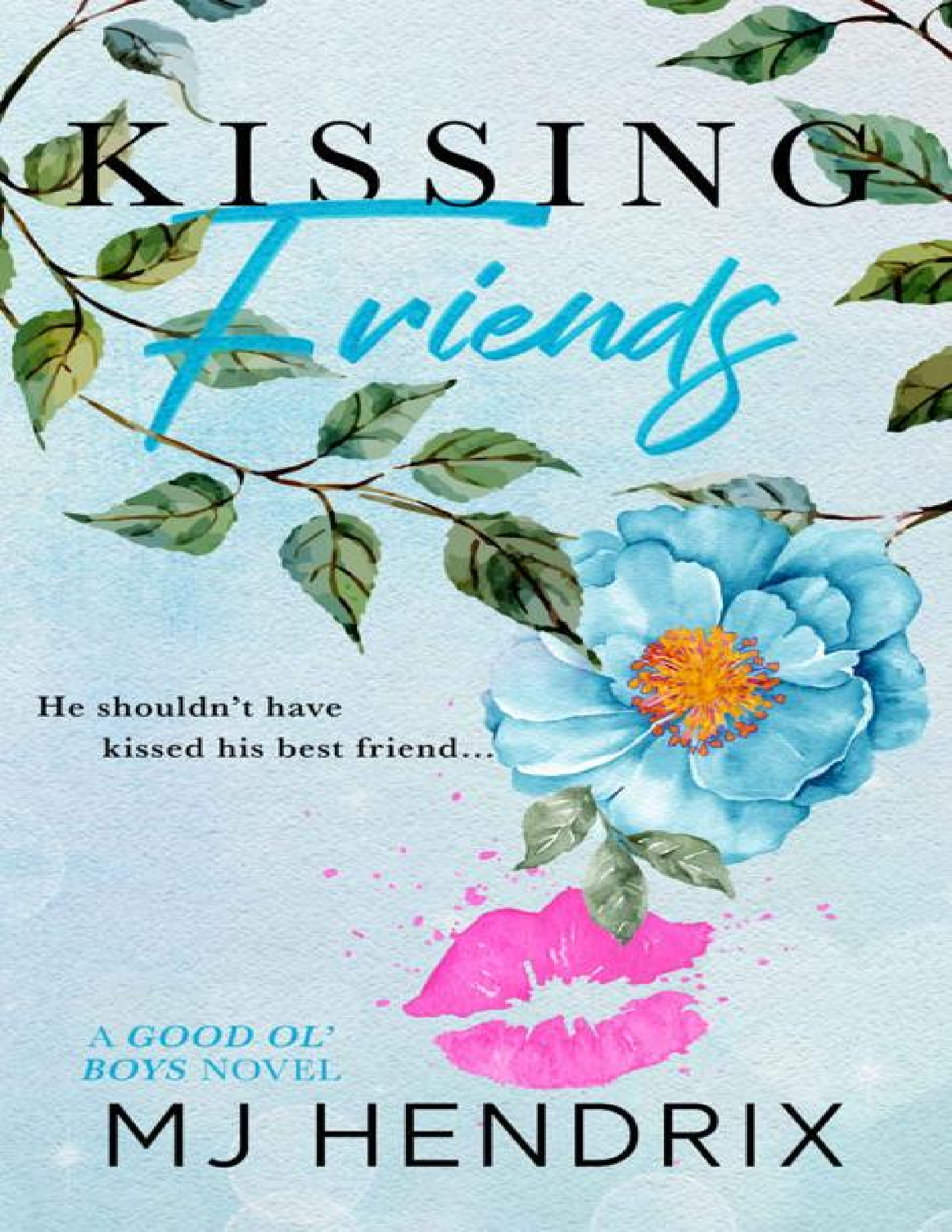




KISSING

Friends

He shouldn't have
kissed his best friend...

*A GOOD OL'
BOYS NOVEL*

MJ HENDRIX

kissing friends

A REVERSE GRUMPY X SUNSHINE BULL RIDER ROMANCE

GOOD OL' BOYS

BOOK 4

MJ HENDRIX

MJ HENDRIX PUBLISHING LTD. CO

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Visit my website at www.mjhendrix.com
Cover Designer: Kate Farlow, Y'all. That Graphic.
Editor: Jovana Shirley, Unforeseen Editing
Proofread: Misha Carlstedt, Verity Ink Editorial

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about this book

When my best friend unwittingly walks in on me in the shower, our platonic dynamic goes down the drain.

Dan has golden retriever energy.

We're polar opposites, sunshine and rain.

I should've known moving in with him would throw a kink in my plans to be grouchy and alone. He makes me smile way too much.

After getting cheated on by my high school sweetheart last year, I started spiraling, and I almost failed three classes. I will *not* be falling in love any time soon, not until after I graduate.

I do, however, need a rebound—no strings attached.

(Preferably someone damaged and heartless like me.)

Dan wants to lose his virginity and find a sweet, bubbly girlfriend before graduation, and I signed up to be his wingwoman. It shouldn't be too hard, considering he's the golden boy.

Everything was going just fine until that steamy afternoon when I borrowed his shower, he walked in, and now he'll never be able to look at that removable showerhead the same way again.

Or me.

good ol' boys series

Falling for Temptation

Seeing Double

Seducing the Saint

Kissing Friends

*for my real life book boyfriend, J
(who I friend zoned for six months)*

thank you for loving me back to loving myself

Trigger Warnings:

This book contains elements of emotional and physical domestic violence in the main character's past.

There is no physical violence on page.

playlist

Listen on [Spotify](#).

Not Like I'm In Love With You by Lauren Weintraub

Love You Anyway by Luke Combs

Feel Like This by Ingrid Andreas

Anything 4 u by LANY

Cover Me Up by Morgan Wallen

Can't Turn You Down by Jon Pardi

Friends by Ed Sheeran

That Way by Tate McRae

Could you love me while I hate myself by Zeph

Good Ol' Boys by Lee Brice

Snow On The Beach (feat. More Lana Del Rey) by Taylor Swift

Clean (Taylor's Version) by Taylor Swift

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ONE

dan

I THINK about sex more than I think about anything else.

“I’m going to die a virgin, Lulu.”

My roommate, Lucy, looks up at me from her charcoal drawing. I’m watching a National Geographic documentary about Africa’s deadliest animals while she sketches my profile. The only light illuminating the room is the lamp behind her and the TV screen. We like to keep the apartment dimly lit when we relax at night.

“I’ll be that cranky, lonely old man in my yard, yelling at kids on the street for riding their bikes on the grass when it’s wet, leaving indentations.”

She snickers, shaking her head. “Sex is overrated.” She looks back down at the sketch, her curly head of hair drifting sideways. “I got your nose wrong. Tilt your head up for me.”

I oblige her, my gaze going over my nose to see the buzzard swooping down on an unsuspecting snake on the screen. Earlier they showed a brief clip of a group of hyenas mating, which is what drew my mind into the gutter. It doesn’t take much to get my head there.

“What do you mean, it’s overrated? You don’t like it?”

“You can look down now. It’s not that I don’t like it; it’s more like an inconvenient thing you have to do. It’s like filling your car up with gas every week. It’s a hassle. Toys are better.”

I lower my head, turning to face her. “When Silas and Scarlett started doing it, he told me on multiple occasions it was mind-blowingly amazing, better than the fun of Christmas morning when you’re seven years old. I had to sleep with earplugs in for the last year.”

Scarlett is Lucy's best friend, and Silas is my old roommate. They hated each other for years before becoming a couple. When they moved in together a month ago was when Lucy became my new roommate. At first, I was nervous to room with a woman, but we've seamlessly adjusted. She's cleaner than my previous roommates. She smells better too.

Lucy shrugs. "Guys are different, but she told me it was amazing too. Maybe I've never done it right. Maybe Silas is some kind of sex god. She did say his dick is massive."

I look back at the TV. "I really don't want to know how big my friend's dick is."

"Size is overrated anyway. It's all about foreplay. Most guys are inadequate in that area, which is simply a result of laziness."

"Maybe Brett was just horrible. If you found someone who wasn't an asshole, maybe it would be good for you," I muse.

"Brett wasn't my first. He was the third guy I was with. Now, he was an asshole, but the sex with the first two was underwhelming. I would get bored and start planning out my grocery list."

Is she kidding? That's not what it's like, is it?

Lucy's ex-boyfriend Brett was controlling, and last year, he cheated on her with her cousin. She's been healing and focusing on school since their messy breakup.

I turn to see how far she's gotten with the drawing. Lucy has tight caramel-colored curls. She has natural, glowing tanned skin, cute freckles on her nose, and dark brown eyes. She wears mostly loose black clothing, and tonight is no exception. Her feet are tucked up under her on the sofa.

"You're making me feel a little better, but I still want to experience it before I die."

"You want another beer?" Lucy moves to stand up, reaching for my empty can and her empty wineglass.

I beat her to it, grabbing the can and her glass. "Sit down. I'll get it."

I walk into the kitchen and toss the empty can in the trash before opening the fridge. I fill her glass with the chilled rosé wine she's been drinking.

"You could have just been unlucky enough to sleep with three guys who sucked in bed. Maybe some of them are better. Silas can't be the only exception. Levi and Adam both seem to sexually satisfy their women."

Adam is my older brother, and Levi is another one of my best friends. We all came to college from a religious, borderline-cult community with Silas. Three years ago, we were the four virgins, but I'm the last man standing. It's a label I'm getting weary of carrying.

I had a pretty serious crush on one girl when we first moved here. I even took her on a date. She's now my best friend's wife.

My first kiss was with Scarlett, a girl I grew up with, who finally admitted she had been madly in love with Silas for years. It's all water under the bridge now. I'm happy for my brother and my two childhood best friends.

Part of me thinks that I'm just meant to be the fun uncle. I've already got one little godchild, and if my history with women is any indication, that's the closest I'll ever get to having a kid of my own.

Accepting my fate has been harder than I imagined. I walk back into the living room with the drinks, popping the top on mine before handing Lucy hers.

"Thanks," she says, taking it from me. "I guess you're right. They can't all be bad in bed. But how many more will I have to try before finding a good one? I've sworn off dating until after I graduate. I almost failed the semester Brett and I broke up. I can't risk my grades again."

I collapse into the brown leather recliner. "Don't ask me. I'll probably be one of the guys who is terrible at it."

Lucy takes a long sip of her wine before leveling me with her gaze. "They don't seem to care when it's not good for us, so I'm sure she'll be used to it."

"I need practice. I want it to be good for her, whoever she is. I just don't think any women are interested in being a college-aged virgin male's first time." My eyes drift back to the TV when I hear the narrator mention a killer hippopotamus.

"You could sell it."

My eyes jerk back to Lucy. She's looking down at her drawing.

"Sell what?"

Tickets?

Her eyes squint as she draws a long, dark line on the edge of the page. "Your virginity. You could sell it to the highest bidder."

My jaw drops open. "People do that?"

"Mm-hmm. I knew a girl who got over two million dollars for hers."

“You’re screwing with me.”

She looks up, amusement in her eyes as she shakes her head. “Am not. Her name was Helen, and she marketed herself as a virginal modern-day Helen of Troy. She started a YouTube channel about it and everything.”

“Damn. You learn something new every day. Seems risky though. What kind of person buys someone’s virginity?”

Lucy laughs, shaking her head. “Not someone I’d want to be with, but you could get that awkward first time over with and make a little cash.”

Making Lucy laugh is a pretty impressive thing because she’s usually a quiet little grouch, except when it’s just us.

“I think I’d rather take my chances with a girl from a sorority or something.”

She drops the charcoal, setting the sketch pad on the coffee table before stretching her arms up overhead. “We could make it our goal for the semester. To get you laid and to get me someone who can actually make me like sex.”

“What happened to the prohibition of the penis?”

“I never said no penis; I said no dating. No emotional attachments. No relationships. Sex was never included.”

I nod, slowly turning back to face the TV. There’s a lioness fiercely protecting her young, clawing the shit out of a hyena.

“All right, Lulu, I’ll help you find a man who can lay some pipe, and you help me find a woman who’s looking for an inexperienced plumber...to get some pipe laid.”

She snickers. “No plumbers, but you got a deal.”

“We could start tomorrow. It’ll be Friday night, so everyone will be going out. I’m an excellent wingman, if my history of helping all my friends get into long-term relationships is any indication.”

“I think we should prioritize finding you a woman first. Are you looking for a onetime thing, a hookup buddy, or a relationship?”

I glance over to see that she’s on her phone, presumably searching for potential females to set me up with on her Instagram.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m open to any of the above. The end goal is a relationship, but if I met a girl who didn’t want that, I wouldn’t be opposed to something short-term before the relationship.”

Lucy nods, typing on her phone. “How tall are you?”

“What are you doing?”

“Just answer the question and let me keep my end of the bargain.”

I let out a sigh. “I’m six-two.”

“I’m using that picture of you from the summer when you were hauling hay shirtless with Adam. Harley was there too, and I was shamelessly ogling you. Your abs look amazing.”

“Are you making me a dating profile?”

She shakes her head without looking up. She bites her lip, trying to hold in a smile.

“Don’t make me an Instagram account, please. I’m not into social media.”

“I’m not. Chill, Danny.”

I lean my head back against the back of the recliner, closing my eyes. “How am I supposed to know if a guy is going to be good in bed for you? Should I interview his ex-girlfriend?”

She’s silent for a moment, busy typing out some essay to every girl she knows about my abs and how I’m a loser who still has his V-card. My eyes watch the TV screen without me actually absorbing any of the information.

Animal life fascinates me. I’m studying to become a veterinarian. I was raised on an isolated Texas farm less than two hours from our college campus. I’ve got a lot of experience with birthing calves and raising chickens, goats, and rabbits. I came to Ole Tex University to broaden my animal knowledge and get my undergrad before applying for vet school.

I started to get a little taste of what the world was actually like when I moved here three years ago at twenty years old.

“I think you should ask them about their porn preferences.”

I slowly turn back to face my roommate. “You want me to ask random bros about what kind of porn they watch?”

She nods.

“Why?”

“Because I’ve decided I don’t want to be with a man who watches it, and I think all the ones who do have unrealistic ideas for women’s bodies and normal sexual activity. So, finding one who doesn’t is step one. They’d probably be honest with a man about it.”

I rub a hand over the back of my neck. “I’m gonna have to figure out how to bring that one up without sounding like a complete...freak.”

“Just tell them what you like first.”

I stare at her. “I don’t watch it. I have no interest in it.”

She lays her head down on the sofa, curling up into a little ball. Her eyes finally lift to meet mine. “Why not?”

“I guess I just want the real thing, not some random girl on a screen.”

She blinks at me. Her phone buzzes on the arm of the sofa. She picks it up, and I turn back to the TV.

“So, you don’t have a sex drive at all?” I ask.

It feels a little weird for me to talk so freely about sex. Purity culture made me feel like my hormonal urges were bad, needing to be repressed. I was never given any lesson on what sex was or what it wasn’t supposed to be.

I’ve never seen pornography, but I think the idea of watching other people do it is repulsive.

I want to be with a real woman, to take it slow, one step at a time, while I figure it out. I’ve learned the very basics by watching farm animals, but that’s the extent of what I know.

“I never said I don’t have a sex drive. I think about sex every day.”

My eyes turn sharply back to meet hers. “What?”

“I have a very high sex drive.”

“But you said—”

“I don’t get fulfillment from having sex with men, but that doesn’t mean I don’t take care of myself. Don’t you?”

I nod dumbly.

No. Hardly ever.

Once, to be exact.

“I just meant that sex with guys is underrated. I think I’ve finished, like, five times total during sex—with the help of a toy.”

I lean forward, planting my elbows on my knees. “You can use toys during it?”

She nods. “Toys are my best friend. I don’t even need a repulsive, cheating man. No offense. But I prefer the showerhead.”

My brain short-circuits. Suddenly, I’m picturing it—Lucy with the showerhead, spraying herself.

Don’t think about her like that.

I have so much to learn.

“Dan, we’re going to need to work on you not blushing about these things.”

My neck is hot, and my lower back feels itchy.

“This is a whole world I apparently know even less about than I thought.”

She stands up, stretching her arms high. “I’m exhausted. Keep your phone on. Maybe you’ll find yourself an opportunity to pop that cherry sooner than you think.”

“Are you giving random women my number?” I lift up the remote and press the Off button.

She shakes her head, still biting back a smile as she turns to walk to her bedroom. I stand up, following her because mine is right across the hall.

“Lucy, tell me what you’re up to.”

“Nothing! I just mean for when we go out tomorrow and we get you a bunch of potential first-timers. It’s not like we’re going to have a hard time finding people to hook you up with. Look at you.” She reaches out a hand to squeeze my round shoulder muscle. “Show these guns off, and I won’t even have to lift a finger.”

“Hmm, yeah. Good night, Lu.”

“Night, Danny.”

TWO

lucy

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, I started PMSing on Friday morning. By Friday afternoon, my cramps are a dull ache in my lower belly. I'm starving to death.

All I can think about is Chinese takeout and watching *Pride & Prejudice* or *Twilight* until I fall asleep with a heating pad on my stomach.

Maybe both. Why not both?

Some douche canoe in my Arts and Culture II class told me I would be prettier if I smiled more. I told him he'd be funnier if he'd been born without a tongue and he couldn't speak.

Why do men?

My phone starts buzzing in my pocket right as I reach my black Toyota 4Runner. My rich but absent grandparents got me my car for Christmas. They wanted to get me a red one, but I begged for the black to match my heart.

Daddy Danny is flashing on my screen. He entered his name in my phone like that ages ago. I swipe across the screen to answer.

"Hi."

I climb into the car, pushing the Start button to begin cooling off the scorching interior. Black cars in the Texas fall are a terrible idea.

"Hey, grumpy. We grabbing dinner tonight before the bar?"

"Ugh," I groan, throwing my backpack into the passenger seat. "I forgot about tonight. I started bleeding this morning, and I have cramps like Satan sent his minions up to earth with pitchforks to stab me for shits and giggles."

"Oh, that doesn't sound good. You need me to get you anything?"

I'm slowly backing out of my parking space to head home, which is only two miles away. "Are you at home?"

"Yeah, but I can run to the store really quick."

An emotional wave starts to roll over me out of nowhere. I'm not normally a crier, but every month, like clockwork, something totally random will bring moisture to my eyes, like my roommate offering to do something nice for me.

"Um, can we just do dinner at home tonight? Maybe if I eat and lie down for a little bit, I'll feel up to going somewhere."

"Yes, ma'am. You want Chinese, don't you?"

I laugh, shaking my head as a lone tear rolls down my cheek. "Orange chicken and lo mein with a spring roll."

"Coming right up."

He hangs up the phone. A few minutes later, I'm pulling into my apartment complex. Dan's old-school truck is there. I park right beside it. After lugging my backpack out of the passenger seat, I sling it over one shoulder and lock my car.

When I reach our apartment door, I'm nearly out of breath. I twist the knob open, finding it unlocked. As I traipse through the hall, I deposit my backpack on the dining room table. Our place has an open floor plan with the kitchen, living room, and dining space all being one big area. The decor is very minimal and screams bachelor pad. I'm an artist, but I don't like to display my own work. It feels narcissistic somehow.

Dan and Silas had a few garage sale-looking paintings on the wall that haven't been moved since as long as I've known them. The sofa and chairs are mismatched. The recliner is brown leather, while the sofa is black polyester.

My phone starts to buzz in my hand. I look down to see that my dad is calling me. I don't have energy for a conversation about how I'm doing with the breakup and all right now, so I send it to voice mail.

I hear Dan's door open as I reach the fridge, opening it up to get a bottle of water.

"Takeout will be here in twenty. You need some Advil?"

As I turn, I see that he has a towel wrapped around his waist. My eyes drift over the V-shape of his hips, the defined abdominals, all the way up to his chest and thick shoulders. His dirty-blond hair is dripping wet as he dries it with a hand towel. His blue eyes are looking at me with concern,

slightly pinched together. He extends a bottle of Advil toward me with the other hand.

“Two, please. Thanks for getting food. How are you still a virgin anyway?”

Dan hands me the pills, and I put them on my tongue. I twist off the plastic cap of the water bottle, tilting it back over my lips to chug it.

“Too charming? Too muscular? Too funny? There are a lot of reasons. Why do you ask?”

“Hmm, so women are intimidated by you? Because you look like someone they’d be swarming around.”

I walk toward the hallway to get my heating pad out of my nightstand. Dan follows.

“I’m going to get dressed and meet you in the living room.”

“Okay.”

After changing out of leggings and into sweatpants and a white tank top, I find my heating pad and my favorite blanket. I slip on my fuzzy black slippers before walking back out to the living room.

Dan is already there, relaxed on the sofa. He’s still shirtless, only wearing a pair of gray sweatpants. We silently established early on that we want to be comfortable in our home. Dan walks around shirtless frequently. I feel more comfortable when I’m covered up. It doesn’t matter who’s around.

After plugging in my heating pad, I sit down on the sofa and cover myself up with the blanket.

“I think it’s simple.” He continues our earlier conversation. “I fit well into the friend zone. For whatever reason, that’s how women see me. It doesn’t mean I haven’t had the chance though. Maya and I dated for about three weeks, but she was just...she was rude to everyone, especially people like servers and bartenders. I hated it. Then, there was Katie, and she was such a sweetheart. She was like me though, raised in a really strict home. She wanted to wait until marriage, which I fully respected. We never even held hands. I’ve been out with a few other girls since then, but never more than three dates.”

“Did Maya not want to jump your bones?”

He laughs. “Oh, no, she did. We did fool around a little bit. It probably would’ve happened if we’d dated longer, but I honestly just wasn’t into her. I need someone more friendly.”

I lay my head back against the sofa. “Let’s figure out your type. This Advil will kick in soon, and we can leave.”

The doorbell rings. Dan stands up to get the food. I watch him walk to the door, staring at his back muscles.

Finding him a woman is going to be cake.

Do I want to share my best friend with another girl though?

The thought fills me with dread.

Dan brings the food over, laying it out on the coffee table.

If he gets a girlfriend, he’ll be doing this for her instead.

How selfish of me—to want to keep him all to myself and never find love. He places the box of orange chicken and lo mein in my lap before handing me a plastic fork.

“Thanks for dinner, Daddy Danny.”

He sits, smiling as he opens his box of beef and broccoli with brown rice. “You’re welcome.”

“Did you seriously get something healthy? I thought we were pigging out.”

He spears a broccoli. “I’m working on my physique.”

I snort. “I look like a pincushion compared to you, and I’m eating straight carbs and sugar.”

He shakes his head. “You are fine as hell, Lu.”

“Are you worried that if you get a girlfriend, she won’t like how good of friends we are?”

He’s chewing a mouthful of food, so he doesn’t answer right away. He leans back against the sofa, his Styrofoam container balancing on one leg. “I guess I want one who understands we’re just friends, nothing more. She’ll have to be cool with that.”

I nod. “So, what is your type?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “I’m usually attracted to bubbly personalities, someone who wants to be social with me. The normal stuff, obviously—honest, sweet, gets along with my friends. I like blondes, but hair color isn’t a big deal. I do like curly hair. Um, someone who has a definite career path and knows what she wants out of life. Someone who wants kids in the future. If she’s into sports or the gym, that would be fun to do together, but it’s not a requirement.”

Cool. The exact opposite of me, besides the curly hair and kids in the future.

I chew on a piece of chicken, nodding along. “I feel like if I throw a rock into any sorority house, I’ll hit ten girls with that description. This should be easy.”

Dan takes a bite of a steaming-hot egg roll, chewing and swallowing before he replies, “I guess I should add that she needs to be into me and not put me in the friend zone. Ha.”

“I’m trying to wrap my head around why that keeps happening to you. You clearly have golden-retriever energy, so I think if you tried being a little more mysterious, we’d jump that hurdle right away.”

He nods. “Be mysterious—got it. So, what about you? What’s your type?”

“I want him to be mean to everyone else but nice to me. I like dark hair, dark eyes, and guys under five-nine.”

Dan throws his head back in a laugh. “I’ve never heard a girl say she likes short guys.” He stands up, heading to the kitchen. “You want a drink?”

“I have my water. I think tall men are too assuming, too proud. They know they’re hot, and I hate that. I’m only five-one, so I don’t need someone tall.”

He comes back with a water bottle, lifting it up to chug it. His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat. He finishes it while sitting back down.

“Short, dark, and handsome—got it. Shouldn’t be too hard to find. I’ll just throw a rock into a frat house and hit ten guys who fit that description.”

I shake my head. “No, I want him kinda ugly. I want to be the hot one in the relationship so he won’t be tempted to cheat.”

Dan snickers, shaking his head. “We need to work on your trust issues first. Not all of them cheat.”

“*Most* of them do.”

“Well, I wouldn’t.”

I chew on my lower lip, staring at his face, each individual feature. He’s got unfairly bright blue eyes that always seem to see straight through my tough-girl act.

“I know you wouldn’t, Danny.”

He blinks, looking down at his food. “So, you feeling up to going somewhere, or is it gonna be a movie night?”

My cramps have eased, and the half-box of greasy food has revived my spirits.

“Let’s go out.”

“What can I get for you?”

The bartender is visibly chewing her gum, eyes focused on Dan. I generally like to feel invisible, but this is a bit much.

“Ah, I guess I’ll go with Blue Moon tonight. Whatcha feeling, Lu?”

“White wine.”

The woman doesn’t even glance my way before grabbing a mug to fill it, eyes only for Dan. With the look on her face, you’d think they were alone in a hotel room and not in a crowded bar. She’s got a sleeve of tattoos, fake eyelashes, enormous boobs, and bleach-blond hair.

The bar is crowded, mostly with college students. Some of them probably have fake IDs, but the average age looks to be around twenty-three, like Dan.

“What do you want to do for your birthday?” he asks.

I’m turning twenty-two next month.

My eyes stop scanning the crowd, drifting back to his face. He’s wearing a long-sleeved white button-down with black denim jeans. Since I’ve known Dan, he’s dressed well. His hair is long on top, short on the sides, and always styled nicely. He keeps his beard trimmed close. He smells amazing, like cedar and the outdoors.

I asked him once what it was, and he shrugged and said, “My cologne, I guess.”

“I haven’t thought about it,” I say.

I fold my arms over my stomach as the bartender pushes the wine toward me and a beer toward Dan.

“That’ll be eighteen dollars.”

“Oh, I’m separate,” I tell her, reaching for the zipper of my black crossbody bag.

He hands her his card, ignoring me. “We could see about a wine-tasting weekend. Maybe Scarlett and Silas could come. Adam and Harley have plenty of room for us.”

I’ve only met Dan’s brother Adam and his wife, Harley, a couple of times, but I instantly fell in love with Harley. She’s covered in tattoos, much like our bartender, and she has a tough-girl personality, like me.

“Okay, I’m up for it. I’ll see if Scarlett and Silas can make it work.”

The bartender is still giving Dan sex eyes as she pushes the receipt toward him, but he doesn't even notice. He grabs the pen to sign it.

"Don't worry about it. I'm planning your birthday weekend."

He picks up his mug to take a drink, still ignoring the bartender. She huffs before moving down the bar to serve another patron.

"Did you not think she was gorgeous?" I lift up my glass to take a sip.

"Who?" He looks around the bar.

I lower my voice, leaning closer to his ear. "The bartender."

He looks over at her serving the other customers like he's seeing her for the first time. "Yeah, she's pretty."

"She's into you."

He frowns, looking away. "I don't think I'd date a bartender. They have a horrible schedule."

I nod. "What about for a hookup?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. What about you? See anyone you're interested in?"

I look around the bar. There are a few familiar faces from my classes. One of them is a gorgeous blonde girl from a sorority that Scarlett told me about. She and Silas talked on and off for a few months, and Scar *hates* her for it.

"Is that Adeline Sage?"

Dan turns to look in the direction my focus is on. "Sure is. She's cool."

Adeline turns to face us right then, her face lighting up. Dan lifts a hand in a wave. She starts walking toward us. Her outfit is stunning—a short brown leather miniskirt with slits on the thighs, paired with a tied-up white button-down. She's showing just enough midriff and cleavage to be sexy without looking trashy. She completed the outfit perfectly with knee-high white boots.

"Hey, you two. How are you?" Adeline reaches around to hug Dan's neck.

She smiles at me with perfect teeth, pulling me into a hug right after. She smells divine.

"We're good. How was your summer?" Dan asks.

"So amazing! Spent two weeks in Bali with my family and ten days in Greece for my grandparents' fiftieth anniversary. Turns out, I am obsessed with other cultures around the world."

I nod as if I went anywhere when, in reality, I spent the whole three months at home with my reclusive parents, watching reruns of *Survivor*. My

family makes a fair amount of money, and my dad is as frugal as they come. We occasionally vacation to Galveston Beach, the butthole of the Texas coast. My sister, Jenn, and I enjoy it, but we would love to see a beach with clear turquoise water someday.

“Hell yeah, that’s awesome. I bet Greece was amazing,” Dan says, taking another drink.

Adeline bobs her head. “Oh, yes, truly, it was. I can’t wait to go back.” She takes a sip of her drink, looking from my face to Dan’s. “I had no idea you guys were a thing, but it totally makes sense! You are such a cute couple—like the sun and the moon, in the best way.”

She’s grinning like it’s the happiest day of her life and she didn’t just thrust us into the most awkward space ever.

“Um, yeah, no—” I begin.

Dan chuckles, wrapping his arm around my shoulders in the most bruh way ever.

“Shit, me and Lu? No wonder I can’t pick up girls. Ha-ha. You are such a cockblock.”

He squeezes my shoulder playfully before tipping his beer back over his lips. I don’t know how to react, so I laugh with him, shaking my head.

“Yeah, gross. Dan and me? I like short, ugly brunettes. He’s so not my type.”

Adeline gives me an *are you serious* face before giggling awkwardly.

“Well, in that case, my friend Billie was just saying that Dan is totally her type. She loves the classic Ken vibes. Do you want to meet her?”

Please don’t leave me over here alone.

I take a sip of my wine, watching Dan’s face.

“Sure, I’m up for it. You care if we go join their group, Lu?”

I sigh in relief at the invite, nodding. “Yeah, sure. Let’s go.”

THREE

dan

FARMWORK HAS ALWAYS FELT like a safe place to me. It's infiltrated deep down in my bones, like an old memory resurfacing whenever I smell hay bales or fresh garden soil. The farm I was raised on will always be *home*, but every farm I get the chance to visit or work on is a little taste of that feeling.

I toss the bale of alfalfa up onto the trailer before wiping the sweat off my brow. My weekend job on Saturdays and Sundays helps me make it through the semester without touching my savings account. I met the owner of the farm, Clyde, at a bull-riding event.

I compete in an underground bull-riding circle known as The Riders. It's held at farms and ranches all around Texas, usually after dark.

Professional bull riding is a sport that I always wanted to compete in growing up, but my strict father was firmly against it. It's dangerous, one of the most dangerous sports you can do.

When I was sixteen, I was invited to The Riders by a kid I met at a cattle auction. I snuck out for the first time that night to watch it. I tried to convince my brother Adam to go with me, but he refused. He's always been a rule follower.

I went anyway. I was mesmerized and forever changed. I wanted to ride so bad, to feel the power of the bull underneath me and see if I could actually stay on for eight seconds.

The thing about The Riders is that some of the bulls they use are the ones that were banned from being used by the Professional Bull Riders—the PBR—for being too wild. They're mean, and half of them seem to know that the rider is trying to play for a bet on their hide.

They've been known to not only buck like they're trying to start an earthquake, but as soon as they throw the rider, they charge him. They know who he is. Even with the rodeo clowns dancing in their face, they pick out the rider and attempt to crush his chest with their massive body.

It's exhilarating.

Aside from that first night when I tried to get Adam to go with me, I've never told anyone about The Riders. It's my dirty little secret, my original ounce of rebellion that started at sixteen and continues seven years later.

They only let eighteen and up ride, so I wasn't allowed to compete until five years ago. I spent those years leading up to it training on smaller bulls at the farm. But since I turned eighteen, I go whenever I can. I ride, and lately, I've started to win a lot more. Even when I don't, I love the adrenaline rush it gives me. The most I've made in one night was ten thousand dollars. Usually, the pot is a lower amount, closer to one or two thousand. I save most of my winnings.

The beauty of working for Clyde and bull riding is that I can focus on my classes throughout the week. I live two very different lives, and I prefer to keep them separate.

"I got a fence on the north side that needs mending. Cows got out last night again."

Clyde desperately needs the help. He's bent over with age. He lives here all alone because he never married or had any kids. We start work at four thirty a.m. most Saturdays and Sundays.

"Sure. You got the wire and new posts?"

He nods, spitting in the dirt as he walks toward the barn. "Right this way."

My phone pings with a text. I reach into the back pocket of my work jeans for it while walking behind Clyde to the barn.

LULU BEAR:

When do you get off today? I need help with something.

DAN:

Probably around 4:30. What's up?

LULU BEAR:

I want to go buy an outfit to wear next time we go out. I'm terrible at clothes.

DAN:

Okay. I don't know what makes you think I can help with that, LOL.

LULU BEAR:

You dress way better than me, and you can tell what makes a girl attractive, right?

DAN:

You are attractive, but I'll do my best.

"I think the way you dress is fine. What makes you feel like you need to change it?"

Lucy and I are standing in front of a store called Roses Are Red. The mannequin in the window has on a crimson miniskirt, tall black boots, and a long-sleeved crop top. Lucy's typical style is baggy jeans, the occasional pair of leggings, and dark hoodies. When it's warm outside, she wears loose T-shirts. I've never seen her in a dress.

"This is where Adeline said she got her outfit. If I'm going to pick up a man, I need to look the part."

She steps up to the door, but I reach around her to open it. It's the way I was raised.

"Thank you," she says.

I'm not one to argue with a woman. If she wants a new look, that's her choice. She's attractive the way she looks now, but I know her ex cheating on her and mistreating her affected her self-esteem. As her friend, I want to support her in her healing however I can.

"What about this?" I point to a flannel shirt that looks warm and cozy. "It's perfect for fall."

She scrunches up her nose. "I'm not here for comfy fall stuff. We're looking for something to show some skin. I wish Scarlett could've come."

"I take offense to that. What about this one?"

I grab a brown sweater dress with a little cutout on the shoulders and a long skirt.

She frowns, crossing her arms over her chest. “Are you trying to pick stuff with the most coverage? Do you think I can’t pull off something skimpy?” She pops a hip, facing me fully.

“What? Where would you get that idea? I told you I’m bad at this.”

There’s no way she thinks she can’t pull it off, right? That’s ridiculous.

She exhales, walking to another nearby rack. “What about this?”

She holds up a tiny scrap of red fabric. The front is barely enough to cover her breasts, and it’s literally being held together by tiny silver chains.

I scratch the back of my head, shrugging. “Where would you even wear that to? You don’t like parties.”

She searches through the hangers, finding her size and pulling it out.

“We’re going to some soon, right? To find us both someone to take home. What kind of shoes do you think?”

“Um, red ones.”

A sales associate approaches us with a pleasant smile on her face. “Hello. Can I help you find something?”

Lucy turns to her. “Yes, please. What kind of shoes would you wear with this?” Lucy holds up the “dress.”

“Oh, I have just the thing. Follow me.” The woman leads us through the racks, plucking items as she goes and holding them up for Lucy.

“You would look amazing in this.

“This color suits your skin tone.

“Oh, your curls will really stand out with this shade of green.”

By the time we reach the shoe section, Lucy is holding so many clothes that she needs help. I take the whole stack from her so she can try on the shoes.

“These boots go with *everything*. They are the perfect transition into fall and winter as well. I’d recommend a black pair. Also, these pumps will match anything.”

Lucy sits down to try them on. After finding her size in both pairs, the saleswoman leads us to the dressing rooms. They both walk through a dark curtain, but I pause at the entrance, not knowing if men are allowed.

“Come on back,” the woman says.

I follow through, turning the corner. The space has about ten rooms with closed black doors and two back-to-back red velvet sofas in the center. The lighting is moody, making the room feel almost like a nightclub.

“You can sit here so she can show you everything. Here, I’ll hang up the clothes.”

The woman takes the stack from me, and I collapse on the plush sofa. It feels incredible to relax after working twelve long hours in the heat. All I had time to do before we came here was take a quick shower. Lucy let me eat her leftover Chinese takeout, but I’m still hungry.

“I’ll give you two a chance to go through the outfits and decide on your favorites. There’s a button inside the dressing room you can call me with if you need a new size or anything at all.” She exits the space as Lucy closes the dressing room door, leaving me alone.

I tap my fingers on my denim-clad knee, thinking about what I might want to eat for dinner after this.

A burger would be good, with bacon and a side of chips and queso.

My mouth is salivating by the time Lucy opens the dressing room door. She steps out, wearing the bold red dress and thigh-high black boots.

My lips part, the saliva in my mouth nearly dripping down my chin.

Lucy—my best friend, the girl who always wears baggy jeans and sweatshirts—has the body of a siren. Almost her entire front is exposed from her chest down to her navel. The dress is literally held together with little silver chains, meaning it barely covers her tantalizing nipples with three inches of fabric over each breast. Her curly hair is massive and perfect around her head. She plants her hands on her hips.

My skin heats as I watch her turn slowly to show me the back.

Holy fucking...

Her round ass is showcased deliciously in the stretchy fabric, which barely reaches her upper thighs. The back of the dress suctions close to her lower back with another cutout and a chain, exposing the curve of her spine between her shoulder blades.

My eyes drift down farther over her tanned thighs, which I have never seen until now. The black boots are the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen, with enough of a heel to make my very short roommate stand a few inches taller.

Against my will, I feel a slight increase in blood flow below my belt.

“Well?” she says, popping a hip out.

I’m quite literally speechless, so I simply shake my head.

“No? I thought it looked pretty good. I mean, I feel naked, but I think that’s the point.”

“Um...” I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure. “It, uh...it’s not that. I just think it’s too...too much.”

She folds her arms, squeezing her breasts together. They’re not huge, but until now, I never even thought about the fact that Lucy has breasts. Now, I have to look up at the ceiling to stop staring at them and wondering what shade of pink her nipples are.

“Too much is good, right? Do you think some guy will want to show me a good time in this dress?”

Yeah, I do actually. That guy is sitting right fucking here.

I can’t say that, so I simply nod, clearing my throat again as I chance another look at her. I had no idea her tiny waist flared into hips like that, hips that are begging to be grabbed and worshipped. Then, there are her thighs...

Maintain eye contact.

“I think—”

“Oh my gosh! You look like a dream! That dress was made for you, girl. You have to get it! Try the blue one next. Those bold colors suit you.” The saleswoman has returned, interrupting us.

Lucy grins at me, and I realize with a jolt that even though I’ve always seen her as beautiful, this is the first time I’ve seen her looking sexy as hell.

Damn, you’re a pervert. This is Lucy Lu, Lulu Bear, Luce. Recently traumatized, sworn off of relationships, looking for a quick hookup Lucy. You can’t be the guy, or this amazing friendship you have with her will be utterly destroyed.

And you care way too much about her to let that happen.

But, holy fuck, that image is permanently burned in my brain...

She does another turn, back to the front, a shy smile on her face. “Thanks. I definitely want to get this one. I’ll try the blue next.”

“Okay! Call me if you need more opinions. Your body is outrageous. Ha-ha. The world deserves to see that.” The woman walks back out of the room.

Lucy glances at the mirror to the left of the sofas, tugging down on the short hem. “Well, even if you don’t like it, I do want to get it. It’s exactly what I was looking for.”

I pull out my phone to avoid eye contact with her and to cover the bulge in between my legs that won’t go down. “I never said I don’t like it. I think she’s right; you look great in bold colors.”

Lucy doesn't reply, walking back into the dressing room and closing the door. I exhale, closing my eyes and praying for a tornado to tear through and rip the roof right off this building so we have an excuse to get out of here.

I grit my teeth as the door opens a few minutes later. Thankfully, I'm feeling slightly less overheated, so I glance up at her.

This dress covers slightly more skin, but it's in a bold royal-blue fabric. The long sleeves have shoulder cutouts. The side is ruched up around her hips, again emphasizing her ridiculous curves. I catch myself licking my lips as she turns to the side to face the mirror again.

How am I ever going to look at her the same after this?

The air in my lungs completely escapes me when I see that it has no back. There's not a shred of fabric from her neck all the way down to the top of her ass. If I thought I had regained any composure at all, I was gravely mistaken. The gentle curve of her spine and her soft-looking skin are all I can think about, making the situation down south even worse.

"Could you tie me up?" she asks, adjusting the front.

Oh, fuck me...

If I stand up, there's a very big chance she'll notice what my seeing her in these scandalous clothes has done to me, but I can't think of any reason to say no without sounding like an asshole. I stand up, keeping my body angled away from her view of me in the mirror until I'm behind her.

My fists are clenched by my sides until I lift them up to reach for the little strings hanging down in the center of her back. I try not to touch her skin because I don't think I can handle it at this point. Her familiar scent of shea butter drifts up to my nostrils.

"Do it tight so the sleeves don't fall off. I love this color."

I twist the strings into a bowknot, tying it loosely.

"Is that good?" My voice is hoarse, so I clear my throat again.

"No, a little tighter, please."

I sigh, pulling the strings to undo it.

Don't think about how much this feels like you're undressing her right now.

Also don't think about tying her up.

I've never done it to anyone, but I've always wanted to try it. Something about being in control with someone who fully trusts me to take

care of them after never getting to make my own decisions growing up has always been my dirty little secret desire.

My gutter thoughts are threatening to break through, and I bite into my tongue to cause pain in hopes of distracting myself. I taste blood, but it doesn't help the downward spiral in my head.

I finally get another bow tied, this one a little tighter. The gentle sway of her hips as she walks closer to the mirror nearly destroys what little sanity I have left. I swallow over the lump in my throat, unable to stop fantasizing about untying the dress again and laying her down on the red velvet cushions, thick thighs spread apart.

We could start fulfilling our yearly goals right here and now, and even though I don't have a clue how to pleasure a woman, finding all the little things that make Lucy squirm is suddenly all I ever want to accomplish in this life.

"Well, what do you think of this one?" Lucy asks, turning to see the back side.

I return to the sofa to sit down, trying to form some kind of compliment that sounds like something a supportive friend would say. The problem is, all I can think about is tearing that dress off of her.

"You are quite the lucky guy. She's a stunner! Girl, you're wearing that dress like you're doing it a favor."

The saleswoman returns, forever entering at just the right time to save me from embarrassing myself.

She looks at me, a big smile on her face. "What do you think?"

I try to seem indifferent, pulling my phone back out. "Looks great. You should get it."

I can feel Lucy's eyes on me, but I don't want to risk looking up at her again and her seeing my expression of pure lust.

"We aren't together. Thank you so much for your help. I'm getting both of these."

FOUR

lucy

THE PRESSURE TO fit in with the popular, beautiful girls has never been something I've worried about. Even after Brett cheated, I didn't want to change anything about myself.

For a man? Please.

But after going out with Dan the other night and seeing how women all over were ogling his biceps, flirting with him boldly, and just in general vying for his attention, I realized that my confidence could use a boost. Maybe I could stop feeling so sad and grumpy all the time if I had a wardrobe makeover and started to dress like I was interested in finding someone. Maybe the key to fully getting over my nightmare of a past relationship and getting cheated on is to get another man's attention and have a little fun.

How are any men supposed to know I'm open to being approached if I'm always dressed in clothes that hide all the goodies?

The idea of wearing clothes with the intention to attract a man is somewhat repulsive to me, but if I am going to look for someone to spend a few steamy nights with, it'll be much easier if they can see what I'm working with.

"So, basically, you're opening yourself up to being objectified to try and get a few Os," Scarlett says, holding up the backless royal-blue dress. "This one is hot."

I dab my lips with one of the pink lipsticks that Scar brought over with her. "Not exactly. I'm trying to appear single and ready to mingle. You should see the way women fall over themselves for Dan. They all dress so sexy, and I think that's where they get this ridiculous confidence to hit on a guy. I'm just trying it out."

Scarlett comes over to my getting-ready mirror, picking up a powder brush and dabbing her forehead with it. She's absolutely stunning with cherry-red lips, long and dark waves, and stormy-gray eyes. She's already dressed for the night in heels, black leather bell-bottoms, and an off-the-shoulder white crop shirt.

"I get it. I feel like a million bucks when I put on a hot-ass outfit. Silas drooling over me doesn't hurt the situation either." She smiles at me in the reflection.

"I'm glad we finally get to hang out. Y'all are always so busy with baseball these days."

She exhales, moving back toward my bed to sit down. "I know. It sucks that I never see you and Dan anymore. The three of us had so much fun. How has it been, living here with him?"

