disappears as her pupils dilate and she squirms e
slightly on the spot. It makes me want to push her up against the
, just as building and ravish her, especially knowing how easy the access would

“I don’t have chocolate cake at my place, but the other is defini
offer,” she says, winking as she does, reading my thoughts. *This woma
home*

I groan before linking our fingers again and moving us through th
night crowd in the direction of my truck as fast as I can. I’m good with
es, she cake. *Date over.*



late. He

When I wake the next morning, Lucy’s in my arms. The soft sound
course, I breathing filters through my dreams, and her long hair tickles my ches
it’s splayed across me. Brushing the strands away from her face, I st
t of my features, taking in the way her lips curve up slightly as she sleeps
dusting of freckles across her nose. I can’t stop myself from pressing
ie. So I kiss to her forehead, gently enough that I don’t wake her, content to
pletely here and exist beside her.

er eyes I must fall back asleep at some point because when I wake again, sitting up with my shirt around her shoulders, buttons undone. Sit of the stunningly beautiful, inside and out, that I have to pinch my leg to myself she's mine. When she notices my movement, her eyes light up e those looks my way. "Hey, handsome."

"Hey, yourself. I could get used to this. Waking up with you in my me in yours as the case may be."

Lucy giggles but shakes her head. "Oh, my mornings are nothing li If you think us being together is going to lead to this"—she motions t ever so the bed—"be prepared for a shock."

closest "Huh?"

l be. "Have you forgotten about Katie?" She laughs again.

tely on "Never." *As if I ever would. That girl has definitely found a plac n. heart, just like her mom.*

he late- "Then put two and two together," Lucy says, breaking my thoughts.

out the "Ahh, is she an early riser?"

"She usually sneaks in here at about five."

"I'm good with five. My alarm was set for four thirty when I pl usually wake a lot earlier than this."

l of her A sassy grin appears on Lucy's face, and her eyes sparkle with m t where "Perfect! The sooner we have Katie comfortable with you staying o udy her better. The two of you can entertain each other while I sleep in."

and the Reaching up, I grip her at the waist and pull her backward on top a light tickling her as I do. "Is that how it's going to be?" I say, my fingers v just lie hard to make her squirm.

She cries out, "Absolutely," as she fills the room with uncont giggles, a sound I'll never get sick of and a moment I wish could last f

Lucy's Sadly, reality gets in the way and Lucy's alarm goes off, alerting us
he's sotime. We reluctantly say our goodbyes to get ready for work, and
remind Lucy with a parting kiss to hopefully get her through the day.

o as she As I drive away, I picture waking up to the sounds of two giggling
and a warm feeling consumes me at the thought of maybe one day h
bed. Or family of my own. But not just any family—this one.



ke this.

o us on For the next week, Lucy and I talk every night, but we don't get to
another date. The stupid policy at work means that even though we see
day in the same building, I'm lucky if I get a wink and a smile wh
passes by. It's killing me. And with the season starting up, it's only g
e in my get worse.

I'm anxious more today than any other with the knowledge that Ka
Lucy are meeting with Katie's sperm donor after work. I refuse to c
her father until he's proven himself to be one. The jackass has done i
in my eyes. Not that I have a say in the matter.

ayed. I When it gets to four p.m. and I haven't seen Lucy, I track her
uncaring of who sees us. I can't let her leave without her knowing I'm
ischief. she needs me.

ver, the She's slipping out the glass door to the parking lot when I finally see
and I jog to try and catch up with her.

of me, "Lucy! Wait up," I call as I get closer, only stopping my jog when
working her. Knowing she's going to object, I press a quick kiss to her lips and
take a step back with a small smirk on mine, chuckling when she rolls
rollable eyes as she huffs out a laugh.

forever.

s to the “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself.” I shrug. “Are you heading to the
I leavenow?”

She blows out a breath, and I can see the stress plain as day on her
g girls,am. Dylan’s already with Katie, so I’m meeting them there.”

aving a I itch to pull her into a hug, but I keep my hands by my side, k
she’ll likely push me away. “I want to be there. You know that, right?”

She grins, reaching forward to connect our hands ever so slightly. “
But I’ve got Dylan. He’s not going to let anything happen to either of u
ime for I can’t stop my frown even though she’s right. “Okay. Please call m
end all you get home.”

en she “I will. I...thank you.”

oing to Not wanting to piss Lucy off, I quickly scan the parking lot to ma
the coast is clear before pulling her in for a proper kiss. My lips in
tie and mold to hers as my tongue seeks entry. And without resisting, Lucy m
all him she sucks my tongue into her mouth, her hands clenching my shirt. T
to right may be brief, but it’s full of emotion, both of us knowing how hard to c
be.

down, “Call me,” I say after I’ve broken our connection, my hand mimi
here if phone to my ear.

pot her, “I will.” She laughs, backing away until she hits her car, only then
around.

Unable to leave, I wait until she drives away, an uncomfortable
I reach settling in my chest.

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feeling

Chapter Thirty-Three

Lucy

Dylan stops what he's doing and looks at me in shock. "You want to kill him, right?" *I sure do.* He's mentioned it a few times

I held off on telling him that Greg would be meeting us today because I didn't want him to call in reinforcements. I'm sure if I'd given him a heads up, everyone would be here. He'd probably even have Thomas fly in from Seattle. It's much easier this way. Although he does look a little mad.

"I do know that," I reply. "But I'm kinda hoping that means you can get through his bullshit easier than I apparently do."

"Wouldn't Joel be better for that?"

I sigh, because yes, he would be, but Dylan doesn't get it. "Dyl, there are a lot of better options, but you're my brother, Katie's number one fan, and I need *you* here."

He nods before curling his arm around my shoulders, and while I'm sure he seems to understand, his silence concerns me a little. *I hope I'm doing the right thing.*

Katie, Dylan, and I run around the park until five thirty comes along. Making my way to the parking lot, I wait anxiously, wringing

fingers, while Dylan and Katie continue to play behind me, close enough that Dylan can keep an eye on us both. I'm not ready for this, at all, but how do I get to know his daughter, and what choice do I have?

Greg arrives a couple of minutes late and jumps out of his car as it pulls into the parking lot. "I'm so sorry. I swear I left work on time; traffic was a real nightmare."

The sincerity in his voice shocks me, but I recover enough to respond. "Fine. It's barely been five minutes. Are you still working in the city?"

"I am, but not at the same joint. I've moved up in the world."

I figured as much when he mentioned money, but thought I'd ask him about it. I know I'm about to ask another question to delay him, when Greg's eyes flash at me. I see the playground and then back to me, a small smile playing on his lips. I know I'm cause I'm

"Can I see her?"

I internally flinch and hope my anxiety doesn't show on my face. I know I'm in from heads- why we're here," I say uncomfortably, forcing the words out. "You know that Katie knows who you are. Or at least, she knows she's meeting her father today. She's excited. Don't mess this up." I'll see

Anger flashes across Greg's face before it subsides, replaced by hurt. "I'm not an absent father, Lucy. *You* kept her away from *me*. Remember that before you speak." re are a

Keeping a straight face, I nod once and then head off toward Katie and Dylan, leaving Greg to follow. His words do everything to remind me of how deep down, he's still the same guy, and I can't get sucked into the nice guy persona he does. I need to be wary. I, and I

Dylan's the first to spot us when we approach, and his jaw locks with surprise. My eyes find Greg. If I wasn't one hundred percent sure that Dylan was my

ugh that enough not to ruin his career with an assault charge, I wouldn't have wanted him to come. But thankfully, I'm confident in that.

Katie spots Greg a few seconds later, and she frowns briefly soon as smiling. Reaching for Dylan's hand, she waits patiently for us to arrive. Then motions for me to bend down so she can whisper in my ear. "I thought you was going to be Wes," she says, her voice laced with disappointment. "It's chest tightens as I bite back a gasp, having no idea why she would think that." When I straighten up, my eyes lock on Dylan's and there's no doubt in my mind that he heard what she said, with his expression almost mirroring mine. *I'm mine. And if he heard...*

to the I turn to find Greg staring at me with a forced smile and rigid stance. He absolutely knows what she said, and he's not too happy about it. Then I guess I wouldn't be either.

"That's "Katie, this is Greg. Greg, this is Katie," I say, hoping to move on. Katie should Katie nods Greg's way and then her eyes flash to me and Dylan. I holding her breath waiting to see what she does, and just when I think I'm going to intervene, she turns back to Greg. "Do you want to play football?" I'm right. I mentally facepalm because of all things to say, that was possible. The worst, but at least she's trying. Plus, she doesn't know that Greg thought of him for a football player all those years ago.

Katie and Greg, to his credit, gives Katie a huge smile and asks her to lead the way. All while Dylan fumes as he watches them walk to the field.

2 things Hip checking him on the way past, I manage to get a tiny smile in my eye but it's obvious that he's struggling to keep his cool. And I can't say I'm not when his him.

s smart



e asked Katie and Greg play until it starts getting dark and I have to call it
before Katie objects as usual, and by the time Dylan and I finally get her i
ive and car, I'm emotionally drained. I've been on edge ever since Greg arrive
ought it didn't realize how tense I was until he was gone.

nt. My I can't wait to talk to Katie about her thoughts but know it's going
k that. her some time to process things. If I ask her now she'll just shrug or
t in my she doesn't know, but if I give her an hour, she won't shut up about it.

nicking After closing Katie's door, I turn to find Dylan pacing in front of
nce. He what he does when he's worked up about something. "I'm sorry, I
1 again, know that was difficult, but I really appreciate you being here."

ould my "You're sorry?" he asks, confused. "You shouldn't be sorry, *I'm*
to have can't even imagine how you're feeling right now. You're my hero
bly the Always have been. Your strength. My God...you're just...amazin
ks I left don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise."

He pulls me into a hug as tears prick my eyes, and I mumble a thar
his chest. My phone starts ringing but I ignore it, enjoying the comfo
my baby bro. Having him here made a world of difference, and he
even needed.



ie way. Katie and I grab take-out dinner on the way home, and when she's all
return, into bed, I finally ask about Greg.

I blame "Was today okay, sweetie? You had fun with Greg, right?"

"It was good. He's nice."

"He is." *Can be.* "Do you want to see him again?"

a day. Katie shrugs and shifts her attention to one of the many stuffed t
has in her bed. “If I do, I don’t think we’ll play football. He’s not that
nto my I bite back a laugh and lie down next to her, wrapping her up in m
d, but I “I’m sure we can find something else for you to do together.”

to take “Like karaoke?”

tell me This time I do laugh. Katie’s been obsessed with karaoke eve
finding out Dylan once sang to Summer.

ne. It’s “We can ask. But for now, it’s time to close our eyes.”

Dylan. I “Can you stay in here until I fall asleep tonight?” she asks, and w
normally ask her to try on her own, tonight I easily agree.

sorry. I “Of course. I love you.”

, Luce. “Love you too.”

g. And Katie takes a little while to drift off, so in my exhausted state, I p
next to her. It’s not the first time and it definitely won’t be the last, bu

icks into I wake I’m a little disoriented. By the time I make it to my room it
rt from a.m. and I’m still so tired, I could probably sleep for a month.

wasn’t Double-checking I’ve set my alarm on my phone, I see a messag
Wes and wince. Actually two missed calls and three texts. *Shit!*

I don’t even bother reading the messages before I dial his number, n
worrying about the time. He answers within seconds.

tucked “Lucy?” he rasps, clearly awakened from sleep.

My heart pounds in my chest as I prepare to hear the disappointmer
tone, or worse, for him to scold me.

“I’m so sorry, Wes. I know I said I’d call you, but Katie wanted me
beside her until she fell asleep, and I crashed with her. It’s no exc
today was emotionally taxing, and I can’t believe I forgot. I’m so
Please don’t be upset. I’ll—”

ays she “Whoa! Lucy, slow down. It’s okay. I’ve been worried about you. I’m good.” not upset. Why do you think I’m upset?”

y arms. “Because I said I’d call you and I didn’t.”

Wes huffs out a soft laugh. “Yes. But only because I wanted to know you were okay. Today killed me, but I understand.”

r since My pulse slowly returns to normal, as the tightness in my chest subsides.

“So, you’re not angry?” I ask, confused.

“Fuck, no. Why would I be angry? Luce, are you okay?”

hile I’d Sighing, I bury my face in my hands and try to stave off the tears. “I’m fine now,” I say with a sniff, and it’s not a lie; hearing his voice is incredibly calming.

“God, Luce. I wish I was there.”

ass out “I wish you were here too. But it’s three in the morning. You should be asleep.”

’s three “I don’t give a shit about sleeping. Tell me all about it. How did it go? How did he do anything he shouldn’t have?”

ge from My lips pull up at the edges, and all the stress leaves my body. I’ve never had this. My family cares for me, obviously, but I’ve never had someone to talk to about my day. To help unpack my emotions. Someone to share with. My insides fill with butterflies because maybe Wes is my guy. The thought terrifies me. And because I have Wes asking to listen to my troubles, those thoughts disappear.

“It was actually okay. They seemed to get along and he was good with me. I want to stay. But it was hard to watch. And I’d much rather talk about something else than him.”

use but “Are you sure? I don’t mind talking about him. Yes, I want to physically harm him, but I’m not going to do that unless you ask me to.”

I bark out a laugh and lie back on the bed, getting comfortable for the night.

but I'm chat, because I could listen to his raspy voice all night. "So, as long as you don't tell me you're getting back with him, I'm here to listen."

Laughing again, I switch the phone to video call and wait for his answer. When he does, my heart races at the sight of him. His thick black hair is a mess on top of his head, and his eyes have that just woken up shiny glint. He's naked, or at least he's shirtless, and has the most beautiful smile light up his face. A smile that has the corners of his eyes crinkling.

"You're so beautiful, Luce," he says, interrupting my gawking.

"I am?" "Huh?"

I'm so distracted by *his* beauty, it barely registers that he's commenting on mine.

He laughs and the sound hits me within.

"I said you're beautiful, Lucy. Where's your head?"

A slight frown crosses his face as though he's worried about the camera. "Go? Did it go? But it's gone in a flash."

"I'm lying there next to you," I whisper shyly and love when Wes' face never returns.

"I need that to happen again real soon," he says, running a hand down my face. And while I want that too, it's not that easy.

"It will," I promise. "It will just take time."

"I know, and like I said, you're worth the wait."

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with her.

se."

ysically

: a long

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“It will,” I promise. “It will just take time.”

“I know, and like I said, you’re worth the wait.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Wes

Lucy and I try to see each other as much as we can over the next few days, but life is against us. I'm so desperate, I want to either pull her into the utility closet or ravage her in the lunchroom, but of course, I don't, because she wants to keep things on the down low. I get it; she's nervous about her job, especially now that she has the distant threat of Katie's dad hanging over her head. He may not have even mentioned custody to her, but it's always in the back of her mind.

The college season officially kicks off tomorrow, and just like Lucy, I've grown to love these guys. Baby Bennett—or Mini B as I often call him—is killing it as quarterback, the team's back to full health, and actually gelling together. We might even have a shot at a championship year. *If we keep it up.*

I've seen Katie a couple of times since we spent that day together, and she's well and truly wormed her way into my heart. I've found myself looking forward to our time together, something I never saw coming. With the first game being tomorrow, I invited her to sit as close to me as possible. And I just might have become her favorite person. Watch

eyes light up brings me as much joy as spending time with her mother and I'm growing attached to them both. *How that happened, I have no*

It's now been twenty-four hours since I last kissed Lucy, and I'm withdrawals. While she's always on my mind, I'm not losing my focus usually do. This time around it feels like everything just fits, like it always been here and I don't need time to adjust. It's a strange reality but a good one.

With my nerves kicking in for tomorrow's game, I stay back in the locker room later than normal, even though I don't really have anything to do. I shouldn't be so worried; I've done this a million times before. I even have a pre-game ritual. But that's for Wes the player. Wes the coach? I don't know what the fuck he does. But it's stressing me out, that's for sure. When I finally get out to my truck at around eight, I have jitters. I'm tense, and I keep clenching and unclenching my fists, bouncing my shoulders, cracking my knuckles. I know I need anything to get myself out of my head.

I played in a Super Bowl for God's sake. *Get yourself together!* Remember when I put my hands down my face, I groan out loud, then freeze when that beautiful voice enters my head. When I open my eyes, my gaze locks onto the exact thing I need. Or more specifically the exact person I need.

"Fuck, are you a sight for sore eyes," I say with zero chill.

Lucy laughs before biting down on her bottom lip, making my chest instantly tighten. She's a devil in disguise. While she looks angelic in that simple white summer dress and flip-flops, it's the hint of a black lightning bolt underneath and the fire in her eyes that give her away. She's here to ruin me, and I'm ready to drop to my knees and let her.

"Are you here for me?" I ask, despite knowing the answer.

"Is this your truck?" she sasses back quickly, lifting her foot up

er does,running board.

idea. “Does that mean I can kiss you?”

having “I should hope so; I’ve been waiting a while.”

is like I I huff out a laugh as I shake my head. “What if someone sees us?”

e she’s “Do you care?”

ization, “Hell no. I’m only doing that shit for you.”

“Then get your ass over here, Johnson. I need those lips.”

e office “Yes, ma’am.”

ouldn’t She lifts up onto the running board and falls forward when I reagrapping her arms and legs around me. I waste no time pressing her
regamewrapping her arms and legs around me. I waste no time pressing her
/that themy door, grinding into her.

ly head “I want you so badly,” I rush out as I take a breath between kisse
enchingthere are cameras everywhere.” More kisses. “Your place?”

7 neck, Lucy shakes her head as she rolls her hips.

“God, my place?” I groan out, struggling to talk.

unning She shakes her head again, and I almost cry out in frustration.

e most “Lucy.” Kiss. “I need you.” Lip nibble. “Right now.” My length pul
; on thepump into her, and she moans in response before ripping her mout
mine.

“Let’s go parking.”

7 shorts “What?” I stare at her in disbelief.

ic in a “Our places are too far away. Let’s park somewhere.”

ace bra My head tilts to the side as I study her with a puzzled expression
uin me,are you?”

Lucy blushes. “Right now, I have no idea. But I need you too.”

Good enough for me.

to the Walking around to the other side of the truck, I open the door ar

Lucy onto the seat before running back to the driver's side.

Since I'm not a sixteen-year-old kid anymore, I have no idea where parking," so instead, I drive to the nearest deserted street, put the car in park, and slide my seat all the way back, before unbuckling Lucy and pulling her on top of me.

She laughs at my wordless motion, but it dies when I grip her hips and hold her still as I pump up into her, rubbing against her core.

We grind together for a few minutes until I'm so worked up I can barely catch her, much more. It's break time. Lifting her up, I reposition her with her back against her knees instead of my lap, then without warning, drop the backrest and sink down until I'm almost to the floor with my face positioned between her legs. "But between her legs.

"Now you can sit," I say, looking up at her from below.

Her chest rises, and I can just make out eyes widening in the dark. I realize my life savings that her skin is now a perfect shade of pink too, only barely visible in the low light.

Lucy gasps as I push her down. Despite her reaction making me certain she understands my meaning, she doesn't move.

"Sit, Lucy," I growl before reaching up and pulling her down onto my lap, my face to her face, chuckling when she gasps in surprise.

As I suspected, she's wearing another thong, so my tongue easily slips underneath it, making her cry out in pleasure. "Fuck, Wes."

"Whoa," she gasps. Moving the strip of fabric to the side, I lift up slightly to suck her into my mouth, but she's not making it easy on me. She's hesitant, refusing to put her full weight against me, and that won't do; I need her closer.

I alternate between licking and sucking a few times until I feel her head drop and start to shake and I know I've found my moment. The next time I lick

use all my strength to pull her down and she buckles, sinking on top
to “gosmothering me with her heat. *Fuck yes!*

in park, With my back now flat on the seat and easier access, I’m able to w
ing her into a frenzy of gasps and high-pitched mewls, until she’s a writhing r
top of me. And fuck, is it a beautiful sight.

lips and Squeezing her ass in my hands, I suck one more time, and she jolts
crying out my name and falling back against the steering wheel, giving
n’t take even better view.

weight “Maybe I should have positioned you like that,” I say with a chuc
rest and turns into a full laugh when she squeezes my head between her knees.

perfectly “That’s enough out of you,” she replies breathlessly seconds bef
lifts up and moves back to her side of the truck. “I need a momen
myself together.”

I’d bet I bite back a cocky grin. “Take your time. In fact, where’s Kat
I can’t know?”

Lucy’s eyes flash to mine, confused by my sudden mention of Kati
ng, she can’t help but laugh.

“As in, do you have to pick her up?”

into my “No, she’s at my place. Summer’s staying there until I get home.”

“Perfect, you rest. I’ll drive us to my place and then drop you home
ly slip you turn back into a pumpkin.”

Lucy laughs. “You know Cinderella didn’t turn into a pumpkin, righ
into my “I do, and I also know that I’m no Prince Charming.”

rest her She laughs again as I put the truck in drive and head to my place.

the first time she’s been there, and something tells me she’s going t
ier legs shock.

k her, I

of me,



ork her
ness on
The second we pull up, Lucy opens her door and bounces out of her s
eyes raking over my modest three-bedroom house, with a small fro
and a white picket fence.

; before
g me an
“You continue to surprise me, non Prince Charming. *Every day*,” sl
beaming my way.

I grimace with a fake laugh. “Let’s hope those surprises are good thi
kle that
“Trust me, they are.”

With a small nod, I follow her to the front door and let us both i
ore she
house, switching on a light as we walk in.

t to get
“*Fuck!* Way to wake a guy up,” Grayson’s voice comes from the
area.

ie right
Lucy screams, and I curse under my breath as his head lifts off the
and he shields his eyes from the light. “Can you turn it off?”

e, and I
“Can you fuck off?” I counter.

“Nope.”

“Same answer.”

He groans but then reluctantly uncovers his eyes, smiling when th
: before
on Lucy.

“Fuck me. I didn’t think I’d see you again.”
it?”

Lucy’s brows furrow and her gaze flits to mine. She either
recognize him, or thinks that I’m keeping her a secret.

It’ll be
o get a
“He didn’t think he’d see me again,” she says with a raised b
thought you were close?” The latter then.

Gray laughs as Lucy shakes her head.

“He knows about you. He’s being a dick.”

Grayson nods exaggeratedly. “It’s true, I am. I thought he’d screw me before we got a chance to meet again.”

“Is that likely to happen?” she asks Grayson. Not me, *Grayson*.

“Not sure yet.” He shrugs and I roll my eyes. “He’s got a lot of balls, but he’s a good guy,” he continues, digging himself a grave. “And—”

“Are you done?”

“I wasn’t, but I can be...for now.” He nods. *Fucker*.

Turning back to Lucy, he studies her face and then smiles. “You haven’t changed one bit.”

Lucy blushes shyly, probably because she thinks that she has, but not for long. She looks at me quickly and smiles. “Well, you’ve now got stubble,” she observes, looking at Grayson to crack up as he runs his hand over said stubble with a nod.

“That I do. I’m not the eighteen-year-old you once met.”

“No, you most certainly aren’t.”

My eyes flash to hers because that sounded flirty, but when I notice her expression, she’s laughing silently at me. *Very funny, Lucy. Yes, I’m a jealous type.*

As if reading my thoughts, she laughs out loud before getting comfortable on the couch beside Gray, settling in for a long chat, while I make a change my locks.

doesn’t



row. “ILucy yawns and I glance at my watch to see we’ve all been talking for an hour. I need to get her home.

