



# Copper

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Lucy Lenin is broke, her abusive husband is missing, and the gangsters he owed want to take it out on the demure Lucy. When shes offered a job at a strip club, Lucy takes the job for fast money and to get the mafia off her back, even finding a way to tolerate her regular client, Sheriff Aaron Dwyer, who happens to be her old boyfriend.

Aaron Dwyer has his own problems. Hes the face guy of the county, and the public is breathing down his neck for answers on why unemployed men have shown up dead in his jurisdiction. Pile that on top of losing his wife a year ago and raising two daughters.

But theres one bright spot in his life

Lucy.

Can Lucy and Aaron work together to solve the countys murders before its too late for one of them?

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

## Chapter 1

Lucy...Three Months Ago

“Do you see that man over there?” the asshole standing over me asks, squeezing my cheeks together so close they hurt. He’ll leave finger marks for sure, but I don’t dare move his hand.

I nod, and a tear runs down my face. Four men standing over you and asking for money will do that to a girl. My eyes flick to the man he points to, and I can’t help but notice how much the man looks like a stereotypical mob boss. White suit with black tie. Dark hair combed over to hide his balding hairline. The man wears glasses and is about sixty pounds overweight. He sits on my couch, looking out of place. He’s a long-haired, Siamese cat away from full movie mobster.

“That man doesn’t like to be left hanging when money is on the line. You understand?”

I nod, another tear rolling down my cheek as the man lets go of my face. I wish he was still holding my chin, though, since his hand moves to my V-neck shirt and slides into my bra.

I shiver but don’t dare move, especially since the knife the man holds in his other hand is precariously close to my rib cage. Something in his smirking expression tells me he won’t have any problem using it on me. His hands tremble with excitement. This isn’t his first time holding a knife on someone.

The man holding my breast is half a foot taller than me with a gold tooth instead of one of his canines. His dark hair is long and tied back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck. He's in all black, a contrast to his boss. The other men in the room all wear black shirts and pants. Is there a thug uniform meant to showcase the boss? Did they decide that in an email or group chat?

"Where's your husband?"

"I already told you I have no fucking clue. He left. No trace. I can't even find him for divorce papers."

The man bites his lip and drags the knife up to the breast he palms under my shirt. "What man would leave this fine piece of ass? I say you're full of shit."

"Totally full of shit," another thug echoes. "Maybe we should fuck it out of her." He toys with the belt on his pants, but the boss raises his hand on the couch. When he puts it down again, the thug backs away from me and puts his hands at his side.

The fact that the boss can control his crew with a mere hand movement scares the shit out of me more than the idea of gang rape. Thoughts of the old gladiator movies my dad liked to watch enter my mind. Will the boss give a thumbs-down movement when it's time for one of his men to slit my throat?

"There's no need for that. You can check my phone records," I plead, searching my pockets for my phone. "I've sent texts and called. Nothing. No response. I reported it to the police, but they don't seem to care. I swear to fucking God."

Terror boils the chicken soup I had for dinner in my stomach. My heart pounds, and my fight-or-flight instinct that ramped up as soon as these guys kicked in my door makes my fingers twitch. Flight wasn't an option since there was a guy at my back door. Fighting wasn't an option. Self-defense only goes so far with three hired mafia

bouncers and a boss.

In addition to terror, there's shame rattling around in my body. Shame that I let them force me to my knees as they interrogated me about Beck's whereabouts. Beck forced me to my knees several times for other reasons during our marriage, and I swore I'd never be forced to ever do anything I didn't have control of on my knees again.

The man takes his hand off my breast and moves it to my sore chin, this time tilting it until I look so far up that my neck hurts. He looks at the boss, and the boss snaps his fingers. What the fuck does that mean? Death by strangling? Leaving?

The man holding my chin nods and bends down until he's an inch from my nose. His breath smells like beer and something spicy. Hot sauce? Nothing like stopping for a bucket of wings on your way to threaten an innocent woman who never took a dime from you.

"This is what's going to happen. Listen up because the next time we come back here, we won't be nearly as friendly or nice. Do we understand each other?"

I nod. What am I going to do? Say no?

"Your shit husband borrowed money from my boss over there. He doesn't like it when people don't pay money back, and he certainly doesn't like it when they disappear before paying the bill." The man's knife trails down my cheek.

I mentally scream at the universe, begging the man not to use it. Not my face.

I can only afford soup for dinner and am broke as a joke. I need my face to find a job. I won't find one when I have a weird knife mark carved into my face.

"Beck's never bailed on his debt to my boss, and we want to know where he is."

Beck has done business with these guys before? Great. Not only did he beat me daily for our entire marriage, but he's been wheeling and dealing with the mafia.

I search my memory for any sign he was involved with organized crime. Did the checking account show any proof of gambling?

Not that I had access to a lot of accounts. Beck ran most of that, only allowing me a credit card to buy makeup, pay for a gym membership, get filler once a year, and buy clothes. He even monitored that, probably to make sure I spent the money on things to make me attractive to him. Since he's gone missing, I've searched his office and found a ledger, but there's nothing in it that shows anything unusual.

The man sticks his tongue out and runs it up my cheek as I try not to gag. I'll just sit still and worry about how I'm going to get their money after they leave. Stay cool. My hands flex, but I don't dare take a swing at him as he finishes the lick at my forehead. He pulls back, smiles an evil grin, and spits straight in my face.

I blink, trying to clear his spit from my eyes, but there's nothing I can do about his drool stuck to my eyelashes.

"You owe us fifty thousand dollars, bitch."

Fifty thousand dollars? What was Beck planning? Running away with Ellen Quarry? I can't even afford fresh fruit. How do these guys think I'm going to get fifty thousand dollars?

"If Beck's missing like you say, we can be benevolent and charitable. We'll give you..." He trails off and looks at the boss, who holds up three fingers. "We'll give you three months to pay us back. Do you understand, you dumb fucking cunt?"

I nod and try to control my heaving breaths. What will they do to me if I don't pay?

“I understand,” I say, and it comes out as a husky whisper, fear controlling my ability to speak.

The man backs away from me, and the other thugs walk toward the door. The big boss rises from his seat and rubs his hand down the back of his pants like my couch filth ruined them.

“If you don’t have our money when we come back, Beck won’t be the only one that goes missing. We may even start with your family and friends.”

The men leave, closing the door quietly when they go, and I fall on the floor in a heap of tears and breathless sobbing.

Where am I going to get that kind of money? I don’t have a job. Beck wouldn’t allow me to have one even though I was fully capable of working. He wanted me home and at his every whim with a perfectly clean and decorated home. I’ve been out of the job market for years. My skills with computers are outdated, and I can’t make fifty thousand dollars plus my own living expenses working at Target. I’ve been living off my allowance money Beck left.

The joke’s on these guys, though. They didn’t research me before they came here tonight. If they did, they’d know I don’t have friends to unalive since Beck scared the shit out of them too, and the only family I have left is my skeezy cousin, Peter, who was disowned by the rest of my now-dead family years ago for opening a strip club.

My head comes up, and I fist the carpet under me with ambition I didn’t have an hour ago.

Peter owns a strip club.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 2

#### Lucy...Present Day

“A nd then what happened?” I ask, leisurely taking Aaron Dwyer’s dick out of my mouth and running my tongue up the bottom of it. I look at him with doe eyes, hopeful he’ll finish the rest of his story. At least I’m entertained when I suck him off.

Aaron runs his hands through my long, auburn hair and gathers it at the top, holding it and thrusting a little into my face. He inhales and tilts his head back on the couch. He really shouldn’t do that. No telling how many greasy, bald heads have been on that upholstery tonight and sweating all over it while they get their balls licked.

“That’s the end of the story, Lucy,” he whispers. The sound is husky, a cross between a moan and a sigh. I love the sound of his voice, even after all these years. “The guy was dead. Throat slit. No forced entry. No motive. Ex-wife is across the country with an alibi. No friends he owed money to. No wives he slept with that we can find.” He swirls his hips and looks back down, his eyebrows furrowed. “Why are you so interested?”

I smile at him and bat my eyelashes as I flick my tongue over the head of his cock. “Do you know why I love sucking your dick, Aaron?”

“It’s your comfort dick since you’ve been sucking on it for close to fifteen years?” he says, smiling that damn grin that lights up a room. The dimple in the middle of his chin pops out.

“Funny,” I say, taking a long, slow bob down his cock and pulling off again with a popping noise. “There were several years when your dick was nowhere near my mouth or any other part of my body.”

He’s not wrong about the on-and-off dick sucking. Aaron Dwyer was my high school boyfriend. We broke up when we went to separate colleges. He met his wife. I met my dirtbag ex-husband because I was depressed when I broke up with Aaron. I moved to nearby Chicago, and Aaron stayed in our large suburb and had two kids with his wife. He had the perfect house with the picket fence, kids, and even the golden retriever.

Perfect until his wife died of a congenital heart issue a year ago, that is.

Me? I had other things happen. Things that weren’t so perfect – a push down the stairs or a black eye when dinner wasn’t on the table when Beck got home. There was no use explaining to my husband that he didn’t let me know when he was coming home. How could I possibly know, down to the minute, when he would walk through the door? I’d get a slap across the face if I made a wrong joke at a party, and I’d get a kick to the ribs if I didn’t have the dutiful housewife smile on my face at all times.

He had clients to impress, and he did that by letting them fuck me while he held me down.

Nice guy.

I learned to fight back, but the YMCA self-defense course only went so far. I left when I could, hiding with friends until I needed to go home for something I owned. That was back when I still had friends and before he scared them off. Then, he was waiting for me with a glare and a punch to the back or a kick to the ribs. When I fought back, blocking his punches like they taught us, it only angered him more and made it worse. A broken arm once. Six stitches where he ran a knife down my



ribcage, and I told the hospital I ran into a door. I soon learned it was better if I played possum and stayed on the floor after the initial hit. If I was compliant and took my beating, he'd leave me alone faster. I switched up my workout routine to increase my core strength so I was better conditioned to survive a swift kick to a body part. How fucked up is that? Most women work out to maintain a certain weight or even feel comfortable in their own skin.

I worked out to condition my body to have my ass kicked.

Every. Fucking. Day.

I eventually started tracking his phone without him knowing and was able to whip something up for dinner if I saw him leave the office. I knew when he was looking for me if he was driving around my friends' neighborhoods. I knew he followed me to the grocery store, probably worried that a produce guy or cashier would hit on me.

Unfortunately, I also saw him go over to Ellen Quarry's house after work more than once. He was fucking her. It was obvious. I couldn't ask the produce manager about banana prices, but he could shag his coworker's wife.

"Speaking of your other body parts, can you pull the top down? Or does that cost extra?" Aaron asks. I know he's joking with me by the smile on his face. He forgets that I know him better than I ever knew my husband.

"You're a fucking pig, Aaron," I say, taking his cock into my mouth again and sucking on it like it's lifeblood. I guess it is since I'm in deep with paying for my own place now and owing the mafia.

A stripper can't be too choosy, and there are worse dicks to suck in this joint if my mouth wasn't spoken for by the dick I'm more than familiar with. Sure, I don't have to suck dick. I could just work the pole. The difference between the two jobs in this

joint is that one gets singles stuffed in the G-string. The other gets hundred-dollar bills stuck to your face with cum afterward.

Truth be told, I sigh with relief when Aaron walks into the joint. It's not just the fact that he keeps me from having to blow or dance for other men, and it's not just that he would never disrespect me by sticking a bill to my face.

I miss his hands on me. His mouth. He's the only client I'd ever kiss if we could get away with it. It's hilarious that the club lets me suck a dick for extra cash if we're in the VIP room, but I can't give the man I still love deep down a goodnight kiss at the front door.

I let him touch me while I go down on him. Most men have to keep their arms on the top of the couch. But Aaron's hands are free to roam wherever they want.

And his fingers enjoy roaming to my face, trailing a finger up my jaw, and swiping my hair back like he did before cheerleading practice years ago.

"If it's any consolation, sweetheart, you're the only woman who really knows how to suck me off," he moans, leaning forward a little and stroking the hair he was just fisting. He could be leaning to speak to me so Sheri, if that's her real name, won't hear our business as she blows another customer in the next cubicle. More than likely, he's just reaching for my tits.

I huff and pull my halter tank top down, letting him palm my breasts while I suck him. "You want a tit jack?"

He laughs and a bit of spit lands on my cheek. I used to kiss this man every moment I could, so it doesn't bother me the way it would if another man's spit landed on my face. "Blow jobs are better. Everyone knows that."

Aaron tweaks my nipples, and I yelp with the exquisite pleasure of it. Fuck this man and his memories of just what I like. He knows exactly what to do to drive me insane. My body hums under his hands, and I suck harder on his cock, using my tongue on the spot just under the head that drives him bonkers.

“Fuck, Lucy,” he grunts. He grips my face along my jawline and bucks into my mouth.

I move to his balls, pulling the left one in my mouth and humming around it as I look up at him, watching his expression. I will always love his face right before he comes. He’s a lip chewer. He gnaws at his lips and moves his mouth in a circle when he’s close.

He throws his head back again as his chest heaves. He’s still wearing his work uniform, but his three bottom shirt buttons are undone, revealing a happy trail I’d idly lick if he wasn’t paying me to focus on his dick and balls.

He slouches in the seat and pulls his pants further down so I can really get after his balls or even lick that spot just under them I know he likes. “Anyone going to come in?”

“No. Even if they did, is anyone going to cause a ruckus with the sheriff if I’m not kicking up drama?”

He laughs, and I’ve missed the sound of his chuckle. It’s low. It reminds me of the way he used to growl when I did something really naughty or when he’d chase me and throw me onto the bed before kissing every inch of me.

I push his thighs further apart and tongue the head of his dick. “Tell me how the victim was murdered. I’m curious.”

“You’re a ghoul. You know that, right?”

I bite my lip and wink before lifting his leg a little and sucking his left ball again. He reaches for his knees and pulls them to his chest into an unholy position a pillar of the community would never want to be caught in, especially inside a strip club. That’s a headline from hell.

“Indulge me, Aaron,” I drawl. “I’m curious. Besides, it’s not like anyone in the press will talk to a stripper.”

It only takes one flick of my tongue over his taint spot and up his sack before my ex-boyfriend sings like a fucking canary.

George Cannon. Age fifty-two. Divorced. No kids. His dog was well-fed and even given fresh water by the attacker. Aaron thinks that’s odd. After all, why would a murderer give the dog water? Cannon was tortured before his throat was slit. Rope burns were found on the man’s wrists, indicating forced restraint while the attacker carved his arms and torso apart. The initial forensics say the man’s fingers were removed one by one before death. There were no signs of forced entry, so he knew the attacker.

“Right fucking there,” Aaron moans, breaking me out of thoughts of his latest murder case. His thighs tremble on either side of my head, and he adjusts his grip on his knees. He pulls himself wider and allows a whine to come from his throat with little concern for an audience.

“I know, Aaron,” I coo into the center of him. “I know how to do this for you.”

My hand moves to his cock, and it takes two jerks before a warm spray of cum coats the webbing between my thumb and index finger. I drag my tongue up his balls and over my hand. Opening my mouth, I show him what I just picked up off my skin and

swallow it with a smile.

He bites his lip and looks at me with kinder eyes than I deserve, still panting from his orgasm. He laughs a little and bends to situate his pants into a decent position as I stand and pull my halter top down. I watch him dress while I take a swig of water from a bottle on a nearby table and marvel that this is probably the millionth time I've seen this man pull up his pants. It's hard not to admire the sculpted biceps and the wide shoulders I used to wrap my legs around. They're wider now. He lifts more than he did when we dated.

Then again, he's different now. His hair is darker, if that's even possible, and it curls at the nape of his neck. There's a lock of hair that curls at his temple, and I itch to lick my fingers and push it back. His jaw is more defined, and there's a new scar at the top of his forehead. You have to be close to see it, and it's small, but I wonder if he got that from police work. There's so much I missed of his life in the last decade, and it seems a pipe dream that I'll ever be close enough to Aaron Dwyer again so I can learn how he got it.

"Same time next week?" he asks when his pants are buckled. The static from his police radio crackles through the low beat of the music being played for whatever girl is on the pole downstairs.

Aaron's been here twice a week since I moved back and started stripping. I have no idea how he found out I work here because Peter said Aaron never came to the club before. He was an upstanding city leader and a widower before I got this job and dragged him down to my depravity. But he was here the second week of work with a smile on his face, dollars in his pocket, and lust in his eyes.

I swallow the water and push a lock of hair back from my face. "Of course. But I'll charge you double for the ball play and the taint spot lick next time. Don't make me tell Peter."

I'm only joking. I have no desire to tell Peter I'm licking the sheriff's balls. There are just certain things you don't talk about with your cousin.

Aaron's already paid me and tipped me an extra fifty bucks, but he throws down an extra twenty-dollar bill on the cushion he just vacated like he's tipping the sofa. He looks at the floor, but I know his face. He's sad.

"Thanks, Lucy. Always a pleasure to catch up with you."

I don't take it right away. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me lurch for money from my high school boyfriend like a starving person served the first meal they've seen in weeks. I won't dare grab that twenty while Aaron watches. I'd rather die than show him my desperation.

"Don't call me that here. I don't call you Sheriff Dwyer when I suck your dick."

"To be fair, you didn't call me Sheriff Dwyer when you sucked my dick a long time ago."

"Well, you weren't the county sheriff then, were you?" I ask with a grin.

He smiles back and reaches out his index finger, tilting my chin up so I can't look away. "What should I call you when I come to see you, Lucy?"

"You need to call me by my stage name, especially if you ask for me. Peter will know, but the other girls won't know me by my real name. I don't want random guys to overhear it, either."

His face softens, and I know that look. Protective. He doesn't like me working here, and he doesn't want other men to know my name. "What's your stage name?" he asks.

“Copper. You need to call me Copper here.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 3

Aaron

She's abrasive and fucked in the head about something lately, but I can't get her out of my mind. Not that it's a new feeling. She never left my brain, even when I was married to Cynthia for a decade. Even when I saw her at our ten-year reunion with that shit-stain husband of hers and sporting bruises barely visible in her low-back dress. I wanted to reach out and run my hands over the purple blotches the size of a man's fist, like my touch could magically heal her.

I'd heal every part of her if she'd let me – if I knew how to even propose helping her. I continue to frequent the club, knowing full well she's in some kind of financial trouble. The cop in me thinks it's legal issues. Something feels off about all of this. She moved back in a hurry without Beck. She's quiet and closed off now. Whatever it is that haunts her, it's dark. There's something she doesn't want to tell me. I can't tell if it's because she doesn't want to tell anyone, or she doesn't want to tell the sheriff.

Lucy. My sweet, sunny Lucy with the dark cloud over her head since the world – and probably that fucker she married – kicked her in the throat. Sweet Lucy that used to scrawl my name on her notebooks inside pink hearts. My girl who gave me her virginity the same time she took mine in her twin bed.

The girl that got away.

I drop my keys on the counter and open the fridge as I play my voicemail messages. Two came in while I was at the club with Lucy, and I was too frazzled by the intense



orgasm to listen to them on the drive home. It's like that every time I see her now. It takes an hour after I see her to process simple directions or thoughts. I don't even have to get a hell of a blow job for my brain to be scrambled. I ran into her at the grocery store last month, and we had a five-minute conversation on bran flakes versus Frosted Flakes. When I got to the self-checkout station, I tried to pay the bill with my library card. I was lucky to make it down the stairs to the main club on my wobbly legs tonight.

I hate that she works at the club, but what am I going to do? Go in there and cover her with a trench coat and tell her she never needs to work another day in her life because I'll take care of her? She's not my sweet ex-girlfriend now. She's hard. Determined. Something happened to her. I asked her what happened to make her strip when I got her up to the VIP room before she blew me, but she dropped to her knees, avoiding the question and driving me insane at the same time.

She moved back to town after living in Chicago with Beck for years. I used my resources to find out she now lives by herself in a two-bedroom townhouse that's affordable and has utilities included in rent. She used to drive a BMW while she was married but now drives a Honda with a registration showing she purchased it a few months ago when she left Chicago. She also goes into the city once or twice a month, faithfully making the forty-five commute, rain or shine.

Fuck if I know why. Is she looking for her ex?

"Yeah, boss," my deputy's voice sounds through my phone. Mitchell's voice is low through the speaker, which means he was still at the station when he left the message and didn't want to be overheard. "We got some info on the Cannon case. Detective Coleson found some paperwork in the office drawer. We're still working on the laptop, but there was a paper trail for a transaction from an offshore account. Guess who it's from? Murphy Beckett. We'll dig deeper. If we find something, I'll call."

The message finishes, and I clap my hands. Murphy Beckett is the president of the local motorcycle club. We've suspected him of general shittery for about three years and have never caught him. There have been whispers of drugs, trafficking women, and a few unexplained bodies have turned up in his territory. It's possible George Cannon may be one of those bodies. We've been trying to nail Murphy on being a satellite seller for one of the big Chicago dealers and filtering drugs out to the housewives in the suburbs. If he's killing men like George Cannon, or having them killed by hired help, we've been building the wrong case against him.

The second message starts, and Pearl's voice fills the kitchen. "Hi, Daddy! Grandma wanted to know if we could stay a little longer on Sunday to go roller skating. Is that OK? Text Grandma."

I fire off a text to my late wife's mother that she can keep my daughters longer this weekend and take a beer into the living room. Settling on the couch, I blow out a sigh. If I could get Murphy Beckett on some shit and connect him to George Cannon, I can put him behind bars faster. The world would be that much safer and girls like my daughters the world over would be safer.

If I could only get Lucy to do more than suck my dick, my life would be perfect.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 4

Aaron

“Holy fucking shit,” I mumble, turning my head and covering my mouth with my forearm. You never really get used to the smell.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much the reaction every person that’s come in has had,” Detective Coleson says, waving his hands around the room. He straightens his tie like one does when a superior walks into a room. “The smell was bad for a few days before the landlady let herself in and found him.”

I usually let the detectives do their job while I do mine, but violent deaths in a county outside of a large city require press conferences. I need to know what’s going on before I make an ass of myself on TV. Unfortunately, I’m the guy they interview.

Coleson looks like he rolled out of bed to report to the crime scene. His suit is rumpled like he’d already thrown it in the hamper after work and threw it on after he got the call. His dark salt and pepper hair is mussed around the bangs, and he has bags under his eyes. He’s been working the George Cannon case around the clock with zero results. Nobody saw anyone coming or going from Cannon’s place and there’s no DNA evidence left. Whoever cut up Cannon didn’t knick themselves in the process. They used Cannon’s own Sawzall to cut him up. There are no prints in sight. No hair. Coleson only has some fibers that are denim and cotton blends. Nothing that every citizen in the county doesn’t already have in their closet.

Coleson’s been living on coffee and adrenaline. Now there’s another one. Two

murders within a week, and we usually get two a year in the county.

As far as I can tell, we're looking for a bald ghost that covers its footprints and wears gloves.

"Think it's related to Cannon?"

He shrugs and chews on the toothpick in his mouth before adjusting his suit jacket, smoothing it for wrinkles. "They were killed differently. This guy was killed by blunt force trauma. No cutting up major parts. No slit throat. Maybe. I just don't know."

"What do we know so far?"

Coleson waves me into the dining room, and I'm careful to walk directly behind him to reduce the number of footsteps in the area. Forensics is already working the room and has little place card holders on the carpet where they've found evidence, whether it be fabric fibers or footsteps that don't match the victim's footprint. The carpet is plush in the dining room, a thick blanket of white with blood splashed in the center like a work of art at a gallery opening. The blood is reddish-brown, obviously congealing from air exposure over several days.

"Victim is Justin Hammons. Age thirty-one. No family. Foster kid growing up. The footprints are the landlady's as far as we can tell. She's giving us the shoes she was wearing when she found him so we can compare. So far, any footprints in the carpet are small."

"Like the landlady's. Any matching a man's size?"

"Not yet." He hands me a jar of vapor rub, and I dab it under my nose, the secret weapon of first responders to death scenes the world over.

“Any ex-wives or angry girlfriends?” I look around the place. The carpet is nice, and the dining room table screams money. A couple lines of cocaine are cut on a corner of the glass table. “Hookers?”

“We can’t find anything. The neighbors say he has women coming and going. We looked through his laptop in the living room. We’re taking that for evidence. Let me tell you, this guy’s real fucked up.” He takes the toothpick out of his mouth and points it at the victim behind the table on the floor. “Total asshole, if you ask me.”

Walking around the table, I find Justin Hammons staring at his ceiling fan with wide eyes. “Fucked up how?” I ask. I bend down and examine the Caucasian man whose skin is now navy blue. A fly lands on his ear as I watch.

“Incel from what I can see. He posted a lot on social media about a woman’s place. Rape fantasy shit on his computer. Some porn I don’t want to tell you about since you have two little girls.”