Scarlett, her boyfriend, Silas, and Dan all grew up together. Silas is the team captain and starting pitcher for the Ole Tex Mustangs baseball team, and he's been scouted by pretty much every major league team in the country. He refuses to visit campuses without Scarlett because he says he won't pick one unless she likes the area, too, so they can move together next year.

"Living here has been great. Dan is a sweet roommate, and he's actually really clean. He makes the coffee better than Starbucks. He doesn't mind when I watch romantic comedies or get paint on the floor."

My ex-boyfriend was the world's biggest asshole, so a simple mistake, like dripping a dab of paint on the floor, would sometimes start a three-hour argument, ending with me in tears and him storming out after smashing something into the wall.

I stand up to put on the blue dress. I remove my T-shirt and sweats. The stretchy fabric is so thin; wearing underwear with it is impossible. I bought my first sticky bra at the saleswoman's suggestion. The cups suction well to my breasts, but they feel weird to me. I've never worn anything like this. I'm used to cotton. The dress slides over my hips easily, and I turn around for Scarlett to tie it. It's unfamiliar to me, and soon I'm going to be wearing it in a crowd. I hope I can adjust to the feeling of being so exposed.

"Can you tie the back up?"

She stands up from the bed, moving behind me. "That's good. I knew you two would be a good fit ever since y'all met that day in the cafeteria.

Danny is the best. He needs a good woman.” Her eyes meet mine in the mirror. Scarlett and Dan grew up together, and she introduced us last year.

“We made a pact to be each other’s wingman for the year.”

Scarlett arches her brow. “Oh, yeah? How did that come about?” She finishes with the dress, sitting back on the bed.

I look down on the ground to search for my new heels.

I chew on my lip before answering, “He was saying he wants to lose his virginity, but basically, he’s really nervous about it. He thinks no woman would want to sleep with a twenty-three-year-old male virgin. I might or might not have...signed him up for this website, just to let him see how many options he really does have.”

My eyes jump back up to meet hers to see her reaction. She’s trying to hold in a smile.

“What kind of website? He doesn’t know about it?”

I shake my head, my stomach cramping with anxiety. I regretted it as soon as we went out Friday night when Dan got hit on by every woman in the bar. He has plenty of options. He’s just picky and frankly oblivious when women are interested in him.

The problem is, the website won’t let me delete it until the application is approved or denied, which apparently takes days. After it goes through, I can delete his profile. I try to smile, but I know it’s weak.

“Ah, well, it seemed really legit. He could actually make a profit if—”

“LUCY!” A male voice screams my name from the hallway, followed by a loud banging on my bedroom door. “LUCY! Open up this door—now.”

Well, fuck me.

My heart pounds in my chest as I slowly move to open the door. Angry men make my hands sweat. I have too many bad memories.

“Yes?” I pull back on the doorknob, trying to make my expression innocent with wide eyes and pouty lips.

Dan holds up his phone, which is ringing with an incoming call from an unknown number. He purses his lips. The skin on his face and neck is red, his veins bulging on his forehead. He’s shirtless, wearing only a pair of Wrangler jeans. It’s my favorite pair because they hug his ass perfectly.

“Would you know anything about why I just got a call offering me fifty thousand dollars for a night of passion with an older woman in Upstate New York?”

Just lie. He can't prove it was you.

Scarlett howls out a laugh from behind me on the bed. "You are worth more than fifty K, Danny."

Dan flexes his arms, like he's trying to resist the urge to punch a wall or throw something. I take a step back, my limbs beginning to feel numb.

Scarlett gets off the bed and walks out the door. "Where's Silas? He needs to hear this."

He's not going to hurt you. It's Dan. Calm down.

The walls feel like they're closing in on me. Dan takes a step toward me, entering the room. The phone call goes to voice mail, and he holds out the device to show me the screen.

"You see this? I have ten missed calls, seventeen texts, and about thirty-five emails, all from the last twenty minutes. I was in the shower, so I didn't answer the first few times. What did you do?"

I inhale a slow, steady breath, trying to tell myself to calm down, not to panic. My hands go clammy.

"I thought...I thought you needed to know that women...that women do want you. It was stupid. I'm sorry." My voice is weak.

I twist my hands, taking another step back from him. I'm close to the wall now. Dan takes two steps closer, getting right up next to me. He's a foot taller than me, and I'm not wearing shoes. His shoulders are huge, and if he wanted to, he could crush any part of me in an instant.

It's Dan. It's Dan. It's Dan.

He raises his arm up, and I flinch. My arms go up to protect my face, and I shut my eyes and wait. My body is coiled tightly, on defense. A few endless seconds tick by.

"Lucy."

I slowly open my eyes, lowering my arms slightly to see his face. His expression has changed completely, the anger vanished. It's been replaced with concern, his lips parted.

"You know I would never hurt you, right?"

He sounds confused, like he has no idea why I'm reacting to him this way. My bottom lip is trembling as I nod.

His brows pinch together. The phone lights up with another call, so he declines it and presses the power button to turn it off. He throws it on the bed before his gaze returns to mine.

“I would never ever lay a finger on you. Do you understand me?” His bright cornflower-blue eyes are wide and intense as he studies my face.

I nod, trying to tell myself to relax. My body hasn’t registered that I’m not in danger, so my heart is still pumping. My muscles are tense. I exhale slowly, keeping my eyes locked on Dan’s.

“I know that,” I whisper. “My...my body just doesn’t know that.”

He nods, looking down over me. He seems to struggle to find words for a few moments. My inhales are growing shallow.

“You look pretty in the dress, Lu. Am I gonna have to get in a fight later tonight?” His voice is soft and calming.

I smile, trying to hold back the tears that want to spill out of my eyes. “Maybe. Scar says it’s hot on me.”

He doesn’t seem to know what to do with his hands, so he sticks them in his pockets. “I didn’t wanna sound like a weirdo in front of that saleswoman, but you look like a fantasy come to life. You’re...” He rubs his hand on the back of his neck.

I know he’s just trying to distract me.

I’m hanging on every word.

“I’ve never been speechless in my life, but I can’t form words to describe how good you look. I’ll just say that.”

My heart rate is slowing down—finally. The fear seems to have finally seeped out of my bones, replaced with the desire to lie down and curl up into a little ball under a blanket. I slowly exhale one more time.

“I’m sorry for signing you up for that website,” I whisper.

Dan smiles, shaking his head. “Let’s talk about it later. I want you to focus on not being afraid of me and knowing you never have to be. Can I... do you need anything?”

I feel chilled all of a sudden. “I’m cold. Can you get me my hoodie over there?”

He nods, moving to my desk and grabbing my black hoodie off the back of the chair. He extends it out to me. I grab it, pulling it over the dress. I push my hands into the pockets, suddenly feeling silly and overexposed.

“That was so over the top of me. I’m really sorry. You’re a good friend.” I don’t want to explain to him what my reaction was about.

Dan pushes his hands into the pockets of his light-wash Wranglers. His abs are tight, flexing with the movement. He’s wearing his brown boots, the ones he calls his “dancing boots.”

He leans up against the doorframe leading into my en suite bathroom. “I just want to make sure you’re okay. Do you still want to go out tonight? We don’t have to.”

I nod, reaching down for the shoes on the floor. “Yes, of course. I’m fine, really. I’ve never seen you so angry, but you have a right to be—”

“Now that I know, I’ll be more careful. Damn, Lucy, I just didn’t know. I’m going to beat the fucking shit out of him.”

My eyes jump to meet his. “Please don’t.” My voice is hoarse.

This is why I didn’t tell Dan or anyone else about how violent Brett was when we were alone. I don’t want Dan going to jail for me. I don’t want Brett to hurt Dan. I don’t want people to know how much he hurt me. I don’t want to talk about any of it. If I just keep burying it, I’m hoping I can forget it ever happened. Talking about it to people makes it real; it takes me back there.

Dan clenches his jaw, eyes narrowing. He looks pissed off, but I know that it’s not directed at me. I walk up to him, reaching out a hand to grab his forearm.

“You are a really great friend. Living with you makes me feel...it makes me feel safe. Let’s go out tonight and have fun shaking our asses. Scar and Silas are here, our besties.”

With Dan, I know I’m safe. I have no reason to feel afraid anymore.

He looks down at my face, his expression unreadable. He slowly nods, standing up straighter.

“All right, Lu, let’s go.”

FIVE

dan

EVERY MAN in the room seems to be aware that Lucy is wearing a new dress. She's stealing the show simply by walking. I never even considered this part when we were in the dressing room—the part where other people get to look at her in this stupid, backless dress. My eyes sweep through the bar, and I take note of each man whose gaze roams in her direction.

It's all of them.

I need to text Jim about a ride. I gotta have a distraction.

Jim is the guy who sets up the events for The Riders.

Lucy and Scarlett are walking ahead of me and Silas. They choose a high-top table in the corner, each taking a stool. I push my stool a little closer to Lucy's before sitting down, my back against the wall.

Her curly caramel hair is styled perfectly with whatever product she uses that smells like shea butter. Maybe it's her lotion. She's wearing more makeup than usual, which isn't much. Her lips are pink, and her thick lashes are darker than normal.

The bar is a classic country style with wood tables and cracked leather stools. The walls have old country singers' records in frames and a few belt buckles with mounted longhorns above them. Three pool tables and a jukebox are the extent of the entertainment, and the crowd is a mix of college students and young adults with a few older groups interspersed.

The waitress approaches our table. "What can I get y'all?"

"Grapefruit vodka with Sprite for me," Scarlett orders.

"Me too," Lucy says.

"I'll take a tall draft of your IPA," Silas says.

"Same." I try to keep it simple for her even though IPA isn't my favorite.

She nods and walks away.

Silas grins at me, his green eyes sparkling. "I heard you're up for auction, man. Who's the lucky winner?"

"The highest bidder, obviously." Scarlett snickers, reaching her hand to loop it through Silas's arm.

I chuckle, shaking my head. Lucy sighs to my left, so I turn to look at her.

"I'm really sorry. I was not thinking straight. You can obviously get whoever you want," she says.

"I cannot believe you thought I would consider actually auctioning myself off like that, Lu."

She leans toward me. "I knew you wouldn't go through with it, but you seemed to think no one would be interested in you. I wanted to squash that feeling. I'm sorry. I will never be able to express how sorry I am."

I lean back against the wall. "Well, I will say, it hasn't hurt my confidence. The last one I saw was offering five hundred thousand dollars."

Silas's jaw drops. "Damn, never would've guessed there was a market for that."

"It was from a man."

Scarlett throws her head back, roaring out a laugh. Lucy giggles next to me.

I turn to face her again, holding in a smile. "You think that's funny, Lulu?"

She's pressing her lips together, shaking her head. Her dark eyes are sparkling with humor, which is all I care about after the interaction we had in our apartment.

If I ever make her feel afraid of me again, I don't know how I could live with myself.

How could a man do that to a woman and still call himself a man?

My entire body filled with burning rage when I realized what was going through her mind. All I had done was raise my arm to rub the back of my neck in frustration, and she flinched.

She flinched because she'd seen that action before from an angry man. And it was directed at her.

I can't think about it much longer, or I'll hunt Brett down, and I'll crush his windpipe with my knee after rearranging his facial structure with my fist.

Lucy covers her mouth with her hand, trying to hold back her laughter.

“Here you go.” The waitress has returned with our drinks, passing them out to each of us. “Open or closed?”

Silas reaches for his wallet, handing her his card. “I’ll get the first round. Close it up.”

I grab the mug, taking a long swig. I might need a few more of these before I start to feel calm and ready to have a good night. My mind is all over the place right now, and I need some semblance of life to return to normal after the day’s turn of events.

“Aren’t you on the prowl, Lu? You should go hit on that guy.”

I almost choke on my beer when I hear Scarlett’s words. I lower the mug slowly to the table, my eyes drifting over to Lucy’s. She’s looking in the direction Scarlett is.

“The one with the blue hat?”

“Yes. He totally checked you out when you walked in. Walk by him toward the restroom, and I promise he’ll say something to you. He’ll probably mention that you’re both wearing blue or some line about matching him.”

Silas shakes his head. “I’m so glad you’re mine now. The way I used to sweat every time I had to watch you flirt with other men is not a feeling I miss.”

Yeah, it blows.

What?

I just want her to be careful—that’s all.

Scarlett smiles, leaning in to plant a kiss on his lips. “Now, it’s time for me to teach Lucy my ways.”

I love Scarlett. We’ve been close friends since we were kids, but right now, I want to tell her to shut up. I don’t know what has possessed me to become this overprotective, weirdly territorial *friend* of Lucy’s. It must have been the combination of the new dress and the realization of what Brett did to her. I need to shield her and keep her safe.

“Yeah, he’s cute. What do I say if he talks to me?”

“Let him buy you a drink and flirt with him for a few minutes, then walk away. You gotta keep them wanting more,” Scarlett advises.

Lucy takes a sip of her vodka and Sprite before stepping down from the stool. “Wish me luck,” she whispers.

I grip the handle of the glass mug tighter. My gaze follows the sway of Lucy's hips and the curve of her exposed back as she walks toward where the pool tables and the guy in the blue hat are.

He's playing pool with his friends, minding his own business. If he so much as moves a fingernail too close to her, I could take him down and two of his friends. Silas will get the rest. I'm not a violent person by any means, but I was raised out in the sticks with a shit ton of brothers. Fighting for fun in the heat of the sun was a regular occurrence for us. The only one who didn't participate was my oldest brother, Adam.

Just as Scarlett predicted, the guy turns toward Lucy as she's walking by the pool table, saying something to her. She pauses, tilting her body slightly toward him.

"How did you know he would talk to her?" I ask Scarlett, trying to keep my voice neutral.

Scarlett turns to me with a smirk. "I just know these things, Danny. It's easy to tell when a guy is into your friend."

I glance away from Lucy for a moment to see the pointed look Scar is giving me. I lift my beer again, this time draining its contents.

"Who wants another?"

Silas's beer is only half gone. Scarlett's and Lucy's drinks have barely been touched.

"You can get me one," Silas says.

I stand up, looking over at Lucy once more before stepping up to the bar. My stomach muscles feel tight. I don't like how this night is going.

"Two more IPAs," I tell the bartender.

It's a different woman, and she smiles at me, batting her lashes. She takes my empty mug, depositing it into the plastic tray under the bar before she grabs two clean ones and turns to fill them.

"What's your problem tonight?" Silas speaks to my left.

I reach into my back pocket for my wallet. "What do you mean?"

"What happened with you and Lucy at the apartment?"

I can trust Silas with anything, but for whatever reason, Lucy hasn't told any of us about how abusive Brett was to her in private. Spilling that secret now, even to someone I trust, would feel like a betrayal to Lucy.

"Nothing, man. She felt bad about the auction website. I was pissed at first, but I realized she was really sorry. We talked for a few minutes. That was it."

“Eighteen dollars,” the bartender says.

I hand her the card. She pushes the filled mugs toward us.

“Hey, can we also get two more grapefruit vodkas with Sprite?” Silas orders before turning back to me.

“Put them on that card,” I tell her.

“It was pretty hilarious that she did that. I can’t believe people are willing to pay that kind of money.”

I shake my head before tipping the beer back over my lips. My eyes search for Lucy again at the back of the bar, but she’s nowhere in sight. I look around all three pool tables before I see the guy with the blue hat, laughing with his friends. Lucy isn’t with them.

I start walking toward the back, thinking I should check on her.

“Danny! Where are you going?” Lucy’s voice calls from the direction of our table.

I turn to see that she’s there with Scarlett, back on her stool. I exhale the breath I was holding as I turn back to the bar to sign the receipt. I grab one of the girls’ drinks, and Silas and I funnel back through the growing crowd.

“Thanks for the drink. Have you tried this one?” Lucy has perked up, her energy clearly revived.

She’s lifting up her drink to my mouth. I put my lips around the straw, tasting the liquid. It’s a mix of bubbly Sprite and tart grapefruit.

I wince. “Too sweet for my taste.”

I want to ask what happened with the guy that put her in such a good mood. Thankfully, Silas butts in to do it.

“You give him your number, Luce?”

She nods. “He’s a pilot in the Navy. How hot is that?”

Scarlett nods in approval. My hand is starting to hurt from clenching the glass so hard.

You wanted to help Lucy find someone. You signed up for this.

I had no idea it would have this effect on me. All I can think about is how much I need to shield her from the risk of getting hurt again. She’s vulnerable right now, if the incident in her room was any indication. No one knows how vulnerable, except for me.

“I’m hungry. We should go eat somewhere,” I say.

“They have food here. The cheese sticks are really good,” Silas says.

I don’t want cheese sticks. I want to get the fuck out of here.

Lucy looks over at me. “Do you see any cute girls? What about that blonde sitting at the bar? She’s with a redhead.”

I follow her gaze, only to see that it’s not just any redhead; it’s my ex-girlfriend, Maya, the not-so-nice one I met my first semester here. I duck down, trying to cower behind Silas.

“Yeah, no thanks. The redhead is that girl I told you about, Maya.”

Lucy’s eyes widen. “Oh, oops. I think she saw you.”

Maya did not take me ending things with her well. She told people that I gave her chlamydia and that I had cheated on the final exam in one of my classes. Her dad is friends with the dean of the school, so I had to go in for questioning about the entire incident and retake the test.

Thankfully, I had studied my ass off and got an even better grade the second time. Needless to say, I have no desire to speak to her.

Lucy leans down to whisper in my ear, “She’s walking over.” She loops her hand around my forearm, intertwining our fingers. “Put your arm around me.”

I look up at her face to see that she’s smiling sweetly across the table. I sit up straighter, slowly inching my fingers around her back. My skin makes contact with hers, and I try not to react when I remember that her new dress is completely backless.

“What are we doing?” I whisper.

She leans closer, her curly hair tickling the bottom of my chin. “We’re pretending to be a couple so she’ll go away.”

“Daniel? Oh my gosh, it’s been forever. How are you?” A shrill voice speaks to me from my right.

I slowly turn to face her, a plastic smile on my lips. “Hey, Maya. How’s it going?”

My ex is the girl I used to think was pretty, but after everything she did to me, I just don’t see it anymore. Her bright red hair is up in a high ponytail. She’s wearing a formfitting black minidress.

Her eyes flutter down to where Lucy’s hand is intertwined in mine. Her face pinches. “I’m doing so good. I have a boyfriend actually.”

I nod. “That’s great. This is Lucy.” I lean back to introduce them.

Lucy smiles sweetly. “Nice to meet you. How do y’all know each other?”

Maya is popping her gum obnoxiously. “I’m Maya. Dan’s never mentioned me?”

Lucy frowns, shaking her head slowly. “Danny, you should have told me about her. I feel so out of the loop now. Ha-ha.”

I’ve told you about her several times now.

I move to look at Lucy. She surprises me by leaning up to kiss me on the cheek, only she misses because I turn my face at the same time. Her lips land on mine, and suddenly, we’re *kissing*.

I slowly pull back. Her eyes are wide as she leans away from me.

“Um, well, anyway...it was nice to meet you. I have to go back to my friend,” Maya mumbles before disappearing.

“Oops,” Lucy says, smirking.

Yeah, Lu, oops.

SIX

lucy

“YOU CAN’T MAKE me wear pink. Please, Jenn.”

“You are so dramatic sometimes. I think you look so much better in bright colors. I don’t know why you wear black all the time. Your shoes can be black. How about that?”

“Why can’t we wear the rust color for the bachelorette party? It’s so pretty.”

My older sister sighs on the other end of the phone. “The gorgeous rust color is reserved for the wedding, and I want it to be a surprise. Pink is for the bachelorette party because the theme is penis.”

Thank heavens I didn’t have to plan that.

“You gave Lila my number, right? So she can call me to figure out the weekend.” Lila is my sister’s best friend.

Jenn is running water on the other end of the line. “She’s supposed to call you in the next few days. I know the group is big, like thirteen people.”

I try not to react audibly, but my throat feels tight. Jenn and I are polar opposites. She has more friends than anyone I’ve ever met. I’m an introvert to the max. Fake smiling is a form of torture to me.

“Well, it should be fun,” I squeak.

Jenn laughs. “Oh, stop. I know you’re dreading it. Mom said I shouldn’t make you go. I just want you there, sis. I’m getting married.”

I’m ambling to my Arts and Culture II class. The September day is already getting too warm for the long-sleeved shirt I put on this morning. The campus of Ole Tex University is all orange brick buildings and plain but well-kept grounds.

“I’m obviously not going to miss anything. I am really excited.”

“Will you be bringing a date to the wedding?”

I chew the inside of my lower lip. A group of girls passes me, laughing among themselves.

"I don't know yet. It's still a few months away."

The guy from the bar has been texting me, so maybe that will turn into something. Connor seems really cool. He asked me to meet him out for a drink this weekend.

"It's six weeks from today. Mom was talking to Mrs. Richards at brunch the other day. She said Brett is really hoping you'll give him another chance."

My eyes roll so far back into my head that they might get stuck. "I'm sure she was."

"I told her to let it be. You made your choice. He needs to get over it."

"Is our sweet cousin Molly going to be there?"

"I told Mom she shouldn't be invited, but obviously, we can't *not* invite her parents. Her dad is Mom's brother. She said it's impossible to send an invite to a family and leave out one of their kids. What can I do? *To everyone, except Molly?* You know that would cause so much drama."

I'm at the entrance of the building my class is in. I'm a few minutes early, so I sit down on the front steps.

"I get it. I'm just going to drink a lot."

"I'm really sorry. There are going to be, like, five hundred people. You won't have to talk to them. You'll have a place of honor at the bridal party table. I'm not afraid to cause some drama and drop-kick her in the face if she says anything. Same goes for him."

Brett and Molly had an ongoing secret relationship behind my back for months. I don't know exactly how long because he wouldn't tell me any details. Brett and I had been dating since my junior year of high school. He was a popular, athletic football player. I couldn't believe it when he picked me, a quiet art student.

I've started to wonder if when I caught him cheating on me was really the first time. My cousin Molly made more sense on paper, being the outgoing, perky cheerleader in high school. I guess I was just too dumb and trusting to realize it had been happening all along.

I've been silent on the call, watching other students walk past me into the building.

Jenn finally speaks up. "I think you should bring a hot date. A hot, muscular, tall one with a killer smile. Brett would shit his pants, and no one

could say anything shitty if you were being doted on all night. We could hire a model or an actor to do it, and his one job for the night would be making everyone believe he was madly in love with you. What do you think?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “I don’t know. I am talking to this guy. He’s cute. I just don’t know if I want to bring someone into that whole mess.”

Connor is a complete stranger, so unless I get to know him a lot better over the next six weeks, I’m not taking him to my sister’s wedding. I’m also not at all ready for a committed boyfriend again with my trust issues. I firmly believe all men cheat.

“Oh, I want to hear more about him!”

I stand up, stretching my legs. “It’ll have to wait because my class is about to start. I love you.”

“Love you too, sis.”

“Why are you avoiding me?” I confront my roommate as soon as he walks into our apartment a few nights later.

Dan freezes, his eyes drifting up to meet mine. I’m sitting cross-legged on our sofa, working on a research paper about the evolution of art throughout the history of mankind and watching *Bridgerton*—my guilty pleasure. I’m fueling up with a Diet Coke and a bowl of popcorn. I have my favorite sweatpants and a tank top on, and I washed my makeup off as soon as I got home.

His lips part as he slowly slides his backpack off one shoulder, lowering it to the floor.

“You’ve barely said two words to me since Saturday night, and today is Thursday,” I continue since he still hasn’t spoken.

He lowers himself into his leather recliner. He’s wearing gray joggers and one of his sky-blue cut-off tees he usually works out in. It’s the one that brings out his eyes the most. The sleeves are sliced off to form an A-shape, revealing his muscular shoulders and half of his chest. His forest-green baseball cap is on his head backward, his hair sticking out the back.

“I’ve had a busy week.”

I narrow my gaze at him. "Mm-hmm. So, you're not mad at me?"

He frowns. "Mad at you? For what?"

I shrug. "I have no idea. You've been acting strange and not speaking to me. I thought maybe it was the Maya thing."

"What Maya thing?"

"The way I pretended to be your girlfriend and not know who she was. I thought you might have lingering feelings for her or something."

He chuckles, adjusting his hat. "Uh, no, Lu. No lingering feelings. I'm not mad at you."

Something is off with him.

I noticed it on Tuesday night when he came in from his workout with headphones on and went straight to his room. Dan always talks to me, at least for a few minutes, about his day, my day, our classes. All week long, he hasn't said a word to me.

"Is something bothering you in general?" I keep pushing.

His eyes study me for a moment as he shakes his head, the corner of his lips curling up. "I'm good, really. How was your day?" He leans back against the chair.

"It was good. I've been texting that guy, Connor. He wants to get drinks tomorrow night."

He blinks at me, slowly nodding. "Cool. Do you like him?"

I shrug. "He seems okay. He's funny."

Dan's line of sight drifts toward the TV, where two *Bridgerton* characters are making out even though one of them is engaged to someone else. We both watch them for a few moments before he speaks up.

"Well, that's good. I didn't know you were looking for someone with a good sense of humor."

I raise a curious eyebrow. "A great sense of humor is like a guy being tall or a girl having a cute button nose. Everyone likes it."

He nods, like that totally makes sense.

Why is he being so weird?

"Have you texted that girl, Adeline's friend? Billie?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, a little. She's cool."

I pick up a piece of popcorn, tossing it into my mouth. "We could all get drinks together tomorrow, the four of us."

He flexes his jaw, eyes still on the screen. "I can see if she's free."

“It would really help me get out of my comfort zone for this date if we weren’t alone. First dates are so awkward.”

And I don’t feel safe being alone with strange men.

Dan pulls out his phone from his pocket. “I’ll text her.”

“Cool.”

We continue watching the show in silence. I hear Dan’s phone buzzing a few times. Connor texts me, but I’m trying to take notes from my textbook to use in my paper so I ignore him.

“Billie said she can do it tomorrow night.”

I nod. “Perfect.”

He smiles but doesn’t say anything.

“Did I tell you that my sister is planning a penis bachelorette party?”

I’m trying to think of ways to keep him in conversation. Whatever is bugging him is now bugging me.

He shakes his head. “Uh, no, you didn’t. How could you forget to mention that, Lu?”

I groan. “I have to wear pink. Can you imagine it? I just got far enough out of my zone to wear the blue dress. Pink feels so much more...not me.”

“You got the red dress too, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I have the courage to wear it in front of anyone. The blue one made me feel like I wanted to crawl out of my skin.”

He nods, looking down at his phone screen. “Well, you looked great in both.”

I looked great?

I don’t know why, but that almost sounds like an insult.

“Dammit,” he says.

“What?”

He holds up his phone to show me an incoming call from an unknown number. “Even though you deleted the account, I’m still getting random calls from people who saw it.”

I cringe. “Okay. I’m really sorry. Maybe we should change your number.”

He sighs, shaking his head in frustration. Guilt washes over me at what I’ve done and all the stress it’s caused him. My plan to boost his confidence really backfired horrendously. I stand up, setting my popcorn bowl and my textbook on the wooden coffee table. I walk around it to where Dan’s chair

is, sitting down beside him on the armrest. I wrap my hands around his neck. He tilts his head back to look up at my face.

“Please, please try to believe me when I say that I only did it to make you see how many women are truly interested in you. I had no idea this would happen, and I just really didn’t think it through. I am so monumentally and unbelievably sorry, Danny.”

I trace my finger around the shape of his left ear, imploring his forgiveness with my eyes. He stares up at me, slowly nodding.

“I forgive you...of course, Luce. I’m not mad,” he murmurs.

The tension between us is palpable. I want to cry, just thinking about how this must be what he’s been upset about all week. He’s been fielding these phone calls, and I’m walking around all happy-go-lucky like nothing ever happened. I’m the world’s shittiest friend.

He smiles, reaching his arm to wrap it around my waist. “So, you have to wear pink for the penis bachelorette party. Do you also have to order a male stripper?”

I sigh in relief, thankful he’s finally speaking to me normally. “I have no idea, but I seriously hope not. I don’t want to see a man’s butt.”

“Hey, we can have good butts. I’ve been told mine is quite nice.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, if I need one, maybe I’ll hire you.”

“I’d be honored.”

“Would you do it with a cowboy hat on and assless chaps?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s my secret talent, baby.”

I throw my head back, laughing, my arms still around his neck. When I look back at him, his eyes are on my lips. The pose we’re in is...strangely intimate. I slowly let go of his neck, standing up from the chair. I turn to walk back to the sofa, feeling a flush creep up my chest.

“Also, my sister said that Brett and Molly will be at the wedding. His mom is adamant that he deserves another chance.”

Dan scoffs. I lower myself down to the sofa, picking up my wineglass from the coffee table.

“How some parents are so delusional is beyond me. Why is he even invited? Why are either of them?” Dan shakes his head, interlacing his fingers together and resting them on his stomach.

I shrug. “Our families have been friends for a long time. Molly’s dad is my mom’s brother. The only one in our family who really knows the worst

of what Brett did is Jenn. My parents don't know about, like, the...physical stuff."

Even saying the word *abuse* out loud is hard for me. I don't like calling it that even though I have come to grips with knowing that's what he did to me. It was abuse. I read a book about how to identify it in your relationship, and Brett fit almost every description.

Since then, I've read multiple follow-up books, written by different therapists and counselors, about how to heal after leaving a relationship like that. It's slow going, apparently.

"You shouldn't feel pressure to open up to anyone about it unless you want to tell them. Although I wish his friends and family knew the kind of prick he is behind closed doors."

Telling people about Brett's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde persona is terrifying to me. I know he'll claim it's all made-up, that I'm crazy and unhinged. His family will hate me.

On top of that, it's hard for me to even believe what actually happened sometimes. When I was in the midst of it, it was surreal. My memories are foggy. I kept a journal for the first year of college. I'm afraid to go back and read the raw accounts I recorded of our fights, the things he would throw at me, the cruel names he would refer to me as.

"Lulu."

I blink, suddenly returning back to reality.

Dan is now sitting beside me on the sofa, leaning up close to my face. His eyebrows are lowered in concern. "Are you okay?"

My limbs are shaking, my teeth are beginning to chatter slightly, and my body feels hot and cold at the same time.

"C-can you get me a blanket?"

He turns to grab the one tossed over the arm of the sofa, twisting back toward me to wrap it around my body. He gently tucks it around me. I lay my head back against the cushion.

"You want to watch *Bridgerton* with me?"

He nods, leaning back against the couch next to me. "Sure, Lu. Whatever you need, I'm here."

SEVEN

dan

BILLIE WALKS through the door I'm holding open.

"I didn't even know Lakewood had a bowling alley," she says.

I walk in after her. "Yeah, I've only been once or twice. When they have tournaments, you can't get a lane."

Lakewood is twenty miles away from Greencity. Tilton's Arcade is the only place to bowl there. It doesn't serve alcohol, so we came here instead. We look around for our friends. Lucy and Connor are meeting us here any minute now.

"I guess we should get a drink and wait." I gesture toward the bar.

Billie nods. She's a pretty girl with short dirty-blond hair that brushes her shoulders. She's dressed in a denim jacket with a low-cut pink shirt underneath and black leather pants. I'm wearing my Wrangler jeans and a navy-blue henley with my cowboy boots.

The bar has an authentic stone backsplash, lined with liquor bottles. Clean glasses are hanging above it. I pull out a stool for Billie. She sits down, and I take the one next to her. My fingertips drum against the counter as I survey the options on tap.

"So, how long have you and Lucy been friends?" Billie asks.

"Mmm, maybe a year and a half now. We've been roommates since the semester started."

"Y'all live together?"

I turn to see Billie's bug-eyed expression. "Yeah, we do. Did I forget to mention that?"

The bartender interrupts us. "What can I get you?"

Billie faces him, pursing her lips. "I'll take a cucumber mojito."

My eyes move back to the line of beer options. "I'll try your summer ale."

I lean forward to reach for my wallet in my back pocket. I extract the card, setting it on the counter.

"Yes, you did forget to mention that," Billie says.

Well, this is awkward.

"Hey." A voice speaks to my left.

I sigh in relief before shifting my frame to the newcomers. Lucy is standing next to her date, the guy with the blue hat from the bar last weekend. She's dressed in a pair of light-wash flared jeans and an off-the-shoulder black shirt that has a ruffle around the sleeves and shows a few inches of her tanned stomach. She must be wearing heels because she's taller than her God-given five foot one inches. Her hair is pulled back from her face with a thin headband. She's beautiful, dressed up or down. I'm becoming more aware of it every time I see her.

Is she borrowing Scarlett's clothes?

"Hey, glad y'all made it." I extend a hand toward Connor.

He reaches for it, a grin on his face. He's a good-looking dude, and he stands right at my height.

"Dan."

"Connor. Great to meet you." He looks at Billie behind me, reaching out to shake her hand as well.

"I'm Billie. Nice to meet you."

"Connor. Likewise. What are y'all drinking?"

He sits down on the stool to his left without pulling one out for Lucy.

Okay, dick.

I grab the one next to me under the bar, dragging it back so that Lucy can sit. The corner of her mouth turns up with one of her rare Lucy smiles.

"Thanks, Danny." She takes the seat, resting her elbows on the bar. She nods at Billie beside me. "Nice to see you again."

"You too," Billie says.

I'm sitting on a stool between the two women. The bartender comes by with my and Billie's drinks and takes Lucy's and Connor's orders.

"We should play a game," Lucy says, pointing at the bowling lanes.

"I'm down. What do you think, Billie?"

Billie smiles. "I'm just warning you, I'm terrible, but I love it because I grew up doing it with my dad every other weekend."

Connor is talking to the bartender, ignoring the rest of us. I take a drink of my beer. This is my first time going on a double date. I can't help but think that Lucy and I would have more fun by ourselves.

Or at least without Connor here.

"Did she hear your drink order, Lu?" I ask her.

She shrugs, folding her arms over her chest. Lucy has a tendency to get an attitude with people sometimes. She's not rude by any means; she just doesn't take being ignored without making a snarky comment under her breath.

Connor is laughing at the redheaded bartender, completely oblivious to his date waiting for her drink. He's already halfway done with his light beer.

What a pussy.

I reach over, tapping his forearm.

He turns to me, still laughing at the girl's words. "What's up, man?"

"Lucy hasn't gotten her drink yet."

I'm trying to give him a chance to take care of his date without stepping on his toes. He nods, turning to smile at Lucy before facing the bartender again.

"Can you get me another beer, sweetheart? For the lady."

I know for a *fact* that Lu does not like beer. She'll sip it at a frat party if it's the only thing available, but she's a wine and margarita girl through and through. The bartender bats her lashes at Connor as she pops the top off of the same beer he has and sets it down in front of him.

He slides it over to Lucy. "Here you go, babe."

Lucy doesn't touch the bottle. I didn't hear what she ordered because Billie was talking to me, but this was not what it was.

I could cause a scene and say something to Connor or the redhead, but in the interest of not getting into a fight over the wrong drink order, I lean in to whisper in Lucy's ear, "Let's go get a bowling lane started, and I'll go get your drink from the bartender on the other side. What did you order?"

She slowly exhales, clearly pissed off about her date blatantly ignoring her and flirting with another woman.

I reach down, gripping her little clenched fist in my much larger hand. "We're going to have a good night, okay?"

She nods, sliding off the stool and leaving the beer untouched. I turn to face Billie, who's absentmindedly typing on her phone.

"Hey, are you ready to crush these two in a game of bowling?"

She looks up, her eyes darting from my face to Lucy's before she smiles and stands up. "Sure. Believe me when I say this. I am really bad at it."

I chuckle, reaching out my elbow for her to loop her arm through it. She does it with her right hand, her drink in her left.

"Unfortunately, I am probably much worse. I like the game, but it's not my best skill."

Lucy falls into step beside me, completely abandoning Connor at the bar. We approach the attendant managing the lanes. I pay for the three of us to get shoes and play for an hour. Since Lucy is now upset, I don't want to stay for much longer if she decides to leave. I only came on this date for her sake. It's turning out to be a good thing I did, too, judging by how Connor is acting.

The attendant takes our sizes and hands us the worn bowling shoes that thousands before us have played in. We grab them before walking over to lane number eight. I set my shoes on the ground before sitting down and turning to Lucy.

"What did you want to drink, Lu?"

She shakes her head as she takes off her shoes. "It's fine, Danny. You don't have to get me a drink."

"Well, you have two choices. You can tell me what you want or I can make my best guess. Either way, I'm getting you something."

She rolls her dark eyes before answering, "Okay, Mr. Stubborn. I'll take a margarita on the rocks, extra lime, salt on the rim."

I slap the top of my thigh. "Knew it." I turn to my date. "You need a refill, Billie?"

She's putting her bowling shoes on. "Yes. I'll take a pineapple mojito."

"You got it."

I stand up, striding back over to the bar area. I choose a spot near the other bartender, a guy with his hair pulled back in a ponytail and a nose ring. He sees me, nodding to take my order.

"Hi. Can I get a pineapple mojito, a margarita on the rocks with salt on the rim and extra lime, and your summer ale?"

He nods, turning back around to make the drinks. My eyes roam over where we were sitting. Connor is handing his phone to the redhead. She types something into it before returning it to him. He winks at her, draining the contents of his beer before standing up to look around.

Did that just happen? What a douche bag.

He spots me. A grin cuts across his face as he struts in my direction.

He claps me on the shoulder when he reaches me. "Hey, man, where'd y'all run off to? That was my cousin. Haven't seen her in years."

"Really? Your cousin? What a strange coincidence."

He chuckles, looking around for a minute. "Well, between you and me, we aren't blood-related. My uncle married her mom and became her stepdad. Stepcousins."

I don't acknowledge him. The guy with the ponytail delivers my drink order. I pay him with my card and sign the receipt with a tip. Connor waits for me while typing on his phone.

"We got a bowling lane," I tell him.

I'd prefer to ditch him, but since he seems to be waiting for me, I don't have another choice.

He looks up from the screen, nodding. "Cool. I love bowling."

I grab the three drinks, using my index finger to hold my beer bottle with Lucy's cup in the palm of my hand.

I sincerely hope she doesn't pick this loser for a rebound.

He trails behind me as I head back to the bowling lane. I notice him stop to pay for a pair of shoes before joining us. Lucy is up to bowl, her ass looking way too good in the tight jeans she has on. Her bowling ball soars down the lane, knocking out all the pins at once.

"Whoa! Look at that strike. Baby, you're on fire." Connor approaches Lucy, wrapping his arm around her shoulders as she turns back to the seating area.

Her lips are in a hard line. She walks back with wooden steps, trapped by Connor's overly familiar embrace. He's oblivious to her blaringly obvious body language, a stupid grin on his face.

"Is it my turn?" he asks, stopping by the ball return and releasing her shoulders as she keeps walking.

Billie is sitting down on the leather bench, her legs and arms crossed. She points up at the screen with our names. "Yes, you're next."

He follows her point with his eyes. "Hell yeah. Watch this."

I approach my date, smiling as I hand her the mojito. "Here you go."

"Thank you," she says.

I turn to Lucy, who is sitting down a space away from Billie. I hand my roommate her drink.

"Thanks," she mumbles.

“You’re both very welcome.” I sit down between the two, feeling like someone needs to break the ice around here and try to warm up the frigid temperature in the room.

Connor steps up to the lane with my bowling ball, shooting it across the slick wood at lightning speed. It crashes into the pins, knocking over all of them but one.

Of fucking course he’s good at bowling.

In all my life, I’ve never given a crap about being a good bowler, but now, it’s suddenly making my skin itch that I’ll be lucky to knock over even one of the pins. Connor struts back to the pinsetter, grinning at the three of us.

He winks at Lucy. “Don’t worry; I’m still warming up, sweetheart.”

Lucy takes a slow sip of her drink, pretending not to hear him. He’s unfazed, reaching down for the ball when it spins back up. He easily knocks down the last pin. He returns to the bench, sitting down next to Lucy and stretching his arm around her back.

This is going to be the longest night of my life.

EIGHT

Lucy

“WELL, if I’m only looking for a hookup with zero strings attached, he’s certainly a viable option. I’d rather contract the Spanish influenza than date someone like that. He could make the perfect rebound without a *chance* of catching feelings.”

Dan gapes at me like I’ve grown two heads as he jiggles the key to unlock our stubborn front door. “You’re kidding, right? How could you possibly even consider a tool bag like him? He got the bartender’s number, and she’s his *cousin*.”

I shrug as he opens the door, allowing me to step over the threshold first. “I’m not looking for commitment. Why not someone like him?”

I walk down the hall and into the kitchen to get some water. I open the fridge, grabbing a bottle before turning back to face Dan. He has his big hands planted on the kitchen island, his broad shoulders tense as his blue eyes stare deep down into my soul.

“Lucy Blake, please tell me you aren’t considering this. I need to hear you say it out loud that you will not be intimate with that man.”

I try not to smile as I twist open the bottle of water and tip it over my lips. Dan watches me quench my thirst, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Danny,” I breathe out, “I don’t like lying to you, so I can’t say that.”

His sleeves are pushed up to his elbows, revealing the bulging veins in his tense arms. He blinks at me once before shutting his eyes as he exhales slowly. I set the water down, crossing my arms over my chest.

“This is exactly what we agreed would be good for me. Why are you having second thoughts now?”

He flexes his jaw, eyes briefly trailing down over my body. He reaches up a hand to rub the back of his neck, a smirk finally touching his lips as he

looks away from me.

“Just think you can do better, Lu. That’s all. I’m going to bed. Night.”

He turns and walks away, disappearing into the hall.

What has been up with him lately?

I’m indecisive about Connor as the week drags on. He texts me sporadically, but I keep forgetting to reply. It’s a good sign really. My emotional involvement with him is practically in the negative zone at this rate. He’s hot from a strictly physical standpoint, but when he sends me a half-nude picture, showcasing his impressively toned body, for some reason, I cringe at it. He asks me to return the favor, requesting “something sexy.”

I’m at the campus library, working, when he does it, organizing the sci-fi section of books. I look down at my phone, chewing my bottom lip as I debate whether or not to fulfill his request. Dirty pictures are not something I’m familiar with, as Brett never asked and he’s my only relationship experience. This is my first time casually dating.

I wander over to the restroom, choosing the one meant for families because it has its own room with a door that locks instead of one of the stalls in the ladies’ room. I love my job because it’s slow most of the time and I can sneak away to read if my manager isn’t around. I also don’t have to get dressed up or look cute by any means.

My curly hair is up in a bun, so the first thing I do is take it down. It’s massive around my shoulders. My plain, lumpy gray sweater comes off next. I’m left wearing a nude bra I’ve had since my senior year of high school.

“Guess that’s gonna have to go too,” I mumble.

I yank it off, staring at my topless form in the mirror. Without really even thinking, I pull my phone out of my jeans pocket, dialing Dan’s number.

He answers on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hey. Um, are you busy?”

I chew my fingernail, suddenly feeling unsure of my reason for calling. I shift my weight to the other foot.

“Nah, I’m just grocery shopping. Are we out of lunch meat?”

“Yes, I took the last of it to work today. What kind of dirty pictures do you like?”

The other end of the line goes silent.

I wait about five seconds before speaking up. “Hello?”

He clears his throat. “Um, why are you asking me that, Lu?”

My eyes are still staring at my body in the mirror. I’m growing more anxious about this every moment.

“I just don’t know what men like in that department, so I’m asking you. You’re a dude. You should know. Do you guys just want, like, a straight shot from the front, or should I squeeze my boobs together? Maybe it would be better to go from the back and pull down my pants and bend over—”

“Holy shit, I’m so sorry. Are you okay? I’m really sorry for running into you like that.” Dan starts talking to someone else, and the other person replies in a deep, irritated male voice.

“Yeah, man, really sorry about that.” He goes silent for another moment before the background noise quiets and he speaks again, his voice low. “Lucy, what the hell are you talking about? Where are you?”

I sigh, rubbing my eyes. “I’m at work. Connor is asking me for a dirty picture. I’ve never sent one, and I don’t want to look dumb.”

“Why on God’s green earth would you ever send Connor *anything* like that? He doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as you, much less see the delicate—look, I don’t think you should do this. Whatever you send him could end up on some kind of porn site or something. He could sell it. He could blackmail you. He could do...any number of things like that.” Dan’s voice sounds slightly raspy.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he grits out. “I just ran into this massive bodybuilder type dude at the grocery store because you asked me a bizarre question that I never could’ve been prepared for.”

I’m holding the phone up to my ear while I try to hook my bra back on.

“You’re right; it was dumb. I don’t know why I was considering it. I’m sorry for calling.”