“We better go, Luce. It’s getting late.”

She checks the time herself and gasps. “Shit. It is. I’m sorry. It was upsetting you, Grayson. Hopefully we can catch up again.”

“I’d love that.”

After saying goodbyes, we head to my truck in silence, and once we get on the road, Lucy’s hand flies to her mouth and her breath hitches. “Thank you for returning the favor. Pull over.”

I can’t help but chuckle at the shocked look on her face as I lean over to pat her leg.

“As tempting and *romantic* as that sounds, I’m not keeping score here.

“You’re not?” she asks seriously, and my humor fades. *The fuck* covers another red flag with regards to how Lucy’s been treated in the past. I can’t help but feel a little better hope we never cross paths. Sexual assault is obvious enough, but he was one hundred percent emotionally abusive too and a total fucker. It’s hard to imagine how someone as confident and strong as she could end up in a situation like that, but it’s not inconceivable. Like I know her, not all our scars are visible. Everything about the situation with her makes me want to do anything in my power to keep her safe, but at the same time, I know she wants to prove to herself that she can go it alone, and that scares the hell out of me.

I drop Lucy off with a chaste kiss to her lips and brows before I head home to deal with whatever happened to lead Grayson to my couch. It turns out, he was actually worried about me, and by the time I get into bed a couple of hours later, I crash hard, sleeping right through until my alarm goes off, not even once thinking about the game.

Looks like I’ve found my new ritual—Lucy.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Lucy

After surprising Wes at his truck last night, I completely fo actually wish him luck for today. The sole reason I was there not the sole reason, but the main one. Okay, not that either but... *ugh!*

I knew he was nervous after seeing him in the lunchroom and ha being able to do anything about it. Not that I calmed him down when a given the chance. But he definitely had *me* forgetting all of life's pr When Wes takes control like that, he completely owns me, and I ca enough. But I probably should have—

“Can I have a sleepover, Mom?” Katie asks out of the blue, cutting inappropriate thoughts. She’s playing beside me while I finish the bi dishes. *And daydream, apparently.*

“Ah, sure,” I say, acting very interested in the plate I’m cleaning can’t see my blush. “Shall we invite Aunty Summer again?”

“No. I want Wes,” she quickly responds, not even looking up fr figurine she’s playing with. The plate I’m holding drops in the sink spin around, my hands covered in bubbles. “Wes?”

“Yep.” *That’s it. That’s all she gives me.*

“Um, well, I guess I could ask him.”

“Tell him we have popcorn and if we’re really good we might get chocolate milk.”

I have to bite back a smile before responding. “How could he possibly know?”

When she finally looks up at me, her face shines with a confident smile. She replies, “Exactly,” before going back to her toy.

Exactly. I mean, what more could you want?

“We’ve got your party this coming weekend too. How about I invite you to that and then we’ll see.”

“Okay.”

Okay. It seems so easy; why am I nervous?

“Can Greg come?”

What?! “To the sleepover?” *That’s not happening.*

“No, the party.”

My chest tightens, but I put on a smile when I look her way and give a noncommittal answer. “I don’t know, sweetie. You can invite Wes to the party after the game today. Greg might be busy. Now you better grab your bag because Delilah will be here soon to pick you up.”

“Yes!” She runs off to her room, singing as she goes. Joel and Delilah are taking her to the game today while I work. Did I use that as a distraction now, knowing Delilah was still thirty minutes away? Yes. But I need to change the topic away from Greg. Even though I know the guilt will catch up to me and I’ll end up inviting him.

Why does my life have to be so complicated?



I sneak down to the perimeter of the field a couple of times during the night, but most of my day is spent in my room. It's a close one, but when the whistle blows, we get the win, and I'm both thrilled *and relieved* for Wes. I'm finishing up with one of the players when I hear Katie in the hallway. "Hold up, Katie. Your mom's door is closed so she might have something there," Del says, and I can picture Katie stopping right away, something that never happens when I ask.

"She should be almost done," Wes's deep voice follows, and it takes me a moment on my part not to react. "I'll pop in and see how they're doing. How do you show Joel and Delilah my office?"

A knock comes seconds later before the door creaks open and a gorgeous face peers through. "Are you decent?" he says with his eyes on Jackson's mouth forms an O and he panics.

"Stop being an ass, Wes," I call out. "Of course we're decent."

He opens his eyes and walks deeper into the room, his shoulders into a shrug. "You never know who's sneaking around in this place."

Jackson relaxes and even laughs. "You're not wrong. I saw—"

Raising his hand, Wes shakes his head. "I'm going to stop you right now. It's better if I don't know."

Jackson shuts his mouth and nods, once again looking nervous until my next words calm him down.

"Good game today. We'll see you fit and healthy at practice on Monday."

"Thanks, Coach," Jackson says with a smile. A smile that grows when Wes pats him on the back as he walks out.

As soon as Jackson's gone, Wes turns his attention to me, a cocky grin on his face. "So I got invited to a party *and* a sleepover earlier."

I grimace and cover my face in my hands. Katie was supposed to v
e game, me before asking about the latter. Wes laughs at my reaction and p
hen the into a hug. “I told her I’d love to come. I’ll even bring my favorite
/es. animal.”
l.

Gah! My ovaries.
eone in “Thank you. That was lovely. I’m sure you’ll be very comfortable
ing that floor under her fort,” I joke. There’s no way I’m letting him stay in my
es work and not sleep in my bed, after Katie’s asleep of course.

“The floor sounds perfect to me.” He winks. “Can I help with the j
v about all? It’s not her birthday, right?”

Wes’s “Her birthday was months ago, but she wanted to wait to have it a
closed. and Summer’s new house, so we’re only now celebrating. And as fo
thank you, but I think we have it covered. Just show up with a smile
be happy. Oh, and I’m going to have to ask you to keep it there.”

“Keep what there?”
; lifting

“The smile. Katie wants to invite her dad. I think I’ll just tell him it
few hours later than it does. That way he’s not there the entire time.
it there. risky.”

“Why? Do you think I’m going to deck him?”

“I think there will be a line for that, yes.”
l Wes’s

Wes huffs out a laugh, mumbling “It would be deserved” under his l

“I know, just please behave.”
iday.”

He smiles at that. “For you, always.” Then bows with a cocky grin.
en Wes

Why does that not give me confidence?

grin in



wait for On the day of the party, Wes arrives at Dylan's place an hour before
ulls mein his signature jeans and black tee. I've noticed a move toward black
stuffedhis previous blue wardrobe and have to wonder when that hap

Something for another time. He's carrying a box on his shoulder, making
bicep bulge from the effort, and my God, it's hot. I quickly look away
: on the don't get busted staring but find I'm not the only one. Delilah and Summer
y housearen't even trying to hide their appreciation of his form.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," Joel announces as he wraps
party arms around Delilah's waist. "He's smoking hot."

Summer and I burst out laughing as Delilah nods. "He's not kidding
t Dylansaid it a few times last night. I think the term '*man pretty*' was
or help, around."

and I'll "Credit where credit's due," Joel says with a laugh and a shrug
walking over to help Dylan set up some chairs.

"Joel's right," Summer says. "He's even more dreamy than the last
starts awe saw him and—did he just drop the box midjourney to hug Kat?
It's too God!"

I laugh, but that's exactly what he did. Whatever's in the box was
discarded to say hello to my little girl, and my heart is thumping because
it.

breath. Wes helps Dylan, Joel, and Logan continue setting up around the table
while I busy myself inside. I'm plating up some snacks when his strong arms
wrap around me from behind and he sighs.

"Please tell me we don't have to be a secret here? You didn't invite
coworkers, did you?"

He reaches for a chocolate from the bowl in front of me but I slap his hand
away.

it starts “None other than Dani, so yes, we can show a little more PDA. But
ck from much. We’ve still got Katie to consider.”

opened. “Of course.” He presses a kiss to my cheek and heads back c
king his stealing two chocolates as he goes.

ay so I “No PDA for you,” I call out and laugh when he waves over his h
hummers shoulders bouncing as he undoubtedly chuckles.

raps his



The afternoon goes by quickly and painlessly as I fly around playin
ing. He With a beer in hand, Wes spends most of his time hanging out with th
thrown and they appear to be getting along well. I’d know, because my eye
before pretty much been on him or Katie all day. And since Katie’s all
currently playing tag with Liam and Addie, Cory and Nate’s little one
is my focus right now.

ist time “You’ve found yourself a good one there, sis,” Dylan says, joinin
ie? My my side.

Wrapping an arm around his waist, I couldn’t stop my beaming smil
quickly if I tried. It’s been a long time coming, but I have. I’ve finally got n
ause of keeper.

“He’s alright,” I say, making Dylan laugh.

ie yard “I was watching him play with Katie earlier. They definitely seem
ig arms comfortable together than she and Greg do. At least from the two
tagged along. Maybe the last one was different.”

rite any He shrugs while I sigh. “No, you’re right. Greg’s trying. I have to g
that credit, but they’re not really connecting. She seems to have in
is hand bonded with Wes, and I don’t know why.”

not too Dylan's brows furrow as we both watch Katie run toward Wes and
behind his legs. He plays along, jokingly pointing in the opposite direction
outside, when Liam comes looking for her.

My chest fills with a lightness I don't think I've ever felt. *Can I really
lead, his a guy and Katie in my life, and make it work?*

"Could it be something to do with how you feel about both guys?"
says, interrupting my thoughts. "Maybe Katie's picking up on your
He shrugs.

Shit! My eyes shoot to his and I frown. "Oh God. What if you're
the host. That's not fair to Greg."

the guys, "Bullshit, the guy deserves every negative thing coming his way."

as have "He's Katie's father."

good— "He's bad news, Lucy. Always has been. And if he ever steps out
—Wes he'll have a lot of people to answer to. And the first person on that
game at currently showing your daughter *exactly* the kind of man she should
her life."

le, even My gaze follows to where Dylan's pointing at Katie up on
myself a shoulders, and I swallow a lump in my throat. Let's hope Greg never
anything to warrant that, because Dylan's right... I have no doubt Wes
be the first one to throw a punch.

in more
times I



Despite me begging them not to, Joel and Nate set up karaoke at
five his request. Nate and Cory sing first while Katie watches with stars in her
instantly You'd think they were famous with the way she's staring at them.

and hide When they finish, and Joel sets up for his song, Katie comes running in that direction her face full of excitement.

“Can you ask Wes if he’ll sing with me? Please?”

My *have* I bark out a laugh and look over my shoulder, into the house, where he’s busy restocking the drinks with the ones he brought. I’d love to see that, but I can’t. Dylan imagine he’ll say yes.

vibes.” Joel groans into the mic, drawing everyone’s attention, and I start to walk until I see why he’s so pissed off. Greg’s walking through the gate, exactly on time, with flowers in hand. His eyes scan the crowd, presumably for Katie, but she hasn’t noticed him yet.

“Your dad just arrived. Didn’t you want to sing karaoke with him?” I point in his direction.

of line, The words taste like poison on my tongue, but ever since Dylan met me, my feelings affecting Katie’s, I can’t stop thinking about how I can fix this. Katie shakes her head almost violently without even looking at me.

“Nope, I want to ask Wes!” She stamps her foot as though I’m stopping her. Wes’s when in reality that’s definitely my preferred option.

er does “Okay, go and ask him. He’s inside the house.”

Yes will Katie skips away, calling his name as she does, and I want to laugh but I can’t. *This is going to be a train wreck. I can already see it.* Although I’m lucky, maybe it will break the tension of Greg’s arrival.

When I step closer to Joel, he announces he’s taking five and joins me on my side as Greg walks over. “Lucy, thank you for inviting me today.”

er eyes. Joel’s shoulder subtly bumps mine, reassuring me that he’s here, giving me the strength I need to pretend everything is good. “Thank you for coming. Katie’s going to be thrilled. She’s inside at the moment, but should be here shortly.”

ing over, Greg smiles, his eyes scanning the yard.

“There’s a present table over there.” I point. “If you don’t want to cut flowers around, you can put them down. I’ll get a vase.”

Wes is “Thank you.” He nods and then walks in the direction I just pointed.

I can’t I release a sigh as soon as he’s out of earshot and immediately turn

“Am I doing the right thing?”

o laugh “You’re doing the best you can, Lucy. I hate this for you. But I’m h almost whatever decision you make. I’ll always have your back.”

umably “I’m just so scared. What if he tries to take her away?”

Joel notices something over my shoulder and smiles. “I’m not goin
” I ask, and say he won’t try that, but along with us, you’ve got someone else t almost certain will fight to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

ntioned I don’t have to look to know he’s talking about Wes.

that. “Thank you, Joel. You’re right. I need to be positive.”

’s way. He wraps his arm around me and pulls me into a hug before kissing ing her, of my head. “I know you’re holding something back, Luce. And I

knew what it was so I could better help in this situation. But fr information I do know, all I can say is that you’re doing the right th gh but I both him and Katie. And it doesn’t hurt that you’ve got your guard up u, if I’m your instincts, and if you’re ever worried, call me day or night. Call us. We’re all here for you.”

is me by

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ring me

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be out

Greg smiles, his eyes scanning the yard.

“There’s a present table over there.” I point. “If you don’t want to carry the flowers around, you can put them down. I’ll get a vase.”

“Thank you.” He nods and then walks in the direction I just pointed.

I release a sigh as soon as he’s out of earshot and immediately turn to Joel. “Am I doing the right thing?”

“You’re doing the best you can, Lucy. I hate this for you. But I’m here, for whatever decision you make. I’ll always have your back.”

“I’m just so scared. What if he tries to take her away?”

Joel notices something over my shoulder and smiles. “I’m not going to lie and say he won’t try that, but along with us, you’ve got someone else that I’m almost certain will fight to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

I don’t have to look to know he’s talking about Wes.

“Thank you, Joel. You’re right. I need to be positive.”

He wraps his arm around me and pulls me into a hug before kissing the top of my head. “I know you’re holding something back, Luce. And I wish I knew what it was so I could better help in this situation. But from the information I do know, all I can say is that you’re doing the right thing by both him and Katie. And it doesn’t hurt that you’ve got your guard up. Trust your instincts, and if you’re ever worried, call me day or night. Call any of us. We’re all here for you.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Wes

“Please. Pretty please,” Katie begs, her tiny hands framed under her chin like she knows it’ll make her look cuter. And she’s not wrong. *Dammit!* I’m not sure I can say no to her, and that’s not a good start a relationship with her mom, because I’m totally going to take her side every time they’re arguing. *Eh, not my problem right now.*

“Do you have a song in mind?”

Katie’s face lights up and she squeals. If that means yes, God, please let it be Spice Girls. *Do kids even listen to them anymore?*

Grabbing my hand, she drags me into her room for a costume before we make our way outside ten minutes later. Thankfully, the costume is simple, but it gives nothing away about her song choice.

As we near the stage set up, Joel’s finishing up a rendition of “Y Leave Your Hat On” by Joe Cocker—which has Delilah almost in tears of laughter. *Inside joke maybe?*

Katie leads me to the booklet that lists the songs and flips through it until she gets to the page she wants. *Has she been studying this list? Of course she’s four.*

“Is this one okay?” she asks, pointing to a star on the page. That much more sense. Someone helped her find it. The fact that she’s asking if it’s okay has me saying yes before I’ve even looked at the song she’s pointing to. She cheers and wraps her arms around me like I single-handedly made her day, and my chest flutters with a feeling I don’t recognize, but that’s not at all unwelcome.

Joel moves our way and hands over the mic with an encouraging pat on the back. “Go be a star, Katie. Good luck, Wes.”

“Ha, thanks.” *I’m going to need it.*

We step up to the screen, waiting for the song to come on, and as the words appear, I bite back a groan and force a chuckle.

“Shake It Off,” by Taylor Swift.

I was really hoping for rock, but what was I expecting with a preschooler?

“You sing the other part and I’ll do the main bit,” Katie rushes out and lifts her mic to her mouth.

Does she mean chorus? And for me to sing the verse? The music starts and I’m not at all ready. *Fuck!* What do I do again?

Words fly across the screen, and I must miss my cue because Katie starts to whisper-yell, “It’s your turn,” but it comes out at full volume and everyone is watching laughs.

I manage to catch up and sing along—badly—until the chorus begins. Katie takes over. She’s so fucking adorable my heart melts, and when I see Lucy with tears in her eyes, I decide the embarrassment in this moment is worth it. At least Carter and Gray aren’t here. That’s a bonus.

The next verse begins, and while I sing more confidently, I still surely never really been able to hold a tune, and today’s no exception.

My gaze flashes between the words on the screen and the man

... makes smiling up at us, trying to ignore the ones that are laughing, but I can't bring myself to find it utterly hilarious, while Summer hides her smile behind her hand. I'm shaking my head with a grin, laughing at the situation and indulging myself in, when my eyes lock on a new arrival at the party. He's looking directly at me with a menacing gaze. His fists are clenched at his side, and I can think of only one thing... *What the actual fuck?*

... on my feet. I miss my cue again, and Katie lets me know it, pulling at the hem of her dress until I snap out of it and smile at her, checking the screen and singing my part.

... soon as the song finishes and everyone surrounds Katie with congratulations, I slip away, beelining straight for Greg with my fists clenched at my sides, matching his look from earlier.

... cooler? "What are you doing here?" I bark out when I reach him, not wasting a second as the time.

"Nice to see you too, big brother. It's been a while."

... arts and "I'm not your fucking brother. Why are you here?" *Surely he's not looking for me? God, did he track me down?*

... tries to Greg laughs so hard that his head flies back. "Real... step... well, everyone... You haven't figured it out yet, have you? I thought you were just trying to ignore the fact that you're hooking up with my ex."

... hits and "Your ex?"

... on I see "Don't play dumb. Lucy and I dated for *years*. I was supposed to be your mentisher. Maybe I still will."

What the fuck?

... ck. I've "She might be fighting it right now, but she always comes back. How do you feel to know that while you were together, she was pregnant with my baby?"

... Dylan *Greg is Katie's father? Greg...*

and her Without thinking about the consequences, I slam my fist into
I have before grabbing his shirt and shoving him against the wall. Blood pool
staring corner of his lip, but I don't care.

and all "You raped her," I whisper through clenched teeth, as I slam him
the brick over and over. "You fucking raped her," I say again, with a
of my tone. I'm conscious of others around; otherwise I'd be screaming
ing my face.

"I didn't rape her." He pushes back, trying to break free. "Who the
Katie insaid that? We were dating. It's not rape."

hands "It is if she says no."

"Fuck off. She wanted it. You're just pissed off because she came
ing anyone after being with you."

*The fuck I am. And that didn't happen. Wait. He knew about me back
My fucking stepbrother.* I feel sick. I feel murderous, and I need to wal
here for before I do something I regret. Stepping back, I release him from m
hold, just as he sniggers and bounces his eyebrows.

whatever. "Felt good knowing she was choosing me. That it was me inside he
ying to she could have had you."

What is he talking about? Rage takes over me, and I growl before th
him to the ground and slamming my fist into his face over and over
I vaguely hear someone screaming behind me, but I don't really pro
because all I see is red.

"You're delusional and a piece of fucking shit. You don't deserve t
w doestheir lives."

with my "And yet, I am."

Lifting him up, I slam him back down to the ground and cringe

sound of his head hitting the concrete. I would feel worse if the fucker his jawsmirking at me the entire time.

As at the “Stop!” someone yells a little closer this time, but it still doesn’t that it’s me they’re screaming at until arms lock around me and I’m against into the air.

Greg laughs despite the fact that he’s lying in a pool of his own it in his “You’ve just made things so much easier for me.”

“Let me go! I’m going to kill him.” I thrash about but whoever ha he fuck stronger.

“It’s not worth it, man. Leave it be,” he says in my ear, and I recogn voice as Logan’s.

Dylan and Joel move into my line of vision, lifting Greg off the helping him stand, both with scowls on their faces.

“You need to leave,” Dylan says, pointing toward the back gate. k away Greg doesn’t move, the two of them escort him, ignoring him w ry tight argues.

Logan’s grip loosens slightly, and it feels like he’s just about to r when when Katie’s scream overshadows everything. “Let him go!”

“Katie, no,” someone calls behind her but it’s not Lucy. Lucy is mi rowing action.

I can I turn to see Katie running from the back door in our direction, an ocess it ever worse. I just beat the shit out of her dad. *Fuck!* What the hell is with me?

I chance a look at Greg and see his smirk widen before his exp morphs into one of pain.

My head falls in shame. I can’t watch this. She’s going to ha e at the Dropping to the ground with Logan still holding my shirt, I sigh as tv

wasn't hands wrap around mine and begin yanking me away from his hold.
Go. Loge," she says with each pull.

register Logan lets me go instantly, and Katie wraps me in a hug, comfortin
hauled though I'm the one that's injured.

I hear Greg curse and watch out of the corner of my eye as Joel sh
blood up, pushing him through the gate.

When my full attention turns back to Katie, I squeeze her tightly
s me is arms, whispering "I'm sorry" into her hair as my heart thrashes in my c

Movement catches my eye, and I look up to see Lucy standing behi
ize the her arms folded over her chest and a frown locked in place.

"Come on, Katie. Inside. *Now.*"

ground, "But, Mom."

"But, nothing. Inside!"

. When Katie reluctantly lets go and follows Lucy toward the door as I watc
hen he walk away. From my position on the ground, a feeling of regret tak

me as my girls move farther into the distance. *What the fuck did I do?*

o let go *Please turn around, Luce. Please turn around.*

Lucy disappears out of view without so much as a backward glance.
ssing in soon as she's gone, Logan lifts me to my feet.

"Don't worry, she'll come around. Any guy would have done the s
d I feel your position."

o wrong I stare at him blankly, confused by his meaning. "What's my positio

"Meeting the ex face-to-face, knowing he's hurt Lucy in the past."

pression Okay, so he didn't hear the stepbrother part. Did anyone? And is
knowing a good or bad thing?

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Lucy

I pace the kitchen as Delilah takes Katie into the other room to don't even think Katie noticed a bloodied Greg being dragged away. At least I hope she didn't. As far as I can tell she just saw Logan holding her and ran.

What the fuck was he thinking? Wes, I mean. If I'd had the strength to take him off Greg myself, I'd have done the same as Logan. But Wes... Why did I care about him not hitting Greg. What changed?

Wes walks in at that moment with a dejected look on his face. My heart beats faster at the sight of him, but I can't let that stop me from saying anything. I take a piece.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I repeat my earlier thought.

He winces at the obvious pain in my voice and reaches out to touch my arm. I wince again when I move away.

"No, no. Don't touch me. Do you even realize what you've done?"

"Yes," he rasps, barely above a whisper.

He's completely breaking me, but I can't stop because I'm so fucking mad.

“He’s Katie’s father, Wes! Whether we like it or not. And...and...a shouldn’t have done that.”

Wes’s entire body sags before he runs his hands down his clenched broken face. I’m about to say more when the sight of one hand catches my eye. *Shit!*

“Wes, you’re bleeding.”

He doesn’t even look before shaking his head and whispering, “It’s blood.”

“Like hell it’s not. Look at it.”

I race over and gently secure his hand in mine. It’s an absolute mess if his hand looks like this, I can’t even imagine Greg’s face. I didn’t get a good look.

“He pounded the pavement at one point when Greg dodged his way out. Dylan says, joining us inside.

“I did?” Wes looks to the ceiling, lost in thought. He’s not at all him in fact, he looks really spaced out. What’s going on in that head of his?