I remove a tongue depressor from my pocket. Careful not to hurt forensic research, I lift the man’s chin to look at his throat, making sure there are no cuts there.

Not even a shaving nick.

“So, you were a piece of shit in life, huh?” I ask more to myself. Fuck knows Justin Hammons isn’t answering. I can’t decide if I care, given the contents of his laptop.

“Any connection to Cannon that you can think of?”

Coleson chuckles. “Cannon was middle-aged, and this guy is in his early thirties. Probably not beers on weekends friends. The only connection they have is that nobody knows exactly what their respective jobs were.”

I turn to Coleson, squinting. “Both unemployed?”

He shrugs. “This place screams money and so did Cannon’s. It’s possible they did something unsavory under the table.”

“Hm,” I hum, thinking and looking around the room. “What did you say the cause of death was?”

“Blunt force trauma on the back of the head.”

“Forced entry?”

“Nope. Either he knew the attacker or he left his door unlocked.”

“Was it locked when the landlady came in to check?” I ask, still squatting on the floor. Something scratches at my brain.

“I’ll check. She’s still pretty upset and incoherent. We’re getting her calm first.”

“Do we have files on these guys for anything?”

“Cannon was clean. This guy had a rap sheet a mile long but it was for petty shit. Nothing that would result in serving substantial time. Domestic violence about ten years ago, resulting in a restraining order. He got it for knocking around a girlfriend. One incident of shoplifting that resulted in probation. Assault charges that were dropped after a bar brawl. Suspended license for unpaid tickets. Possession of marijuana before it was legal. He got community service for that one since it was a first drug offense.”

“Enough shit that he couldn’t get a regular job that requires a background check, though.” I look back through the doorway into the living room. Leather furniture. A

gold watch on the coffee table. “Definitely getting paid for something.”

I stand up and walk back into the living room, and Coleson follows at my heels. I stop at the coffee table and look at the watch. It’s gold Rolex. “This was personal.”

“Why do you think that?” Coleson asks.

“They killed him but left some valuable shit. You can rule out him being surprised by a robber.”

Coleson scratches something on his pad and takes a picture of the watch with his phone. He puts it back in his pocket. “Do you have any thoughts?” he asks. “I’m at a loss on this and Cannon. No DNA evidence means I have to actually pound pavement and start finding people that want to talk. Other than a frazzled landlady, I don’t know where to start. No boss to interview. No family.”

“I have no idea, but Deputy Mitchell said you found a paper in Cannon’s office that had ties to Murphy Beckett. Let’s start there and see if this guy did business with Beckett too.”

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I close my eyes and run my hands through her hair as she wraps those familiar lips around my dick and takes long pulls from me that make my toes curl inside my shoes. “It just bothers me that it’s two murders in my county over such a short amount of time.”

Lucy comes off my cock, and I look down at her. Her hair is wild and mussed. Her lipstick is bright red and smeared around her mouth. The red smudge she left on my dick reminds me of the red on my dick after I took her virginity, and my heart clenches in my chest. Will I ever get this woman out of my system?

“You’ll figure it out, Aaron. You’re a smart guy.”

“It’s not my job to figure it out. I have detectives for that. Coleson can take the lead, and I’ve got great deputies like Mitchell to do a lot of the grunt work. It just makes me look like an idiot to the press and to the public since I’m the face guy.”

She takes a long lick up my dick and grips the base, jerking me as she presses whisper kisses to my thighs. I wonder how many clients she kisses. “The public loves you. Sheriff is an elected position. It wasn’t even close last election.”

“Yeah, it may be this next time with all this shit.”

“I’ll vote for you.”

I smile at her and almost cry at how beautiful she is and how much it means to me that she’s willing to show up at a polling station and check a box with my name on it. I affectionately run my hand through her hair, enjoying the feel of it in my fingers.

“Are you worried about keeping your job?” she asks.

A chuckle comes out of my chest. “Yeah, Lucy, I am. I’ve already lost so much.”

She stops jerking my dick and presses a kiss to my knee before crawling up my body. Her face is an inch from mine. We haven’t been this intimate in years. Her eyes flick to the door, probably worried her douche cousin’s bouncers will come in and catch us doing more than blow jobs. She leans her forehead against mine, and I wrap my arms around her. I know there’s supposed to be no touching in a strip club, but how do I not touch her? We’re mostly alone except for the unlocked door. I just want a moment.

One moment to be present with her. I want a moment with the first girl I loved. The



first girl I fucked. The girl sitting on my lap because she knows I lost her years ago before losing my wife. I came here for comfort, and she's giving it to me.

I was a stupid kid when I left her, and I'll do anything to get her back. It's why I show up here. Sure, I get sucked off when she feels like it, but I'm here for her. If we did nothing but sit like this with our arms around each other, I'd pay hundreds of dollars. I'd make it rain on her in the club every night. I know damn well that I'm going to go home, take my shirt off, and put it over my face just to breathe the scent she'll leave on it.

"Can we have this again?" I ask. "Just this, Lucy. No worries about the past. I know I have kids now, but sometimes I look at them and wish they were yours." I close my eyes in shame. "Don't ever tell anyone I said that. That stays between us, and I'll take it to my grave."

She buries her head in my neck and inhales like she's reacquainting herself with my scent. I run my hand up her spine, letting her do whatever she wants. Her nose nuzzles my jaw, and I rub my own face against whatever skin of hers I can reach. She's warm...so warm.

"That ship has sailed, Aaron. You don't want me now. Look at my life."

"I don't care about the dancing, Lucy. If you'll be my girl again, you won't have to spend another night on the pole anyway. I'll take care of you, and that doesn't mean you being kept in my house like it's a dungeon. I'll help you get a job. Skills. You can go back to school if you want."

She pulls back and looks at me. She's a foot from my face, and her breath is warm and sweet like she had a piece of candy before she came in to suck my dick. She runs her index finger down my nose. "There are circumstances right now that mean I can't be with you the way you want."

“Why?” I whine. I sound like a boy who was just turned down for the school dance.

She slides back down my body and hums a little as she takes my cock back into her mouth. “It’s just the way it has to be. You’ll thank me later. You should focus on the girls now. Your family. I’ll always be here to play.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and blink away tears. Here I am, laying my heart bare to this woman, and she denies me.

But it’s hard to be annoyed when your dick is getting sucked.

“I just wish I could connect this bullshit to Murphy Beckett, you know?” I ask to the void. I don’t expect her to answer. I sure don’t expect her to suddenly stop sucking.

Lucy’s eyes furrow together and she comes off my cock. She looks up at me and tilts her head. “Murphy Beckett?”

I sit up straight and tilt her chin up to me. “Lucy, do you know that name?” She bites her lip and looks away, but I catch her face and make her look at me. “Sweetheart, how do you know him?”

“He comes in once or twice a week. Usually during the day when I work.”

My stomach turns and hot anger moves up my spine. “Is he cruel to you?”

She looks away, clearly not comfortable meeting my eyes. “He makes demands of some of the girls. I’ve heard stories.”

An idea hits me. “Lucy, does he ever come in with other men or like to talk while he’s here?”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 5

Lucy

I look away from him because I can't stand the sad look on his face. At least, I try to avoid his eyes. He gently turns my face back to him. He doesn't squeeze me or hurt me. It's a gentle movement, and I could lean into the warmth of his finger on my cheek.

Will my eyes betray me? I can't tell him that I know exactly who Murphy Beckett is, partially because he's family. I don't share DNA with the guy, but he's Beck's cousin. Murphy Beckett's father is Beck's mother's brother. Hence, Beck is named after the Beckett side of the family.

I also know Murphy is into a lot of shit. Sex workers. Drugs. Some of it transfers right in Peter's club. Peter has no idea, of course. It makes me wonder if Murphy has the girls doing other things for him. I see them slide small packages to men as they climb on their laps during a dance.

Even if he wasn't involved in girls and drugs, I've never liked him. Fucker gave me a cheap toaster for our wedding and hit on the minister's wife.

"Lucy, you need to come clean with me. What do you know?" Aaron asks. I've never seen him like this before.

Desperation? Anger?

“I can’t help you,” I say standing up and taking the cash Aaron gave me out of the waistband of my panties. “Here’s your money back. Blow job over. In fact, no blow jobs ever again, Aaron. It’s just too weird.”

I walk away from him, and he grabs my arm with one hand and adjusts his pants with the other as he comes after me. “Lucy, stop!” he begs. “Please talk to me.”

I spin around until we’re inches away from each other. I could lean forward and he’d catch me. My entire being yearns to wrap my arms around him and bury my head in his chest. I know there’s a patch of hair between his pectorals that wasn’t there when we dated, and I want to run my fingers through it to see what it feels like. I could just reach into his shirt and pull on that patch as I tell him all about Beck and Beck’s shitty cousin.

Aaron feels the same way about our proximity. I can tell by the way his forehead scrunches like it does when he’s frustrated. His eyes are black holes of desire but also kind as he looks at me.

Damn him and his kindness. It’s so close to pity and borderline insulting. But after all I’ve been through with an abusive husband, I want it like I crave water on a hot day.

“Help me, Lucy. Help the women Murphy traffics. You know he does it. I can see it in your face. You know he’s taking advantage of them. I want to put him away for it. I’ve been working on it for months, but the guy is like butter on a greased pan, slipping around everything we try to get him on. The feds should be helping us, but they’re not, and I’m not sure why. Help me,” he begs, patting his chest.

His pants are still open at the zipper, and I glance down to his erection. I don’t want to blow him at the club anymore. I want to make love to him. Wrap my legs around him, wrap my arms around his shoulders, and let him curse and moan into my neck. I want it to be at his house because it’s probably clean and I won’t have to worry about

sticky floors or used upholstery. I don't want to wear a G-string and pasties – I want to wear his t-shirt and a pair of his old boxer shorts while we cuddle on his couch with a warm throw blanket thrown over us.

“Lucy,” Aaron says, clapping his hands in front of my face and pulling me out of thoughts of domestic bliss with him. “Help me.”

I turn again and walk to the door. He doesn't follow this time. I pull on the handle to the stair area, ready to walk downstairs and accept my place on the pole. No more VIP room tonight. I'll have the DJ turn on some loud tunes, zone out, and dance, gathering the one-dollar bills off the floor. It may be humiliating, but so is sucking my ex-boyfriend's dick for money.

There's a soft sigh behind me. “Girls, Lucy.”

I freeze with my hand on the door, and a hot flush moves up my back.

“Some of them are just girls. Not even old enough to be in high school. Girls like Ruby and Pearl will be in just a few short years.”

There's something in his voice that I've never heard from him. He was a senior in high school when he lost the scholarship he wanted. He never shed a tear over it, but his voice was husky then. Worried. Tired.

This is worse, and it fucking kills me. Whatever this weird dance is that we do here, I love this man.

His daughters are beautiful. I only know that because I stalk my high school boyfriend on Facebook like every other red-blooded American woman. His page is marked to private since he's a cop, but he accepted my friend request back in 2014. Besides the random birthday wish, we never interacted, mostly out of respect for

Cynthia. But I've seen his daughters. Ruby with shiny green eyes like her dad's. Pearl with the gap-toothed smile every second-grade girl seems to have. I know when they were born because I cried at the picture of Aaron holding up a squalling Pearl, his hair askew like he'd been up with his wife all night.

I look at the floor and blink back tears. Girls. I can't let girls get hurt if I can stop it. If I have the power to help Aaron and get Murphy off the street, I can help girls. Even if I help one person or family from that sicko, it's the right thing to do.

I meet his eyes. They're wet, and he wipes them, pinching his nose when he's done.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Aaron drops his hand and puts his hand on his chest again. "You'll help me?"

"I ain't doing any Nancy Drew shit. Don't ask for that, but I'll tell you what I know."

He nods and smiles, clearing his throat. He gestures back to the couch. "No blow job tonight, Lucy. Just sit with me and tell me what you know. Please."

I put my hands on my hips and chew on my bottom lip before walking to the loveseat I never get to sit on – I usually straddle it or kneel in front of it – and gently sit on the fabric, careful not to touch too much of the upholstery. I've seen way too many men come on this furniture.

Aaron claps his hands together like it's Christmas and sits next to me. He places his hands in his lap like he's a consummate professional and has never touched me in his life. His thigh touches mine but only because the seat is small. "What can you tell me about Murphy Beckett?"

"He's my cousin."

I wish I would have had my phone out to take a picture of my ex-boyfriend's face. It almost makes me laugh, and I press my lips in a thin line to force my smile down. He flinches back and furrows his brow. His mouth opens like he wants to protest the situation. "True fact," I add.

"Wha-how? I met your family, Lucy, and I'd remember if you were related to that dick."

"I see you've met him." I wave my hand. "Relax. He's my cousin by marriage. I don't share DNA with him. Beck's mother and Murphy's father are siblings. Beck? Beckett? Get it?"

He shakes his head. "Unbelievable. Is Peter his cousin too? Is that why he comes in?"

"No. Peter's my cousin. I don't like saying it too loud, but I actually share a set of grandparents with that slimy bastard. Murphy comes here because it's the only strip club within a fifty-mile radius unless you want to go into Chicago on a Wednesday afternoon."

The relief that Peter's not fronting Murphy's motorcycle club bullshit out of some sense of family loyalty is etched on Aaron's face. His cheeks relax, and he takes a deep breath.

I yearn to run my hand down his cheek and let him lean into my palm, but I keep my hands in my lap. He's not mine to touch. I've only touched him in the club when he's paid me. If I touch him outside of a simple business transaction, I don't know if I'll stop. I'll want to touch him all the time. No, it's better if I continue this silly business of touching him only when he pays. It's better for both of us.

I mean, a cop and a stripper together? Talk about damning his next election.

“Is he running drugs through here?”

“Yes.” I hold my hands up. “Peter doesn’t know. He wouldn’t allow that shit. Don’t take it out on him.”

“What kind?” Aaron asks, reaching for his back pocket. He brings out his phone and opens a note-taking app.

I shrug. “You know I never tried any of that shit. I wouldn’t know a crack pipe from a plumber’s pipe, Aaron.”

“What does it look like?”

“I don’t know,” I mumble, staring at the wall across from me and trying to remember. “Small, white baggies. Kind of tan and white color for the powder.”

“Are pills coming through?”

“Yeah. They’re usually green and round.”

Aaron blows out a breath. “Fentanyl. Is he using the girls here?”

I smirk and bat my eyes. “What’s your definition of use?”

Aaron blushes, probably thinking of shit stain Murphy Beckett using the other women the same way as he uses me, thus putting them on the same level of turd. “Does he use girls to recruit other girls to his, well, his sex business?”

“Is he a pimp? Just ask the question, Aaron. We both know you’re not a shy virgin. I took care of that for you a long time ago.”



“Is he pimping out the women that work here?”

“Possibly. I see them hand him or his men cash sometimes. I don’t know if it’s for the drugs or tips from lap dancing. I think it’s for lap dancing since it’s done on the main floor, but I’m not sure. I honestly don’t know and don’t talk much here. I don’t have friends in the back.”

“You’d have to be a hundred percent sure for me to pursue that. Can you start watching?”

I tilt my head. “You want me to spy on Murphy?”

“Yes.” He says it deadpan like there was never a question.

“Sure, because that’s safe.” I laugh a little and a drop of snot snorts out of my nose. Aaron ignores it.

“What else? We can’t find any wife, but what do you know?”

“There’s no wife. If there ever was, she was long gone by the time Beck and I got together. He’s more of a uses a hooker and doesn’t have to pay for the hooker type. Personally, I’m surprised syphilis hasn’t taken him yet.”

“Hobbies? Things he talks about a lot?” Aaron asks, his fingers dancing over his phone as he takes notes.

“Is being a dickhead a hobby?”

Aaron looks up at me and smiles. I nearly swoon at the boyishness of it. It’s like he smiled at me years ago when he showed up at my house with a posterboard asking me to the sophomore homecoming dance, and I smile back without thinking.

“Actually, I’ve been in this job long enough to say it is, Lucy.”

“He likes cars.”

“Does he deal in cars? Chop shop?”

I shake my head. “Not that I’ve heard. He’s the president of the motorcycle club around here, but that’s common knowledge. I’d be disappointed if you didn’t already know that. I guess he’s just a motorhead and has been since he was a kid. I don’t think he’s into anything illegal there.”

“So, just the drugs and women?”

I nod. “That I know of.”

Aaron leans forward and licks his lips like he does when he’s thinking. He doesn’t know I notice he does that. We could never play poker together. I know when this man has a bad hand at something.

“Is there anything else you can think of that can help me or that I can use to get close to him?”

“He’s really into charity.”

Aaron scrunches his nose. “Charity?”

“Yeah, it’s probably how he flies under the radar. He goes to all the big events and galas around town. He doesn’t give a shit about children, unless he’s selling them, or wetlands. He goes to rub elbows with, well, guys like you. I’m surprised you haven’t seen him around.”

“I don’t go to events unless my campaign says it will be a good idea. Then, I’ll speak, shake a few hands for press pictures, and get the fuck out.”

I cock my head to the side. “Why?”

“People.”

Enough said. He doesn’t have to elaborate.

“Well, Murphy goes to those events. The annual gala for the turtles is coming up. I’m sure he’ll be there greasing palms, smiling, and kissing babies so everyone thinks he’s a great guy.”

“The turtles?”

“Yeah, Aaron. It’s not just sea turtles that need help. Illinois has five indigenous turtles that are endangered. Don’t you read?”

“Not about turtles!” he protests. He’s smiling, though. Fuck me, I got Aaron Dwyer to smile a real smile.

He looks at the floor for a moment and taps his feet. “Come with me.”

“What?”

“If I get a ticket to this gala, you have to come with me. If you’re with me, maybe Murphy will speak to me socially.”

“You want to be social with him? Chat about the Bears over a few beers?”

Aaron nods and looks back up at me. “Yeah. We’re going to talk football and pretty

girls. That means I need a pretty girl on my arm.” He stands up and adjusts his softening dick. The idea that he’ll have to take care of that at home pains me. “Get a dress. I like you in red.”

“What makes you think I’ll dress for you, Aaron Dwyer?” I sass back, knowing damn well that there’s a red number in the back of my closet just waiting for that man’s eyes. It’s five years old, but it’ll do.

He reaches the door and pulls it open before turning back to me. “Because I said so, Lucy. You’ll help me because you always help me...every time I’ve needed it.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 6

Aaron

“Will you bring a turtle home?” Pearl asks, tying my tie like I’ve taught her. She kneels on the dresser as I face the mirror.

I laugh and bump my nose against hers. “It’s not that kind of event to save turtles, sweetheart. We only raise money for them. Besides, we’re kind of hanging on by a thread here. It’s enough for me to keep you and your sister alive. I don’t think I can handle an endangered turtle.”

“I’d take care of it.”

Fat chance of that.

“Who is the lady you’re taking?” Pearl asks, thankfully changing the subject. She moves her hands so I can finish threading my tie. It’s the only part of the process she has trouble with.

Here it is. The conversation. Cynthia died a year ago, and I’m a good-looking guy in his thirties. I’m not going to be alone or celibate for the rest of my life. I’ve dreaded this conversation, though. No father wants to tell his eight-year-old daughter who lost her mother that he’s dating again.

Am I? I’m not sure if talking your ex-girlfriend into helping you spy on a human trafficker at a charity event counts as a date.

If I had my way, I'd take her on a proper date. I'd take her to a nice dinner and then for a walk on Lake Michigan. We're always in Chicago in my fantasy for some reason. We'd go on a carriage ride, even if they are overpriced tourist traps. My hand would trail under the blanket and –

“Daddy!” Pearl says, jolting me out of my fantasy date with Lucy.

“I ran into my high school girlfriend. I asked her if she'd go with me.”

Pearl's eyes widen to the size of dollar coins. “You had a girlfriend before Mommy?” she whispers.

I put my hands under her armpits, kiss her forehead, and help her off the dresser so she doesn't have to jump. “A long time ago.”

“Is she pretty?”

I need to be careful here. Do I tell her the truth that Lucy's gorgeous? I know why she's asking. Pearl wants to know if my new interest is prettier than her mother. How do I compare the blonde, Swedish wonder that was my late wife with the auburn-haired enigma that's Lucy? Cynthia was fit and muscular, even joining a female bodybuilding gym. Lucy is all curves and soft breasts. It's like comparing an apple and an orange.

“She's very pretty,” I say, leaning down to her level. She pulls on my tie a little while looking at me with her brow scrunched. “I know why you're asking. Nobody will replace Mom in your heart, OK? My friend's name is Lucy, and she makes me happy. I want to spend time with her. Is that enough for now?”

Pearl bites her lip like she's thinking, and I can tell from her expression that I have a long way to go to explain this to Pearl and Ruby so they can understand. I'll deal with

it then, though. This isn't something I can just mention and hope they accept. I also don't know if I have a shot in hell with Lucy. She's coming with me tonight as a favor. I sold it as her helping me – not as a romantic evening. I have my hopes way too high for the night.

“How do I look?” I ask, standing up and holding my arms out.

“Mom would say you're hot and would have spanked you on the bottom.”

Tears well up in my eyes. Yeah, Cynthia would have called me hot and smacked my ass as she walked by. The way Pearl says it hits me in the chest. It's amazing how much my daughters watched me interact with their mother without me realizing they were watching. Hopefully, I was a good enough role model for them to have high expectations for their own adult relationships.

“I need to go pick her up, Pearl.” I wag my finger like I'm telling her something important. “A man should always be a gentleman and pick up the woman properly for a date. He should ring the bell, talk to your father, and open doors. I should also bring her a gift. What should I take her?”

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“What are you holding?” Lucy asks, swinging her door open.

I avert my eyes from her ample cleavage and try to form words. Fucking hell, she can fill a dress. It's red and long, fitting her like a second skin in all the right places. How am I supposed to get through the night without begging to tear the dress from her body? My mouth waters at the bodice of the dress that shows the side of her breasts – breasts I want to suck on.

“Um, I asked my daughter for advice. We're working on being a good guest and

bringing something. I asked her what I should bring you.” I shrug and hold out the items I purchased on the way here. “I went with her advice because it’s different. I thought I’d have a shot of standing out from the crowd.”

Lucy smiles, and her fingers brush my hand as she takes the item. “Yes, well, it’s been a long time since a boy gave me a candy necklace and a bouquet of Pixie Sticks. How could the other boys ever compete?”

“You look amazing,” I say, trying to control my breath so I don’t sound like a middle school kid who’s never seen a naked woman. Hell, I’ve seen this woman naked, but it’s a pleasure every single time. Will I ever stop liking how she looks or stop drooling over her? Even if she’s old and gray, I can’t ever imagine a time when I won’t want Lucy.

I’m so utterly fucked.

I gulp and offer her my arm. “You ready?”

“Let me grab my purse. Do you want to come in?”

Is it the policeman in me, or is it the obsession I have with my high school girlfriend that compels me to see what her house looks like now? I step through her doorway without a moment’s hesitation and take a deep breath, trying to commit the scent of her house to memory and looking around with wide eyes.

Lucy has always been clean. Even her bedroom in high school had the bed made and no dust on the her small homework desk. For a boy who threw his underwear wherever he pleased, I was fascinated then. I’m even more fascinated now because the condo is sparse, with very little furniture, but it’s immaculate and smells like pine cleaner. There’s an Ikea couch facing a small flat-screen TV. A wooden coffee table in the middle of the room is bare except for a small, white candle and a set of hand-



carved coasters. A bookshelf, decorated with picture frames of a dog and sunflower fields, is on the far side of the room. No wedding pictures are on the shelf, and only a few books are scattered between the frames and a small vase of real flowers. Part of me wants to step further toward the shelf and see what she reads. I squint to read the spines, and they look like sci-fi.

Some things never change.

“Still a clean freak, huh?” I ask. Her eyes darken like a cloud just passed over them. I clear my throat and backpedal. “Sorry if I offended you. Did I say something wrong?”

“I’ve always been clean, but it’s...well, it’s an obsession now,” she says, wringing her hands. I look at the candy I brought her. It’s on the end table in the entryway and at a perfect 90-degree angle. She follows my gaze. “You ever see *Sleeping with the Enemy* with Julia Roberts?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Remember how the husband liked the cans and towels? Well, that was Beck.” She looks at the floor. “If you get punched or kicked enough for having stuff out of order, your body and mind won’t let you have things disorganized. I like clean. It kept me safe. Well, safer than what I was if something wasn’t decorated or dust-free. He wanted blankets perfectly folded, even if they were in the linen cabinet. Ever try to fold a fitted sheet perfectly? I equate clean with safety. Mess makes me uneasy.”