I’m suddenly feeling ashamed and embarrassed by what I was about to do. Dan’s right; Connor could use a picture like that for anything.

And I don’t even like Connor!

“It’s okay that you called. It’s more than okay. I’m glad you did. Please just always remember that a lot of these men don’t care about how their actions affect you negatively. They’re operating from a completely selfish point of view. They’ll say anything to get you to do something for them like this. You deserve better.”

I hold the phone away from my ear as I pull down my sweater over my head. “I feel like an idiot. I don’t like Connor, but I still think he could help me get over my sex-avoidance issue. I want to be *craving* it by the time I meet the one I actually do want to date, not dreading the entire thing.”

Sex with Brett was traumatizing. I had to do it to keep him happy, and keeping him happy was an important component to keeping myself safe.

It was always *all* about Brett. I don’t remember him ever even asking me if it felt good or if I was enjoying myself. Once he finished, it was over. It started and ended with him. I felt like a means to an end, a body he used to get *there*.

“You will. I’m beginning to think maybe we’re approaching this all wrong. Maybe a guy who actually cares about you and wants to date you is the way to do it, not the other way around.”

I shut my eyes, unwelcome tears pooling behind them. “I can’t risk that. Breakups turn me into a useless, mindless robot. I can’t fail my senior year. I fall in love way too fast and hard, and then I’m blinded by it. If it doesn’t work out, I’m screwed. I won’t graduate.”

My father was a professor at Ole Tex University. He’s an academic. He loves learning and art, and he very much loves me. I also get my artistic side from him. I’ve never felt worse about myself than I did the day he called me and asked me why three of my professors had called him to tell him that his daughter was failing their classes.

I need to call him back and tell him I’m passing my classes now at least.

I’ve been avoiding both of my parents, not wanting to answer their questions about Brett or hear why they think I need to give him another chance.

Dan’s voice is smooth and calming, something I’ve come to crave from him. “You’re going to graduate, I promise. I’m helping you focus on school and not get caught up with another bad guy, but you can’t force it with someone who’s clearly a shitty choice, even a onetime shitty choice. That’s not going to help you. I mean, honestly, can you think of one redeeming quality in him?”

My tears have abated. I exhale slowly. “Okay, yes, I can actually. This is going to sound stupid, but the other night, I wasn’t even thinking about sex with Connor. I was thinking that I want to sign up for the bowling league with him. He’s clearly good, and I want to start playing on a team. Brett always thought it was stupid.”

I feel silly even mentioning it, but I want to start doing things for me and try to socialize more. Hiding out at the apartment too much tends to make me feel depressed. My relationship with Brett squashed my individuality. I want to find it again.

“I’m a little hurt that you didn’t ask me. I’d be happy to join the league with you. We could start our own team. Maybe Silas and Scarlett would do it.”

I’m silent for a moment, wondering if he means it. “You really would do that? I might need to give you lessons first. And Silas and Scarlett have no time.”

“I’m even more hurt now. I can get better. I’ve barely ever touched a bowling ball. Give me a few weeks, and I bet your sweet ass I can play better than douche face Connor.”

I’m nodding as I open the restroom door and exit, hoping no one saw me go in and thinks I just spent ten minutes in there with bowel movement issues.

“If you’re being serious, then, yes, I want to start a team. We need at least two more people, but preferably three in case someone misses occasionally. Hey, why not Connor?” I snicker, knowing he’s getting irritated that I keep bringing him up.

“What can I do to make you forget that guy exists? I’ll find us three more players. When’s the next tournament?”

I walk up to the half-empty shelf I was working on earlier, smiling as I sit down cross-legged on the floor to get eye-level with the row I was on.

“Maybe find me a replacement, and I’ll forget he exists. I’ll call PinStack and find out. We’ll probably have to pay an entry fee. Oh! We need a team name.” PinStack is the bowling alley we’re playing at.

Dan hums on the other line. “Hmm, I have no idea. It has to be catchy and original.”

“Maybe we should figure out who’s on the team first and consult everyone.”

My belly is tingling with excitement that I finally have a partner to start a bowling team with. “There’s a girl in one of my art classes I talk to a lot. I could ask her if she’s interested.”

“Cool. I have a few ideas too.”

“Okay, Danny, thank you for...being such a good listener all the time. I really should get back to work. See you tonight?”

“Yes, of course. I’m making dinner. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

I hit the End button before pushing the phone back into my pocket. A grin cuts across my lips as the perfect bowling team name comes to mind.

NINE

dan

CLYDE'S COWS are my responsibility to keep healthy. One of them has a severe limp on Saturday morning, so I haul her up into the trailer to take her to the vet. I know a lot about animals from growing up on a farm. There will always be more for me to learn.

"Hey, Dan, how are you?" The veterinarian is a short, middle-aged woman with kind brown eyes that remind me of my aunt Martha, my dad's sister.

I grin at her, reaching out one arm to pull her into a friendly hug. "I'm loving this weather. How are you doing?"

She smiles warmly, returning my hug. "Oh, you know, can't complain. What's wrong with this big gal?"

I walk around to the back of the trailer, unlocking the gate. "Poor thing is limping bad. Clyde said she's been this way for four days now. She's one of his older ones. I'm afraid she might've fractured a bone stepping into a hole somewhere on the property."

Dr. Brawner nods, peering into the trailer at the black cow who refuses to exit, probably because she's in pain. Half my body has mud mixed with cow shit smeared on it from when I tried to get the cow in the trailer.

"We'll see what we can do with her." Her frown morphs into a smile. "The invitation to intern with me next summer at that Montana ranch is still open, by the way. We can always use a good vet student."

I nod. "Still thinking about it. Don't know where I'll be by then, but I'm definitely considering it."

Dr. Brawner smiles at me, patting my shoulder. "All right, well, you let me know what you decide."

"Will do."

After helping them unload the cow, I unhitch the trailer and pull out of the gate in my old, faded red pickup. I have the windows down because of the smell on my clothes.

I feel my phone buzz with an incoming text. I check the screen to see Jim's name, and my heart immediately starts racing.

JIM:

Ride tonight? 6 p.m. at Brushman's arena.

DAN:

Hell yeah. See you then.

I press the pedal down farther, excitement coursing through my veins. It's been at least three weeks since my last ride. I feel like a drug addict who's just been told he can take another hit in a few hours.

Brushman's place is only about twenty minutes north of Clyde's. They're pretty good friends, so I'm sure Clyde will be there too.

My phone starts ringing, and I check the screen to see my buddy Beckham's name.

"Hey, man."

"Hey, Dan. What's going on?"

Beckham and I have been friends since I started at Ole Tex three years ago. We'll go months without talking, but every time we do, it's like no time has gone by. He dropped out of college after one semester to pursue his artistic dreams of being a tattoo artist. He's been working at a shop in Lakewood ever since. He's always trying to convince me to come in and let him design me a piece, but I'm afraid my grandmother would have a heart attack if she saw it.

"I'm driving down the road, headed back to the farm. What are you doing?"

"I'm tattooing a centaur on a woman's back right now."

I can hear the buzzing of his tattoo gun in the background.

"That sounds pretty sweet. Send me a picture when it's done."

"What are you up to tonight?" he asks.

These are the moments when I heavily consider sharing with my friends about The Riders. For some reason, I've just always wanted to keep it my dirty, rebellious little secret, the thing I do on my own that no one knows about. On the other hand, it would be nice to have a friend go with me occasionally.

Instead, I invite Beckham to the bowling league.

"Not much. Hey, do you like bowling?"

"I do like bowling. Pretty damn good at it too. Why do you ask?"

"Trying to get together a team to join a league in Lakewood. Interested?"

"Hell yeah, man. I'd love to. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"You let me finally take your ink virginity. I called to bug you about it again actually."

"Ha-ha. I'll think about it, man. I need it somewhere I can hide it from my family. Can't lose my status as the favorite."

"I can do that."

"I'll text you the schedule for the league when I get it."

"Cool. See you later."

I toss the phone on the passenger seat of my truck. I'm pulling into the farm. I need to check on the water troughs near the north end and see if I can locate the hole where the cow could've stepped in and hurt herself.

I hop out of the cab, ready to get my hands dirty.

Close to eight thirty, I drive up to my apartment. I'm filthy, covered in mud and blood. I found a calf stuck in a run-down fence before going out to Brushman's for the ride. I had to wrestle her out, getting cut up with barbed wire on my arms and one pretty deep slice on the side of my jaw. My clothes are sticking to my skin. This morning, when I left for work, my shirt was white, but now, it's a mix of brown and red. My old Wranglers have a cut down the thigh. The only article that seems to have been spared is my Stetson.

After the *calf in the fence* fiasco, I rode a completely manic bull. It threw me off in exactly eight seconds, right as the buzzer went off. The

enormous white animal charged for me, nearly crushing my bones with his two-thousand-pound body.

The event lasted over an hour, and I ended up in third place, winning just over three thousand dollars from the pot.

A shower and a cold beer are all I can think about right now, preferably while watching some National Geographic or *Bridgerton* with Lucy. After trudging up the stairs, I reach for the handle, finding it unlocked. As I open up the door, the delicious smell of garlic, onion, and various other spices reaches my nostrils. There's also a hint of burned bread in the air along with it.

"Holy shit," I groan under my breath.

That smells like heaven. Slightly burned, but still like heaven.

Lucy must be cooking. Lucy never cooks. I didn't know Lucy could cook.

I would take my boots off, but I rinsed them off in the hose at the arena. They're clean enough to wear inside the apartment. I step over the threshold, my stomach rumbling. Music is playing over the Bluetooth speaker. It's a romantic country song by Luke Combs.

I halt as the kitchen comes into view.

Lucy is wearing the red dress.

Why is she wearing the red dress?

Is this for me?

My heart is hammering inside my chest. I haven't eaten all day. Everything in this kitchen right now looks delicious. It looks like exactly what I need to be satisfied after a shit day.

I take another step closer, swallowing over the lump in my throat. Her back is turned toward me. I can't seem to tear my eyes from her exposed tanned skin. Her curly hair is piled up on her head in a big, messy bun, a few loose tendrils falling out.

The oven timer goes off, beeping loudly. Lucy opens it up, bending over to look inside. The bottom crease of her round ass cheeks is revealed, and my mouth waters instantly. She reaches inside, her arm moving forward and the hem of her dress rising up even more.

I want to bury my face right there, right fucking now.

Stop! This is Lucy. Lucy is your friend. Lucy doesn't see you that way.

Then, what is she doing all this for?

She stands up straight, and I let out an exhale. She whirls around, her free hand clamping against her chest. The other one is holding a pan of mystery brown lumps.

“Holy shit, Danny! You scared the hell out of me! How long have you been standing there?”

My already racing pulse increases. “I just got home.”

She nods, her dark eyes trailing over my body. They widen as she takes in the state I’m in.

“What happened to you? Are you okay?” She turns to set the pan on the stovetop before she takes a step toward me. She’s barefoot, over a foot shorter than me with my boots on.

“Ah, calf got caught in the fence. I’m fine.”

I stand still as she gets closer to me. I’m suddenly very aware of how bad I must smell, considering I worked all day long in the sun and there’s some manure mixed in with the mud on my clothes. I can feel a bruise beginning to form on my shoulder from where I landed in the arena.

“Danny, these cuts look deep. We should clean them so they don’t get infected.” She reaches up toward my face, her fingers stopping right before she makes contact with my sliced-open jaw.

I look down at her, my chest rising and falling steadily. My eyes are on hers, but she’s carefully inspecting my wounds. Frown lines crease her forehead with concern. I’ve never gotten to study the freckles on her nose so closely, but I could count them from here.

I let my line of sight drift lower, taking in the deep V-neck of the dress with the little silver chains holding it together. I can see the faint outline of her nipples through the thin fabric.

The front of my jeans is getting tighter as my erection grows. I don’t know how to control my reaction to her body, her nearness, the way her skin looks so soft. I’ve never experienced this level of arousal. My stomach is cramped with nerves at these new, unexpected thoughts about my best friend that are infiltrating my brain. I want to shut it off, but I don’t know how to force myself to do it.

You just need to get laid. That’s all this is.

Her eyes flick back up to my face. My cheeks flush pink as she catches my eyes looking down at her chest. I meet her gaze again, seeing them spark with surprise. Her pink lips part, and she blinks up at me.

We're both frozen in the moment, neither of us moving an inch. I don't want to touch her with the filth all over me and mess up her perfection, but I also can't fathom *not* touching her and losing the strange, unfamiliar intimacy we're experiencing in this moment.

She opens her mouth, seemingly to speak, but a loud knock sounds on the front door, shattering the invisible glass case around us.

"That's Connor," she murmurs, her voice a little breathy.

"What?"

She takes a small step back from me. "It's Connor. He's here...for dinner."

This dinner is for Connor?

The dress is for Connor?

My throat is closing up, as well as my fist by my side. Lucy bites into her bottom lip before moving around me to walk toward the front door. I turn, watching her pause at the door and inhale a deep breath before reaching for the knob and twisting it open.

"Hi. Come on in," Lucy greets Connor, stepping back to allow him to enter our apartment.

I turn away before I see him. I don't want to look at his face right now. I'm afraid of what I might do if I see his smug expression. My chest is tight.

Ten points to the idiot who can't seem to remember he's still the fucking mayor of the friend zone.

I stomp through the hallway, passing the living room and kitchen before making my way to my bedroom. The grating sound of Connor's laughter reaches my ears right before I shut my door. I start stripping down, removing my hat, followed by my ruined T-shirt, when I hear a gentle knock on the door.

My hands are shaking. I don't know if it's from embarrassment or jealous rage.

Why do I do this to myself?

I'm a glutton for punishment, this miserable feeling the result of my unrealistic expectations.

"Yeah?"

The door creaks open. I'm shirtless, wearing only my muddy, ripped jeans and boots as I turn to face the door.

"Danny?" Lucy pokes her head around the doorframe. "Are you okay —" Her voice halts, her eyes widening. She gapes at me for a moment

before shifting her eyes to look at the floor. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were halfway...undressed. Will you come let me rub some antibiotic cream on those cuts after you shower?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Sure.”

That sounded like an invite to crash her date, and I don’t mind if I do.

TEN

lucy

I QUITE LITERALLY CANNOT STOP MYSELF from stepping into Dan's room and gently closing the door behind me.

This is wrong. You're a sick, twisted person for having filthy, perverted thoughts about your best friend when your date is in the next room, waiting for you.

"I told Connor I had to grab something from my room. I said I would be right back." I'm whispering because I don't want my date to hear me, and I'm not fully certain I want my roommate to hear me either.

But Dan does hear me because he takes a step in my direction. I'm holding the oxygen in my lungs captive as my eyes drink him in again, from head to toe.

He's *filthy*. His jeans are torn to shreds, and I've always known that he works out and that he has a nice body, but his ridiculously cut abs and bulky arms with the grime and mud on them have awakened a feral side of me that I was unaware even existed.

Do his shoulders look like that from hauling baled hay? Or is it from wrestling cattle out of fences in the mud? Why haven't I noticed this before?

I have noticed it, but for some reason, I've never registered how... delicious he is.

His barrel chest is right in front of me now, perfectly in line with my vision. I'm barefoot, meaning I'm even tinier than usual in comparison to his build and stature right now. He's not smiling, which is unusual for Dan.

"Then, what are you doing in my room, Lulu?" His voice is a deep growl. He sounds angry, but Danny *never* sounds angry.

I tilt my head back, my lips parting as I try to think of a reasonable excuse other than, *I wanted that confusing and addictive moment we just*

had out in the hall to go on forever, so I'm trying to pick it back up where we left off.

You can't say that to him.

"I just wanted to ask you if—" My shaky voice trails off as he stretches out his muscled arm, leaning against the doorframe over my head. It sounds like there's a whistle blowing directly in my ear, preventing me from forming logical thoughts.

"Ask me what?" His rough voice sends a chill down my spine.

My nipples pucker up under the thin fabric of my dress. His eyes are on mine. I finally exhale the breath I was holding.

"Nothing, Danny. I just...want to help you."

His blue eyes drift away from my gaze and move down to my lips before he takes in my entire body. I *know* he sees the outline of my nipples from this proximity. My knees are quivering, practically knocking together. A pool of arousal is gathering between my legs.

Why am I so turned on right now? I don't remember the last time I was this turned on.

He leans down to my ear, his hot breath lighting my skin on fire. "How badly do you want to help me?"

Anything. I'll do anything.

"Whatever you need...I'm here for you. You know that."

"Mmm."

His nearness is making me tremble with need, and I want more than anything for him to touch me.

Why? Why do you want your best friend to touch you?

"Well, I'm about to get in the shower. I think you left your date waiting."

He lingers near me for a few more seconds before pulling back, twisting open the doorknob behind me, and walking down the hall to his bathroom.

As soon as he leaves, I quickly suck in a lungful of oxygen and nearly choke on it. My shaking hand claps against my chest as I pant, trying to regain composure of myself.

What the fuck just happened?

I'm not entirely sure, but the out-of-control feelings swirling inside me are not in line with my vision for tonight's dinner.

I invited Connor over to get laid. I asked him to come to our apartment for one simple thing, and now, this weird moment with Dan has thrown me

into an odd headspace.

Get yourself under control. Dan has made it very clear that you aren't his type.

Dan's friendship means more than you getting off and getting over Brett. You'd ruin it if you touched him.

You'd ruin him. He's too good for you.

I grit my teeth, stomping out of his room and out into the hall, continuing to the kitchen. My heart is thundering in my ears.

"Has anyone ever told you that you'd be prettier if you smiled more?" Connor pops open a second beer as he speaks.

It feels like tiny ants are crawling all over my skin as I slowly pivot to face him.

I tilt my head to the side, easily keeping my lips in a harsh, flat line. "You know, being pretty for you hasn't ever really been a priority of mine."

He stares at me, his brows lowering in confusion for a moment. He lifts the beer to his lips to take a sip, chuckling as he shakes his head.

"I guess it's starting to make more sense why you're single."

I walk toward the stovetop to poke one of the overbaked rolls. It's as hard as a rock.

"Why is that?"

He doesn't answer right away. I grab two porcelain plates from the cabinet above me, hoping I can resist the urge to smash one against his forehead if he opens his mouth again.

Why am I wearing this stupid dress for him?

Suddenly, I feel naked.

"Guys like sweet girls. You look sweet. Lucy is such a cute name, but then you act like a...well, you know."

I turn to walk toward the dining room table. "No, I don't know. Why don't you enlighten me?"

My blood is nearly boiling, irritation prickling my skin with each passing breath.

"Ha-ha. Never mind. I'm here to have a good time. You seem like you're interested in the same thing. Am I right?"

I'm considering walking back over to the stovetop and tossing the pot of lumpy mashed potatoes right into his face.

A masculine voice behind me speaks up, potentially saving Connor's face from second-degree burns. "Dinner smells damn good, Lu." Dan

approaches, sounding like his mood has improved substantially.

Connor perks up, his eyebrows scrunching together. “Yeah, sure does. What are you up to tonight?”

I walk back into the kitchen, reaching into the drawer to get silverware.

Is Dan planning on eating with us?

“Just hanging out in my apartment after a long day of work. I’ve been hankering to try Lucy’s cooking for a while now. Smells like you outdid yourself, roomie.”

Dan walks up behind me, casually reaching over my shoulder into the cabinet for an extra plate. I spin around, looking up at him with a frown. I can smell the masculine pine soap on his skin.

“Did you bring the triple antibiotic?”

He’s dressed in a clean white T-shirt and gray sweatpants, looking like his usual self, but the image of him filthy, cut up, and muddy is forever burned into my brain in the deepest part of my *pervverted thoughts* category. His dirty-blond hair is wet, the longer waves on top glistening in the light.

He grins down at me, flashing me his perfect good-ole-boy smile that might be powerful enough to implement world peace. “It can wait till after dinner, Lu. I’m starving.”

I gape at him as he grabs a plate and silverware before snagging a beer from the fridge and waltzing into the dining room. He pulls back the chair I had a plate at for Connor—the one at the head of the table—and sits down.

He sets the extra plate in front of the chair beside him, across from my usual place.

I guess he’s joining us for dinner.

I grab the pan of dark brown rolls and bring them over to the table. Connor slowly ambles over, pulling a chair out and sitting down. He and Dan both look at the rolls, studying them closely, most likely trying to think of something nice to say.

Eat it or don’t. I couldn’t care less.

Next, I bring the pot of lumpy mashed potatoes over. I think maybe I didn’t cook them long enough, but I’m honestly not sure why they aren’t smooth.

My mother was a takeout queen. I had to google *how to make your house smell like good cooking* and tried microwaving minced garlic to cover the burning smell of the rolls.

The only thing I made that really looks edible is the steak. I baked the two slabs of red meat in the oven at four hundred degrees, hoping the outside would get crispy.

Dan and Connor are both silent as I bring over the porcelain baking dish. The meat is swimming in Worcestershire sauce and cloves of garlic.

"I didn't know you could cook, Lu. Thanks for making dinner." Dan smiles at me, reaching for the plastic serving spoon I put in the potatoes.

He serves himself a heaping spoonful. Some of the lumps are quarter-sized. Connor reaches for the spoon next, only he gets a much smaller portion.

"So, Connor, what exactly are you looking for in a woman right now?"

My chest tightens as my eyes shoot up to Dan's face in shock.

Connor shrugs, grabbing a rock-hard roll from off the pan. "I'm in the market for a good time with a chill girl. Lucy seems laid-back."

He looks up, winking at me with a smile. I don't return it.

Dan adds a portion of steak to my plate before he serves himself some. He doesn't serve Connor, and this date is getting more awkward by the second. I start to cut the meat, which is much tougher than I was hoping it would be. I spear a tiny slice and bite into it.

"That sounds like a roundabout way of saying you want a girl who doesn't give a shit how you treat her and has low expectations," Dan muses.

I inhale a sharp breath, choking on the meat. I start coughing loudly, trying to get it out of the place where it lodged itself in my throat.

Dan reaches for me, patting my back to help me dislodge the steak. My eyes start to water before it finally comes out. I spit it into a napkin that my roommate hands me, grabbing my glass of water.

I gulp down a few sips before looking up at him. Dan's eyebrows are scrunched together in concern as he studies my face.

"Are you okay?"

I nod, blinking away the moisture in my eyes.

Connor continues the conversation as if nothing happened. "Yeah, I can't be with a girl who expects a whole lot. Relationships should be chill. Dating someone who wants me to be with her all the time or wants to know where I am every night is just not my style."

I roll my eyes, not giving a damn if Connor sees me.

"Why don't you get a dog then?" I deadpan.

Dan chuckles at my joke as he turns his head to look at Connor. “Lucy is the opposite of chill.”

I turn back to my roommate, wondering what the hell he’s talking about. I learned from my relationship with Brett that being “chill” was the best way to relieve tension and keep him from getting angry. But it also means that guys who want a low-key girlfriend have bad intentions.

All things considered, I am a pretty laid-back person. But that’s none of Connor’s business.

Connor chuckles. “You two are fucking, aren’t you? Is that what’s happening here?”

Dan leans back against his chair, folding his bulging arms over his chest. He doesn’t answer the question; he simply smirks.

I shake my head. “No, of course not. We’re just friends. Dan is just... overly protective. Like a brother.”

I need space from the stifling tension at the dinner table. I grab two of the pans and stomp into the kitchen.

Will this night ever end?

“Yeah, I guess you could say that Lucy is like a *sister*. Hey, do you have any brothers, Connor? Me and my brothers used to play fight for fun. I miss the feeling of my fist making contact with bones. I guess that makes me weird.” Dan chuckles.

What is he on tonight?

Connor mumbles a reply that I can’t make out. I’m so frustrated with the way the night has turned out. I’m debating ditching the guys and taking a warm bath with some wine.

The food sucks. It’s barely edible. Dan is the only one who cleared his plate.

I’m having the strangest thoughts and feelings concerning my roommate/*brother*, but I’m also pissed at him for intruding like this on my first date since my breakup.

Connor is turning out to be such a tool bag that I highly doubt I would ever climax with him, considering sex is such an emotional thing for me. A potential orgasm is the only reason I even invited him over tonight and put on my spicy red dress. Now, he just feels like an intruder in our apartment.

I return to the table to gather the remaining serving dishes in my arms and drop them in the sink.

“Do you want to put that triple antibiotic on my cuts now?” Dan comes into the kitchen with the plates. “I’ll do the dishes.” He adds them to the pile in the sink.

I cross my arms over my stomach. “Sure, *brother*.”

He grins, disappearing into the hallway. I look over at Connor, who’s sitting at the table, texting on his phone. I contemplate how I can get him to leave now that I’ve officially decided I won’t be inviting him back to my room.

Only one solution comes to mind.

Dan returns with a little clear box of first aid supplies. He sits down at the table in the same spot. I notice he changed into black gym shorts, probably so that I could reach the cut on his thigh.

I walk over to him. My fingers reach for the tube of triple antibiotic. My skin prickles, the hair on my arms standing up as Dan’s pale blue eyes focus on my face. His gaze feels intimate in the same way it did when we experienced that strange moment in the hallway.

My chest is level with his gaze in this position, and with this dress on, it feels almost like I’m topless in front of him. My hand shakes as I loosen the cap from the tube, squeezing out some of the cream onto my finger.

“Turn your head,” I instruct.

He obeys, tilting his face toward Connor.

If this little show doesn’t make him want to leave, I don’t know what will.

I lean closer to Dan, reaching one hand over to grip his shoulder and steady myself. His body is warm under my touch. After swiping the ointment over the cut on his jaw, I grab a Band-Aid and cover it. Then, I lean down and repeat it on his upper arm, near his shoulder muscle. My hands are trembling, so I release an exhale to try and center myself.

“This one is deep.”

He hums, his chest rising and falling steadily. My nipples have been hard since the moment he looked up at me with his piercing eyes, and now, my breasts are aching for some attention.

Well, too bad. That ship has sailed, thanks to Dan’s intrusion.

Connor clears his throat, and I glance over to see him standing up slowly. “Well, this has been an interesting night. Thanks for the food and... all that.”

I glance up at him. “Oh, are you leaving? Bye.” My voice is emotionless, but I don’t care enough to show him out or say anything else.

He walks around the table and toward the front door.

“Bye,” Dan says right before Connor opens the door and slams it shut.

The sudden intimacy of our apartment being ours again swells around us. It’s a high I’ve grown addicted to.

Has he?

I lower myself down onto my knees in front of Dan so I can tend to the cut on his upper thigh. His legs are spread apart to make room for me, which feels incredibly similar to an intimate act that I know he’s never experienced.

Don’t think about giving him head for his first time ever. Don’t. Think. About. It.

I inhale, trying not to overheat as my thoughts slowly slide into the gutter.

The things you could make him feel. The way you could introduce him to an entire new world...

Dan’s thigh muscles are thick and hard, like he’s worked a physical job his whole life and goes to the gym regularly. The cut is about halfway up his upper thigh, so he tugs up the shorts to reveal it.

“This could get infected. Maybe you should go to the doctor.” I glance up into his eyes.

His gaze is intense on my face as he stares at me in a way that feels like so much more than...friends.

“I’ll be fine. You can do it.” His voice has grown husky and raw.

I bite my bottom lip, looking back down. I squeeze a generous amount of ointment onto my finger before gently applying it to the cut.

He inhales a breath that sounds almost like a moan. I can’t tell if it’s from pain or something entirely different, but my fingertips are on fire as I rub his thigh.

What would happen if I simply just...let my hand slide up farther?

I’m on the edge of a cliff, trying to decide if I want to make a move on my best friend and potentially ruin everything we have. I look back up at him, seeing that his eyes are closed, and he looks almost like he’s...enjoying this moment.

My memory flashes back in time—to a physical setting not very different from this one. My ex-boyfriend told me he wanted a blow job

because he'd had a stressful day at work, and I obliged him at our dining room table. I never minded it. I was always eager to do anything I could to make him happy.

But then he finished, and he stood up and pulled his pants back up and walked out the door to meet some friends at a bar. He left me on the floor without saying a word. I cried myself to sleep in our bed, waiting for him to return. I'd never felt so used and discarded in my entire life.

My body starts to shudder. I feel my hands growing clammy as I reach for the clear box and retrieve a bigger Band-Aid to cover the area. I gently press it onto his skin before slowly standing back up. My palms are trembling.

"Thank you," he says.

I nod, twisting the cap back over the tube of antibiotic.

Then, I turn around and walk back into the hallway, shutting the door to my room quietly. I lie down on the bed and silently start to cry.

ELEVEN

dan

I THINK I UPSET LUCY. The way I talked to Connor and intruded on her date seemed to put her in an eternally bad mood.

And I feel like shit for it.

It's been six long, agonizing days of her avoiding eye contact with me and mostly sticking to her bedroom. I'm not even sure if she's been eating here because I have yet to see her lingering in the kitchen or planting herself cross-legged on the sofa with a bowl of ramen noodles and a sketchbook, as usual.

By Friday morning, I'm fed up with it and itching to talk to my best friend. We're supposed to have our first bowling league practice tonight.

I try to come up with a lame excuse to text her while I'm sitting in one of my boring elective classes.

DAN:

Hey, Lu. Have you noticed the dishwasher barely cleaning the plates? I was thinking about putting in a maintenance request.

I delete the message right after typing it out. I tap my thumb on the screen before trying again.

DAN:

Lulu, I was thinking about grabbing a panini at Philly's Grill.
You want something?

Again, I delete the text and rack my brain for what I can send that sounds natural and friendly.

When did it become hard to talk to Lucy like a friend?

I try again.

DAN:

Lucy Lu.

Lulu Bear.

Lucy Goosey.

Roomie.

Let's get happy-hour margs at Javier's.

I hit Send, shoving my phone into my back pocket and looking back up at Professor Harding. She's writing a homework assignment on the board about antibiotic treatments for cattle that I start to copy into my laptop notes. My knee is bouncing as I study the clock ticking on the wall. The seconds inch by. I look around the class, trying to keep myself preoccupied.

To my surprise, I make eye contact with Billie.

Has she been in this class this whole time?

She smiles at me, lifting her hand in a wave. I return her smile politely before turning my eyes back to the professor, who is droning on about the medication to treat infections and the risks with overdosing.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. My palms sweat as I reach inside the denim to retrieve it, hoping Lucy texted me back.

BILLIE:

You look like you could use a drink. We should go out tonight.
:)

I can feel her gaze on me from across the classroom, so I try not to let the disappointment show on my features.

DAN:

I really do, ha-ha, but I have bowling league practice.

BILLIE:

Since when are you in a bowling league? Would never have guessed that.

DAN:

Yeah, I know. I suck at it. Lucy wanted to start a team up.

BILLIE:

Oh, I see. Are you and her still...just friends?

DAN:

Yes, of course. Why do you ask?

BILLIE:

Just curious, LOL. How many players do you need for a bowling team?

DAN:

So far, we have three, but we need two more. Know anyone who might be interested?

Professor Harding finally releases us, so I stand up and start putting my stuff into my backpack. I turn around to shuffle out of class with the rest of the students who are eager to get out of here, considering it's Friday.

"Well, if I can at least get a drink while we play, then the answer is yes." Billie speaks from my right.

I turn to face her, realizing I was completely lost in thought and didn't even know she was beside me.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, holding open the door for her.

She laughs. "The bowling team, obviously."

I hesitate. Billie is sweet. I hate to lead her on. For reasons I can't put my finger on, I don't really feel any romantic pull toward her. I haven't really taken the time to process why, but it just wasn't there for me on our date.

"Um, are you sure? We're planning to meet up, like, two or three times a week."

We're walking toward the parking lot together. The day is already getting hot even though it's not even noon yet. I'm ready for fall and cooler weather.

"I'm okay with that. The only other thing I have going on this semester is my sorority events."

"Okay, great."

My phone starts buzzing with an incoming call. I look down to see Lucy's name on the screen. My stomach zips as I press the Answer button.

"Hey."

"Hi."

I'm nearly at my truck, but Billie has followed me. She seems to be waiting for some kind of confirmation about joining the team.

"Billie said she would be happy to play with us, so with her and Beckham, we only need one more."

Lucy pauses on the other end of the line. I turn to Billie, who smiles up at me. I return it absentmindedly. I wish I could see Lucy's expression right now.

"Okay. That's good. Do you still want to go to Javier's?"

"Yes, of course. I'm on my way home."

"Okay. See you there."

The call ends.

I turn to Billie. "You want to meet up later tonight at the bowling alley?"

She nods, smiling. "Yes. Perfect. See you then."

She leans in for a hug, wrapping one arm around my waist. I return her embrace before opening my truck door, stepping inside it, and revving the

diesel engine to life. I speed the few miles home, bobbing my knee with anticipation. Maybe Lucy will finally be acting normal toward me.

I take the steps two at a time as I go up to the door. It twists open, signaling that she's already home and left it unlocked for me. I drop my backpack beside the sofa before walking back toward the hallway. Her door is open, so I knock lightly on the doorjamb.

She walks out of the bathroom, towel-drying her hair. She's wearing a pair of gray terry-cloth shorts and a matching crop tank top. Her face is clear of any makeup.

"Hey." I lean up against the frame of the door, crossing my arms.

Her gaze meets mine. She doesn't smile. "Hi."

This hey-hi thing is getting annoying.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry." The words feel like broken glass in my mouth. I don't want to bring up what happened and risk ruining the small amount of normalcy we have.

I hold my breath as I study her reaction. She slowly lowers the towel, tossing it onto her bed. Her rosebud lips are still in a harsh line.

"Sorry for what?" She crosses her arms to match mine.

"For crashing your date. For running Connor off. I promised to help you...get laid." Invisible shards of glass are cutting my tongue, but I continue on. "I had no right to do that. You're my friend, and I care about your happiness. I care about it more than my own."

Her eyes are wide as she listens to me, motionless. Her lips part as she slowly nods. "I know he's a piece of shit. I still wish you hadn't taken it upon yourself to barge in on my date. I can make my own decisions about men."

I exhale, reaching back to rub the back of my neck. "I know. It's not my place. You're a grown woman. You can definitely make your own decisions. I'm...really sorry, Lu."

If she doesn't forgive me, I don't know how I can go on. Her friendship means more than anything in the world to me.

She takes a step toward me. Her eyes don't leave mine as she makes her way over to me until she's standing only a foot away. She sighs, tilting her head up. "I forgive you, Danny. Of course I forgive you. I don't know where I'd be without your friendship. I'd probably still be shackled to Brett, fearing for my safety every day."

My stomach muscles cramp at the thought. I reach out to her on instinct, my fingers gently twisting around her arm right above her elbow.

“You’re safe now. You’re safe here. You’ll never fear for your safety again as long as I have anything to say about it.” My voice cracks at the end.

She blinks up at me, silently nodding before she turns away. “I’ll get dressed, and we can go, if you’re ready.”

I wish I could hold her in my arms first, but I try to push the urge down. I’ve learned that she needs physical space sometimes.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

“Team name?”

“Highest Ball Bidders,” Lucy says.

The kid in charge of registering new teams gapes at her. I turn to stare at her, holding in a laugh.

“The highest what?” he questions.

“Highest Ball Bidders. Do you need me to spell it out?”

His pen scratches across the paper. “Ain’t never heard that one before. Okay, entry is two hundred dollars for a new team.”

I reach for my wallet, extracting two of the one-hundred-dollar bills I won from bull riding and hand them over.

“Let me pay for half,” she says.

“Nah.”

The kid puts the cash in the drawer. “I need y’all to fill out the team members’ names here. There’s a schedule online, and you can also come up here to see it. First match is in one week.”

Lucy takes the clipboard from him. After filling out the team information, she hands it back to the kid.

“Thanks,” I tell him.

Lucy and I walk over to the bowling lane we already rented out for the next two hours. She sits down to put on her shoes. She’s back to her normal self, scowling at strangers and handing out snarky comments like candy on Halloween.

I love to see it.

“The Highest Ball Bidders, huh?” I fold my arms over my chest, trying not to laugh.

Her curly head is all I can see with her face still turned down. She finally tilts it up to look at me, her dark eyes staring into mine. “I thought you’d like it.”

I sit down next to her, leaning close to her to whisper in her ear, my words only for her, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re making fun of me, Lu.” My lips are right above the nape of her neck.

She turns to face me. Her breath is hot on my ear. “I would never do such a thing, Danny. Your innocence is not a laughing matter.”

I can hear the hint of humor in her voice, but she’s trying to hold it back.

My fingers inch around to her waistline. I brush them over her side lightly.

“If you’re going to laugh at me, I might have to give you something to laugh about.”

“Like what?” she challenges.

I grip her side quickly, tickling her midsection, and she doubles over in surprise.

“Daniel Wesson! Stop that this instant!”

She tries to push me away as laughter bubbles out of her. Hearing Lucy’s rare laugh for the first time in a week washes away the heavy feeling that’s been in my stomach for days.

She’s still fighting against me, squirming around on the bench and trying to get away. I don’t let her, pulling her close to me and continuing to tickle her.

“You’re supposed to be helping me lose my innocence this semester, and so far, all you’ve done is list it for sale on a sketchy website and make me join this bowling league with a bunch of senior citizens.”

I give her a break so she can take a breath and answer me, but I don’t let go of her waistline. She exhales, facing me with a spark in her eyes.

“Well, maybe you would do well to find a woman with some experience to show you how it’s done.”

I lick my lips, staring down at hers. I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately when it comes to her, but my thoughts are as filthy as ever.

It’s the pent-up sexual energy from being a twenty-three-year-old virgin. It has nothing to do with her.

I can't muddy up this friendship. Lucy needs healing. She doesn't need her best friend hitting on her when she's vulnerable.

If there's one person in this world I could never hurt, it's her.

TWELVE

lucy

DAN HAS MADE it very clear that he likes smiley blondes, and his ideal woman just joined our bowling league. Billie is exactly the type of girl he described when I asked him what his type of woman was.

I should be a good friend and try to set them up. Keeping Dan to myself has been selfishly motivated, and he's too good of a man for me to not keep up my end of the deal and help him find a girlfriend.

My phone pings with a text. I look down to see my mom's name. I open it to see that she sent me a picture of her and Brett's mom having dinner together. The message reads, *Wish you could be here with us.*

I slam the phone down on the bench, exhaling.

Billie approaches me with a cautious smile. "Thanks for letting me crash the team," she says.

"We needed more bodies. I'm glad you were free."

She's bringing over a pink ball from the rack. My stomach feels queasy after reading the text, but I try to appear welcoming.

She smiles down at me. "I am too. When Dan mentioned it in class, I was so excited! None of my sorority sisters like bowling."

I nod. "It's kind of a geriatric sport."

A guy covered in tattoos from the neck down approaches our group. Dan walks over to shake his hand. I can't seem to get over how broad Dan's shoulders are, always making every other man around us look small.

"Beckham, glad you could make it," Dan says with his ever-present smile.

Do his cheeks hurt from that eternal grin?

They shake hands before turning to face us.

"Lucy, Billie, this is my buddy Beckham. He's a badass tattoo artist."

“Oh! I need to talk to you about a design I’ve been wanting. It’s so hard to find a good artist.” Billie hops up, swiping through her phone to get to the image.

Beckham smiles at her and then me. I nod, curious about his work. Being an artist myself, I’ve always loved tattoos. I’ve just never been able to commit to one *forever*.

Billie is talking to Beckham in an animated voice about her tattoo as Dan walks back over to the bench. He sits down next to me, sprawling his legs out.

“Wonder if the Highest Ball Bidders will be able to compete with these veteran teams,” he muses.

I turn to face him. For some reason, I feel like he’s slipping away from me. It’s an irrational, silly thought.

“If you want to change the team name, I don’t care at all. It was stupid.”

He chuckles, flashing me his pretty-boy smile. “Lucy Lu, I love it. I love it because you came up with it and because it’s *spit out your beer and slap your mama* funny.”

He levels me with a very Daniel-esque look, blue eyes seeing straight through to my soul.

“Okay. I’m glad you think so, D. I’m happy you’re not mad at me.” My voice is strained as I look down at my hands, fingers twisting together.

He wraps his muscular arm around my shoulders, draping it casually, like he’s done it a hundred times before. “I could never ever be mad at you, not for something so silly.”

A warm, fuzzy ball of nerves is tumbling around my insides. The crowd around us is a blur as I sit next to him, wishing we had joined the league as a team of two. It could have been a weekly roomie night—something I could always look forward to without the pressure of having to socialize.

Beckham and Billie join us, and I finally stand up to start the game. We’re just practicing tonight, working on techniques and skills that we can hopefully apply once we’re up in an official match against an opponent.

I bowl a strike. Everyone whoops and hollers with impressed voices. I smile shyly, returning to my seat. I hate being the center of attention.

One of my favorite pastimes growing up was bowling with my dad. My mother and I are complete opposites. She’s bubbly and blonde, much like Billie.

“That was awesome, Lucy. You play a lot?” Beckham grins at me, and I notice for the first time that he has a tongue ring.

“Uh, yeah, I grew up playing with my dad.” I sit down a space away from him on the brown leather bench.

Dan and Billie are talking on the other bench. He smiles at her before standing up to bowl his turn. He walks up to the rack, reaches for his ball, and continues to the lane.

He wears those Wranglers like he’s doing them a favor.

I look away, focusing on Beckham’s face.

“Dan tells me you’re an artist.”

I blink up at him. I had no idea Dan talked about me to his friends. I cross my arms, wondering what all he’s said about me.

“I am. Mostly charcoal and lead.”

Beckham nods. The sides of his head are shaved close while the dark hair on top is longer. He has pierced ears with diamond studs, and the tattoo on his neck is of a black butterfly with blue shading.

“I’d love to see your work. He said you’re really good.”

I nod, unsure of how to respond. I don’t take compliments well.

“I’ve been trying to convince him to come in and get something done,” Beckham continues as Dan walks back after only knocking over three pins.

Billie gets up for her turn. She asks Dan to show her his form, and he obliges, of course. He’d probably give her the shirt off his back if she asked for it.

“I’m not surprised you haven’t been able to. Dan is a good boy.”

Beckham laughs. “True that. I guess I like a challenge.”

Dan sits down on the other side of me after helping Billie out. “Maybe I’m not as good of a boy as I pretend to be.”

I raise a brow, turning to face him. “What does that mean?”

He lifts his shoulders, shrugging. “Just saying, I’m not perfect. I wouldn’t still be single if I was.”

I don’t know what he means or what him being perfect has to do with tattoos or all the women around here who seem to be blind and dense. Maybe they’re all missing a few marbles upstairs. Billie isn’t, of course. She’s interested in him.

Beckham chimes in, “You’re single because you’re too picky. That one day you came to see me at work, every damn female in the shop asked me

who you were and for your number. Started to make me a little insecure, which is hard to do.” He winks at me before getting up to take his turn.

Billie sits down in his place, grinning. “This is so much fun! Thanks for inviting me, Dan.” She bats her lashes at him.

Dan’s eyes are on Beckham’s back, and he’s not smiling. I wonder if he’s even aware of Billie’s attempt at flirting with him. He seems distracted by something.

“I wonder if we’ll be good enough to place,” she says.

“We should just try to have fun. We won’t place,” I tell her.

Dan turns back toward us. “Lucy is a pessimist. I bet we will.”

“I hope so,” Billie says.

“How much do you want to bet, Daniel? I’d take that wager.”

He grins. “I wouldn’t bet against me, Lucy Blake. I’m not known for losing.”

“I look horrible in pink. I have started wearing more colors, I’ll have you know, but pink is not among them.”

Jenn is radiant in her white two-piece outfit with ruffled sleeves and a fitted miniskirt. Her blonde hair is cropped at her shoulders, and she’s the definition of a glowing bride, complete with a tiara. She’s also our mother’s doppelgänger.

“I think you look hotter than fire in pink and nearly every other color. You just don’t see yourself the way I see you.” Jenn is puckering her lips in front of the mirror in the restroom of the bar as she applies crimson lip stain to her lips.

“I can’t believe you’re about to get married. It doesn’t feel real,” I mumble.

My older sister smiles at me in the mirror, true joy sparkling in her eyes.

“I thought the day took forever to get here. Sam made me wait an eternity before proposing. Have I told you about all the hot groomsmen and guests that will be there from Yale? Sam has a list of social media handles for us to look over.”

I roll my eyes before reaching down to smooth out the hot-pink bodycon minidress I’m wearing that matches all the other bridesmaids.

There are *twelve* of us. That's right—*twelve*.

We look like a horde of pink bubblegum, parading the streets of Nashville with one stick of white peppermint gum stuck in the center.

"Whatever happened to that guy you were talking to? Is he coming to the wedding?"

I shake my head. "Definitely not. I'll just keep a constantly full glass of champagne in my hand instead of a date. I'll probably have an even better time that way. As long as Brett doesn't talk to me."