“You didn’t feel it?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

I gently run the pad of my finger over his knuckles, not even caring about the blood, and he flinches as his eyes close. It’s like he’s only just realizing he’s hurt.

“Come on, let me fix you up.”

Leading him into the bathroom, I make him sit on the edge of the tub before I grab the first aid kit. I can feel his eyes follow me around the room as I move, and when I turn back to face him, they lock with mine, and the sadness reflected there shatters my heart. Though it shouldn’t.

He reaches out for me again, but changes his mind and pulls away.

and you last second. "I'm sorry," he rasps, still completely out of sorts.

I go about cleaning his cut, trying to appear calm, when in reality my heart's pounding in my chest and I feel sick. I'm worried about him because he's my dad, but I don't want to mean the cut. Thankfully that doesn't look deep enough for stitches, but I know the internal damage he's suffering... God knows what that will take to fix.

As I apply a bandage to his hand, Wes's gaze flits between his fist and not my face, silently taking everything in. When I move to clean up the stitches, he clasps my wrist and stops me, locking me in place.

"Did you know?" he whispers, raw emotion and uncertainty in his eyes. "God, I didn't know what?"

"I didn't get a name," I say. "That Greg..." He clears his throat. "That he's my stepbrother? Is that what you kissed me that first day?"

"Strike," I say. *What?! That can't be right.*

I stare down at him, completely speechless. I have no idea how to respond to myself. Into that. The shock of it is too much to process. Greg and Wes? No. I don't have known. Right? *Did I even know Greg had any stepsiblings?*

"I...wha...but...I've told you about him. You never made the connection?"

"You never said his name. Not once. I would have known."

I sit now. *Jesus.*

My chin drops to my chest and I sigh. *Stepbrothers?* I can't even think about that. *What does it even mean?*

We're both silent and still for a moment. So quiet that I can hear the room short shallow breaths. He's not at all coping with everything that's happened and I understand it must be a shock, but this seems like more than that.

Stepping between his open legs, I run my hands through his messy hair and then down to his cheeks. He closes his eyes as his head falls back.

exhale leaving his mouth. His chest shakes as though he's fighting back. And it makes my own eyes glassy.

And I Taking a deep breath, he opens his eyes as his huge palms wrap around my waist, and when his gaze locks on mine, I see every emotion clear as day. He's breaking. The revelation that I dated his stepbrother is killing him, and my why?

He says, "I'm so sorry, Lucy," he whispers in a gravelly voice. "I didn't know I should've. I don't talk. Ever. I'm sorry."

He drops to his knees in front of me, hugging my legs tightly, and it feels like he's holding me more than I already was. Tears silently fall as I pull free of his grasp. I don't know why I join him on the floor.

"It's okay, Wes. It's okay."

I curl myself into his body and welcome the feelings I get when he wraps his arms around me, gently rocking us from side to side.

We stay like that until Wes clears his throat and moves back, shaking himself off. "We better get back out there," he rasps. "I'm sure they're wondering where you are."

Before letting me respond, he jumps up and pulls me to my feet, looking at me with his eyes a few times. I quickly wipe away my own tears and smooth down my clothes, a little shocked at this change in pace.

"Come on," he says, with a facade now in place, before linking our arms together to lead me back into the kitchen where the group is hovering, looking at Wes's phone. Wes's sure. But when my phone rings on the counter the second we enter the room, it snaps them out of their weird mood.

"Whoever it is has called a few times," Dylan says, picking up my phone. "I was going to answer it, but I wasn't sure if you'd want me to." He looks at the screen, and I see it's an unknown number.

dark tears, “Thanks, I’ve got it.”

When he hands me the phone, I answer before it cuts off. “Hello.”
and my “Is this Lucy?” a deep voice grates from the other end of the line
as day.sounds as though he’s in his sixties or seventies, but I don’t recognize
him. *But* could be.

“It is,” I confirm, unsure if I should give more.

Now. We “This is Bryan Johnson, Greg’s dad.”

Fuck! What the hell? My eyes shoot to Wes’s as he watches me
with a furrowed brow, no doubt desperate to know who’s on the line.

asp and “Hi Bryan,” I say, once again keeping things short, my eyes never
Wes’s so I can see his reaction. His eyes widen, and within seconds
my side, confirming that I’m talking to *his* dad too. Though the last
a wrapsgave it away.

“Greg asked me to call you because he’s in a pretty bad way. They
shakinghim at San Francisco General Hospital.” I gasp as he continues to
Katie’s think that’s what he said it’s called. Anyway, he’d like you to go and v

“What?”

rubbing “Greg’s in the hospital, love. He wouldn’t tell me what happened b
out myyou’re his girlfriend so he wanted you to know.”

“The fuck?” Wes yells, his booming voice making me jump. It’s t
fingerstime he’s said anything above a whisper since he came inside.

a little I take a step away, so he can no longer hear Bryan’s side
enter theconversation and apologize.

“Sorry, Bryan. Do you have any more details? A room number or fl
phone. “As far as I know he’s still in the emergency room. We don’t live
showssame state, so it would make us feel better knowing someone wh
about him is there.”

“Of course. Thank you for letting me know.”

Turning around, I find several sets of eyes locked on the phone in my hand. I expect Wes to start arguing, but it’s not him who speaks first.

“Tell me you’re not going?” Dylan says, pushing past others to get to me.

He grabs my shoulders and looks me square in the eyes. “Lucy, you can’t go.”

You need to think this through. I’m not condoning what Wes did, but I’m

also not going to say he did the wrong thing. You owe Greg an apology.

with a *Nothing*.”

I sink down onto the stool behind me and drop my face in my hands. I don’t know what to do.

“Mom?”

Katie’s voice draws my attention, and I look up to see her and

entering the room. Delilah mouths “I’m sorry.” But I could use the distraction.

I wave off her apology.

“Hi sweetie. Are you okay?”

Katie nods and runs to my side, pulling me down to whisper in my ear.

“Wes okay?”

I turn his way as his eyes open in surprise before he digs his palms

through his hair and sighs. Once again, Katie’s attempt at a whisper failed.

“He’s okay, but your—”

Joel clears his throat and shakes his head, causing me to stop talking immediately. *God, what was I thinking?* I don’t need to offload that

weight on a four-year-old. I need to check on Greg before I mention a word to her. Right now, she needs this party to start again so she can forget

what happened.

“I think it’s time for cake!” I cheer, surprising more than just Katie.

Despite everyone’s obvious concern for me, they all play their part,

like the party never stopped. The music starts up again, and the pain
in my come out. And while Katie's worries are thankfully forgotten, mine have
begun.

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like the party never stopped. The music starts up again, and the party hats come out. And while Katie's worries are thankfully forgotten, mine have only begun.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lucy

The party's dying down when Thomas's face lights up my phone on cue.

"Katie, Thomas is calling," I yell out and watch as she drops the book she's reading with Joel and comes screaming into the kitchen where I'm waiting for her.

I lift her into my arms and connect the call with both our faces on the phone screen.

"Hi, Thomas. How are you?"

"Much better now I'm seeing two of my favorite girls...plus you, of course, Summer," he yells at the last second in case she's listening.

"She's not in the room," I say with a smile, one I'm sure doesn't meet my eyes, but he doesn't notice.

"Ha, lucky. How are you, princess?" he says, turning his attention to me.

"Good. I got—"

"Before you start," I interrupt, "I'm just going to talk to your uncle. Can you hold my phone?"

Katie bounces up and down in my arms, reaching for the device. “You can talk about secret stuff,” she says to Thomas, trying to wink.

I put her down on the floor, and she immediately launches conversation while I head over to Dylan. I’m midway through another from him when Katie yells “finished” and drops the phone to the floor walking away.

“Go and grab your phone,” Dylan says, ending his anti-hospital visit. “Chances are Thomas is still there and most likely still talking. He’s always disappearing on me halfway through a call.”

I bark out a laugh before jogging into the kitchen, and sure enough, Thomas’s smiling face is staring up at me from the tiles.

“Hey, down there.”

“I can see up your skirt,” he jokes.

“I’m wearing pants.”

“And they say these new camera phones are better.”

My lips pull into a smirk and I roll my eyes at his poor attempt at a joke. “Oh, Thomas. I miss you.”

I know we’re not technically family—we’re both just in-laws to each other’s siblings, but he’s always treated me like we are and I love him for it.

“I miss you too, Wifey,” he jokes, and I chuckle at the nickname I’ve had since I was a kid. “I miss you too, Wifey,” he jokes, and I chuckle at the nickname I had when I first took the Kelly name. College Lucy would have swooned over that, but now he’s more like a brother. *Brother...* Thomas now has me cringing as an image of Wes and Greg comes to mind.

“Your dad jokes are on point, Thomas,” I say, needing to get out of the room. “And you’re not even a father.”

“No, but I’m soon to be an uncle again.”

Like the rest of my friends, Thomas treats Katie like she’s his

Yes, we However, with Summer and Dylan's son soon to be born, he'll *officially* be an uncle.

es into "Speaking of being an uncle," Thomas continues, "Katie sounds like she had a great day."

before "She did, thank you. And thanks for the gift you sent. You didn't have to do that."

sit rant. Thomas laughs. "Of course I didn't have to. I wanted to. My niece Katie deserves the world."

My lips pull into a grin. "That she does."

enough, "So what's going on with you and Dylan?"

The grin drops. "What?"

"I could see the two of you in a heated conversation in the back of the car. Katie's not the best at keeping the phone focused on her face."

Shit! "It's nothing."

"Do I have to kick my brother-in-law's ass for you?"

a joke. How I have so many amazing people in my life I will never understand.

"Nope, he's actually looking out for me, just like you are."

to each I quickly explain what happened at the party and that Greg wants to visit him in the hospital. By the time I'm finished, Dylan and Joel are gawking behind me asking him to back them up.

re been "I'm sorry, guys, but I'm going to side with Lucy on this one."

at word *What?!* My heart jolts as I look between the guys beside me and the phone.

Dylan frowns while Joel has an amused smirk on his face.

of my "I know he's treated you like shit, Lucy, but from what you've told me he's trying with Katie. Everyone deserves a second chance. Take it from someone who's lucky he got one with Summer."

is niece. Summer yells out, "Love you, Bro," as she walks into the room, eliciting a

ially bewarm smile from Thomas. He's right. He and Summer went through together and she forgave him. While I may never forgive Greg, I need like shehim a fighting chance with Katie and actually show her that I'm trying I don't love that he told his dad...stepdad, I was his girlfriend, but have tohave something to do with giving me access to his room. I can't j conclusions before I see him.

mesake "Thank you, Thomas. I'm going to go."

"Good. But Lucy, if he does anything else to hurt you, I'll be join guys in their quest to fuck him up."

"I know."



ground.

Katie crosses her arms over her chest as I try to leave. "I thought We were having a sleepover?" she announces, and the room falls quiet. *Ah*

and. With all eyes on me, I want to hide away. *Thanks, Katie.* Joel and both bite back smiles, while the girls are all heart eyes and swoonir *yes, he's amazing with Katie but he just beat the shit out of her dad.*

is me to "Wes can't make it anymore," I lie. I've yet to tell him the sleep oel are canceled but I'm going to assume that he knows. "And Summer pra begged me to let you stay here instead." Another lie.

Thomas "She's right, I did." Summer backs me up even though *I begged i saying yes she has to deal with Dylan's wrath. Because if she'd said r e. maybe I wouldn't be going to the hospital. I'd hate to be her right nov old me, love her for it.*

it from When I make eye contact with Dylan, he's standing stiff as a post my way, proving my theory. He's not happy. Katie, on the other hand, citing a

gh hell It doesn't take much to sway her in Summer's direction, and before I can even get to give I'm grabbing my keys to leave.

. "This isn't a good idea," Dylan says again, like a broken record.
: it may "God, you are making this so much bigger than it needs to be. He's not going to do *anything* to me while he's in the hospital. I'll be fine. Just go on your night with Katie and leave me be."

I take a step toward Wes, ready to say goodbye when Dylan gets in, cutting in and taking the verbal jab in.

"This is bullshit. You need to stop her, Wes. Tell her she can't go."
My jaw falls open as someone or maybe multiple someones gasp.
"What—"

"Are you kidding me with that, Dylan?" Wes booms, moving to interject. I like we're a united front. "You want me to tell her she can't go?" he asks, not even bothering to mask his shock. "I may not like what she's doing, but it's not my decision to make, and I certainly can't force her to do anything. Nor would I want to. Isn't that what you hated about Greg in the first place? The way he manipulated her? Or did none of you see that?" Dylan and I can tell he's about to argue back when Wes continues.

ctically "Lucy wants to do this. It's *her* choice. And frankly, after my conversation with her today, it's probably necessary. I'm with you, man. I don't like this at all, but Lucy's right...he's not going to hurt her. And if he did—"

io, then "We know what you'll do," Logan interrupts with his hand on my shoulder. "You ready to go?" he asks me.

w, but I My brows furrow as I give him a questioning look.

glaring "You're not going alone, and I'm the one less likely to attack anyone in this cause," he says with a slight lift to his shoulder.

is fine. I huff out a laugh because he's probably right. Most of the others were

re long “Hey! I take offense to that,” Joel cries out, biting back a smile. “I’m
about to bust up my hand unless it’s necessary.”

“Yes, but you’d probably verbally attack him,” Delilah adds from
le’s nothim, her lips pulled into a smirk.

st focus Joel looks to the ceiling in thought before he nods. “She’s got a po
you were, Logan.”

one last A small laugh comes from beside me, and I have to hold myself bac
giving Joel a hug. He broke the tension, and he absolutely knew what
doing.

“Okay, let’s go.” I grab Logan’s hand before anyone else tries to arg
pull him toward my car.

ny side “Lucy, wait,” Wes calls as he jogs down the steps behind us.

repeats, Logan stops when I do, but I wave him off. “I’ll meet you at the car.

ing, but When Wes reaches me, he stands a few feet away, giving me space
ything.wanted to apologize again.”

place? “It’s done. It’s okay.” I shrug, but it’s not a lie.

stiffens “It’s not okay, Luce. I fucked up and I’m sorry. I hate watching yo
to be with him, but I understand why you have to do it, and I know
fuckupfault.”

all, but “It’s no—”

“It is. Just accept my damn apology and tell me we’re going to be ol

Wes’s I recoil slightly until I see the suppressed smile on his face. “Yeah
okay,” I say reluctantly, trying not to smile myself. “I’ll call you wh
done. And this time, I’ll remember.”

without Wes leans forward and presses a chaste kiss to my brow before v
back inside, taking a piece of me with him. While I wish he hadn’t *fu*
ould— as he put it, a little part of me loves his fierce protectiveness. And whi

I'm not to think that these days I can take care of myself, there's something
man willing to risk it all to defend you. Because make no mistake, Wes
besides risking a lot with what he did.

"Am I doing the right thing?" I ask Logan when I'm settled in
chair beside him. It's a question I keep asking because I'm still not sure
answer.

back from "I think so." Logan nods, his eyes on everyone watching us from
the porch. "Trust me, you don't want this to end in a custody battle. Think
everyone involved, especially the kids." Finally turning my way, he comes
to my side and smiles. "You're making the right decision *for Katie*," he says,
almost repeating Joel's words. "So how could that ever be wrong?"

After putting the car in reverse, he backs us out of the driveway and
drives off with his eyes on the road. "You've always been a badass in my mind."
"I just... You can do this."



When you leave
it's my
Greg's eyes light up when I pull back the curtains to enter his room.
"I came," he says with a beaming smile, and I feel sick. His face is swollen
and bruised, he can barely open one eye, and there's a bandage around his
forehead. "God, Wes, what did you do?"

"I'm here. And you look like shit," I say honestly but cringe with
my words leave my mouth.

When I'm
loved."

Walking
As hard as I try to stop it, my lips pull into a small smile and I shake
my head. "I was too good to you."

le I like

about a “Yeah, you were.” He sighs. “And I realize that now. Hopefully
/es waslate.”

So late, the ship has well and truly sailed.

the car “Why am I here, Greg?” I say, moving on.

of the “Because your boyfriend attacked me.”

I cringe again, but he’s right, only that wasn’t my question.

om the “Why am *I* here?”

ey hurt “Because your boyfriend attacked me,” he repeats, “*and* I wanted
ups mysee what kind of man he is.”

ie says, My eyes narrow. While I’d love to believe that’s his only motivation
asking me here, I’m skeptical.

l smiles “He is your boyfriend, right?”

l, Luce. *Is he?*

“Not sure yet, but I’m more interested in what he is to *you*.”

“I barely know him.”

I scoff. “But you knew he was your stepbrother? That wasn’t sor
1. “You Wes sprang on you today, was it?”

len and Greg rolls his eyes. “Of course I knew.”

is head. “Wait... You knew when you sent me that article, didn’t you? You
have.” Holy shit, he’s known the entire time.

hen the “I found out you were dating him when I first read it.”

My insides squirm and I grimace. *Why the hell wouldn’t he have told*

me feel Crossing my arms over my chest, I stare him down, trying hard to
him out. “Did you provoke him?”

ake my “Why the fuck would I provoke him? I’m trying to get onto your
side.” With his eyes wide with shock, I almost want to believe him.

“Why?”

not too He drops his head back to the pillow and groans. “So I can spend time with Katie. So we can work things out between us.”

I sigh, much louder than I mean to, shaking my head. “There is no Greg.”

“Not right now there isn’t.”

I have to bite my tongue so I don’t speak. Greg’s in the hospital because of my *boyfriend*, as he put it, beat him up. Pissing him off isn’t a smart move for you to “Plus, I could easily report Wes for assault. If I wanted to. But I won’t.”

And he just proved my thoughts. *Is that a threat?* God, I wish I knew how to handle this situation for can’t tell. His face gives nothing away. Possibly because it’s so messy. By Wes.

“Let’s just focus on you getting out of here and getting to know Katie. She’s a wonderful little girl, and I know she’d love to spend more time with you.”

I swallow a lump in my throat. Having to say all of that wasn’t easy. Nothing Greg smiles knowingly, but I’m not sure what he thinks he knows.

“That sounds like a great plan, Luce.”

I’m about to make an excuse to leave when a nurse comes around signaling the end of visiting hours, and I almost sigh in relief, I’m so happy to see you.

Coming here wasn’t a mistake, but I definitely don’t need to stay any longer than necessary.

d me? I depart with the promise to increase his visits with Katie, and almost figure it out when I meet Logan out in the hall. Having Wes and Greg in my life is going to be a challenge. *God, I hope it’s worth it.*

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Wes

Greg only spent one night in the hospital before being released, milked it for all it's worth. I do feel bad that I pummeled him, fucker absolutely deserved it. *My fucking stepbrother*. I knew he was of shit, but I never thought he was capable of rape. *Fuck*, it kills me to think of that word. Not to mention the emotional abuse he's subjected to.

Seeing him at Katie's party and discovering their connection ignited inside me that I never thought was possible. In that moment I could have killed him if Logan hadn't stopped me. Hell, I wanted to. I've never felt so out of control in my life. To think of what he did to Lucy, and that he's still to be part of her and Katie's life *sickens* me. And to know I can't do anything to stop it makes it so much worse.

My only relief comes from knowing he's a deadbeat so doesn't have the means to fight Lucy in court—*oh fuck!*

I'm calling my father before the thought has fully formed in my head. Please for the love of God let me be wrong. That it was actually his daughter, Bridget, that needed the cash.

Dad answers the phone and I bark out my question before he's even hello. "Who needed my money, *Dad*?"

"Hello, son."

"*Who. Was. It?*"

Dad sighs, and I hear the telltale sign of a beer can being opened, a sound I have memorized from before he left Mom and me.

"Greg told me everything. Well, at first he said Lucy was his girlfriend, but he's since cleared that up."

Fuck! Standing up, I pace my living room, running a hand through my already mussed hair. "Okay, then what's the money for?" I don't care if he has or hasn't told my father. I just need him to answer *one* question.

Dad's voice rises. "So he can provide for his child! What do you think for?"

"So he's not going to file for custody?"

"What?" Dad huffs out a laugh and takes a sip. "You really think so? Him, don't you. He's trying to do the right thing for a child he had about, and co-parent with a woman who's dating his brother." *He's* brother. "It's not easy, but he's trying."

My entire body deflates. *God, I hope he's right.*

"Sorry. They just both mean so much to me."

He lets out a long sigh, and when he speaks, I can hear the smile through in his voice. "I can't wait to meet her. I'm a grandfather, Wes."

"You're going to love her. I just wish it was *me* that was introducing

The thought that it's not breaks my heart and my world stops. I wish it was *mine*. Actually, no. I don't wish that at all. Deep down, it already like she is. My mind whirs as I think about Katie and the need to protect

"It's a complicated situation, that's for sure," my father says, inter

en said my thoughts. “But I promise, he wants to do right by both of them now, he’s taking Katie to the beach.”

What? The hairs on the back of my neck spike as my body covers in bumps.

sound I “She said she’s not doing swimming lessons anymore, so Greg’s g start teaching her.”

end, but *What?!*

“Where are they?”

igh my “Huh?”

re what “Where. Are. They?”

. Dad huffs. “Fuck, I don’t know. The beach near his house?”

think it’s “Send me his address and phone number. Now, Dad. I need to go.”

“Ah Wes—”

“*Please, Dad,*” I beg, my heart racing as I wait for him to answer.

low of “Okay.” *Thank God.*

no clue I don’t know why I’m so worried, but the tightness in my chest tel *not my* need to run, because if something happens and I didn’t go, I’ll never myself.



coming Greg’s phone goes to voicemail with every attempt I make, and Lucy’s
” does the same, though as I dial hers, I’m not sure what to say.

; you.” It’s been a week since the party at Dylan’s, and she’s already lettin
h Katie and Greg have time alone. I guarantee she’s trying to make up for wha
ly feels and it sickens me to think this is all my fault.

ct her.

rupting

l. Right I drive through the streets in a panic, but thankfully there's only one stretch of beach close to Greg's house, and it's fairly easy to find.

n goose Parking my truck diagonally across two spots, I leap from the open door and take off in a run toward the water, my heart thundering in my chest. I'm going to hope I'm wrong. That this physical reaction I'm having is *wrong*, but it doesn't shake the feeling that something is going to happen.

When I get to the shoreline and scan the water, there's no sign of Greg. Running a hand down my face, I blow out a deep breath, the air dropping to the ground with the weight of the tension I'm holding back. It's too much.

I've barely had a chance to pull my hands from my face when Greg's raised voice carries with the wind.

"Katie, stop! You're being ridiculous."

Jesus, fuck.

Pushing off the sand, I take off in the direction of his voice and see Greg. I try to grab Katie's arm as she runs away from him.

I don't think or process what's happening before I yell, "Leave her alone!" and pump my legs harder to get to her.

They both freeze at my voice, until Katie takes off running again, only this time it's in the opposite direction, straight into my open arms.

s phone She crashes into me at full speed, almost bouncing back as though she's hitting a brick wall. It would be comical if my heart wasn't lodged in my throat. I wasn't worried to the point of feeling nauseous.

g Katie My arms wrap around her on instinct as I press my cheek to her head. I did, here, Katie. It's okay."

What the fuck happened?

Katie stays curled into my chest until Greg approaches, huffing.

he smallcursing under his breath.

“I don’t want to. Don’t make me,” Katie rushes out, gripping my ten doortiny hands.

chest. I My gaze flashes to Greg’s before moving to Katie. It doesn’t take r
I can’tguess what she’s referring to, but why would he try to force her?