I’m within an inch of her in seconds. “Lucy,” I whisper, and my hands cup her cheek before I can question if it’s a good idea to touch her outside of the club. It’s been a long time since I’ve touched her without paying. Both of us flinch. It’s funny that touching her without a pole or cum-stained upholstery under us feels weird. I pull my hand away and instantly miss her skin. “He was an awful piece of shit. A good man

would never do that to you. You didn't deserve that. No woman does. Can we finally talk about it? Can you tell me so I can help you?"

She looks up at me, a tear in her left eye. She blinks, and it doesn't fall. "What's the point? It's over. At least, it is if he stays gone. I just wish I could find him to serve him papers. Part of me is scared of that, though. If he comes back and still wants me, he'll go into a rage. He told me several times that if I tried to leave him, he'd kill me. I'm...I'm fucking terrified, Aaron."

I grit my teeth and flex my jaw. Lucy instantly tenses at my expression, and I try to soften it. I focus on my breathing. This is a woman who doesn't like angry men in her proximity, even if the angry man could kill her abusive husband with his bare hands. I step back from her one step. "Let me help, Lucy. Do you want me to look into it?"

She shakes her head and puts her black clutch purse under her arm, wiping her cheek a little and taking a deep breath. "I tried calling the police, Aaron. I reported him missing. They said they'd look, but if he left voluntarily, there's nothing they can do. Everything points to him leaving voluntarily. They, well, they questioned his girlfriend. She hasn't seen him either."

I step back further. "Girlfriend? The fucker was even cheating on you?" I look at her in that dress I want to peel off her body, and my mouth drops open. "What idiot would cheat on you?"

She shrugs. "My husband isn't particularly bright, Aaron. Like I'm some prize anyway."

I step to her and cup her cheeks again. This time I press my forehead to hers. She can push me away if she wants, but I need to be near her. In her face. She doesn't push me away but puts her hands on my shoulders, not quite pulling me into her, but allowing the closeness in her home. Not in the club. Not after a blow job paid with

taxpayer salary cash. She lets me breathe her in without music pumping through the speakers and a girl coming around selling shots in tubes. This feels more personal and intimate than when she crawled on my lap and let me hold her at the club.

“You are so much more than what you think, Lucy. I never asked why you work at that club. Are you in financial trouble? Did he take everything?”

“Your guess is as good as mine on if Beck had us in financial trouble. Maybe you can find that out too? I just needed to scramble to find a job to keep the lights on. I only had access to money to buy things that make me pretty or keep me fit.”

I suck my bottom lip. “That’s financial abuse, and it’s a real thing.”

She clucks her tongue. “That was the least of my abuse issues,” she says, tilting her head. “After he left, I went through his office and couldn’t find shit. I’m thankful to Peter for hiring me, even if it’s creepy for a stripper to work for her cousin.” She looks away. Is she hiding something? My intuition raises its head, and a chill moves up my back. “I was out of the job market for a long time, Aaron. I had to take what I could get. I bought some sparse furniture and sold the nice car for cash to pay for a new place and a smaller sedan. Oh yeah, Beck will be pissed about that when he comes back. Whatever. Guess I’ll take my beating when the time comes.”

“You’ll do no such fucking thing. If he ever beats you again or even comes near your home or work except for a divorce proceeding, I’ll show him his severed dick before I fuck his skull with it.”

She slides her hand down my shoulders to my chest. Now I know what the romance novels Cynthia read meant when a woman says her nipples quiver. Mine definitely do something when she touches me, and my dick wakes up like it does whenever Lucy touches me anywhere below my neck.

“While that’s a lovely gesture, do you think you can find him, Aaron?”

Sure. I’ll add it to the list of things to do besides find something on Murphy and stay on top of my team to see who’s killing men in my county. Hopefully, the two are related so I can kill two birds with one stone. Things are rarely that easy, though.

But Lucy’s a top priority for me. “I’ll look into it this week. I can’t make promises. What do you want me to do if I find him?”

“I just want to know where he is. It’d be nice to know which direction to look when he comes back for me. I’m sure he will someday.”

“Are you sure the girlfriend doesn’t know anything? Have you talked to her?”

Lucy snorts a laugh and sniffs. “We talked. I showed up at her door when I hadn’t seen Beck for a couple weeks. The suspense was killing me. I suddenly couldn’t track his phone, and I couldn’t sleep since I was just awake every night, wondering when he would show up and blame me for whatever kept him away. I went to her house, knocked on the door, and asked if she knew anything. I did it when her husband was at work. I didn’t want to start trouble there.”

“Why not? You could have caused issues for the woman that was Beck’s side piece. That had to hurt.”

She clenches her fists and chews on the inside of her cheek before answering. “Call it intuition, but I don’t think it turned out too happy for her. Just a hunch I had. I waited until her husband left for work and knocked on the door. I introduced myself, and I could tell she was scared I was there to hurt her or something. Something in her eyes told me he hurt her when he didn’t get his way with her too. She was scared of me. Of anything to do with him. Anyway, she fell for him the same way I did. He was charming at first and then started with a dirty look and a random shove. Eventually,

he moved to a slap or a harder push. It progressed with her from there.”

I make a mental note to pay the girlfriend a visit. Lucy’s not a policewoman and not used to people lying to her. Maybe I can talk to the woman and learn something new. “Who is this woman? A coworker of Beck’s?”

Lucy shakes her head. “Jalen Quarry is Ellen’s husband.” I make a mental note of the name. “Jalen worked with Beck.”

I laugh and shake my head. “A wife beater, the cousin of a motorcycle club president with questionable ties to the mafia, and someone who likes diddling his coworker’s wife. This just keeps getting better. Let me guess. They met at the company Christmas party and tickled each other’s tinsel?”

Lucy smiles a crooked, close-lipped grin. “Probably something like that.” Her smile slips away. “Not to be a drag about the police, but they said that the fact that he had a girlfriend and our marriage wasn’t the best was the reason they weren’t going to throw up road flares for him.”

“That’s unusual. You reported it to Chicago?”

She nods. “Yeah, they posted the missing person report around on social media. I filled out a form and provided a picture. Those were the beat cops. I don’t think it ever moved up the chain. Present company excluded, but I don’t have a high respect for the profession after all that was pushed under the rug when it was obvious I was being knocked around. Not one of them helped me, even if a doctor’s eyebrows were raised enough to report it. Beck also told anyone who would listen that I was clingy and he couldn’t wait to get away from me someday. I’m sure that didn’t help with motivation.”

Clingy? I’d sell my soul to the highest bidder to have Lucy cling to me like plastic

wrap.

“But we have a hot night ahead of us, right?” She grips her purse tighter under her armpit and smiles. “You ready, Sheriff Dwyer?” She slides her hand in mine, and all thoughts of her dick ex-husband and his girlfriend are gone. All that matters is Lucy and the fact that I have one night to dig up something on Murphy Beckett and impress this woman for the second time in my life.

I wait as she locks the door, and I check the lock for her – my small gesture to let her know I take her safety seriously. I walk her to the passenger door of my car and wait as she adjusts her dress, reminding me of the time I drove her to senior prom. “Let’s go save some turtles, gorgeous,” I say, closing the door.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 7

Lucy

Aaron's smell reminds me of hard and dirty sex – the kind we had when we were dating. Every time I'm next to him, I think about the way his body used to move over mine and the way he sounded when he came next to my ear. Does he still moan into a woman's neck when he finishes inside of her? Would he still grip my throat the way I liked? Aaron was the filthiest talker that I've ever been with. Beck only called me a dirty cunt in bed and made it sound like he was doing me a favor or that I wasn't desirable.

Aaron Dwyer was the only man that ever fucked me dirty but didn't make me feel like I was a pity fuck.

Chills move up my spine every time he touches me on the car ride. There must be something weird about the walls of the club because my hair doesn't stand up on end when he touches me at work. He rests his hand on my thigh on the ride to the gala, and I trace the veins in the back of his hand with my fingertip as he drives. It's the same way I used to ride next to him when we were teens. This time, we're not in Aaron's first car on the way to a date with our friends or sneaking out of the house after midnight for a summer joyride followed by skinny dipping.

He chats about his kids, work, and what he hopes to find out from Murphy tonight. I'm to make small talk while he butters up Murphy to make him comfortable. We're to notice who he talks to at the gala and watch for any envelopes or papers being exchanged, but we shouldn't ask specific questions about any questionable business

deals or the mafia. Aaron prefers to have a friendly relationship with Murphy and find out who else he sucks up to and not go in guns blazing.

I check out his profile as he talks. His jaw is stronger than when we dated before. Perhaps it's because he's leaner and more muscular now. His face is more relaxed than when he was young. Like he's on vacation. Is he really that comfortable around me?

I wish I could say the same. Since Beck went missing, I'm nervous when I talk to anyone, especially the police. It's the definition of irony that I have the county sheriff in my life. If there's one thing I want to avoid, it's all this mafia connection bullshit and police entanglement. I don't trust the police as a general rule. When I reported abuse in the past, they glossed over it. Maybe Beck had more connections than I thought.

But here I am with the fucking sheriff. I imagine waking up next to him and going to Home Depot every weekend before tackling some landscaping project together around the house. I fantasize about long, lazy Sundays in a hammock out back with Aaron Dwyer's dog at our feet.

I couldn't say no to him about tonight. Sitting next to him in the front seat of the car, I inhale deeply. I've missed this smell for over a decade, and I want to memorize it in case I never get to sit next to him again.

He prattles on about something cute Ruby said this morning, and my chin quivers with emotion. How did I let him go so easily all those years ago? Why didn't we both fight for our relationship? How did I end up with Beck who is the complete opposite of Aaron?

I am, without a doubt, one hundred percent still in love with Aaron Dwyer, and I will destroy anyone who hurts him without blinking an eye. Shame roils through my



stomach at the idea of Aaron finding a nice woman who teaches kindergarten or works as a librarian. That's what he deserves, but I feel sick when I think about him being happy with anyone but me ever again.

We arrive at the convention center and pull into the parking attendant station. Aaron gets out of the car as the valet opens my door. Without hesitation, Aaron's at my side, taking my hand as I get out of the car. "Did I mention you look gorgeous tonight?" he asks.

"You did."

He pats my hand on his arm and smirks like he's the luckiest man in the world. "I just wanted to make sure you knew that before we enter this hornet's nest."

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"Sheriff Dwyer," a man I recognize as an alderman in our small suburb says immediately as Aaron walks through the door. Aaron stops to talk to the man and shakes his hand as I take in the surroundings. I hope he doesn't get stopped like this every few feet. We'll never learn anything tonight.

The convention center is draped in seafoam green and blue decorations. Decorative turtles hang from the ceiling, and carefully placed lights make the walls look like we're under a lake or river. Light music comes through overhead speakers, and several women and men stand at points around the room. They must be organizers or on some kind of board because they shake hands and greet everyone on the way to the bar or dining room. Waitresses circle the room with glasses of champagne and appetizers. One woman stops in front of me, and I grab a cracker with some type of dip across the top. I let out a chuckle at the thought that we're here to protect turtles and this may be some type of seafood spread, but I close my lips and fight the smile. Maybe it's just a bean dip.

Waiters come and go from a bar area, but there's an open bar where people can also get their own cocktails or beer. I slide my fingers into Aaron's free hand as he finishes speaking with the alderman and greets our mayor. I smile and shake the woman's hand when he introduces us, but I'm too busy trying to find Murphy to focus on the conversation. I know he'll be here. He wouldn't miss a chance to socialize with the area elite.

No Murphy as far as I can see, but he could already be in the dining room or running late. My heart stops as my eyes flick over the bar area.

Standing at the bar with a drink halfway up to his lips is the mafia thug who licked my face. And he's looking right at me.

"Aaron," I whisper, practically hissing. I tug on his hand a little.

"What is it?" he asks, excusing himself from the conversation between the fire chief and an alderwoman by holding up a finger. Something in my voice must tip him off that he needs to listen to me right now.

I face him and smile like nothing is wrong. But this is Aaron. He knows something's wrong because he's known me over half my life. "The man at the bar with the dark hair. He's not a nice man."

Aaron looks over my shoulder and keeps the smile on his face. He doesn't stare or make it obvious he's looking. It's the cop in Aaron, and he's calm and cool about seeing a man staring at me. "The guy practically sneering in our direction? Who is he?"

"He has ties to Beck. That's all I know."

Aaron blinks and shakes his head in disbelief. "Wait. What?"

“I haven’t been completely honest about something.”

Aaron lightly grabs my elbow, smiles at the people milling around, and pulls me over to a corner, waving away a waitress with a tray of champagne. “What did you not tell me?”

I need to tell him. “Beck owed some people money. They came looking for it a few months ago, which is part of the reason I took the job at the club. I needed fast money. They want me to pay Beck’s debt.”

Aaron rears back and looks at the ceiling. If we weren’t in public, he’d probably run his hands through his hair in frustration. He glances back at the guy at the bar. The man hasn’t blinked, and he’s not at all intimidated that I’m with the sheriff. “Who is he? Do you have a name?”

I shake my head. “Gangster number one? He has a boss. I don’t know names. They didn’t exactly tell me their life stories over margaritas and pedicures.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. I can’t tell if he’s annoyed with me or the piece of shit I married. “Is there anything else I need to know?” he asks. “I really wish you would have told me this already.”

“I’m scared, Aaron. They say Beck owes them money.”

“Is it possible that Beck borrowed money from the mafia so he could disappear? Money of the kind they loan is enough to buy a new identity and a small place somewhere off the grid.”

“I wish I knew. If he did use the money for that, it’s pretty shitty to leave me to deal with it. It’s another thing I can add to the list to hate him for.”

Aaron looks at the floor and looks back at me. “What did they look like?”

I subtly jerk my neck in the direction of the bar. “That guy.”

“No, Lucy. What did the other guys look like?”

I bite my lip while Aaron grabs my hand like we’re a couple and just having a nice conversation in the corner. I squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself to pull their faces from memory like I’m describing them to a sketch artist. “The boss was late forties, maybe early fifties. Balding with dark hair where he had it. Glasses.”

Aaron’s eyes widen. “Were there others?”

“Two more, other than the boss and the guy at the bar.”

“Describe.” His voice is clipped. Impatient. He’s on to something.

“The other guys were both early thirties. Maybe late twenties. White. Normal-looking guys. The kind you wouldn’t look twice at if you saw them on the street.”

Aaron puts his hand on the wall behind me, boxing me in. To anyone else, we look like lovers. He may be doing it to show the guy at the bar that I’m under his protection. He may just be thinking.

“If I show you a picture that you’re not supposed to see, would you be able to identify him?”

“I guess.”

“Lucy, you can never tell anyone I showed you this. It’s evidence.” He digs his phone out of his pocket and taps a few things. Turning the picture around, he shows me. “Is

he one of them?”

I turn my head and close my eyes. “Fuck, Aaron. You could have warned me.”

“Sorry, Lucy. I’m excited. Is he one of them?”

I nod curtly and cover my mouth with my hand at the sight of a decomposing body. I can handle a lot of gore, but I can’t stomach decomposition. “He was one of the thugs.”

Aaron taps something else on his phone and turns it around. I look away and tentatively squint one eye at it, hoping I don’t see another decomposing body. What I find is a picture of the boss man smiling on Aaron’s phone in what looks like a driver’s license photo. I nod at it. “That’s the boss.”

“His name is George Cannon. He’s the guy I told you about that was sliced up pretty bad and murdered. The younger guy is Justin Hammons. He’s also obviously dead. At least you can rest easy that George Cannon isn’t concerned about his money anymore.”

“So, your dead dude cases are related to Beck and possibly to Murphy? This just keeps getting weirder and weirder. I mean, it’s nice the boss guy isn’t going to come looking for money, but I’m not sure if I’m relieved people involved in this are dying.”

Aaron pushes away from the wall and straightens his tie. “It’s pretty convenient that thug pirate guy over there is at the same event as Murphy and that Beck owed his dead boss money. Let’s go into the dining hall and rub some organized crime elbows.”

The dining room is decked out in white linens and matching seatbacks. Large

chandeliers are spaced throughout the room and dimmed to create a romantic dinner ambiance. Blue and green accent decorations and napkins are on the table, giving the entire area a wedding under-the-sea vibe. Aaron calmly greets the board members at the door, his hand on my lower back.

Fuck, I like it there. It's comforting while my stomach roils and sweat pools in my armpits. I haven't seen Murphy outside of the club for months, and nerves send alternating currents of heat and chills through my body.

Aaron and I find our seats and Murphy stands as we approach, tilting his head in surprise to see me. The look on his face is almost humorous, and I bite my lip to keep from laughing. He knows damn well who Aaron is, and he never expected his stripper cousin by marriage to be on the sheriff's arm.

"What do we have here? Lucy," he says, nodding at me. "Sheriff Dwyer."

Aaron shakes Murphy's outstretched hand, but he also wipes it on his suit pants as we sit down. Aaron shivers like he has a chill. It must be hard for him to eat shit and sit across from a man you want to arrest. I'm impressed Aaron had the ability to make sure Murphy was seated at our table.

Murphy settles into his chair, and my eyes flick to his date. I've never seen her before, but a sex worker knows a sex worker. She's in the industry. There's a hardness in her face, and she looks like she's here under duress...or the promise of payment. She's obviously a hired escort.

Murphy looks respectable in his tuxedo. His dark hair is slicked back with hair gel, and his beard is trimmed. He doesn't always trim it, so it's obvious he made an effort. As I watch, he makes a fist, stares at Aaron, and cracks every knuckle on his hand with a leer. "When did this match happen?" Murphy asks, gesturing at Aaron.

“We dated in high school,” Aaron says before I can open my mouth to answer. I’m glad he’s going with the truth. It would be hard for me to remember a lie if Murphy ever brings it up at the club. I have enough lies and trash in my life I have to cover in my daily life. Although, there is a weight lifted off my shoulders now that Aaron knows about the money I owe the dead gangsters. “My wife died a year ago, and Lucy and I recently reconnected.”

Did we? Something like a warm glow moves from my toes to my breasts. Does Aaron consider us reconnected, or is this all a show?

“I see. Interesting choice for a sheriff.”

Aaron meets Murphy’s eyes and smiles. It’s not a real smile. It’s his fake one he only uses when he’s trying to keep from punching someone through a wall. I’ve only seen it on Aaron’s face a few times in my life. “Why do you say that, Beckett?”

Murphy shrugs. “You do know she’s still technically married to my cousin, right? She’s also a stripper.”

“And what do you do?” Aaron asks, turning to Murphy’s date.

Murphy puts his hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Don’t answer the sheriff.”

Total hooker.

The woman looks between all of us, confused, but Aaron brushes it aside and keeps going. His leg tenses under my hand when I place my hand on his thigh to keep him calm. He ignores it. “If you’re referring to the fact that Lucy strips to make ends meet after your cousin left her high and dry without a way to support herself months ago, I already know. I also don’t give a shit. Now that that’s out of the way, I hope we have a lovely evening. Dinner smells fantastic. I bet the starter isn’t turtle soup.”

Murphy stares at Aaron for a few moments, but we're joined by the fire chief, the president of the library board, and her husband. Aaron makes small talk with each of them and ignores Murphy. Part of me wonders if Aaron knows that will bother Murphy, and a small smile creases my face as I make small talk with the fire chief's wife when she arrives just before the salads are served.

Dinner is served in courses, and Aaron plays it cool through all of them, ignoring Murphy's stare from across the table. The more Aaron hobnobs with the others at the table, the more Murphy shifts in his seat in agitation. Aaron's clearly stealing Murphy's shining moment to rub elbows with the area's big wigs.

By the time dessert rolls around, Murphy's face is beet red, and he squints across the table at Aaron as he goes out of his way to look happy and relaxed. Aaron's arm is draped over my shoulder, and his warm thumb traces over to my collarbone, sending electric pulses to my clit, even as the guest speaker on stage delivers a heartfelt speech about turtles.

"How is business Murphy?" Aaron finally asks. "Remind me what you do again."

Murphy practically glows that attention is finally on him. "I'm an entrepreneur. I have a couple of tailoring outfits and am an active member in the local motorcycle club."

"Ah, that sounds interesting. Is it a hobby?" Aaron asks, cutting off a piece of his cheesecake.

"I'm the president of the club, so it requires a bit of my time. I'm surprised my cousin by marriage didn't tell you I run the club."

"We don't talk about you," Aaron says in a clipped tone. Seriously, does Murphy think he's the topic of every conversation? "Did you know the man that died



recently? George Cannon? I think he was a member of the club, right?”

Murphy’s too smart to fall for it. He makes a clicking noise with his mouth. “We didn’t have a member by that name, but I read about that in the press. Damn shame. Didn’t seem like the motorcycle type.”

“Really? You didn’t know him? That’s so weird.” Aaron goes back to his cheesecake.

Murphy leans forward, not blinking. “What’s weird?”

“Well, my detective on the case, Coleson, found some evidence that showed a payment from Cannon to your club. My deputy told me about it, but maybe he got the information wrong.”

“Obviously. I don’t know George Cannon. We don’t deal in his kind.”

Aaron tilts his head to the side. “What kind is that?”

Murphy sputters a laugh, and it almost sounds evil. Every set of shoulders at the table tenses. “Old. The guy was past our prime member age requirement. All members are under fifty. There’s another club we partner with for older riders.”

“I didn’t say how old he was, and I’m not sure if we released that to the press. So you knew him?”

Murphy takes his cloth napkin off his lap and throws it on the table. “I already said I didn’t know him. If the press got his age right, we wouldn’t have let him in. I’m sure I saw it in the news. Your deputy and your detective don’t have shit right.”

Aaron takes a drink of his coffee. “That must be true. My mistake. How is the club doing? Good membership levels? Incidentally, why are there two clubs?”

“It’s just the way I do things, Sheriff Dwyer. I’m sure you and Lucy have your...ways.” He leers at my tits, completely ignoring his date and her wide eyes. She may be a hooker, but she knows something is up, and she wants nothing to do with it. “Why can’t you solve the case of who killed George Cannon? In fact, I think there was another murder recently. Sounds like you don’t have control of your county.”

“Who’s excited for dancing?” I ask, pressing hard on Aaron’s thigh under the table. “I need to use the restroom first.”

I stand and place my napkin on top of my half-eaten plate of cheesecake. Aaron respectfully stands as I rise from the table. “I’ll be back.” I lean in closer to Aaron’s jaw. “I’m going to walk around and see if I see anything else odd. Try not to kill him while I’m gone.”

Taking a deep breath, I walk down a marble staircase to the downstairs ladies’ room. Rounding the corner, the breath knocks out of me as I’m pushed against the wall so fast that my vision blurs. I open my mouth to scream, but it’s fruitless. A hand that smells like cigarette smoke and raw onions covers my mouth. It’s not like anyone would hear me anyway since thunderous applause comes from upstairs as another speaker takes the podium.

“Funny seeing you here, bitch,” the voice says. “I nearly shit when I saw you.”

I blink twice, clearing my vision, and find the mafia-hired help with his face three inches from mine. I didn’t see him at dinner. Was he waiting for me to use the bathroom all night, or did he follow me out of the dining room?

“We need to have a little chat about money.” Something cold and sharp is pushed against my pelvic region. “If you value your clit, you’ll talk to me like a good little girl.”

My stomach roils, and I look around the area for any asset. A vase I could smash over his head. Someone walking nearby.

But everyone is upstairs. The man grabs my elbow and roughly drags me to the corner past the bathroom door and pushes me up against old-fashioned, salmon-colored wallpaper. This is obviously the least cared-for area of the event hall. To anyone passing by, we'd look like lovers making out against a wall.

He digs the knife between my legs, and I yelp. "If anyone comes down here, you'll be quiet. Understand? I know where the artery is."

I nod. Play dumb, Lucy. It's saved you before with them.

He smiles and licks my face again as I cringe from his saliva. "You owe me money."

"I don't have it. I'm a stripper and have to pay the bills."

"You're Beck's wife. You have money."

"Beck wasn't wealthy. He probably borrowed money from you guys and scrimped to pay it back. He's still missing. Take it up with him. If you find him, let him know I want a divorce. I told you I'd try to get you the money, but I have bills to pay."

"Not my problem." He leers down my dress. "But we'll make a deal. I want half of it or this clit you like gets removed. Capiche?"

"I don't even know how to contact you," I say. Maybe I can get some useful information here. Names. Places. If they work for or with Murphy. "Who are you people?"

That earns me a chokehold. He grips my throat tight, and I gasp, inhaling air. "My

name is Geoffrey, and that's all you need to know. You know Murphy Beckett, too. I saw you at dinner."

"He's Beck's cousin," I whisper, barely getting the words out.

A tear runs down my face. Aaron. He's upstairs finishing his dessert while this happens. I can't call for help. What I wouldn't give for him to need to use the bathroom right now.

"We know that. We also do business together. I'd hate to have to get him involved to pay us back."

"Us? Your boss is dead," I whimper, and Geoffrey releases me. I gasp for breath and cough a little as I slink down the wall.

"How does a dumb stripper know that?"