Jenn shakes her head. "You know him better than that. He'll definitely try to talk to you. But you won't be alone, even for a second. Like I said, Sam has a bunch of guys he wants to introduce you to. You'll have the pick of the litter."

My blood turns to ice as she spins around with a grin, grabs my hand, and pulls me out of the restroom.

"You won't be alone, even for a second."

You'll be introduced to man after man after man all night long.

You won't be able to tell them to fuck off because it's your sister's wedding and you can't cause a scene.

If that isn't bad enough, your abusive ex will be waiting in the wings to pounce on you as soon as you manage to escape.

I feel like I'm swimming around in a lucid nightmare, only it's the premonition of one I'm destined to have.

Beads of sweat are beginning to gather on my lower back. The wedding is still a month away. Surely, in that time, I can find a suitable date who will leave me sufficiently alone while acting as a male repellent.

As fate would have it, my phone buzzes in my hand with a text. I lift the screen up to see that it's from Dan.

DAN:

Text me when you're home safe, okay? Have fun tonight, roomie.

Of course. Why haven't I thought of this until now?

LUCY:

Okay, I will—on one condition.

Will you be my fake date to my sister's wedding?

THIRTEEN

dan

THE BULL IS powerful between my legs, so I squeeze my thighs together harder as he bucks. My left hand is in the air, not making contact with him for the eight seconds. My right hand is strapped to his back, literally holding on for dear life.

My cowboy hat is somehow managing to stay on my head. I inhale, trying to catch my breath as the adrenaline surges through my veins. My thoughts are only focused on one thing during these endless seconds—staying alive.

The buzzer sounds in my ears, and I immediately start planning my escape. I reach down with my left hand to grip the leather strap. The bull takes a swift left turn, throwing off my balance. I try to hold on, but my legs slide over.

I'm now holding on with my hands only, my feet nearly dangling. I know the next move has to be letting go, and I hope I land without breaking any bones or being crushed by the hooves of the animal.

I say a quick prayer as I leap off as far away from the bull as possible. My boots land in dirt. I almost maintain my balance, but the force of the fall throws me on my side. In the split second I have to look up, I see the angry bull charging in my direction.

I try to stand, but there's no time. A bullfighting clown tries to jump in front of me to distract the animal, but his black eyes never leave mine. He knows who was riding on his back. His aim doesn't waver.

I'm halfway up when he makes contact, one of his hooves landing on my upper thigh. I'm shoved back against the ground, pain shooting up my leg.

I roar in agony, sharp, agonizing burns piercing through the muscle. Adrenaline must still be at an all-time high in my body because I manage to jump up again and hop away as the bull attempts to turn around and go at me again.

The iron fence isn't too far, so I make it before he gets me again, leaping up onto it and climbing over.

I lie on the ground, moaning in pain.

"Boy, you all right? Damn, that sucker sure got you, didn't he?" An old spectator looms over me.

The men who come watch The Riders are usually just a bunch of old cowboys. Most of them have money, and they're bored out of their minds. There's hardly ever a woman in attendance.

"I'll be all right," I groan, rolling to the side.

"That was one hell of a ride though, son. I'll be damned if you don't take first."

Let's fucking hope so.

After my best friend sent me a picture of herself with a penis straw in her mouth, all I'm trying to do is distract myself from that image.

LUCY:

Billie is exactly the kind of girl I see you with. Why aren't you dating her?

I stare at her text, wondering how it somehow hurts worse than the bruise that covers my entire left quad muscle.

At least I got monetary compensation for nearly breaking my leg. The seven-thousand-dollar first-place prize money helped ease the pain substantially.

DAN:

I didn't know you felt that way. Maybe I'll take her out again.

I know Lucy doesn't want to be anything more than friends. She's made it abundantly clear to me over and over again. Ever since that moment in the dressing room...then the one in the hall, then my room...I haven't been able to get the thought of her as *more* out of my head.

Sex. Sex will help this. And maybe a girlfriend.

LUCY:

I can't figure out why you don't feel this way. What are you waiting for?

DAN:

I agree actually. She's perfect for me.

Starting with the fact that she likes me, wants to date me, hasn't been hot and cold with me. I always seem to go for the girls who don't have a clue what or who they want. It's maddening, and I'm sick of it.

Billie is steady. She's clear about what she wants, which seems to be me. I need that.

I want that.

Why am I not jumping at the chance to get that?

LUCY:

As long as she's still cool with you being my fake date to Jenn's wedding. You can't bail on me, or I'll hang you from a tree by your toenails.

DAN:

I would never. I'll be your fake date. I don't think Billie will mind.

Lucy has been in class all day, so I haven't seen her yet. Now, I don't think I really want to. My head is pounding from this conversation and how much I hate it.

Maybe I should text Billie, see what she's doing tonight.

I could call Beckham and ask him to go out for a beer.

What I really want is to feel some physical pain. It seems to be the only method of distraction that works for me anymore.

I pull out my phone to text Jim and see if there are any rides tonight.

DAN:

Anything going on tonight?

JIM:

You'd better not be asking for yourself because I know you don't think you can ride with your leg like that.

DAN:

I feel good. Barely hurts.

JIM:

Ha-ha.

I tap my knee, waiting for a response. I've been taking painkillers every morning and night, but he's right. I feel like shit. A run would be nice, but I doubt I can do it. It takes everything in me not to limp when I walk. I don't need people asking me questions about what happened.

Instead, I grab my keys and drive over to the campus gym. I haven't been there in a while. I'm sure my upper body could use some work.

As I pull into the parking lot, I see a familiar blue truck. I walk in, looking around for the tall, dark haired man who drives it.

"Levi."

His head bobs up, and a grin spreads across his sweaty face. "Dan, how's it going, man?"

I smile back at him, reaching out to shake his hand. His grip is as strong as ever. He adjusts the glasses on his face before planting his hands on his hips. He's panting for breath, like he just got done with some push-ups.

Levi has a photographic memory. He's the smartest guy I know. He's also built like an ox. He's quiet and reserved, and we've been friends since we were kids.

He's married with a kid of his own now. He met his wife, Kenna, during our first semester of attending Ole Tex. I took her on one date before he did, not knowing she was already completely in love with him.

They're as different as two people could ever be. She's a curly-headed strawberry-blonde with an outgoing personality. He's a Clark Kent look-alike with even worse social anxiety than young Superman.

They never spoke a word to each other until he ended up as her online tutor. The rest quickly became history. I couldn't be happier to see two people in love, although I'm still a little jealous of the connection they have.

"I need to clear my head. Spot me on the bench?" I ask.

He nods, leading me over to one of the racks. Levi doesn't usually say much, which is fine by me. I don't feel like talking today anyway.

We rack the weights for a warm-up, and I lie down on the bench.

After ten reps, I rack the bar and stand up. "You going?"

He nods, lying down and completing the set. "So, what's bothering you?" he asks.

I chuckle, adding more weight to the bar. "The usual. A woman."

"Ah."

Typical Levi—doesn't say much, which leaves long pauses that beg to be filled in with words. He's a good listener, probably one of the best.

"The girl I want doesn't want me back, which seems to always be my lot."

Levi nods. I don't need him to confirm that he remembers how I went out with his wife first. There was a time when I had a pretty big crush on Kenna. She gave me a chance for one date but quickly friend-zoned me because she desired her secret tutor.

I'm completely over it—at least the part about Kenna rejecting me and choosing my friend. What I don't know how to handle is the repeated history going on right now with Lucy. The familiar feeling of rejection is stirring up inside me, and I'm licking my wounds all over again.

Levi stands up, adding more weight to the bar. I lie down and complete the set. My chest and arm muscles are screaming at me by the last rep, but I manage to complete them all.

“If there’s one thing I learned about love, it’s that you can’t force it. I was the one who wasn’t ready for Kenna when we met. I couldn’t even speak in her presence. My head and my heart were at war with each other. Kenna was ready, but she had to wait for me to get my head out of my ass.” He lies down on the bench to push the bar up ten more times.

“I guess what I hate is not knowing if she’ll ever be ready. She’s been through a lot. She’s been hurt in ways I don’t even want to imagine. What if I need to get over this crush and date someone else? Maybe she’ll never feel the way I do.”

It stings, just thinking about it.

“Then, you date other people. As much as it hurt me to watch, I understood why Kenna went out with you. If anything, it made me realize that I had to make a move or I might lose my chance forever.”

“You came pretty close to beating my ass the night I took her to that dance.” I laugh, adding another ten pounds to each side of the bar.

Levi shakes his head, sweat dripping down in his eyes. “I still get pissed thinking about that.”

“She never even looked in my direction. She was yours, even before you knew it.”

He nods, smirking. “True.”

We finish the set and move around the gym to do push-ups, chin-ups, and bicep curls. I’m dripping sweat by the time we’re done. Levi and I shake hands again as we both make our way out to the parking lot.

“I’ll see you around, Dan.”

“Have a good night.”

I climb into my truck, feeling slightly less frustrated than when I came. I turn my vehicle toward my apartment, wondering when I’ll feel healed enough to do a lower body workout or go for a run.

My upper thigh is killing me.

I walk into my apartment with my headphones still on. My workout playlist is blaring in my ears as I try to drown out all the thoughts plaguing my subconscious. Talking to Levi helped, but I’m still irritable. Patience has never been one of my virtues. The fact that I’ve waited twenty-three long years to let out my sexual frustration is miraculous.

The house is dark, and I still don’t see any sign of Lucy. I’m normally not home at this time because I’m working at Clyde’s or riding a bull. I guess she’s grabbing food or possibly on a date. She never works this late.

What I need is to stop obsessing over where my roommate is. A scalding-hot shower on my sore muscles might do the trick. I drop my gym bag off in my room before peeling my damp T-shirt off and tossing it onto the floor. Next, I push down my shorts and underwear. I walk over to the bathroom door, opening it to turn on the water and heat it up.

Instead of being met with an empty, dry shower like I was expecting, my gaze immediately takes in a scene that I've never even dared to conjure up in my imagination.

Lucy—my roommate, also known as my very platonic best friend—is in my shower. The curtain is down on the ground in a crumpled heap, revealing her very naked and very wet, tantalizing body to me. She's not just casually washing herself under the spray because the shower sprayer isn't where it's supposed to be—above her head.

She's holding it in her hand, aiming the spray directly between her legs.

Is Lucy pleasuring herself...in my shower?

I gape at her, frozen in shock as my eyes travel over her deliciously exposed skin. Her right leg is propped up on the side of the tub. Her eyes are closed as she leans back against the tiles with her upper back.

Her rosy lips are parted in ecstasy as she holds the removable showerhead against herself.

With zero control over myself, I feel the member between my legs begin to stiffen. I can't help from trailing my hungry eyes down over her. The supple mounds on her chest look like soft pillows. The pink buds are hard, begging for a taste.

What do they feel like? I have to know.

What do they taste like?

My perverted thoughts are taking me down a dark, addictive path. Her mouth is still open, eyes closed, and I want to spend the last few seconds I have—before she sees me or I find the strength to walk away—listening to the noise coming from those full, sultry lips.

I slowly reach up, pulling the headphones off my ears. The rush of the water reaches my ears first, immediately followed by her soft panting. She moans, and it's the sexiest fucking sound that's ever entered my ears.

You're a sick fuck. Leave her alone.

Walk. Away.

I'm on the verge of finally acting like the gentleman my father raised me to be and turning around with my hard length pointing straight out in

front of me when her eyes pop open.

She gasps, her body visibly jolting. My stomach tightens, my muscles taut and coiled with anticipation, fear, and a ravenous lust that has overwhelmed all my senses.

“Dan,” she pants, blinking in shock.

Her hand is still holding the showerhead, but she pulls it over to the side to point it at the wall instead of herself. Her breasts are moving up and down as she attempts to catch her breath. Her widened eyes drill into mine for another few seconds before they slowly begin to drift down over me.

They grow twice in size once they reach just below my waist. I’m exposed and fully nude with a woman for the first time in my life, completely unexpectedly.

“Don’t stop on my account.” My voice is rough and almost hoarse.

Her tongue darts out of her mouth, wetting her top lip. She’s speechless, but I’d pay all my bull-riding winnings ten times over to read her mind at this exact moment.

I’m about to turn around and leave her alone when she slowly inches her hand holding my removable showerhead back over to her center. She keeps her eyes open and focused on mine as she holds it there, lips parting again. Another moan escapes her, drawing a visceral surge of primal need out of my core.

I want to taste it.

I need to taste her.

She lowers her gaze down to my penis, licking her lips once again. I instinctively move my hand over, gripping the thick base. She sucks in a breath before letting out a final cry. Her body quivers for a moment, her breasts shaking before she jerks away from the water. She turns to the front of the shower, grabbing the knob to turn it off. Her hand reaches up slowly to return the sprayer to its base.

We both stand in the sudden silence for a few long seconds, panting. My eyes are still ravaging her body, taking in the curve of her generous ass and the little dimples on her lower back. The head of my penis is throbbing with a desperate need for some attention, something to relieve the pressure that’s building.

Finally, she looks up at me with her deep brown eyes. “What are you doing home so early?” She sounds breathless.

“What are you doing in my shower?”

She extends her hand toward the towel on the toilet seat, slowly wrapping it around herself. I let go of my dick, moving a step back to give her some room. She steps out of the tub, taking care not to walk on the shower curtain still on the ground.

“I use yours sometimes...whenever you’re not here.”

I blink at her, my mind whirling with the newfound knowledge that not only has she been naked in here countless times, but she’s also been masturbating with my showerhead without me knowing.

I won’t be able to think of anything else for as long as I live. How can I even take a shower without getting hard now?

“The shower curtain was an accident. I stepped on it, it came down, and I didn’t want to stop to fix it,” she murmurs.

My erection is still very prominent, and she seems to be having trouble averting her eyes from it. She glances down, her cheeks heat, and she looks away from it. I decide against all reason that instead of grabbing my towel and covering myself, I’m going to fold my arms over my chest and continue this conversation, completely naked.

“Well, my only issue with this discovery is the fact that I’m just now finding out about it. How long have you...been doing it?”

She purses her lips. “Since I came in here a few months ago and found out that your showerhead was removable and mine isn’t.”

Realization dawns on me. For some idiotic reason, I thought she did it in here because it’s my shower, not because of the actual hardware in the bathroom. The tiny little burst of hope in my chest is squelched.

“Well, as long as you don’t get mad at me for accidentally walking in on you occasionally...I don’t see why you can’t continue.” My bold, outrageous suggestion doesn’t faze her in the slightest.

She tilts her head to the side and looks me up and down one more time before slowly nodding.

“Only if you return the favor.” She raises a brow with a challenge before reaching back to turn the sprayer back on.

The water sputters out. Her eyes dip back down over me as she nibbles her bottom lip.

“If you insist.” I walk over to her, careful not to touch her skin, for fear I won’t be able to stop if I do.

I step into the shower, feeling the warm water run over my body, the spray hitting me and misting everything nearby. Lucy steps back, her eyes

following the movement of my hand as it stretches back down to my dick.

I grip the base again, feeling that none of the blood has left the area. My mind is a tormenting abyss of need for her touch as my hand caresses the skin of my erection. I pump my fist over it, my eyes watching hers as she stares at my hand. She gapes at me, eyes full of lust and desire. In my mind, she's on her knees before me, milking the pleasure from me. I've only ever done this once before, all alone in my bed. I was young, and I felt filthy for doing it. The guilt of sexual pleasure is an old, familiar feeling for me after being raised in purity culture to believe that my natural urges were inherently wrong. Since then, I just let it build up until I eventually come in my sleep.

Now, Lucy is observing me, and I've never felt so fucking horny in my life. I couldn't stop myself if I tried.

If this is wrong, why does it feel so damn good?

We make eye contact as her gaze finally moves back up to my eyes. In a very short time, my body begins to jolt with the force of an incoming orgasm. It shoots out all over the side of the tub as I continue to study Lucy's expression and gasp for breath. Her knuckles are white as she grips her towel, holding it close to her chest.

Then, she turns and flees the room, slamming the door as she goes.

What did we just do?

A shadow of uncertainty and guilt settles over me, bringing on a strong sense that I just made a fatal mistake.

FOURTEEN

lucy

THE COFFEE MAKER is running the next morning when I walk barefoot into the kitchen, wearing my baggiest sweats and a hoodie. I pause, looking around the apartment, barely lit with the early morning sunlight. I don't see or hear my roommate, so I continue in to fill a mug with coffee.

I quickly snatch the creamer from the refrigerator. I pour it into the cup, followed by the coffee. I lift it to my lips to sip the steaming liquid. The aroma of cinnamon from the creamer wafts to my nostrils before I taste it, the flavor bursting on my tongue.

"Good morning." A gruff voice speaks from behind me.

My nipples harden instantly.

I turn around, face-to-face with him. "Hi."

He's wearing black sweatpants, hanging loose on his hips. The sight of his barrel chest sends my thoughts back to last night. My toes curl up inside my fuzzy slippers.

Why is he out here, half naked? Is he trying to mess with me?

I fled his bathroom last night in utter disbelief at what we had done.

We technically didn't do anything. We watched each other do things...

"How'd you sleep?" he asks as he pours himself a cup.

I shrug. He turns around to face me, staying a safe distance away, out of arm's reach. His blue eyes trail down over me, like he's picturing me in his shower again.

My thighs clench together.

"I slept okay."

Not at all.

He tilts his head to the side, rubbing his hand over his head of golden hair.

“What about you?” I ask.

We just need to act like everything is normal and okay and not completely fucked up.

He half smiles. “It took a while for me to get to sleep, but then I slept better than I had in ages.”

I stare at him, unsure of what to respond with.

Does he not think what happened was a big deal? Is he completely unfazed by it?

“We going to talk about this, Lu?”

I sigh, wishing I could go back in time and never use his damn shower in the first place.

“Does it have to be now?”

He shakes his head. “No. We don’t have to talk about it now. Later?”

His kind eyes look down at the floor, studying the tiles.

“I’m going to be late for work,” I mumble, escaping safely back into my room without confirming that I will ever be able to talk about *the incident* with him.

I completely avoid Dan for the next week. It’s nearly my birthday, and I don’t exactly know what to do about it. We were supposed to spend it together with his brother Adam; his wife, Harley; and our best friends, Silas and Scarlett.

Jenn’s wedding is only one week after my birthday.

Am I still taking Dan with me or braving it alone?

All I can think about day and night is my best friend’s hungry blue eyes watching me orgasm. It’s infiltrating my dreams. Attempting to stay engaged in class is essentially pointless because my thoughts start drifting back to the way he looked, pumping his fist over his erection, eyes locked on mine.

It was the hottest thing that I’d ever witnessed, and I feel a crippling amount of guilt for it.

He’s too good. He’s too pure. And I just soiled him.

Okay, that’s a little dramatic, considering we didn’t even touch, but what happened was wrong on so many levels.

You're supposed to be helping him find a girlfriend who will love him and happily take his V-card, not giving him a pornographic display in his shower.

I know his schedule well enough to only come out of my room when he's not here, and I've been spending all my time at the library, working or studying.

I've been eating every meal out.

I have *only* showered in my bathroom.

And I haven't set foot in our shared spaces, except to exit and enter the apartment.

By the time Friday arrives, I'm tapping my fingers on my phone, debating if I should text him and wondering why he hasn't tried talking to me. I have no idea what he's thinking or how he's feeling about what happened.

It's lunchtime, and I'm done with class and off work for the night. Dan is probably going to be home soon, and I'm going to attempt to mingle with him again like nothing ever happened.

Today, I realized that I miss him. It's as simple as that. I've grown accustomed to being around him, hearing his laugh, letting him pick what we have for dinner, and having him remind me to eat.

After changing into my favorite dark-gray tank top and a pair of loose-fitting gingham sleeping shorts, I plant my butt on the sofa with my sketchbook, a set of charcoal pencils, and a glass of prosecco.

My sketchbook has seen some vivid, highly sensuous drawings this week. I love to sketch nude bodies, but this week, I went rogue and started putting them in erotic positions.

One of them is a girl with fingers between her legs, her mouth open in ecstasy.

The very next page is a man with broad, muscular shoulders, gripping his erection. His eyes are fierce, intense, and hungry.

Tonight, I think I'm going to continue the series. I'm not sure where it will go this time, but my mind has been marinating in the gutter for days. I wish I could put on some sultry music, but I'm afraid Dan will walk in and think I'm trying to repeat what occurred the other night, which I'm *not*. I'm still just processing it.

I'm on my third glass of prosecco when I hear the front door. My focus is fully immersed in my work. I grab my glass, taking a long sip of the

contents. I lift my gaze when I hear his heavy footsteps. He walks into the living room, pausing when he sees me.

He's wearing a simple olive-green T-shirt with a pair of his worn Wrangler jeans, the ones that hug his ass perfectly. Without smiling, he drops his black backpack beside the sofa before continuing into the kitchen.

"Hi, Lucy."

Hi, Lucy?

"Hi, Dan."

He seems to be grabbing something from the refrigerator. I attempt to ignore his presence and work on my sketch. It's nearly finished now.

The room goes silent once again, and I'm afraid he might have gone back to his room to avoid me.

Well, this blows.

"All this time, I thought you were drawing the animals on National Geographic." His rugged voice speaks from directly behind me, making me jolt.

My skin prickles with his nearness.

"Um, I do sometimes," I say quietly.

We both stare at the drawing for another few moments. It's what I could call an artistic rendition of oral sex with a man performing it on a woman. His head is between her spread legs, and his arms are stretched around her knees to grip her hips, enhancing the bulges of his shoulders and triceps. The drawing is mostly about him. The definition of his back muscles and the roundness of his ass. She's just a shadow with legs at this point.

The only part of the girl that's done is her wild, curly hair and her open mouth. I haven't decided if I'll draw her eyes open or closed.

"Don't think the animals do this," he muses.

I snort, shaking my head. "Then, they're missing out."

He walks around the sofa, taking a seat in his recliner and casually popping open a beer. He rests his head back, looking at me like it's just another Friday evening. He sprawls his legs out, blue eyes on me.

I've avoided him for a week, and he acts like another one wouldn't faze him.

Is he not frustrated as hell and losing sleep like I am?

Just rip the Band-Aid off.

I chew my bottom lip for a moment before letting out a deep sigh. "I... should've asked your permission to use your shower."

He chuckles. “No, you shouldn’t have. You can sleep in my bed, wear my clothes, take my phone charger, eat my food—hell, you can use any of my shit anytime you want. You know I don’t care that you used my shower.”

Did he just say that I can sleep in his bed?

I take another sip of my prosecco, avoiding eye contact with him. “Okay then, do you want to talk about what happened or...”

“I want to talk about what we did, Lucy.”

I wish I didn’t love the way he says my name, like it’s the title of his favorite novel that no one else seems to understand.

I meet his eyes. “We technically didn’t do anything.”

He smirks, taking a slow gulp of his beer without breaking eye contact with me. His biceps flex as he does it.

I want to bite it.

“So, it doesn’t count if we didn’t touch each other—is that it?”

I nod, crossing one ankle over the other. “Yes. No touching means it was just friendly...shower time.”

I’m avoiding the situation and definitely avoiding talking about what it meant and how it made me feel all tingly inside, and Dan knows me too well to fall for it.

“Lucy, you know that it’s me, right? You don’t have to declare your feelings or make any commitments you don’t want to make. We can go on like nothing happened.”

I look down at my sketch, debating on my next words.

“I’m sorry. I was into it. I liked it—a lot. I just want to make sure we don’t get things...mixed up between us. You want commitment. I truly want and need to be single right now. I care way too much about you to pretend to be something I can’t be for you.”

Anxiety pinches my insides as I wait for his response.

He nods slowly, contemplating my words. I keep my eyes centered on his so I don’t get caught up on staring at his shoulders and change my statement.

My heart hurts for how much I hate that I’m not ready for this, for him. But I know it’s true, and my emotional roadblocks aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. By the time I’m ready for a relationship, he should be married with two kids at least. Someone like Billie would make him happier than I ever could.

“So, you think just because I’m inexperienced that I don’t understand the concept of a no-strings-attached hookup?”

“I didn’t say that.”

His words sting. I don’t see him that way, as inexperienced or assuming. I see him as someone who deserves a *much less damaged, much more suitable for his preferences* type of girl.

Dan deserves someone without all this trauma and baggage, which makes even slightly difficult or uncomfortable conversations bring out my fight-or-flight response. With Brett, it was always a fight, and now, all I ever want to do is run away from conflict. Brett made me do things I hope I never even have to think about again, things I can’t even make myself say out loud.

My best friend deserves someone good and wholesome like him.

His gaze softens, and he leans toward me with an intense gaze.

This is Dan. I can talk to Dan about anything.

“I promise not to touch you, if that’s what you want.” His voice is tender, making my beat-up heart ache. “Is that what you want?”

I feel myself nod, exhaling out the anxiety building inside me.

“If you don’t want to repeat what we did or even talk about it, I fully respect that decision. If you change your mind and want to talk through it... I’d really like to know what you were doing with my showerhead.”

I blink up at him, my mouth dropping open. “What?”

His cheeks tinge pink, and he looks down at his beer. “I don’t have any experience with sex.” After a few quiet moments, his eyes meet mine again. “I know the basics of what goes where. I know how to make a baby. I know it feels good when I do that with my hand, but...it looked like that felt good for you. I don’t understand the logistics of how that works.”

My heart softens like butter. He was probably lying awake half the night, wondering what on earth had happened when he walked in on me masturbating with his showerhead, his mind completely blown by what he saw.

“It’s called the clitoris. It’s like this little bundle of nerves at the top of the vagina. It’s above where you would put your...thing in a woman. It feels really good with water pressure, but you can do it to someone with your finger or tongue.”

He looks down at the drawing in my lap.

I inhale. “I’ve heard the tongue feels unreal if you know how to do it right. I’ve never experienced that. To me, it always just feels like someone devouring ice cream, like it’s melting too fast. It makes me uncomfortable. Some women love it. They say it’s better than the showerhead feeling.”

He licks his lips, his eyes dropping over me momentarily. His cheeks are still red, but he looks absolutely fucking delicious, quizzing me about oral sex and what it means. He’s the first man who’s ever asked me what feels good for me sexually.

“It can go the other way. You’ll like being sucked off,” I murmur.

“I knew about that part actually. I heard it from one of Silas’s friends one time. Can’t wait to try it. Ha-ha.”

I nod, trying not to imagine showing him. I also don’t want to imagine someone *else* showing him, and I don’t really know why.

“I use your showerhead because other than that or my fingers, I can’t finish any other way. My sister told me to get a vibrator, but I don’t need another way to give myself an orgasm.”

Dan’s chest is rising and falling steadily as he gazes at me. His eyes look exactly like they did when he walked in on me in the shower—*hungry*.

“That’s why you wanted to find a man who could give you one during sex.”

“That’s not the only reason. Something about Brett being the last man I was with just makes me...nauseous, like I need to erase him with someone else.”

Dan nods, allowing me to continue.

“But, yes, I’ve literally been with three different men, and it felt the same with all of them. It’s like...I enjoy it if they’re not too big and they use lube, but the feeling of pleasure builds up and never goes anywhere. They finish before I’m able to climax, and it ends with me feeling...frustrated. Then, I have to do it myself when they leave. I’m really starting to understand why some women never get married.”

Dan adjusts his position on the sofa, taking another drink of beer.

“What would they do exactly—from start to finish?” He sets his empty can down on the coffee table, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his big hands in front of him.

Oh my, the way I want to show him every little thing they would do. The way I would love to show him all the little things I can do...

I squirm on the sofa, trying to find a place that feels comfortable. Part of my trauma is feeling overly sexual when I shouldn't—at least, that's what I've read from therapists in self-help books.

"I guess we'd usually start with kissing. The kissing part is really fun—definitely my favorite. It's so intimate and sexy. As soon as they'd start taking clothes off, it seems to go downhill."

He chuckles. "I love kissing. Making out is as far as I've gone, and Maya did grab me through my jeans a couple of times."

"Kissing is dangerous. I feel like it makes me get in my head and think the sex is going to feel like the kissing does, only multiplied by a million, but I'm let down every single time."

"Well, considering it's all I've ever done, I think it's the best part too."

I shake my head. "You won't after you've done anything else. Guys rush past the kissing to get to the rest."

He stands up and walks back into the kitchen. He grabs himself a beer and my bottle of prosecco to fill my glass back up to the brim.

He returns to his chair before speaking again. "When are you going to realize I'm not like other guys, Lu? What do they do after kissing?"

I know you're not, Danny. Trust me.

FIFTEEN

dan

"AFTER THE KISSING and filling my head with all the potential of how great it could be, they would just rip off their pants and mine, shove themselves inside, and pump a few times.

"They'll grunt like they've never worked out a day in their life, finish inside the condom, and then they pull out and collapse beside me."

My eyebrows crease together. "What about the clitoris? It's above where the guy goes, so when do they touch it?"

Lucy laughs, shaking her head. "They don't bother with it."

Damn, I've missed her laugh this last week.

"Bother with it? What do you mean?"

"Most guys really don't care if it feels good for the woman. They tell themselves they did a fantastic job and that nothing can compare to their dick."

"Why wouldn't they simply ask you what feels good for you?"

"I had one try it, but he was just not doing it right. I finally just faked it so he would get off of me."

"That answer isn't working for me, Luce. This whole thing sounds like they're using you to get off, but if you look like what you did that night when you're experiencing pleasure...there can't be anything sexier than that image."

Her eyes grow dark, and her neck flushes. She takes a sip of her prosecco, stalling her response.

Did Lucy like it when I watched? What the hell does that mean?

If she liked it, what's up with her disappearing act?

Maybe she's just embarrassed.

“I doubt I’ve ever looked like that with a guy before. They don’t do it right, so I’m not experiencing much pleasure. You saw something no one’s ever seen.”

Now, it’s my turn to have pink cheeks and readjust myself in my chair.

“You saw something no one’s ever seen before too, Lu.”

She bites her bottom lip, nodding. “I kinda liked it,” she whispers.

This is the first she’s said about how she felt after watching me in the shower. She bolted as soon as it was over. I can’t just beg her to let me watch again even though it’s all I can fucking think about. She has to make it clear it’s what she wants. She has to give me the green light.

“I can’t stop thinking about it.” Her voice is low—so low that I’m not even sure I heard her correctly.

“Are you saying you want to borrow my shower again?”

She shrugs. “Maybe.”

What is this about to become? Some fucked-up, shower-watching situationship? What does she want?

I exhale a shaky breath, wondering what lines we’re about to cross and realizing I’m fully incapable of stopping us.

She rushes out her next words. “I don’t mean that I want anything to really happen. We can find each other attractive and not let it go any further than...looking.”

I open my mouth, unsure of how to even respond. I’m more confused now than ever.

“What was with that big bruise on your leg?”

She’s trying to change the subject.

I almost forgot about my bruise from the bull’s hooves.

“Ah, it happened at work.”

She crosses her arms. “How do you keep getting these insane injuries? Do you have workers’ comp insurance?”

I chuckle, standing up to get another beer. I try not to wince when I put too much pressure on my leg.

“I get paid in cash, so no. It’s not a big deal. This is how it is for farmhands.”

After getting myself a beer, I walk over to the coffee table, where Lucy’s glass and the bottle of prosecco is, to pour her another one.

She watches my movements, probably noting the way I walk with a very slight limp near the end of the day.

“You’re limping. How did I not notice that before now?”

I collapse on the other side of the sofa and crack open the beer. “Is someone worried about me? Aw, Lu.”

I wink at her, but she only creases the line between her eyebrows more.

“I’m not kidding, Dan. What happened to cause a bruise like that? Let me see it again.”

The bruise from the bull looks even worse today. It’s turned from dark blue to a mix of purple, yellow, and brown. If she sees it, she might do something crazy, like try to take me to the doctor.

“Are you asking me to take my pants off? At least buy me dinner first.”

She tilts her head to the side in annoyance. “What. Happened?”

I exhale, wondering if now is the time that I finally should just let the secret out. No one has ever found out about the underground bull riding. After my injury, I started to wonder if I should share it with someone, just in case something horrible happened to me. It’s not like I’ve filled out some kind of emergency contact form.

“If I tell you, you have to swear to secrecy. I mean it. I don’t want anyone to know.”

She perks up at my words, realizing there is something I’ve been hiding. She nods slowly, leaning forward.

I feel uncomfortably exposed right now, but I know I can trust Lucy to keep my secret. I guess our new thing is secrets.

A heavy burden slowly lifts from my shoulders as I speak. “I ride bulls competitively. One of them stomped on me during my last ride.”

Her eyes widen.

She doesn’t speak, so I continue, “It’s not like an official organization or anything. It’s called The Riders, and it’s just a group of guys who get together and bet on riders. Best ride wins the biggest pot of the night.”

“That’s your job? You don’t actually work on a farm?”

“I do both. I work on the farm a couple of days a week, but every few weeks, I go compete against the other riders. If I win or at least place, I bring home more than I make on the farm in months.”

Her mouth slacks open. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you risk your life like that?”

“Have you ever seen a bull rider in action?”

She shakes her head, curls bouncing. I suddenly want to share this intimate, secret part of my life with her.

“Well, once I’m healed, you should. It’s unlike anything you’ve ever seen.”

“How did you get into it?” She leans forward, clearly intrigued.

I smirk. “That’s a long story. I’m starving. Should we go get something for dinner?”

She nods, reaching her arms up and revealing a sliver of her tanned stomach as she stretches.

Mmm, I really am fucking hungry.

“You sure are acting like a sissy. What’s the holdup?” Adam is up inside the trailer, waiting for me to bring him another case of wine bottles.

The bone bruise on my leg is throbbing. It was a dull ache this morning when we started, but it’s fully progressed into shooting bursts of pain. I grunt, lifting another box and walking it toward him, trying not to limp. I hand it over, and he takes it to add to the stack.

“I’m good, just tired, asshole,” I grumble under my breath.

Adam steps out of the trailer and grabs a big jug of water from inside the truck, drinking his fill before tossing it to me. The Texas sun is beating down on us mercilessly, like it has since we were kids, working outside on the farm. Now that my brother owns a winery with his wife, Harley, and makes an impressive living—supplying wine to stores and restaurants and making online sales—he’s living the life he always dreamed of, possibly even better than what he ever hoped.

After chugging down the cool water until my thirst is quenched, I look up at his tanned face. He’s studying me closely.

“Hmm. You been staying up late?”

My brother might know me better than anyone on this planet. He’s always been the well-behaved one, the rule follower. He gets up early, even on vacation. He’d give the shirt on his back to a stranger in need without a second thought. I’d do it, too, but Adam would do it with a smile.

Our parents were tough on us, and Adam always nodded and agreed with their strict rules and suffocating insistence that all of us grow up to live

our lives exactly like them. It wasn't until he met Harley that he questioned them and their expectations at all.

I shake my head. "Not too late."

I'm torn in two directions. I always have been. I adore my family. They got a lot of things wrong, but they loved us and tried their best.

Adam is my best friend. I look up to him. Hell, I wish I could be half the man Adam is. I usually enjoy spending time with him.

But right now, I can barely stand up straight because of the bruise on my leg, which I brought on myself. If I told him where I got it now, I'm not sure what he would say. He's never been as judgmental as our father, but reckless, dangerous acts aren't something Adam would ever support. He's the levelheaded one.

No, you don't need to tell him if you don't want him checking in on you every weekend to see if you're being smart.

"How's it going with your roommate?"

I toss the water jug back to him. He catches it, returning it to the truck.

"She's a good roommate."

He turns around, shaking his head with a smirk. He lifts his shirt to wipe the sweat beading on his forehead. I do the same before it drips into my eyes.

"I guess I'll have to get Harley to pry it out of you when we go in for lunch."

"Pry what out of me? There's nothing to tell."

I've been friend-zoned again. What else is new?

Except she basically told me I can watch her shower. Not sure what the hell that means...

He shrugs. "I thought you liked her."

I'm in splitting pain, and it's now traveling up my leg and into my hip. I'm drenched in sweat. I don't mind manual labor, but the week of Lucy ignoring me and our return to a somewhat-normal and irritating dynamic has me in a foul mood.

I'm trying to get over the arousing vision of her in my shower out of my head.

I'm repeating her words in my mind over and over again, like a never-ending chant.

"I care way too much about you to pretend to be something I can't be for you."

It's not the first time I've been shut down and had to go on pretending that it doesn't affect me. I'll get over it—eventually.

So far, instead of getting easier, it's getting harder with each passing day that I look at her curly caramel head of hair and try to think of new ways to make her smile.

“She's a good friend.”

Adam nods, gesturing toward the stack of boxes that still need to be loaded. I walk over, grimacing when my face is turned away from him.

“Remember when I kept insisting to you that Harley and I were good friends?”

I hoist up a box, using my upper body strength to lift it. “You were both lying to yourselves.”

“You've always been stubborn, brother.” Adam takes the box from me, adding it to the stack.

“Good thing too, having to put up with you all this time.”

He chuckles.

“How's it going out here? You getting hungry, baby?” Harley's raspy voice speaks from the side of the trailer.

I turn to face my sister-in-law. She's got a mane of black hair tumbling around her slim, tattooed shoulders. She's in a white tank top and denim shorts, looking as healthy as ever. She was all inked skin and protruding bones when we met her our first year at Ole Tex. We started the same year even though Adam is two years older than me.

I smile at her. “Hey, Har.”

She returns my smile with one of her own and a little wave. “I'd give you a hug, but you look smelly.”

“We can come in and eat now, love.” Adam hops down, reaching for his wife's hand and pulling her closer. “Who said you could come out here, looking so beautiful?”

She smiles, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I guess I'm willing to risk the smell for a kiss.”

I look away as their lips meet, wiping my hands on my jeans.

“Dan isn't being honest with me about Lucy.”

I follow them as they start walking hand in hand toward the big white farmhouse.

“What did he say?” Harley asks.

They always talk about me like I'm not here. I've gotten used to it.

“He said, ‘She’s a good roommate,’ and ‘She’s a good friend.’ ”

“Hmm, that does sound suspicious. Is Lucy still single?” Harley asks.

“She brought a date over a few weeks ago,” I pitch in, thinking it will settle their curiosity.

“Ooh, was that jealousy I detect in your tone?” Harley questions.

Dammit.

“Did he stay the night?” Adam asks as he opens the screen door and allows Harley and me to walk in first.

Their old house is still being renovated since Adam does all the work himself. It’s original to the property. They’ve kept a lot of the vintage charm it was built with. Harley’s design choices are a mix of neutrals, warm textures, and as many live plants as she can possibly fit in it. She’s got the greenest thumb I’ve ever seen anyone have, and I was raised by farmers.

“No. We had dinner, and he left.”

“We had dinner? You ate with them?” Harley says.

I go sit down at the little kitchen table, wishing I’d never brought it up.

“Ah, well, she cooked a lot of food, so I ate some.” I’m trying to make my voice sound nonchalant.

Adam grabs the plates from Harley to set the table. “You just intruded on their date and ate the food she’d made for him?”

I exhale. “You’re making it sound like something that it wasn’t. We’re roommates. Why can’t I sit down and eat dinner in my own apartment?”

Harley and Adam exchange a *look*. This is why I hate hanging out with them sometimes. They talk about me with their eyes too.

“Methinks the lad doth protest too much, my love,” Harley remarks.

Adam chuckles, setting a bowl of sliced peaches on the table. “I would have to agree with you.”

I grind my teeth together, reaching for the spoon in the peaches and thinking of a way to change the subject.

“What about you two? Any little annoying shits on the way that I should be aware of?”

Adam and Harley both grow silent.

Shit. Is she pregnant?

They don’t answer me, changing the subject to talk about the grape growing and how they just secured a contract with a local venue to be the wine supplier for their next event.

At least I shut them up about me and Lucy.

SIXTEEN

lucy

THE SOUND of my bedroom door creaking open rouses me from a strange dream. I'm thankful for the interruption because the dream was giving me a tingling sensation deep down in my belly that I don't like.

I see Dan's golden head of hair sneaking into my bedroom.

Maybe I'm still dreaming.

My eyes slit open, just barely wide enough to take in the huge bouquet of white roses in his hand, along with a sparkly, enormous bunch of colorful birthday balloons. After setting the roses on my desk, he slowly spreads the balloons out all over the room. I shut my eyes, hoping he doesn't know that I'm awake yet.

After a few more minutes, I open them again to see him walking in with a tray of colorful cupcakes, and this time, he's wearing a pointed party hat.

He's also doing it all *shirtless*.

The hard planes of his shoulders and abs are somehow more distracting than the colorful balloons and cupcakes. He sets the tray next to the roses and spins around to inspect the room. I squeeze my eyes shut, wondering what else he could possibly be bringing in here. My room isn't that big.

A few moments later, I hear him returning. I wait until there's no more sound before opening up my eyes to see that he's gone. There's a box wrapped in glittery gold wrapping paper, topped with a big white bow, sitting next to the roses.

I slowly sit up in my bed, taking in the scene around me. It's my twenty-second birthday today, October 10. In twenty-two years of birthdays and being with Brett for four of them, I've never had anyone do something like this for me.

The rush of tears behind my eyes is just another reminder that I don't deserve it. I'll never deserve him. This is just a prequel for the amazing life he'll give another girl when he showers her with affection, thoughtful gifts, and all his undivided attention.

I don't know her yet, but I hate that bitch with a force so great that it *terrifies* me.

"Lulu?" Dan whispers from the crack in the door.

I try to hold back a smile. "Yes?"

"Can I come in?"

"Um, it looks like you already did. If not, I think we need to get a new lock on the door."

He slowly pushes it open. "Happy birthday."

He has a cup of coffee in his hand. He walks over to me, setting it on the bedside table. We both look around for a moment, and the room is filled with a tense silence.

"I don't know how it happened. I just went to get you some cupcakes. Then, I saw the balloons. I told the lady to blow them up, but after she did, I thought they looked childish. So, I got the bouquet since you're turning twenty-two, not five."

He rubs his hand on the back of his neck, surveying the room.

That doesn't explain the party hat...or the coffee. Or the gift.

"It's...I like it." I'm afraid if I talk too much, I'll choke up. I don't know what to say.

"It's a lot. I'm sorry. Looking at it now, I can see how it feels like—"

"Danny, I love it."

He half smiles, his eyes wide with uncertainty. "I just wanted you to have a good birthday. You've been so sad lately."

I laugh, reaching for my coffee as I stand up. I plant a kiss on his cheek, trying not to inhale the fresh scent of his cedar and pine soap that I've secretly used a thousand times.

"You're an amazing friend. Thank you."

I look up at him, and suddenly, we're breathing in the same oxygen. He nods, azure eyes dipping down to my lips and back up so quickly that I wonder if I imagined it.

"Everyone is meeting us out at Joe Bob's at one. The band is a local Texas country singer."

He pushes his hands into his pockets, taking a step back from me.

I nod. "Sounds good. What should I wear?"

I don't want him to leave yet, but he looks like he's about to bolt. He shrugs, his massive shoulders still the most distracting sight in my line of vision. I keep thinking I'll get used to the sight of them, but I just haven't.

"Um, what about that yellow shirt?"

I scrunch my eyebrows together. "What yellow shirt?"

I hardly own anything that isn't black or gray, except the blue and red dresses I bought recently.

He walks past me toward my closet, pulling open the door. "It was this yellow tank top you wore one time. Scarlett was here. I think we all played poker, and she was complaining about how Silas was an ass, so pre them hooking up."

I stand frozen on the carpet, wondering how on earth he remembers a shirt I wore that long ago. "Um, well, I have no idea. That was, like...last year."

He thumbs through my shirts and dresses, which is a very limited selection.

"I'll just call Scarlett and see if she has something." I want him out of my closet. I feel strangely exposed with him sifting through my clothes.

"Here it is." He pulls out a hanger with a pale yellow crop tank top hanging on it that was buried under the rest of my clothes and shoved to the back.

"Oh. That's Scarlett's. I think I spilled something on myself, and she let me borrow it back when she was in the dorms."

"You look good in yellow," Dan says. "You could wear it with those denim shorts and some cowgirl boots."

"I don't own cowgirl boots."

He smiles, walking over to the dresser and grabbing the box. "Maybe you'll get some for your birthday."

I slowly step toward him. My heart is in my throat as I gently pull on the end of the bow, releasing the knot. The ribbon falls away. I tear at the gold wrapping paper, revealing a brown shoebox. Dan spins the box until the opening is facing me. He slowly lifts the lid to reveal a pair of white cowboy boots with an angled toe and a two-inch heel. They have small rhinestones etched into the center of the leather leaves and flowers. They're stunning, and they look *very* expensive.