“You don’t have to do anything, Katie. I’m sure Greg didn’t know
Katie oryour lesson.”

before “She said she’s scared. All the more reason to get in.”

coming *Is he for real?*

“She’s *four*.”

Greg’s “She needs to learn.”

“That’s fair, but is the ocean really the best place to do that?”

Greg grips the back of his head and scowls. “Come on, Katie, let’s
about swimming and get something to eat.”

æ Greg Katie shakes her head, gripping me tighter.

“How about I just take her home to Lucy?” I offer, thinking only
alone,”scared little girl in my arms.

Greg’s hands move to his sides and he stands tall. “She’s *my* daughter
but this I stiffen, but remain calm. “No one’s disputing that. How about
Katie? Katie—”

he’s hit “You, Wes,” Katie blurts out, almost crawling into my lap to get clo
at and Irepeat my earlier question... *What the fuck happened?*

Greg’s body sags, and he nods until a cocky smile comes to his face
d. “I’mknow you need a car seat, right?” *Dickhead*.

“Yup, I’m covered. Can you grab me Katie’s things so we can head

He reluctantly moves to collect her bag as I lift her into my arms ar
ng andback toward my truck. Thank fuck I had a car seat installed last we

hoped but didn't expect to need it this quickly.

she in her Katie's silent for most of the trip, but when we're almost home, she opens up. "I didn't want to go in but he said I have to. Do I have to?" much to *Fuck!*

I meet her eyes in the rearview mirror and smile. "I think it's a good thing about for you to get back into the pool, but we can work up to it. Maybe we can play in a kiddie pool next weekend. You don't even have to put your head under." *Baby steps.* I hope I'm saying the right thing. *God, this parent is hard.*

Katie's eyes light up and she nods before turning to look out the window for the remainder of the trip, singing the chorus to our duet over and over until we get home.

she forgets



As suspected, Lucy is livid when I explain to her what happened, and she mumbles to herself that it's her fault, I know a part of her still blames me. "She probably wouldn't have given him alone time so soon if I hadn't been up." But it's done now. We just have to figure out how to move forward. Despite Katie wanting me to stay, after only a few minutes, I make an excuse and head home. Lucy may say we're fine, but it's not hard to see a change in our relationship, so I want to give her time to forgive me.

A little time anyway. She can have another week. I don't think I'll be here much longer than that.

I've barely been home for five minutes when there's a knock at the door. "Who's off?" My pulse spikes as my first thought is Lucy, but I know that's unlikely. When I open the door, my guest is the last person I want to see. I'd

“How did you get my address?” I say with my arms folded across my chest, standing at my full height. I know I can be intimidating, and I hate it, but right now, that’s the look I’m going for.

Greg rolls his eyes, seemingly unaffected. “Your dad was more than willing to hand it over when I told him I wanted to sort things out with your candarling brother.”

I roll my eyes in return, as I call bullshit. “Dad doesn’t have my address, *ing shit*.” “Okay, so I followed you one night; sue me.” He shrugs.

What the fuck?

Up until now, I’d never thought of Greg as a threat, except for his ambition to overtake Katie from Lucy. But in this moment, my spine’s tingling and I’m on edge. *Has he been stalking me?*

“Why are you here, Greg?” I say without changing my stance, trying to appear unaffected.

A hint of a smirk lights up the asshole’s face as he looks me square in the eye. “I thought it was time we had a little chat.”

Fuck!

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Fuck!

Chapter Forty

Wes

Greg's arms cross as he tries to mirror my stance, his eyebrow's as he waits for me to respond.

"Okay, I'll bite. Say what you've got to say. And fast. I'm kind of b

"With what?" He laughs. "Lucy doesn't want to see you and the football today. What else could you have going on?"

He's right, but I don't need to tell him that. Instead, I stare at him blank expression. "Just talk."

A hint of nerves flits across his face before he recovers. "I need money and you're going to give it to me."

I roll my eyes and move to slam the door in his face. *What a joke* runs forward, stopping the door with his foot, seconds before it ripping it open again. "You're going to want to hear me out."

"Five minutes," I grunt in frustration.

After taking a deep breath, he leans against the doorframe and says "I need money so that I can give Katie the life that she deserves. You know I got nothing. I want to make sure I've got a decent place to live, nice

for Katie—when she comes around—and enough left over so that I have to live paycheck to paycheck.”

My jaw drops. He’s delusional if he thinks Katie will be spending a grand at his house after the shit he just pulled.

“Get a better job. Work for it. I’ve given you enough payouts.”

Greg’s features morph into something almost sadistic, and his eyes narrow. “No, I don’t think you understand. This isn’t a question. If you don’t get the money, I’ll press charges against you. Maybe even get a restraining order. Anything I can do to make it impossible for you to see Lucy and Katie

raising *Fucker.* I should have known this would happen. “How much do you want?” If it’s another ten grand, I’ll do it to shut him up. He can’t do damage with that.

usy.”
re’s no “Five hundred.”

What? “Fuck off.” I try to slam the door again but he pushes through

with a “I’m serious. I’ve done the math, and I need five hundred grand.”

He’s kidding himself if he thinks I believe for a second that he needs money for Katie. He’s been asking for payouts his whole life, and I’m an idiot that started giving them to him.

e. Greg “And if I don’t do this—”

closes, “Katie suffers.”

He’s bullshitting. She’s going to suffer either way. He won’t spend on her. *I’m calling his bluff.*

Shaking my head, I get in his face and sneer. “I’m not doing shit for you. You need to realize how amazing that little girl is, *before* it’s too late. She deserves a father that understands money *can’t buy happiness.* She just needs your love.”

“Says the guy with millions of dollars. I’m just asking for enough

second she was down.

hat she Wes: I'm so fucking sorry. I know I messed up, but you and Katie
number one priority. I'm here for you if you ever need me. Any time.
you, soreason

ould be It's going on eleven p.m. when I click send, so I don't expect a
However, thirty minutes later, I get one.

shrugs **Lucy: Thank you for being there for Katie today. It means a lot**
is. He's **More than you'll ever know**

and he It's not hard to read between the lines of that message, so I call her
she has a chance to leave her phone. When she doesn't answer on the f

I call straight back, desperate to talk to her. On my third try she answer
han my "Hello."

ie. Five "Answering on the third call? Taking a page out of my book?"
but I'm hoping to lighten the mood right off the bat.

"Huh? You do that?" Lucy asks, her tone flatter than usual.

I huff out a laugh anyway. "Only every time someone calls."

"You've never done it to me." *What?*

sign of "Really?"

"Yes, really." She softly giggles and the sound brings me so much j
: would "Well, there you go. Sorry to call when we were texting, but I wa
reg... I make sure you were okay."

ie. And Lucy sighs, but it's so quiet I wouldn't have noticed it if I wasn't
for signs of her feelings.

rell and "I'm okay. Just tired," she lies.

part the "Lucy..."

“What do you want me to say, Wes?”

are my She’s trying hard to come across strong and unaffected, but the qu
For anyher voice gives her away.

“I want you to tell me the truth.”

a reply. Her breath hitches and then she huffs. “What truth? That I messed u
I made a stupid mistake that could have hurt Katie. Or worse?”

“It’s not your fault. I—”

to me. “I know it’s not all mine, but I’m still partly to blame.” *Ouch!*

My chest tightens thinking about my part in all this. She wouldn
: before granted Greg any unsupervised access if I hadn’t fucked up. And I h
irst try, I’m the cause of her hurt.

rs. “Can I come over? I need to see you. I hate this distance between us

“I’m—”

I joke, “I get it, Lucy. I do. And I’ve been giving you space. But fuck, I m
and I really want to hold you right now.”

Lucy sniffs, providing me with even more proof that she’s not o
miss you too, and I do want to see you, but this week’s pretty cra:
weekend?”

I hold back a sigh; it’s better than nothing. “The weekend sounds g
oy. the meantime, I’m here if you need me.”

nted to “Thanks, Wes.”

“Bye, Lucy.”

looking



I only see Lucy once over the next couple of days and it kills me. Wo
by slowly, even though the season’s started. And I just feel like

charges.” Greg laughs. “But too late now.”

or. *Too* My chest tightens. *What?*

“I should have.” He chuckles. “I’ve been trying to convince (e fan of destroy the asshole that beat him up. I’m fully prepared to bury h my big Greg’s not talking.”

“How would you bury him?” I ask curiously.

o matter “I’m a cop at San Francisco PD.”

I internally cringe. “Right. That makes sense.”

without *Fuck!* Greg is not at all the spineless asshole I thought he was. Lu he manipulated her without her knowing it, and that’s exactly wh doing to Tye. I should have been more focused on what Lucy said ab for the ex, especially now I know it’s Greg. But when I found out she was re to my stepbrother, I spiraled and never really reconciled the two pe being one and the same.

“Whoever did it deserves everything coming to him,” Tye continu Greg’s try not to appear unnerved. “So if you could help me convince Greg rother-be great.” He smiles like he’s proud while I hold back vomit.

“I’ll try my best,” I say with another fake grin. *Motherfucker.*

oping it “Okay, big bro, we’ll leave you be. Have a good evening. I’ll be you.” He smirks at me before walking away, and my insides squirm out,” *Ithe fuck was that?* Actually, I know the answer. That was my warnin I know Greg the money, or Tye gets what he so desperately wants. *I’m screw*

It’s almost ten p.m. when I hear the knock I’ve been expecting sinc wn and and Tye drove away.

“Change your mind, big bro?” Greg asks when I answer the door.

rother. “Nope. Your threats mean nothing to me.”

o press “Okay, that’s fair. But does this?”

He hands me a piece of paper, which on inspection is an official statement outlining what happened when I *allegedly* attacked him *unprovoked*. Greg tore request for a restraining order. All that's missing is the name of the victim, but accused...me. And a signature. *Jesus, this guy doesn't mess around.*

"Won't take much for me to file that. It's all ready to go. Tye helped me with the wording. Says he knows what to say to ensure it's taken seriously."

My body stiffens and I close my eyes, trying to block out the need to kick his ass. When I open them again, Greg's glaring at me. Waiting for my response.

"The money's all for Katie?" I ask, calmer than I feel.

"Yep, all of it. Well, as I mentioned, a lot will go to a better home for her in the long run."

I sigh in resignation. I can't get him out of her life, but I can make it better. "It'll be in your account by morning, that'd be great." Greg shakes his head before pointing to my pocket. "Get out your phone. Transfer it now."

What? "Come on. I can't transfer that kind of money on an app."

"I'll come with you to the bank. I trust you about as far as I can throw a punch. *What* and I'd be lucky to lift you up."

"Give me your money." I roll my eyes. "It's ten fucking p.m., Greg. Banks aren't open. You're kidding me."

Greg He stares at me for a moment—looking for some kind of answer. He nods. "I'll be back if I don't. You've got a lot riding on this. An arrest would look good for your rep."

"I don't give a fuck about that. I'm doing this for Lucy and Katie."

"Keep telling yourself that." He smirks.

atement Ignoring him, I turn to close the door, moving quickly so I don't
l and ahim again. "Goodbye, *brother*."

of the "Pleasure doing business with you," he rushes out as the door shut
face.

ped me *Fuck you*.

n more



l I have As promised, I call my bank the next morning to arrange the money t
ig for a and hate myself the entire time. In all of twenty minutes, I signed over
money than Greg's had in his lifetime, and I'm almost certain he's g
fuck up.

ise, but You wouldn't think it was that easy to hand over five hundred g
someone else, but since I've made a transfer to him once before
ke sure painless process. If you don't count the pain in my chest.

ng." I expect that to be the end of the conversation. That when the money
phone. up in his account, we'll be done with it. But I'm wrong, and fuck I
wasn't.

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Ignoring him, I turn to close the door, moving quickly so I don't punch him again. "Goodbye, *brother*."

"Pleasure doing business with you," he rushes out as the door shuts in his face.

Fuck you.



As promised, I call my bank the next morning to arrange the money transfer, and hate myself the entire time. In all of twenty minutes, I signed over more money than Greg's had in his lifetime, and I'm almost certain he's going to fuck up.

You wouldn't think it was that easy to hand over five hundred grand to someone else, but since I've made a transfer to him once before, it's a painless process. If you don't count the pain in my chest.

I expect that to be the end of the conversation. That when the money shows up in his account, we'll be done with it. But I'm wrong, and fuck I wish I wasn't.

Chapter Forty-One

Lucy

It's almost a week after the fact, and I still feel sick over what happened with Greg and Katie. She hasn't mentioned it much since Monday, but I'm hopeful that means she's okay, and not that she's too traumatized to talk. I don't even really know what happened. I have both of their stories, but I only know if Greg is being honest. All I have to go by is how angry he was when he dropped Katie home, and the way she clung to him for her lifeline.

If he hadn't been there...*no, I can't think that.*

I've got to bring myself out of this fog I'm in.

After Katie had fallen asleep that night, I slid down the wall opposite the room, dropped my head in my hands, and cried. Tears fell until I reached a point of hyperventilating, struggling to take in air as the severity of my mistake consumed me.

I can't continue to live like that, but it's not going away. I knew I was doing the wrong thing. I'd been on edge from the moment Katie got in Greg's car, but when she got home, with Wes, it took all of my strength to hold myself together until I was alone. *Why would I allow that? Why*

go with them? Everything I've done, all my life, has been for Katie, and I make that colossal mistake. I'll never forgive myself for it. I shouldn't have trusted in that message he sent. The one that convinced me to say yes was absolutely bullshit because he didn't protect her at all.

Greg: Thank you, Lucy. I promise I'll take care of her with my life. She means the world to me. I'm so grateful to you for letting me know her better

While the tears may have slowed down, they still come, every night. It happened soon as Katie's asleep, and maybe I deserve that. To forever feel like I failed, so I'm my daughter. Like I failed as a mother. Because I make no mistakes, I talk. I absolutely did.

But God Even now while I'm in the ring, attempting to throw a few punches with my sparring partner, I can't get my mind to stop. I try to remain focused on my movement, my technique...hell, even my instructor...but nothing seems to be working and I'm off my game, which has never happened to me before. Boxing is usually my outlet. The way I rid myself of negativity. But right now my practice partner, Gina, is totally kicking my ass.

How could I be so stupid? I'm supposed to be stronger. Katie is the most important person in my life, and I fucked up. Greg shouldn't have had so much of my time with her. I knew in my gut it was the wrong decision but as you know in the past, he managed to get his way, and this time it could have been fatal.

A fist connects with my shoulder, and I flinch with the pain. Jesus. I can't concentrate. Standing tall, I bounce on my toes a few times and assume my fighting position before attempting a jab. I barely clip Gina's arm as she moves. I didn't and I curse under my breath.

and then *Dammit!*

it's not have But how could Wes put me in such a difficult situation? While Greg

. It was exactly threaten to press charges against him, he mentioned the fact

hadn't enough to reiterate that he could. And if Greg presses charges

Wes, the media would be all over it. They'd drag Katie into it, and

my life. None of it would bode well if there was ever a custody battle. I just—

get to *Oof, fuck!* Gina gut punches me, literally, and it's exactly what I'd

In fact, I deserve a lot more than that. I'm not perfect, but I should

right, as followed my instincts and kept Katie home, something I'll always regret

I failed *God, get out of your head, Lucy.*

stake. I Gina hits me three more times before the trainer calls time on our session

She packs a mean punch, and it's obvious I'm not coping. I'm surprised

as at my lasted as long as it did.

on my After apologizing profusely for lack of competition, I head off

as to be cooldown on the treadmill, still needing to do something to release

re. This tension. I'm covered in sweat and feeling a little achy—okay, a lot

low my when Joel walks in.

“What are you doing here?” I puff out, wiping the water from my brow

re most “Been coming every day since our session a while back.”

d alone At that I smile. “Bullshit.”

with the “Okay, you got me; the trainers are hot.” He bounces his eyebrows

looks behind me. Since I know my trainer, Anika, just left, I burst

. I need laughing before looking at the guys he's referring to. I mean...

ness my “Tell me I'm wrong?”

s away, “I can't. You're not wrong. But *why are you here?*”

Joel sighs. “I wanted to talk about Greg. I'm here for a workout time

just, whenever I come to your house, Katie's there...obviously. So

never really discuss him.”

g didn't I take a deep breath and stop my machine.

that he “Go ahead. What do you have to say on my least favorite topic?”

against Joel drops down on a bench against the wall and pats the seat beside Dylan, crinkling his nose when I sit.

“Shut up, you accosted me in a gym. I'm allowed to smell.”

deserve. He nods with a crooked smile. “Fair call. Anyway, after Wes, umm... I'd have Greg a touch-up, we got to talking. Wes and I. He's under the impression that his brother is a low-life, brainless, piece of shit. They may have even been exact words.”

session. “Okay.” *I'm not going to argue.*

rised it “He's not brainless, Lucy. Not even a little.” I suck in a breath as a flash to his. “He kept you coming back *for years*. He knew exactly what he was doing to get his own way, while still keeping you in his life. You use this even questioned him. I don't believe for a second that he didn't know exactly—*you and Wes*. After all, he sent you that article with the photos of you. He's calculated and manipulative and I'm worried about you.”

ow. “I...I...I don't know what to do, Joel. I can't cut him from our lives like that. It didn't work.”

“Just be careful, Luce. Question *everything*. I don't know his angle and I don't like it, whatever it is.”

irst out I sag into the seat with a sigh. “Where were you *before* I gave you unsupervised time with Katie?”

“What the fuck?” Joel's eyes widen in disbelief. “That just proves your point. Calculating and manipulative.”

oo. It's Running my hands down my face, I shake my head as my heart aches. we can “I know that's hard to hear, but remember you're not alone in this.”

have a lot of people on your side.”

“I know. But unfortunately, that may not help me.”

Joel walks me to my car after we’ve finished talking, making me
de him, when he heads straight to his motorcycle instead of back inside. W
huh? Leave it to him to always know the right things to say and do in
situation.

...gave When I’m settled behind the wheel, I check my phone before
ion that driving. Like I always do, just to make sure Katie’s okay. This time
seen his that I hadn’t.

Greg: Can you meet me at Bailey’s diner? We need to talk

ny eyes That’s the last thing I want to do, but there’s nothing stopping him
what he turning up at my work or the house, so if he has something to say
u never probably best to be out in public.

v about After letting Summer and Dylan know I’m running late to pick up
ou two. shoot Greg a text before showering and heading straight there.

Since I left the stadium as soon as the game ended today, it’s still
. I tried evening, so the diner’s busy when I arrive.

I spot Greg in a corner booth with a stack of paper in front of him, and
e, but I immediately rises in my throat. This is it. He’s going to do it. He’s going
file for custody.

ve him I walk slowly toward the table, as though I’m walking to my death
it sure feels that way. I shouldn’t be so worried about this but I
ves my mentioned he has money, so he could probably hire good lawyer
there’s the fact that I kept Katie from him for years. That’s not going
as. in my favor. *How did I not see this coming?*

is. You

I'm silent as I sit down. I hate that he holds all the cards right now. He's getting his way, just like Joel said he does. I could have refused to smile at him here and changed the location, but this isn't a power play; this is my *workout*, my daughter. I just want whatever this is over with.

On every Greg smiles, and it's somewhat genuine. *Fuck!* He's trying to do it. To pull me back in.

I start "I'm going to get straight to the point," he says immediately and I wish I could thank him for it. "This is a contract giving me joint custody of Katie fifty/fifty."

I scoff and lean back in my chair, acting calm, while inside I feel like I'm being suffocated and unable to take in air. "Why would I ever sign that?" "Because it's either this contract or I file a police report against Wes." I laugh but it's a little mechanical. "So you're threatening me with reporting Wes?"

Katie, I "Not exactly. Here's the deal. Wes promised me a large sum of money, I promised to look after Katie and destroy the police report. I don't trust Wes. So I had an idea...do *you* trust him? I need reassurance. A reason for him to hold up his end of the deal. Sign the contract, and I'll rip up the police report and even sign this agreement"—he waves a second piece of paper in my face—"stating there will be no charges filed in relation to this assault, no charges in the future. You'll have your own reassurance. Wes will be safe." He looks as if he's letting that all sink in, so I nod. "Don't sign it and we have more issues than your lack of trust in someone you seem to care so much about." Greg I swallow a lump in my throat. This isn't just a question of trusting Wes. And This is about what I want for my daughter, and while I love Wes—to help fucking love him—it's not enough.

I trust Wes, I do, but I don't trust Greg. Wes never once mentioned

ow, and Greg money, and he hates lying, even by omission. If he was going to meet anything over, he would have told me. *Wouldn't he?*

s about This can't be real. None of this is real. "What kind of person plays people's lives like this? You're discussing the future of a four-year-old again. she's a possession. Isn't it enough that I'm trying here? We've been working together to build a relationship between the two of you. This isn't how I almost want to start your life with her. And you told me you've got money? Well, split you need more?"

"That's my business."

ike I'm No, I can't do this. Joel's right. He's smart, but I'm smarter.

t?" "I can't sign it," I whisper defiantly. "I won't."

s." I expect Greg to be pissed but he just shrugs.

ie with "Are you sure about that?"

I stare between him and the paper he's holding, then nod. His confidence if I demeanor never wavers as he places the first document in front of me.

ist him. "Not even after seeing this?"

Wes to

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report,

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out."

ig Wes.

—shit, I

l giving

Greg money, and he hates lying, even by omission. If he was going to hand anything over, he would have told me. *Wouldn't he?*

This can't be real. None of this is real. "What kind of person plays with people's lives like this? You're discussing the future of a four-year-old like she's a possession. Isn't it enough that I'm trying here? We've been working together to build a relationship between the two of you. This isn't how you want to start your life with her. And you told me you've got money? Why do you need more?"

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"I can't sign it," I whisper defiantly. "I won't."

I expect Greg to be pissed but he just shrugs.

"Are you sure about that?"

I stare between him and the paper he's holding, then nod. His confident demeanor never wavers as he places the first document in front of me.

"Not even after seeing this?"

Chapter Forty-Two

Wes

When I pull up in my driveway after the game late Saturday Greg's waiting for me on my porch steps. I should have been there hours ago, so the thought that he could have been waiting a while gives me a little pleasure.

He stands as I approach, making himself taller than I am on the porch above me. Nodding in acknowledgment, I make a mental note to call the realtor tomorrow. *Fuck, I need to move.*

"I got the money," he says, as though that's information I don't have.

"I said I'd send it. What more do you want?" I raise an eyebrow. "I'm going to need you to sign something to say you won't be asking for money. Continuously showing up here is not on."

Greg laughs. "That's not why I'm here."

"Then why the fuck are you back?" I say, raising my hands in the air. My patience nonexistent.

The fucker gives me another one of his sadistic smiles, and I know I'm in for a world of pain. "It's simple...I want you gone."

My eyes flash to Greg's, hoping to find even the smallest amusement. But there's nothing. It's not a joke. "*I want you gone.*" *What the actual fuck?*

"I want you out of Lucy and Katie's life," he adds, as though I understand him the first time. *Heard you loud and clear.*

"Okay, why would I do that?" *He's definitely insane.*

"Because if you don't, I'll be using that money you gave me to file custody." *Motherfucker.*

"You actually gave me the idea. Well, Dad did, but he got it from thought showing Lucy I was a good dad and that we could be a family habit. Which is a pity because all of this could have been avoided." *7 night, n home es me a*

I feel physically sick. Again. My stomach twists in knots and I vomit. *I did this?* *landing*

He stares at me with no emotion. No regard for the fact he's messing the life of a child. *His child.* *call my*

I huff out a laugh though this is absolutely not a laughing matter. *e.* *v.* "I'm have no reason to take Katie away from Lucy. She's a great mom."