"I read the news," I lie. "If your boss is dead, why are you coming after me?"

"Yes, it's unfortunate that my boss died. One of my coworkers, too. May have been a bad accident."

"What kind of accident is that?" I ask the question in a taunting voice, but anger controls my voice now – not common sense.

"Let's just put it this way. There's a new boss in town, and I don't like forgiving my old boss's debts." He pulls back from me a little, still not removing the knife, and I suck in a breath of clean air that doesn't smell like his breath or hands.

"You have one more month for half of what we asked for. I'll find you. If you tell the guy you're with anything about this, we'll come for him too. What's his name?"

Dwyer? Has two little girls, if I remember right from his campaign.”

I grit my teeth, and spit forms in my mouth. I don’t dare spit in this guy’s face, but I want to. Threatening an innocent woman is cowardly enough. Threatening two little girls is reprehensible. But something about it being Aaron’s two girls makes my blood boil. How dare this man threaten to hurt Aaron or anyone he cares about?

I should scream, run, or make a scene, especially since three old ladies about the age of The Golden Girls smile at me as they parade into the bathroom like Geoffrey may simply be my lover and we’re having a heated chat. I should ask for help or send one of the silent looks women send to each other when they need assistance with a dickhead.

The knife presses flat into my crotch once they disappear, completely immersed in their conversation. “Are we clear? Remember, not a word, or I’ll pay your boyfriend a visit. I may have to check out his girls’ school some day during recess. I have connections that would pay a pretty penny for them.”

Over my dead body. Which is a distinct possibility with this mess. “I’ll get it for you.”

And I will. If I have to fuck every patron that comes into the club, I won’t let those girls be hurt. I’ll get that money, or at least have enough to appease this guy until I can get more. It may be horrible, but I’ll spread my legs for Geoffrey to buy more time until I do have the cash. Not one hair on Aaron Dwyer’s head will be hurt or even inconvenienced.

Geoffrey pulls the knife away from my crotch and drags his index finger down my face. “Such a sassy little mouth. If I didn’t think you’d be the kind to bite my dick off, I’d make you get on your knees to work off a hundred bucks of that debt.”

I shiver and clench my thighs to keep from wetting my dress in fear, but I force myself to look at him. If I avert my eyes, he'll know I'm scared of him. Once the debt is paid, he'll keep coming around if he thinks he can. My nostrils flare as I try to control my breath.

He pushes my head back against the wall before backing away. I whimper and rub my head but don't dare move until he's gone and taking the stairs to the main area.

I'm so fucking tired of being afraid of men.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 8

Aaron

Lucy's been quiet the whole way home. She came back from the bathroom shaking. I asked her what happened, and she just smiled in return, ignoring the question and asking the nearest waiter for a stiff whiskey. Something happened, though. I could tell by the way she wouldn't meet my eyes.

The drinking later into the night turned out to be a good thing. Murphy loosened up, and I did too. We finally got to have that conversation about the Bears. Sure, I didn't get him to admit he traffics women, but I did get a minute alone with his date which was long enough for me to slip her my card in case she needs help.

Murphy loosened up during after-dinner cocktails and dancing, but I didn't like the way he looked at Lucy. He looked like he knew her intimately or wants to, not like a cousin should look at his cousin's wife. Lucy looked away from him whenever she could, and I was able to not let it get to me as the bar ran out of alcohol. Both of us drank more than we should, and I probably shouldn't have driven back to her house. By the time I realized that I should have called us an Uber, we were almost home.

I walk her to the front porch, and she opens the door wide behind her in a silent invitation. Unsure of what she's willing to do inside her house, I follow in silence, my hands in my pockets and waiting for her to make a move on me or indicate she wants to be physical. It's not like we don't do stuff at the club, and we're familiar with each other's sex tells.

She drops her purse and keys on a small table in her entryway before hobbling to the refrigerator, opening the door, and pulling out a bottle of wine I recognize from my own shopping at Trader Joe's. She kicks off her heels in the kitchen and sighs. "I'm so fucking tired of painful shoes."

I walk to the kitchen entryway and casually lean against it. "I don't know how you wear the ones you wear at work. You have my respect for walking in those things."

She opens the twist cap on the wine, takes a drink, and holds the bottle out to me. I take a sip and let the dry red fill my mouth. More alcohol. This will sit well with the whiskey and beer I've already consumed. Hopefully, the kids aren't too wild tomorrow morning since the overnight sitter only lasts until eight.

She takes the bottle back from me, takes a swig, and sets it on the counter. She leans on her elbows and her tits about fall out of the dress, but it's not meant to seduce. She's just leaning forward. "You like the shoes, don't you?" she asks in a whisper.

"I like the shoes, Lucy," I whisper back, pushing off the doorframe and leaning against the other side of her counter so we're across from each other. "I like a lot of things about you."

"Still?"

"Always."

The silence between us is deafening, and the air practically crackles between us. I burn to touch her, and her shoulders tense in restraint like she wants to touch me. We're locked in a game of sex chicken, but I'm not sure if the first to touch will lose or win.

"Be with me tonight. Your bed. Like we used to be." I lose the chicken game. I don't



care. I'm going to lay my cards out and fall first.

Lucy looks down. "No, Aaron."

The room spins a little as I push off the counter, laughing like a maniac. Lucy stiffens further and circles the counter. "I think you should go."

"Why did you let me follow you inside? Hand me wine? You have to know I want you, Lucy!" I yell. I don't mean to. Something about the alcohol and my frustration combine into an uncontrollable pitch. I clear my throat and reach for her. When I tuck her hair behind her ear, she gently pushes my hand away, and my skin burns where her fingers touched me.

"I don't know why I invited you in, Aaron. I guess I'm still codependent and don't want to be alone all the time. I'm broken, Aaron. I'm so fucking broken."

"No, you're not. You're beautiful and strong. How many women would have survived what Beck put you through?"

She looks up at me, and her eyes darken. It's not sexual, though. It's...mean. "I've had to be strong." She nudges her chin toward the door. "What happens at the club doesn't necessarily happen in my home."

"So, now you only fuck around with me when you get paid for it?" I pat my pants pockets like I'm looking for something. "I think I have a twenty here somewhere."

The slap comes before I can block it. Her hand moves faster than my eyes. I have police reflexes, but I don't see it coming since my guard is always down with Lucy. At that moment, I know I've had way too much to drink. I really should have seen that coming.

Because I deserved it.

Her handprint burns on my face, and I instinctively touch my cheek before she can straighten from the follow-through. Even her hair moved with the strike, a lone lock of auburn hair flopping over her forehead with the force of her movement. She has one hell of a right arm.

She backs into the wall behind her, shaking her head. Her eyes are wide like she thinks I'll come for her, and that's typical for a battered woman. I'm actually shocked she got violent with me. "I'll call you a ride. I'm sorry, Aaron. I shouldn't have hit you..." Her voice trails off and her face crinkles like she's about to cry.

I hold up my hands, trying to signal I won't hurt her. I want to pull her into my arms and apologize, but I don't want to scare her. Truth be told, I've never seen Lucy slap a mosquito, and my heart pounds in shock that she hit me, even as I want to comfort her. Something has crawled under her skin.

"Don't call a car. I shouldn't have said that. Fuck," I whine, running my hands through my hair in anguish. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I didn't mean that. It just came out. Something obviously has you rattled, and you're not talking about it. I want to keep you safe. I'll sleep on your couch tonight. I will never touch you again, but let me keep you safe tonight. I just..." My voice trails off, and I lean against the wall opposite from her.

"I'm sorry, Aaron. I just so fucking angry all the time now."

I step toward her, and she cowers against the wall, one step up from curling into a ball. "Hit me," I whisper.

"Wh-what?" she stammers.

“Hit me again.” I hold my arms out wide. “You’ve got some rage. You have some issues with men after what he did to you. Hit me again, Lucy! I’ll take it if it’ll make you feel less broken. Less battered. More powerful. I want you to take your power back. I want you to be Lucy again.”

She shakes her head but her stance straightens. She’s not cowering anymore at least.

“I won’t.”

“I’m giving you a pass. Beat the shit out of me. I’ll take it. I’ll take it from you. For you.”

“I’d never hurt you like that, and I’m sorry I slapped you, Aaron.” Her eyes dart around the room. “I guess I do have some issues with men, but I’m pretty sure they’re valid.”

“Lucy, you’ve got a lot on your plate, and I really wish I could take those words back. I would do anything to take them back,” I plead, looking at the floor. “I don’t think of you as my whore.”

She tilts her head as a tear rolls down her cheek. I see it and wince. I put my hand over my heart because it feels like it’s going to crawl out of my chest that I made her cry.

“What do you want, Aaron?” she asks in a tired voice with a weak smile. “And don’t tell me to beat you up.”

My chest heaves, and I walk to her, boxing her in and putting my elbows on either side of her face. If she doesn’t want me here, she can bring her knee up and nail me in the balls, but she looks up at me as I tentatively run my hand through her hair.

That soft hair. I'm so psycho for this woman that I'd take a lock of her hair to sleep with under my pillow if she ever said she wouldn't talk to me again.

"I want you, Lucy. No club. No me having to pay for a blow job to feel close to you."

"Is that why you do it?"

"Yes," I say without a moment of hesitation. "It's not physical. I mean...some of it is. It feels nice." She smiles a small grin. "But you between my legs and licking the most hidden part of me makes me feel close to you. That's all I want. I want to feel close to you, but you keep pushing me away. I think about you all day. I think about how I can't wait to see you. I think of ways to talk to you. My fingers hover over my phone because I want to message you about something silly my kids said or something funny my dog did. Do you think I just want you to suck my dick?"

"I don't know what to think. About anything."

"I tried to stay cool around you at the club and act like it was no big deal. It was a big deal to me. Any time you put your hands or mouth on me, it's a big deal. It's special. I'm sorry if I ever acted like it wasn't or was disrespectful to you. Hell, I know I've disrespected you."

I bury my head in her neck, but she pushes me away. Tears burn at my eyes now as she scowls. "Did you just ask me to be your date tonight to be your date? It wasn't about Murphy, was it?"

"I want you on my arm all the time, Lucy."

She looks at the floor. "I can't be with you the way you want, Aaron. We live in different worlds now. I'm not the same person I was. You deserve better. You deserve someone like Cynthia who can be a role model to your girls."

“That’s not even close to true.”

“It is true, and you know it! This will always be a cloud over my head, Aaron.” She pushes me away and holds her hand over her head like it’s a storm cloud. “This will always be a thing between us. You’ll always be able to throw it in my face that I sucked your dick for your money! You will always be tainted by what I’ve done.”

“What have you done, Lucy?” My voice is as loud as hers, and she stiffens at the question. “You haven’t done anything but try to support yourself. If something happens between us, it will never be an issue. I will never throw it in your face.”

“Except you just did, Aaron.”

She’s right, and shame roils in my stomach. I blow out a breath and step to the doorway again. “I’m so sorry I made you feel like a whore. It will never happen again, and I’m ashamed of myself. But I’m going to go get a blanket and sleep on that IKEA wonder in there,” I say, pointing to the couch in her adjoining living room. “I’ll be gone before you wake so we can have some space to think, and we’ll talk about this more later.”

I turn and walk away as she wipes a tear from her face.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 9

Lucy

“Five hundred, sweetheart.”

The man that can't be more than twenty-one leers at me from the booth. I've never seen him before, but he's been throwing cash around like he's Midas tonight. Why I grabbed his attention, I'll never know. I wasn't even trying.

Then again, that's what they all like. Act disinterested and out come the dollar bills to draw us like flies to shit. It applies both here and in the world outside these walls.

“I don't fuck,” I say.

“Come on. My girlfriend dumped me. I want to fuck her off my skin.”

Ah. One of those. No wonder I've never seen him. He's been busy with a woman and doesn't usually go looking for companionship in a fleabag like this.

“One thousand,” he offers, jerking his chin toward the upstairs.

I freeze and scowl. I can't believe I'm even entertaining this. I look the man up and down again. Blond hair, blue eyes, and tailored clothing. He looks like a frat guy. He has all his teeth and is under sixty, and that can be a big perk in this joint.

My eyes flick to the upstairs room where I've only taken a few customers – one being

Aaron. My stomach turns, even as my fingers itch for the money in front of me.

It's no fun to be threatened with a knife at your clit if you don't come up with twenty-five thousand dollars by next week. It makes a girl do strange things to survive.

It's unsavory. It's foul, and I hate myself for even thinking I could do it, but it's a good start to the money I owe. If nothing else, it may appease Geoffrey if I hand over some money when he comes calling.

"How old are you?" I have to be sure.

"Old enough." I raise my eyebrows, and the man blows out a breath and reaches for his wallet. He holds it out, covering the address with his thumb. "See? Twenty."

My eyes move to the stamp on the back of his hand, and he smirks. "You going to tell on me that I used the fake at the front door? There's another fifty in it if you're quiet."

I tap my foot, which is no easy task when wearing six-inch platforms. "All cash. Don't get me up there and pull that credit card bullshit. My ass crack isn't a card swipe, and I don't take Venmo."

The man stands up and adjusts his dress shirt. He must be someone's wealthy son out on the town. He's in a dress shirt and dress pants.

"You use a condom. No condom, no pussy. What's your name?" I ask.

"You want to know who you're going to moan for?"

I sniff. I can't remember the last time someone made me come. I've used my hand for orgasms for a decade. Lord knows Beck never cared about getting me off after I

signed the marriage certificate.

“Something like that, sweetheart,” I reply.

“Jason.”

I spin and wave at him over my shoulder before I change my mind. Fuck, I need this money. “Come with me, Jason.”

He follows me up to the VIP room, and I close the door, not locking it because it’s not allowed. Peter says it’s for our own safety, but I’m sure it’s to also send us the message that he doesn’t want us giving too much to our clients without him getting a cut. I love my cousin, but he’s a dickhead.

Jason looks around the room, twirling in a circle. “I’ve never been in the VIP room before.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” I say, stalking to the couch and already pulling my tank top down my torso.

Jason eyes my tits and licks his lips. “Such bossy words to a man that’s going to give you the best sex of your life. They teach you that in charm school?”

Aaron Dwyer was the best sex of my life, and my heart gives a funny skip at the thought of him as tears burn my eyelids. Why did I turn him down the other night? We both needed it. We both needed to feel that human connection to each other. He talked about reconnecting, but we need to do that physically. I ache for it with him.

I went downstairs to apologize the other morning, but I found a quick note from Aaron saying he had to get back to the kids and wanted me to sleep in. He said we’d talk later.



I have no idea what later means because I haven't heard from him. He hasn't come by my house or the club. Maybe he's busy.

Maybe he doesn't ever want to see me again after I slapped him. He probably thought about it while getting crappy sleep on my couch that night and decided I'm not worth the trouble.

Instead of communicating with Aaron and making plans for a bright future with him, I'm fucking this arrogant douche weasel so I can pay back a mafia dickweed that held a knife to my clit and threatened Aaron's children.

Jason undoes his pants and drops them like he's confident I'll allow anything he wants to do. He's not wrong. He's the paying customer. He's also fully erect like any other twenty-year-old guy that's about to bang a hot stripper.

"Pull your panties off, bitch."

I need the money to pay off Geoffrey. I need the money to pay off Geoffrey. I recite it in my head as I slowly pull my thong down my long legs and kick it away before leaning back on the couch. "Condoms are on the little table there," I say, nodding to the small table by the couch.

His eyes flick to them, he frowns, and grabs one before grumbling, "I shouldn't pay full price because of the rubber."

"Fuck off. You want this pussy or not?" I say, propping myself up on an elbow and dragging my finger down my glistening slit. I'm not wet for him. Thoughts of Aaron make me wet. Some nights, when Beck was particularly foul, I thought of Aaron to get in the mood enough to take Beck.

Jason quickly rolls a condom on and positions himself on top of me. He's smooth and

doesn't smell bad, but he pokes around for a while to find my hole. This guy said he had a girlfriend, but I feel sorry for her. I roll my eyes over his shoulder.

He eventually pushes in with a sigh and starts humping me like he's a jackhammer and I'm concrete. He doesn't rub my breasts, grunt into my neck, or make any sound besides his ragged breath as he hammers at my pussy.

A scuffle outside the door causes both of us to freeze. Peter? The feds? Another stripper thinking this VIP room is open?

When Aaron comes through the door so fast that the door hits the back wall, Jason startles, and I gasp. Aaron bares his teeth, and his face reddens. His hands ball into fists, and a guttural growl comes from his chest. I may not like the guy that owns the dick currently in my pussy, but I'm suddenly afraid for his life. It's interesting that I've been a battered woman for a decade, and I'm not afraid for my own. Then again, I don't know much in my shitty life, but I know Aaron Dwyer would rather drink drain cleaner than hurt a hair on my head.

"What are you doing here?" I shriek. I only realize I could get all of us in a world of shit after the words leave my mouth.

I've seen Aaron Dwyer angry, but this is next level. His shoulders are squared, and he's so red that he looks like he's been in the sun for hours without sunscreen. He grits his teeth until I'm worried they'll crack. "Get off her."

"No fucking way. I paid for this pussy."

Fuck Jason. Fuck Aaron Dwyer. Fuck anyone that thinks they can own me. Fuck the entire world.

I grip Jason's ass and pull him into me. "Finish, Jason," I say. "You paid." I look at

Aaron and sneer. “After all, I only fuck when I’m paid.”

If Aaron was angry before, he’s sad now. His face crinkles like he’s going to cry, and I wish I could take back my words. My mouth opens a little like I’m shocked at my own words.

Jason pumps into me, and I wrap my legs around him, pretending that I’m enjoying it. I arch my back, close my eyes, and moan. Not that I want to. This kid is a lukewarm lay at best. No wonder his girl left him. But I soldier through the ruse. If Aaron’s going to throw insults at me like he did the other night and make me feel like the cheap whore I obviously am, he can stand there and watch someone fuck me.

Jason notices and turns his head. “Hey, man, if you insist on being in the room, make yourself useful or something.”

“It’s just sex, Aaron. It doesn’t mean anything. Watch if you want. I need this money. If you don’t want to watch, take a hike,” I say, pointing to the door.

“It would mean something to me.”

Aaron opens his mouth to say something else, but Jason cuts him off. “If you insist on being here, why don’t you watch me fuck her while you fuck my ass?”

I stop arching into Jason’s thrusts. In fact, I freeze entirely like a record just skipped at a rave.

Did he just ask my high school boyfriend and the county sheriff to not only watch another man fuck me but fuck his ass while he does it?

“Excuse me?” Aaron and I ask at the same time.

Jason slaps the couch. “Bro, my friends and I fuck all the time between bitches. What’s the big deal? It feels good. I could go for a dick milking with a nice prostate rub thrown in.”

Aaron’s going to walk away. He’ll wait for me after work, and we’ll apologize to each other in that way we do. It’s how we’ve done it since high school. We won’t talk for a long stretch, and then we’ll run into each other doing errands, strike up a conversation about something mundane like stamp prices or the best brand of potato soup, and everything will be forgotten.

I sure don’t expect Aaron Dwyer to undo his belt without breaking eye contact with me.

He stalks like a panther and doesn’t blink. That’s the scariest part. His face is steel, without emotion. Unflappable and determined. He unbuttons the bottom buttons of his khaki uniform shirt and parts the fabric like it’s no big deal.

“Fuck, yeah,” Jason mumbles, his hands finally gripping my breasts and holding them as they jiggle. He widens his stance and bends forward on me.

I can’t tear my eyes from Aaron. I should look away, ashamed. He looks at me with hooded eyes and grabs a condom off the table. “It’s just sex, right, Lu – Copper?”

“Don’t do this.”

My words come from my heart, but they fall on deaf ears. Aaron pulls his dick out of his pants behind Jason and rolls the condom on his cock without looking at Jason’s ass or his own dick. If he needs help to get erect, I can’t tell, but I hear the unmistakable thumping sound of Aaron’s cock against Jason’s ass.

His eyes never leave mine until he mouths, “I wish this was you.”

“Don’t,” I whimper. I have no idea if I’m telling him not to fuck Jason’s ass or if I’m replying to the fact that he wishes it was me. Probably both.

“If this is the only way you’ll let me fuck you, so be it. Just know that every time I push into this guy’s asshole, I’ll wish it was your pussy. You want to wrap your legs around this guy and let him have that cunt I want so bad? I’ll be the guy controlling every thrust he gives you.”

Tears burn my eyes as Aaron finally looks down and spits hard on Jason’s asshole. He lets his pants drop to his knees, squares into position, and inches into Jason, placing one hand firmly on Jason’s back and one hand on his hip.

Jason arches his back and squirms. Oh. My. Fucking. God. Aaron Dwyer is making a man squirm as he slides his dick into his ass.

“Don’t just kneel there. Fuck her, you little prick,” Aaron growls, fisting Jason’s hair. It’s probably meant to be degrading, but my mouth waters. “If you don’t, I will.”

Aaron can’t see Jason’s face, but I can. Jason’s young and can’t control himself. He’s bit off way more than he can chew with both of us, and he’s helpless to control the situation now that he actually has a dick in his ass. I’m half afraid he’ll pass out.

Aaron grunts and pushes Jason until he’s an inch from my face. If I wanted to kiss Jason, I could bend up and place my lips on his.

Too bad the only man I really want to kiss is otherwise busy behind the annoying frat guy in my face.

“Fine, Princess,” Aaron says, running a hand down the younger man’s spine again and then slapping Jason’s ass. “I’ll show you how she likes it. Take notes, asshole.”

Aaron slams into Jason so hard that I cringe at how much that must have hurt. Jason, to his credit, takes it. He wasn't joking when he said he'd done this before. This is someone who knows what to expect and breathes through the initial discomfort.

Then he takes it again and again. Aaron grips Jason's hips like he used to grip mine and thrusts into him over and over as Jason moans. The movement pushes Jason's cock into me.

Aaron Dwyer is fucking me with Jason's dick.

I should have done this with Aaron. We should have just cut out the middleman the other night. I want it so bad that my mouth waters for him. His skin. His scent. His taste.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asks like he's reading my mind.

I want to tell him that I want him. I can't have him, though. Not with what I've done. Look at me, for fuck's sake. Look at what I've done to us. My innocent sheriff has his dick in another man's ass in some kind of twisted game we play. The things I've done will taint me forever and will infect him. They already have.

All I can do right now, though, is position my legs higher so they're thrown over a frat guy's shoulders and near Aaron's face.

Aaron wastes no time in dragging his tongue over my ankle and up my calf as my eyes practically roll back into my head at the force of Jason's thrusts. They have nothing to do with Jason. This is all Dwyer's power. Jason's just a well-paying dildo.

Aaron's lips burn on my skin as he mouths and tongues my calf. I should have let him eat my pussy when he asked the other night because his lips are warm, and they feel like home. And that tongue...

He rests his head against my ankle and pumps into Jason again and again, not even trying to hide his moans. This may be the first time he's fucked a man, but he's not hiding the enjoyment. Pride moves through my chest when I realize that he still doesn't have any shame or embarrassment from me. He could hide his face or bite his tongue to keep everyone in the room from hearing how much he likes riding a man's ass, but he hides nothing from my eyes and ears.

Guilt seeps into my soul even as I rock into the incredible pleasure.

"This is a tight little hole. I've forgotten how good ass is."

"Don't stop," Jason begs, pulling me out of the world I only share with Aaron Dwyer. "Fuck me hard, bro."

Aaron goes deeper until the sound of Aaron's thighs slapping against Jason's butt cheeks fills the room. If anyone walks by the room right now, there's no way I can hide this. My eyes flick to the door, worried we'll be caught. Everyone expects unsavory activity from a stripper. They don't expect to see the county sheriff balls deep in a frat guy's ass at a strip club.

Aaron grips Jason's hair and pulls him back so Jason practically swoons into Aaron's built chest. "Don't you know how to please a lady? Rub her clit."

Jason's hand fumbles at my slit, and it becomes obvious that Jason knows nothing about pleasing a woman. He looks for my clit half a centimeter too high.

Aaron smirks at me and nuzzles Jason's jaw. "It's not her belly button, moron. Here," he says, forcing Jason's hand at the engorged and wanting nub at my center.

It's my turn to arch my back and cuss.

“See what that does to her? It’s a magical thing to watch, huh?” He moves back to gripping Jason’s hips so hard the younger man will have bruises. “Keep rubbing until she moans my fucking name. She knows it.”

The only moaning happening now comes from Jason’s mouth. No matter how hard Aaron fucks him and no matter the degrading things Aaron calls him, Jason moans like a bitch in heat. If possible, I think Jason enjoys being fucked by Aaron more than he enjoys my sopping wet cunt.

And I’m a mess. A filthy mess as Jason’s sweat drops onto my face as he’s bent over like a good boy, taking his ass pounding from my senior prom date. The sweat and body fluids are nothing compared to my soaked pussy. Hell, even a tear leaks down my cheek as my nose runs.