"You shouldn't have," I whisper.

I reach out a finger to trace over the petal of a flower.

“This guy I ride bulls with hand-makes them. He does great work. I had to sneak into your room to get your shoe size, but you should try them on to make sure they fit.”

He sets the box down on my bed, taking a step back.

My phone on my nightstand starts to ring. Dan takes it as the opportunity to leave.

“I’m going to shower.” He turns around and leaves the room, shutting the door behind him.

I exhale, wondering why I feel like as hard as I’m trying to hold on to our friendship, he’s still slipping away from me.

I press the Answer button on my phone screen.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Lucy Luuuuu. Happy birthday to youuu!” My dad’s, Jenn’s, and my mom’s voices all sing the birthday song in unison.

I can’t help but smile through until the end of our little family tradition.

“Thanks, guys. I love you.”

“Any big plans for the day?” my dad asks.

I look down at the white boots. “I’m going out with friends to a concert tonight.”

“Oh, that’ll be fun. I transferred some money into your account so you can treat yourself,” Mom pitches in.

“Thanks. I miss you guys.” Emotion swells inside my chest as the sound of their familiar voices settles over me. I shouldn’t have been avoiding them for so long, just because of the messy breakup.

“How are classes going?” Dad asks.

“Really good. I have all As and Bs, except for one class, but I’m still passing it.” *Barely.*

I hear a sigh of relief on the other end, reminding me why I’m trying so hard to focus on my school this semester and not be the disappointment for once in my life.

“That’s great, sis! I got your shoes for the wedding yesterday. I’ll send you a picture.”

“Okay, sounds good. I love y’all so much. I can’t wait to see everyone at the wedding.”

“Okay, sweetheart, have a good day. Happy birthday,” Dad says.

“Is that my shirt?” Scarlett asks, pulling me into a tight hug.

“Yes. Found it in the back of my closet.” I hug her back.

“The boots are amazing! You look hot as shit.” Her ruby-red lips form a smile.

She’s in a similar outfit with a purple tube top and Daisy Dukes like mine, but she paired them with Chucks.

She’s holding a white ribbon with glittery pink letters that say *Birthday Girl*. She shakes it in front of me before looping it over my head and under one arm.

Scarlett is my badass, outspoken friend. She and Silas had a tense, high-conflict love story that ended in absolute, blissful happiness. Dan and I had a front seat for the entire thing, which was entertaining to say the least. Silas is behind her, holding on to her hand like he’ll never let go.

“Happy birthday, Lucy,” he says, grinning.

I nod. “Thank you. I’m so glad y’all could come out.”

“I need a cold beverage,” Scarlett says. “First birthday drink is on me.”

She called me earlier to sing me an off-tune “Happy Birthday” song and to chat while we both got ready for the day of concerts. They start with lesser-known local bands and steadily progress to more popular, well-known artists as the day goes on. The food trucks are one of my favorite parts of this venue.

“Si said we can all stay at Adam’s tonight since it’s so close. Harley texted me that they’ll be here around two.”

I nod, looping my arm through Scarlett’s. My long ringlets are stretching down my back, and I’m already regretting not putting my thick mane of hair up in a ponytail. October in Texas is still grueling heat some days.

“We want a drink, boys,” she singsongs behind us.

I’m tempted to turn around and see if Dan is following us, but I force my gaze ahead. We make it to a bar that has no line. The bartender is a short guy with a goatee, and he smiles at both of us approvingly.

“What can I get the birthday girl?”

I’m half tempted to make Scarlett wear the sash, considering I hate being the center of attention and she thoroughly enjoys it.

“Um, what are we drinking today, birthday girl? I’m thinking tequila.”

I nod. "I'll take a margarita on the rocks with salt."

"Same for me." She turns to Silas. "Babe, what do you want?"

"Get me a Shiner."

Scarlett reaches for her wallet, but Silas steps up with his card and places it on the counter in front of her without a word.

"Are you okay? What's wrong?" She turns to me while the bartender mixes up the drinks.

My and Scarlett's friendship has been through thick and thin. Her relationship with Silas was fraught with tension, especially from the drama between their families. I can tell Scarlett anything, but I'd have to be able to articulate my own emotions before I can share them.

"I'm really okay. I didn't sleep well last night." I turn around and glimpse Dan and Silas a few steps behind us.

"That's a lie. Come on. You need to get it out so we can actually enjoy your birthday. The vibes are a big fat no right now." Scarlett thanks the bartender for our drinks as he sets them down on the bar in front of us.

I exhale, wondering if the liquid courage will help me open up.

"I'm not trying to kill the vibe. I just don't know how to process the last few weeks."

She nods like she understands even though I haven't told her anything. Without another word, she spins around and marches up to Silas and Dan.

"Bathroom break. Y'all wanna meet us by the food trucks?"

Silas nods and leans down to peck her on the lips. Dan avoids eye contact with me. I turn to follow Scarlett as she struts toward the restrooms. She loops her arm with mine.

"What has happened in the last few weeks? I don't need to know it all, just tell me one thing that you can't get out of your head."

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, trying to come up with something to say without just laying it all out there.

"Things have been weird...with Dan. He's acting strange."

She takes a sip of her drink. "When did that start?"

"Uh...it started when we had this...awkward moment."

"Did you kiss or something?"

I gasp. "What? No! Of course not. Nothing like that."

She just casually asked if we kissed like it would be no big deal?

She laughs. "Okay, then what happened? Did you accidentally brush against his junk or something?"

Um, yes, among other things...

"He saw *my* junk. He walked in on me...in the shower—his shower," I blurt out before I have a chance to chicken out.

Scarlett turns to me, blinking twice before she stops in her tracks. "Don't stop there. What did he do?"

I chew on my bottom lip as we approach the ladies' room.

"I...well, I was using the showerhead to...you know." I can't look at her while I say it, but I feel like I have to get it out in the open before I go crazy with the memory rolling around in my brain over and over.

The eternal tension between me and Dan is making me feel faint.

After a few painful silent moments, I look up at her face. Scarlett is covering her mouth with her hand, like she's in shock. Her gray eyes are wide.

"Don't look at me like that! Was it that bad?" I nearly shriek with panic.

It means nothing! my desperate internal dialogue whines.

She somewhat recovers, shaking her head. "No, no, it's not that bad. I was just surprised is all. I think it's *barely* a big deal. What did he do? Dan is still a virgin, right?"

I nod vigorously, my curls bouncing. "Of course! He wants to lose it though. He's been looking for someone all semester to date, sleep with, whatever."

"Oh my gosh, Lucy. Tell me what happened! The facts—from start to finish."

She pulls me aside, out of the line of ladies waiting for the restroom and over to the side of the building, where we're secluded. I close my eyes, taking a long swig of my drink before opening them and making eye contact with her.

"Okay. So, I started using Dan's shower a while ago. His showerhead is removable, and...a girl has needs."

Scarlett snickers. "*Pre-dating Silas* me totally gets it."

"So, one day, I was showering, and I put my foot up on the side of the tub for easier access. I guess the curtain wasn't very secure because it came tumbling down. I was close, so I just...left it there to finish. Next thing I knew, I opened my eyes, and he was standing there...completely naked. I thought I was dreaming until he moved."

Scarlett's eyes are sparkling with interest as she nods for me to continue.

“So then, he says, ‘Don’t stop on my account.’ I just...I couldn’t. So, he watched me...until the end.”

She’s still speechless, and I very seriously debate on finishing the story.

She blows out a breath. “Damn. That was hot. I need to talk to Silas about a *self-pleasure while watching* session because I would be so into that.”

“You are not getting the point, Scar! Dan and I are *just friends*. He’s looking for something long-term with a sweet sorority girl. I’m so far from ready for a relationship. I don’t know if I ever will be—at least not in this decade. He’s ready now. I cannot lose him as a friend...I just can’t.” My voice starts to break at my last words.

She reaches her arm around my quivering shoulders. “I’m sorry, Lu. I shouldn’t have said that. Please continue. What happened next?”

I blink away the moisture threatening to spill over my lashes. “I...got out of the shower, and he got in and did what I had done. I”—I lower my voice to a whisper because I can’t say it too loud—“watched. I don’t know why. I just couldn’t look away.”

I can’t look her in the eye when I tell her the last part. “Then, I just bolted. I feel like sex is so intimate, so vulnerable. I haven’t been with anyone since Brett. Brett took what he wanted. He was so...well, you know what he was. I want to erase him with someone else, but that someone can’t be Danny. He deserves better. Our friendship is too important to both of us. I just want to forget it ever happened, but now, he’s being weird. Things are weird.”

She nods, pulling me in tighter for a hug before slowly pulling back. “Honey, I get where you’re coming from with Brett, wanting some time to heal, all that. How are you so sure it would ruin everything? What if you and Dan could just have fun and not let it get emotional? Who said sex has to become a long-term relationship?”

I sigh. “He’s the only man I’ve ever been able to get close to and still trust, other than my dad. I can’t risk losing him. He’s a catch. There are so many sweet girls out there who were made for him. He said it himself—he wants a bubbly blonde with a big personality. Someone like Levi’s wife, Kenna. Essentially the opposite of me. And that’s fine! It’s totally fine with me. I want to be alone. I’m not going to get in the way of him finding his dream girl for a few romps in the sheets. If he gives it up, he might get

really attached. It'll be his first time. You can't deny how potent that can be, considering what happened with you and Silas."

Silas and Scarlett slept together long before they began a relationship, resulting in him giving his virginity to her and falling head over heels in love before she was ready for it. It worked out, obviously, but they're the exception, not the rule.

She spins us around to start slowly walking back toward the food trucks. "I'm thinking you either have to start flirting with another guy or take it to the next level with Dan. Y'all can't be in this limbo forever. What you need is a birthday kiss. If you don't want it to be with Dan, then we'll find you someone else. Deal? You're getting smooched tonight, maybe more." She wiggles her eyebrows.

I gulp down more alcohol, nodding along as we approach the guys. Dan's shoulders are broad and sexy, as usual. I look away, feeling annoyed with myself for constantly noticing things about him like this.

Just. Friends.

I didn't even tell Scar about the birthday spread he'd put out for me this morning, but it's irrelevant either way. She's right. I either have to decide to become kissing friends with Dan or find another guy to distract myself with while I sort out my feelings.

SEVENTEEN

dan

AS SOON AS the girls hurry off toward the restrooms, I turn to face Silas. "Has Scarlett told you anything about Lucy lately?"

He turns to me, eyes glinting with humor. "Like what?"

I try to appear casual, shrugging. "Like if she's said anything recently about dating or that guy Connor."

That's not what I'm wondering about, but I can't voice what I'm really asking without him catching on that I'm into her but that I've been friend-zoned *again*.

"If I've learned anything about my girlfriend and women in general, they're talking about it right now."

My eyes drift to their backs as they walk away.

"But I think you should get your head out of your ass and tell her how you really feel."

My gaze cuts back to his face. He's shaking his head with a half-smile on his mouth.

"Hey, where's the birthday girl?" Adam's voice saves me from having to lie to Silas.

My brother's arm wraps around my shoulders in a bro hug before doing the same to Silas. Harley is right behind him with a smile on her face. She pulls me into a tight hug.

"How did she like the boots?" she whispers.

I enlisted Harley to help me choose between black, white, and brown leather. I trust a woman's opinion much more than my own, and I didn't want to screw up and pick the wrong thing.

"She's wearing them right now, so I guess she likes them."

She grins, clapping her hands together. "I'm so glad. They were a great choice."

Lucy and Scarlett walk up to join the group. I've been avoiding eye contact with Lucy, but I study her face for a moment to try and read her mood. She smiles warmly at my brother and Harley, greeting them both.

Harley gives her a hug. "Love the boots! You look so good in white," Harley says.

Lucy's eyes dart over to me as she thanks Harley.

I look away, taking a long gulp of my beer. *This is going to be a long fucking night.*

"Dan! My man, you look as good as new. How's the leg? You're a crazy son of a bitch." A semi-familiar voice speaks into my ear.

I turn to see a crooked grin with a tooth on the bottom missing and the rest tobacco stained. The man's face looks like someone I've seen before, but I can't place his name. He must be from The Riders, considering he knows about my injury.

Shit. Could this night get any worse?

"Hey. Yeah, man. I'm good." I try to speak quietly so Adam and Silas don't get curious about what this guy is talking about.

"Missed you since then though. When you gonna come back? I won hella good money on you." He chuckles, his tobacco- and beer-scented breath wafting toward me as he leans closer, lowering his voice to match mine.

He probably takes the existence of the entire organization's "secrecy" more seriously than I do. I just don't want to get a lecture from my older brother.

"I'll be back soon. Already feeling better. You'll probably see me at the next one."

He winks, holding out a fist. I bump his with mine before turning away and taking a step closer to the stage. The group seems to be preoccupied because no one questions me about who the guy was.

The sky finally darkens, cooling us off as the crowd gets more animated with every new bottle of liquor that's drained.

The main band for the night should be out any minute now. I'm four beers deep, but I'm about to switch to whiskey if I have to keep watching guys buy Lucy birthday drinks. She's had too many for her small frame. I don't want her to get sick later.

“You’ve got that look.” Scarlett speaks up from beside me.

I turn to face her. Her eyes are glassy. Silas agreed to be the designated driver and stick to water, but he’s continued to fill Scarlett’s glass with alcohol, just like the rest of us. Adam is the only other one not drinking. He doesn’t like the feeling.

“What look?”

She smirks, shaking her head. “The good old-fashioned look of *jealousy*. If you don’t make a move, someone else will, Dan.”

I exhale before downing the rest of my beer and walking up to the closest bar. “Two classic margaritas.”

“Doubles?”

“Yeah.”

Scarlett’s right. Tonight is the night when I’ll tell Lucy exactly how I’m starting to feel a lot less like friends and a lot more like something else.

The couples are all paired off for a slow song. Everyone around us seems to have someone. Lucy is alone, her arms wrapped around her elbows and pulled close to her stomach. She tilts her head up to look at the few visible stars in the night sky. I’m fighting every urge in my body not to go to her, pull her close, and whisper in her ear that I’d rather jump in front of the nearest combine plowing up a field than keep standing three steps away from her ever again.

I take a step toward her, determined to make my intentions known. Before I can get there, a man approaches her from behind. The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

He reaches out, cupping her lower back. She’s inches away, looking up at his face. His other hand is holding a drink. He leans down to say something to her.

I can’t hear the conversation over the noise. I step closer, seeing his hand steadily reach lower down her back. Sirens shriek in my ear as I see his hand fully cup her ass, grabbing it obscenely.

She yelps, jumping away from him. From his profile, I can see a smile plastered on his face. My drink goes down to the ground as I reach forward, close enough now to touch him, and my fist wraps around the collar of his

shirt. I yank him toward me, simultaneously removing his groping hand from her backside. Lucy steps away from the man while his beady eyes widen up at me.

“Hey! Chill out, man! I didn’t know she was—”

“What the fuck kind of lowlife prick approaches a lady and touches her like that? You’d better thank your lucky fucking stars that God blessed me with the gift of *restraint*.”

I shove him away from me, hard, and he falls to the ground. His drink splashes up on his shirt. He gapes up at me in fear.

Good, fucker. You should fear me.

He scrambles away. I exhale the oxygen in my lungs before slowly turning to face Lucy. She’s huddled up close to Scarlett and Harley, worried eyes shifting from my face to the creep who narrowly escaped a visit to the emergency room for a dislocated jaw.

My brother and Silas are both grim-faced, standing tall with puffed chests, facing the man, no doubt watching for any companions who might be tempted to defend him. They’d be idiots to take on us three, and they’d be complete degenerate morons if Levi were here.

My blood is still boiling, heart racing like a horse on the track.

Lucy.

I turn back to her, stepping closer to her. I reach out to touch her forearm. Her brown eyes are round as they meet mine.

“Are you okay? I’m so sorry, Lu.”

She bites her lip, nodding woodenly. “I’m okay. That was...he came out of nowhere.”

I nod, my hand curling around her arm, wishing I could pull her close to my chest and hold her tightly.

“I should have stopped him sooner. I’m sorry. I won’t let anyone else touch you, I promise.”

A small smile curls across her pink lips. “I guess that means I won’t get a birthday kiss.”

My eyelids droop, but I shrug instead of responding. She laughs, spinning around to face the band that has finally taken the stage. She leans back against my chest before reaching her hand back to possessively stick it inside the top of my front jeans pocket.

Okay, I like that way too much.

We listen to the band play a few familiar songs, swaying to the music like we've done it a hundred times before. I wish I could freeze time, never losing hold of her in this moment. I wish we didn't have to be stuck as being roommates and *just* friends.

I wish we'd met tonight, just now, as I was defending her from a pervert. Then, we could continue on with me asking for her number, maybe even getting in a kiss tonight and waking up with the heady anticipation of a date and the best story to tell our kids.

"You know what makes me so happy, Danny?" she murmurs, interrupting my fantasy.

I look down at her. Her eyes are closed, long, dark lashes brushing against her rosy cheeks. She has a hint of a smile on her lips as we sway back and forth.

I'm overwhelmed in the moment with how desperately I want to tell her how I truly feel about her. I want to confess to her all the times I've held her like we were just friends, but I pretended it was more than that. I lean down, eyes on her lips with the intention to finally just kiss her, conveying my true feelings. Her mouth is only a breathe away from mine.

I want her to know that I'm falling for her. Even if she rejects me, I need her to know how I see her.

"What makes you happy, Lulu?"

I lean down my ear to her lips so I can hear her over the music and the crowd around us. Her sweet shea butter lotion scent wafts into my nostrils, and her free arm snakes up around my neck. Goose bumps prickle on my forearm.

"I'm so happy we can be friends without anything romantic getting in the way. You're one of the only guys I've ever been able to trust because of that."

My throat constricts, and my chest tightens. I swallow down the ache of desire, wrapped in a heavy layer of pain and loneliness. I pull back.

I'm not physically lonely. I have a lot of friends who love me. My heart is lonely.

"I'm glad you're happy. Your friendship...means a lot to me." The words taste like acid on my tongue.

She's more than a friend to me even though it's completely one-sided. I can't deny it anymore.

My coping mechanism is as dangerous and futile as they come. I just want to feel physical pain. Anything is better than this. I pull my phone out to text Jim, asking him when the next ride is. This time, I won't take no for an answer.

EIGHTEEN

lucy

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”

Dan looks up at me. He pauses for a beat before answering, “I have a ride tonight.”

He looks strapping in his worn Wrangler jeans, brown leather cowboy boots that have seen their better days, and a plain white T-shirt. His short hair is wet from the shower, putting dark, twisted thoughts in my brain against my will.

My eyes widen as curiosity gets the best of me. “When?”

“In an hour.”

My mouth gapes open. I was planning on staying in tonight and working on a series of artwork I’d been designing for my overly optimistic goal of beginning to dive into the world of book cover design and custom graphics.

It came to me in the middle of the night, literally from a dream. Dan’s friend Beckham mentioned it offhand during our bowling game a few nights ago. Ever since, I’ve been lying awake, thinking about how it could truly be a real business for me.

Dan walks to the fridge, opening it to grab a bottle of water, which he chugs in less than ten seconds.

The stamina it takes to go without air for so long...

The other topic I haven’t been able to get out of my head is Dan...in my bed. Ever since he defended me on my birthday, things have been about seventy percent normal. They’re better than they were, but the sexual tension between us is potent, to say the least.

Scarlett’s exact drunken words the night of my birthday were, “If y’all would just fuck already, the vibe of the group would be much more chill.”

I keep telling myself it's just going to take time to go back to normal. He saw me naked, and he's obviously sexually charged, considering how long it's been for him—forever.

Not mine. Not for me. Too good of friends.

He's going to get laid, I'm going to throw up, and everything will be just fine between us after that.

"Can I come watch?" I hear myself say.

He inhales, puffing his chest up. I feel the urge to look away, but I resist, planting my feet stubbornly.

"It can get bloody. Are you sure you're up for it?"

I nod, setting my jaw.

He smiles, sending tingles down between my thighs, making me clench them together.

That smile is dangerous.

"You have to change. It just rained, so the arena is going to be pure muddy filth. Don't wear the white boots."

Excitement zings up through my spine as I turn to run down the hall.

"We gotta leave in five minutes," he calls after me.

I tear through my closet, looking for a pair of old jeans I don't care about anymore. I find some torn ones that I haven't tried on since high school because they got a little small. They slide on over my butt nicely, the perfect amount of snug. I have black tennis shoes that I don't mind getting ruined, so I tug those on too. Lastly, I put on a plain heather-gray tank top with a hole on the hemline. I'm pulling my curly hair up into a big bun as I walk into the hallway.

Dan's eyes trail over me, his expression unreadable. He pauses, blinking quickly before turning around.

Does he not like the outfit?

"You ready?"

I nod, skipping to catch up to him. He opens the front door for me.

"Have you ever brought anyone along for a ride?"

"Nope. First time."

We walk out to his truck together. He opens the passenger door for me, as all Southern gentlemen do for a lady.

"Thanks," I mumble.

He goes around to the driver's side, hopping in and roaring the engine to life. We cruise for about fifteen minutes, heading out of town. I squeeze my

knees together, my eyes searching for a hidden entrance into some *Yellowstone*-esque ranch, anticipating a Rip-looking bodyguard with a rifle over his shoulder.

Ten minutes later, when he finally pulls up, it's an average-looking property with a rusted iron entry. The gate requires a code to open. Dan leans out of the truck window to key it in. It automatically begins to creak open. He slowly pulls over the cattle guard. After we drive past a group of oak trees and an aging white barn, we pull up to an arena surrounded by pickup trucks and a group of cowboys that weren't visible from the road.

"This is like a movie," I mumble.

Dan chuckles. I glance over at him. His eyes are peeled, looking for a parking space. He pulls the truck up next to a vintage-looking tractor, killing the engine.

"Okay, before we go in, I need to talk to you about something."

My eyes are latched on his, which have never looked so serious to me. He adjusts himself to face me fully.

"I only know a few of these guys. I've been riding with this group for years. Some of them are rough, and I don't know shit about them. A fair amount has been to prison. I don't know what for, but when I'm up on that bull, I can't be worried about you. I've got two thousand pounds of an angry beast to think about. I need you to plant yourself somewhere, preferably next to Jim or Clyde, so I don't feel the urge to look for you. Can you do that?"

My throat feels tight as I nod in agreement.

Dan opens the door, and I follow. This suddenly feels serious, like we're in a lawless area, where the rules of society don't apply.

I guess that's true.

He reaches into the back of the pickup for a pair of cognac leather chaps that I've never seen before. He puts them on, tightening the straps around his thick, muscly legs.

Is this illegal?

Dan reaches for my hand, grabbing it firmly and pulling me right up next to him. My heart has been jumping higher than usual ever since he started his little speech about ex-convicts being present here tonight.

I don't usually frequent dangerous circles. I'm a semi-good girl—at heart anyway. I dated an abusive douche bag for a few years, but it wasn't

in my life plan. I've decided that I like good guys, the ones who go the speed limit and pay their water bill a week early.

So, what am I doing here?

I look up at Dan, his callous hand clutching mine tightly, and I know that he's got me. He always does.

He leads me over to two old men in plaid shirts, which have been worn down by the washing machine a thousand times. They look up at us, chewing tobacco behind their gray beards.

"I need you to keep an eye on Lucy while I ride. Both of you."

They nod without question, creating a small space between them for me to stand in.

"How you feeling, boy?" one asks him.

Dan reaches a hand up to grasp the fence. "Ninety percent there. It's not fully healed, but I can compete."

The man nods before spitting into the mud. "Well, get out there and do what you do best."

Dan nods. He turns to me, exhaling. "I'll see you after. Stay with Clyde and Jim."

I nod, my expression solemn. Dan's blue eyes survey the surrounding area before he quickly turns and struts away. My abdominals are clenched tight.

One of the old men turns to me. "You're safe here. Don't leave."

The words feel like half-reassurance, half-warning.

Watching Dan ride is like watching a live-action porno being filmed, only it's one that's being directed from the female gaze.

His hand is strapped down to a bull that looks like it's been tortured with scars all over the leather hide. He's in the chute, and a couple of guys are around him, trying to help him get ready while the animal protests.

"Holy shit, he's going to die," I exhale.

Clyde and Jim ignore me. They haven't spoken a word to me, but various other cowboys have approached them to place bets.

My hands are sweating. My eyes trail back over to where Dan is getting strapped onto the bull. I bite my bottom lip when I see him nod. A teen boy

pulls the pin to open the gate, and steel clashes together as the gate swings open with the loud sound of the buzzer.

My heart is in my throat as I watch the enormous ebony animal try to throw its rider. Dan's hand is in the air, and he somehow almost looks graceful as he rides. Every time the beast swings to one side, Dan seems to anticipate the move and goes with it. His hips are swaying back and forth, and it's the most erotic sight my eyes have ever beheld. My tongue is dry, and my eyes can't look away.

We're right up near the action, so close that I see the black eyes and drool dripping from the angry animal's mouth. I bite down on my lip until I feel pain, watching Dan's concentrated face as he holds on for the entire eight seconds until the buzzer sounds.

Shouts rise in the air as half the bettors celebrate, but the tension doesn't leave my shoulders with Dan still up on the bull's back. He's holding on with both hands now that the time is up.

"How does he get off?!" I screech.

No one seems to give a shit that I'm panicking. Clyde and Jim are talking to men who have approached to discuss the next rider. The fear prickles my skin with goose bumps as I watch him continue to be tossed up in the air, over and over.

I'm about to scream again for someone to help him when a rider on a horse comes out of nowhere and sidles up next to the bull. He pulls a strap from the back of the animal, whose bucking immediately lessens. At the same time, Dan leans over and grips the saddle of the rider, sliding smoothly off the bull and landing on his feet in the dirt. Some of the tension oozes from my shoulders almost immediately.

Then, the bull turns, eyeing Dan like he knows who was just on his back. I'm about to scream again when Dan jumps up onto the fence, swinging his leg over and reaching safety just as the bull gets to the edge of the arena, where he could have easily crushed him with one ram against the iron fence.

The adrenaline rushing back through me nearly sends me over the edge into a panic attack. My heart rate is skyrocketing. My skin is on fire. I've never felt such a rush of fear and excitement at the same time.

Dan is clapping his hands as he makes his way back over to me with a grin. I don't even think I want to see him after what he just put me through.

He removes his helmet when he reaches me, sweat dripping down his brow, creating a line through the thin layer of dirt on his forehead. His chest is still rising and falling rapidly with exertion.

His eyes are bright with the thrill, and my heart putters when I clearly see on his face how excited he is for what he just accomplished.

“What’d you think, Lu?”

I open my mouth to answer, but the words are trapped in my throat.

I think you’re certifiably insane.

I think you’ve just ignited a new kink in me I didn’t know I had.

I think you need to stop fucking around and kiss me right this second before you die from riding another monster for fun!

“I...I think...I think I have a new kink.”

Dan tosses his head back, a deep, guttural laugh coming from his throat.

“What kink is that, baby girl?”

Oh my...

“That was it, boy. Glad to finally have you back in the ring with us. You looked good tonight, son. I’ll have your winnings by tomorrow,” Jim interrupts us, clapping Dan on the shoulder.

My roommate’s blue eyes are on my face, dipping down to my lips for a split second before he turns to look at Jim.

“Thank you, sir. It’s good to be back. I’ll be here for the next one too.”

My heart hammers, a mix of thrill and terror numbing me.

Why does he have to be such a heady mix of perfection and chaos?

Dan reaches out to clutch my hand, turning and leading me back out to his truck.

“We aren’t staying for the rest of the riders?” I ask.

“Not tonight,” he says.

I’m disappointed, considering that was the most thrill I’ve felt in my entire life. It was my first bull-riding event to attend. Even though I was raised in Texas, my parents are academics, and this is far from the scene I grew up in.

He leads me to the passenger side of his truck, opening the door for me. I notice him favoring his injured leg.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, my fingers reaching out to touch his forearm.

He shakes his head. “Nope. Just a little sore.”

I don’t believe him, but I climb into the truck anyway. He makes his way around to the back of the pickup, probably removing his chaps to put in

the bed of the truck. I quickly whip out my phone to send a text to Scarlett.

LUCY:

I've never wanted to fuck someone so badly in my entire life.

I. Am. So. Turned. On. What the hell is happening to me?

The driver's door opens, startling me. I lock the phone, my cheeks blushing pink in the dark. I think my panties are actually getting wetter the more I bask in the memory of what I just witnessed.

Just friends, just friends, just friends...

Dan doesn't say anything as he turns his truck home, and we begin the short drive. I have so many questions to ask him. I almost don't trust myself to be around him tonight without blurting out loud that I'm having dirty thoughts about him, which are overwhelming me with each passing day.

While we ride in tense silence, I pretend he's inviting me to his shower again tonight. He wants me to show him how I like to touch myself, and then he watches me do it so he can learn. But then, of course, he wants to try it, so we switch places, and he takes over. My lower back starts to sweat as my mind swirls further down.

My underwear is soaked through by the time we get to our apartment. I exhale and try to gulp back a full lung of oxygen, but I struggle to. We make our way up the stairs, me ahead of him. I'm hoping he can't smell my arousal by walking so closely behind me.

I fumble with the key in the door before pushing it open finally and walking into the darkness. I don't know why, but I just don't want to turn on the big light. My hands are shaking as I step all the way into the kitchen, wondering if he's going to speak or just silently go into his room and close the door, shutting me out. The only light is from a small lamp we leave on in the adjoining living room.

I don't hear anything behind me, so I spin around to see him pausing as he checks his phone. The light from the screen illuminates his face. A twinge of uneasiness pinches inside my belly as I wonder if he's texting a girl, Billie maybe.

Which he has every right to do.

I'm incapable of leaving until he dismisses me because I'm just that far gone for him right now. I need something to happen, something to break this tension before I go completely mad.

He looks up at me, lips parting as his gaze rakes over me, a hunger I've never seen on his face before.

"Get over here." He growls the words. He's demanding. He's not asking.

My entire body lights up with anticipation as we both close the distance between us. His big hand cups around the back of my neck, the other one roughly reaching for my waistline. He jerks me against him, our flesh connecting as closely as we possibly can. His lips collide with mine, tongue tasting me like a man dying of thirst in the desert. His mouth seals against mine, and we hum with pleasure as we both sink into the kiss.

My hands move up into his hair, my fingers scraping across the base of his neck. He smells like sweat, Dan, and cowhide, and it's the hottest thing I've ever experienced in my life. He lifts me off the floor, and my legs swing around his waistline as he carries me back toward his bedroom.

My tongue slowly parts the seam of his lips, reaching in gently to taste him. He releases the sexiest, deepest moan. I tilt my pelvis toward him, trying to get closer to him.

The next thing I know, he's tossing me onto his bed. I look up at him with wide eyes, noting that the excitement I witnessed in them earlier when he finished his ride was nothing compared to the fire in them now.

"Take everything off."

NINETEEN

dan

“TAKE EVERYTHING OFF,” I tell her.

My good-boy Southern roots are hanging on by a thread right now because all I can think about doing to this woman is ravaging her like a man with no morals.

She doesn’t look afraid, not like I am with the unhinged desire I feel raging inside me. She looks...excited.

Well, based on the text she sent you, she’s never been so turned on in her entire life.

I still don’t know why she did it through a text, but I sure as hell am glad she finally gave me the green light to make a move on her. My dick has been as hard as stone ever since we were driving home and all I could think about was her sucking me off.

She maintains eye contact with me as she releases her curly hair from its bun. Next, she pulls her tank top over her head, revealing a soft pink bra underneath. I groan with the desire to taste her nipples, to touch her all over with my tongue.

“That’s a good girl,” I tell her as she sits up to unbutton her skintight jeans.

My hand is reaching for my button, and I slowly release it before dragging the zipper down while she tugs hers completely off. She’s naked now, except for her silky pink panties and bra.

“You look good enough to eat.” I lick my lips in anticipation, eyes blazing over her tanned skin, fantasizing about all the places I’m going to taste.

She waits for me now, and I slowly approach the bed, tossing my filthy T-shirt aside as I get closer.

“I’ve seen you do it with water, but I want to try it with my mouth.” My voice is a hoarse whisper.

Her pink cheeks grow a deeper shade, but she nods in agreement. I plant myself on the side of the bed, pulling her hips to the edge of the mattress as I get on my knees for her. I can smell her arousal, and it’s a heady, delicious scent. I slowly peel off her panties, my eyes focused on the prize.

“Danny...” she whimpers.

My eyes flick up to hers as I pull the silk completely off and dip my head between her legs. Her mouth is open as she watches me.

We’re really about to do this.

My first taste is the best moment of my entire life. She’s flawless as she bucks under my tongue, as if that could ever stop me. I slide it farther in, searching for the spot that will drive her wild.

I explore every part of her as she begins to moan, reaching her hands down to run her fingers through my hair.

“Danny...oh my...D...”

“Say my name, baby. I want the neighbors to hear you scream it.”

There’s something in me coming alive for the first time. I’ve never done this with anyone before, never tasted a woman like this. Lucy is the sexiest woman alive, and *finally* knowing that she wants me, too, is sending shivers of pleasure down my spine.

She gently pushes herself up toward my mouth, giving me better access.

“Right there,” she pants.

I reach my hands over her thighs to spread her legs apart more, baring her to me completely.

I want to wake up with my face right here.

I suck gently on the top of her clit, in awe of her reaction as she lets out a muffled moan and her legs begin to shake. Several seconds pass before she completely relaxes, pushing her hips to the side.

My length is hard in my jeans and beginning to ache.

She sits up, reaching for me. She helps me pull down my jeans, and I kick them off. My dick springs forward underneath my boxers. She rips them down, grabbing my hard length.

I can’t speak as I watch her pump her hand over me. My world tilts off its axis as the heady sensations soar through my body, sending bursts of electricity through me.

“Baby, yes...Lucy, that feels so fucking good.”

I'm on my knees on the bed, and she bends down in front of me. I can feel myself getting close, but I know it's way too soon. I have no experience with holding it back, but I wish I did so this could go on for a little longer.

She leans down, kissing the tip of my shaft. I can't comprehend how good she feels with her soft hands, sweet lips, and her naked body in front of me. I feel it coming up, spilling all over the sheets and her hand. I exhale, feeling embarrassed that it happened so quickly. It felt like heaven, the best experience I've ever had.

After a few silent moments, she slowly pulls back, turning her face up to meet my gaze.

My stomach drops when I see the tears streaming down her red-rimmed eyes. The euphoric feeling I had moments ago is immediately replaced with fear.

"Lucy. Lucy, what's wrong?"

I reach for her, but she pulls away from me. Tears continue to stream down her cheeks as her bottom lip begins to tremble. I reach for her again, desperate to hold her close and tell her she's going to be okay.

I touch her arm, but she pulls back even farther before stepping off the bed and running out of the room.

"Lucy! Where are you going? What's wrong?"

She doesn't stop to answer. She flees the room as a sob escapes her throat.

The room starts to close in around me. My heart begins pounding as adrenaline and terror rip through me like a bullet train with no brakes.

Did I hurt her? What is happening? Why did she run from me?

I pause for a few seconds as I try to catch my breath and process what's happening. I climb off the bed and find a pair of gray terry-cloth shorts to throw on before walking out into the hallway. I can hear the water running, coming from Lucy's bathroom. I slowly walk into her room, seeing that she left the bathroom door open.

"Lucy, can I come in?"

She doesn't answer. I exhale a breath, debating whether or not I should leave her alone or make sure she's okay. She just bolted with a look of fear in her tear-soaked eyes. A lump has settled in my stomach, making me think I might throw up.

"I'm coming in to check on you. You're scaring me."

I decide I care more about her being okay than her privacy right now, considering the fact that we just did some pretty intimate things together and she can't possibly be more exposed now than she was five minutes ago.

She doesn't respond, so I step in through the open door. I see her now, sitting on the floor of her shower. The glass door is open. She's looking down between her legs, her hair covering her face.

I don't hear any crying, but her shoulders are trembling. My heart squeezes with concern, and my palms begin to sweat. I sit down on her bath rug on the floor outside the shower. She hasn't responded to me, so I'm getting the sense she's not going to even if I keep talking.

"I'm right here, Lu. I'm here if you need me."

She still doesn't say anything, but she slowly reaches her hand out to the edge of the shower. A trickle of relief goes through me as I grab her hand, gently threading my fingers through hers. She holds on to me tightly, and I hear a shaky exhale release from her mouth.

The tension eases from my shoulders the longer we sit in the silence. The water from her showerhead is trailing down her arm and over our hands. It starts to wet the rug I'm sitting on. I don't know how much time passes, but it's enough that the faucet starts to spray cool water out.

Eventually, Lucy starts to stand up. I move with her, helping her to her feet. She lets go of my hand before reaching for the knobs, turning them both off. I turn around to find her a towel. Once I grab it I hold it out to wrap around her. She lets me do it, blinking up at me as I slowly dry her off. Her eyes are no longer red. Now, they just look sad and tired.

What happened to you, Lu?

I finish drying her body off before moving to her dripping hair. I tenderly dry her hair with the towel. We don't speak as I hang it up on the towel rack. She walks into the room, rummaging through her drawers and finding a big T-shirt and sweatpants to pull on. She lies down on the bed, reaching for the remote on her nightstand.

I shove my hands in my pockets, wondering if she needs alone time or company.

"Stay," she says simply, eyes on the TV.

So, I stay.

I don't touch her as I lie down on the pillow next to hers, but after ten minutes of the first *Friends* episode, she reaches her hand out to hold mine,

gripping it gently in her smaller one before her eyes drift closed and she falls asleep.

TWENTY

lucy

A HEAVY ARM is draped over me as I begin to open my sore eyes. My face feels swollen, like I've been crying. The events of last night come rushing back to me as I look down and see Dan's arm cradling my waist.

My throat is dry. I wish I could go back in time and never let last night end the way it did.

I haven't tried doing anything sexual with a man since I was with Brett. I guess the reality of how abusive he was is taking a toll on me in more ways than one.

Something about last night triggered my fight-or-flight response.

Dan had been nothing more than a gentleman, and I was incredibly turned on. I wanted everything, all of him. The dirty mouth I hadn't known he had and the member between his legs were beyond perfect. His surprising skill and enthusiasm when his face was between my legs was the best sexual encounter I'd ever had.

He made me feel things I hadn't realized my body was capable of. I wanted to show him those things, too, so I went down on him.

But right as he'd started to finish, I had a flashback. It was like suddenly, mentally, I wasn't where I really was, consensually hooking up with a man I truly cared about.

My brain was at war within me, one side insisting I was in danger and the other side insisting that I was okay.

The first side won, and panic rose inside me. Tears immediately began to spill down my cheeks. I looked up at Dan's face, trying to convince myself to calm down, but it was too late. I couldn't convince my reactive, panicked side that I was safe with him, that he wasn't hurting me like Brett used to.

I ran to get in the shower to calm my nervous system down. I'd always had mild panic attacks growing up, but after being with Brett for so many years, they had gotten worse and worse as his abusive behavior increased.

Since leaving him, it seems to have gotten much better, except for when I'm triggered.

It's happened twice now with Dan, and I hate myself for it. The first time wasn't nearly as bad—after he found out I had listed his virginity online and he got mad about it. At least I didn't have to sit in the shower for an hour after that one.

What happened is just further proof that he needs someone who doesn't have all this fucked-up mental trauma. I could hear the fear in his voice last night, but I couldn't find mine to reassure him that he hadn't hurt me or done anything wrong.

I scared the hell out of him. It was literally his first time to have oral sex, and I ruined the experience.

You can't keep dragging him into your fucked-up orbit. He deserves better. He deserves someone whole. You need to focus on school and healing.

A lonely tear squeezes out of the corner of my eye, running down into my pillow. I'm sick of crying about my trauma. I'm sick of feeling like, no matter what, I will never be healed or better. I want to be good enough for him.

His muscular arm tightens around me, pulling me closer to him. I immediately feel his morning wood poking my butt. A flush washes over my chest, arousal puckering my nipples.

"Mmm, morning," he groans.

Holy fuck...

His rough morning voice sends shivers down my spine. My thighs clench together instantly.

"Morning." My attempt at nonchalance is less than convincing.

He nuzzles the back of my neck, his warm breath on my skin making the dampness between my legs grow.

What did you just tell yourself you weren't going to do? You're weak.

"How do you feel this morning?" He rubs his hand up my arm as he speaks.

I slowly spin around so that I can face him, praying I washed off all my eye makeup last night in the shower. I haven't looked in a mirror.

His blue eyes are half lidded in the dim morning light. He's shirtless in my bed, fulfilling one of my very specific fantasies.

I hesitate, trying to find the words. He waits patiently, gently caressing the exposed skin on my side with his thumb.

"You're distracting me. Stop it."

He pulls his fingers away, and I feel like I can breathe better and worse at the same time.

"I, uh...I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to lose my shit like that. I get...I get panic attacks sometimes."

I bite my lip, gauging his reaction.

He blinks slowly, eyes never leaving my face. "Like when I got mad about the virgin website?"

"Sort of. Different trigger, worse reaction."

I don't have any intention of telling him why sex triggers me. It's a new discovery for me, and I'm not fully done processing it yet.

"Was it something I did?" His eyes are guarded.

I shake my head. He looks skeptical as I rush to reassure him. "No. No, it wasn't you. You were perfect. I enjoyed it thoroughly until...the last minute."

Guilt plagues me, weighing down my shoulders. It was Dan's first experience, and now, he's questioning if what he did is what caused my reaction. My stomach starts to ache.

"I had no idea you had such a, um, filthy mouth." I blush as the memory resurfaces.

"Say my name, baby. I want the neighbors to hear you scream it."

"I thought maybe that was what upset you."

"No! Oh my gosh, no. Don't ever stop that—ever. Women fantasize about that kind of shit, trust me."

He smirks, clearly pleased to hear it. "That's good to know."

My phone ringing breaks the silence between us. I look at his mouth one more time before rolling over to grab the device off my nightstand, where Dan must have put it on the charger for me last night.

"Hello?"

"Lucy, are you coming into work this morning?" My coworker Sally's voice comes through the speaker.

"Um, yes, of course. I'm just running a little late. I'll be there soon."

"Okay. Bye." She hangs up the phone, clearly annoyed.

I pull back the phone screen to see that I'm already ten minutes late for my shift at the library, and Sally and I are supposed to study for midterms together while we sit at the quiet front desk.

"Shit."

"So, if the protons connect to each other correctly, they end up creating a nucleus."

"Uh, yeah, sounds right," I muse. My mind is still back in my bed, wrapped up in my roommate.

An exasperated sigh escapes Sally. I look over at her, seeing her shake her head at me.

"What?"

"I don't know where your head is, but it's not on this material because everything I just said is complete bullshit."

Sally's personality is similar to mine, blunt and unapologetic about it. We have a mutual understanding with each other based on honesty and the fact that we don't share any friends or social groups. She's strictly a work and biology class friend, someone I open up to more than my close friends because she doesn't know any of them.

"I hooked up with someone last night," I blurt out.

Sally's eyes widen as she leans forward. "Okay, well, spill. You clearly aren't going to get any studying done until you talk about it."

I purse my lips, doodling on the page I was taking notes on, starting by drawing a little spur.

"Ah, it was my first time since my ex, and it was with someone who I... don't see a future with."

"Was it not good?"

I let out an incredulous laugh, clapping my hand over my mouth at how unexpectedly loud it was in the eerily quiet library. I glance around before lowering my voice into a whisper. "It was *very* good. We didn't get very far, and he still made me...you know."

She raises her eyebrow. "So, what's the issue?"

My pen has attached a cowboy boot to the spur, so I decide to add a pant leg to it.

“I don’t want a boyfriend, and me and this guy...we’re just friends. He’s into bubbly blondes who have a disco ball hanging from their rearview mirror and own at least five shades of pink lipstick.”

“Is he an asshole?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. He’s...he’s one of the good ones. We just aren’t a good match.”

“Are you feeling guilty or something? Does he have a girlfriend?”

I gape at her. “I would never hook up with someone who’s taken.”

She shrugs. “Then, I’m confused.”

Her question has me questioning Sally’s morals and her ability to advise me, but I’m desperate to talk this out with someone.

I look back down at the drawing as I start on the cowboy hat attached to the body, deciding I have nothing to lose by sharing more of the story with her.

“This guy and I made a pact at the beginning of the semester. He wants to lose his virginity, and I want to find a man who can make me enjoy sex but still stay single until summer. I really need to focus on myself, on my grades, on healing, and my track record with relationships is...worse than you can imagine. He agreed to keep me accountable and find a no-strings-attached thing, and I agreed to help him find a girlfriend or at least someone to take his V-card.”