Greg takes a step closer, trying—but failing—to be intimidating. "The woman who kept Katie's father away from her, a mom who lets an abusive man raise her daughter, a mom who is soon to be out of a job, unable to take care of herself." *r more. air, my*

"The fuck?"

"I know about the policy at your work. Won't take much to prove I've been dating the entire time she's worked there. Isn't her boss kind of a stickler for the rules?" *7 I'm in*

As hard as I've tried not to react, I lose it at that and get in his face

hint of the hell do you know all this?"

That the He smirks. "Lucy's my business. I make it a point to know."

Holy fucking shit. This guy is unhinged.

I didn't "I'm not leaving Lucy. It's just something you're going to have to get
to. Do the right thing and we won't have a problem."

He's bluffing. Surely he's bluffing.

for full Greg steps back, raising his hand to stop me from talking. "This is
for discussion, asshole. You break up with her, or I take Katie."

1 you. I "Fuck off. There's no way they'd give you full custody. Not a chance
7 would scoff, shaking my head. "We'll fight it. You may have some of my
savings, but it's only change compared to my actual savings. I won't even
risk it. We'll fight you. Every step of the way."

want to "And how are you going to do that with a restraining order in place?
I mention the fact that you tried to pay me so I wouldn't press charges
and it doesn't look good on your part. Think of the media. Lucy and Katie
were dragged into the spotlight. So will Dylan. I wouldn't want that for my
children. "They that's for sure."

I'm seconds away from beating the shit out of him again and that's

A mom what he wants.

an near "If you wouldn't want that for your family then why make it happen
support "Because they're not my family...yet."

"That's messed up. And no one will believe you. You're my stepbrother
and I could easily explain away the money."

you've "Are you willing to risk that? You've never once mentioned us
and the media. That fact alone is scandalous."

I reach out to grab him but pull back at the last second. "I don't give
up. "How about the media coming after me."

“What about Katie and Lucy? Are you really that selfish?”

My fists clench at my sides as I physically shake. I want to punch
want to break his nose. But that’s only going to work in his favor. He
get used me on a leash and he knows it. *Basically, I’m fucked.*

“We’ll fight it together. Letting Lucy go is not an option.”

“Even if staying with her is causing her pain?”

isn’t up “What?”

“She came to me today, offering me fifty percent custody if I drop
ance,” I charges against you. She was completely heartbroken when she ha
money, over to me. But your actions are forcing her hand. Wouldn’t she be be
tice it’s without you?”

I internally flinch. “I don’t believe you.”

’ Not to “I didn’t think you would.” Reaching into his pocket, Greg pull
s. That piece of paper and hands it over to me. A joint custody agreement, sig
will be Lucy and dated today. *Jesus Christ. What am I doing to her?* All I
family, Greg is my fucking *brother*.

“Fine.”

exactly “Fine?” he repeats. “That easy?”

Gripping his shirt, I spin him around and slam him against the brick
i?” house. “It’s not fucking easy. But I would do anything for those girls
this is my only option, I’m not going to let them down.”

other. I *Meanwhile, I will figure out a way around this.*

Greg leans forward until our faces almost touch and smiles.
in the decision. Make it happen and all this goes away. I’ll be the doting da
deserves.”

e a fuck I tighten my grip on his shirt. “You know Lucy won’t go for this, rig
I need to talk to her. Surely that document is a fake.

Greg sneers. “She probably won’t. You need to *make* her believe in him. Isays, finally trying to push me away.

Letting go, I step back and blow out a deep breath, speaking with clenched teeth. “I’ll do what I need to do. But I need proof that you’ll go after Katie, that you’ll never file for custody, and you’ll do everything at Lucy’s pace. She makes the decisions.”

Greg nods. “Already ahead of you.”

He hands me a signed contract from a local lawyer that states everything I’ve asked for, proving he’s definitely smarter than I thought. A mix of relief and off-putting disgust swirls inside me, now that I have to go through with my end of the deal—but knowing Lucy gets to call the shots for them makes things easier.

Greg puts the agreement back in his pocket and smiles heartlessly. “Signed by you and the contract is yours. You can even come with me to have it notarized because I nod before stepping closer and whispering in his ear. “If I ever find you’ve treated either of them less than the royalty they are, I will ensure consequences be damned.”

“Noted,” he says, moving away with a smirk. He knocks my shoulder and walks down the driveway, just as Grayson pulls up across the street. I try, and in everything in my power not to chase after him and throw him to the curb.

But instead, I watch him until he opens his car door, before I move toward the house, feeling utterly defeated. I’ve just reached the top step when he says, “Goodye.”

“Oh and Wes...if you ever decide to change your mind, *remember* everything awful that’s happened to Lucy is your fault. *Everything.*”

Grayson gives me a “what the fuck” look as he walks across the street, hearing every word. Greg’s not even trying to be discreet.

it,” he “Including the night we conceived Katie,” he adds.

What?

between “I knew she kissed you that day. I wanted to prove she was still mi
ll nevershe was. I slid inside her like...”

thing at He keeps talking but I don’t listen. A rage fills me as I run toward
full speed. I’m so close, I’m already imagining his bloodied face.

“Stop, Wes.”

anything I Grayson slams into me with such force we almost fall, but as soon
lief andgained my bearings, I push him aside to get to Greg. “Stay ou
l of theGrayson.”

a little “Stop, he’s not worth it,” Grayson yells as he continues to get betw
while Greg laughs behind him, jumping into his car and rolling do
“End it,window, out of harm’s way. *Coward.*

zed.” He looks me square in the eye with a sinister smile on his face as C
ind outholds me back. “I’m going to ruin you until you have exactly what I
nd you.nothing.”

And with that, he drives away.

er as he

It takes



ground.

toward

hen he

my mind.

r *this...*

saying.

e road,

I sink down to the carpet as soon as I get inside and drop my face i
hands. I feel nauseous, I’m tense, and sweat is already starting to pearl
brow. I’m physically repulsed by what I’m going to do. But I can’t
Grayson hovers above me, and he’s talking but I can’t hear a wo
saying.

Greg raped Lucy *because of me*. Because he saw us together? I didn't fucking know her back then. Fog fills my head and I can't think straight, and hurting her. Staying with her is hurting her. I wish there was someone I could do, but he's never going to give up. He's actually right; I need to let him take her life. I don't want to but it's for the best. I'll watch from the sidelines and never let him hurt her again. But I have to end this. *Fuck, how can I end this?*

Tears prick my eyes as my breathing shallows. Pulling on the straps of my hoodie, I try to *feel something* but I'm numb. I sit like that—for how long, I don't know—until I'm hit with a bucket of freezing cold water, snapping me out of it.

“What the fuck, Gray?”

“I'm helping *you* for once. You were freaking me out. Get your head together. He's gone.”

As I shake off the water droplets running down my face, a moment of clarity—strength fills me. I can do it. I can end things. For Lucy. For Katie. I've done it without them before; I can be without them again.

Pulling myself up off the floor, I stretch out my muscles and grab my phone from my pocket, sending Lucy a text.

Wes: I need to see you

into my

And then I fall apart with Grayson picking up the pieces. *My, how things have changed.*

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Chapter Forty-Three

Wes

I drive to Lucy's in a daze, pulling up as Katie gets into a car with Cory. She waves enthusiastically through the window and mashes. I'm not just leaving her mom. I'm leaving her too.

"We're taking Katie for a play date with Addie. We'll be back in hours. Enjoy your alone time." Cory winks and I have to force a *Nothing about this is going to be enjoyable.*

"Thanks, Cory. Bye, Katie."

"Bye, Wes," Katie calls out, just loud enough for me to hear it through glass.

My stomach heaves but I ignore it. I can't show any emotion or Lucy see right through me. *Fuck, this is hard.*

Looking up toward the house, I find Lucy waiting in the doorway smiling shyly, but it's a cover for the nerves she's trying to hide. It's written all over her face. I'm not sure why *she's* nervous though. All I was that I needed to see her. I've given her no clues as to why.

The sound of Nate's car fades, and when it's barely a whistle distance, Lucy rushes toward me, clearly panicked. "I'm sorry, I c

sign it. I don't want him to press charges against you, Wes, but I can't hand him Katie. No matter how much trust I have in you."

What?

"I'm sorry. You never told me about the money, so I had to wonder if Greg was lying? I just..." She fades off as I finally catch up with her. She didn't sign the custody agreement. It wasn't her?

I should feel relieved, but I don't. It changes nothing. Greg's going to continue to go after her if I don't do this. Contract or no contract, I can't let him give up.

"It doesn't matter," I say, emotion stripped from my voice as I walk her into the house.

"No, it does. I'm sorry. I didn't know about the money. I mean, could you give him money?"

"I did." I nod once. "It hit his account on Friday."

Lucy's eyes widen in shock, before they narrow again. "Friday? But he saw him yesterday, and he said—"

"It doesn't matter," I repeat sternly. "I'm not here about that."

"You're not?" Uncertainty flashes across Lucy's face while my insides freeze with dread. These next words are going to kill me.

"I think we should stop seeing each other," I croak out and inwardly cringe at how unconvincing it sounds.

Lucy recoils. "You what?"

"I don't think—"

"I heard you. But—"

Digging deep, I find it in myself to make her see reason. "It's never going to work between us. Greg and I don't get along, and he's going to be with her for life forever. It's a lot of drama that I don't need right now."

n't just *Jesus!* That sounds so awful. What an asshole excuse. A lump cl
throat, but I don't swallow it. I can't afford to give the game away.

Lucy's body stiffens and her fists clench. "You don't need the dran
...whatnow? That's what you're going with?"

h what "It's the truth." I shrug.

"Well fuck, Wes. I'm sorry my life isn't picture perfect enough f
oing toI'm sorry I have *drama*. And you know what? While we're at it I'r
an't seeyou're an asshole." *Yep, just like I thought.* That hurts, but a part o
happy to see her fight back. To see the strong version of Lucy. After
ilk withstrength is one of the things I love about her.

"I'm sorry too. But I just can't..." I trail off, only making myse
did youmore like a dick.

Lucy shakes her head in disbelief. "Because it got too hard? *Jesus,*
thought you were better than that."

it I saw I shrug again. "Guess you were wrong. I never claimed to be a go
Lucy. Not even once."

She scoffs, shaking her head. "Saying and doing are different thing
ides fill*showed* me you were a good guy. Are you trying to say it was all an ac

I don't know what to say to that so I stay silent. A look of disgust
y flinchLucy's face before she runs her hand over it, ending with just a frown.

about Katie then? Is she too much *drama* for you? This will devast
She loves you."

My heart stops before starting up again with a low thud, my skin pi
with goose bumps. *Katie.* My eyes close briefly without permission. I

r goingfor a second, but when I open them again, Lucy's staring at me wide-e
in your "I knew it! What's going on? Why are you really ending things?"

Fuck!

ogs my “I told you why, Lucy. You just threw me by mentioning Katie,”
my voice laced with anxiety.

na right “Did you only just realize how much you mean to her?”

Gripping the back of my neck, I sigh. “To be honest...yes. I mean,
she cared but...”

or you. I trail off because she loves me? *Fuck*. Of course I know how much
n sorryto her; I feel the same. *In my head she’s already like a daughter to r*
f me islove?

all, her Lucy nods, holding back her emotions. *I need to leave*.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to see Katie either. Not right
elf lookanyway. I think a clean break is best. Plus, with Grayson, I already
someone to look after. I don’t need *or want* someone else.”

Wes. I Lucy flinches and I hate what I’m doing to her. I once mentioned
that Gray can sometimes be a burden. It was a shit thing to say, but it
od guy,truth. Comparing Katie and Grayson now is like telling her that Katie
be a burden to me...something that will break her.

gs. You Lucy closes her eyes, her forehead creasing. “You’re really ending
it?” Without giving me an explanation?”

crosses “Isn’t *not wanting* to be in a relationship with you reason enough?”

“What Her eyes fly open as my voice rises slightly. I’m panicked. Why would
ate her.fucking believe me? I can’t keep doing this.

Another wave of nausea takes over me. Allowing these lies to e
ricklingmouth is making me physically ill as it goes against everything... M
t’s onlywanders as an idea hits me.

yed. “You know how I feel about lying, Lucy. So believe me when I s
done.”

Lucy stares at me with tears welling in her eyes, and my chest a

I rasp, knew that would work, and yet it fucking hurts to see her reaction.

“I believe that you’re done. But I don’t believe your excuse,” she w

“Why are you doing this?”

I knew “Lucy...” *Please, please let this go. I’m begging you. Let us go.*

“Why, Wes?!” she yells. “Why? Cut the crap and tell me the truth

I mean Why?” She won’t let up, asking me over and over while I try to focus
ne. But I’m doing this...why I need her to believe me. But that backfires whe

back. “Because he’ll take Katie if I don’t!”

Lucy freezes. “What?”

ht now, “I’m going to go.”

ly have She doesn’t respond or even process that I’ve spoken, so I slip out t

in a rush. Tears prick the back of my eyes, but I bite my cheek to stay

l to her off. I can’t let her see me like this. I shouldn’t have said what I said.

was the I make it five steps down her driveway when she chases aft
: would screaming my name.

“Wes, stop! Dammit, stop!”

ig this? I do as asked but don’t turn around. I can’t. It won’t help either of us

Lucy doesn’t stop moving until she’s standing in front of me, her f

of anger. “Are you fucking kidding me, Wes,” she yells, shoving n

on’t shetoward the house with a force I’m not ready for.

“You think it’s that easy?” she continues, switching from sho

exit my pounding my chest. “That you can just walk away, again?”

y mind Left, right, left, right. Her speed increases and I take it all. Letting h
all out.

ay, *I’m* “Fuck, no. You don’t get to leave. You don’t get to make that decis

us. We fight together, asshole. Fight *with* me!”

aches. I She screams the last part as her fists crash against me in quick suc

and the tears in her eyes start to fall. “Why would you walk away?
his pers. mean that little to you?”

Her fight goes, and it’s not long before she’s barely even connecti
me. She’s utterly destroying me, but I don’t know what to say. I can’t
. Why? losing Katie. I’m not worth it; *nobody* is.

on why “Are you really going to just stand there and say nothing?” she w
n I yell with a scratchy voice.

I nod. “Do your worst.”

“Fuck you.”

She slaps me across the face and walks away while I’m frozen in
he door unable to move until a car driving past snaps me from my inner madne
re them “Lucy, wait!”

She’s standing still when I turn to face her, her eyes boring into me.
ter me, you changed your mind?”

Shaking my head, I take a tentative step closer but stop when sh
back.

s. “He hurt you because of *me*, Luce. He raped you to prove he cou
ace full have you after we kissed. I can’t...” I trail off, unable to get the wo
re back with emotion clogging my throat.

Lucy’s tears start up again and she frantically wipes them away.

ving to “Please let me do this,” I beg, my gaze never leaving hers. “I need t
I’ve done *everything* I can to keep you and Katie safe.”

er get it “But you’re leaving us. How is that keeping us safe?”

“Because he won’t come after Katie, and you never have to give h
sion for unsupervised access. And you’ll never be alone. We may not be toget
I’ll never let anything happen to you.”

cession She huffs out an ironic laugh. “He still wins. If you do this *he* wins.’

Do we I'm already shaking my head before she's finished speaking because wrong. So wrong. "No, Lucy, he doesn't. He'll *never* win because he ng withup. He fucked up the best thing to ever happen to him, and if he doesr risk heryou and Katie, he loses."

"But he will have Katie."

hispers "No, he'll get to *see* Katie. On your terms. There's a difference.' another step forward, and this time Lucy lets me.

"I hate this," she whispers. "And I hate *you* for doing it, but I unders and I think I hate that even more."

1 place, My face falls. I hate it too. "I'm so sorry, Luce." *More than you ss. understand.*

"I know," she whispers again. "But sorry doesn't change things. Sta . "Havefrom me at work, okay? I can't do this if you're constantly around."

I inwardly flinch, but on the outside I'm stone. "Okay, Luce. Okay." ie steps With that, she rushes off toward the house, slamming the door as she

I don't know how I get home. I don't remember driving, and yet old stillhave, because I'm now lying face first on my couch with tears in my e rds outall the shit things I've done in my life, that would have to be the wors will never forgive myself for the hurt I caused, or forget the look of a loathing on Lucy's face. I deserved the slap, and yet I didn't even f o knowfeel nothing. I'm still numb. And maybe that's for the best.



im any Two days later, I still haven't left my house, and my voice messa her, but piling up. I know I'm letting the team down, but I can't focus on th

,

se she's enough to care. I hurt the one person I promised never to hurt again. I deserve whatever life throws my way. *Give it all to me! Make me suffer!*

Banging starts on my door, and while it's deafening, it's easy to ignore at least until the door slams open a second later and a booming voice enters the room.

I take “Get the fuck up. People are worried about you.”

Did I leave the door unlocked?

stand it, “Did you hear me?” Carter yells again. “What the fuck is going on?”

I wish I knew. The world is so fucked-up right now.

’ll ever “Wes!” Grayson. *I’m taking his key back.*

“What?” I groan, not even bothering to move.

ly away “Why aren’t you answering your phone?” Carter says, continuing to yell at me. “And why do I have one of my teammates all up in my grill because he

’ broke his sister’s heart and then disappeared?”

e goes. *Fuck!*

I must Finally lifting my head, I look up at the two men that are supposed to be my closest friends and roll my eyes.

it, and I “I broke up with Lucy.” *Obviously.*

bsolute “Yep, we got that part. But why?”

eel it. I “Because Greg threatened to take Katie if I didn’t.”

Carter laughs until he sees I’m serious. “That was a joke, right? What are you going to do? Pay someone in stolen goods? That guy doesn’t have a name.” *That gets my attention.*

ges are “You know about Greg?”

at long *“Fuck.”* Carter sighs as an apologetic look crosses his face. “Not to worry, but when I saw him at your work, he looked so familiar and I couldn’t ignore the feeling that I knew him. I only just figured out he was your stepbrother.”

in, so I mean, it's not like I really saw him that often—you hated the guy—but
r. Grayson told me his name was Greg, I put two and two together
more. At figured it out sooner..."

ters the *Motherfucker!* I want to kick his ass only I can't deal with that right
But Grayson can and he does; he slaps him across the back of his head
calls him a dickwad. Good enough for now.

Running my hands up and down my face, I shake my head and groan
"Is that why you're so messed up? Because he's your brother?"

"He's *not* my brother, and fuck no. It's all for Lucy. I feel sick, Carter
barely slept. I can't eat. I don't even have it in me to drink myself into
oblivion. I'm just empty." I pause before groaning again. "I think I'm
to attack with her and I just broke her heart." *Both our hearts.*

use you Carter's eyes just about bulge out of his head. "No shit, Wes. You've
in love with her for years. You should've never let her go. Then come
What were you thinking?"

ed to be "What was I thinking? Are you fucking kidding me?" Sitting up, I hit
clenched fist by my side to physically stop myself from hitting him
going to take *everything* from her, and I gave him the means to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"I gave him money!"

hat's he "What the fuck, Wes," Grayson finally joins the conversation.

cent to "So rather than running away, why not help her?" Carter adds.

Sucking in a breath, I stand up and get in Carter's face. "What do you
I'm doing, asshole? He said if I stepped back he'd leave her be."

at first, "The fuck? All this is about you? Why?"

't shake Why? *Don't punch him. Don't fucking punch him.*

other. I "He's unhinged, Carter. He's hated me for most of his life. That's w

it when Carter's brows furrow as he frowns. "Nope, I'm not buying it."

. If I'd I take a step back, giving us some much-needed distance because reach him, I'm going to knock him out.

ht now. "You're not buying it? Which goddamn part?" I yell and immediately and myself for it. *I never used to be this angry.* But I'm not wrong; those v exact words—"I'm going to ruin you until you have exactly what I n. nothing." *Wait!*

"I've got to go," I blurt out, taking off in a run toward the front er. I've grabbing my keys from the stand before I'm gone. I don't even give myself into they lock the door behind them. This needs to end. *I need to end it. No in love*

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hy."

Carter's brows furrow as he frowns. "Nope, I'm not buying it."

I take a step back, giving us some much-needed distance because if I can reach him, I'm going to knock him out.

"You're not buying it? Which goddamn part?" I yell and immediately hate myself for it. *I never used to be this angry.* But I'm not wrong; those were his exact words—"I'm going to ruin you until you have exactly what I have... nothing." *Wait!*

"I've got to go," I blurt out, taking off in a run toward the front door, grabbing my keys from the stand before I'm gone. I don't even give a shit if they lock the door behind them. This needs to end. *I need to end it. Now!*

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Chapter Forty-Four

Lucy

After calling in sick to work for the next few days, I spend my time staring at a blank wall, alternating between being angry at Aaron calls me several times, but I don't tell him a thing. "Just a stomach bug," I repeat over and over, hoping it sounds believable. And I guess it's somewhat true. I'm nauseous all the time and my heartbeat's out of control. I definitely don't feel like myself, and facing work *and* Wes is the last thing I want to do. The only person getting any real smiles from me is Katie, my reason for being, and no matter how broken I am inside, she can pull me out of it. In *that* moment, anyway.

By Friday, however, I know I'm going to have to sort myself out and make a conscious effort to do that. Dylan's playing at home again this weekend, so I have no doubt he'll be breaking down my door any day now since I've ignored all his calls today. I told him I needed the week to rest, so really, I should have until Sunday. But, I guarantee he thinks five days is sufficient and is on his way over.

The roar of his truck filters through an open window barely five minutes later, and I have to laugh at how well I know him. Katie abandons her

and leaps up, racing down the hall toward the front door, like she always does when any of our friends or family arrive. *Even Wes.*

“Summer came, Mom,” she yells as I finish tidying up the kitchen counter, still waiting for them to come in.

Dylan drops a box of my favorite cookies in front of me and presses his hand to my temple. “Have you heard from the f... from him?” he asks, cutting off his words just in time. Summer shakes her head as she pulls me into the living room and then joins Katie on the floor with her adorable baby bump now getting in the way.

“Have I heard from which *f’er*?” I ask, although the answer is the same either way.

“Either, but I meant Wes.”

“Is Wes coming over?” Katie calls out, excitement in her tone. I cringe, though I’m shocked she mentioned Wes, despite knowing she’s been listening.

Dylan nods toward the bedrooms, and I follow him down the hall, slipping into my room so we’re out of earshot.

“So?” he asks.

I take a deep breath as my heart thuds in my chest. “It’s been radio silence from both.”

Scrunching up his nose, Dylan curses. “Assholes, both of them. I’m sorry this is happening, Luce.”

I huff out a sigh. “Thank you. Me too.”

“I take it since you’re home right now it means you haven’t been to work? I called Mom to see if Katie was there first.”

“And she didn’t spill the details?”

Dylan’s lips pull into the smallest of grins before it fades. “Not that she would. So she must really be worried. Have you been back at all?”

ys does Covering my face in my hands, I shake my head and mumble, “No.”
“Lucy...”

ounter, “Don’t fucking scold me. I’m doing the best I can. I went to the doc
got a note. They’re not going to fire me.”

s a kiss “And your boss is okay with that?”

ting off “He’s fine. He believes me. Or if he didn’t, I’m sure his wife wo
o a hug him to back off. We’re friends, and she knows a little about my pa
tting in Greg, so she’s constantly on his back to look out for me.”