“Hear how wet that pussy is for me? Does it feel good? Tell me all about it,” Aaron whispers next to Jason’s ear. “Fuck knows she won’t let me have it.”

“S-so w-wet,” Jason stammers. “Good.”

Aaron fists Jason’s hair again. “I’m going to make you come so hard like I know you want. I can feel how much you want to get off. When I’m done with you, you’ll pay the lady twice what you offered her and never come back here. Do I make myself crystal fucking clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good boy.” Aaron spanks Jason’s ass cheek hard, the sound practically echoing through the room.

Aaron calling another man his good boy does it. I arch my back, my vision tunnels, and I shake until I worry I’ll never stop. I tremble and shake as Aaron urges me on,



telling me I'm gorgeous and telling me I'm the only girl he ever wants to be with again. He leans forward, past Jason's head, and places a kiss on my cheek.

I want to wrap my arms around his neck and pull him to me for a real kiss, but Jason loses his fucking shit and wails like a dying animal between us. Aaron pulls out of Jason's ass just as Jason unloads into his condom.

In one fluid movement, Aaron unrolls his condom, throws it on the table, and grabs Jason's face like the mafia men grabbed mine. He pinches Jason's cheeks together and forces him to focus on Aaron's face, even gripping his hair and pulling hard. "Suck my dick while she watches."

Aaron widens his stance in front of Jason, and his finger moves to my clit because he knows I can come back-to-back. It was our thing senior year. I could get off, and he knew he could move his finger a fraction of an inch and adjust the pressure to send me into the stratosphere a minute later.

I place my hand on the top of his as it rotates over my clit, welcoming his familiar touch, and I watch in fascination as Jason bends down and takes Aaron into his mouth, gagging when Aaron thrusts down the younger man's throat. "Drink it when I'm done," Aaron grunts, fisting Jason's hair.

Jason has obviously sucked dick before because he bobs like a professional, licking and sucking on the tip of Aaron's cock when he needs to take a breath. I watch until my second orgasm forces my eyes to flutter closed.

"Aaron," I moan, unable to stop myself. It rolls off my lips like my own name.

Maybe it's me moaning for him. Maybe it's the fact that a man is sucking his dick, and men really know how to suck dicks...because they're men. Whatever it is, Aaron grabs Jason's face, fists his hair, and pushes his dick so far down Jason's throat I

think the younger man will digest it. Aaron grunts, and his jaw tenses like it does whenever he orgasms.

Jason gags and coughs, but Aaron holds him until I grab his hand. “Don’t hurt him. He’s twenty.”

Aaron pulls his dick out of Jason’s mouth and looks at the long line of drool that comes with it. The spit is attached to both Jason’s bottom lip and the tip of Aaron’s cock, and Aaron swipes it away like it’s filthy.

Jason sputters and coughs as he swallows the last of Aaron’s cum, and I watch the younger man's throat move, wishing I was drinking Aaron down.

How did we get here? How did I ever put Aaron in this position? I just want to stay alive, out of trouble, and live in peace. I want Aaron to be happy, even if it's not with me. He deserves that and so much more. He doesn't deserve to fuck an anonymous frat guy in a back room while his ex-girlfriend wishes she didn't fuck up so damn much.

Shame roils through me for the millionth time when I think about how much better Aaron deserves, and I force myself to look at Aaron.

When I finally find his eyes, Aaron’s already buttoning his shirt and pulling up his pants. Without a word, he turns his back to me to finish dressing.

“Aaron!”

“You’re special to me,” he says, buckling his belt and wiping a drop of sweat from his forehead. “You always will be, and there’s not a fucking thing you can do to change that. Not even this.”

I don't know what to say. I can't form words, and I can't run after him. I'm naked, and my legs still tremble from my orgasm. I look at the floor, frantically trying to locate my underwear and bikini top to go after him.

Aaron pulls a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and throws it in Jason's lap where it flutters to the younger man's dick. "That's for you, Princess. You earned it," Aaron says, walking toward the door.

He shuts the door with a slam when he leaves, and I wonder if it's finally the last time I'll ever see Aaron Dwyer.

### Chapter 10

Aaron

“Who are you again?” the man in front of me asks, straightening his suit.

I quickly look Jalen Quarry up and down before shaking his hand and moving my own suit jacket out of the way to show him my badge. No police uniform today. I wore a suit, and I didn’t bring Coleson. I didn’t tell Mitchell where I was going. Nobody at work knows I’m in Chicago. I told them I was doing rounds but also had some personal business to attend to. Unless another mafia thug dies, they’ll leave me alone.

“Sheriff Aaron Dwyer. I was wondering if I could talk to you about Beck Lenin.”

He nods and circles his desk, simultaneously gesturing for me to have a seat. “Of course, what can I do for you?”

“How long did Beck Lenin work for the firm?” I ask, taking a seat in the reddish-brown chair across from him.

He seems eight miles away with the wide pine desk between us, but the desk is insightful. That must be Ellen in the silver picture frame. I’m assuming it would be her in the white wedding dress. I lean forward and smile at it. She’s pretty. Not as pretty as Lucy, but she’s blonde whereas Lucy has auburn hair. Ellen has a lighter skin tone with watery blue eyes, and Lucy has light brown eyes and a skin tone that makes her always look like she just spent a couple days in Florida. Ellen doesn’t have

as many curves as Lucy. Some women lose weight for the wedding, and I wonder if Ellen was one of them since her shoulder bones stick out from the strapless gown.

“Five years or somewhere around there.” Jalen pauses. “I know he left without telling anyone where he went, but are you concerned about him?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell Jalen Quarry that I wouldn’t care if Beck drove off a cliff, but I smile and play nice. “We’re covering all our bases. His ex-wife has recently moved to my area and contacted the police. She says Chicago wasn’t that interested in finding Beck. Since she wants to serve divorce papers and file in my county, we have an interest over there to make sure he really abandoned the marriage.”

If Jalen thinks twice about my bullshit, he doesn’t show it. In fact, he’s hard to read at all. I’m usually good with nervous fidgeting or facial expressions, but either Jalen doesn’t know the first thing about Beck or he’s a professionally trained actor.

“Well, he didn’t show up for work one day. We didn’t think much of it,” Jalen says, tapping his fingers on his fancy ink blotter.

“That seems odd. Why didn’t you think much about it?” I ask, leaning forward and staring at his face like I expect some big revelation from it. Jalen’s a handsome enough man, but he’s not what I was expecting. He’s bald, and his head is shiny, giving him the appearance that he buffs his head with a floor buffer. There’s a dark and neatly trimmed beard that he idly scratches when he talks. He’s the complete opposite of what I can remember about Beck Lenin. Lucy’s dickhead ex was clean-shaven and had the messy but stylish hair so popular with men of our generation when I saw him.

Jalen shrugs. “He was always talking about how he was going to leave Lucy. Personally, I felt a little bad for her.”

“Bad how?” I ask, opening my phone’s note app and jotting down some notes.

Even hearing this man say Lucy’s name makes me second guess being here. I haven’t seen her since I left the club the other night after what I’ve been calling in my mind the incident . My fingers have itched to call her every day, and I sit in the club parking lot at the end of her shift, parked where she can’t see me from the door. I make sure she’s safe when she gets in her car after she waves to Peter at the front door. But I don’t know what to say to her. Something tells me I can’t lead with, “Yeah, remember when we both fucked that guy the other night? That was fun.”

I widen my eyes, trying to keep them open after not having nearly enough coffee this morning. Jalen raps his knuckles on his desk a few times before answering. “He was always leaving Lucy at parties by herself. The company picnic. The Christmas party.”

I clench my phone so hard my knuckles turn white, and I take a deep breath. I’d never ignore her at a party, and I don’t see how any man could. My hand would be at her lower back until the night ended, and I’d drive her home and make love to her properly before getting up and making her pancakes. She deserved so much more in a first husband than Beck Lenin, and I intend to make sure her second husband is much better.

Because I can’t get the idea of being her second husband out of my head.

“It wasn’t just that he ignored her. The other women didn’t talk much to her because of, well, because we all kind of knew about him cheating on her.”

My eyes flick to Ellen’s picture on the desk. “With whom?”

“Hookers. Strippers. Whoever would spread their legs, pardon my rudeness. Beck was away at conferences with us and always had a woman in the room. He went to strip clubs after the conference event was over and would do what he pleased.”

Interesting. I take it Jalen Quarry has no idea that his wife was also fucking Lucy's husband.

"Was your wife friendly with Lucy at these parties?"

Jalen looks behind me and tilts his head like he's thinking. "I don't remember. I know Lucy was often seen in the corner or sitting by herself with an appetizer plate. She smiled when someone walked by. She's a sweet woman, and we could tell she wanted to talk to someone." He sighs and looks down like he's ashamed. "It was just awkward for us. He made a fool of that poor girl. I guess you could say we didn't know what to say, and I know some of the assistants here were so mad for her they didn't trust themselves not to tell her what a cheater he was."

I clear my throat and move to the edge of my seat. "Mr. Quarry, was there any reason to think that Lucy may have also been abused by Beck?"

Jalen's eyes snap up to meet mine. "Abused?"

"A punch. A kick. He ever talk about pushing her around?"

He shakes his head. "Not that I know of."

"Did you ever see bruises on her or see him with a scraped hand. Anything like that?"

"Not that I can recall. Why? Has she said he was abusive?"

I put my phone back in my pocket. Jalen obviously doesn't have as much useful information as I thought he would. "Not officially to police. However, I know Lucy from high school. I saw her at our reunion a few years ago. Let's just say it took my late wife holding onto my arm to keep me from beating Beck Lenin's ass right there. There were marks that night. I'm a police officer, and I know what a punch or a kick

to the back looks like versus falling down a few stairs.”

“I didn’t know about it. None of us did. Something like that would have got around to the other partners and office staff.”

“Did she come to the office a lot? Surprise her husband for lunch?”

Jalen scowls. “Not once. That’s kind of weird, huh?”

“Does your wife come by the office to bring you lunch or chat?”

Jalen pushes back from his desk, and his chair makes a squeaking sound. He crosses his leg over the opposite knee and steeples his fingers under his beard. “She does about once a month. What does Ellen have to do with this?”

“I’m just trying to get an office culture comparison. That’s all.” I look at the picture of Ellen again, and if Jalen suspects something, he doesn’t show it. If I had to bet money on whether Jalen knew his wife was cheating, I’d say he didn’t. “You mentioned he talked of leaving Lucy often. Did he mention a cabin rental or property he owned?”

“He just always said his parents trained him to live in the middle of nowhere if necessary. I guess they were preppers. You know the type.” I nod. “He said he’d go off the grid, and nobody would ever find him. He talked a lot about raising his own food and purifying his own water. We just kind of thought he was full of hot air. He was stressed here at work, so we all kind of just thought he finally threw up his hands and moved to Idaho or something.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Stressed about what? Was there a work issue?”

“Not really. We just wouldn’t give him the billable hours he wanted.”



“What kind of hours did he want? Less?”

“No,” Jalen says, drawing the word out and widening his eyes. “He wanted to be swamped with work. Said he needed the billable hours. I know he wanted some new things. He talked about how his car wasn’t good enough. That was just Beck being Beck, though. He was always a bit pretentious. Anyway, when he asked our big boss for the upgrade in hours, Beck almost seemed...desperate.”

I’d be desperate too if I owed the mafia money. But why not go to his cousin and see if he could negotiate an extension with Cannon to pay the money back? Murphy and Cannon obviously did business.

I stare out the office window and think. None of this makes sense at all. Why would Beck Lenin, a man who’s pretentious and keeps up appearances, actually pull the trigger and go out to the middle of nowhere where nobody would be impressed with a Rolex.

Jalen lets me sit in silence a few moments before clearing his throat. “Was there anything else, Sheriff Dwyer?”

I turn back to him and smile before I rise from my seat and hold out my hand. He shakes it and smiles back at me, rising from his own chair. “Thanks for talking to me. You’re all probably right. Beck Lenin probably just ran off to the mountains or something. Thanks for the insight. I’m sure you have a busy day,” I say, gesturing toward the desk stacked with papers and sticky notes.

“Yeah, I’m here until late tonight,” he says, walking next to me as I head toward the door. “My wife will be upset again.”

It’s good to know that he’ll be here all night. I don’t tell him that his wife is going to be more upset to find a police officer at the door. I’m going there next, and I need to

make sure he isn't going to interrupt us.

### Chapter 11

Aaron

She doesn't unlock the storm door when I show her my badge and smile like I'm a normal person and not a psycho here to kill her. I'd never hurt her, but I guess she doesn't know that. She pales, like she saw a ghost, and her hand shakes as she holds on to a dainty teacup like what my grandmother drank out of. Maybe that's what makes her look so old.

She's a couple years older than Lucy, but there are bags under her eyes. This is a woman who hasn't been sleeping. She's wrapped in an old gray sweater that doesn't go with her black Lululemon leggings and the house slippers on her feet that look like expensive fabric boots. A grungy white t-shirt is under the sweater and looks like it could use a wash.

"I just want to ask a few questions about Beck Lenin. Can I come in?"

She shivers at the name and looks left and right up the street. Is she scared of him like Lucy is scared of him? Did they fight?

Her fingers toy with the lock on the screen. "Did someone send you?" she asks.

The question startles me, and I open my mouth in surprise. It must be enough of a genuine reaction to get her to open the door because she unlocks the door and pushes it open before stepping back. Is she afraid I'll grab her? Does she think this is a kidnapping attempt? Who would send me? Beck?

I climb the two steps into the entryway of her home and keep my hands visible. I need my phone to take notes, but I don't dare put my hands in my pockets now. She may think I'm carrying a weapon. I am. I have my service weapon in my back holster, but my jacket covers it. Something tells me that I'd never need to use it with her anyway.

She's terrified of me. Her lip quivers, and she backs against the wall, knocking over a nearby frame of Jalen holding a golfing trophy. "What do you want with me?"

"Can we sit down, Mrs. Quarry? I'm with the police. I just have a few questions for you."

She waves me to the nicely decorated living room and waits for me to walk into the room first. She doesn't want to turn her back on me. I normally don't like to turn my back on anyone I don't know and trust – it's just the cop in me – but I don't think a woman that weighs all of a hundred pounds dripping wet will get the jump on me. If I can get her to relax, I have a feeling she'll be a great source of information.

I take in the room and smile at her wedding pictures on the mantle as I make my way to a rose-colored loveseat with white and yellow cushions. The room is cheerful and bright. It's definitely a contrast to Ellen's demeanor and clothing today. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was in mourning. The rest of the room is floral patterns and pinks with a rich, white shag rug in the middle of the room.

She practically slinks onto the couch across from me. No offer of coffee or water. Most people I question want to impress the police officers at their door. Play nice.

Ellen Quarry doesn't give a shit.

She pulls her sweater tighter around her chest. "What did you want to know?"

I lean forward. “I’m going to get my phone out so I can take notes, OK?” She nods, and I finally reach into my pocket. “It’s my understanding you know Beck Lenin.”

“What would make you think that?”

I sigh and look around the room again, finding my words carefully. “Mrs. Quarry, I know you were having an affair with him.”

She sits up straighter and her eyes widen to silver dollars. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“His wife reported him missing. We know you were involved with him. I’m not here to judge you, Mrs. Quarry. I’ve spoken to your husband about Beck’s work life, and I did not mention your affair. I have no desire to break up your marriage. Hell, maybe you have an open marriage. It’s not my business what you do in your bedroom. It is my business to gather information about Beck to see where he may be.”

She’s silent, but a little tea sloshes onto her leggings as her hand shakes. After what seems like minutes, she clears her throat. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“Tell me how it is. Please. His wife wants to divorce him, and she needs to find him to serve him papers.”

Something in her eyes lights up like a match spark. Happy Lucy’s leaving him? Angry? I can’t tell, and other than trembling, which could be for any number of reasons, Ellen Quarry’s holding her cards close to her chest.

“How did you meet him? Let’s start there.”

She looks down, ashamed. “Jalen’s work party. He was so...charismatic.”

I smile and prop my leg on my knee in a relaxed pose, trying to put her at ease. “You wouldn’t be the first to say so. His wife indicated that he could charm the birds out of the trees when he felt like it.”

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I swipe the red phone button to send Mitchell to voice mail. Can’t the man take direction? I told him I was handling personal business and couldn’t be bothered.

“I met Beck during a bad time in my marriage,” Ellen says, her face reddening and her eyes filling with tears.

“Bad how?”

“Jalen and I were, well, we were trying to have a baby and couldn’t. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. It just wasn’t happening for us. Sex was just...” She trails off and clears her throat again, waving her hand in front of her face. “I’m sorry. It’s odd to talk about my sex life with a strange man.”

“I understand. Believe me, it’s nothing I haven’t heard. We’re all adults.”

“Sex with my husband would only happen when we were trying to have a baby.”

“I see.” And I do. Cynthia and I went through our phases when the bed was cold. Trying for Ruby was hard, and it definitely lost its luster after the eighth month of sex and Cynthia keeping her pelvis propped on a pillow after I came.

“Suddenly, Beck was this shiny toy with good hair. He was handsome and said all the things my husband wasn’t saying to me. I’d lost weight from depression, which probably wasn’t helping anything, but Beck was there with a text or a funny meme to cheer me up. He made me feel...special.”

“Did you know he was married?” I ask.

She nods. “I’m a horrible person for that, but I knew Lucy from the work picnics and everything. Beck treated her like shit, but I couldn’t stay away. Some perverse part of me liked that he was giving me attention and not giving any to her. It’s probably the way a lot of side-piece women feel. I was down on myself and not getting what I needed for my self-esteem. In some sick way, it felt good to take it from another woman.” She pinches her nose, and a tear falls down her cheeks. “I realize how awful that sounds.”

“It actually makes a lot of sense, Ellen. Can I call you Ellen?” She wipes her nose and nods. “When was the last time you saw him?”

Her eyes darken and she goes still, not even a tremble from her hands. “I told Beck I was pregnant.”

Holy fucking shit.

I cough to hide my shock and the gurgle that comes from my throat. “Forgive me, but I have to ask. Who was the father?”

“I don’t know.” She looks at me with a dark, pleading look. “I didn’t know then and I still don’t. I told Beck, and he left. That’s the last time I saw him. Part of me thinks he may have disappeared because he was scared I’d take him for child support.”

“Would you?”

“Why should I answer that?”

“I apologize. It’s just that I need to know how scared he was. If he wasn’t happy about being a father, it may have spooked him bad enough to make him disappear.”

“I would have zero intention of ever letting the world think that child belonged to anyone but my husband, Sheriff.”

I look at her thin frame. If she’s pregnant and Beck left months ago, she either lost the baby, aborted it, or was mistaken. A quick glance around the room shows no baby toys or blankets. “I assume you’re no longer pregnant?”

Another tear dribbles down the other cheek. She reaches for a tissue from a box on an end table this time. “I aborted. I couldn’t live with what I’d done. Jalen never knew I was pregnant. I couldn’t do that to him. Fuck, can you imagine if it came out looking like his work colleague? How would I explain it? I also couldn’t risk it if he got suspicious and asked for a DNA test.”

I tap a few things on my phone. I have more questions, but she’s getting upset. I’m not sure how much more time I have with her before she’s a blubbing mess. “Did he seem upset when he left? Like he was upset about the baby?”

Her lips twitches like she wants to spill something important, but she takes a deep breath. “He wasn’t happy.”

“I don’t suppose he mentioned where he was going?”

“No, sir.” It’s stiff. Her voice straightens where it trembled before. A lie? Just reiterating that she can’t help? It’s hard to tell with her.

“Mrs. Quarry, I know I’ve upset you today, but I need to talk about something with you. Beck Lenin’s wife has accused Beck of abuse. Do you know anything about that?”

She bites her bottom lip to keep it from trembling, and a line of clear fluid drips from her nose. “He was a cruel man,” she says before bending into a crouch position and



pulling the collar of her t-shirt over her face.

I'm out of my seat and sitting on the couch with her in a few short seconds, and she allows me to get close, obviously convinced I won't hurt her now. I rub her back in small circles like I've seen some of the female officers do for women down at the station. I'm unsure if I should be touching her, but she obviously needs comfort. I can't just sit there as she sobs.

"Did he hurt you, Ellen?"

She doesn't answer, but her head nods from the spot between her knees. She doesn't volunteer information or push my hand away, so I pat her, waiting to see if she'll talk more. For now, I let her cry.

We sit there for minutes as sounds of life go on outside. The block is tightly packed together, and sound carries from the intersection a few houses down. Loud trucks and motorcycles go by, gunning their engines. Somewhere a few houses down, what sounds like a UPS truck stops. A group of kids play on a porch at a neighbor's house, and the silence is interspersed with shrieks. City living is loud, and it's impossible not to know your neighbor's business here. Hell, Beck and Ellen must have met in a hotel to avoid everyone knowing.

Eventually, she raises her head and accepts another tissue from me. "It's OK if you don't want to tell me about it, but I'm listening if you do. He's no friend of mine."

She wads the tissue in her hand. "It started with a slap on my hands when I grabbed his hand in public. I didn't think anything about it at first. I thought he was joking since it was such a weird thing to do. I passed it off as him not wanting someone to see us holding hands and it getting back to Lucy. The next time it was a shove. Not too rough. Just enough to stumble into the wall. I guess I should have walked away then. Maybe he would have understood I wouldn't put up with it."

“Did he hit you?”

She takes a deep breath. “Lucy had him riled up about something. He took it out on me. Slapped me so hard I had to tell Jalen I ran into a door.”

“Punching or kicking?”

She ignores the question, and her eyes darken. I’ll take that as a yes, but she doesn’t say yes or no. She stares out her picture window like she’s just noticed it’s daytime and a beautiful day. Like she wants to go outside and play in the sun now that she got this off her chest. “Do you know where he is, Officer Dwyer?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Do you think you’ll ever find him?”

“I hope so.”

She doesn’t respond. Something about her expression, the side eye she gives me, tells me I’ll get no more from her today. My phone vibrates with Coleson’s number again, and I reject the call, muttering a cuss word under my breath.

“Officer Dwyer, I need to do some work before my husband gets home. I also need to calm down. I haven’t been sleeping well or eating much since all of this happened. Work has been the only thing that keeps me sane these last few months.”

“Of course,” I say, pulling my card out of my other pants pocket and handing it to her. “If you don’t mind me asking, what is it you do for work?”

Ellen rises from the couch, and I follow. She grabs the crumpled tissues and the teacup before facing me. “My grandfather died last year and left me a campground.

RV hookups. Tent spots in the summer. It doesn't get traffic this time of year, but I have maintenance we do in the winter. I arrange work orders and take reservations for the summer. Planning music festivals and routine landscaping keeps me busy."

"That sounds interesting. Is it possible Beck Lenin knew about it and is hiding there?"

Ellen snort laughs, and it's a foreign sound to me. She's only cried since I've been here. "Hell, no. I have a ranger that checks things every few days. He'd tell me if someone was squatting on the land. I wouldn't let him stay on my property."

That kind of breakup, huh?

"I'll leave you to it," I say just as another call from Mitchell comes across my screen. For fuck's sake. "Excuse me, it's work," I say, holding up a finger to Ellen.

Walking over to a corner of her living room, Ellen moves back like she doesn't want to intrude on my conversation in her own house and pulls her sweater tight over her chest.

"What is the problem, Mitchell?" I bark as soon as the call is connected. "I told you I had personal business to take care of and not to bother me unless you had another dead body for me to look at."

Mitchell pauses so long that I think he hung up. When he does speak, the younger man's voice cracks. "Well, uh, that's the thing, sir. We found another body. Coleson's on the scene and asking for you. You need to come in."

## Page 12

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### Chapter 12

Lucy

“You’re late, doll. You OK? I was about to send the police to your house,” Peter says, his feet still propped on his desk. He obviously wasn’t that concerned if he’s lounging around like he’s on a beach with a beer on a Tuesday afternoon.

“Sorry. I lost track of time. Lots to do that doesn’t involve pasties or a pole.” I plop in the rickety chair across from his desk. “You can dock me.”

Peter finally puts his feet down and leans forward, peering at me over the old garage sale desk he bought for his office when he started the club. Fast food wrappers litter his desk, and the smell of fry oil hangs in the air. My stomach growls since I didn’t have time for breakfast or lunch. I usually try to eat healthy, but I grab the brown bag in front of me, hopeful there are fries at the bottom.

I find a cheeseburger at the bottom of the sack. Peter must be saving it for later, but he raises an eyebrow and then nods, a silent invitation to it.

He may be a greasy pig on the outside, complete with slicked-back hair, unbuttoned shirt, and pinky ring, but he looks out for his family. Peter watches as I unwrap the burger and bite into it, practically swooning even though it’s cold.

“What’s going on with you and the sheriff?”