Sally’s voice rises. “He’s a virgin? How old is this guy?”

“Shh.” An elderly librarian over at one of the shelves holds her finger up to her lips, scolding us.

Sorry, we both mouth at her.

“Is he at least eighteen?” Sally whispers.

“Holy shit, Sally. Yes, he’s an adult male who goes to this university. We’ve been friends for over a year now.”

“In that case, if you two were already meant to help each other, I don’t see the problem. You can both benefit from the arrangement. Is he decently attractive?”

My pen stops mid-stroke as I create the cowboy’s raised arm.

“Yes...he’s decently attractive.” *Liar, liar.* “What arrangement?”

Sally is leaning back in her chair, filing her nails. “The friends-with-benefits arrangement. You stay single and get your needs taken care of, and he gains experience for whenever he finds his perfect little princess with all the pink lipstick. If that’s his type, he’s not going to catch feelings for you.”

Sally truly has a way with words, no sugarcoating whatsoever.

“I don’t know. How do I keep myself from catching feelings? I’ve never had a friend like that.”

Sally shrugs. “You don’t do any relationshipy stuff with him. Treat him the same way you do now, like a bro. No hand-holding, no dates. Keep it strictly sexual. It’s all your mindset. I had a friends-with-benefits thing with this guy in high school, and we’re still cool.”

“Um, excuse me, can I check out this book?” A man’s voice speaks from the front of the desk we’re sitting at.

We both turn, staring up at him without smiling. He’s a timid-looking student with thick-framed glasses and stringy blond hair. I have no idea how long he’s been standing there.

“Sure thing,” Sally says, standing up and reaching out for his stack of books. “Wouldn’t any dude be lucky to lose his virginity to her, no strings attached?” she asks him.

The guy’s eyes widen as he looks from her face to mine. He doesn’t speak, simply nodding his agreement as he reaches for his library card.

“See, this guy agrees. You should do it.”

But what if I’m the one who can’t help but attach the strings?

TWENTY-ONE

dan

MY RIDE IS NEXT, and the speckled gray bull looks meaner than I've seen in a while.

Clyde leans down to speak into my ear. "Got a lot of money riding on this one, son. You feeling right tonight?"

I simply nod. This arena is bigger than any I've ridden in before. It's filled with people, more than usual at the rides. I drove six hours up into Oklahoma to be here. I don't need the money. I need to ride. I'm starting to feel like a drug addict in search of my next hit.

"Seventeen," the announcer calls.

They don't use names here, just numbers attached to our backs. I walk over to the chute, climbing over to get ready. The bull is surprisingly still as I get on its back.

"You're scaring the shit out of me," I mumble to the calm animal.

"Hold on, seventeen. This one broke an arm two weeks ago," one of the rodeo clowns leaning against the gate tells me.

I barely hear the buzzer as the chute opens, and the bull charges out. He's on a mission to fucking kill me—at least, that's what it feels like. I hold on for dear life with one hand, stretching the other high up in the air as my body feels like it's being tossed around like a rag doll.

Everything fades away besides the hide beneath me and the adrenaline shooting up through my bloodstream. Nothing matters up here, except staying on and surviving. My neck feels like it's going to snap at any moment from the whiplash.

I've been the king of avoiding shit ever since I discovered The Riders as a teenager and could escape the suffocating life I lived with my strict, isolated family.

The buzzer reaches my ear, calling me back to reality. This is the tricky part—getting off without getting trampled. I feel safer up here than I do with Lucy's eyes on me, her tiny hands caressing my heated skin and my heart dangling in front of her face.

The bull's flank strap is finally pulled and removed, but he doesn't seem to give a shit. The pickup man can't get close enough to me, so I do the only thing I possibly can and jump.

I land in the dirt, boots first. I roll to the side, somehow managing to stay upright and make it to the fence without dying. I hear the approving clap of a few cowboys around before Jim approaches me.

"Damn, son, you're a wasted talent here in this league. You have any idea how much money you'd make if you competed in the PBR?"

I chuckle, taking off my helmet. "You know I don't need all that attention."

"Well, you're wasting yourself here. That's clear as shit."

Well, they don't put my name on a TV screen here.

"You can't study for a test here. This bowling league is serious, Lucy." Beckham winks at her as he reaches for the textbook in her lap.

Lucy sighs, releasing the book to him. I clench my fist at my side, regretting having invited my friend to join us. He thumbs through the book pages, stopping on one and looking down at it.

"Wow, did you draw this?"

Lucy turns to look at the paper. Her hair is up in a high ponytail with a few curly tendrils around her face. She's wearing a loose pair of denim jeans and a black crop top. We haven't had time to talk since the night we spent together. I disappeared to Oklahoma for the weekend after she left for work.

All I can think about is her taste and the fact that Beckham is clearly admiring her art and trying to talk to her about it.

And that she's not mine.

"Oh, yeah, just a random doodle while I was studying. Helps me focus."

Her eyes flick up to meet mine for a split second before she looks away to watch Billie come back from playing her turn. Lucy stands up to bowl

her round.

"It's really good. Dan, check this out." Beckham hands over the book with notebook paper shoved inside it.

Half the paper has biology notes. My breathing grows shallow when I see that the bottom half is a drawing of a bull rider.

He's got one hand stretched up in the air, the other down on the bull's back. They're mid-buck, the hind hooves up in the air. The rider's face is obscured by his cowboy hat, except his mouth, which is in a grimace. The details are perfect, down to the muscles in his shoulders and arms, showing how tensed up his body is. He's wearing a white T-shirt.

My heart is beating inside my chest at one hundred miles an hour when I realize the drawing is me. Lucy captured my passion for riding on half a piece of scratch paper.

"That would make a hell of a tattoo. I'm thinking shoulder piece or maybe the chest," Beckham muses.

I look up at him to see him looking down at his shoulder, which is already covered in ink. For some reason, the thought of him getting one of her drawings forever inked into his skin makes me want to vomit all over this bowling alley.

Lucy returns to the seating area. My eyes rise to meet hers, and she sees that I'm holding her textbook. She bites her bottom lip, sitting down and folding her arms over her chest. I slowly close the book.

"Let me see. I'm so ready to get a tattoo!" Billie reaches for the book.

I hand it over before standing up to take my turn.

"Wow, girl, you are talented. I had no idea you were an artist. What else do you draw?"

I tune out the conversation as I roll the bowling ball down the lane. The sooner this game ends, the sooner I can get Lucy alone to talk. The limbo we're in is eating away at my sanity.

"Yeah, as soon as this game ends, let's go. You up for a little field trip to the shop?" Beckham stands up, clapping a hand on my shoulder.

"Uh, tonight? I don't know, man."

Billie claps her hands together. "Come on. Let's go! It'll be fun. Beckham said he would do the tattoo tonight, and I don't want to chicken out. Please come with me."

I look over at her as she tilts her head and bats her eyelashes.

Why do I have to be there for her to get a tattoo?

I thought I had made it clear to Billie that I wasn't going to ask her out again, but she still seems to think it might happen. She looks up at me with wide eyes.

"What do you want to do, Lucy?" I turn to face my roommate.

She's curled up on the bench, hugging her knees to her chest.

I can't stand sitting on the other bench for so long, so I go over to where she's sitting and take the space next to her on the old leather. She releases her knees, tilting her body to face mine. My skin feels like it has electricity running through it, charged by her nearness.

"I'm fine with going," she says. "Are you mad?"

I reach out to push a stray hair behind her ear, just to get an excuse to touch her. "Mad about what?"

"The drawing," she whispers.

I exhale, slowly lowering my hand, and not knowing what to do with it, I shove it in my jeans pocket. "I'll be mad if Beckham gets it permanently tattooed onto his body."

Her brown eyes are wide as she blinks up at me.

"What's the verdict? You two coming or not?" Beckham asks.

"We're coming," I tell him.

"Why would that make you mad? He likes my art."

"He doesn't get to have your art etched into his skin. Besides, maybe I want it."

Her mouth drops open. "What do you mean?"

I stand up, reaching for her hand. "I think you know exactly what I mean."

TWENTY-TWO

lucy

MY ROOMMATE IS fresh from the shower, just casually strutting around our apartment, shirtless, with my bull rider drawing inked into his shoulder.

I can't stop staring at it, at his body, at *him*.

We just got home from the tattoo shop, where Billie got a cute floral piece on her upper thigh, and I've realized I'm finding it increasingly difficult to not like her.

As soon as Beckham finished the piece for Billie, Dan sat down in the chair and slapped my drawing on the counter in front of Beckham. Beckham smiled the entire time he was working, but Dan's eyes stayed locked on mine through the mirror on the wall. I could barely breathe.

What does this mean? Does it mean anything?

"Movie?" I ask him.

Dan plops down in the center of the sofa, nodding. "Sure."

I take my normal spot on the far side, which puts me right next to him, but not touching. I made a bowl of popcorn, but my stomach is in knots. I don't think I can eat anything.

"What have you eaten today?" he asks.

I keep my eyes on the TV as the introduction music for *Jurassic Park* plays.

"Um, I think I had toast for breakfast and some grapes and crackers for lunch."

Admittedly, it wasn't nearly enough food for me. When I'm stressed out, I don't eat, and after my panic attack I just fell asleep.

"Lucy, do you really think that's a healthy, balanced day of eating? You can't survive on that."

He stands up, ambling into the kitchen.

“Where are you going? It’s starting.”

I pop a piece of popcorn into my mouth as my stomach growls loudly.

“I heard that. I’m making you some real food to eat.”

“That’s right you are. Get in there and make mama a sandwich.” I laugh at my own joke.

Truly, I’m so relieved that Dan and I are okay, and now, my appetite is returning. After I got home from work the other night and I realized he had left, I was worried our friendship was destroyed for good. I had no idea where he was until he texted me that he was in Oklahoma for a ride and would be back in town for the bowling game.

After how hard my year had been with nearly failing last semester and my breakup with Brett, I can’t take any more losses right now. I pause the movie and scroll through my phone as the smell of garlic wafts through the air.

What is he making?

Finally, he returns to the sofa with two plates. He sets them both down on the coffee table, as well as a glass of my favorite rosé wine. The smell is even better up close.

“Is this Dan’s famous gourmet grilled cheese?” I ask.

He sits down next to me. “For the lady, anything.”

Next to the grilled cheese are some sliced grape tomatoes and mashed avocado. I take a bite of the sandwich as Dan presses play on the movie.

The moan that escapes me is purely involuntary.

“Oh my gosh.” My entire body sinks into the sofa.

“Please don’t make that sound unless you want me to keep trying to draw it out of you.”

My back stiffens against the cushions. I stop chewing, growing silent. Dan takes a big bite of his sandwich, watching the movie like he didn’t just drop a huge bomb between us.

“What if I do?” I say quietly, almost low enough that he can’t hear, but not quite.

He calmly places his food back on the coffee table, the fresh tattoo covered in plastic wrap glistening in the dim lighting from the kitchen as he shifts to face me fully.

“If you do, then we aren’t going to spend this night watching *Jurassic Park*.”

Holy macaroni...this man is so fine.

I lick my lips, my eyes dropping to his lips. "What if we...do things... just as friends? No strings."

My risqué proposal hangs in the space between us, treacherously threatening our former dynamic with the idea of taking our platonic relationship into unknown territory for both of us.

His eyes are hungry, but he holds himself back. "You mean, like, friends with benefits? Nothing romantic?"

I nod, scooting back a smidgen to face him straight on. I clear my throat, stepping further out on the ledge.

"I propose that we help each other accomplish our goals for the year. I want to remain uncommitted, and you want to...lose your virginity. I want to have sex that's enjoyable for me, and I have a feeling you can...help me do that, if the other night is any indication."

He looks like he's trying to hold in a smirk as he presses his lips together. "I can help you do that." His voice sounds more gravelly than usual.

"Kissing friends. Still friends, just friends who kiss sometimes, occasionally, when we both want to."

We're both coiled like rattlesnakes, ready and anxious to start exploring each other's body. My eyes travel over his tense muscles, landing briefly on the new tattoo but continuing down over the rest of his torso. I'm about three seconds from reaching out to run my fingers over his six-pack.

"Okay, Lu. You have a deal. I'll be your kissing friend. No catching feelings allowed."

"Also, no boyfriend-girlfriend stuff, no hand-holding, cuddling, you know. Except for at Jenn's wedding. Strictly platonic sex."

"No catching feelings. I got it."

He reaches over to brush his fingers down my forearm, his touch light and sending shivers down my arm.

"Are you ready?" I whisper.

My belly is tight, and I'm suddenly feeling nauseous. A surge of anxiety rushes through me with the thought of trying to have sex again. Last time ended so badly.

Is it going to happen again? Am I capable of sex without full-on panic?

I clench my fist by my thigh, my breathing growing shallow.

Hopefully, he thinks this is anticipation and not fear.

Dan smiles, slowly leaning forward, but instead of kissing my mouth, his lips meet my forehead in a chaste, gentle kiss.

“Let’s just watch the movie for now, okay, Lu?” he whispers.

He reaches for his plate before leaning back against the sofa, casually taking a bite of the sandwich.

Um, what?!

I just offered myself up to this man on a silver platter, and he rejected me. What is life?

My thundering pulse feels like it’s turning my entire neck red. I’m hyperaware of Dan’s body heat and the way his legs are spread out like a naughty invitation. An intrusive thought shoots through my brain, making my palms sweaty.

You should give him head.

I know he would love it. He’s playing it cool right now, but what red-blooded man doesn’t love it?

He just needs me to show him how good it can be, sans panic attack.

The thrill of introducing him to this side of life overrides the panic I was feeling as I slide down off the sofa, crawling over toward him until I settle right between his legs. Dan visibly swallows before his half-lidded eyes drift down over me.

“What are you doing?” It sounds like his throat is parched.

My fingers reach out for his knees, brushing over his soft gray sweatpants and traveling up his strong thighs.

“I want to try something,” my voice nearly squeaks, but I manage to mask it with a sultry tone.

His square jawline, blue eyes, tanned skin, and dirty-blond hair are all working together with the broody assessment he’s giving me to establish the fact that he is the fucking hottest man I’ve ever been this physically close to.

He reaches out a callous, work-strong hand to thread it through my hair at the roots, sending bursts of electricity through my scalp and down my spine.

“Then, show me.”

I clench my legs together as I feel the moisture building. My fingers slowly inch up over the soft terry fabric, and his eyes never leave mine. Once I reach the waistband, he lifts his hips so that I can pull them down.

Immediately, his evident arousal springs up. I swallow over the lump in my throat as I pull the pants down past his knees before reaching for it with my right hand. As soon as I make contact, he sucks in a breath.

“Lucy.”

My name on his lips with the obvious pleasure he’s feeling is a high I’ve never experienced.

“Daniel, you’re going to like this.”

My horny, possessed evil twin is surfacing, and there’s nothing I can do to stop her. My hand moves over him a few times before I lean up on my knees and take the tip in my mouth.

“Baby, baby, yes...”

His hand reaches farther into my hair, gripping the roots firmly. I take him deeper, my hand still around the base as I move over him.

“That’s it, baby. Holy fuck.”

My other hand reaches around to touch the front of his abs that I’ve been staring at all evening. His hand cups over mine, gripping my fingers tightly.

“Lucy, you feel so damn good.” He’s breathless as he praises me, his voice sounding weak, like he just ran a half-marathon.

His entire body is tight, muscles contracting as I suck him deeper into my mouth.

“I’ve pictured this so many fucking times,” he pants.

This? Exactly this? With me?!

I can’t ask him with my mouth currently full. He’s growing harder, and I know he’s getting close. I pull back, popping off of him as my watery eyes meet his.

“You’ve pictured what exactly?” I tilt my head to the side, blinking up at him with wide eyes.

He doesn’t answer, leaning forward to grab my hand and pull me up off the ground and onto his lap. I’m wearing a pair of silk pajama shorts and a thin tank top with no underwear. My eyes stay trained on his as he flicks my tank top down, exposing both my breasts.

“I’ve pictured this too.”

I guess he’s not going to answer me, but my brain stops functioning when I see the starving look in his eyes.

He leans down, slowly sucking my perky nipple into his mouth. I cry out, surprised by the sensation that shoots down to my slick arousal.

“Ah! Danny...” My words turn to a moan.

He slowly starts exploring my chest like it could be his last chance to ever do it. He kneads one side with the other in his mouth, sucking hard, then soft again.

I’m sweating, panting, and out of breath by the time he pauses and looks up into my eyes. I can’t decide if I want to beg him to keep going or to stop so I can catch my breath.

“You’re so beautiful when you’re turned on,” he says, a smirk on his face.

“I’m beyond turned on right now.” I wiggle over his lap, his hard length resting right between my lips in the perfect spot with only the thin silk between us now.

“Does that feel good?” he says, eyes drifting down to my mouth.

“Mm-hmm.”

I slowly lift up, and he reaches down to position himself at my opening, pushing the silk over. Neither of us says a word as he moves it around, eyes locked on mine, exploring my exterior and taking his sweet time with it. He pauses for half a second once he finds the right place. I can’t wait any longer. I slowly start to lower down, feeling myself stretch out around him.

It’s been a long time since I’ve had sex. It starts to hurt a little, and I wince. He reaches out to grip my hips, stopping me halfway down.

“Lucy,” he gasps, “are you okay?” His voice is strained. He can’t hold back much longer.

I nod, forcing myself down faster to fully take him in. I’m deliciously full and only in a small amount of pain.

“It’s been a while for me,” I explain.

No need to explain that to him, I guess.

Dan’s mouth is open, the effort to restrain himself clearly overwhelming all of his senses right now. I move up, slowly beginning to ride him.

“Lucy...”

He can’t form a sentence as I move up and down over him, relishing in his reaction from his first time experiencing this level of intimacy. I’m the only woman he’s ever touched like this, held like this, seen like this, and it’s getting to my head, making me feel hot as shit, powerful, sexy.

His hands grip my hips, guiding me as I move up and down, riding him. I pick up the pace, loving the feeling he’s giving me and the one I’m clearly giving him.

His eyes close as his head falls back against the sofa in ecstasy.

"I have a condom in my room," I whisper.

I'm on birth control, but I have no idea if I even took my last pill.

Considering this is his first time, will he even know how to pull out?

He stops my movement, reaching his hands around to grip my ass as he stands up, still inside me. He carries me easily, like I'm weightless. His muscular shoulders are under my hands, and I'm about to finish with just the subtle movement I'm feeling with each step he takes.

"Ohh," I say, feeling manhandled and loving it.

He walks me into my bedroom, laying me down on the edge of the bed before he starts to pump inside of me, taking control this time. His eyes grow serious, more intense than I've ever seen them. I reach for his arms, squeezing the bulging muscles in my hands because I don't know when I'll get the chance to touch him like this again.

He maintains eye contact with me, making me wonder if the look he's giving me is purely from sexual pleasure or something more.

He pulls out, panting for breath. "Condom?"

I point to my dresser, where the last one I had from an old box got stuffed into the drawer on the night I had Connor over for dinner, hoping we might use it.

Glad that didn't work out.

Dan searches around, pulling it out before he rips it open with his teeth like he can't take another second of not being inside of me. I reach for it, not knowing if he's ever even seen one.

He hands it over with a smirk. "I guess you'd better show me."

Fuck. I'm in so much trouble.

TWENTY-THREE

dan

LUCY GRABS MY DICK, placing the little rubber circle on the tip and rolling it over me. My senses are overwhelmed with pleasure, to the point that I'm afraid my brain might explode and I'll say something I really shouldn't be confessing right now.

Her soft hands feel like heaven, but her mouth was ten times better.

No, inside of her is the best. It's warm and wet and perfect.

She finishes, looking up at me with her big brown eyes. I feel like I might drown in them, in her, in the way I can't stop thinking about how this'd better not be the last time we get to do this.

Once with her could never come close to being enough. I need thousands of hours of exploring her body, every position, every feeling I can possibly give her.

She sits up, pulling off her shorts for the first time, followed by her top. She's fully naked now. She moves to turn around, but I reach for her cheek, gently caressing her soft skin. I dip down, my eyes dropping to her lips. Our mouths meet, softly touching for the first time today even though we've already started having sex. We're doing it all backward, but I can't go another second without tasting her kiss.

She reaches one hand around to hold the back of my neck. I feel her other one grip my dick as she positions it in front of herself. With my mouth still holding hers, I push inside her. I drive the kiss further, sucking her bottom lip inside my mouth with a hunger that might overtake me. I'm not close enough to her, even with my dick inside her and my mouth on hers.

I want more, so much more.

She sticks her tongue in my mouth, and I suck it in before pushing mine inside her mouth. She pulls my face closer, like she can read my mind and

agrees that we still aren't close enough. I'm pounding inside her, and it's the best feeling I've ever experienced.

She pulls away, panting. Her eyes are bright as she licks her lips, trying to catch her breath.

"Let's switch," she says.

She didn't like it that way?

I'm glad she stopped me because I was about to finish, and I'm not ready for this to be over.

She turns away from me, switching to all fours with her ass facing me. I take a deep breath as I crawl up on the bed behind her, reaching for her perky, round ass.

My fingers start searching around, exploring her from this angle and sliding her wetness around.

She moans, "Dan, please...please."

I smile. "I like it when you beg."

"Then, I'll beg. Please put it in me and fuck me harder."

Yes, ma'am.

I don't go easy on her this time. I can't. I need to feel it rough. The sound of me pounding into her fills the room, my body suddenly jerking with pleasure way sooner than I wanted to. I try to hold back, but it's useless. I fill the condom, reaching forward to put my hand on her shoulder as I feel the best orgasm of my life overcoming me. It washes all over my heated skin, my senses fully relaxing almost immediately.

I slowly pull back, and Lucy collapses onto the bed with an exhausted sigh. Instantly, I start to worry about what the experience was like for her, if she enjoyed it or if I just joined the pathetic group of men who have all failed to give her any pleasure.

I walk to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. There's a folded stack of towels and washcloths, so I take one and run warm water over it before going back into the bedroom. She hasn't moved, making me worry even more that she hated every second of it.

Please don't panic again, baby.

I reach for her with the washcloth, slowly cleaning her up. "Baby—uh, Lucy, are you okay?"

She slowly rolls over, and panic rises in me when I see that her eyes are red.

"What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

I crawl up onto the bed, reaching for her. She comes to me, sitting up and leaning into my chest. My pulse is slowing down as the sweat on my lower back starts to cool.

"I'm okay," she whispers. "It felt amazing, Danny."

I rub her shoulder, reaching for the fuzzy blanket and comforter scrunched up on the side of the bed. After covering her up, I lay my head down on the top of hers.

"Do you need some water?" I don't know what to do for her.

"No. I just want to sleep now." Her voice already sounds droopy and tired.

I wait until she's drifted off to sleep before I pull her against me and close my eyes, wondering if I'll ever be able to wash away all the sadness and trauma she keeps trapped inside.

A soft whisper wakes me from a light sleep. "I just keep waiting for you to wake up one day and start being mean to me."

I roll toward her, my eyes still closed. I pull her body flush against mine, her head on my chest and my arm wrapped around her lower back.

"Well, you're just going to wait forever then."

Her curly hair is tickling my chin. We're both still naked, and my morning wood is prodding her stomach.

"I thought you were still sleeping."

"Mmm, shh." I kiss her forehead.

"This position isn't very *friends with benefits* of us."

I chuckle, reaching my hand down to find the sweet spot between her legs. "Well, if you want, we can get to the benefits part."

She doesn't reply verbally, but her leg lifts up to grant me access.

Thank fuck.

I pet the seam between her lips, loving that she's already wet and ready for me. I open my eyes to watch her face. Her mouth is open, eyes closed, a look of euphoria on her face.

"Does that feel good, baby?"

She nods, her tongue reaching out to wet her upper lip. I need to taste her again. I lean forward, pressing a kiss to her lips before I slide down,

under the covers. She lets me move her where I want, how I want. My hands push open her thighs as I lean in to swipe my tongue over her.

She's trembling, legs shaking as her hands tug on my hair. I devour her like she's the air I need to breathe. She tastes like heaven, her sweet scent filling my nostrils as I enjoy every second of her being on my tongue.

I try sucking on the part that seems the most sensitive, and she attempts to jerk away from me.

"Dan!"

I pull her closer, not letting her escape from it. My fingers dig into her ass cheeks, holding her captive against my tongue. She has no idea how incredible her taste, smell, and pleasure are to me. I can't stop.

She's writhing and sweating on the sheets, pulling away, then pushing up against my mouth like she needs more.

I give it to her. I give it all. Her little gasps of pleasure, followed by soft moans, guide me toward learning what her kinks are, how she feels good and what does it for her. I'm determined to be the first man to make Lucy enjoy sex. Not just enjoy it. I want her to be so fucking obsessed with it that she can't stop—at least with me.

Is that toxic? I can't seem to give a shit.

She finally cries out, her fingers gripping the roots of my hair even tighter as her entire body tenses up. She relaxes a few seconds later, sinking into the mattress like she's weak and unable to move.

"Oh my gosh."

I move up, crawling toward her as I wipe the wetness from my mouth.

"Good morning to you too, roomie."

She laughs, eyes sparkling as she bites her lip. "I could get used to that kind of good morning."

I want to reach out and brush my hand against her hair, but the morning light is bringing on the realization that we aren't together. She's not my girlfriend, and she's made it abundantly clear that she doesn't want to be.

Her smile fades. She looks down, her dark lashes brushing against her cheeks. Her phone starts to ring on the nightstand. She rolls over to answer it, exposing her bare back to me.

"Hey, Jenn." She puts it on speakerphone, rolling back over to face me.

"I'm getting married in one week, Lucy! One freaking week. Please tell me you got your hair trimmed and have an appointment for a brow wax? We'll do mani-pedis on Thursday, but we won't have time for any other

beauty treatments between the rehearsal dinner, the dance lessons, and everything else! And—”

Lucy cuts her off, “Yeah, I forgot about the hair trim. I doubt anyone will notice that I have a few split ends. I can get my eyebrows waxed today if you’re that worried about it.”

She rolls her eyes, looking adorable, as usual.

“What about your date? Does he have a suit? It doesn’t need to be fancy or anything, but since you’re in the wedding, he should at least have a tie.”

Lucy’s eyes widen with a question as she blinks up at me. “Um…”

“Yeah, I have a suit. Is gray okay?”

The line goes silent, and Lucy’s cheeks grow pink.

“Uh, yeah, gray is good.” Jenn sounds like she’s grinning from ear to ear on the other side of the phone line. “I hope your beard isn’t too overgrown either.”

Lucy’s neck is completely red, and she’s at a loss for words. I wink at her, grabbing the phone.

“I keep it clean shaven.”

“That’s good. Connor, is it?”

The hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I grit my teeth. “No, ma’am, my name is Dan. Daniel Wesson.”

Lucy covers her eyes with her hand.

“Dan, as in Lucy’s roommate, Dan?”

Lucy bites her bottom lip, still covering her eyes.

“One and the same,” I reply.

I’m trying not to laugh at her embarrassment, but it’s so damn cute.

Has she always been this damn cute?

“Interesting. Well, I’m excited to meet you. Thanks for coming with Lucy.”

“She needs some emotional support, due to all the pink she’s gonna be wearing,” I say.

Jenn bursts out laughing. “I’m sure she does. You’d think I abused her or something with the way she reacted to my wedding colors.”

Lucy grabs the phone back from me, trying to hold back a smile. “Okay, well, that’s enough, you two. I’m right here.”

“Oh, sis, I was meaning to tell you. I hope since you and Dan are already roommates that you won’t mind if you guys share a hotel room. It’s just that Aunt Betsy RSVP’d at the last minute! I told Mom there were no

rooms, but she gave me that look, and I was just hoping that maybe you guys—”

Lucy is clenching her jaw, smoke blowing out of her ears.

“Sure, it’s no problem. We are, after all, already roommates,” I butt in before Lucy has a chance to protest, winking at her.

She shakes her head, mouthing, *No*, to me.

“Oh, thank you! You’re a lifesaver, Dan. I’ve been so stressed about everything, but this helps a lot.”

Lucy plops her head back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, it’s fine, I guess,” Lucy says.

I lean toward her ear, away from the phone, and drop my voice to a whisper. “Trust me, I’ll make it worth your while, Lulu Bear.”

TWENTY-FOUR

lucy

LUCY:

I have a bad feeling about this wedding. Brett is definitely going to give me shit of some kind.

My family wants us back together.

Dan is coming, and I have no idea how he's going to mix in with this inevitable disaster. What if they fight? I don't know what to do.

TEXT BUBBLES INSTANTLY APPEAR NEXT to Scarlett's name. My hands feel clammy as I wait for her reply. Dan is drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, humming along to Zach Bryan.

SCARLETT:

Take a deep breath. See if one of the bridesmaids has any Klonopin. Just try to focus on your sister and try to get laid. You'll feel much better after a few stress-relieving romps in the sheets. Always works for me. Are there any hot groomsmen going?

My fear that Dan had confided in Silas about our salacious activities for the last week was apparently unfounded. He hasn't told anyone, it seems.

Is he embarrassed about it?

I close my eyes, trying to exhale out all my out-of-control nerves.

“Lucy Lu, what’s got you so wound up?”

Dan’s Southern drawl makes the inside of my legs tingle. He looks like he walked out of an aviator sunglasses ad right now. He has the glasses on, a toothpick from our lunch stop in the corner of his mouth, his legs spread out, hand on the steering wheel. We’re taking my car for the four-hour road trip to Rainy Lake in East Texas, where Jenn is getting married.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

I pull my phone out, texting Scarlett back.

LUCY:

I don’t like casual sex. It would make things even worse with all the tension going around. Plus, Dan and I have to share a room.

I don’t know any of the bridesmaids.

SCARLETT:

WHY ARE YOU AND DAN SHARING A ROOM???

I tilt my phone away from Dan, hoping he didn’t see her text in all caps. He shifts in his seat, turning the volume down on the music.

LUCY:

My aunt didn’t RSVP, so Jenn asked if we would give up one of our rooms. We’re already roommates.

SCARLETT:

< eggplant emoji >

< water emoji >

I slam the phone down, staring out the window and trying to ignore the continual buzzing in my lap.

I could just tell her. But does he not want anyone to know?

We're about to go pretend to be a couple for my entire family, but he doesn't know a single person there. We're fake dating, friends with benefits, and roommates, who are also best friends.

Is there another term for this situation? Something shorter and to the point?

I lay my head back on the seat, looking out the window. I should've packed my sketchbook in my purse instead of my suitcase. Doodling would help my racing thoughts right now. I close my eyes as my head starts to pound with a headache. I lay my seat back as far as it will go.

The sounds of the moving car and the country music slowly lull me into a lucid, restless sleep.

When I open my eyes again, I feel a comforting warmth on my upper thigh. I reach down, my fingers brushing against skin.

I open my eyes to see Dan's tanned hand gently squeezing the top of my thigh in a very *familiar* way. He pulls his hand back, gripping the steering wheel instead.

"You talk in your sleep."

I sit up, adjusting the recline of my seat back to normal as I face him. "What did I say?"

He shrugs. "Couldn't understand most of it."

I swallow over the lump in my throat, hoping he's not lying to me. I don't remember what I was dreaming about. I look out the window as he starts to slow down. We're approaching a rocky entry, surrounded by trees. The wrought iron above us has the name of the wedding venue.

VILLA DEL ROSE AT RAINY LAKE

He pulls the car through as my stomach continues twisting up into many knots. I think I might throw up. He reaches over, grabbing my hand.

I blink at him, a question of *what the hell are you doing* in my eyes.

"We're pretending to date, right?"

I relax my hand, letting him thread his fingers through mine. It feels good, holding his hand. It feels better than I'm comfortable with.

Not his type, Lu.

He squeezes mine gently, and I can feel the tension in my shoulders start to ease up. Maybe the weekend won't be so bad. Maybe Brett will be intimidated by Dan and his perfect shoulders and white teeth. Brett's were always a little yellow.

"Did you bring your cowboy boots?" I ask.

"Yeah. They look good with the suit. I have a nice pair."

I nod, feeling a smug satisfaction in the pit of my stomach.

He pulls the car around the winding road, lined with massive oak trees. After a few minutes, it finally clears, revealing a stunning venue made of wood, white stone, and aged brick. The grounds are well-kept with luscious rose bushes, mature trees, and thick green grass.

"Wow. Sam's parents have outdone themselves."

"Is that Jenn's fiancé?"

I nod. "They're *loaded* loaded. Jenn wanted to elope actually until Sam's mom offered to foot the bill for the whole thing if she could invite whoever she wanted. I'm just excited for the open bar and the food."

There are a few cars parked under the shade of the oak trees, so Dan pulls up beside the last one.

"I don't really get the point of big, expensive weddings. It's just one day," Dan says.

I nod. "Same. Unless you have *fuck you* money, I'd rather buy a house or go to Italy."

Dan starts to pull away from me to get out of the car, but I keep holding his hand. He looks back at me, tilting his head slightly.

"I, uh, I wanted to say thanks. Thanks for being here, for doing this for me." I nibble my bottom lip, holding back the sudden emotion welling up.

"I'd do anything for you, Luce." He reaches his free hand up to tug on one of my curls, straightening it out.

I know he means it, and my battered little heart doesn't really know how to fully process that.

"Well, thanks. It means a lot." My voice is hoarse.

He smirks, leaning toward me and pecking my lips with a quick kiss, so fast that I don't have time to prepare. My heart starts rattling around in my chest as he pulls back and steps out of the car.

I blow out a breath. “Just breathe, Lucy. Breathe. You get to sleep with him too.”

We get our bags and start walking toward what looks like the main house. Dan carries everything he possibly can, only letting me hold the dressing bags with his suit and my dresses. He’s loaded down, but he doesn’t even break a sweat as we step up onto the porch and knock on the door. Less than thirty seconds tick by before the door swings open and my mom’s smiling face greets us.

“Lucy, honey, you’re here! Come on in.” Her blonde hair is styled to perfection. She smiles brightly at us.

I step inside, pulling her into a hug. “Hey, Mom.”

She pats my back, brushing her hand over my curls. “How was the drive?”

“It was fine. I took a nap.”

She turns to face Dan, looking him up and down. Her smile fades as she tilts her head to study him.

“Well, I heard you were bringing along a new friend. Hi, I’m Maurene.”

Dan grins at her, still carrying everything. “Pleasure to meet you, ma’am. I can see where Lucy gets those heart-stopping eyes from.”

My mother blinks at him, a slow smile growing across her face. “I’m starting to understand why I haven’t heard much from my daughter this semester.”

She turns around and gives me a *look* before leading us up the stairs to the left side.

“Jenn told me she informed you that we were short a room and that you two have to share. I’m truly sorry for the inconvenience. Your aunt continues to be a thorn in my side, even after all these years.”

I follow her up the stairs with Dan close behind me. My mom leads us to the room, turning to face me as we get to the door.

“It’s sort of like a mini hotel here. Your father and I are just down the hall, and as long as your grandmother doesn’t catch on that you two are shacking up, everything should be fine.”

Dan walks through the door after me, depositing the bags on the floor.

“I’ll give you a chance to change. We have a family dinner tonight. Cynthia ordered a private chef.”

“Um, okay. We’ll be down soon.” Cynthia is Sam’s mother.

I shut the door, exhaling as I turn around. Dan is standing in the middle of the modern room, observing the cold yet clearly designer style. The large black bed frame, high ceiling, and plush white accent chairs are all indicators of the level of wealth we're dealing with here.

"I guess that was her way of saying we need to put on something fancy."

Dan looks over at the bed, covered in so many pillows that they reach halfway down the mattress. "My parents would voluntarily walk through the eye of a tornado before they let me share a room with my girlfriend."

I turn around, working on unzipping my suitcase. "What do you mean?"

"They're very against intimacy before marriage."

"Oh. Yeah, my grandmother is too."

I spin to face him with my deodorant stick, toothbrush, and toothpaste in hand.

He's pulling his road-trip blue T-shirt over his head, revealing the chiseled abs underneath. My mouth waters as my eyes travel down over him.

His eyes meet mine. A fleeting thought enters my mind about stripping down and having a little fun before we go down, but I'm afraid the family is already waiting and would suspect something if we don't hurry.

"I'm just going to put on a dress," I murmur.

Dan nods, riffling through his bag. We've had sex thirteen times now. That's twice every day since we started last week, except today, which was only once.

The memory of his strong hands gripping my thighs this morning, sliding me up and down over him, is like a cattle brand inside my head. I float into the bathroom, wondering if I could sneak in a quick shower with the removable showerhead before dinner.

"I figure, later, we could...break in the bed," Dan says.

His words stop me mid-movement as I was putting toothpaste on the toothbrush.

I bite my lip. "Seems like the proper thing to do."

He walks up behind me, brushing my hair to the side and leaning down to press a kiss to my shoulder. "Seems like the very *improper* thing to do."

TWENTY-FIVE

dan

LUCY'S FATHER greets me with a firm handshake and the offer to drink a beer with him. I'm hugged by three of her aunts and shoulder-clapped by two uncles, fist-bumped by a handful of cousins, and offered a cigarette by her grandfather.

What I can't figure out is why she was so nervous to come to this wedding alone. Her family seems understanding, welcoming, and like they very much love her.

The fact that they're letting us stay in the same room together tells me they're nowhere near as uptight as my family is.

"What do you do, Dan?"

Lucy's dad and I are seated in an area overlooking the lush green field behind the main building where we're staying. There's a pool with a few younger kids swimming under the watchful eyes of their parents.

"I'm in school to be a veterinarian, and right now, I work on a farm out near Greencity."

Lucy's dad is dark haired with tanned skin like hers. Everyone is dressed in what I would call "Sunday best"—nice slacks or jeans with a button-down shirt. The ladies have on dresses. I put on my nicest button-down with pale blue pinstripes, rolled up to my elbows, with my light-wash jeans.

Lucy has been missing ever since we came down and she started introducing me to people. I don't remember most of their names.

"That sounds like a good career path. Lucy hasn't told us much about you. You seem like a straight shooter."

I turn to face Tom—Mr. Blake—curious as to what he means.

“Lucy and I haven’t been dating for that long, but I’m an open book. Ask me anything.”

I take a swig of the Corona. Tom does the same.

“I don’t have any particular questions. I’d like to get to know you. We all just want what’s best for Lucy. You’re both young. Everyone makes rash decisions.”

What does he mean by rash decisions?

“We are just living in the moment right now, sir. No rash decisions going on here.” I smile, trying to figure out what it is he’s getting at.

He nods, smiling again. “I’m glad you’re here, Dan. You seem like a good friend. I hope you’re able to enjoy the weekend.”

He stands just as Maurene comes out with another tall blonde woman and a dark haired one.

The blonde woman addresses the crowd. “Dinner is served!”

Lucy appears out of nowhere beside me, gripping my elbow.

“Hey, you,” I say.

She turns to me, eyes bright. “Hi. Sorry for disappearing. Are you good?”

We start walking toward the house with everyone else.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She looks around. “You need to meet Jenn and Sam now.”

“I can’t wait. I was talking to your dad.”

Her head whips around toward me. “Was he weird to you?”

I frown. “No, not at all. He just said he hopes we’re not making rash decisions.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, right, him and those rash decisions. Do you want a drink? There’s wine.”

I chuckle, pulling her closer as we enter the house, following everyone.

She’s dressed in a formfitting navy-blue dress I’ve never seen on her before tonight. It dips low into her cleavage, revealing just enough that I kind of wish no one else got to see it, but at least we’re mostly with her family. Her hair is up in a big bun on her head with a few curly tendrils around her face—my favorite way she styles it. She put on nude pink lipstick, and I nearly tied her to the bed while watching her do it in our mirror.

“You smell like heaven, you know that?” I whisper in her ear, breathing in her shea butter scent. I saw her putting on the lotion after she shaved her

legs.

Goose bumps prick up on her neck, and she twists her fingers in mine. “I didn’t know that, but now that you mention it, you smell divine too—always like cedar. So manly.”

She looks up at me, batting her lashes and pressing her hip into me. My mind is in the gutter, marinating in filthy, salacious thoughts of her twisted all up in that big bed upstairs.

Later. You can’t get a boner right now.

“Lucy.” A male voice speaks from our left.

We turn in unison, and I find myself eye to eye with a good-looking man with short brown hair and blue eyes, standing about two inches shorter than my height of six foot two. On his arm is a tall blonde girl, close to his height. She’s got a smug grin on her face and big, artificial-looking breasts spilling out of her short hot-pink dress.

“Brett, Molly, hi.” Lucy’s grip tightens significantly on my arm. Her voice is casual, but I can detect a hint of strain in it.

He eyes me momentarily before looking back at her with a smile. “You look breathtaking, as always. I’m glad you came.”

She scoffs. “Jenn is my sister. I wouldn’t have missed it, obviously.”

He nods, eyes drifting over her body in a way that makes me want to do violent, illegal things to him, things that would damage the sharp end of a chain saw.

“I’m still glad you came. You look amazing, really. I feel like I’ve never seen you like this.” He stares at her like he’s trying to communicate some mystical message through his eyes.

“It’s crazy what a happy, healthy relationship can do for someone’s skin tone.” Lucy pulls me closer. “This is Dan, by the way.”

Brett’s eyes focus on her for a few more seconds before he turns to me. “Dan, as in your old friend that you and Scarlett were always hanging out with?”

“Yes.”

Brett chuckles. “I always thought you were gay, man.”

Molly laughs loudly, leaning forward to shake my hand. “You’re not at all the type I would picture Lucy with.” Her eyes trail over me suggestively.

I shake Molly’s hand before reaching out to Brett, briefly considering what the consequences would be if I crushed just one of his finger bones in

my grip. We shake—hard. I almost think I do hurt him, but his face doesn't change as he retracts his hand.

"I think Lucy can testify to the fact that I'm very much not gay. Right, baby?"

Lucy nods, turning to walk into the house with her arm still cradled in mine. Brett doesn't say anything else. We make our way to the largest table.

A girl who is the opposite of Lucy, with blonde hair and blue eyes, greets me with a smile, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Dan! I'm so glad you're here." She lowers her voice, leaning closer to my ear. "You are a lifesaver. What with random, uninvited people just showing up unannounced, I couldn't be more pleased that you are supporting Lucy. I'm Jenn, by the way."

I turn my eyes to Lucy, who's pursing her lips.

A tall man behind Jenn leans forward, grinning ear to ear. He has bright copper-red hair.

"Hey there! I'm Sam Carter."

I shake his hand, immediately feeling a sense of relief that he seems genuine.

"Dan Wesson."

Sam grins before turning around to take his seat. Jenn follows. I pull out Lucy's chair for her next to her sister, and then I take mine.

I see Brett's eyes lasering in on us from three tables down. He sits down, not bothering to help Molly with her chair. It just now occurred to me that this is a blended family dinner.

So, why is Lucy's ex-boyfriend even here before the wedding?

I look away, surveying the group. I met several people, all of whom were related to Lucy and Jenn. I know Sam's family is here too.

Is Brett related to Sam?

The servers start bringing out the food. They offer us two different types of wine before starting with a salad with cranberries and pecans in it. I've never had a dinner this fancy. The room is decorated with greenery, white linens, and candlesticks.

Lucy is silent beside me. Jenn keeps trying to draw her into conversation, but she's responding with one-worded answers. The seat next to me is a guy who introduces himself as Sam's former college roommate.

"I live in Boston now. I love visiting Texas though."

I nod, trying not to be rude while also eavesdropping on Jenn and Lucy.

“Mom repeatedly told his mom he couldn’t come until the day of the wedding. He showed up this afternoon, and we don’t know if it was because Becky or Molly told him he could or if he just did it,” Jenn whispers, barely loud enough for me to hear. Becky is Brett’s mom.

“Where is he even staying? I thought there weren’t enough rooms,” Lucy replies, her tone biting.

“Sleeping in his car? I have no idea. There aren’t any more rooms. Molly is staying with a friend who lives somewhere around here.”

“Why can’t he shack up with her?”

“They’re not even together anymore. She’s dating some guy in the military.”

Lucy snorts.

I lean back in my chair, shoving my fork into the tender steak that was brought out. It’s unbelievably flavorful and juicy.

“Do you get your own room? I was supposed to, but then they told me at the last minute that some guy would be sleeping on the pullout sofa in mine. Kinda sucks, but I guess that’s how these things go.”

I turn to face the guy, Clay. “Lucy and I are in the same room. Who’s the guy you’re sharing with?”

Clay looks surprised, clearly thinking I wasn’t really listening. “Um, that guy in the brown shirt.”

He points at Brett, whose eyes are on us again. I would feel rude for the clear pointing and talking about him, but it’s Lucy’s ex, so I don’t give a fuck if he’s offended.