“Does she know more than I do? Because you said he hurt you l
me. never gave me any more details.”

Shit! I think about what Wes said and briefly close my eyes. This i
inge asto kill Dylan.

always “I’ve kind of been in denial for a long time, but Greg forced him
me...when we conceived Katie.”

slipping “What?! Fuck, Lucy. Fuck.” He drops to the bed as his face sink
hand. “God, Lucy, how are you okay? *Fuck*, I wasn’t there to help. Yo
told me.”

silence. Sitting down beside him, I squeeze his leg and take a deep breath. “
told anyone,” I say, with my voice void of emotion. “Because un
I’m sopped it out, I never considered it.”

Dylan looks my way with a furrowed brow, his hand raised to scr
head. “What do you mean?”

back to “I let him do it. I just...” I trail off. He doesn’t need the details. “I
him do it. I spent the entire time in my head, thinking about my ki
Wes earlier that day.”

is time, “It was the same day?”

“Yeah. It was.”

’ “Jesus. I’m so sorry, Lucy. I wish you’d told me back then. I thou
were close.”

tor and “We are, but I didn’t think I had a right to be upset about it. He an
slept together hundreds of times, Dylan. And I didn’t fight him.

happen.” Dylan begins to talk but I cut him off. I can’t cry about this
uld tell “Plus, isn’t it in the Mathers’ blood to keep things bottled up. You ke
ist with secret for *years*. At least you thought you did.”

“That’s true.” He sighs with resignation. “I still wish I’d known.”
out you I grip his hand and pull him toward me, securing him in a side
know. But trust me, I’ve always felt like you were there for me, ever
s going didn’t know you were doing anything to help.”

iself on



After dinner, Dylan and Katie head outside, while Summer and I cha
s in his living room. As much as I try to avoid the topic of Wes, of course she
u never it up. “How are you really doing? You’re allowed to show your en
Lucy. You’ve been through a lot.”

I never I flop back onto the coach and stare out the window, watching Dy
til Wes Katie play catch in the yard. “I hate what he did. But I kind of get it
miss—”

atch his A strange car pulls up in the driveway, making me lose my t
thought. An older man in a business suit and polished black shoes g
just let his eyes flashing straight to Katie. My heart lodges in my throat as
ss with outside, midconversation.

“Miss Kelly?” the man asks, as he moves toward me. I nervous
while Dylan eyes us both curiously. He must see something written

ight weface because he takes Katie into the house without a word.

“Can I help you?” I ask, taking small steps toward him, not really
d I hadwant to get too close. The door opens again behind me, and I feel a p
I let iton the porch instantly calming me. I should have known Dylan w
s again.leave me out here alone.

pt your “Miss Kelly, I’m here to request your presence at a family court he:
discuss the parental rights for Katie Kelly, on...”

He keeps talking, but nothing enters my consciousness as my work
hug. “Iand I struggle to take in air. Greg wasn’t supposed to do this. Wes l
1 if youWes did as he asked. *How is this happening?*

I fall to a heap on the grass and feel Dylan’s arms immediately arou
He holds on tight as I completely fall to pieces. And while I love him
wish it was Wes. I want Wes here comforting me, helping me through.

t in the “Lucy, you need to listen.” Dylan shakes me a few times but I igno
e brings trying to brush him off. I feel the first tear fall just as a car door slar
otions, and *his* voice enters my mind.

lan and “Lucy? What happened?”
I feel a loss of warmth as Dylan moves away, muttering as he goes.
. And I ever hurt her again, Johnson—”

rain of “I won’t.”
I don’t even care that he broke my heart; when Wes kneels in front o
ets out, throw myself into his arms.

; I rush “It didn’t work, Wes. He’s taking her. It didn’t work.”
Wes leans back and frames my face in his hands, his eyes bori
sly nod mine.

on my “No, Lucy. It’s over.”

“What?”

“It’s over. You need to go to court because Greg’s relinquishing his
presence I as a parent. He’ll be out of your life, Luce. It’s over.”

I collapse into his chest and burst into tears, soaking his crisp white
couldn’t the presses kisses to my hair. He holds me while I cry, never once ask
to calm down or stop, something Greg would have done in a he
aring to *Greg... is this real? Is it really possible?*

Shaking myself off, I pull away and wipe the tears from my face. “I
d stops, rasp, looking between Wes and the uncomfortable looking man behind
eft me. “It doesn’t matter right now,” Wes answers. “What matters is that
going to be okay. *You’re* going to be okay, and you’ll never have to
ind me about Greg again.”

for it, I I shake my head frantically. “No, it can’t be that easy. I don’t believe

Wes touches his forehead to mine as his hands cup my neck. “I
re him, fucked up, but if you only ever trust me *once*, let it be *now*.”

ns shut I nod against his head as fresh tears fall, and he gently rocks me ba
forth, quietly humming “Truly Madly Deeply,” by Savage Garden as I
A memory of him humming once before enters my mind, and my
“If you warm at how right this feels. I’m ready to stay like this for hours until
clears and a voice interrupts me.

“Ma’am, I just need you to sign—”

of me, I “One minute,” Wes says, cutting him off. “Take your time, Lucy. I
no rush.”

I feel bad for the poor man and jump up right away, prepared to do
ng into need to do, thanking God that the hearing is set for only a few weeks
now. I don’t think I could cope if this dragged out.

As soon as he’s gone, everything finally sinks in, a frown forming a
to Wes. “I appreciate you being here when I needed you just now, b

s rights about the last few days? You're right; you fucked up and you've just ruined
your *one moment of trust*. How can I be sure you won't run again if this
shirt is as tough?"

ing me Wes takes a step toward me and reaches out, linking our fingers.
artbeat. I'm not going to lie. I'd do it all again if the result was the same. All
I wanted was for you to feel safe, for you to never have to worry about
how?" I But I know I hurt you, and I'm going to work my ass off to prove to you
I'll never let you go again. Properly this time."

Katie's My brows furrow in confusion and Wes laughs.

o worry "Be prepared for superior groveling. I've learned a thing or two since
time."

e you." I bark out a short laugh, even though I'm still mad at him. "Well, you
know I get any worse." I shrug just as Dylan walks back outside.

I'm about to ask Wes if he wants to come in, when he presses a kiss to my
back and cheek and steps back. "I mean it, Lucy. I'm sorry. I promise to make
it up to you."

insides He takes a few steps backward until he reaches my drive and then turns
a throat walk away. Without saying another word, I let him leave, knowing it's
the best. I'm not sure I'm completely over what he did yet.

He definitely had something to do with Greg's sudden change of heart.
There's for the fact that someone personally delivered the news, but he still lied
to me and I need assurance that won't happen again.

o what I Dylan circles his arms around me the second I'm through the door
and I feel the air from me into the air. "I'm so happy for you, Luce. And relieved. So
relieved."

is I turn I wriggle myself free and drop to the ground. "Me too, but what
about what Wes did?"

used up A smile pulls at his lips while his gaze moves to where Wes is getting his truck. “I have a theory. But you should probably talk to him about it.”

“Ugh.” I shove him away. “You suck.”

“Lucy, “Little brother duties,” he says as he walks down the hall.

“Asshole,” I call out and then cringe when Katie comes running down the hall, positive she would have heard me but too happy to care.

My beautiful girl is safe, and the weight I’ve been carrying for almost years is close to being lifted. I bite my cheek to stop myself from laughing again as Katie jumps into my open arms.

“I love you, baby girl.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

You can’t

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A smile pulls at his lips while his gaze moves to where Wes is getting in his truck. "I have a theory. But you should probably talk to him about it."

"Ugh." I shove him away. "You suck."

"Little brother duties," he says as he walks down the hall.

"Asshole," I call out and then cringe when Katie comes running down the hall, positive she would have heard me but too happy to care.

My beautiful girl is safe, and the weight I've been carrying for almost five years is close to being lifted. I bite my cheek to stop myself from crying again as Katie jumps into my open arms.

"I love you, baby girl."

"Love you too, Mom."

Chapter Forty-Five

Lucy

Every waking second of my weekend is spent with Katie, keep much closer than she needs to be. You'd think I'd been summoned to court because Greg was trying to *gain* custody of Katie, *not* relinquish rights, but I just can't bear to be away from her.

We spend our time dancing around the house, playing dress-up, or Katie practices her throw and I poorly catch, we cheer Dylan on in his which they win—and even go out to dinner to celebrate. All the while eyes never leave Katie.

Wes texts a few times, sometimes to check in, other times to say always short and sweet, so I don't have to reply. And yet, I always because I always want to. He's never far from my mind.

Back at work, first thing Monday morning, I find myself wandering his office even though I have no reason for walking that way. But instead Wes, I find our athletic director sitting at his desk with a scowl on his face making me hastily keep moving. I don't need a scolding on my feet back.

When I round the corner, I hear Wes's deep voice coming from the offensive team offices. I don't stop as I walk past, but curiosity gets the best of me and I glance through the open door on my way. He's sitting behind the desks, playbook open in front of him as he chats with the offensive coordinator. My stupid heart does a little flutter when my eyes lock on him and I choose to pretend it's got more to do with the strange scene I'm witnessing, rather than my feelings. Wes almost always makes people feel at home in his office, and yet, he looks like he's made himself at home. I nod and continue on my path, finding one of our linebackers waiting for me when I reach my room.

From then on, I have a revolving door of appointments, barely stopping for lunch, except to quickly run to the kitchen to shove something into my mouth. My heart skips while thinking about the possibility of bumping into Wes, but on this occasion I don't. Aaron checks in at one point about my stomach bug, but other than that, I don't see any other staff.

I'm leaning against my table at the end of the day, with my foot propped up, hand, massaging my aching joints. After hitting the right spot, I let out a moan then internally curse when Wes chooses that moment to knock on my door and wander in.

After taking one look at my pained expression, he silently glances at my foot before he strides over to meet me, taking over my effort. Using his thick fingers to knead my arch, he gently moves my ankle around, as if to roll into the back of my head and another moan escapes me. It's so amazing that I get lost in the moment. That is, until I realize what he's doing and snap out of it, hopping around as I try to pull my foot free.

"Ew, Wes, no. I've been on my feet all day. You shouldn't be touching them." I feel my chest heat as embarrassment takes over.

om the He laughs but doesn't let go, making it really awkward for me.

he best “Lucy, if I cared about that at all, I wouldn't have grabbed your foot
ind one you touch sweaty guys all the time; does it bother *you*?”

ifensive *Did he just compare my foot to a player after a game?*

on his, “Shit! Let go!”

ne I'm Wes's laughter grows louder as he finally lets go, causing me to stu
le meet little when I'm not quite prepared for the release. He reaches out and s
shrub it me before I fall, quickly righting me to a standing position.

for me “It doesn't stink. You're worrying for nothing,” he whines.

“And you're back to sucking in the groveling department,” I c
y even slipping my shoe back on and taking a step back.

nothing “I just massaged a part of you some people wouldn't even touch.
running that's A-plus material right there.”

t to ask “It's definitely not if you have to point it out.”

I sound like a brat, but he threw me off and I need to get my shit to
t in my Crossing my arms over my chest, I tap my wrist where a watch w
it a soft before motioning to the door.

on my “I've got to go. I promised Katie I'd be home on time tonight.”

“Of course. I just popped in to apologize again. Please tell her I said
toward He moves to the door but pauses when he reaches the threshold. “I
sing his seeing you smile again. I've missed it.” *Huh? When did I smile?*

ny eyes Wes chuckles at the confusion that I can only imagine is written a
feels some face.

s doing “I caught it when you were on your way to get lunch today. If you c
that protein bar lunch,” he mumbles the last bit and I huff out a laugh.

ouching what I called lunch, and I think that was the only time I smiled all
know exactly when he's referring to.

“You must have been thinking about something pretty amazing. Plus money’s on Katie,” Wes says and then disappears down the hall.

My second smile for the day tugs at my lips as I watch him leave, shake my head as he goes. *Nope. It was you, Wes. I was thinking of you.*



imble a

steadies

counter,

I’d say

I only see Wes intermittently throughout the next week, but he always sure he’s on my mind. Lunch arrives in my office on a busy day. Little somehow appear right when I need them. Some telling me to smile, reminding me that everything’s going to be okay, and one that made —a note telling me that Katie loves me no matter what, even when I’d say apart. That one appeared on my chair when I was at a low point after night meeting.

together.

could go

We may have only been together for the shortest time, but he *knows* almost better than I know myself. He sees me. He understands things I could go me that I didn’t even think I’d explained. And he’s definitely winning over.

hi.”

t’s nice

all over

can call

That is

l day. I

On Saturday morning, Wes stops by my office with Aaron, a sight that has me doing a double take. “My buddy Aaron wants to give you the afternoon off so you can enjoy the game with some friends,” he says, patting Aaron the back in a condescending way, but strangely, Aaron just laughs it off all over. “Wes is right. We’ve got tickets for you, Katie, Logan, and Liam with something a little special.”

My eyes narrow as I look between Aaron and Wes. Aaron seems okay with this. He doesn’t look angry about giving me the time off on our busiest day. I But Wes does have a mischievous look on his face, so I can’t be too sure

ig. My “Ahhh...”

“It’s fine, Lucy. Please, it’s all arranged,” Aaron reassures me. “W shakingforcing my hand.”

I huff out a laugh as Wes shrugs. “I mean, I would have if I had Aaron went along with my plan willingly.”

“Okay, so what time do I finish?”

; makes “Now, Luce. You need to go *now*.”

le notes Wes hands me the tickets and practically pushes me toward the door. I remember I need my car keys and my bag. Aaron walks out ahead of me when I follow, Wes smacks me on the ass on the way past, earning him a dirty look. “We’re not there yet,” I scold.

1 we’re “Worth a try.” He lifts a shoulder as his lips pull into a line. “En a late- game, Luce.”

ows me.



s about

ing meWe’ve only been sitting down for five minutes when one of the security guards gets my attention from the end of our row. I squeeze past a few people that has to chat with him so I don’t have to yell over everyone.

ternoon “Noel, how are you?”

aron on He smiles shyly at the use of his name before pointing over his shoulder toward the exit. “I’ve been asked to grab you and Katie for a surprise.”

l, along My eyes widen and I laugh. “What surprise?”

“Now, I can’t tell you that, ma’am.”

ay with “Good surprise, though, right?”

est day. He smiles again. “Yes, ma’am. A very good surprise.”

ire.

Katie's already watching me curiously, and when I wave her towards the field, she runs, forcing the other fans to stand and let her through, all while she thanks each of them as she goes.

I lift a shoulder in response to Logan's raised eyebrow as Noel claps beside me.

With Katie's hand in mine, he leads us to the back end of the tunnel where my heart flutters. Baby Bennett, a.k.a. Ryan, is standing with Wes, both of them until they both smile on their faces. Ryan bends down to Katie's height. "Ready to go out onto the field with me, Katie? I hear you're a big fan of the game." I smile at myself as Katie squeals as my hand flies to my mouth. *Dammit, Wes, you're making it really hard to stay mad at you.*

Katie starts walking down the tunnel without any instruction until I call her back, suddenly nervous about her going out alone.

"Wait for your mom, Katie," Wes calls out at the same time. "She and Ryan are coming with you."

We race to catch up to her, just as the rest of the team arrive behind us, slowing their pace so that their quarterback and Katie are the first on the field.

Katie's eyes bounce around the stadium as mine stay firmly locked on hers, and there's no doubt in my mind that she'll never forget this day.



With the excitement of the game, and Katie's energy after her moment on the field, I don't really get time to process everything until I get home. Katie and I run off to her playroom while Logan calls Dani.

ard me, Staring out the kitchen window, I pull out my phone to call Wes, but I can't think about what to say, wondering how to express how grateful I am for what he did for Katie today. But I can't find the right words. After realizing that nothing I say will ever be enough, I send him a simple text.

rel, and **Lucy: Thank you**

with He writes back instantly, and I can picture his genuine smile.

to run

Wes: Anytime

making

When I arrive at the gym the next day for an extra boxing session, I find Wes waiting by the entrance, geared up in his workout clothes, with a water bottle in his hand. "Any chance I can earn some extra credit by letting you be my sparring partner?" he asks and I bark out a laugh, shaking my head.

he and

"No, but if you give me a real workout by being a worthy opponent, I will consider it."

mind us,

He smirks as he opens the door for us both, pressing his palm to the back of my back as I go. "Done."

into the

I try not to react as I move through ahead of him, but stop when he grips my waist and he leans in close to whisper. "Oh, and Lucy, I've been practicing."

My pulse spikes and my legs clench as I remember the last time we sparred and what happened after it, but I push the thought from my mind.

ment, *Lucy. Head in the game. He's not done groveling. He wants to do this.*
d Liam

it pause
am for
realizing

Wes is
r bottle
beat me

ent, I'll

e small

is hand
ve been

sparred
. *Nope,*

Chapter Forty-Six

Lucy

I'm a sweaty mess on the floor by the time Wes and I have finished session, and as I stare up at the ceiling, his large frame fills my vision from above.

"How are you doing down there?" he asks with a big smile on his face.

"I'm...fine," I huff out between breaths, my chest still rising and falling in rapid succession.

Wes laughs and sits down beside me, resting his elbows on his knees. "Once again you blew my mind with your power, Luce. Your strength and out of the ring...you're incredible."

My face heats as I blush. I've never been good at taking compliments coming from Wes, it seems even harder. "Thank you," I say shyly, looking up at his eyes as I do.

We stay silent after that until I'm finally able to breathe properly, and I lean up to mirror Wes's posture. "You really have been practicing. You have some nice moves, Johnson."

His face lights up and he smirks. "Well, they do say 'couples that stay together, stay together.'"

I can't stop my laugh and am about to ask him if that's really true and continues.

"It's something that's important to you, Lucy. I wanted to know all about it."

I swallow a lump in my throat as I fight to keep my emotions at bay in my relationships, I've been the one fitting in with my man. It was all about his interests. I either learned to love them, or he enjoyed them on his own. But there was never any discussion about what I wanted. With him, I've never once felt that way. He always lifts me up, even at times I thought I was already standing. I'm not at all used to this attention. But I think it was when I learned to love myself and believe that I can be loved for who I am as an individual, not just because I happen to make my partner happy. *How did I not see anything was wrong for all those years? Why did it take so long before finally treating me right to make me realize how wrong it had always been?*

Yes, I knew things weren't working with Greg and broke it off several times, but even then I hadn't realized just how bad it was.

Wes eyes me curiously as I wipe under my eyes and stand up, shaking myself off. "I'm going to shower. Thanks for the workout."

"Lucy?" he calls as I leave, but I ignore him, needing to hide away from the tears prick my eyes.

When I'm finished in the shower, having somehow managed not to get out, Wes is waiting for me. He walks me to my car, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead like I'm delicate, despite just saying that I'm not. I want to roll my eyes but I can't, because it's so freaking sweet that butterflies take over my stomach and I feel giddy. He's trying. Really trying. But unless we get everything out in the open, it's never going to work. With a deep breath, I finally take the next step we need if we're ever going to move on.

When he releases my hand. “Are you planning to tell me what you did anytime soon?” I ask.

His eyes flash to mine, and his shoulders tense slightly. “Does it matter to you? Of course it matters. You don’t owe Greg for life or anything like that. In all you?”

Wes laughs—which bugs me a little because this isn’t a joke on his conversation—then shakes his head. “No, nothing like that. I wanted to be with Wes, of our lives, not forever a part of it.”

I sigh when he continues to give me nothing, then step back, open the timecar door before moving behind it, creating some distance between us.

“Saying everything is fine but not telling me why is like lying by omission. *the hell* something you hate. Either tell me the truth or don’t bother grating on anyone anymore. It won’t work.” *How my mood went from giddy to angry, how long it took to get here? I know. But here we are.*

Wes raises an eyebrow and huffs out a breath as he runs a hand through his hair. “Okay. But it’s done. I need you to remember that. No one can change me now.”

My gaze flashes to his as my eyes widen with worry. *Why would I want to change it?*

After running his hands down his face, Wes gives me a sheepish smile. “I should have known. I gave Greg some money and stepped back from my role as head coach. What? How didn’t I know that? There’s way too much to unpack. First...

“How much is *some*?”

Wes winces at the raised pitch of my voice, and I find myself making the rounds to make sure we’re alone.

“A lot...” he says with a shrug. “I gave him everything I—”

When he “What? No!” My eyes snap to his as I step out from my composition and move closer. “I will *not* let you do that. You can’t,” I yell, as a wave of guilt runs through me, making me feel ill. “No way. That, do happening.”

“It’s already done,” Wes says, unapologetically. “And Lucy, none of it is your fault. *None.*”

He tries to reach for me but I hold out my hand to stop him. “Wes...

Blowing out a breath, he grips the back of his neck before sagging my against the hood of the truck parked next to my car. “None of it’s yours,” he repeats, his eyes begging me to believe him. “It’s mine.”

What?

“It may have taken me a while to figure it out, but I realized it was *I don’t* about you and Katie. None of it. Turns out he’s known about Katie since the day she was born. He only came back into the picture because *I* did.”

“What?” I say again, out loud this time as my body tenses and my hands clench. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I’m absolutely livid. The chance of me whispering now. *What the hell is wrong with that man?*

“He wanted everything that I had,” Wes continues. “Well, the money was more important than anything else. He wanted me to have nothing.”

“Holy shit! My anger subsides, making a place for nausea. “So you just handed it *all* over?”

“Not exactly. I gave him everything he knew about.”

“Motherfucker.”

Wes laughs. “My thoughts exactly.”

“Okay, so what didn’t he know about?”

“While he’ll definitely be sitting pretty for the rest of his life, he’s not as smart as we thought he was. I have investments and other accounts. S

comfortable we may not be able to buy a celebrity-sized mansion or a yacht, but we have enough to live comfortably, and Katie will never want for anything. It's not my heart flutters, but I hide my reaction to his words. Instead, I bite my lip and smile. "We"? You sound pretty confident that I'll take you back."

If this is Wes's lips curl into a smirk. It's not cocky, but it's not innocent either. "I'm hopeful, *not* confident. But Katie will want for nothing regarding me." She's kind of grown on me." He winks as his phone alarm goes off, and I go back to work, thankfully not noticing as I just about melt into a puddle on the ground. "Way to this girl's heart is definitely through her daughter."

"I've gotta go," he says, interrupting my thoughts. "But I'll see you tomorrow, and I'll be at the hearing Tuesday. Okay, Luce?" All I do is nod as he kisses my cheek and walks away, earning yet another gold star in my eyes.



my teeth

The day after the hearing, I'm still on cloud nine but also a little in shock. As promised, Wes was there, distracting me with how well he can hold a conversation in a suit, while also bringing me instant calm. And if the hearing proved anything more, it definitely highlighted how amazing my friends are. Only two were allowed in the room with us, and yet all of them came to support me, waiting in the hallways for it to be over. Even Thomas flew in from out of state conveniently here for his football game against Dylan on the weekend.

While I trusted Wes completely when he said it was over, there's a little niggling in the back of my mind, always wondering... *what if it's not as* needed the support, regardless of the outcome.

is not as

So, yes,

it we'll But now it's over; it's really freaking over, and I can't keep the smi
1g." my face as I move behind my desk and kick off my heels.

back a I finally have a break in my schedule, now that I'm back at work, ar
welcome one. I've been run off my feet playing catch-up for
er. yesterday, and I need to sit and relax for a second.

ardless. Connecting my phone to the speaker I have in my office, I play
es off, music and lean back in my chair, closing my eyes. "Hotel California"
nd. *The Eagles* plays first, and a relaxed state takes over me.