I practically choke on my bite, and I beat on my chest until the bite goes down. Peter

hands me a small plastic water bottle from under his desk. “Nothing. Why do you ask?”

“Don’t piss on me and tell me it’s raining. I know you dated him in high school. Brought the bastard around and showed him off at every family event. Your prom picture with the guy sat on Mom’s mantle. You act like I’ve never seen him before.”

“He’s a friend,” I say, the words coming out like a mumble around the food.

“We thought he would be the one you married.”

“It should have been him. All along...it should have been him,” I admit. “Why are you curious? He nosing around when I’m not here?”

“Nah,” Peter says, waving his hand. “He only comes when you’re here, and don’t act like I don’t know there’s more than dancing going on in that VIP room with him. It’s why I asked if you were together. If anything, I was kind of hoping he’d be around more.”

Interesting.

“Why?” I ask, tilting my head. Peter runs a tight ship but I’m surprised he wants the fuzz breathing down his neck.

Peter winks. “Come on, Lucy. You think I don’t know drugs are coming through here?”

“If you know, why don’t you stop it?”

“Murphy Beckett. Enough said. Not sure if a guy like me has the clout to stop him from doing something he really wants to do.”

My dander goes up, and I set the burger down on its wrapper, suddenly not hungry. “Has he been threatening you?” Peter looks at me a moment, blinks, and then looks at the floor. “Never mind. I’ll take that as a yes.”

“I wouldn’t say threatening.” He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “He came in here yesterday and wanted to talk to Sheri. Said she was doing him a favor and to make sure she got access to a lot of VIP clients. Wanted her on the schedule more.”

“Sounds like Sheri may be in on the drug smuggling. Is she being threatened, though?” I ask.

He shrugs and leans back until his chair squeaks. “Fuck if I know, but I value my dick and like it attached to my body. I also don’t want any of my girls hurt. This place ain’t much, but it’s mine. Think you can talk to Sheri to see if he’s working her over or has something on her?”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“Do people tell their boss what’s going on as much as their coworkers? Besides, she doesn’t know you’re my cousin. I haven’t told anyone. Did you?”

“Come on, Peter,” I say, wadding up the cheeseburger wrapper with what’s left of the meal and tossing it into the bag. “You know I don’t claim to even know you half the time.”

“She’s more likely to talk to you.”

“Fine, dickhead.”

“There’s the girl I used to play Scooby Doo with,” he chuckles, putting his hands behind his head and kicking his feet on his desk. “I just want a clean operation here. I

mean...as clean as a strip club can be. I don't need the feds busting me for some drug bullshit. I certainly don't need trafficking through here. I thought you could talk to Sheri and then see if that boyfriend of yours could come around more often. It may keep the girls and Murphy in line. It won't hurt to have it known there's a uniform here."

"He's not my boyfriend," I say, wiping my greasy hands on my cutoff shorts. It doesn't matter if there's grease on my hands. The dark denim is old and stained now anyway. I eye the brown bag I just discarded and think about covering my lap so Peter won't know how stained my pants are. I need to just throw these things away and buy something new, but dollar signs dance in front of my eyes.

"Sure, Lucy. I'll believe that when he doesn't come around with a lovesick look anymore."

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I set my stuff on my vanity backstage and look around the dressing area. Nobody ever messes with me back here. I don't talk to anyone, though. That's always been who I am. I always kept to myself at work when I had a job in high school. I didn't want to be involved in work drama, even back then.

But maybe I should start talking to people. Asking around. Be friendly. I should get to the bottom of what Murphy has going around here once and for all.

I smile a cheesy smile at my reflection in the mirror and then slouch in my seat. My blush brush rolls across the wooden vanity and falls to the floor. I don't pick it up. Who am I kidding? I've been a quiet mouse with the other girls since I started here. I get in, get my makeup and heels on, dance, and go the fuck home. They won't buy a fake smile and a kind word from me. Not after months of radio silence.

It's still worth a try.

Two women I work with come in the back door and let it bang loudly against the wall. They scurry in with their own bags of food and large gas station drinks that I'm pretty sure aren't soda if the smell of vodka wafting out of them most days is any clue.

Some of us need a little help getting through this job. I don't judge.

"Hello," I say, and they look at each other slowly and then back to me. Yep. They definitely think I'm the antisocial freak of the club.

"Um, hi."

"Janice, right?" I ask the friendlier one. Her hair is sprayed so high that it reminds me of eighties hair. Dark eyeliner lines her eyes, and I wonder what she looks like without a fortress of makeup and regular hair.

"Coral for the stage," she replies.

"Right. Sorry."

"Why are you talking to us? Aren't you a narc?" the other stripper asks. I think her real name is Cheryl, but she goes by Bang on the stage. Like the guys will believe that's her real name. Her bright red hair is in pigtails, and she pulls her yoga pants off to step into her dance clothes for the evening. She kicks off her Pumas and sighs a little as she fishes her heels out of her duffle bag.

"A narc? Is that what you think of me?"

"Your boyfriend's the sheriff," Coral says.



“Why does everyone think he’s my boyfriend?”

“Oh, honey, you’ve been doing this for three or four months, right?” I nod. “We’ve been here four times that. We know the look of the men that come in here and watch their girl dance. There’s a look, and that man has it for you, doll.”

“A look? You think he’s my boyfriend because of the way he looks at me?”

“Boyfriend. Husband. Who cares? I don’t know how you’re involved, but that man is in love with you. He watches some of the other girls on the pole while he’s working up the nerve to talk to you. His eyes rain hellfire when he comes in and you’re dancing for another man. That hot sheriff squeezes his glass so hard when you dance for another guy, I think the glass will shatter. We’re lucky to get a glance. He only has eyes for you. Now you’re going to pretend he’s not yours?”

I know Aaron still has feelings for me, but hearing other people describe it is surreal. They see. They hear. Something about that makes it more real. My heart flutters, and I’m not sure if it’s nerves or because even my organs want Aaron Dwyer.

Holy shit. I want Aaron Dwyer. I’ve wanted that man since I was fifteen. I wanted to hold him at the class reunion. I want to hold him now. If I didn’t feel so damn unworthy of a great man like him, I’d flip off my heels and head over there now.

I shake my head. “It’s not like that. It’s complicated. Have you seen Sheri around?”

“Nah. Haven’t seen her. She’s working tonight,” Cheryl says. I refuse to call her Bang. “Why?”

“Just wondering if she’s OK. I saw that creeper guy sniffing around her on my last shift. She looked scared.” I’m totally making up bullshit and fiddle with my lipstick in my mirror so I don’t meet their eyes.

“Are you talking about Murphy?” Cheryl asks, earning a nudge in the ribs from Coral.

Bingo. Obviously, Coral doesn’t want Cheryl talking about Murphy.

I clear my throat. “I know Murphy’s running drugs through here.”

“Total narc,” Cheryl whispers to Coral.

I set my lipstick down a little harder than necessary. This is backstage at a strip club. Going for most friendly can only get me so far. These women are hard, often traumatized people that can smell bullshit a mile away and have very little loyalty to people that aren’t family or close friends they trust.

“You know what? You’re right.”

Both ladies stiffen.

“I’m not a narc, but Murphy burns my balls when he comes in. It pisses me off. Don’t think I don’t know he makes ya’ll suck his dick without paying. I’ve seen him push Candy up against the wall and whisper something that made her lip tremble, but excuse the fuck out of me for being concerned. I also don’t want him to pull that shit on me. So sorry to have asked for info. But I guess you want to take his shit, huh? Well, good for you, but I’m not going to do it.”

Cheryl gives Coral a pleading look, and Coral shakes her head. “Nuh-uh,” Coral practically grunts. “I’m not doing this. Too much at stake.”

Once Coral stomps off to the bathroom, Cheryl stands in place, shuffling her feet and looking at the floor. “I don’t want to get hurt. We’re all just scared.”

“Me too,” I admit. “There seems to be a lot of guys around here that think they can do whatever they want to women and girls, and they use us for more than a good time.”

“Murphy makes me sell drugs. Well, I don’t sell them. I just hand them off and collect the money.”

“Does he cut you on the profit?”

She shakes her head, and her pigtails swing against her face. “He says that my payment is living in peace because he can make it so that I have a rough time.”

“What kind of rough time?”

She shrugs and sits at her own vanity seat. She stares at herself in the mirror for a bit but doesn’t pick up her makeup or hairbrush. “He says he knows my landlord and can get me evicted. Says he knows people that can hurt my kids. I have twin boys. Third grade.”

My stomach rolls. I dislike men who threaten women, but I despise them if they threaten kids. “What specifically?”

“He says he’ll take my kids from the bus stop and find a buyer for them. He says twins turn a pretty penny.” She turns to me, her eyes desperate. “Don’t tell anyone. Please. I just, well, I just want it to stop. I want my damn kids safe. So I push his stuff. I slip buyers the package and then collect the money for Murphy. I swear to God I don’t do it to hurt people. I just don’t want to be hurt. If I tell Peter, Murphy will hurt my kids, and I’ll be out of a place to live. Who would believe me if I tell the police or ask for help? I’m a stripper.”

With what’s going on, I know for a fact that the county sheriff would believe every word she said, but it’s hard to reason with a cornered and threatened person who

probably grew up distrusting authority.

She finally reaches for lipstick, opens it, and then sets it back down. Her hands shake so hard that she can't put it on without smearing it everywhere.

"Is Sheri into this too? Is she being threatened?"

Cheryl's eyes meet mine in the mirror. "I won't rat out another woman, especially if she has kids, but I've seen the way he treats her."

"Like what?"

"Worse than what I get. He forced her one night."

"Sex?" I ask.

She nods. "I heard her crying the whole time, and he slapped her around pretty good for making noise. He must have good dirt on her because, even after that, she runs drugs for him and has to give him some of her tips. So far, he hasn't asked for my tips."

"He's pimping her and running drugs. Has she been his all along? Is he putting women to work selling sex and has moved to strip clubs? It'd be a good way to leech off tips."

"I don't know. But if it comes to that, I'll run. Grab the kids and disappear someday. I know she has a kid. Toddler girl. Sheri's elderly mother watches her while she works, so an elderly mother is a liability, too. I'm sure Murphy has everyone threatened all the way around."

### Chapter 13

Aaron

“Let me guess. This guy’s a piece of shit.”

“Nailed it in one,” Coleson replies.

I wave at Mitchell behind me before he can walk into the room and fuck anything up. Mitchell is my deputy, but he’s still young and green and has never been on a murder site before. “Stay here and keep the press out if they show up.”

He nods, his lips pale around the edges. He doesn’t want to come in. There’s no smell since the body is fresh, but I can tell he doesn’t want to come into the room in the off chance it’s messy. Blood splatter isn’t for everyone. Hell, it’s why I ran for sheriff and not detective. I’m just the guy that comes in for the update and brainstorming.

Coleson waves me through to the back porch where the dead man lies in a puddle of blood. “Todd Daniels. Age thirty-eight. Found by his sister when he didn’t pick her up for a doctor’s appointment he was supposed to drive her to. She got an Uber and came over to check on him.”

“I thought you said he was a piece of shit. A shitty person doesn’t drive their sister to the doctor.”

“Yeah, well a good person doesn’t have a list of hookers taped to his refrigerator. So here we are.”

“Hookers again. Why are all murder victims into hookers? It’s not even the hookers that kill them most of the time.”

“It’s the type,” Coleson says, nodding sagely. “They make poor life choices, in general. That’s why they get killed.”

I snap on an offered glove. “How’d this one die?” I ask, bending down but not touching the victim. I try to look under his neck to see if his throat was slit. There’s a lot of blood, though. This one wasn’t blunt force to the back of the head.

“Screwdriver up through the bottom of his chin.”

“Ouch.”

“At least we think it was a screwdriver. Forensics says it looks like the perfect size and shape for a flathead. No murder weapon that we can find.”

“Footprints?”

“We swept it. Nothing at all, and what we do find is oddly shaped. It’s like the person doesn’t wear normal shoes.”

“Like space shoes?” I chuckle at my own stupid joke.

Coleson shrugs and smirks. “Or just someone that knows how to cover the tracks.”

Someone smart and knows how to cover up a crime scene. “Any ties to Murphy Beckett?”

“Ah,” Coleson points to the ceiling like he has a great idea. He shifts his always-present toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “As a matter of fact, guess what club

this guy is a member of?"

"Is there a motorcycle in the garage?"

"Ding, ding, ding!"

"Any payments or business ties?"

"Nope. Just the club membership card in his wallet. Oh yeah, wallet is intact and not taken. There's no cash in it, but I don't know if the killer took anything. It looked like it wasn't touched. It would be smart not to touch it. The more a perp handles things, the more opportunity to leave skin or prints behind." Coleson sniffs and puts his hands on his hips. "I think Daniels and Hammons are related, and I'll treat them as such. Cannon doesn't fit, though. Cannon was just bizarre that he was tortured and cut up while the others weren't. Different dirty work people but maybe the same orders from Murphy Beckett?"

"Possibly?" I look around the room, thinking and gnawing at my lip.

Two men were hastily murdered in the last few weeks. Someone took their time with George Cannon. What Ellen said about Beck Lenin comes to mind. He was violent with Lucy and got rough with the petite Ellen. Something scratches at my brain, but I can't nail it down.

"There's good news, though," Coleson says from behind me.

"The killer left a signed confession so that I don't have to make an ass of myself by telling the press we have three murdered men in a few weeks and absolutely nothing to go on?"

He holds up a baggie with a hair in it. "Found this in the living room. It's definitely

not the victim's."

I look away from it and back to the dead man on the floor. "One lone hair? After all of these forensics on all these crime scenes? No viable footprints. No fingerprints. Nobody saw anything unusual. No suspects we can pair with the fibers we do manage to find. No DNA with a system match yet." I blow out a breath and stand, snapping off the gloves as I walk to the kitchen. "And this hair was in the living room and not even on the back porch area where he was killed? Are we checking it out and running the DNA through the system?"

"Yep. Bartlett from forensics says she can have results to us by later tonight if the person is in the system. If it belongs to the one of millions of hookers that come to the house, we'll be able to narrow it down if we've ever arrested the person. At least we can ask some questions."

I laugh sarcastically and shake my head. Coleson frowns. "You don't like this theory?" he asks.

"Did the neighbors say there are lots of women through here?" Coleson silently nods. He looks down because he knows what I'm going to say next. "It doesn't feel like a woman. It feels like a man who is angry, has a small dick, and is pissed off about something. The guy had hookers in his house all the time, and he wasn't exactly a housekeeper," I say, waving my hand around the kitchen and the old pizza boxes and overflowing trash. "I'm actually surprised we only found one single hair that didn't belong to the victim."

"We also found a pair of panties. We sent them for evaluation, but they were, well, they were kind of crusty and hidden under his bed, so I don't think they were from today."

"Any porch cameras nearby?"



“A few with nothing unusual around the time it happened. I say nothing unusual because most of the neighbors have the sensors set to only pick up something when it comes on their own property. One is set to pick up outside their own yard, but there’s a bush blocking the view.”

“Jesus Christ. We have nothing. It’s like an angel of the Lord just swoops into the houses and kills these pieces of shit like a vigilante of the Chicago suburbs.” I pause and brace my hands on Todd Daniel’s kitchen counter. I have half a mind to open the fridge to see if he has any beer or something harder. “How much do we even care?”

“Honestly, not as much as if it was happening to decent people, but I still don’t want a killer on the street, and I don’t want you to look like an asshole on primetime television.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

“Besides, if we can tie him to Murphy and get a warrant, that’s solving a whole other bag of dicks.”

Coleson and I stand in a dead man’s kitchen in silence, fuming at our own ineffectiveness as Mitchell comes around the corner. “Detective Coleson, I’m sorry to bother you, but the coroner’s here for the body.”

My eye catches a stack of takeout menus and odds and ends on the counter, and I rifle through them as the coroner troops in with his team and greets Coleson. I block out their conversation as I go through the stack, mildly curious what the man orders for takeout, until I find a half page of paper torn off from a yellow legal pad. The paper is stuffed in between a Chinese takeout menu and a bank statement, and I recognize it as an address on Stone Street. I squint at it and shake my head a little like I’ve been punched. I know that address, but it rattles around in my head for a moment before I can place it. When I do place it, I practically vomit.

It's Lucy's.

### Chapter 14

Lucy

The nightmare is usually the same.

Beck comes home from a trip, usually smelling like cheap whores who wear even cheaper perfume. I'm in the kitchen with the requested smile on my face and pretending not to notice my husband got laid while he was away. He'd always say, "Lucy, I don't want to see your hangdog face. I want pleasant. No man wants to see a woman's problems. You're my wife and exist for my pleasure. Fucking smile." Then, he'd pinch my cheeks and force me to smile until I got it right. Many times, he'd force me to smile while he beat me and wouldn't stop until he was satisfied with the look on my face.

I purposely frowned for days after he was gone. Funny movie? I frowned through it. A child telling a joke in line at the grocery store? The kid probably thought I was an asshole. My mouth felt free for the first time in years. I could frown, zone out, or even scowl without caring about getting a swift kick to the ribs.

Over and over, I dream about that asshole, and I pray for the day it'll stop.

One night sticks out in my mind the most, and my subconscious always toys with me. It was after a work party. I knew he and Ellen Quarry were in the coat room fucking around, and I had nothing to do but drink while they did it. I must have had too much to drink because I asked him about it on the ride home. I never would have done that sober.

He smiled like he did when he was dangerous, but I was emboldened that night. Maybe I was mad about being cheated on. Maybe it was because it was so...public. I never hit him unless it was in self-defense. Even then, it was usually me raising my arms to protect myself and accidentally clipping him in the process. But I slapped him that night. He was driving, and I slapped him as hard as I slapped Aaron last week.

That was the night he pulled the car over, dragged me out of the car by my hair so hard that a large clump came out, and beat me until I was unconscious at the side of the road. After he beat me, he sodomized me. When I woke up, hurting in my most intimate places, he was sitting in the car like nothing had happened. He'd gone to get tacos, and he came back to watch for when I woke up. I often wonder what he thought he was going to do if I hadn't regained consciousness. Bury me right there?

When I came to, my ass was sore like I had been torn. I remember blood streaks dried in rivulets down my legs. He must have had a hard go at me. The blood was either from the brutal sexual assault or the blood from my broken nose ran all the way down to my legs.

I was in the middle of nowhere, so I had no other choice but to hobble to the car, get in, and let him move the hair back from my face. "There, there," he said. "That's a good wife. And you'll be a better wife now, won't you?"

Silence.

A slap hard across the face. So hard that my head hit the passenger window. I remember nodding in agreement. He just wadded up his taco wrapper, started the car, and drove home.

I didn't sleep the rest of that night, mostly because of the pain, but I didn't dare make a sound as he slept like a baby next to me. Not a whimper. Not a moan. I knew he'd

be angry if I woke him. When he left for work the next day, I went to urgent care and told them I had a terrible fall at home. Was my husband home? They asked the question, and I told them he wasn't, the lie dripping easily off my tongue. It was the only time I could lie with a straight face. Mostly because I knew what would happen to me if I didn't. He was at work when I fell, of course. I always made him out to be a good husband when I went to the doctor. I was just clumsy.

A cracked rib, a nose that had to be reset, two black eyes from either the beating or the broken nose, a sprained wrist, and two chipped teeth on my left side, to say nothing of the bruises all over my body. Surely, they knew. If the beatings weren't a sign, the small bald spot at the back of my head should have been a clue.

But nobody helped me.

Not one fucking person.

When the nightmares come about that night, my subconscious shows me what my conscious missed while I was out. Beck calling me every name in the book as he pushed into me, my dress up to my waist and ruined in the ditch water. I was bent over, my mouth full of grass clippings, weeds, and dirt, and barely able to breathe.

Sometimes, while I was getting the worst of a beating, I fantasized about a hero coming to save me. Most of the time, it was Aaron who drove up in my fantasy, tapped Beck on the shoulder, and punched him out cold.

But that didn't happen. As much as I wanted Aaron to come almost every time I was getting beat on and as much as I tried to fix my eyes to silently ask him for help at the class reunion, I knew he wouldn't. He couldn't. His eyes barely met mine that night. Cynthia was his date. I ran into her in the bathroom, and she was nice to me with the few words she said. Of course, she was. She was nice and quick with a smile for everyone, even her husband's ex-girlfriend. She complimented my dress. Aaron

deserved her. Out of respect for his wife, he didn't dawdle while politely speaking to me at the bar.

If he would have looked harder – closer – I know he would have seen my plea for help.

I needed a hero. My heart ached for one, but I was alone to solve my problem. I've always been so alone. Powerless.

I wake up in a cold sweat, the blurry memory of Beck on top of me still in my mind, and I grasp at my throat. I swear I can still feel his hands there, and I can still smell him. His laughter echoes through my ears, and I reach for my bedside lamp, quickly turning it on to chase the shadows away.

He's not here. He can't hurt me.

I need to talk to someone. Something. Why don't I have a cat or a goldfish? I wish for something I can talk to just to hear a sound beside Beck's maniacal laughter rolling through my brain.

Picking up my phone, my fingers dance over the screen. Who would I even call to talk me through this? Who understands enough to talk me down and tell me everything is OK? Peter? He'd listen, but it's awfully personal. He knows Beck beat me, but he doesn't know the details, and he doesn't know I have nightmares. I need comfort.

There's only one person I could call. I could message him through Facebook or call through there, but he gave me his number on a club napkin after I moved back to town. I remember stuffing it into my bra, thinking I'd only message him through social media if I wanted to say hello.

But I entered his number into my phone as soon as I retrieved it backstage.

Thoughts of the last time I saw him nearly make me pause the process of entering his number. Him pulling his pants up. Jason with a mouthful of Aaron's cum. We haven't spoken. What makes me think he'll take my call in the middle of the night? Will he yell at me for waking his girls? Tell me off for putting him in the position of fucking a man's ass now that he's had time to really think about it?

"Dwyer," he says, answering in a professional tone. He sounds like he hasn't gone to bed. I look at the clock and notice it's three in the morning. Is he working? "Hello?" he asks again.

"Aaron?"

He sighs on the other end of the line, but it's not a sigh of annoyance. It's...relief. "Lucy?"

"You know my voice that well?" I chuckle.

"I'd know your voice anywhere. We talked until midnight every night as teens. Are you safe?"

I scowl at the phone. "Why wouldn't I be safe?"

He ignores the question. "I'm actually glad you called because I need you to open your door."

"My door?" I ask, moving to my window and parting the blinds just as a car swings onto my street and kills the headlights. "I just called you twenty seconds ago. Is that you pulling into my driveway?"

“I was on my way over as soon as I got done sorting some work stuff and taking my daughters to Cynthia’s mom’s house. Open your door for me.”

I don’t cover myself. Aaron’s seen everything. I head down the stairs in the dark, fumbling for the railing as I walk toward the door in a pair of purple granny panties and a country concert shirt from five years ago. I fling open the door, and he’s on me.

I’m in his arms before I can focus on his face. Normally, I’d push back against him, but I don’t this time. Maybe it was the bad dream, but something tells me he needs just as much comfort right now.

He kicks my door closed and turns the deadbolt on the door before picking me up, pulling my legs around his waist, and slinking to the floor right there on my entryway tile. He grips me tight like I was a girl who was lost in the store and was finally found by her parent, his hand firm at my back.

I have no idea what got into him, but I’m here for it. He’s warm. He’s like a weighted blanket during a thunderstorm. We sit like that in my entryway for minutes, my face buried in his neck as he strokes my hair and my back, whispering words I never thought I’d hear again.

“I love you, Lucy,” he whispers.

I’m safe, and I’m loved. With him, I don’t have to worry about being abused. Aaron would never hurt me the way Beck did. He’s my hero, and he always will be.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers.

I pull away from his neck and move my forehead to his jaw. The heat of his skin on mine is like coming home from college and your mom having a grilled cheese sandwich ready for you.



Home.

“Sorry for what?” I ask.

“What happened at the club. That wasn’t me. It wasn’t...us. I was angry at you because I don’t understand why you push me away all the time. I wanted to be with you any way that I could be with you. I lost my mind in that moment, and I’m so ashamed of how I treated you. How I’ve treated you since you moved back. You don’t owe me anything, and you sure don’t owe me any part of your body. I’m ashamed I didn’t knock Beck out when I had the chance. I’m ashamed that I didn’t go to Chicago and help you. Even if you pushed me away and we hadn’t talked for almost a decade, I should have seen. Even if my wife had never died, I should have checked on you after I saw the bruise on your back at the reunion. I should have helped you. I’ve always loved you, and I want you safe.”

I move my face an inch up his jaw, and he cups my cheek. We sit nose-to-nose for a moment, our breathing heavy, until he moves his lips to mine.

And I let him. For the first time in over a decade, I kiss Aaron Dwyer.