“Ah, that sucks. My roommate is a lot better looking.”

Clay laughs, nodding.

Lucy turns to me, leaning close to my ear. “Do you wanna sneak away to have sex?”

I turn my mouth toward her, letting my lips brush over her ear. “You know the answer to that.”

She has goose bumps on her shoulders.

I kiss her softly on the nape of her neck, then again right behind her ear. “Have I told you that you look like a fantasy come to life? So beautiful.”

She reaches her hand over to the top of my thigh. “You’re too good at this whole boyfriend act.”

Maybe because I’m wishing it weren’t an act.

“Gotta get my practice in for the lucky lady,” I say instead.

Lucy bats her lashes, big brown eyes looking right down into my soul. She looks away, reaching for her wineglass.

"I wanted to explore the grounds. Should we go now?" She speaks louder.

"Sure," I say.

Lucy's parents are watching as we stand, taking our leave. Almost everyone is done eating, and the servers have cleared most of the plates.

"Do you want to sit by the fire outside later?" Jenn asks.

"Yeah, we'll find you in a little while." Lucy pulls on my hand, leading me away from the dining room.

My jeans are growing tighter in the front. This woman does things to me, things I've never felt before.

"I heard there's a star observatory deck somewhere. Let's find it," Lucy says.

She has a little clutch purse with her, and she's wearing heels.

"Do you want to change first?" I want to go to the room now, preferably with plans for her to get naked.

She shakes her head. "No, I'm good."

We walk, hand in hand, out of the house, where the sun is beginning to set. The venue has lampposts lining a cobblestone path that winds throughout all the buildings. Most of them look like little cabins for people to stay in. One is clearly a chapel with an entire wall of windows. Another is an open tabernacle with round white tables and chairs around it.

At the farther end of the path, it looks like there's some type of large stable with horses. We follow the path, neither of us speaking a word.

A few people walk by us, carrying things that look like folded tablecloths, candles, and other decorative items. Lucy doesn't talk to them, so I'm assuming they are employees here and not her family members.

"Jenn said he wasn't supposed to be here until the wedding. I guess he just showed up early, unannounced."

"Well, if you need a volunteer to ask him to leave, I'd be delighted."

Lucy bursts out laughing, squeezing my hand. "I've never seen this side of you. I'm into mean Dan. He's hot."

"Mean Dan just wants to make sure his Lucy is okay."

"Hmm, his Lucy?"

"Yes, his Lucy."

She grows silent as we keep walking. The barn is open, a path leading through it out to the other side. I stop to pet a paint horse sticking his head over the gate.

“Hey, pretty girl. How you doing this evening?”

She nuzzles my hand, looking for a snack.

“I don’t have anything for you, sorry.”

“You’re so good with animals. I’d have such a big crush on you if you were my pet’s doctor. All the single, old cat ladies aren’t going to be able to handle it.”

I chuckle, continuing to walk with her out of the stable.

“There it is,” she says.

The observation deck is a towerlike structure with a winding staircase leading up to a platform higher than the top of the barn. Lucy walks up the stairs ahead of me.

Once we reach the top, the view of the entire estate stretches out before us. The sun is setting between two hills. It’s picturesque, like the back of a postcard from a tourist destination. The leaves are starting to turn for the fall, and a herd of horses is grazing in one of the fields.

“I heard there was a bed up here to lie down on and look at the stars,” Lucy says.

I look down, seeing that there is a set of outdoor furniture with an oversize chaise lounge about the size of a queen bed. It looks unbelievably cozy with a plethora of throw blankets and pillows on it.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to test it out.”

I sit down, removing my boots before reaching for Lucy’s leg.

She steadies herself with my shoulder before lifting up her foot. I carefully unstrap her heel from her foot. She puts it down, lifting the other foot for me.

She crawls up onto the cushion, propping herself up on one of the pillows. I lie beside her, looking up at the darkening sky to see if any stars are visible yet.

“It just feels like...they’re choosing him and his mom over me. After everything he did to me, I just don’t see how they could still want him in their life. No one even likes Molly. I knew she’d be here, too, but she’s technically family. He’s not even related to us.”

Lucy hasn’t told me much of what Brett did. I’ve always figured she would share it when she was ready, but now that we’re here and seeing how

much this is hurting her, I really need to know. It seems like it must've been more than just cheating. I know there was some kind of abuse, but I've never asked her for details.

“What did he do to you?”

TWENTY-SIX

lucy

I KNEW Dan would ask for details about Brett eventually. I honestly expected it to happen sooner—much sooner. His patience with me is unprecedented.

I open my mouth to answer, pausing for a moment and taking in some air. My heart rate has increased, but I know I need to do this. I haven't told anyone this part.

"It's hard to put into words, I guess. Brett and I dated for so long. I, um...I didn't really understand that what happened between us was wrong. The first two guys I was with were barely an experience. It was once with one and twice with the other. Like I said before, it was just awkward. I was rebellious in high school. I never enjoyed sex, and I confided in Brett about that. He seemed to think he could make it better for me. He made me try everything...everything, even when I didn't want to. He kind of manipulated me into it all, I guess. He made me do whatever he said. I thought I loved him. I thought he loved me..." I trail off, wetness spilling down my cheeks.

I was young—fifteen—when I lost my virginity. That experience was normal. The time after that with the next guy was too. He and his family moved away. I was heartbroken.

"Brett and I grew up together. He was always a family friend, almost two years older than me. His mom and mine are best friends. She was like my second mom. At first, people joked that he and Jenn would get married. But he always showed special interest in me. Jenn crushed on him for such a long time too. Finally, she got over it, and not long after that was when he and I started dating. When he found out I had lost my virginity to someone else, he was...so enraged. He said I should've been his. I remember feeling

like some of the things he did to me were a punishment for that. I used to think it was attractive how jealous and possessive he was. But then he started to accuse me of things, things he just made up. He never let me spend time with any friends. I'm sure you remember that from when we first met."

Dan reaches over, gripping my hand in his. "Scarlett was the first one to realize he was being controlling."

I laugh, shaking my head as more tears flow. "It was much more than controlling. He would hurt me...hurt me at night if I didn't do what he said. It was...I don't know how to describe it. I didn't have any broken bones. He hurt me, mentally and emotionally mostly, especially when he drank. Then, it turned into sexually. He'd call me a bitch and tell me my whole family hated me. He'd tell me he heard my mom tell his mom that my dad wasn't really my dad. Jenn has light eyes like our mom, but mine are dark brown. I didn't believe him, but it was like he warped my mind into accepting it as truth. Every time I tried to break up with him because he was such an asshole to me, he'd make some big move. He'd buy me flowers, cry about being sorry, beg me to forgive him. He'd tell me how much our families wanted us together. He'd tell me I was the only girl he could ever love, ever have kids with."

I inhale, breathing in deep, cleansing breaths. Now that I'm spilling out the truth, I feel like it might not ever stop. Dan is holding my hand tightly, reminding me that he's someone I can trust and rely on. He stays silent, waiting for me to be ready to go on.

"Mostly, he just confused me. Every time we fought about him lying or texting another girl, he'd somehow spin it around on me, and I'd end up apologizing to him. It was bizarre. It's so hard to even put into words how he would do that. Then, after, he'd flip the script on me, guilt-trip me, make me feel so low that I didn't even think my own family loved me anymore. He'd make me do sexual stuff with him and basically blackmail me into it. He'd say that if I didn't do it, I would never find anyone else to love me, to put up with my shitty attitude. It sounds so fucking stupid, saying it out loud now. I can't believe I...put up with it for so long.

"Every time I came home for a holiday, I'd talk to my parents or Jenn about how our relationship was struggling, and they would just tell me, 'Brett's such a great guy. We all love him! He's like family already! Y'all

will work through it.’ With his mental fuckery and the fear that they wouldn’t love me if I left him, I just kept putting up with it.”

My pulse is racing, and my skin is getting hot. I don’t want to have a panic attack from reliving the nightmare that was my four-year relationship, but the reality is weighing on me—that he’s here, that my family adores him, and I never really told them everything because I didn’t know how to break it to them that the boy they loved so much had been hurting their daughter for years now.

On top of all the trauma I’m dealing with, I don’t know if I can face breaking their hearts like that.

“Bottom line is, he fucked me in the head from a young age.”

Dan sits up on his elbow, slowly tracing his fingers up and down my arm. His warm breath is on my cheek, and his quiet strength and understanding make me want to cry even more.

I still don’t deserve him. What will this story make him think of me? He’s perfect, the golden boy.

“I was so glad when I found out he’d been cheating with Molly. I mean, part of me was heartbroken. In some ways, I loved him. I had loved him my whole life. But when I saw that proof—her big fake tits on his phone, followed by a picture of his dick and a promise for another romp in the sheets soon—I realized how much I’d grown to resent him. I didn’t even care if he turned my family against me at that point. I just wanted away from him. I never wanted his hands on me again. I never wanted him to fuck with my head again.”

“Does your family not know?”

I turn to face Dan, sweet Dan. His kind blue eyes are a mix of sadness and...rage. Pure, unfiltered rage. He looks ready to hurt someone, and it’s not me.

“I told them he’d cheated, yes. I just didn’t give them any details. My parents understood why I’d broken things off, and Jenn hates him now. She warned me that they still ‘love him like a son, even if he messed up.’ I’ve been too afraid to come home since the breakup. I know how he is. He’s a manipulator. He lies, spins the story for his benefit. I have no idea what he’s been telling them, but I have no doubt that between him and his mom, they’ve convinced my parents that I should give him another chance. Jenn was in tears when he got here. She told me she’d tell him to leave, that she wouldn’t make me be around him and Molly this weekend. I told her it was

fine. It's her wedding weekend. Why should she have to spend the whole thing feeling distressed about causing family drama on my account? I'm fine." My voice cracks at the word *fine*.

Big tears start spilling out on my cheeks as I start to hiccup and sob. Dan hugs me to his chest, pulling me closely against him with his strong, safe arms. I cry so hard that my whole body shakes, but he holds me tightly against him. If anyone tried to hurt me, they'd have to get through him first.

I wake up in bed alone. I look over at the empty spot Dan fell asleep in after I kept crying and trauma-dumping on him like a hot mess.

Maybe he drove himself home. I wouldn't blame him.

Then, I hear the shower running. I stare up at the ceiling, trying to decide if I feel worse or better since telling him everything Brett did. Well, most of it. I couldn't go into details. I don't know if I'll ever be able to do that.

The water shuts off, and a minute later, Dan emerges from the steamy bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. The muscly planes of his stomach draw my eye directly down the V-shape of his hips. He rubs his hand through his damp, short hair. I swallow over the lump in my throat, suddenly very aware of my morning breath. I try to keep my gaze off his tattoo.

"Morning," he says, Southern drawl thick and yummy.

"Morning."

I stand up, walking around him to get to the bathroom and brush my teeth. He reaches his arm out to wrap it around my waist.

"How did you sleep?" he asks.

My pulse picks up its pace at his nearness. He smells divine, like his potent cedar soap.

"I slept good. You?"

"Good. You fart in your sleep."

I clap my hand over my mouth, mortification washing over me as I flip around in his arm. "What? No. No, I don't..."

His blue eyes spark with amusement as he looks down at me. "I liked it. It kept me warm."

I swat his arm, removing myself from his grip. “I do not fart in my sleep! You’re making that up.”

I escape to the bathroom, feeling my cheeks heating.

Since when do Dan’s jokes make me blush?

I feel like I’m in high school and the quarterback just winked at me in the hallway.

Get it together, Lucy!

I take my time in the shower, shampooing my hair, using a deep conditioner masque, and shaving every inch of my skin. I finally get out, put my curling cream and leave-in conditioner spray in my thick hair, and start on my makeup.

My typical morning routine usually takes less than thirty minutes, but this isn’t a typical morning.

Not only am I facing my ex-boyfriend, the girl he cheated on me with, and his and my mother, who both want us back together, but I’m also going to have to take a thousand pictures with Jenn. Then, there’s Dan, who I really hope was kidding about me passing gas under the covers last night.

Most of all, I want Dan to not be able to keep his eyes off of me.

I finally emerge in a fluffy white robe that was hanging in the bathroom. The room is empty, so I quickly tug on a pair of classic Levi’s jeans and a white tank top with matching sneakers. I spritz myself with my perfume and head downstairs.

As I approach the kitchen, I hear Dan laughing along with my cousin Parker. Parker is my mom’s sister’s son who barely graduated high school, still lives at home, and has never kept a job longer than a month. He’s always the life of the party, and he has the best stories.

“I was up in the bed of his truck, half my jeans ripped to shreds, a blonde wig on, and a stack of one- and five-dollar bills in my left hand. Those guys weren’t having it, even after I told them that they got me for a discounted price. I was scared for my life, but I—oh, hey, Lucy. How has your boyfriend never been to a strip club? We’re going tonight.”

Dan is holding a cup of coffee as he leans back against the white marble of the kitchen island. He’s dressed in his relaxed Levi’s, cowboy boots, and his signature white T-shirt.

“Maybe Dan doesn’t care about strip clubs because he respects women.”

Dan chuckles, pulling me in to peck my cheek with a kiss. "I've never wanted to go. Seems strange to me for a bunch of dudes to go get horny together."

Parker shrugs, turning around to pour himself another cup of coffee.

"I think it's a man's rite of passage."

Dan walks over to the coffee maker, reaching for a cup to pour me some. "I'm really just a one-woman type of man." He turns to face me, winking at me as he adds in creamer and extra sugar, just how I like it.

"Damn. It's weird, not seeing you and Brett together, Lucy. But he's a fucktard for screwing Molly. You're so much hotter than her."

"Wow, Parker, it's awfully early in the morning to be saying fucktard, don't you think?" My dad walks into the kitchen, heading straight toward me with his arm outstretched. "How'd you sleep, honey?"

I hug his big body back. "I slept amazing. We actually dozed off in the observatory and had to walk back in the dark."

He chuckles, pulling back and shaking Dan's hand. "I don't blame you. That place is pretty spectacular at night. How's the coffee? I set it on an automatic timer."

"It's really good," Dan answers.

My dad goes to the coffee maker to pour himself some. I realize with his presence now how much I missed him and my mom this past semester. It sucked, having to distance myself from them with the breakup. A tickle of guilt flits through my stomach for all the calls I ignored from them over the past few months.

I really hope they like Dan.

"What's the plan today, Dad?"

"I think your sister has brunch, then a dance instructor lined up for this morning. We have a free afternoon, then the rehearsal dinner." My dad heads out the back door, leaving the three of us alone.

"I don't know how to dance," Dan whispers in my ear.

"Me neither," I whisper back.

The room seems to grow darker all of a sudden when Brett walks in. His hair is slicked back with too much product, as usual.

"Morning, everyone. Good night's sleep?" He looks around the room, eyes resting on me longingly.

Parker covers a laugh with a fake cough. Dan casually sips his coffee.

“Our bed is very comfortable, but, no, we didn’t sleep much,” Dan says, his voice low and bored.

Brett looks constipated before turning back around to pour himself some coffee. I try not to smile, but it breaks through. Dan pinches my side gently before leading me out to the back porch, where my dad is. We sit down, and less than a minute later, Brett joins us.

“I just can’t believe Jenn is finally getting married. I always thought it would be us going first, Lucy.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

dan

IF THERE WAS EVER a time when I wished I could be riding a bull to let off some steam, it's now. Brett's smug face looks pleased as he stands near the railing of the porch. He'll be fucking lucky if he doesn't end the night on a stretcher.

Lucy's dad looks up at him. "My daughter made her choice. Leave it be."

We're all silent for the next few moments until Jenn walks outside, screeching loudly, "It's time for the rehearsal-day brunch! Lucy, come see the flower-shaped fruit arrangement!"

Lucy drags me inside with her. We feast on eggs Benedict, apple-smoked bacon, homemade biscuits with strawberry butter, fresh fruit, and mimosas. Brett seems to lurk in the shadows, only talking to his mom. She's a short woman with dark hair like his, who keeps eyeing me from across the room but never approaching. Even when Molly appears around noon, he ignores her unless Lucy is around, and then he suddenly grabs Molly's arm and starts talking to her.

Dance lessons are held in the open pavilion outside, where the dance floor will be, and only the wedding party and parents attend. Lucy and I are arguably the worst dancers, but she cracks a smile every time she accidentally steps on my toes. It might be the first one I've seen on her face all weekend.

She seems sadder and more distant than ever. I'm feeling closer to her with each passing day, each time we crawl under the covers and explore each other's body, each time she lets me pull her close to me even if it's all for show.

It makes my heart ache to feel like I'm feeling stronger things for her every single day and she's still just pulling away from me. I can't even tell if she's glad I'm here or not.

After her confession about Brett's treatment of her and the way her family still adores him like a son, I'm more concerned for her than ever.

How could they leave their daughter in that position for so long?

After dance lessons, we're given a free afternoon. Jenn wants Lucy to go with her into town and search for a last-minute toenail polish because she changed her mind about the color. We all have to be back for the rehearsal dinner by seven p.m.

I find myself wandering into the barn and petting the paint horse. As she nuzzles my shoulder, my phone starts to buzz in my pocket.

I see Adam's name on the screen. I swipe to answer it.

"Hey, brother."

"Dan, it's been forever. Are you busy tonight? You should come for dinner."

"I'm at a wedding with Lucy this weekend."

"Uh, your roommate?"

I keep rubbing the horse's neck as I talk, looking around to see if I'm alone.

"Yes, my roommate. She needed a date because her piece-of-shit ex-boyfriend is here."

"Whose wedding is it?" Harley joins Adam, and I realize I've been on speakerphone.

"Hey, Har. It's her sister's."

"Why would her ex be there?" Adam asks.

I sigh. "He's like an old family friend, I guess. His mom and Lucy's are best friends. He wasn't supposed to come for the whole weekend, but he's a real dickhead, so he just showed up, unannounced. He'll probably regret that decision soon. Patience isn't my strong suit."

Harley barks out a laugh.

"Is he being an ass to her?" Adam asks.

I look around to make sure again that I'm still alone. "He's an ass in general, but, yeah, he keeps making comments about how they should've gotten married. I'm really not in a good headspace for it either. I don't want to upset her family or start shit, but if he keeps it up, I'm gonna have to say something."

Or punch something.

It's for Lucy's sake that I *haven't* said or done anything yet. After learning about all he did to her, I'd love nothing more than to imprint his face in the drywall, Han Solo-style. I know she wants to avoid conflict with him and keep Jenn's wedding a drama-free event.

"So, are you pretending to be her boyfriend or just a friend?"

"I'm her boyfriend for the weekend. It's weird. They even put us in a room together."

"Are there two beds?" Harley asks.

"Not exactly."

I sigh, rubbing my hand over the back of my neck. This could be my last two nights getting to hold her like this, to kiss her in public and be all over her. My shoulder muscles ache from all the tension I've been carrying around.

"You sound distressed," Adam observes. "What's going on with you two?"

I kick a dirt clod with my boot, stepping toward the exit as I start to pace.

"She's in my head. I don't know how else to put it. I like her. I want it to be real, not a facade for her cocksucking ex. She's all I ever think about."

An invisible burden lifts as I say the words. Admitting my feelings for Lucy has been on the tip of my tongue for so long; it's surreal to finally say it out loud, to speak it into the universe.

"You've been in a shitty mood since you and she moved in together. It's annoying as hell, and I'm sick of it. Just tell that woman how you feel, dammit. I want my brother back."

It's unusual for Adam to raise his voice. The line is silent for a moment as I contemplate his words, my eyes studying the old rafters in the barn.

"Loving the girl who's been hurt is never an easy road, Dan. If he's that bad, I'm sure she has trauma and ugly memories she might never be able to share with you." Harley's raspy voice speaks softly.

My mind flashes back to her panicking during sex and the time I was angry with her for listing me on that website. She was terrified. I clench my fist at my side, pressing it against my jeans.

Harley continues, "But if she invited you to be there with her this weekend, she clearly feels safe and comfortable with you. She might be

worried she's not good enough for someone like you. It's still something I have trouble with, with Adam."

"You're everything to me, and you're the best thing that's ever come into my life," Adam tells her, his voice full of conviction.

"I know that now, but it was so hard for me in the beginning to believe it, to see past the scars on my body to the clear skin on yours."

"This is making me want to ram his face into my knee, take Lucy back to our apartment, and kiss her feet until she agrees to be my girlfriend."

Adam chuckles. "Not the worst idea actually. But I think you need to start with manning up and telling her you don't see her as a friend, not even close. You can't keep pretending that you do."

"If it's not her, I don't even want a girlfriend. I don't want anyone."

"Grand gesture, Dan. Find the perfect moment and tell her!" Harley claps her hands.

It feels like a light inside my head clicks on. Confession time with Lucy is the only way for us to move on from this place, for me to get her to be mine for real.

"I will. I'm going to tell her this weekend."

The day of the wedding is chaotic, to say the least. I volunteer to help Lucy's dad move chairs from the storage building to the ceremony site, simply to have something to do with my hands.

Lucy didn't get back to our room until late. She woke me up with her mouth around me and gave me a mind-altering blow job before climbing on top and riding me.

It was the sexiest thing I'd ever experienced in my life, and I held her naked in the dark all night long. When I woke up this morning, she was already out of the room and with the bridal party.

"I had no idea weddings were like this," I tell Parker as he and I carry a table together to the reception area.

He grunts, lifting it higher. "It's the most insane shit I've ever seen. Jenn isn't like this, but some girls get married just for the wedding. It's a big, expensive popularity contest. Who can spend the most money in one single day?" He shakes his head. "I'm pretty sure this one is the result of a rich,

bored, soon-to-be mother-in-law with nothing better to do. Sam's mom wanted it to be massive to impress all her Upstate New York friends. That's where she's from. My mom and Maurene have been talking about it on the phone for months."

We place the table near the last one we brought down, as the wedding planner instructed us to do, before going back for more chairs.

"What does it cost, like twenty-five grand?"

That seems like an absurd amount of money to spend on a wedding, but it can't be cheap.

Parker bursts out laughing. "For the food maybe. Try two hundred thousand."

My throat dries up. "Dollars?"

He nods. "Yeah, buddy. This three-day event could cover the cost of a starter home in some areas."

Do some people really just blow money like that?

I have more than that in my bank account right now from bull riding for over four years, but the idea of spending it all on one event is ludicrous to me even if I had ten times that. My family has money, too, but no one would ever know it by looking at us. The home I grew up in was modest, although it was large and comfortable.

It seems like Lucy's family is just along for the ride with this whole thing.

I wonder how it makes her dad feel to have someone else pay for his daughter's wedding.

Tom is walking toward us, down from the main house where we're all staying. He's holding three beer bottles.

"Take a break and have a drink with me." He hands one beer to me and one to Parker.

"Thanks, Uncle."

"Thank you, sir."

I take a sip of the cold beer, not realizing how thirsty I was until then.

"Appreciate all the help with the setup. Apparently, the venue was supposed to have this all done already, but the crew they use was double-booked."

I shrug. "No big thing. I get bored if I go too long without a little work."

"I'm not a serial killer, so I don't enjoy working, but I love my cousin. Also, I couldn't have the lumberjack over here making me look bad in front

of the bridesmaids.”

Tom chuckles. “I think one of those bridesmaids is really doing better than I’ve seen in a while. I even saw her laugh during the rehearsal dinner last night.”

He looks up at me, pale blue eyes studying me.

Parker turns to me. “That’s true. I noticed that too. Since when does Lucy smile, let alone laugh?”

A bubble of pride builds up inside my chest.

Tom smiles. “It’s nice to see. I’ve been very worried about her. Glad you came along, Dan.” He claps me on the shoulder before walking off down the path toward the reception area.

“Damn, getting Tom on your side after two days is pretty impressive. Especially since Brett is practically the son he never had,” Parker remarks.

The good, bubbly feeling inside my chest quickly bursts.

TWENTY-EIGHT

lucy

“I FEEL like I might faint. Do I look pale?”

Jenn’s face is white, but her neck is red with a rash. I blink at her, trying to think of something that could take her mind off of the nerves.

“You look like a stunning bride, Jenn. Maybe you need water. Or cheese and wine?”

“Wine, definitely. White, in case I spill it!”

I nod, thankful to have a task that will actually help my sister and get me out of the bridal suite. If I get one more makeup artist up in my face with a powder brush or a lipstick tube, I might rip out an eyelash or two.

I escape to the hallway, sucking in a deep breath of clean air after inhaling straight hairspray for the past four hours. The rusty-rose-colored bridesmaid dress swooshes around my ankles, revealing my leg with the flattering slit as I meander through the hall toward the kitchen. Surprisingly, I love the color, and the off-the-shoulder neckline makes me feel feminine. I’ve been wondering what Dan will think of it since I put it on.

The bridesmaids have been sipping on mimosas all morning, but Jenn was too nervous to drink anything. I’ve had two, but wine sounds like just the thing to get us through the next three hours until the wedding actually starts.

When I reach the kitchen, I see the cake decorator adding final touches of white icing to an enormous five-layer wedding cake. It’s stunning and glittery, like something out of a Disney princess movie. Sam’s mother is bending over, inspecting the detail work on one of the layers like it’s an episode of *Cake Boss*. The baker is sweating but diligently pressing on.

Good for you, buddy. Wish I could rescue you.

I move toward the wine fridge, where the alcohol stash is. I grab two bottles, one chardonnay and one rosé. I also reach for two wineglasses in the cabinet. No one acknowledges my presence, thankfully. I scurry back out into the hall to get back to Jenn.

“Damn, girl, you are a vision.”

Brett’s cold, unexpected voice freezes my veins. I turn slightly to see that he somehow appeared in the hall out of nowhere.

“You scared me.” My heart rate flutters back down as I keep walking away.

He falls into step beside me. “I like when you show some skin. You should wear more color. I don’t know why you hide behind baggy sweats and dark colors all the time.”

This, coming from the man who tried to shatter every part of me?

I ignore him, still walking.

“Can you slow down? I just want a minute alone with you, Lucy. Please.” He steps in front of me, blocking my path.

I halt, looking up at him. “I need to get back to Jenn. Let’s talk later.”

“Later, when your bulldog is around, sniffing my ankles?”

“Dan? Are you intimidated by him or something?”

He laughs, shaking his head. “I get that he’s tall and has the blue eyes everyone gawks at, but he can’t make you happy forever. I know you better than anyone. You and I have a history. No matter what or *who* you do, you’ll never replace that.”

He leans closer to me, his eyes dropping to my lips suggestively. I step back, sucking in oxygen.

“Our history isn’t something I’m looking to recreate.” My words have a bite to them, but I’m shaking.

Brett reaches his arm out to grip my upper forearm. His touch freezes me in place, fear beginning to build up inside me.

“I know you love romance, Lucy. I know you read those dirty books, and you’re just waiting for the guy who can come in and sweep you off your feet and steal you away from him. You want that fantasy life, that *fairy-tale bullshit* type of relationship. I’m here, baby, to give you everything you ever wanted.”

He leans down, trying to kiss my neck. I step back, but he pulls on my arm, jerking me to him.

I want to scream at him. I want to run. I want to tell him to go fuck himself and die in a hole.

But instead, my body stills. My breathing grows shallow as the old, familiar feeling of suffocating panic seeps into my veins. He has a concrete hold on me as soon as his lips make contact with my neck, like a venomous snake sinking fangs into my skin and slowly poisoning me.

I can't move.

I have to move.

I can't.

He takes my lack of running away and slapping his face as desire, pulling me all the way against him and wrapping his other arm around my waist. The wine bottles and glasses are at my sides, still clutched in my hands.

"I still love you, baby. I always will. I know I fucked up with Molly, but she was a temporary distraction. You were always it for me—you know that, right? We're soulmates."

He's not going to hurt me. He's not going to hurt me. If I just don't make him angry, he won't hurt me. Just stay calm. Just tell him you need to go back to Jenn.

I'm trying to regain composure, to think clearly, to move my limbs and get him off of me.

I want Dan. I need Dan here, now, to shove Brett to the ground and decorate his face with pretty bruises and a broken nasal bone.

Oh my gosh, Dan. Dan can't see this!

The realization of what he might logically think if he did snaps me back to reality. I find the will to move, pulling away from Brett.

Surprisingly, he lets me go. I gape up at his face, panting to breathe before I move around him and hurry down the hallway toward the bridal suite.

"Save me a dance, sweetheart," he calls after me.

I'll save you a dance, fucker. In hell.

Once the short ceremony and endless bridal party pictures are finally over, I get to see Dan in the reception area. He walks toward me with a smile, hand

extended with a full glass of champagne. He's a sight for sore eyes, and my knees nearly buckle from the relief of being near his calming presence after having to stand in front of five hundred people with a plastic smile on my face. His cowboy hat, white button-down, and jeans make him look like the epitome of *my type*.

I take the glass, leaning into him and inhaling his cedar scent.

"Mmm, didn't anyone ever tell you that you're not supposed to upstage the bride?" he whispers in my ear, nuzzling my neck.

I smile against his shoulder, feeling his hard muscle underneath my cheek. My body sinks into him, and I wish we could escape to our room and hide under the covers for the rest of the night.

"I'm exhausted. Let's go somewhere, just for a minute."

He grips my hand and whisks me away without another word, steering me toward the hall.

He is the embodiment of male perfection.

Because of the massive amount of people in attendance at this wedding—most of whom I don't know—there are two reception areas. One of them is outside with heaters to combat the cool evening air. The other one is inside for the people who need a little more heat and light.

Dan and I are still inside, but I'm hoping he's directing me toward the observatory. Instead, he turns me toward the entryway, suddenly veering right, opening a door and pulling me inside. I look around to see that we're inside what appears to be a large coat closet.

"Um, why are we in here?" I ask him, taking a sip of my champagne to calm my nerves.

He shrugs, looking around. "I thought we could dig inside people's pockets and see if we found anything interesting. Plus, they'd find us too easily if we went to our room."

I giggle, nodding with approval at his logical plan. "You seem to have prepared for this."

"I've been scoping out the building all afternoon, planning." He winks at me, taking a step closer to me.

I look around, noticing the closet is shaped like an L. The wall at one end has the door we came through, and the other one has a full-length mirror.

"Does the door lock?" I ask.

He maintains eye contact with me, leaning closer to stretch his arm out and twist the lock until it clicks. “Yes, ma’am.”

His thick Southern accent brings my internal body temperature up a few degrees. He takes my champagne glass, sets it on a shelf beside us, and cups his hands around the back of my neck.

“You’re the definition of beauty, Lucy Blake. This reminds me of that time you took me shopping with you and I saw you in that little red dress for the first time. Holy fuck. I had no idea you had curves like this.”

I don’t have time to process his bold statement before his lips descend on mine, hungrily taking over me. I willingly relent to him, sinking my body fully into his. He’s bigger and stronger than me, and I love the feeling of his body on mine. His strength and presence are sexy and intimidating, but I’m not afraid of him. I know he’ll take care of me.

He pulls back, his gaze meeting mine intensely. As if he read my mind, he suddenly undoes the tie from around his neck, grabs both of my wrists, and loops the tie around both of them. He keeps his eyes locked into mine as he knots it. He then pushes my arms back behind my head, hooking my bonds to a something above me.

He hikes my leg up, using the slit in the dress to his advantage. It doesn’t go high enough, apparently, because he rips it all the way up to my hip.

“Oh shit, Luce. I’m sorry—”

“Shh, don’t be. I’ll never wear it again.”

I dip my face back down to his, licking the underside of his freshly shaved jawline. He moans into my ear, searching for my opening with his fingertips. He tears away my thong, ripping it off of my hips effortlessly.

“I want to taste it, baby.” He starts to lower himself down onto his knees.

“No, please, just fuck me right now.”

I don’t know why, but I’m suddenly desperate to feel him inside of me. I need it like I need air. He doesn’t have to be told twice, pulling the neckline down to reveal my breasts, dipping his head down to suck my nipple into his mouth. I want to touch him, but I love the feeling of being exposed to his wants, at his mercy to do what he wills with me.

If I didn’t fully trust and feel safe with him, this would scare the shit out of me.

But it’s Dan. Dan will always take care of me.

He fumbles with the front of his denim, undoing his belt and working on the button while he sends little jolts of pleasure from my chest down to my center.

It was never this good. I never remember craving it like this.

How did I go so long with it being so miserable and traumatizing?

He finally lifts his head up. He stands above me, bracing himself with one hand on the shelf behind me while using the other to guide himself inside. He bends his knees to get low enough to reach me. I'm dripping wet and so beyond ready.

He exhales a sigh of relief as he presses inside me. It hurts for a split second before feeling like absolute heaven on earth. I pull against the tie, trying to wrap my arms around his neck.

He's steady, braced against the back shelf as he slowly inserts himself and pulls back. I look up into his eyes, feeling my heart thunder loudly in my ears as he looks down at me like I mean everything to him.

"Lucy, baby..." he groans, pressing his damp forehead to mine. "You mean so much to me."

I turn to the side, wondering exactly what he means by *so much*, when my gaze intersects with his, only this time, it's in the full-length closet mirror.

"Baby girl, are you ready to watch me fuck you all tied up at my mercy?"

All I can manage is to nod at him in the mirror.

YES.

TWENTY-NINE

dan

LUCY'S TIGHTNESS clamps around me harder, making me grow lightheaded. Her perfect body is Saran-Wrapped around my hips, flawless, round ass cheeks and tits exposed with her arms tied back. I've never seen anything so erotic in my entire existence.

Waiting twenty-three years to have sex was all worth it for her, for the feeling of her being the only one I know.

Her caramel-colored hair is wild around her face, her cheeks tinged the perfect shade of pink.

"I'm going to marry her. He can have his turn with her for a while, but at the end of the day, she knows she's mine."

We both freeze as an all-too-familiar voice grows dangerously close. Brett is talking to someone right on the other side of the door while I'm balls deep inside his ex-girlfriend.

I pull out slowly before pumping hard back inside her. Lucy gasps, mouth gaping. I kiss her lips, nibbling the bottom one before thrusting again and again and again.

Another voice joins Brett's, but I can't make out what he's saying. I make eye contact with Lucy in the mirror again. Her lips are parted, eyes wide and knuckles white above her head.

"He'll get the fuck over it. She's mine, and I'll win her back. I'll do whatever it takes to prove that she belongs with me."

I reach my hand around the back of her neck, gripping it tightly as we hold eye contact in the mirror, my hips still pounding into hers.

"You want me to open the door, baby? You want me to show him exactly how fucking *mine* you are right now?" I whisper in her ear.

Her eyes roll back as she starts to shake, her body convulsing with a powerful orgasm around my dick. I hold her through it, thrusting continually until she's done.

Once she slacks against me, I pull out, finishing on the floor while still holding her up. I slowly reach up to lift her tied wrists off the hook, carefully undoing the knot.

I feel like I'm on top of the world even though my body is sweaty and weak with exhaustion. Lucy takes a tiny step back from me, adjusting her dress up to cover her breasts. She bends down to get her shredded underwear, moving the skirt of her dress to conceal the tear.

"That was a first," she whispers, trying to hold in a laugh and catch her breath.

I chuckle, tucking myself back inside my underwear and jeans before zipping and buttoning them up.

"I didn't even realize how fun the mirror would make it," I say, my voice low.

She looks over at it. "Yeah, we might be needing a new mirror at the apartment."

I look down at her flushed cheeks and swollen lips, loving that I've made my mark on her and it's going to be obvious as soon as we open the door.

"You ready?" I ask, reaching for the door.

Her eyes are wide, but she nods. I reach my hand to rest it on her lower back before turning the knob and opening the door.

The hall is empty. Brett and whomever he was talking to must have moved on. I'm mildly disappointed, but I try not to let it show on my face. Lucy's expression is neutral as we both look around before stepping out into the hall.

"I'm going to get a paper towel and clean up in there so some poor staff member doesn't slip and fall." I lean down to kiss her temple. "I'll find you in a few."

She nods, walking toward the reception hall. I watch her for a moment before turning to go into the men's restroom and get some paper towels. After cleaning up in the coat closet, I wash my hands and check my teeth in the mirror.

I'm going to do it. I'm going to tell Lucy that I love her.

I stride back into the reception hall, feeling confident that in the next ten to fifteen minutes, she'll have agreed to be my girlfriend and confessed she has feelings for me too. My chest is puffed up, but the smile on my face fades as I hear a voice coming over the microphone.

"I remember when Jenn and Lucy moved into the neighborhood. They were the prettiest girls on our street. I felt so lucky to be the guy they would hang out with after school. We had a secret club. Jenn was the leader. She's always been one to give orders, Sam—I'm just warning you."

The crowd laughs. I find my seat next to Lucy, who's as still as a statue, eyes glued on Brett under the spotlight. He grips the mic in one hand, the other holding a beer.

"But Jenn and I were best friends for a long time until she started dating boys. After that, it was just me and Lucy. I was there when she got her first period actually."

What the fuck?

Lucy stiffens even more, and I reach out to grab her hand. Her fingers are as cold as ice.

"The first person I called was Jenn, her big sister. I said, 'You know about this stuff! What do I do?' Ha-ha. She was always there for me when things were tough. Even when her little sister broke my heart, she comforted me. Jenn, you're a wonderful person, an even better friend, and I hope, one day, to also call you my sister."

Lucy squeezes my hand so tight that I think my finger bones might crack. My chest is rising steadily as my blood starts to boil. My skin feels like hot coals are pressing into it.

Why is he even up there, giving a speech?

Lucy rises from her chair, letting go of my hand as she does. I stand with her.

"Are you okay? I could snap his neck with my bare hands," I whisper.

She looks up at me, tears glistening in her eyes. "I have to give my speech."

She moves around me and walks up to the mic, grabbing it from the DJ. I slowly take my seat again, looking over at Jenn. Her eyes are wide. She looks at me, shrugging before turning her eyes back to Lucy.

"I want to say to all of you how much I am honored to be here for my sister." Lucy's voice is slightly monotone as she speaks, like she's trying to control her emotions. "I've never loved anyone quite like I love her. Having

a big sister isn't something you really understand is a privilege until you grow up and make friends. I have a close friend, Scarlett, who is an only child. After meeting her, I truly started to appreciate all that my big sister was to me. She's my rock when I'm feeling unsteady." Her voice breaks momentarily, but she looks away from the crowd before she continues, "She believes me, even when everyone else has doubts. She knows me better than anyone on the planet. She takes my side. Even when I'm wrong, she takes it. She's my warmth when it's cold, my light when it's dark, my listening ear when I've had a little too much wine and I need to rant."

The crowd chuckles, causing Lucy's normally somber expression to crack into a smile. She looks over at Sam.

"Sam, I know you love Jenn. I know you will treat her with respect and love her always because Jenn would never accept anything less. You are getting a fierce, loving woman to stand by your side. I hope you know all that she is and that you never let her go." Lucy looks over at Jenn, tears building in her eyes as her voice becomes an emotional whisper. "I love you, sis, to the moon and back."

The crowd erupts in applause as Lucy hands the mic back to the DJ. Instead of walking toward me, she turns and heads in the opposite direction, to the outside door. My stomach drops when I see Brett follow her out.

My instincts are screaming at me to go after her, to make sure she's okay. But another part of me is wondering if she wants some time to talk to Brett about things after their breakup and his ridiculous speech about wanting Jenn to be his sister.

I stand up, taking a few steps toward the door. Someone reaches out to grab my arm. I look down to see a wrinkly hand on my forearm. The eyes that meet mine are wide with suspicion.

"Did I see you on First-Time Match?"

My mouth goes dry as the older woman grips my arm tighter, not letting me go.

"Uh, I don't think so. I'm not on dating sites or from this area."

She shakes her head. "It had to be you. I never forget a face. I'm Jenn and Lucy's aunt, by the way."

She pulls out her phone, swiping through it. I try to pull away, but she holds me in a vise grip. Lucy's mom approaches with wet eyes.

"Deloras, wasn't Lucy's speech the sweetest? Do you remember when those two girls were inseparable?"

The woman doesn't answer, taking another few moments to swipe through her phone before holding it up triumphantly. "Aha! Here it is."

She turns the screen around to reveal a picture of me, standing shirtless on top of Adam's hay trailer, holding a bale of hay in each hand. My torso is covered in sweat. I'm wearing my old Levi's with boots and my work Stetson.

Where did Lucy's aunt get this picture of me?

"Um, yeah, that's me, but—"

"You were on First-Time Match! I bid on you a few months ago. I never heard back who won. My whole pickleball team put in a bid, hoping one of us could win and report back to others."

My body freezes when I realize that she's talking about the website Lucy listed me on—to sell my virginity.

I try to stammer out a reply, not knowing how to explain myself or the situation without just telling them all the strange, very personal facts about my and Lucy's pact in the beginning of the year and how we both sort of helped each other keep it, but not the way we'd planned.

Maurene stares at the picture on the phone before looking up at me, disapproval in her squinted eyes. "Do you make a habit of dating women old enough to be your mother?"

Shit. Now, she thinks I'm a gold digger.

I attempt a smile. "No, ma'am. I think this is a misunderstanding. I didn't create that profile. It wasn't me behind that."

Maurene looks at the photo again. "You're saying this isn't a picture of you?"

I try to take a step back, but Deloras holds tight to my arm.

"Uh, no, it is a picture of me. The profile that goes with the picture wasn't really me. Someone else made it."

Deloras and Maurene both look at the photo in confusion. Brett's mother approaches our group, laughing hysterically with a glass of white wine in her hand. She looks at the phone in Deloras's hand.

"Well, that was—oh my, who's the hunk? Bite me off a piece."

Molly sidles up next to me at the same time, eyeing the phone with hungry eyes, which then dip over me, making my skin crawl. She shifts her weight forward, pushing out her breasts. I feel like a caged bird.

I stand up straighter, feeling my lower back start to dampen with sweat. I risk my life every other weekend in the arena, but this somehow feels

more dangerous.

“This is really making me think my daughter has lost her mind. She’s making terrible decisions. I don’t know why she thinks Brett is such a bad choice when Dan is actively online, trying to meet mature, older women for God only knows what purpose!”

I gape at her, wondering how the hell I’m going to explain this situation. My throat is tight as I intentionally grab Deloras’s hand and remove it from my arm with force. She eyes me suspiciously before crossing her arms over her lacy red dress that looks like it’s from a Forever 21 clearance bin.

I’ve had enough of this.

“Listen, Lucy left Brett because he not only cheated on her with her cousin, but he also mistreated her horrifically. You can either accept that or not, but I’ve been friends with her for much longer than we’ve been involved romantically. She was only with him because they had a long history. He abused, manipulated, and controlled her. If you care about him, you’ll spend your time and efforts trying to get him help, not chastising her about breaking up with him.”

Brett’s mother opens her mouth to protest, but I hold up my hand to silence her. Molly’s eyes are more filled with lust than ever.

“Furthermore, I didn’t try to sell my virginity. Lucy did that.”

Maurene gasps, clutching her pearls, literally.

“You’re a *virgin*?” Molly blurts out.

“Not anymore. It was a joke, and we deleted the account a while back. But on that note, we recently started sleeping together, and I’ve realized that I’m completely in love with your daughter. You can believe me when I say that I was raised with a true understanding of how to treat women, and I will always love and respect Lucy. You don’t have to worry about me cheating on her because she’s the only woman in the world for me. She’s it. She’s all I want. What you might want to worry about is me putting my fist through your ‘adopted’ son’s face if he doesn’t stop trying to embarrass her in front of crowds to earn back her affection. She’s *mine* now.”

All four of their mouths are gaping open in shock as they stare at me in complete silence.

I tip my cowboy hat to them before walking out the door to find Lucy outside.

THIRTY

lucy

HIS HANDS ARE on my body while my mind is screaming. Mentally, I'm back in his old apartment, the one where he did most of the damage to me. He's whispering in my ear that he still loves me, that I'm his forever, that we just need another chance to make it work.

I want him off of me. I want to run.

Why can't I run?

"Lucy, baby, don't you know we were meant to be? I've missed you so much," Brett whispers.

He's not going to hurt you. There are tons of people around.

"Lucy?"

Dan's voice shatters the bubble of confusion around me. I open my eyes, searching for him and immediately focusing on his shadowy frame in the dark.

Dan.

I push Brett's arms off with force. He steps back, holding his hands up in front of his chest like he's innocent.

"Whoa, calm down."

I spin around, facing him head-on. With Dan's presence at my back, I feel strong enough to shut Brett down once and for all.

"We are over. We are done. *Forever*. Stop fighting for this, for me, for us. You need to move the fuck on and leave me alone. I am in love with someone else. Do you hear me?"

Brett's gaze hardens. He folds his arms. "Fine. I'll give you some more time to realize what you're missing."