Taking deep breaths, my head moves slowly to the beat and my th
ee you wander while song after song plays. I almost drift off to sleep when

"Madly Deeply" comes on, and I smile. This song will forever remind
another Wes now. Listening to him hum it to me the day I was summoned t
made me feel at ease, and hearing it now makes me realize I really
have thanked him for that, instead of just letting him walk awa
everything he did for me. *What are the chances this song would pl
ck. when I almost never hear it?*

pull off "Please Forgive Me," by Bryan Adams comes on next, and I huf
nothing laugh but mouth along as more images of Wes play through my mind.
people miss him, and I do forgive him, mostly...I think. I'm just so nervou
rt Katie taking the next step and being hurt again. I want this to be *it* for me, b
n early, can I be sure he feels the same?

The music stops abruptly midway through the song and my eyes fl
been a "Kiss From A Rose" by Seal comes on as Wes's hand appears in m
not? I offering for me to take it. I jump at the sight of him as my own hand
my chest, my heart beating rapidly. I'm about to read him the riot act
see my phone clenched between his fingers and it all clicks. *The
weren't a coincidence.*

le from Raising an eyebrow, Wes waves his outstretched hand, prompting
take it. My gaze moves between his hand and his face, hesitantly
and it's until he smiles shyly. That tiny gesture has my heart skipping and b
missing flutter to my stomach.

Without a word, I clasp his palm and allow him to pull me to my
chilled expect him to hug me, maybe even press his lips to mine. What I don't
by Theis for him to start swaying me slowly, dancing with me, barefoot
office, as he softly hums to the music.

thoughts It's not an overly romantic song, but I understand his meaning, and
"Truly away the tears that rise to the surface.

l me of *I'm his rose.*

o court We dance until the song ends and then Wes steps back, keeping our
should connected. "Lucy..."

y after "Turns out you're not as bad at groveling as we first thought,"
y now, cutting him off before I suck my lips into my mouth to hide my smile.

Wes laughs. "I told you I'd be giving it my all, and I plan to keep
ff out until you realize how sorry I am. I've only ever wanted to do right l
. God, I And that's never going to change. I won't be stopping until you kno
s about It's amazing what one can do when they're in love."

ut how *In love?* I release a gasp as my heart stops and my smile breaks thro
My chest fills with something new, something all-consuming,
y open. suddenly occurs to me that while I've said I love you many times befo
y face, never actually felt it romantically...until now.

flies to

when I

2 songs

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g me to
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fingers

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re, I've

Chapter Forty-Seven

Wes

Lucy stares at me with a shocked expression mixed with something awe. Why she's shocked that I love her is beyond me. I thought was clear, but maybe I needed to spell it out sooner.

She opens her mouth to speak but then closes it again, and I'll put the last dollar I have—which is a lot less these days—on her wanting to mean what I said.

“You love me?” she finally questions, and I almost laugh, but that would be detrimental to helping her believe that I do.

Lifting her fingers to my lips, I gently kiss her knuckles as she smiles at me.

“I love you, Lucy. I'm *in* love with you. You are the one for me. You're my end game. My ride or die... Help me here—are there any other ways to say it?”

She giggles and the sound is my undoing. *She's* my undoing. That's why we never had to go along with my stupid breakup plan, because I hadn't known how long I could have kept it up. She's my everything, and it's about time she knew that.

“Lucy, I want a life with you and Katie. I want to experience all ups and downs, teach Katie to swim, teach you how to catch—you really should be better considering who your brother is.”

Lucy swats at my head with her spare hand, but I duck in time and she misses. “I knew that practice would come in handy.” I wink. “Joking—”

“But what about everything that happened?” she says, cutting me off. “Aren’t you annoyed that you had to give up so much for me? Isn’t there a little part of you that resents me for that?”

ing like
ght that
“Not even my smallest cell. It wasn’t about you. Is there a part of you that resents me for Greg coming back into your life?”

“No, of course not, but—”

it every
ask if I
: would
es up at
“There’s no *but*. I don’t blame you. And that’s not something that will change. Plus, Greg fucked up. He wanted me to have nothing, and you’ve already succeeded when he took away the two things I wanted most in the world. But he traded them back for possessions and money. He can’t have everything that I own and I’ll still be happy. Because Lucy, if you come back into your life, I will always have what I need. *Everything* I’ll ever need. *You and Katie*. I’ll always have *you*.”

ou’re it.
Lucy’s eyes shine with unshed tears, and she nods.

ways to
I’m hoping the nod is a good sign but have to ask. “Does that mean—”

nk fuck
onestly
and it’s
“Yes!” She throws her arms around me and burrows her face into my neck before looking up at me through hooded eyes. “Yes, I want us to be together. You’ll always have me.”

Framing her face with my hands, I press a kiss to her forehead, then her nose before gently brushing her lips with mine. She sighs, rising to her feet to increase the pressure as my hands move into her hair, securing her in

the upsOur lips open at the same time, allowing our tongues to explore, and shouldat the feel of finally having Lucy back where she should always be— arms.

and she Our kiss remains soft and unhurried yet it feels like a deeper conr aside, Iand when I finally pull back with a lazy smile on my face, Lucy look me with a sassy grin. “So, ‘Truly Madly Deeply,’ huh?”

ne off. I huff out a chuckle at the change in direction and shrug, like it’s there adeal, and yet... “It’s kinda our song. At least it is for me.”

Her brows furrow as though she doesn’t believe me, and I laugh ou you thatrunning a hand through my hair. “Okay, you got me. The first time I h it was because I’d heard it early that day and I couldn’t get it out fucking head. But when you smiled, even though I thought yo ill ever sleeping, it kind of became a song that reminded me of you over the ye et he’dof course, I really fucking hated it when we were apart. But now it’s t in thebad.”

an take “So romantic.” She rolls her eyes and bites back a smile, nibbling let mebottom lip. Pulling her back into my arms, I squeeze my eyes shut an r need.focus on anything but her lips, knowing that if I do, she’ll never get work.

“How many more players do you have on your schedule for today?” —” “Just the one, in...” Lucy looks at the clock on her wall. “Shit, rigly chestYou need to get out. We still have to talk through our work situation. ogether.I resign? I mean—”

“What? Why would you resign?” hen her “Because of the policy?”

toes to “Don’t worry about that. I’ll sort it out. There are always ways 1 place.these things. And if there weren’t, it wouldn’t be *you* resigning. Don

I groan think about it. I'll have it all worked out before you've finished for the
-in my Lucy nods as one of our running backs knocks on her door, freezin

I open it. "Ahh shit. I can come back."

rection, I smile and shake my head. "No need, I was just leaving. I'll s
cs up attonight, okay?" I say, turning back to Lucy.

"Okay," she mouths as she moves about the room.

no big



it loud, It takes all of two seconds for me to get written approval for our relati
ummed Turns out, we weren't hiding from anyone, and Aaron submit
of my application weeks ago. Maybe he's not as bad as I thought.

u were After supervising a workout session with some of the team, I jog
ears. So the office to meet Lucy before she finishes for the day.

is not so "It's taken care of. We are officially on the approved couple list wit

I say as soon as she steps out of her room.

on her Her brows furrow in confusion. "There's an approved couple list?"
d try to "No idea, but either way, we're good. We don't have to hide it.
back to wasn't even my doing. Aaron handled it."

Lucy barks out a laugh before covering her mouth. "Sorry, how c
make you feel?" she whispers knowingly.

ht now. "Cheated!" I grunt and I'm not lying. "I feel cheated. I wanted to l
Should hero," I half joke, laughing until Lucy's expression turns serious.

"You already *were* my hero," she says, taking a step toward me. "Fi
moment I met you."

My heart pounds in my chest as I grip Lucy's forearms and w
around backward into her office, slamming the door shut behind us with n
i't even

day.” The second we’re locked inside, I lift her onto her PT table and push one leg when legs, stepping between them.

“You’re *my* hero, Lucy. Fuck, I love you.”

Seeing you Cupping her neck, I slam my lips to hers, groaning at the feel of her as she moans into my mouth, frantically clawing at my polo shirt. My hand travels down to squeeze her breast, and from then on, I can’t get enough of her.

“God, Lucy. I need you. Right now.”

Relationship. Reaching for the hem of her dress, I give it a tug as Lucy gasps. Within a word, she lifts her ass off the table, allowing me to bunch the material at her waist, leaving her deep purple panties on full display. I drop to my knees in front of her, desperate to taste her again and I’ve just run my hands up her legs when she calls out “no.”

Oh HR,” I freeze, my fingers at the apex of her thighs, as she stares at me with a panicked expression. *Fuck!* “Shit, Lucy. I’m sorry—”

And it “No, that’s not...I mean, I don’t want to stop. I just...” She buries her hands in her hands. “I never said I love you back.”

I did that Chuckling as I stand up, I pull her hands away and lean my forehead against hers before turning serious. “You don’t have to say it at all. You’ve said it to me. Several times. But if it will make you feel better...”

Be your “It will.” She nods. “Wes Johnson, I love you. Then, now, and always. You are it for me too.”

From the I blow out a raspberry and joke, “It’s about time,” with a wide smile. Lucy playfully shoves me back with her palms on my chest.

Walk her Stepping closer again, I run my knuckle down her cheek while she looks shyly at my shirt in her fist.

“I will never tire of hearing that.”

pen her Lucy blushes, her eyes blinking up at me, looking so beautiful, I can't see any longer. "So...where were we?" I ask.

With a raised eyebrow, Lucy bites her lip, only releasing it to speak. "I can't touch, believe you were about to ravage me."

My hand "I was? Okay."

Enough of I drop to my knees again but Lucy stops me, pulling me back up.

"I need you here," she says, pointing to her mouth before dragging me down her lips. A deep groan rips from within me as I grab her arms to hold her without aher, crashing my mouth to hers while grinding against her core.

I look at her Moving one hand down her body, I cup her heat, while sliding the other up her neck and wrapping it around her jaw before tilting her head higher to deepen the kiss. Lucy's mouth drops open as she moans, allowing me to sneak my tongue inside, pumping my hips at the same time.

with a After sliding her panties to the side, I run a finger through her slit before pressing it inside her, watching her head fall back as she rolls her hips. Her face in time with my movements, crying out when I add a second finger. "Wes. Yes."

head to I hear voices in the hall, so I slow my pace, expecting Lucy to pull away any second. But she doesn't. She grabs my forearms, digging her fingers into the flesh, trying to pull me closer. "Don't stop, please."

always. "Wouldn't dream of it."

My fingers pump in and out as my thumb runs circles across her clit, asspot, causing her to pant and writhe around uncontrollably.

Moving my hand from her jaw into her hair, I hold tight as her hips grab me and she squeezes shut and she screams silently. "Oh god," she whispers, her head mimicking mine, pulling at the curled strands near the base of my neck. My movements become frantic and sloppy.

n't wait When I feel her walls tighten around me, I prepare for her climax w
pushes me away, sliding her free hand into my pants. "I need this, *now*
eak. "I *Jesus!* I dutifully comply, freeing myself from the painful constr
my briefs and watching as Lucy runs her thumbs across the tip. *Fuuuci*
"Wait, Luce. Let me get something." Grabbing a condom from my
I quickly sheath myself before gripping my length and pumping it
a fingertimes as Lucy watches on.

steady Covering my hand with her own, she bites her lips as she joins in, a
with my pleasure while I move closer, running the head through h
other up "God. That feels amazing."

higher to I repeat the movement a few more times until I'm so worked up
; me to explode any second, and that's not how I want to finish. Gripping her
take my time pushing inside her until she bucks her hips, forcing me
ck heat into her, sinking to the hilt.

er body "Yes, Luce, fuck. Can I move?"

. "God, "Please, yes."

I pump into her, slowly at first before increasing the speed and in
ll away She meets me thrust for thrust, her hands frantically roaming my bo
ers into forehead pressed to mine.

"I'm... I can't..." she breathes out.

"Let go, Luce. I got you." Leaning forward, I push Lucy's legs wi
r sweetslam into her one last time before she covers her mouth with her ha
cries out in ecstasy.

er eyes My length pulses as she tightens around me, and when she
er hand between us and gives me a squeeze as I pump into her, I grunt out t
eck, her gritted teeth as the added pressure sends me flying over the edge.

"Jesus Christ!"

hen she I collapse on the table as we both catch our breath, my eyes loc
.” Lucy’s.

aints of “Yep, it’s good to have you back,” I huff out with a smirk, knowin
k! would have expected me to say something romantic.

wallet, She giggles and she lazily backhands my chest, her eyes full of lov
t a few good to be back.”



ssisting

er heat. As we walk out to the parking lot a little while later, a thought occur
and I laugh. “Fun fact you didn’t know, but if I ever had a daugh
I could always planned to call her Katie.”

waist, I “What?” Lucy comes to a halt, her eyes wide in surprise and mayl
to slam disbelief.

I bop her on the nose and keep walking, waiting for her to catch up l
continue. “Do you remember me telling you about my gran? The c
took care of me after my mom died.”

tensity. Lucy’s eyes widen to an almost comical level as she chokes out, “I c
dy, her “Her name was Katie, and she—”

“She lived in the hotel with you, right?”

der and “Yeah, right across the hall. You probably saw her around. Here...”

nd and Pulling my phone from my pocket, I flip through my images until I f
last photo we took together, handing it over to Lucy. When her eyes

reaches the screen, she bursts into tears. *What the hell?*

hrough “Shit, Lucy. Are you okay? What did I do?”

“That’s Katie? Your gran?”

“Yeah...”

ked on “Well, you may not have a daughter named after her,” she says
sniffle, wiping her eyes. “But you do know someone that is.”

g Lucy *Holy shit!* “*Mom named me after a lovely lady with a big heart.*” M
flashes back to a conversation with a little girl in this very parking lot
re. “It’s Holy. Fucking. Shit!

“Katie’s named after my gran? How?”

“When I was at my lowest, she picked me up and helped me t
without even knowing my name.” *Sounds just like her.*

s to me “When? When did you meet her?”

ter, I’d “The day I found out about Katie. My entire world had just flipped
down. I discovered I was pregnant by a guy who’d forced himself o
lost you. I was terrified to tell my family because I was going to have
me even my child alone, and I felt completely helpless and unsure. But after tal
before I your gran, I felt better. And after she was gone, I realized that no mat
me that bad things got, I knew one thing for certain. If I had a daughter, he
would be Katie. And that made it feel real. And once it was real, I ki
lo.” fight like hell to give my little one the life they deserved.”

I swallow a lump in my throat and stare at the incredibly strong, b
woman standing before me. How I managed to find someone so perf
never know. But one thing is for sure. I will never take her for granted
find the never make her feel anything less than she is, and I will always love h
lock on all my heart. I had a strong feeling this girl was special, and now I l
Lucy’s my soul mate. And Katie was always meant to be mine.

“So, what you’re telling me is that I got what I always wanted... I
daughter named Katie?”

Lucy’s eyes water again as she launches herself at me, slamming
to mine. I catch her before we stumble back into my truck, gripping he

with the legs, my fingers digging into her ass.

“Take me home, Wes,” she says between kisses.

In my mind And that’s just what I do. Not even questioning where home is, I know it’s not a place; it’s exactly where Lucy and Katie are.

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through,

the upside

down me. I

try to raise

myself

to see how

far I can

reach I’d

be beautiful

and I’ll

know I will

never with

know...

have a

her lips

under

the legs, my fingers digging into her ass.

“Take me home, Wes,” she says between kisses.

And that’s just what I do. Not even questioning where home is, because it’s not a place; it’s exactly where Lucy and Katie are.

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Epilogue One

Lucy - Three months later

Oomph. That caught me off guard.

“Okay, I’ll give you that one, Johnson. But I’m not holding anymore,” I joke as I pretend to wince from the “hit” I just took. We have been sparring now for the past few months, and he’s really holding his own these days. Not that I’m a boxing pro or anything, but I always have technique on my side. He’s catching up.

“Alright, Mathers...show me what you’ve got.” Wes raises his gloved hand, his face and bounces on his toes. It looks more like a dance move than a boxing one and he knows it gets a rise out of me. Every. Single. Time. I wonder why he still does it.

I try hard to bite back my smile, but when he starts cornering me in shadowboxing, I’m done for.

“You need to stop,” I huff out between laughs, shaking my head. “You don’t fight fair.”

“I’m always fair when it comes to you, Luce. You know I only do this because I love seeing that smile.”

Ugh. Then he says stuff like that and I'm swooning. It always p completely off my game and allows him to—

Jesus! Got me again.

"Nice hook, Wes," Summer calls out, and I shoot her a glare bef annoyance turns back to Wes.

"I thought you were always fair."

"I am, mostly. But I'm also one to seize every opportunity." He sh though he's unfazed by my reaction, but I know deep down he's wai my smile, so I give him one.

"And all is right in the world again," Summer jokes, and I can't h
ig back laugh.

She's been having withdrawals, she claims, but I actually thin
s and I nervous about the impending arrival of her little one, and wants to be
ling his friends. While Cory had a fairly straightforward childbirth, mi
ays had anything but, and Summer was my support person. I may have trau
oves to her. Though, as always, she's acting like she's fine.

than a "Want to tag in, Summer? Wes will go easy on you. Or at least h
ne. It's that's what he's doing. But really it's his lack of—"

Oomph again. Only this time I'm thrown over his shoulder in a n
mically fast, I never saw it coming.

"I think training is over for the day," Wes announces. "I'm taki
l. "You home."

Summer laughs as he carries me toward the ropes, only letting r
y do it drop again when we're there.

Surprisingly, getting in the ring with Wes has done wonders for n confidence. He's a strong guy, and unlike when we first boxed toget no longer holds back—within the bounds of boxing—meaning I get

puts my skills on someone who could easily overpower me. While he actually forcefully connects, it's been really helpful and it's extremely therapeutic. Not to mention the fact that it's a fun way to keep fit. As I more mysaid, "couples that sweat together stay together," and I think he's spent our time. Almost like a date night, and we both love it.

It may have only been three months since we officially got together but our relationship already feels different to the others I've had in the past. It's more solid. More grown-up. Maybe it's because we've got Katie to help with about, so the stakes are higher. There's no time for messing around and he knows that. He knows Katie and I are a package deal, and he's completely embracing it. He went from a grumpy bachelor to having an instant crush on her overnight, and it seems to have settled him. He's no longer an asshole around everyone at work, he's enjoying his job and the team, he juggles multiple responsibilities at once... He's taking everything life throws at him and just rolling with it.

Which is kind of how you have to be as a parent. And make no mistake, Wes is a parent. He took on that responsibility the second I let him be there's never been anything but smiles.

"What time's Katie due back?" he asks as we reach Summer, with her name never far from his thoughts.

"Dylan just called to say he's on his way home, so he'll pick her up at your mom's," Summer answers for me. "Want us to keep her for a while?" she adds, bouncing her eyebrows.

I'm about to say yes when Wes beats me to the punch. "Nah, I need to take care of my self-little bug. I didn't see her much yesterday because of the game."

And there goes my heart again. This man.

"You, Wes Johnson, are a keeper. Dylan would definitely have said

neveralone time,” Summer says with a smile on her face.

tremely “Don’t be so sure about that,” I say with a raised eyebrow. “We’ll see once happens when my nephew enters the world.”

on. It’s Summer’s smile widens as she lovingly rubs her huge tummy. “wait.”

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After stopping for takeout, we pull into the driveway at the same time
does.

I jump out with a big smile, ready to greet them both until I s
practically throwing Katie from his truck, albeit in a gentle way.

“What’s going on?” I ask, taking in his obvious panic.

“Summer’s in labor,” he rushes out. “I have to go!” He lifts Katie w
arm and grabs her bag with the other before running to my side. All
stand shocked.

“What?” I breathe out, confused. That can’t be right. “We were ju
her. It’s been less than an hour.”

That pulls him to a stop. “You were? Yes, you were! But she mess
say she needs me at home asap and there were lots of exclamations and

Wes starts laughing as a small smile plays on my lips.

“What’s so funny?”

“Do you really think she’d text you to tell you she was in labor?”

Dylan’s face falls. “Ahh...nope.”

“Then is it possible she needs you for *something else*?” I ask, emph
the last two words as Wes adds, “Like the very thing that made the
the first place.”

Oh Jesus! I was trying to avoid saying that.

“What made the baby?” Katie asks, tugging on Wes’s tee, and I hold back my glare.

“We’ll talk about it soon, honey,” I say, taking her from Dylan. “I need to help Uncle Dyl. Let me take that,” I say, reaching for Katie. “You go home. For whatever Summer needs.”

Wes grabs the bag from Dylan’s hand before I’ve had the chance to pat him on the back. “Have fun with that emergency.” He winks.

“Thanks, I plan to.” Dylan chuckles before saying goodbye.

Katie runs ahead to the front door when Dylan’s gone, and I take the opportunity to smack Wes in the stomach. Thankfully, he at least has the decency to look regretful.

“I’m still learning?” he says as an excuse and I love him for it, because I’m still learning, but aren’t we all.

“It’s fine.” I smile. “I’ll handle Katie’s talk, but you have the next one.”

What?! I jolt as soon as the words are out of my mouth and pick up at a walking speed, hopeful he didn’t get my meaning. *Shit.* It’s only been a few months. We haven’t spoken about kids yet, and—

“Deal,” he says, matching my speed, before jogging ahead and unlocking the front door.

“Who’s ready for pasta?” he asks as though we didn’t just decide we were going to have a child together one day. *Another child.* I never thought I would want that, but now I do. I want that for Katie, for us.

Like always, Wes holds the door open for me as I approach, and as I step through the threshold, he pulls me close, his breath on my ear as he whispers, “I’m ready when you are.”

My eyes flash back to his to find him shrugging exaggeratedly, with

heart beats erratically in my chest. *No big deal. Right?*

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When we've finished dinner and chatted about our days, Wes takes Katie's bag to run through her bedtime routine, while I settle on the couch. He stays over every night, but when he does, it's like a break for me, and something I'm not at all used to. On top of putting Katie to bed, he's with her at the crack of dawn and makes her breakfast, allowing me to wake up naturally.

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ause he

This is what I've been missing. A teammate. Someone to share things with. My family and friends have always been amazing. But this is something new. Wes drops onto the couch beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder just as my phone rings.

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n three

I almost laugh when I see it's Dylan until a thought hits me and I realize it's not Dylan. "Shit, it's Dylan," I say, waving the phone in the air. "So, answer it," Wes states matter-of-factly, like it's the most important thing in the world. *Oh wait...*

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ve were
ight I'd

"Dylan," I rush out instead of a proper answer. "Yeah, so you were right earlier, but now it's go time. They're just waiting for us. We've got a room ready for us."

ight I'd

My heart stops for a second before picking up speed. "Dylan! I'm so excited. I can't wait to meet him. What do you need me to do?"

when I
r as he

"Um..." He pauses, and I can picture him gripping the back of his head. "Can you call Thomas and then head to the hospital? We'd both feel better if you were here."

hile my

My chest tightens at the nerves in my baby brother's voice, but I p
smile and tell him I'm on the way.



atie off

doesn't Twelve hours later, Dylan's pacing the halls while Summer has a mo
hich is herself. There's a commotion down the hall, and seconds later, I
gets up comes screaming around the corner. "What'd I miss? Where is he?"
time to Dylan pauses his movement but doesn't answer, so I take the lead.