His lips are familiar but also new. Stronger. More in control. I kissed this guy most of my high school existence, and I fall into the kiss like we didn’t miss a day. There was no Beck. There was no Cynthia, even though she was actually a good human who loved Aaron. There was no breakup in college that left me devastated and floundering enough to be easy prey for an abusive dickhead. It’s like we never parted. He still tastes the same, and he still moves his head at the same angle when he kisses. He still seeks with his tongue, never forcing. Only testing and tasting.

I wrap my arms around him, and my hand runs through his hair. It’s soft and comforting as I slide my fingers through it. His hands don’t roam my body, but they stay at my cheeks. This isn’t a kiss that’ll end in fucking. It’s not urgent or

disrespectful. This is a kiss that says I'm here now, and I'll be here as long as you let me.

When we break apart, he inhales. "Baby, I need you to pack a bag and come with me."

I scowl and pull away. Well, I move as far as you can pull away when you're straddling a man in your entryway. "What? Why?"

"Another man was killed today. When we searched the house, I found your address on his kitchen counter. You need to pack a bag and come home with me. You're not safe here."

I shake my head, and my stomach roils with nerves. "That's ridiculous. Why would my address be on his counter?" I think hard, but the nightmare from before and Aaron being here and kissing me...it all has my brain on overdrive and like I have too many tabs open. Was the guy planning on hurting me before he died?

"His name was Todd Daniels. Did you know him?"

I shake my head.

He pulls his phone out of his pants. "I have to show you another picture of a dead person. Are you ready?"

I look at the picture on the screen, not averting my eyes this time. The guy's dead, and he can't hurt me. This one isn't so messy, and he's not as decomposed. It's the decomposition I can't handle. "He's one of the guys that threatened me with the other mafia thugs."

That's all of them except for Geoffrey from the gala. George Cannon and two of the

men in my living room are dead. Relief floods through me as I realize Aaron is here, and Aaron will make sure Geoffrey doesn't hurt me.

I rest my head on Aaron's shoulder and then lift it immediately. "What about the girls? If someone is after me, you can't have me at home with the girls."

"The girls are at Cynthia's mother's house. They'll stay there for a few days to make sure nobody is desperate to hurt you. It'll give me a few days to sniff around. You need to pack a few bags, Lucy."

I get up from his lap, and my legs shake a little as I stand. Aaron reaches out and catches me while pulling himself up. Once I'm steady, we head up to my room in silence, and Aaron watches as I pack two rolling suitcases, throwing everything in without thought to season or practicality. Packing at three in the morning isn't exactly well thought out.

Aaron helps by finding a small cosmetics case and going into my attached bathroom and packing my toothbrush, toothpaste, basic makeup, and moisturizer. While he does that, I go down to my small desk and grab my important documents. May as well take those so nobody steals them.

Once we're all packed, we silently load the car. It's only when we're safe in Aaron's police cruiser and the sun is rising over the horizon that we speak, but it's only small talk until we reach his house.

I've never been to Aaron's house, but tears sting my eyes when I see it. It rises up from the perfect yard, a fortress of safety and normalcy in the middle of my life tornado. It's a two-story, modest colonial with a picket fence around the backyard. When I walk through the door, a golden retriever mix greets me at the door, wagging its tail and barking at Aaron to bend down and pet him. "This is Mickey," he says. "He's extra, but you'll learn to love him. You OK with dogs?"

I smile at the friendly animal. “I love dogs. My parents didn’t allow pets, and Beck hated them.” I look at the ceiling and think. “Probably because dogs could sense he was a shitty human.”

“Dogs are good that way. Mickey seems to like you, though.” The dog rolls over, begging for me to rub his belly, and I happily oblige. “You must be a good person.”

Aaron leads me upstairs to a guest room as Mickey tags along behind us, his head never far from Aaron’s palm. Aaron sets my things in a corner and looks around the room like he’s seeing it for the first time as Mickey jumps on the bed, making himself at home. I feel safer already.

I eye the bed and admire that Aaron’s guest bed looks more comfortable than my actual mattress at home. “Will you stay with me tonight?” I ask.

Aaron checks his watch. “Do you mean this morning?”

“You haven’t slept. Do you have to be at work soon?”

“Nine.”

I walk to the bed and pull down the sweatpants I hastily threw on before we left. Kicking them aside, I crawl into the cool sheets and rest my head on a pillow. “Just be here with me for a few minutes.”

Aaron silently kicks his shoes off and climbs under the covers. I curl into his chest as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me against him.

Maybe we’re just exhausted. Maybe we’ve missed this. Maybe the rhythm of Aaron’s heartbeat lulls me into a relaxed state. Whatever the reason, I fall asleep in Aaron Dwyer’s arms as he softly breathes against my hair in his own sleep.

### Chapter 15

Aaron

“Murphy Beckett is the common denominator, but we need something firmer than a membership card and a bank transaction,” I say, putting my feet on Coleson’s desk like it’s mine.

He doesn’t wave me away, but he looks at my shoes like they’re insects. I don’t move my feet, though. I’m so exhausted that I could close my eyes and be in dreamland in under a minute. Coleson must understand because he stands and walks to the small coffee maker in his office. He quickly fills the water and adds grounds.

“I’ve been through everything,” he says, going back to his desk and tapping his fingers as the smell of coffee fills the room. Just the smell perks me up a little. “I can’t make something appear from thin air.”

I crane my neck to look behind me where Mitchell sits in a folding chair against the wall. He looks as tired as I feel. Did he have a long night, too? He looks twitchy today, and it annoys me for some reason. Maybe it’s because I worked all day yesterday, packed up my children, drove two hours to Cynthia’s mother’s, drove back, and spent an hour of restless sleep with Lucy in my arms, but I want to punch Mitchell’s face. Does he really know worry and exhaustion?

I slept with Lucy in my arms for a good hour but woke when I heard something outside. It was probably the neighbor’s dog, but my protective instinct kicked in, and I pulled Lucy tighter to me. Then, I had other ideas. Filthy ideas. They kept me up

until it was time to get ready for work, needling me as she was so close to my body, but I couldn't do what I want with her. I can't remember the last time I had such a frustrating erection – probably when we dated before and were only at the hand job stage of our relationship.

“Any ideas from the peanut gallery?” I ask, directing my question to Mitchell. I wouldn't normally ask his opinion for shit, but I'm also out of ideas.

Mitchell bites his lip and looks out of Coleson's window. “Dunno, boss. Maybe it's easier than what we're making it out to be.”

I sit up in my seat, interested to hear what Mitchell is suggesting. Coleson hands me a mug of coffee. “What do you mean? This is a hard case.”

Mitchell takes a breath like he's going to recite a long Shakespearean monologue, and then promptly closes his mouth again. Is he afraid to voice his opinion at work? Does he know something about this case? Whatever it is, silence won't get you far in police work.

I take a drink of the bitter coffee and shake my head a bit to wake up. “Out with it. If you have an idea, you should share it, Deputy, or you'll never move up the ladder.”

“Yes, sir. It's just...have we looked at the club?”

“The club?”

“The strip club that, well, the one Lucy works at.”

I glare at Mitchell, and he practically shrinks into the wall. “Lucy has nothing to do with this investigation. She's told me Murphy runs drugs through there and threatens the women. What does that have to do with Todd Daniels? Murphy is her cousin by

marriage, and she stays far away. That's the extent of Lucy's involvement."

"Guys go to the club with friends sometimes. Has anyone at the club ever seen Murphy Beckett with guests?"

I glance at Coleson, and he raises his eyebrows. He likes the idea.

I turn back to Mitchell. "Strippers don't talk much. Lucy would have mentioned if he was there with people, though."

"She's not there all the time. I think Lucy works mostly day hours, right?"

The room goes quiet, and I lean forward in my chair, not blinking. "How the fuck do you know Lucy's work hours?"

If Mitchell wanted to blend into the wall before, he wants to sprint from the room now. His face reddens, and his eyes widen like a child that just got caught stealing bubblegum. "Um."

"Don't fucking 'um' me. Do you watch Lucy dance?"

"I, uh..." His voice trails away, and he pops his knuckles. "Sir, I didn't know it was your ex-girlfriend. I went there after work a few times. It was three in the afternoon. I put it together that she may not have the middle of the night hours."

"You've seen her dance? Did you put dollars in her string?" I ask, my voice shaking. "Fucking hell, please tell me you've never been in the VIP room."

"Don't answer that, Mitchell," Coleson interrupts.

"Who are you? His fucking lawyer?"

Coleson laughs and picks a stress ball up off his desk. “Nah. I’m just the guy not wanting workplace drama. We know she’s your girl now, Sheriff, but she’s a stripper. Men in this town have seen her body.” He looks over my shoulder and smiles at Mitchell. “You going to go watch your boss’s girl dance on a pole now that you know she’s your boss’s girl?”

“No, sir. Never.” Mitchell looks at the floor. “And I’ve never been to the VIP room. I swear to fucking God.”

“Let’s explore your idea,” Coleson says, taking control of the conversation. “Dwyer,” he says, snapping me out of thoughts of strangling Mitchell. “Let’s focus. Can we get video footage of Murphy with someone there?”

I shrug. “Maybe. I’ll talk to Peter.”

“Good. I don’t think it’s a bad idea since we have nothing else. If we can tie Murphy to Cannon, which we can through financial records, and to Todd Daniels with something besides a membership card, I think we have a chance at a warrant.”

I stand up and take my coffee mug with me. It’s the only thing keeping me moving right now. “I’ll talk to Peter and go through the tapes. I know Murphy Beckett and can easily identify him in grainy footage better than a rookie that’s never met him.”

“Sounds good. Let me know if you find anything.”

“It could take days. Literally.”

“Well, you’ll probably have to watch them at the club. At least you’ll be near Lucy while you do it.”

Perks.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 16

Lucy

“When are the girls coming back?” I ask in a quiet voice. “You can’t keep them away forever. They have school.”

I feel terrible that his girls aren’t home with him. I see him walk by their rooms at night and stop in their doorways, simply looking at the stuffed animals they left on their beds. He folds their laundry in the evenings, and I see the sad look as he bundles their paired socks into balls, probably wondering how much longer their feet will be that little. How much time is he wasting with his girls who lost so much already?

Because of me.

He’s keeping me at his house for my own safety.

And I’ve never felt safer. We haven’t slept in the same bed since that first night, but it’s not for lack of want. I want to curl into him. He just hasn’t been home much.

He’s exhausted, and dark circles hover under his eyes. He’s pale, and even a morning run the other day didn’t give him the energy I know he wants. Watching endless hours of tapes and looking for Murphy dirt has him tired and drained.

I see him in passing at night before he shuts the door to his room. I close the guest room door and let my fingers wander to my slit as I think about him. His fingers. His mouth. His cock. I’ve stood at my door with my hand on the knob more than once.

Should I tell him I had a bad dream and climb into his bed, only to slowly work my mouth down his body? He'd allow it. I know he would. But he doesn't pursue me himself.

Is he scared I'll say no again?

Because I wouldn't. Not this time. He's probably used to me pushing him away. I don't want to push him away anymore, but I don't know how to initiate a relationship with him again.

"I'm not bringing them home yet." Aaron straightens his tie in his bathroom mirror. He looks at me with kind but tired eyes in the reflection as I lean against the doorframe, my arms crossed over my chest. "They'll come back when it's safe. I'm going to keep all my women safe."

"Do you consider me your woman, Aaron?" I ask. My heart does a swoop, and I clutch my chest for a moment, hoping that Aaron Dwyer finally hasn't given me a heart attack.

He turns to face me with hooded eyes. "Let's get one thing straight, Lucy. I loved my wife. She gave me two beautiful daughters, and nothing will ever change how much respect, love, and appreciation I had for the time I had with her. But you've always been my woman, and I hope that someday, when this shit is all over, you'll look me in the eye and agree to be mine full-time. Not because I'm keeping you safe. Not because I'm hungry for affection and can pay you a Benjamin for it at a slimy club." He waves his fingers between us, and I don't look away. "This is us. It always has been. It always will be as far as I'm concerned, and you'll have to do more than get chased by some mafia guys to get rid of me a second time. I learned my lesson after the first stupid fuckup when I was a college kid. It's got to be harder than that."

I smile at him. It's a shit-eating grin. "You think this is easy? Nah. I just make it look

that way.”

He grins back, and it’s the first time I’ve seen his perfect teeth in days. Before I can help myself, I walk to him and push my face into his chest. My nose and lips press against his blue tie, and his hands slide through my hair. My legs nearly buckle at the proximity of him. The closeness.

But I’m in his arms. I won’t fall. Aaron would never let me get hurt.

“Let me come to the club with you to watch the video. We can look together, and you can nap on the couch in the security room while I look,” I suggest.

“It’s my job to find him. It’s your day off. Stay here and...do whatever you do on days off.”

“I have a vested interest in finding him. I can identify him. Let me help, Aaron. I can’t just stay in this house while you exhaust yourself for me. Let me help. The sooner you get a warrant for Murphy, the sooner your girls can get back to you.”

### Chapter 17

Aaron

“A aron, wake up,” Lucy says. Her voice is angelic and sounds far away. I don’t like leaving the dream I was having, and I come out of it like I’m coming out of anesthesia. I was out like a light, and I blink around at the sparse room, trying to remember where I am.

Maybe it’s because I fell asleep in the employee break room at the club where Lucy was rolling through security footage, and she was the last thing I saw when my eyes gave out. Maybe it’s because the entire room smells like the lotion I watched her rub on her arms before we left the house. Whatever the reason, I dreamt of her while I napped. I don’t know if it was sexual, but my face was in her hair.

I check my watch. “How long was I out?”

“Three hours.”

I groan. “Shit. You can’t do my job for me. Thanks for waking me up.”

She laughs and tightens her ponytail. “I would have let you sleep, but I found something.”

I straighten my shoulders and wipe my eyes, blinking again. “Did you see Todd Daniels with Murphy?” I ask. I stand, stretch my arms above my head, and walk to the small television where we’ve been watching grainy club footage. Lucy has the

screen paused, and I expect to see Todd Daniels.

“Will Justin Hammons do?”

I squint at the screen, and a chuckle starts low in my throat. Turning to Lucy, I wrap my arms around her and swing her around as she giggles, the sound ripping through me like a punch. I haven’t heard her giggle like a schoolgirl...well, since we were in school.

I set her down and wipe my eyes again, picking up my phone and dialing Coleson’s number. “This is even better than Todd Daniels.”

“Why?” Lucy asks.

I run my hands through my hair and lean forward again, kissing her on her cheek. “Murphy had ties through paperwork with George Cannon. Todd Daniels was a member of the motorcycle club. A third victim has now been filmed going to a strip club with Murphy. All three victims had ties. If this doesn’t get us a warrant to search Murphy’s house, I don’t know what will.”

I spin around in a circle, my hands on my hips. “Let’s celebrate.”

“Um, it’s four in the morning.”

“Is that why the club is so quiet? I could have sworn it was four in the evening.”

“No, we’ve been here for eighteen hours.”

“No wonder my eyes feel like they’re crossing. What’s open this time of night?”

“Nothing. Even the club is closed. Peter went home an hour ago. We’re only open

until three. He said we could stay as late as we wanted.” She bites her lip and tentatively reaches out a finger, touching my chest with only the nail. “Do you want a dance, Aaron?”

“A dance?”

“I was thinking the other day that I’ve never given you a proper dance.”

“Proper?” I ask, a small smile inching half my lips into a smirk.

“Nobody else around. No waitress asking if you want a shot while I dance. Just for you.”

She snakes her arms around my waist, and I bury my face in her hair. It’s familiar but also surreal since I was just dreaming of this. Was my dream a prophecy of sorts? My heart pounds in my chest, and I wonder if she can hear it or even feel it against her head.

“Let me dance for you, Aaron,” she whispers against my chest. “It’s what I can give you for helping me. Just us.”

I let her hand slide down my body until she winds her fingers with my own. I let her lead me out of the small room and down the hallway to the main floor where she pulls out a chair and gestures for me to sit at the edge of the stage. She leaves and goes to the DJ booth for a minute, and I watch her with hooded eyes as she flips through the music options, smiling when she settles on one.

“What do I get this dance to?” I ask in response to her smile.

“An oldie from a few years before our time. Ever hear of Samantha Fox?”

I nod my head. “My mother listened to it.”

“Do you know ‘Touch Me’ by chance?”

A small groan comes from my throat from the innuendo of the song name, and she bounds out of the DJ booth as soon as the first notes play, probably trying to reach the stage quickly to take advantage of as much of the song as possible. On her way to the stage, she drags her hand across my shoulder and kisses me on my temple.

I bite my lip as I watch her climb the stairs to the freshly-mopped platform and grab the pole with one hand as she circles it, preparing for a dance.

And she dances with abandon. She closes her eyes as she works the pole, doing the moves from memory. A full climb with a perfect and graceful martini spin back down, followed by a gyrating backward somersault before crawling on her knees back to the pole and doing another fancy spin.

This is just for me.

As Samantha Fox sings about feeling her heartbeat next to her lover’s, my own heart swoops in rhythm to whatever move Lucy does on the pole. When a note draws out for longer than a couple beats, she uses her core strength and flips herself upside down as she looks at me for the first time since the dance started.

Her strength is almost intimidating. She rights herself and does a few more climbs and spins, all done with such fluid precision that I wonder how long she spends practicing. When did she learn this skill? I’ve never thought of it before, but a lot of work goes into this preparation.

That hair. I can’t take my eyes off the auburn strands as it moves in time with her – fanning her shoulders when she’s upright, moving with her as she spins, and barely

whispering across the floor as she hangs upside down.

She slides down the pole and finishes with a backward roll until she crawls to me, her eyes black holes of want, as I wait patiently at the edge of the stage. My breath comes in short gasps, and I realize I'm panting for her. My shoulders tremble with desire and the urge to have her long legs thrown over them. Our eyes lock as she crawls like the animal I want to fuck her like, and she rears up on her knees, her breasts in my face.

The first rule of a strip club is that you don't touch a dancer in the main area. Not on the stage. Not during a lap dance.

But I touch her. Actually, I lick her. I lazily drag my tongue from under her breasts, over the fabric of her bra, and lick the top of her left tit as an unmasculine whimper comes from my chest. She gyrates and rubs my back, fisting my hair every few seconds as I give the same attention to the other side of her body.

She's done things to me in this club. I've watched her fuck another guy while I took his ass from behind in this club. This is the first time I've done anything to her body but kiss her since I was nineteen, and I want more. Need more. My hands circle her waist and push her back to the floor. Any non-dancer would fall ungracefully, but she's graceful as she simply bends back, pulls her legs out of the fall until they dangle over the stage, and pulls me by my hair as she leans back.

I'm half on the stage and half standing at the edge of it as I kiss her breasts, and her stomach until I can't stand it any longer. I stand, selfishly pull her hips to me, part her legs, and move the short shorts she's wearing to the side as I press my lips to her cunt like I'm a starving man.

Her taste overwhelms me. Did she notice my familiar taste when she sucked me off the first time I came here to see her? It's the first thing that crosses my mind. She still



tastes the same – slightly sweet with a savory undertone I could never place. The skin around her clit is salty, but her pussy tastes of something dessert-like. Eating Lucy is like bingeing on pretzels and then wanting something sweet to cut the salt.

Back and forth I move over her skin. I fuck her pussy with my tongue and then swipe up, circling her clit until she gasps and rocks into me. I'm driving her insane as I move away from her clit, desperate for another taste of every hole at her center.

“Fuck, Aaron,” she moans, fisting my hair and spreading her legs wider so I can lick, nip, and suck every inch of her core.

But I know how to really drive her nuts. I push two fingers into her pussy and make a come here motion that arches her back. I take her engorged, throbbing clit into my mouth. I flick my tongue over her as I suck, and the trifecta of sensations is too much for her.

Her legs clench my head, and if I wasn't so intent on getting her off, I'd giggle at her exuberance. Her legs shake against my ears as she bucks into my face, working my mouth without shame. She moans and her fingers either grip my hair or scrabble against the stage floor like she doesn't know what to do with them and what part of me to grab.

Eventually, she settles on fisting my shoulders and curling into an abdominal crunch as she squeezes her eyes shut and says my name over and over.

I know she squeezes her eyes closed because I watch every flicker of pleasure roll across her face. I watch every muscle twitch. I watch her bite her bottom lip so hard I worry it'll bleed. If it does, I'll lick that too. Wetness coats my tongue, and I lap it at it like a dehydrating man in a desert.

When she's spent, she flops back on the stage and loosens her leg grip around my

head. I don't stop licking her, though. I lick away every drop of wetness she released with her orgasm and give her clit one long lick before saying goodbye for the moment with a soft kiss.

I work my way up her stomach, moving her bra to the side as I kiss her nipples, and move to her collarbone. My lips find their way to her neck until I kiss her cheek and move so my mouth is next to her ear.

“Let's go home, Lucy. This time, you'll stay in my bed.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 18

Aaron

I 'm frantic for her and control my body as best I can, lest I come in my pants like a virgin. Laying her on the bed in my room, I bring her legs around my waist and take off my shirt, letting her run her hands up my body. Her fingers are soft against my skin, and there's nothing urgent about her touch. She's having fun.

When she reaches the small patch of hair at the center of my chest, she smiles and lightly tugs on it, combing it with her fingers. "This is new, and I've wanted to touch it since I caught a glimpse once at the club."

"My chest hair?" I ask, a cocky smile on my face as I look down at her in the moonlight.

"There are new things about you I want to know."

I cup her cheek. "What exactly do you want to know?"

"How you sound when you come inside me now." She leans up, planting a kiss on my chest right on top of the patch of hair. "I also need to know if Aaron Dwyer has some new moves."

I fist her hair and move her face so it's an inch from mine. "I have all kinds of new moves," I taunt and kiss her nose. "I'll show them to you one at a time."

She moves away from me and brings her finger to her shorts. Quickly pulling them down to her thighs, she slides her finger to her clit. “Challenge accepted.”

A growl comes from my throat, and I pull her shorts down the rest of her body in one movement, dragging the fabric down her legs and tossing the shorts over my shoulder before boxing her in with my arms. “Undo my belt.”

“You aren’t going to undress for me?” she asks, running her tongue up my cheek.

I turn my face and playfully nip at her mouth. “I want you to do it for me. I liked it when you did that for me in the club.”

Her hands come to my belt, undoing it quickly with an expert touch. When it’s undone and my pants are unzipped, she reaches around and cups both ass cheeks, squeezing like she’s been dying to feel them in her palms. I bite my lip at the pleasure of it – having her in my bed. My head spins at the idea of doing this privately in my room and not in the back room of a skeezy club.

Using a combination of hands and her feet, she pulls my pants all the way down, and I wriggle to help her get them off. My cock is already at attention for her, and I rear back on my knees as I slide a finger through her wetness. “Rub yourself here for me while I watch.”

I’m in charge. It’s obvious because she does what I ask without fuss or fight. My heart tightens at that knowledge because it can’t be easy for her to let me have control after being abused for so long. He took control. She lets me have it. She trusts me so much that a decade of abuse can’t destroy our trust in each other.

Lucy licks her finger before letting it travel back to her clit. She rubs a circle around the engorged bud, and I pull her feet to my chest. “Do you remember how I like this position? You pushing your feet against my chest and me taking my time and letting

you enjoy every inch of me?”

“Yes,” she whispers in a husky voice. “I remember. I never did that with anyone else but you.”

She means Beck, and I appreciate her not saying that fucker’s name while I make love to her. “I never did that with my wife either. I just...couldn’t. This was our thing.”

“Our thing?”

“Just for us.”

And it was. My mouth waters at the thought of getting it again. With her feet against my chest, I fucked her so deep with long strokes, her legs together as I held them. It was so tight. So wet around me.

“Our thing,” she whispers again like she’s trying the words in her mouth.

I wrap one arm around her thighs and put the other hand on her hip as I slide into her.

We both moan. It’s been so fucking long. Too long. Getting laid by Lucy is like walking into my own warm house after a long, cold day. Her eyes flutter closed and she whispers my name as I place a kiss on her ankle and pump into her, softly at first, then harder. I know she wants it harder by the desperate way she bucks against me.

A tear runs out of her eye and slides down her temple. I wipe it away. “Hey.” I smile at her and get further up on my knees, clenching my ass as I pound into her. “What’s that about?”

“I missed you.”

“Oh, fuck,” I groan, her fingers working her clit so expertly that she’s already tighter around me, her orgasm building in her core. “I missed this. Lucy. Fuck, baby. I love you so fucking much. Always have. Always will.”

Sweat drips from my face onto her legs as we rock into each other, the headboard hitting the wall. I’ll have to do something about that when the girls come back or we’ll keep them up all night. I plan to have Lucy in my bed every single night and don’t want little hands knocking on the door and wondering about the ruckus.