Dan steps up in front of me, blocking Brett from me. "Accept it now, asshole. She is not yours anymore. If I need to put my fist through your face

to make you understand it, so be it.”

Brett puffs out his chest, drops his arms, and steps closer to him. “Oh, is that so, tough guy?” He shoves Dan’s chest back before saying, “I’ll let you borrow her for a while, but that bitch is mine.”

Dan grins at him, cracking his knuckles. “You really need to learn when to quit.”

“Fuck you, asshole!” Brett lunges for him, but Dan moves to the side, looping his arm around his neck and getting him in a headlock.

He brings his knee up into his face to smash it. A sickening crunch fills the night air. Dan drops him, and Brett falls to his knees.

I cover my mouth with my hands, hoping he doesn’t retaliate. Brett comes to his knees, looking up at Dan with dead black eyes. I’ve seen those eyes many, many nights. They’ve haunted me.

“I’m going to kill you, motherfucker!”

His threat doesn’t seem to bother Dan, who is still smiling as he holds up two fingers, beckoning for Brett to come to him. He holds back this time, approaching slower as he raises his fists.

“Fight me like a man, coward.”

“I can’t fight you like a woman. I don’t hurt women,” Dan says, rearing his arm back and throwing a punch.

Brett tries dodging it, but it makes contact with the side of his face, knocking him back. His body flops into the side of the white fence connected to the barn. Blood starts streaming down his face as he tries to stand up.

Dan doesn’t give him a chance to reorient himself before he approaches him, grabbing the front of his sports coat with one and rearing the other one back. I gasp as he brings it down hard into Brett’s face. He tries to raise his arms to block the next blow, but Dan drops him into the dirt.

“Don’t ever touch my woman again.” Dan spits in the dirt next to his boots before turning and walking away from the crumpled body of my ex-boyfriend.

I stare at his form, feeling a strange sense of sadness for him. It’s not that I feel bad for him. I know he dug his grave and deserves every bruise that he’ll wake up with. I’m sad that he’s so broken that he can’t accept or receive love, not the way that I can...and Dan.

Dan reaches me, extending his hands, knuckles coated in blood, out to grip my waist. “Let’s get out of here.”

I look down, tenderly trying to turn his hands so that I can see the amount of damage done.

“You need...bandages, alcohol, something,” I stutter as he turns us to guide me away.

“All I need is for you to be safe and as far away from him as possible.”

He cups my cheek, leaning down to inhale as he places his forehead on mine. I’m shaking, my entire body rattling with the realization that Dan just beat the shit out of my ex, even after he saw us in a compromising position.

“Why did you do that? What was the reason?”

We’re still walking, heading around the side of the main house to get inside and avoid all the wedding guests.

“What do you mean, what was the reason? Why wouldn’t I rescue you from a situation where a man who hurt you is trying to do it again?”

We’re on the side of the house now, where it’s totally dark, but we’re walking past the windows leading into the reception. I duck down, hoping no one sees us passing by.

“I just mean, we aren’t dating or anything so, like, why would you—”

Dan stops abruptly, grabbing my forearm and firmly pressing me up against the side of the house. I can only make out his expression from the light spilling out of the window next to us, but he looks exasperated and *pissed*.

“How much longer are we doing this, Lucy? How much longer are you going to keep this up? I’m just wondering so I can mentally fucking prepare myself to continue falling deeper in love with you while you intentionally become more and more oblivious to it.”

My body stills, heart pounding.

What did he just say to me?

My chest is rising and falling steadily as I stare up into Dan’s face, his square jaw set with determination. He doesn’t bat an eye, even after his outrageous confession.

“I...I love you, Lucy Blake.”

He waits for me, eyes softening and growing vulnerable. He drops them down to my lips, licks his own, then looks back up into mine. My legs are shaking, my bottom lip beginning to quiver.

“I...I had no idea. I thought we were friends. I thought I wasn’t your type,” I whisper.

Lies. You knew. You just couldn’t accept it...

He looks away, a smile of disbelief on his face. “Oh, right, you’re not my type. I’ve never even had a girlfriend.”

“You told me you like bubbly blondes! You said you want someone outgoing, someone who smiles all the time!” I fold my arms over my chest, starting to feel queasy. “Is it the sex?” My voice drops because I’m almost afraid to ask him.

Is this going to be how I lose him forever?

He grits his teeth, leaning down into my personal space, his face only inches from mine. His arms go above, supporting his weight against the side of the building and caging me in.

“This has nothing to do with the way I like to watch my dick go in and out of you in the mirror. This is me putting my heart out on the line for you over and over and over again while you continue to turn and sprint in the opposite direction because you are too fucking traumatized and terrified to accept that a man could love you *the right way*. You’re so used to it being toxic, fucked up, and abusive that you can’t even see it when the real thing has been standing right in front of you—hell, living right across the hall from you!”

The wind feels like it’s been knocked out of me. The truth bomb he just dropped on me detonates, shattering the illusion of protective glass I’d been holding my heart inside all this time. Dan—my sweet golden-retriever Dan—has been in love with me all this time. He’s been loving me back to loving myself, to wanting more, to healing the broken pieces of my heart that I’ve been carrying around for months now.

A lonely tear spills out of my eye, rolling down my cheek. He licks his lips before lifting up his thumb to tenderly wipe it away.

“How long? How long have you felt this way? Why are you just now telling me?” My voice is hoarse, barely above a whisper.

I know I need to tell him how I feel, that it’s mutual, but I just need to know when he realized it before I do.

He reaches one hand down to find mine, gripping it tightly.

“I’ve been telling you that I’m in love with you every day for months now. This tattoo? That was me telling you I love you. Me being here? That was me telling you I love you. My fist dislocating his jaw? That was me telling you I fucking *love you*, Lucy Blake.”

I hiccup in a sob, more tears streaming down my cheeks. I can’t hold them back now, the reality of how in love with him I am overwhelming me.

My nervous system feels like it's starting to regulate again, here in this safe place with his arms around me and his heart laying in my hands.

He draws me closer, engulfing me in a hug that only Dan can give me, completely covering me and creating a safe cocoon of warm muscles and security. Emotionally, physically, and sexually, he is my sanctuary. I cry into his chest, feeling the full-body relief of knowing that he loves me back.

He slowly turns me to guide us through the yard toward the front of the house. I lean into him, trying to hold in the tears. The entire weekend has been an emotional roller coaster, and Dan confessing his feelings for me feels like the peak of it. I grip his hand, hoping he doesn't plan on us rejoining the reception. I don't have it in me to smile for any more photos.

We walk through the front door and aim straight for the stairs up to the bedrooms. There isn't a soul in sight. I lean into Dan, and he supports my weight until we reach our bedroom door. He slides the key out of his pocket, inserting it into the door.

"I'm going to go find you something to eat. I feel like you need to have something in your stomach."

I realize he's right; with the pictures and the speech, I never got the chance to eat dinner. I don't feel hungry, but I am a little lightheaded.

"Okay. I'm going to change. We don't have to go back down, do we?"

He shakes his head, leading me over to the oversize velvet green chair in the corner. "If anyone asks, I'll say you have a migraine and you're lying down."

I nod, reaching down for the strap of my heel. He bends down, getting on his knees in front of me. My eyes study the side of his face as he removes my shoes. He has a tiny little cut beside his eyebrow that Brett must've given him during the fight.

Oh shit, Brett. Who is he going to tell about the fight? What will my parents say?

Dan finishes the task, leaning down to kiss the top of my exposed thigh, where my dress slit was torn open. Goose bumps prickle on my skin at the point of contact.

"I'll be back."

THIRTY-ONE

dan

MY MIND IS RATTLING with possibilities as I gather up a plate of Mexican food from the reception hall for Lucy. She looked too pale when I left her. She hasn't eaten anything the entire night and probably not much during the whirlwind day of wedding preparations. I pile the plate high with fajita meat, tortillas, beans, rice, and all the toppings.

I grab an extra plate to get us both a generous slice of cake from the table where it's being served. I know she likes chocolate, so I get her two pieces, just in case she's having a sweet-tooth night. I get myself some of the strawberry one before turning around, plates in hand and plastic forks in my back pocket.

"Dan! Hey, where is Lucy?"

I curse under my breath before I rotate to face the bride, her white gown looking pristine and perfect. Jenn's brows are scrunched in concern.

"She has a headache. I'm taking her some food up in the room."

Jenn leans closer, eyes dropping down to my aching hands. "Is it just my brain playing tricks on me, or is it a strange coincidence that you have crusted blood on your knuckles and Brett is hiding out in the men's restroom with a bloody nose and a black eye?"

I lift my shoulders, trying not to let a smile come across my lips. "I really couldn't tell you if those two things are a coincidence or not."

Jenn claps a hand over her mouth, eyes widening. "Is Lucy okay?"

I nod, looking down at the food. "I think after she gets something to eat, she'll be good."

Jenn's eyes start to water suddenly. She looks around the reception hall, sucking in an emotional sob. "I really should've just said he couldn't come. Whatever he was to us before, after what he did, he's nothing to me now."

I take a step toward her, wishing I could hug her but the plates are in the way. “I hope you know that she might never really share all that happened. Whatever she’s told you is only a fraction of the truth. I know it might upset your parents, but I have no regrets for putting my fist through his face. I doubt it taught him a lesson, but I hope he at least got the message that your sister is off-limits for his fucked-up games.”

Her eyes are wet as she nods. “I know. I’ve suspected for a while that he was worse than she let on. She always tried to protect us all even if she suffered. I need to have a serious talk with my parents about it all. They should know.”

My tense muscles relax at her words. Lucy’s fractured relationship with her family over the breakup and Brett’s lies have been a burden on her shoulders for months, one I want to see healed. I look over at Lucy’s parents, talking in the corner to Brett’s mother. She seems distraught, gesturing with her hands and crying. Tom and Maurene look up, searching around the venue with somber faces.

Tom and I make eye contact. He studies my face for a few long seconds, his mouth in a thin line. I grew up with a strict, unwavering father. I have no idea if this is going well for me or downhill—fast. The disappointed father glare is one I’m all too familiar with.

Tom turns, cupping Maurene’s shoulder, as well as Brett’s mother’s.

“I think you should get back to Lucy. Everything is winding down now. We can talk in the morning, over breakfast,” Jenn says, leading me toward the door.

“Just so you know, I won’t be apologizing to anyone about what I did to his face.”

Jenn sighs. “I wouldn’t have any respect for you if you did.” She tugs my arm back, holding me still for a moment, looking up at me. “Thank you for taking care of my baby sister when we all failed her. She’s not the easiest person to love all the time, but she’s so worth it.”

I lift the corner of my mouth in a half-smile. “It’s never been hard for me to love her.”

Jenn nods, wiping away the lingering wetness on her cheek before turning away.

I quickly walk through the door, stopping off at the kitchen as a bartender walks by with a box of champagne.

“Hey, man, care to let me steal one of those for a private party?”

The guy shrugs, pulling out a bottle and handing it over. I tuck it under my arm before thanking him and walking back up the stairs.

I knock on the door with my foot since all my hands are full. A few seconds later, it creaks open. Lucy is standing there, her face freshly washed with red-rimmed eyes, wearing one of my white T-shirts and no pants.

She lets me in, opening the door all the way. "Oh, wow, I just realized how hungry I am."

I set the food down on the bed for her before starting to unbutton my shirt. She sits, reaching for a tortilla and starting to fill it up with toppings.

I consider telling her about my conversation with Jenn, but with the redness around her eyes, I'm wondering if her tough exterior shell has been removed for the night. She seems fragile and exhausted, and all I want to do is make sure she's okay. The family drama and ex-boyfriend mess can wait for tomorrow.

After removing my shirt, I kick off my boots and change my jeans out for a pair of gray sweats. Lucy watches me silently as she eats her fajita. I join her on the bed, reaching for a fork to dive into the cake.

"You should've gotten first aid stuff, Danny." Lucy grabs my hand, studying the wounds on my knuckles.

"I kinda like having a little blood on my hands when it's for a good cause."

She blinks at me, big brown eyes round and trusting. "I don't know how to process what you did or why it made me feel so...safe. You beat him to a pulp, quite violently, and I suddenly never want to be out of your sight."

My chest swells up with pride, and I hope we're getting closer to her agreeing that us not being officially together at this point is complete nonsense.

"It's called protecting what's mine, sweetheart." I reach over for the bottle of champagne on the nightstand, slowly undoing the top so we can celebrate this new phase in our relationship.

Lucy slides off the bed, settling herself in front of me, between my thighs. She places her hands on my knees, looking up at me with her soft, doe eyes. "I want to thank you, Dan."

She reaches up for my waistband, but I catch her wrist with my hand.

"Whoa, baby, you're not doing that right now."

She tilts her head, looking at me curiously. "I want to."

I gently tug her back up, pulling her into my lap.

Why does me defending her make her want to give me head?

“Lu, baby, you’ve had a rough day, a rough night, and a long weekend. You’ve been through the seven levels of hell with your ex, and tomorrow, we have to get up and face your family to talk through it. You don’t have to thank me with physical favors. I want sex with you to be something we both enthusiastically participate in, not some obligation you feel when I do something, like stand up for you.”

She’s staring at my knuckles, biting into her bottom lip.

“I don’t know how else to express my love for you,” she whispers.

My fists clench, as the desire to rip Brett’s throat out is incredibly potent again. I exhale a long breath before responding to her. I reach my fingers up to lift her chin, my eyes holding hers.

“You are no longer bound to someone whose only intimate transaction with you is physical. You no longer have to give sex to get love or affection. You have my love, and you’ve had it for a very long time now. My love for you, me beating your ex to a fucking pulp, everything I have done for you—it has nothing to do with sex. I will *never* allow you to say thank you or express your gratitude to me with sexual acts. You’re too precious to me, too valuable, to be reduced to sex in exchange for love or me defending you.” I swallow over the lump in my throat as her eyes water, more tears spilling down her cheeks. “If you want to express love for me, then tell me with your words. Tell me that you’re mine.”

She hiccups in a sob, nodding. She doesn’t say anything for a moment, and I realize that maybe I’m still demanding things of her, still telling her what she has to do in order for me to be here and love her.

“If that’s not what you want, then...I understand. But I’ll take what I can get from you. I’d eat the breadcrumbs under your table if it was all you’d let me have of you. But I can’t *only* have sex with you anymore. My heart can’t take it.”

She finally finds her words. “You’re worth so much more than breadcrumbs. And I...I love you more than anything in this world. I’ll never be able to fully explain it or express it, but you’d better let me fuck you again whenever I want.”

I laugh, leaning forward to kiss her on the cheek. “Only as long as you promise to be mine, fully and completely, in private and in public.”

She nods, leaning forward to kiss my lips. Our mouths stay together for a few long seconds, our hands clasped tightly. I slowly pull back, resting

my forehead on hers.

“Mmm, I love kissing you. I love you so damn much.”

“I love you more...fuck, that feels weird to say.”

“Well, get used to it because I’m gonna need to hear it multiple times a day for a long time, especially in front of people.”

She laughs, the sound of her happiness filling my heart up with more joy that I ever would’ve thought possible.

“Can we pop this champagne now?”

“Damn straight, baby.”

THIRTY-TWO

lucy

I WAKE UP FEELING WARM, protected, and cherished. Dan's heavy, muscly arms are wrapped around me, one under my head and the other curled around my waist and resting on my belly. The skin on my face is tender from all the tears I shed yesterday. In a way, it feels good that I finally cried about it. Even after my breakup with Brett, I rarely cried and felt the freedom to express the sorrow over being so damaged and mistreated.

It feels like I've finally buried the old me. Maybe now I can start to rebuild.

I lie still for a few minutes, listening to the steady thump of Dan's heartbeat and feeling his even breathing with the rise and fall of his chest. This is the first time I remember waking up with him still being asleep beside me. There's nothing in the world that can compare to the swell of love I'm overwhelmed with right now. With our newly confessed state of mutual affection, the ball of stress I've been harboring inside for months from diligently pretending not to have feelings for him is finally starting to ease.

I wiggle closer to him, pressing my butt up against his front.

His grip tightens around me. "Don't even think about getting out of this bed."

The early morning depth of his voice is the hottest thing I can ever remember hearing.

"I have to pee."

"Hold it."

I grin, shifting my body around to face him. His eyes are still closed, golden lashes resting against his cheeks.

Dan is my boyfriend, my freaking real-life boyfriend.

“Are we going to tell people that we’re, like, together now?”

His eyes slowly drift open. He studies me for a moment before answering, “I’m personally having a banner made and hiring a pilot to fly it all over campus every day until graduation, just to make sure no one misses it.”

I bite my lip, hoping my morning breath isn’t grossing him out. “I’m nervous.”

“Nervous about what?”

I shrug. “You’re just...you’re everyone’s dream boyfriend. It’s a lot to live up to.”

He blinks at me in confusion. “This is my first morning waking up as someone’s actual boyfriend.”

I exhale. “I’m still just so damaged, so fucked up in the head. Last night was just a little taste of the trauma I’m still carrying around with me like a suitcase full of bad memories I can’t shake. I’m not easy to love.” I blurt out the thing I’ve been holding back from him all this time, the thing that’s been forcing me to keep him at arm’s length.

He reaches out his thumb, brushing it over my bottom lip.

He considers his words carefully before responding, “I hate when you talk about yourself that way. You have always been easy for me to love. I’ve been in love with you for months now. By the time I realized it, I had already fallen hard. Your traumatic past doesn’t scare me away from loving you. I’ve been waiting for you, waiting for you to open your eyes and see me standing right here in front of you.” He smiles, blue eyes lighting up with intensity. “We’re a match, Lucy Blake. There’s no denying it. You’re fire, and I’m water, and I love it. You’re everything good that I’m not. You’re everything I want. Everything I need. I can’t imagine my life without you.” He traces around the rest of my face, touching each feature like he’s memorizing it. His voice lowers to a whisper. “I don’t think God could’ve made a more perfect person than you.”

My heart is nearly bursting with his sappy love confession.

“I really thought that you just saw me as a friend. You told me you wanted a bubbly blonde, someone smiley, healthy, and likable. That’s the complete opposite of me.”

He laughs out loud. “Your hair is gorgeous. I’ve been taking mental notes of all your smiles. I’d bet good money that I can make you smile

more than anyone else on the planet.”

“Well, you’re funnier than most people, Daniel Wesson.”

A banging on the door startles us both.

“Lucy! Are you bailing on brunch?”

My heart starts racing at the sound of Jenn’s voice.

“No, I’m coming. Just need to finish getting ready,” I call out.

Dan and I both get up, taking a quick shower together. We don’t have time for any funny business, but just watching each other clean up under the water is exciting with our newly discovered romantic dynamic.

After we get out and get dressed, we walk downstairs, hand in hand. My hair is up in a loose bun to keep it from getting wet in the shower.

He leans down to whisper in my ear, “I love your hair like this.”

I smile shyly, squeezing his hand as we walk into the dining room. The group is smaller and more intimate for this meal. The only ones present are my parents, Jenn and Sam, his parents and grandparents, and my aunt Deloras. She winks at me and Dan as we walk in and take a seat near my dad.

He reaches an arm around my shoulders, squeezing me tightly to his chest.

“Hi, sweetheart. Your speech last night was...beautiful. I was so proud of you.”

I exhale a deep sigh of relief, sinking closer to his warmth. “Thanks, Dad.”

So, he’s not mad about Brett’s face.

I look up at my mom, who is looking from me to Dan. She drops her eyes to her plate without a smile, and my stomach twists.

“Well, I think we should all toast—to the man who finally stood up to the thorn in this family’s side and ripped it out.” Jenn lifts up her mimosa glass.

Dan and I look around, seeing everyone slowly raise their glass. Ours are already poured and ready, so we grab them and lift them toward the center of the table.

“To Dan!” Jenn says, clinking her glass with Sam’s before downing it.

Deloras stands up, stretching across the table to be able to reach Dan’s glass with her own. I look over at her curiously before I clink my glass with Dan’s.

“Cheers! To smashing in my ex-boyfriend’s face!” I whisper.

Dan winks at me before tipping his glass back over his lips. Deloras is still standing, looking around the room at the group. She licks her lips, and I realize she's about to say something.

"I, for one, am so happy for both my nieces. Jenn, the wedding was lovely. I didn't get to throw it back on the dance floor with the hot young buck, but my main strength is patience. If he wants to keep playing around with younger women, this old gal can wait on him."

She winks again, but this time, I realize that it wasn't directed at me; it was for Dan. With widened eyes, I look around the room to see if anyone else was thrown off by her strange little speech. My mother's face is pinched with distaste, and my father is trying to cover a laugh with a cough. Jenn's and Sam's mouths are both open, along with his family's.

Finally, I turn to Dan. He's completely still, like a sculpture in a museum. His cheeks are tinged pink, which really doesn't happen much anymore since I've taken his virginity. Sex used to be the only thing that made him blush.

"Um, am I missing something?"

"Your boyfriend is into cougars, hon. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news!" Deloras sloshes her drink on the white tablecloth as she makes her way around the table.

Dan reaches for my hand under the table, grasping it tightly.

Cougars? Dan? What?

"Your old one looked like he got his face reconstructed last night, but this one here is still as pretty as a picture. I don't mind giving him a ride home if you two...need some space."

I truly have no idea what the hell is happening with crazy Aunt Deloras, but Dan doesn't seem to be shocked, only embarrassed.

"Do you have any idea what she's talking about?" I ask him.

He rubs his hand over the back of his neck, turning to face me more fully. He glances up at my parents' faces behind me before focusing on mine. "Uh, Aunt Deloras and I matched on...First-Time Match, apparently. She put in a bid."

My stomach drops, along with my jaw. My eyes dart up to her smug face. Her arms are crossed like she's incredibly proud of the fact that she tried to purchase a person's virginity on the internet, and that person now happens to be my boyfriend.

“Well, Deloras, I’m sorry to tell you that the deal has fallen through. The goods are spoiled. Rotten. Used up.”

Deloras’s face falls as her brows scrunch together. “What are you saying? He’s not on the app anymore?”

I shake my head, standing up with my arms folded defiantly. “I took Dan’s virginity, fair and square. He’s not for sale. He’s *mine*.”

“What?! I didn’t want to take anything of the sort! I simply wanted to go on a date with him and consider making him my sugar baby. What the hell are you talking about, paying for his *virginity*?”

The table is completely silent, except for my father, who is barely holding in his laughter. Deloras’s nostrils are flaring as she looks around at all of us, finally settling on Dan.

“Deloras, that’s enough. Dan is with Lucy now. They’re a very happy couple, and I am proud of them for standing up to someone who had us all fooled. I’m sure there are plenty of young men for you to choose from for your...er, extracurricular activities.” My mother’s no-nonsense tone causes her sister to calmly take her seat, albeit with crossed arms and a frown on her wrinkled lips.

I turn to see Jenn hiding a smile with her napkin. I guess she finally told my parents the truth about Brett and everything he had done to me.

I mouth, *Thank you*, to her.

She winks at me before taking her seat.

My dad has given up, silently laughing to himself in his chair at the spectacle our family has created. I crack a smile, too, loving that he’s accepting Dan so well. My mother takes her seat, reaching for the piece of bacon still on her plate as she looks up at Dan and me.

“So, you two, when can we expect to hear wedding bells from you?”

“Mom!” I exclaim.

She smiles, taking a bite of her crispy bacon. “What? I want grandbabies. Lots of them.”

THIRTY-THREE

dan

“THERE’S no way you got that in under three seconds! You two are cheating,” Kenna exclaims as she pours herself and Harley another glass of wine.

Levi shrugs, winking at her as he takes a bite of the mini grilled cheese square on his plate. We all brought snacks over for game night, and my fancy grilled cheese has been a hit.

“You’re just jealous that we’re winning,” I say.

Kenna shakes her head and rolls her eyes, standing up to take her turn.

We’re playing a game called Naked. No one actually gets naked. The way it’s played is simple. Everyone has three pieces of paper. We write the name of a person, a place, and a thing. The teams are split into guys and girls. The first round is like Taboo. We describe the word or phrase on the paper until our team members get it. After that round, we move to charades and act it out, using the same words. Round three is the hardest. We only get one word to hint at the word on the paper, hoping our team can pick up on the clue.

The girls are currently killing us, but Silas and I just started listing famous baseball athletes, which gave us a small advantage. Kenna throws a fit every time we even get one point.

The doorbell rings as soon as Kenna starts her turn.

Scarlett shouts out the answer. “Tampon!”

Kenna nods, tossing the paper into the discard pile on the floor. “I was hoping the guys would get that one and have to act it out.” She folds her arms over her chest before turning to answer the doorbell.

Lucy scoots closer to me, reaching down to steal a potato chip off of my plate. “How does it feel to suck so bad at this game?” she asks.

I try to hold in a smile. “It’s pretty damn okay, considering I still get to go home with you.”

She snuggles into me farther. “True.”

We’ve been living together since our situationship began, so it sort of feels like we skipped the phase of deciding when was the best time to move in together. I look up toward the entryway to see that the guests I invited have arrived.

Beckham and Billie walk in, hand in hand. He’s holding a bottle of wine, which he extends out to the host, Kenna.

“Thanks for letting us crash.”

Kenna accepts the gift with a smile, gesturing toward the group seated around the spacious living room. “Come on in. We’re just humiliating the guys in a game right now, so they might be busy licking their wounds. We’re playing Pictionary next.”

Billie laughs, walking toward an empty set of chairs. “We’re happy to sit and watch. I’m not very good at games.”

Her eyes meet mine. She smiles shyly. I return it before facing Lucy. Everything that happened between Billie and me is water under the bridge. Beckham told me a few days ago that he was taking Billie on a second date.

“Great to have you guys,” I say. “We’re not playing Pictionary. Miss professional cover designer would kick all of our asses.” I’m incredibly proud of my girl for her steady growth of freelance clients in the book cover design world, creating one stunning cover after another.

Beckham chuckles, shaking his head. “I might be able to even the odds. Glad to see you two finally quit with the act. Damn, that was exhausting.”

I look from him to Billie, seeing her shake her head.

“I have never felt so invisible on a date! Beckham and I had a bet going the last time.”

Lucy and I both lean forward.

“What are you talking about?” she asks.

Beckham wraps his tattooed arm around Billie’s shoulders. “Every time you tried to make Lucy smile, we took a shot.”

My mouth slacks open.

“And every time she smiled at something you’d said, we couldn’t take a chaser afterward.”

Silas howls. Scarlett slaps his knee, letting out her own laugh. Adam shakes his head as a grin spreads across his face. Harley snickers, leaning

into her husband, and Levi and Kenna just shake their heads with big smiles and knowing glances.

Lucy turns to look at me with her wide brown eyes. Her wild, curly hair is sticking out all around her beautiful face.

“Well, I guess they caught on to what was happening a few weeks before we did,” she says, leaning forward to kiss my jawline.

My skin is on fire, partly with embarrassment, but mostly with the thrill of how damn happy I am in this moment with her.

“Well, Billie, I hope your dates with Beckham go much better than the ones you went on with me did.”

Beckham chuckles, pulling his girl in closer. “Don’t worry, man; your screwup is my success.”

I grin at him before standing up to get another drink. “You want another margarita, Lu?”

Lucy nods, tipping her glass back over her lips to empty the contents. “Fill me up, baby.”

I’m so fucking lucky.

I step into Levi and Kenna’s kitchen. After mixing up a classic margarita for Lucy, I grab myself another beer. Adam and Levi walk in after me, laughing and smiling about something.

“Brother, so glad you and Lucy could take a break from your busy birds-and-bees schedule to come hang with all of us. For a while, I wondered if we’d ever see you two again.”

I toss my head back with laughter at my brother’s joke. “We plan to leave early tonight so we can get some good loving in before bedtime.”

Levi shakes his head, a smile on his lips. “Don’t blame you. Why do you think Kenna and I took so long to call LJ and tell him good night earlier?”

Adam punches him in the shoulder. “You’re kidding. That’s not fair.”

Silas walks into the kitchen, arms filled with beer cans and empty wineglasses. “Who’s on refill duty? The women are talking about ovulation. Y’all left me alone.”

“What exactly is ovulation?” I ask.

All three of my friends turn to face me with blank stares.

I lift my hands. “Kidding!”

Adam shakes his head, punching my shoulder. “You had me for a minute there.”

“Me too.” Silas claps me on the shoulder. “By the way, when did you get a tattoo?”

He pushes up the sleeve of my henley to reveal Lucy’s bull-rider drawing, which has completely healed. Adam leans in to see it for the first time.

“Uh, a couple of weeks ago.”

My brother’s eyes are glued to the image, and he raises a brow. He cracks a smile, shaking his head. “Damn, women. Cheers to my little brother being in love and finally not hiding his dirty little bull-riding secret anymore.”

He raises his beer—a rare thing for him to indulge in—for a toast. I guess he knew all along that I never gave up on The Riders. Silas and Levi don’t question it.

Maybe I’m not that good at keeping secrets.

Silas and Levi both grin, each raising their beer cans as well. I look around at my friends, thinking about the first day we arrived at Ole Tex, naive and completely oblivious to the experiences we were about to have with life. I think about the way we were all changed for the better, one by one.

“Cheers, boys, to the rest of our lives, living in the real world with some damn good women by our sides.” I raise my glass once more, wrapping my arm around Adam’s shoulders.

He does the same to Levi, who does it to Silas. We clink our glasses together, looking ahead to the rest of forever with one hell of a ride behind us and another one right before us.

epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER

MY HAND GRIPS the rope tightly, holding on for dear life. I have no idea if this ride is going to end in a substantial amount of money or a trip to the closest emergency room.

My legs clamp around the body of the animal, my sweat mixing in with the moisture pouring from the animal's hide. The buzzer sounds in the distance, marking the eight seconds and releasing me from the regulation to keep one hand in the air. I reach down to hold on with both, looking around for an escape.

The bull takes a sudden turn, throwing off my balance and sending me hurling into the dirt. I tuck my head and roll, managing to avoid a fatal injury with pure instinct and luck. I jump to a standing position, quickly climbing over the steel fence only seconds before the bull makes contact with it.

The crowd erupts in applause, cheering my efforts on. I look up, sweat dripping over my brow as I search the crowd for Lucy.

"Damn, that was one hell of a ride." A male voice speaks to my left.

I look up into the dark eyes of a man I've never seen before.

"Thanks," I say.

"If you're ever looking for a job as a ranch hand, give me a call," he continues.

I look down at the outstretched hand of the man. It's callous and tanned, like any real cowboy. I grasp it firmly. He looks vaguely familiar. I don't usually mingle when I come ride, but I might have seen him before.

"Will do," I say even though he didn't offer me a business card.

"Holden Redford," he says.

"Daniel Wesson."

He nods before he turns to strut away, spurs spinning. I continue searching for Lucy in the growing crowd. I've never seen so many people at a Riders event. It's usually just composed of old cowboys looking to make a little cash, but now, it's grown to a substantially large group of people.

"Lucy!" I call out into the crowd.

I see her then, wild, curly hair appearing behind two people making out. A redhead girl I've never seen is leaning in close toward her. For half a second, I think it might be Maya. Then, I realize the copper-colored hair is far too long to be my ex-girlfriend's.

As I grow closer to the girls, a teen boy pulls me aside, asking for my autograph. "Can you sign my cowboy hat?"

"Sure, man. To who?" I ask, one eye still on Lucy.

"My name is Trevor. I've been watching you for a couple of years. Between you and the Redford brothers, The Riders is my all-time favorite sport."

I stop in my tracks, turning to face the skinny teen boy fully. His cowboy hat is oversize, much like his eyes.

"The who?"

"The Redford brothers? The guy you were just talking to?"

I turn back around, seeing the tall man who congratulated me disappearing into the haze of bull riders and cowboys.

"I'm not familiar with them," I say.

The teen chuckles, holding out his cowboy hat. "He signed my hat just a minute ago. They say he's the wild one, the oldest brother."

"Who is he?"

"Number fourteen! We're ready for you, Redford. Show us what you got!" the announcer booms over the speaker.

I'm turning to watch the rider when a patch of curly hair catches my attention in the corner of my eye.

"Hey, cowboy. You got a woman at home?" Lucy purrs next to me.

My lips curl into a smile as I turn to face her. Big, beautiful, dark eyes stare up at me, and I can't believe there was ever a time that I wasn't madly in love with her.

"Mmm, not anyone that could keep me from a woman like you."

She reaches her arms up around my neck, pulling me down to her for a kiss. Her lips press against mine, sweet and soft.

"I just met a girl who has been coming here since she was a kid. Apparently, her boyfriend is one of The Riders too."

I look up, noticing the girl with long copper hair is still perched beside the fence, observing the show. "That's good, baby. I'm glad you're making friends. I wonder if it was the guy I just met." I gesture toward the chute just at the buzzer sounds, releasing the bull with his rider.

Lucy and I both watch as he's thrown up and down, using skill and experience to stay perfectly poised the entire eight seconds. Once the ride is over, she turns back to me.

"I thought the same thing, but, no, she said that's his older brother. She can't stand him."

"Hmm," I mumble, my mind wandering from the conversation. I drape my arm around her shoulders, turning to lead her from the arena.

People jostle and bump into us as we walk. I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket, hoping it's from the person I've been waiting to hear from. I pull it out, seeing the number ending in 7443. My stomach flips as I open the text, tilting the screen so that Lucy can't see it.

UNKNOWN:

It's ready.

I stare at the message for a second before sending a quick reply.

DAN:

I'll be there in the morning.

I put my phone back into my pocket before steering Lucy toward my truck.

"What are you feeling for dinner, Lucy Lu?"

Lucy shrugs, folding her arms over her chest. She looks straight ahead, mouth in a straight line.

Whoa, what happened? Three seconds ago, she was happy.

"You okay?"

She nods. We walk in silence to my truck in the cool night air. I look up, seeing the bright stars out over the Texas countryside.

"Look up, baby. You wanna go stargazing again soon?"

"I guess," she says.

I open the truck door for her, and she climbs in. I'm racking my brain for why her mood suddenly plummeted, but I come up empty.

Maybe she's hungry.

We drive home in silence. She gives me one-worded responses to every topic I try to bring up, so I finally give up. I pull up to her favorite taco place, hoping it will lift her spirits. She doesn't order anything.

"Are you sure you're not hungry?"

She shakes her head. I pull through without ordering. I drive us home and park the truck. I give up trying to figure out what's wrong as we walk up to the door. I open it for her, seeing a tear glistening on her cheek in the moonlight.

"Lucy, baby, what is the matter?" I grab her arm, concern causing a ball of nerves to form in my stomach.

"I just wanna go to sleep, Dan. Okay?" She pushes past me, going to the bedroom and shutting the door.

The next morning, I get out of bed and leave before Lucy wakes up. My head is filled with concern for the short drive, and I decide to stop and get her flowers on my way back.

I pull up to the little store, checking the cash I brought to make sure it's still the right amount. The little bell on the door dings as I walk in.

"Dan, you're here bright and early. I guess you're ready to see it." The old woman smiles warmly as she walks to the back of the store.

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

She walks back a moment later with a little black velvet scrap of fabric, which she lays out on the glass case, setting the black box on top of it. She opens it up, revealing the sparkling three-carat diamond inside.

"Radiant cut, three carats, no halo, classic gold band. I must say, she's a lucky little lady."

I stare at the diamond, suddenly nervous that this is really happening. I'm about to propose to a woman and not just any woman.

Lucy. Grumpy, moody, adorable Lucy. She keeps me on my toes, and I couldn't ask for a better woman to love and cherish for the rest of my life.

I just hope she says yes.

I pay for the ring with cash from my bull-riding winnings. After thanking the jeweler, I get back in my truck and start driving home. Everything is set up for tonight. All I have to worry about now is getting Lucy to the bowling alley without her growing suspicious.

I stop at the florist on the way home to get her a bouquet of white and yellow wildflowers. She still doesn't care for pink.

When I pull back up to our apartment, I exhale, feeling the ring box securely in my jeans pocket and head up the iron stairs.

Hearing footsteps coming down, I look up to see Lucy, suitcase in hand, a duffel bag over her shoulder, and tearstained cheeks.

"Lucy?"

She ignores me, continuing down the stairs with her bags.

"Lucy! Baby, what are you doing?" My voice grows frantic.

She trips, dropping the suitcase, which clatters to the bottom of the steps, landing with a thud. I grab her arms, holding her in place in front of me, midway down the stairs. The sky suddenly roars with thunder as raindrops begin to pelt our faces.

"Where are you going? What happened?"

My eyes search hers for answers, but all I see is a deep sadness.

She sucks in a shaky breath. "I'm leaving. I just need to go see Jenn."

My stomach drops. "What happened? Baby, talk to me."

She closes her eyes, tears squeezing out of them, mixing with the rain. The duffel bag falls to the ground as she starts to cry harder.

"You just...I really think you're cheating on me. You've been texting some woman recently, always on your phone, and when I woke up this morning and you were gone, I just realized I can't wait around here for you to get home. I know you're hiding something from me. I have trust issues, big ones. I need space right now."

The hair on the back of my neck stands up, all my senses on fire. My heart is pounding in my chest. I reach down with my free hand toward the ring.

She thinks I'm cheating on her.

"Lucy Blake...baby, oh my sweet baby. I would never ever in a million years cheat on you. I'd rather saw off my own arm with a dull knife than ever hurt you like that. I'd rather freeze to death in Antarctica than ever even come close to hurting you like that." I drop down on one knee, laying

the flowers down on the top of her duffel. "I have been keeping a secret from you."

Her eyes widen as she looks down at me, still sniffing. My eyes plead with her to trust in me, to believe me, even when the demons of her past fight against her.

"You know me. Have you ever known me to lie to you?"

She slowly shakes her head, brushing her cheek with the back of her hand.

"These feelings are your past talking to you, haunting your mind."

She looks up at me, sad eyes blinking at me as her shadowy past struggles to keep its hold on her, even after all the healing she's done and the love we've built together. Many days are still a battle for her, one I'll never stop fighting.

I reach into my pocket, pull out the ring box, and hold it out to her.

She gasps, clapping her hand over her mouth in shock. She wasn't expecting this at all, clearly. Part of me is glad I was able to surprise her, but there's still a glimmer of worry in me that she'll say no, especially now.

"Lucy Lu, Lulu Bear, Luce, Lucy...I've been secretly texting someone for a while, and I met up with her this morning. She's been hard at work, making me this ring," I flip open the box.

Lucy's eyes grow even larger. She drops her hands to her sides as her jaw slacks open.

"Because I wanted it to be perfect. I wanted this moment to be perfect. I know it's not, but if I can convince you to stay, to give me another chance to get it right—"

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

I slowly nod, heart in my hands. "I wanna spend the rest of my life proving to you that your heart is safe with me. I need you to understand that there is not a person in this world who could draw my attention away from you. I love you, Lucy Blake. Please, do me the honor of becoming my wife. Will you marry me?"

Tears start falling down her cheeks again, but she slowly nods as her lips begin to turn up. "I'm such a mess. I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. I love you so much. All I want is to marry you, to be with you forever."

I smile up at her, taking the ring out of the box. The tightness in my chest is gone, and my entire body feels lighter than air.

She said yes.

“Is that a yes?”

She nods, crying harder. “Yes, yes, yes!”

She jumps on me, wrapping her arms around my neck and peppering my face with tiny kisses as the rain pours down on us harder. “I can’t believe you want to be with me forever, even after all that.”

I slip the ring on her finger before standing up, my arms wrapping tightly around her waist. “Well, believe it, baby, because the rest of your life starts right now.”

the end

For a bonus epilogue with all the Good Ol' Boys couples celebrating Dan and Lucy's wedding, click [here](#) to read "Dan + Lucy Forever," which also comes with Dan's gourmet grilled cheese recipe.

Or scan the QR code below.



also by mj hendrix

If you missed book one, Adam and Harley's bad girl/good boy story read [*Falling for Temptation*](#).

If you missed book two, Levi and Kenna's nerd boy/popular girl story read [*Seeing Double*](#).

If you missed book three, Silas and Scarlett's enemies to lovers second chance story read [*Seducing the Saint*](#).

If you're all caught up on the Good Ol' Boys, you can read my standalone single mom beach romance [*When Summer Ends*](#).

Sign up for [email alerts](#) or follow [Mj on Amazon](#) or [Instagram](#) to be notified of the next series release!

It's already in the works and will be announced soon.

about author & social links

Mj can't seem to resist pairing a damaged heroine with a hero who manages to tear down her walls one brick at a time.

Some family drama, a troubled past, a smidge of angst and a little spice is basically her entire love story formula.

She is a single mother from Texas and eternally indebted to her writing, which rescued her from the darkest place she had ever been.

Her lifelong dream is to one day write all her books in a house by the sea, with a wine cellar that's never empty and her imaginary characters somehow becoming her real-life friends.



You can keep up with Mj and her writing/publishing journey through her amazon author profile, social media, or her website.

She's most active on TikTok as [@mjhendrixauthor](#) and Instagram as [@mjhendrixauthor](#)
www.mjhendrix.com/

You can join her reader group [here](#) to connect with more Mj readers. (Mj's Hot Mamas on facebook).

Follow her on [amazon](#) to get notifications for all new releases.



a note from mj

It was a cold March evening. He took me to a street dance downtown with live music. We were shivering in the spring weather, so we stepped into a wine bar for a drink and their heaters. The song “Cover Me Up” by Morgan Wallen came on. He smiled, telling me that this was the song he used to listen to after he fell in love with me and before we were together.

He looked down at me, cupped the side of my face, and said, “I don’t think God could’ve made a more perfect person.”

No one understands what abuse can do to a person, especially when you’ve gone your whole life believing you don’t deserve good things or good people. There’s this fundamental disconnect with girls who have been mistreated and good men. They really think they will never get anything better than mediocre, at best, and more often than not, they actually believe that mistreatment is somehow their fault, their lot in life.

Some women will never understand it. Those of us who do are so happy for the ones who got love easily—those girls who picked a guy at sixteen who just so happened to be the best guy ever. They fell in love before they were even fully grown and never felt the crippling rush of a heartbreak that was a not-so-lucky choice.

As much as I’ve been crushed by men and felt my entire body ugly-crying and the cold numbness of pain so great that my body wouldn’t feel it, I don’t think I would change it if I could.

There is something utterly beautiful and raw about loving someone into loving themselves. It’s like coaxing a butterfly into full bloom with a gentle little tug. Men who can love women well and smile when they *thrive* are a rare and delectable breed.

That's what I wanted Dan to feel like when he fell in love with Lucy. It's not the love he gives her so freely, and it's not a male's attention and desire that give her meaning, purpose, and drive. What brought Lucy back to life was the realization that she had worth far beyond what Brett had made her believe.

Dan made her believe that about herself.

I know some readers will have a hard time understanding Lucy and Brett's relationship. Why would she stay with him for so many years if he was abusing her? Why did it take her learning that he'd slept with Molly for her to leave?

Well, first off, I'm so glad to hear that you have no earthly idea what it's like to be in an abusive relationship with an intimate partner. Truly, I wouldn't wish it on my greatest enemy.

Secondly, abuse has a strange way of blinding you, of slowly numbing you to the pain. There's an old adage about a frog being boiled alive. If you put a frog in a pot of boiling-hot water, he'll immediately jump out because of the clear and obvious danger. But if you put a frog in a pot of cold water and slowly turn up the heat, you will boil him alive, and he'll never see it coming. The warm water—or abuse—will feel like love and concern at first.

Like Lucy shares in her POV, it's difficult to even put into words or explain the pain and suffering that victims experience, particularly when they have an involved family who wants what's best for them. They give so much of themselves and love everyone around them so much that they can't bear the thought of causing their loved ones pain if they share the trauma they're experiencing.

When a traumatized person does start to feel real love from a genuine, good person, it's so unfamiliar to them that they test it, they run, they scream at them. They can't believe it's real, so they often push it away with toxic defense mechanisms. Dan's love for Lucy was patient and pure, and he withstood her trauma responses, knowing that her hurt and pain needed time to heal.

The Good Ol' Boys Series has been nearly three years in the making. I started writing this book series in January 2021, when I was still married. I dived in headfirst with Harley and Adam, pouring so many of my favorite tropes into one book about a girl who so needed to be loved by a good man. I truly was dissociating from my real life with both of my first books.

Here I am, three years later, a divorced single mom, dating a sweetheart who has read all my books and has elements of all the male main characters in his personality. I truly believe I manifested him right out of my laptop keyboard!

Thank you, dear readers, for following me on this journey and for being ever so patient with me as I wrote my first romance series while getting through a very messy divorce, becoming a single mom, and truly growing into a completely different person from book one to book four.

I hope you'll follow along on my next series, which might not be about such good boys after all.

—Mj