"Your nephew is still coming. You haven't missed anything. In
ie load. don't think Summer expects you at all."

ig else. "She doesn't, but I wasn't going to miss this. Or any part of her li
nd my already missed too much."

My heart breaks for Thomas, and even Dylan's face softens. I
I stop. vowed to be there for Summer when they reconnected a while back,
absolutely has been. Though none of us expected him to come for th
obvious He's still playing football in Seattle. Luckily he played today. Or yeste
God, I've been here for so long.

My phone dings with a text, and I have no doubt it's Wes with
getting update. Bless him, it's his first night with Katie on his own, and even
she's been asleep for most of it, they'd both be up by now.

I'm so When I open the text, it's a photo of the two of them covered in flo
with ridiculously happy smiles on their faces. Of course, tears prick my
is neck. It's moments like these that highlight just how lucky I am to have
etter if Wes. We may have had a rough start, but I wouldn't change a thing, l

I truly believe that wasn't our time. This is our time. And God, am I lo

"Earth to Lucy, everything okay?" Thomas asks, pulling my focus.

out on a I spin around to find both guys staring at me.

“What?”

“You look a little teary.”

I turn the image around without an explanation and watch as both
ment to faces light up.

Thomas Dylan silently walks over and pulls me into a hug. “I’m so happy
Katie’s dad.”

“He’s—”

fact, I “He’s perfect with her,” he continues, cutting me off. Something
happy about, because despite the fact I was about to say that he’s not h
fe. I’ve he one hundred percent is, and one day I hope we make it official. One



Thomas

and he Dylan heads back inside not long after my emotional moment, so I
e birth. and I get the chance to catch up. When Wes and I first got together
rday...insisted on meeting the guy whose last name I’d “borrowed,” expect
dislike him. But of course, to no one’s surprise, they get along really well
another have actually become good friends.

though “Did Dylan tell you San Francisco is in the market for a quarter

Thomas says midway through our talk. And since our conversations re
ur, both focus on football, I think nothing of the change in direction.

y eyes. “No, but Carter mentioned it to Wes, and... Oh my God, have
e found approached you?”

because Thomas bites back a smile. “Nope.”

iving it. “Ah, man. What a way to get my hopes up—”

“I approached them. Or my agent did. We’re in talks.”

What? My eyes flash to his but I try to hold back my excitement. “coming home?”

“That’s the plan. If it all works out.” He shrugs, obviously still th theirnervous about it all.

“Have you told Summer?”

py he’s “Not yet. It all happened so quickly, and I don’t want to get her hop it doesn’t go through.”

“Well, I’m so excited for you.”

ng I’m “Don’t get too excited yet, we—”

ier dad, “It’s a boy!” Dylan yells from the doorway, making Thomas and n : day. out laughing as we run over to congratulate him. Neither of us correct the fact that we already knew that little piece of information, with tl love and awe on his face suggesting he’s in his own bubble.

Thomas “Do we get a peek or are they resting?” I ask, knowing how overl those first minutes can be.

er, Wes “I’ll find out.”

cting to He disappears just as fast as he came, and when he returns, his goof vell and is still in place. “Summer said to come in, but asked if you could call :back?” first. She’d love for her to meet her new cousin, Joshua Dean Mathers.

regularly With tears already in my eyes, hearing my nephew’s name makes t drop fall. “You named him after Dad?”

ve they “We did. Sort of.”

I can’t help myself; I pull him into a bone-crushing hug until he sho away, which is surprisingly not as fast as it usually would be. “I’ll c and then come in,” I say between sniffs as Dylan’s own eyes water.

The call connects on the first ring, and it’s Katie that answers.

“Can I come inside? Has Summer had my baby?”

'You're "Whoa there. What do you mean can you come inside?" I hear chuckling in the background. Probably laughing about the fact that s a littlemy baby. Dylan and Summer have no idea Katie's coming for them.

"Ummm," she draws out and I know instantly they're here.

"Wes?"

es up if "Katie kind of begged me to take her to the hospital. Just in case. So We're in the garden."

I laugh at the fact that Katie has Wes wrapped around her little fin also silently curse. They're going to gang up on me for sure.

ie burst "Then yes, Katie. Come inside. Summer and Joshua are waiting him on you."

he pure "Eeek!" Katie squeals so loudly that the nurse walking past give nasty glare.

ielming "You'll need to be a lot quieter than that if you come."

"I will be, Mom," she whispers, then hangs up before I've given th details.

y smile After texting Wes the directions to labor and delivery, I wait, ll Katiepatiently, for them to arrive, but thankfully, it's only a few minutes

" Katie's running down the hall toward me with her arms out for a hu he firstleaps at me and squeals into my chest. Much quieter than before.

"Can I see him now?"

"We sure can."

oves me The next few minutes are so surreal and contain moments in tim all Weswill never forget. My baby bro has a baby of his own, along with a b wife. Life is good.

"You did amazing, little sis," I say to Summer with a full heart cradles her precious little boy.

ar Wes “Isn’t he perfect?” she says, and I’ve never seen her so at peace.
he said When it comes time for me to hold my nephew, Wes stands close
me, staring down into his eyes. And my heart jumps. I want this. I hav
finally have a little family of my own and now, I can’t wait for it to gro
It’s finally my time.

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“Isn’t he perfect?” she says, and I’ve never seen her so at peace.

When it comes time for me to hold my nephew, Wes stands close beside me, staring down into his eyes. And my heart jumps. I want this. I have this. I finally have a little family of my own and now, I can’t wait for it to grow.

It’s finally my time.

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Epilogue Two

Wes - One year later

Katie stumbles into the living room with a box entirely too heavy and drops it at my feet.

“A little help, maybe?” she sasses as she crosses her arms in front of me. I try hard to bite back my smile, but she’s too cute when she pretends to play “grumpy” Katie, and within seconds my face lights up.

“Stop,” she says, trying not to smile herself. “That’s not fair; you make me laugh.”

“You still nailed it, kid,” I say, scruffing up her hair.

Her eyes narrow as she stares at me before finally saying, “Kid days, no respect.”

I burst out laughing and pull her into my arms as she laughs along with me. God, I love this girl.

Katie and I have our own special thing. It started the day I told her that Gran was the “lovely lady” she was named after. Ever since then she’s come to me to regale her with stories or asked what my gran would do in various situations. And right now, she’s playing her part. Pretending to say thi

thinks Gran would say in this very moment. The moment we all move into our first home together. *Our own home.*

God, it still blows my mind to think that this is my life now. I have a partner, a little girl, a life away from the spotlight where I can be more than the man everyone expected me to be.

There's only two things that could make it even more perfect, and I'm currently working on them right now.

"Katie? I told you not to bother Wes. He's trying to put together the house you finished it?"

Lucy joins us in the living room and looks between our new TV and me with a look of pure disbelief.

"What does that mean? 'Oh, you finished it?' You didn't think I was capable?"

"No, I just...I didn't hear any cursing, or things being thrown around."

A knot forms in my stomach at her completely straight face. I don't seriously expect that? My mind flashes back to the way she was previously treated by the exes and I sigh. "Lucy—"

She bursts out laughing as she pats me on the back. "I'm totally ridiculous with you. Now hurry up; we have to be at Dylan and Summer's in a hurry and you're still in your sweats."

"You love my sweats."

A hint of pink spreads across her face as she pokes her tongue out and walks away. *Yeah, she loves my sweats.*

"Sweats should never be worn outside the house," Katie says in her Gran voice, and I burst out laughing again. If Katie hadn't already been here when my Gran died, I would have sworn she was a reincarnation. It happens sometimes.

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... Oh,

Two hours later, the Friendsgiving party is in full swing. Just over a year ago, I barely knew these people and now they're like my family. No, they're my family. Seeing the way they all look out for Katie and Lucy and I'm impossible not to like them, and those feelings have only strengthened the past year. Carter and Grayson are also here today, making it even better. Oh,

mit and

half drags Josh to where Lucy and I are standing with Joel and Delia, though we wouldn't know who she was talking about if he wasn't with

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d."
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viously

The way she's bonded with Josh is incredible to see. I can't wait to have her as a sibling. It's been on my mind ever since the day Josh was born. Lucy accidentally mentioned us having kids. We've spoken about it a few times since, but never made any plans for it. First things first, and I'm not taking that step tonight.

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Lucy's eyes flash toward Summer as she answers Katie. "I'm not taking a break from my sweetie. It's going to be a long day. Dylan and Summer might need a little help." "It's fine with us," Dylan says, interrupting her out of nowhere. Summer grimaces like she's annoyed, and I can't help but chuckle. I'd already thought about it ahead and made plans for Katie to stay here. Not that Lucy knows that

out and
er fake

"Okay, great. *Great*. Thank you," she says slowly as Dylan walks away, like it's no big deal. Don't get me wrong, Dylan and Summer are happy to help, but they've got enough on their plate with a one-year-old and a fake

en born



's scary

As always, after a few drinks, the karaoke comes out—only this time as part of my plan. I sing a duet with Katie early on, something about building a snowman, and then let the others take over for a while, until it's my turn to shine. *Before Grayson*. I'm not stupid enough to follow him.

"I'm up next for karaoke; are you going to come and watch?" I ask when I'm able to get her attention.

She bursts out laughing, like she does any time I mention singing. "It's sweet that you love doing this with Katie, but didn't the two of you sing? We might lose the crowd." *The crowd. Meaning our family and friends.* She thinks that low of my singing?

I can't help but roll my eyes. "Shut it. Katie is a beautiful singer," I say with a smile, knowing very well she was referring to me.

"It's not Katie I'm talking about," she mumbles, hiding her face behind the bowl she's holding so I can't see her smirk.

"Sorry, I'm no Dylan or Joel or *Grayson*, but would you get your ass out here?" I say, grabbing her waist and pulling her in the direction of the bar.

"Ooh...I love when grumpy Wes returns."

"I'll show you grumpy Wes," I say, bouncing my eyebrows as I place the bowl on the counter and throw her over my shoulder in a fireman's carry, chuckling as she squeals between laughter. "Put me down, you big cavewoman."

"Nope, not until you listen to me sing...and love it."

A few of the guys cheer as I carry Luce outside, and I recognize Thomas's voice as I drop her feet to the ground.

"Don't let her move," I say to Thomas, giving him a knowing grin.

He nods, just as Lucy's eyes narrow in our direction. "What are you two up to?"

Thomas and I became close after Lucy and I officially got together.

me, it's now that he plays for San Francisco it's even better. Although, alongside Carter, he's currently trying to convince me to throw my hat in the ring for the time to the receiver coaching position they have going. But I'm finally happy. I'm not sure I want to risk losing that. So, while I'm sure I'd love to be back with my old team and friends, I think I'll probably stay put. Plus, working for Heartwood U Lions has one thing that the pros will never have... Lucy. "Babe, in the same building definitely has its benefits.

With Thomas knowing what I'm about to do, he pulls his lips into a tight smile and ignores Lucy's question, until she punches him in his arm.

I huff out a laugh and shake my head as I move toward the microphone. "Just stay there. *Please*," I beg, only smiling when Lucy nods.

After picking up the mic, I wait for Katie to join her mother's side and smile at my girls. My life. Those two are everything to me, and I'll forever be grateful for that day on the beach.

Katie gives me a nod as though she's in on my plan, making my chest widen. *She's got no idea.*

Taking a deep breath, I hit the button to begin and raise the mic. The intro for "Your Song," by Elton John plays and my eyes find my family again, determined to block everything else out. I still hate singing in front of a crowd, but I'll do it for my girls. "I still hate singing in front of a crowd," despite doing it for Katie whenever she asks me to—and today's even more nerve-racking.

When the chorus comes, I press pause and take another deep breath.

"Before I continue embarrassing myself—"

"We love you, Wes," Joel interrupts with a cheer, and I wave nervously. "Thanks, man. Before I continue, I'd like to invite a special someone to join me up here. Over the past year and a half she's become my world. I have a question to ask her."

ing with My heart slams in my chest as my eyes lock with Katie, trying hard to bring focus on Lucy.

py. I'm "Katie Kelly, will you come up on stage?"

around Katie's eyes widen and she squeals before turning to Lucy. I miss for the mistake of following her gaze, and the moment my eyes meet with her. Being my heart falters, seeing her tears. Dammit. I can't get emotional yet.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I wait as Katie runs toward me, and when she joins my side, I clasp our fingers together, dropping down to one knee.

"Katie, this song is for you."

akeshift She smiles brightly and dances along as I sing, sometimes mouthing words along with me. The second the song's finished, my heart rate pounds and then as my eyes briefly flash to Lucy's before settling back on the wonderful girl in front of me.

"Katie, my Katie. You and your mother are my world. I'm the luckiest guy alive to have you both in my life. But I want more. Will you do me the honor of becoming my daughter and letting me marry your mom?"

Everyone's silent, so I hear Lucy gasp as Katie goes quiet for a beat and mine is very unlike her. But after a second, she leans in close and wraps her arms around my neck.

in more "Yes, but I already am your daughter. I love you, Daddy."

Holy fucking fuck! There goes *any* strength I had left to keep myself together. Tears prick my eyes as I squeeze her tightly before pulling her close to look in her eyes.

isly. "Katie, you're right," I rasp, choking back my emotions. "You're definitely my daughter. But I want to make it official. So what do you think, and do you want to become Katie Johnson?"

"Yes!" She cheers before turning around to find Lucy. "Mom!"

I don't not to When I spot Lucy, she's already walking toward us with tears streaming down her face.

"So, I got permission..." I shrug, making Lucy chuckle. "While I'm here, I was also wondering... would you do me the honor of becoming Lucy's wife?"

"Yes." Lucy nods between tears. "Yes, I would love to."

And when She leans over and wraps her arms around us both, almost pulling me to my knees on the stage, while our friends and family clap. And my heart fills with joy knowing this is the best decision I've ever made.

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When we arrive home an hour later, I lift Lucy into my arms and carry her over the threshold like we're newlyweds, all while she tries to wriggle out from under my arm. The more she moves, the tighter I hold, marching us straight to the bedroom. "You just agreed to be my wife. I need inside of you *now*," I say, then I lay her on the bed before proceeding to undress her. *Off come the pants.*

"I see you're being a caveman, *again*. But I want to talk to you about something first."

"Nope, no time."

"But...Wes." She grips my tee and gives it a firm tug as she stops me instantly.

"Shit, sorry. Of course."

I once made it clear that Lucy would always be in control of what happens between us, and I'm not about to fail now, no matter how desperate I am to have her.

beaming Lucy's face softens and she smiles. "Has anyone ever told you how amazing you are?"

nodding I huff out a laugh. "Not nearly as often as I'd like."

looking at my After playfully shoving my chest, she turns serious again. "I want you for a baby," she whispers, moving her attention to the sheets, suddenly interested in the thread count or something, while my heart thuds in my chest. "I—"

with pride "I mean," she cuts me off without looking up. "Obviously if that's what you want, or you're not ready then we need to talk about it, but I—"

biting back a smile at how adorable she is, I interrupt her right when she's needing to ease her mind. "I want it, Lucy. For me, for you, for Kat. I've been ready for a while."

trying to free her Her eyes flash to mine as she visibly exhales. "You have? You do?"

in the room. "I really fucking do. In fact, how about we start right now?" I pull her back down to the bed as she giggles.

rowing "I'm still on birth control."

about "Then lose it. That's it. We're officially trying for a baby. And let's practice number one. Better give it our best shot."

sitting up, Before I've even finished talking, I have my hand inside her pants, my fingers running through her core. She bucks up into me as the words breathlessly leaves her mouth.

"I love you, Wes. I can't wait to give you a child."

happens "Lucy, Lucy, Lucy," I playfully scold her as my lips meet her ear. "I already did that. This is about us giving our daughter a sibling."

I am to Lucy's breath hitches and she pulls me in tight.

"And Luce," I whisper again. "I love you too. Truly, madly, forever. You're mine."

ou how

Thank you for reading Wes and Lucy's story. Want more from Heartstrings characters? Thomas and Lainey's book – A Sky Full Of Stars is coming out late 2023 or early 2024. Keep reading for a special sneak peek! In the meantime, if you haven't started the series, Dylan and Summer's story – When Nothing Else Matters, Joel and Delilah's story – Still Here With You, Logan and Dani's story - It Had To Be Us, and Nate and Cory's story – Ain't No Sunshine are all available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

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A Sky Full Of Stars Sneak Peek

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THEN – Lainey

People suck! I mean, yes, there are a few decent people in the world, but most of them suck. I don't say this lightly, of course. It's not something I'm just throwing out there. No, I've spent hours thinking this through and analyzing the things people say...their actions. I even have lists. After careful thought and consideration, that's the only conclusion I could come to... that people suck.

God, that makes me sound bitter, or like a brat. *And maybe I'm one of them.* But for the past six months, everyone in my life has been coming to me to everyone else, pointing out my faults or advising on how I could improve myself. Unsolicited. And I've had enough.

“Luke finds the time to practice football, keep fit and study. All while still having a social life. Maybe you just can't handle the balance.” My mom's response when I mentioned I was too tired to practice after being kept up by one of Luke's parties.

“Did you know Tiffany got into Juilliard? Maybe we should u... practice during rehearsal hours.” My mom, in response to me asking what's for dinner.

“I heard that Jacob's taking Piper to junior prom because she puts a bet on it, but he'd choose you if you offered him something.” A so-called friend.

“I ran into your little brother the other day. He's so polite for his age. You don't see kids like that these days. You can't even tell you two are related.” The cashier at my local grocery store.

And my favorite this week...

“You better keep dancing. That tight body is the only reason girls are interested in you.” That one was from a fellow dancer in my class.

World, but Out of nowhere. I’d literally just sat down.

Nothing So, like I said, people suck.

Through, But surprisingly, despite being compared to my brother, Luke, at least one day after a day, and even though we have our moments, he’s one of the good ones. Along with...

Both of Tap. Tap. Tap. *Thomas.*

Comparing My heart races as I jump up from the bed. I wasn’t expecting him. Running my hand over my crinkled school dress, I try to smooth it out. I cringe. God, I wish I’d changed when I got home. Thomas doesn’t need a constant reminder that I’m still in high school now that he’s in college.

While still I hesitate with my hand on the curtain, wondering if I should pretend my dad’s not home. But when he knocks again, my need to see him wins out.

Not awake Taking a deep breath, I peek through the material to find Thomas smiling, instantly relaxing me. And when he holds up two grocery bags, he mouths the word “hurry”, I can’t help but quietly laugh.

Up your “About time,” he jokes when I open up. “I had a killer practice today. I don’t think my legs could handle trying to outrun your dad if he finds me here,” he adds, his eyes scanning the yard.

Get out. I’d “Shut up,” I say, pulling him inside. “You could easily outrun him any day,” I joke, playfully rolling my eyes. As though there’s no chance of that happening. And yet, when Thomas’s back is turned, I can’t help but quickly check for myself, making sure that no one saw him before the window closed and securing the drapes.

ays are “You just checked, didn’t you?” Thomas asks with a smirk as he
A guy.himself comfortable on my bed, grabbing a bag of cookies from the b
favorite cookies.

“No. You worry too much.” I lie, biting back a grin while ignoring t
my heart flutters.

ist once Thomas chuckles and, like always, the sound hits me in the che
d ones. damn crush is going to ruin me one day. I can sense it.

“Alright. I brought donuts, cookies and candy? What kind of day

Thomas asks, moving on and making it even harder to keep my t
i today. platonic. *He’s Luke’s friend. He’s Luke’s friend.* No matter how many
out and tell myself that, it just doesn’t sink in.

eed the When I don’t answer right away, Thomas waves the bag in front
face as he laughs again, and I can’t stop my responding smile from sp
and I’m across my face.

“It’s a donut *and* candy day,” I say with a grimace, though I ki
;’s easy won’t judge me.

gs, and “Sheesh,” he winces. “That bad?”

“You be the judge... I was told my dancer’s body is the only reaso
ly and I would ever be interested in me.” I laugh as I jokingly run my hands fr
me out chest to my waist, trying to play it down. “So... there's that.” I shrug,

looking up to find Thomas frozen in place with his hand hovering in
i on his his eyes locked on my waist as though his gaze had been follow
ance of movement. I hold my breath under his intense stare as butterflies
elp but chest, my mind whirling with reasons for the attention.

ling the He blinks a few times and then shakes his head, seemingly clear
thoughts, before chuckling along with me. “Well, I mean, he’s ob
never seen you try to rap, because that’s pretty impressive, too.”

... makes I shove at his chest before crawling up onto the bed and crossing my legs. Myto get comfortable, while Thomas lays back into the pillows. “You never supposed to see that.”

...he way “Maybe so. But I’m pretty lucky I did. That’s something I’ll never forget.”

...st. This Like always, we lose track of time talking, and it’s not until I yawn that Thomas moves to leave. The part I always hate. Never knowing when he’s going to come back.

...feelings He’s just opened the window when a banging starts up from the other side of the room. “Lainey! Can I come in? You’ll never guess who I saw today!” Luke yells, making Thomas drop to the floor in a panic.

...: of my Covering my mouth, I fight to stop the giggles and thank my luck that Luke always respects my privacy. “One minute!” I yell back, crouching down to Thomas’s level.

...now he “Not scared of Luke, huh?” I ask, sucking my lips into my fist. Thomas’s eyes flash to my suppressed smile before he shakes his head and stands.

...n a guy “You know he can be a little protective, right?” he whispers, his eyes firmly locked on my bedroom door. “Plus, he’s my teammate, so—”

...finally “Yep, I know. You better go before my minute’s up.” I force a smile and push him out into the cold.

...ing my “You don’t have to tell me twice.” Thomas laughs quietly as he checks to make sure the coast is clear before jogging toward my back fence, only stopping when he’s reached the edge of the shadows.

...ing his My heart sinks when he disappears, but I don’t get time to dwell on it, obviously considering I have about three seconds before Luke’s invasion. And

ny legsthat's a good thing. Because while Thomas's visits always lift me up,
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that's a good thing. Because while Thomas's visits always lift me up, I know they won't last forever.

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NOW – Thomas

I stare into her beautiful hazel eyes, struck completely silent. Lainey's standing in front of me, arms folded over her chest with an expression I'm not used to. My lips involuntarily pull into a smile, like I always did in her presence, until she blinks a few times, snapping me out of my daze.

Someone knocks on the bar to get the servers' attention and the sound of the door brings my mind drifting back to the last time I knocked on Lainey's window, begging her to open up.

“Lainey, please. Summer's gone. I need you.”

“Are you going to say something, or just stand there?” Lainey in my memory, and it shocks me to hear her tone coming across as much more harsh than I was expecting.

It takes all of two seconds for me to bury the thoughts of my past, to do what I always do, before plastering a smile on my face, something I've managed to do over the years.

“Lainey, it's been too long,” I say cheerily, raising my glass. “I trust you're well.”

“I trust you're well?” Jesus! That didn't sound as laid back and carefree as I was hoping.

After all these years, I never thought seeing her would affect me this much, and I'm not sure what to do next.

A Sky Full of Stars is now available for pre order on Amazon.

Lainey.

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Thank you for reading Wes and Lucy's story. This book will always have a special place in my heart. I started writing it long before I had any other Heartstrings characters in mind, but then shelved it when I realized it had to come later in the Heartstrings series. And now it's here! I have so many people to thank for helping to get this book out in the world, but

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Thank you all for supporting indie authors. If you enjoyed this book, please shout it from the rooftops and leave a review on Amazon.

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