I lean forward and spread her legs, boxing her in with my arms again. “I never thought I’d be this close to you again,” I say. I press my forehead to hers as she bends up slightly and kisses me. I respond with kisses down her jaw and her neck. She wraps her legs around me and pulls me further into her with every thrust, so far that I’m afraid I’ll hurt her. “I feel so close to you, Lucy.”

This woman consumes me. She takes every inch.

“I love you, Aaron,” she whispers into my jaw as she shatters around my dick. Her body pulses, and I press down on her shoulders to keep her on the bed. Her back arches. Her ass clenches. Her legs squeeze my trunk with so much force, that I marvel at her strength. Nails scratch at my back, and they’ll sting tomorrow.

I keep her in place and continue giving her exactly what’s driving her orgasm. Once a lady starts to come, you up the ante and keep her coming. “I’ll do this to you over and over. I’ve got you here, and I’m going to do everything to keep you in my bed. You think this is the last orgasm I’ll give you, sweetheart?”

She squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head back and forth as I chuckle. Her toes curl into my ass cheeks, but I don’t stop. I can’t stop.

Once she stops trembling, she practically goes limp in my arms. Her arms wrap

around my back, a silent message encouraging me that it's my turn.

I fist her hair in my hand and cup her cheek. "I know it's hard, sweetheart, but I want you to open your eyes. Let me look at you when I fucking come," I growl. I sound like a damn animal. I can't control my voice, but I know she wants me to take control and tell her what to do. I know that with every fiber of my being.

Lucy tries, but I'm giving it to her so hard that her eyes flutter. She may not have another orgasm in her right now, but she's enjoying the fullness of me - the feel of having me inside her body once and for all.

I pound into her and focus on her eyes as the slightly embarrassing sound of our thighs slapping together fills the room. It's the universal sound of damn good fucking, and I kiss her nose, her lips, and her cheeks as I cuss and say her name, my climax building in my balls. "Fuck me. Wrap those beautiful legs around me and fuck the shit out of me, Lucy. Take what you want because I'm going to take whatever I want from you. All. The. Fucking. Time." I thrust into her with each word so hard that I know it'll hurt later.

She also knows I'll kiss it and make it feel better.

I grunt one last time as my cock twitches inside of her. My entire body relaxes into the orgasm as pulses of hot cum fill her cunt. Her lips are on mine as I sink into her body, not pulling out even as my dick softens from release. I'm safe and warm inside her. Connected.

She strokes my back with a lazy hand, and we stay like that for several minutes, just breathing in each other's scent, licking the sweat away from our respective necks, and reveling in the closeness we've missed for over a decade.

### Chapter 19

Lucy

I blink twice as the room comes into focus. Aaron's room. Aaron's bed. His left arm is heavy on top of my body, and I lift it a little, squirming to face him in spoon position, morning breath be damned.

I nestle my body into him, and he pulls me closer until his chest hair tickles my nose. The domestic bliss of his heartbeat and being this close to him brings a smile to my face, and my lips curve into a smile against his skin.

I've never had this before. I sure didn't have it with Beck. Aaron and I never cohabitated or had time to sleep like this when we dated. I was always rushing him out of the house before we were caught, or he had to sneak me out of his bedroom before his parents caught us.

It's good to wake up next to him and not hand him his underwear and watch him shimmy down my childhood home's drainpipe.

I ache that I've never had this before while he probably had this every morning with Cynthia. From what I saw on his social media and from what I've heard, she was kind and good to Aaron. She left behind two beautiful daughters and an amazing life. I should feel sorry for her. But part of me is jealous as fuck that she got to have Aaron as a husband first and give him his first children while I was beaten every day.

Flashes of waking up in bed with Beck the night after our marriage fill my mind, and



I grit my teeth. He slapped me for the first time on our wedding night, but at least he saved the part where he had his best man, Rick, come in and fuck me for the day after our wedding. While most brides wake up to a doting husband, I was awakened with Rick naked next to me after Beck let him in, mumbling something about a lost bet.

I said no over and over, but Beck held me down and didn't even comfort me after it was over. I remember him patting Rick on the back as Rick left the hotel room, treating me like I was just a piece of property that he lost at cards. As soon as the door shut behind Rick, Beck pulled me out of bed by my hair, dragged me across the floor, and told me to get dressed for breakfast and to look like a happy wife.

My heart pounds so hard at the memory that I glance at Aaron to see if the thunderous sound in my ears will wake him.

"What's on your mind?" he asks with a gravelly voice. He doesn't open his eyes, but he kisses the top of my head.

"Did I wake you?"

"I've been awake for twenty minutes. I just didn't want to disturb you because I kind of like this."

"Like what?" I ask, whispering.

He sighs, his entire body relaxing against mine like we're butter melting into each other. When have I ever felt this warm and loved? Childhood? I don't even remember feeling this cherished the last time Aaron and I dated. Then again, we were two stupid teenagers.

"I like waking up with you. I like the way your body feels against me. We should do it more often."

Most men would expect sex, touching, or a lazy morning blow job, but we just stay like this for minutes. Maybe hours. I lose track of time as my hands graze his skin. I drag my nails lightly over his shoulders and all the way down his back as he strokes my hair. He kisses the top of my head or my temple every minute or so, and I revel in the times he kisses my temple because I can enjoy his scratchy stubble against my face.

I must doze off because I wake to the sound of water running. A shower? I was so out of it that I have to think about where I am all over again. The smell of brewing coffee wafts from downstairs, and the familiar sound of Aaron whistling from his bathroom sets my heart pounding.

I have half a mind to join him, but he's out and halfway dressed by the time I stretch, roll my legs off the side of the bed, and do a cursory check of my email. I set the phone down as he opens the bathroom door.

"Breakfast?" he asks, smiling and wet from the shower. Drops of water roll down his chest, and I lick my lips. Talk about a thirst trap. "I have biscuits in the oven."

"That sounds amazing, Aaron."

As he throws on a dress shirt and tie, I throw an old t-shirt of his over my head and search the floor for my discarded panties from last night. The simple actions of getting ready in the morning touch my heart, and it's all I can do not to drag him back to bed or drop to my knees in front of him to wish him a good day.

When we're both presentable, we silently walk downstairs, and Aaron pours me a mug of coffee. Amazingly, he fixes it exactly how I drink it and hands it to me with a smile.

"Why are you being so good to me?" I ask. I really want to know. I'm not used to a

man treating me this well.

A dark cloud passes over his face like he's thinking about my shit stain ex-husband, but he quickly covers it with a naughty grin. "You know what you did to deserve this, Lucy."

"Was I that good last night?"

He smiles and leans forward, rubbing his nose against mine. "That and the fact that you're Lucy and have always deserved this. I hope I can make you believe that someday. You need serious deprogramming, baby."

I sip the bitter coffee and smile at him over the rim of my mug. "You have no idea." Aaron grabs an oven mitt and pulls the biscuits out of the oven while I take a few more gulps of the sinful drink. "Do you have to be at work soon?"

He grabs a spatula and two small plates. "In about thirty minutes. Just enough time to eat with my girl."

His girl.

He hands me a plate, and we walk to his eat-in breakfast area. I'm familiar with his kitchen since I've been here a week, but I still look around like it's my first time seeing it. A door leads to the back deck, but there are only windows at the very top of the door. It's obviously the kind of door a cop would have because it looks like it'd be impossible to break into by a simple rock to the windowpane.

The only window in the room is above the sink, and it's a small bay window with a few herbs in pots. Popsicle sticks with childish scrawl across the wood labels the plants as basil, thyme, and cilantro. Ruby's preschool drawings of her family and house cover the refrigerator, held in place by picture magnets with pictures of Mickey

in the clear frames. A door with a shiny old-fashioned knob separates the kitchen and the dining room, and a large butcher block island surrounded by stools is in the middle of the food prep area.

“What happens next with the Justin Hammons tape?” I ask.

Aaron swipes jelly on his biscuit and pops a piece in his mouth. He chews and swallows before answering, probably thinking. “I take the tape, the financial record of Murphy, and Todd Daniel’s motorcycle club membership card to the judge and apply for a warrant.”

“Will that take a long time?”

Aaron takes a sip of his own coffee. “The hard part will be scheduling to catch the judge. Judge Hossit, the judge that handles this stuff for me usually, has court in the mornings, so I’ll have to wait until the afternoon. After I get some time with him, it should go quick. I’ll spend the morning with Coleson and some other officers to work out how we’ll go in.”

“Sorry for being dumb about this stuff, but I only know what I know from TV. How do you go in?”

“We cover every entrance to the house, knock, and tell him to open the door.”

“What if he doesn’t? That sounds dangerous.”

“We have a warrant and announce that. Then, we go in any way we can get into the building.” He reaches across the table and grabs my hand. “It’s fine, Lucy. I do it all the time.”

“That’s what scares me about it.” I crack my knuckles and stare at my biscuit, which

suddenly seems unappetizing, even though it's the first meal a man has ever cooked for me. I should enjoy it, but thinking about Aaron in danger and going up against a possibly-armed Murphy makes my stomach turn. "Aren't you scared something could happen to you? I mean, with the girls being so young and your wife...well, dead?"

If Aaron's bothered by the mention of Cynthia, he doesn't show it. "I'm lucky in that way, I guess. People who don't have family would be in a shit pickle. If I didn't have Gayle, that's Cynthia's mother, a couple hours away, and if my own parents weren't in good health at a retirement community in Arizona, I'd be more worried. As it is, someone will be around to take care of the girls until they're eighteen. I've thought about it, and I've talked to all of them about it. They know I'm a cop."

The idea of those girls being orphaned or not having the chance to know what an amazing man their father is sends a chill up my spine. The need for those girls to have Aaron safe even outweighs my own need to have him in my life. I finally got him back. I don't like him going to Murphy's, and I grip my coffee mug so hard that my knuckles turn white.

"Will you text me when you're on your way there and again when you're OK? I'll worry about you."

He runs his hand down his tie and gets up from the table. Before he takes his dishes to the dishwasher, he leans over and kisses my forehead. "If that's what you want."

He puts his dishes away, and I mentally run through my day. I think of all the shit things I need to do this morning while pretending the man I love doesn't put himself in harm's way every single day.

As if reading my mind, Aaron closes the dishwasher and pulls me to him. "Are you working today?"

I nod. “Not until one. Apparently, that’s around the time this pretty awesome guy I know goes into a dickhead’s house. It won’t be easy working a pole while that’s happening.”

“Take the day off,” Aaron says. “It’s been quiet, and we’re going to get Murphy this afternoon, but I still don’t like you at the club while I’m at work and can’t be there to make sure none of his buddies pay you a visit.”

“Peter’s there. We have bouncers. I’ll be fine. You should get going,” I say, looking at the clock on the microwave. “I also have to get ready and head out.”

“Why are you leaving so early?” he asks. “You aren’t going to your apartment, are you? Don’t do it without me with you.”

I laugh and run my finger down his nose before kissing him on the cheek. “No apartment check. I’m still a functional adult and have life errands to run. I’ve been here for a few days. I have to go to the post office if I’m going to be here more often so they can hold my mail. I have to pick up some hold books at the library and deposit some cash tips into my bank account.”

“Stuff to do?”

I smile a wry grin and pat his chest. “Yep. Stuff to do, baby,” I say, watching with a smile as he picks up a messenger bag and grabs a cheese stick out of the fridge before giving me a quick peck on the lips.

### Chapter 20

Aaron

Waiting around for the judge is like waiting in the groom's room at my wedding. Something big is going to happen, probably something career-changing, and I have to sit or stand in one place until someone tells me it's time for the big thing to happen. Butterflies move through my stomach, and my eyes search for a bathroom just in case I need it.

I crack my knuckles and roll my neck as Judge Hossit's assistant, an attractive woman around my age, smiles at me over her laptop screen. Since I've been here, she's unbuttoned her shirt two buttons. If I wasn't hopelessly in love with Lucy, I'd probably flirt a little. As it is, I can't bear the thought of being with anyone but Lucy.

I spent the morning doing nothing but paperwork and even practiced my spiel for the judge in front of the men's room mirror, complete with facial expressions that will hopefully show my confidence that Murphy Beckett is behind these murders in addition to everything else he's done.

Eventually, the door opens and Judge Hossit waves me into his office. "Sheriff Dwyer, it's nice to see you. It's been too long."

I shake the man's outstretched hand and walk into the poshly decorated room that reminds me of Jalen Quarry's law office. Mahogany. Freshly vacuumed carpet. The hint of bourbon in the air he probably shares with fellow judges or the city prosecutors.

I take a seat in the guest chair across from his. “I haven’t been here for months because this county usually isn’t so exciting.”

“You sent me the paperwork already,” he says, looking at something on his computer. “You’ve wanted this guy a long time. I remember you speaking with me about him. Murphy Beckett?” He takes his glasses off, and I know from his expression that I have my work cut out for me. “I believe I sat with him at a banquet a few months ago.”

I nod and smile. “Murphy Beckett likes to hobnob with the elite in this town. Let’s be clear that he knows which way his bread is buttered. Let me guess. He was charming, complimented your wife, and made a sizable donation to your best friend, Mayor Thomas, for the next election, probably making sure to speak a little louder than necessary as he promised the money.”

Judge Hossit reddens, and I know I have him. “Walk me through the evidence.”

“We have three murders with connections to Murphy. In the case of George Cannon, we have a bank statement with Cannon paying Murphy for something through an offshore account. I’ve sent you the video of Murphy and Justin Hammons out on the town at a strip club, and Todd Daniels was a member of the motorcycle club. Three murders. Three connections to Beckett.”

Judge Hossit clasps his hands in front of his chest. “Can I expect more charges if you go in based on the murder information?”

I hold the man’s eye contact. I can’t show any weakness here, but I have to be careful. Murphy’s padded pockets in this town well. “I’ve also talked to the feds about possible trafficking. They’ve been building a case for years but have never been able to get him because their investigation also runs into...roadblocks. You wouldn’t happen to know about that, would you?”



Mentioning the feds is my trump card. Leaders in this town may be able to push things under the rug, but the feds aren't as impressed at local campaign contributions and charitable giving to turtle nonprofits.

Judge Hossit practically squirms, and I take a brief moment to find his daughter's picture behind the desk. She's about twenty-five, blonde, and stands in front of the Grand Canyon in the photo. "Beautiful daughter," I say, nodding to the photo. "I have two myself."

Judge Hossit looks at the picture and frowns, probably wondering why I interrupted our conversation to talk about his daughter.

I lean forward. "We're both fathers of females. You and I both know what happens in those trafficking rings. Are you willing to stand by the fact that Murphy isn't involved in not only murder but is innocent of running drugs and girls in this town?" Lucy comes to mind, and I remember how she helped me at the mention of young girls. "Girls, Lawrence," I whisper, using his first name. "Girls like our daughters."

He leans back in his seat and looks at whatever's on his computer again. The silence stretches over a whole minute, but I sit resolute, waiting. "It'll need to be a lock. I don't want to bring him in and have a shit circus when the only thing you can officially pin on him is an overdue library book."

I roll the dice. "I'll find something. If it's not a connection to the murders, it'll be drugs or trafficking. Hell, if I have to do what they did to Capone and get the son of a bitch for tax evasion by finding an old ledger, I'll do it. Something in that house will lead me to something dirty. I just need the damn warrant."

I can't jiggle my leg like I want or it'll signal that I'm nervous. Instead, I wiggle my toes inside my shoes. I set my jaw and stare at the judge as he bites his lip and thinks. My armpits sweat, and my heart pounds. This warrant could literally be something

that keeps Lucy safe.

I need to keep her safe.

The judge's eyes flick back to his daughter's pictures. "This will be embarrassing as hell if there's nothing there."

"I'll take the brunt of it, and I'll circle people back to me if they blame you."

"That's a big commitment, Dwyer."

"And I have big shoulders."

Letting out a deep sigh, he pecks at some keys on his computer and then presses a button on the phone. "Kimberly, I have something printing. Can you grab it off the printer and bring it in so I can sign?"

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"Mitchell and a few beat cops are at the back of the house. There's a side door with two men stationed, and we have eyes on the garage," Coleson says as soon as I shut my car door. "You want in the front door with me?"

I look down at the tactical uniform I changed into and frown. "I don't usually get this dressed up with vest and gear if I have no place to go."

I usually don't go in at all. I'm the sheriff. I stay on the street in my uniform or in my suit and shake my guys' hands when they bring out a suspect. Then, I talk to the reporters, who usually show up around the time we bring out the offender.

But this one is personal.

“I want to go in because part of me wants to see the look on the bastard’s face. He could get violent, but I don’t think he has a team of armed cartel-hired thugs in there with him. Have we cleared the street?”

“The neighbors have been alerted to stay in their houses, lock their doors, and stay away from windows.”

I nod. “Let’s do this.”

Coleson and I both approach the front door and unholster our weapons. If I don’t participate in a warrant raid, Coleson or the lead person is the one the beat cops and SWAT, if they’re involved, look to for guidance when to go in. I’m the sheriff, so I’m the one the guys look to when they’re waiting for a signal today.

I nod to Coleson, and he talks to Mitchell through the radio and gives the five-second countdown order, signaling that I’m going to knock soon. We all mentally count down from five, and I knock, banging on the door loudly with my fist. “Murphy Beckett, this is the police. We have a warrant to search the premises. Open the door!” I yell in my best cop voice. I almost don’t recognize it since I don’t have to use it often.

Silence.

I knock again. “We’ll enter in ten seconds. Open the door.”

Crickets.

I squint at Coleson. “Are we sure he’s on the premises?”

“A neighbor said she saw him come home last night. Car is in the garage and the door is open,” he gestures to the attached garage. “If he’s not home, he was either picked

up in another vehicle or is out for a walk.”

I roll my eyes. Great intel. “Coming in!” I say as Coleson announces the go signal to the men at the back door. We’ll go in at the same time.

I move aside as the door crew makes short work of the lock. Once the door is unlocked, Coleson goes through first, weapon raised, and I cover his back as we clear the room. Across the living room and dining room, I see Mitchell enter through the kitchen door with other officers, three males and one female. The female nods to the basement door, and she and Mitchell quietly open it to clear the basement.

We sweep the living room and a nearby closet. A few officers from our team head upstairs to clear the bedrooms as Coleson and I silently finish clearing the main level. The living room, dining room, and kitchen are clear, and another team member heads to the garage to make sure he’s not in it.

Coleson nods in the direction of two small rooms on the main level that look like the size of a library or a den. We back up against the wall, and I count down on my fingers from five.

When I reach zero, Coleson flings the door open to a small room and freezes. Oddly, he also sighs and mutters a curse under his breath. “Clear. He’s in here...and fucker’s not going anywhere,” Coleson says, lowering his gun.

I walk around the door frame and follow my detective’s line of sight.

Murphy Beckett is dead as a fucking doornail.

Blood slowly drips from one of his wrists onto the carpet below where he’s seated on the couch. Although not dripping, his other wrist is also open and bloody. An open computer sits nearby along with a glass of something that looks like rum. A box

cutter is on the couch next to Murphy's right arm.

Coleson holsters his weapon. "You have to be fucking kidding me. When do you think he decided to off himself?"

"He's still dripping. It's slow, but this is new. Today. This morning at the earliest." I holster my own weapon with a sigh and slowly approach Murphy's body.

"Think the judge gave him a heads up we were coming?"

I think back to Judge Hossit's love for his daughter. "Not likely. Judge Hossit is usually a straight arrow. He's worried about appearance and is a people pleaser, but he's not dirty."

"Someone at the office?"

I remember the pretty assistant who got the warrant off the printer. "If so, Judge Hossit needs to do better background checks, but I seriously doubt it. She didn't seem the type to run with Beckett. This could be a coincidence."

Other team members approach behind us, and Coleson directs them to holster their weapons. He explains the situation through the radio and calls for the coroner and forensics team as I stand, hands on hips, looking around Murphy Beckett's den. I shake my head and grit my teeth.

"You mad?" Coleson asks.

I hear the far-off sounds of doors closing and instructions given as the team leaves the premises, and we switch to investigation mode. "No," I say. "He had it coming. I almost wish someone else could have had the joy of doing this to him."

Coleson rounds the small coffee table in the middle of the room and glances at the laptop. He's careful not to touch anything because he knows better, but his fingers twitch to click the mouse.

"How do you know someone didn't do this to him?" Coleson asks, ever the detective.

"Look around, man." I gesture to the box cutter and the rum. "Ten bucks says there's a suicide note or email on that laptop."

Coleson looks at the box cutter and the rum. He reaches into his pocket and quickly gloves up before opening a side door that leads to what looks like an office with a large desk and bookshelves. I look around for footprints on the laminate flooring, but unless someone came in and killed Murphy Beckett in muddy shoes, we won't find much on this kind of floor.

"It looks like he got shit drunk and felt like we were closing in. Nothing more. Nothing less." I look around the den and the adjoining office. "Tell forensics to grab what you can from the files in there and take the computer. We could get good info on cohorts. Bag anything you can. But this looks pretty cut and dry. Suicide."

Coleson frowns and nods, silently agreeing with me. We've both seen it more than a few times, and this is standard. I see nothing, smell nothing, and hear nothing that tells me this was anything but death by Murphy's own hand. The door was locked, and we cleared the house, finding not a soul.

As the coroner and forensic team show up to retrieve anything they can from the house, I back out of the room, taking one last look at Murphy Beckett. Raising my middle finger, I smirk. "Fuck yourself in hell, you piece of shit."

I take a deep breath of early spring air as I step outside the house. This is over. At least until someone fills the vacuum of space he leaves in the drug and trafficking

business. Another honcho will move into the area and set up shop, and we'll have to work to get something on that guy too.

But I can be with Lucy without worry now. Whatever was happening with Murphy and the hired thugs that threatened Lucy is over.

I can go home to Lucy and convince her to stay more often or even permanently. I can go get my girls and bring them home.

All of them.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 21

Lucy

“It was flashlight,” Pearl says, pouting that we couldn’t figure out her word. She crosses her arms and marches back to her spot on the floor as Ruby stands up for her turn to draw a choice.

I haven’t played charades in years, but the girls insisted we play it as soon as the pizza arrived. For my first couple of days of meeting the girls, they’re taking my presence quite well. It can’t be easy to come home from a visit to your grandmother’s house and find a strange woman suddenly sharing your house and making goo-goo eyes at your dad.

Granted, Aaron and I haven’t flaunted our adult relationship. Most of my stuff is still in the guest room, and I waited until after the girls went to bed last night to creep down the hallway into Aaron’s room. He held the door open for me and put his finger to his lips as we both quietly giggled at how much it felt like sneaking around as teenagers again.

When I came hard as he took me from behind last night, I bit into the pillow so the girls wouldn’t hear me moan for their daddy. That’ll be the hardest part of my nights in this house. Aaron also sighed and whispered when he came, and I missed the loud moans from his throat.

For now, I’m Aaron’s friend from high school who’s staying with them. Pearl asked a few questions about me dating Aaron in high school, but I made it fun by pulling out



an old purse-sized photo album I've had since high school. She had a great time giggling with me about Aaron's high school haircut and his old basketball pictures. Maybe when she's older, she'll realize how much I love her dad since I kept everything from back then. I showed her the ticket stubs from a Foo Fighters concert even Aaron had forgotten he'd taken me to.

Ruby stuffs another bite of pizza in her little mouth, straightens her right pigtail, and starts mimicking something that looks like her stirring a pot. I marvel at how much she looks like Aaron. She even chews like him, favoring the right side of her mouth and wrinkling her nose when something's extra crunchy or sticky.

"Cooking?" I guess, trying to ignore Aaron's hand suddenly on my inner thigh in a possessive and loving position. If the girls notice, they ignore it. "You're stirring something. Stirring? Mixing! Um, baking a cake?"

"Baking cupcakes!" Aaron yells next to my ear.

"Hey, that's cheating when you piggyback off my guess."

Pearl laughs at me for calling out Aaron, and Ruby gets a case of the giggles, dropping to the floor, her little face reddening as she laughs.

She laughs so long the timer runs out, and Aaron points to me. "You're up next."

I stand and brush pizza crumbs off my pants, smiling as Pearl holds up one of Aaron's old beanie hats that we're using to pick the item cards. I rummage my hand in the fabric as Ruby, still giggling, walks to Aaron and climbs on his lap. My heart practically melts when she throws her arms around him and he kisses her on the forehead.

He's an amazing father to these girls, and nostalgia for having a family hits me in the

gut.

I pick a card and walk to the spot in front of Aaron's fireplace mantel. It's a chilly evening for spring, and a fire crackles behind me.

I look down at the card, and my mouth opens. The card says punching . It's meant to be an innocent reference. The charades game is for kids, and the card probably refers to hitting a mat or a cartoonish punch between animated characters. Defending yourself from a bully.

Unfortunately, I've taken too many punches to emulate this. What am I going to do? Swing my arms the way Beck did toward my face for years?

The card flutters from my hand and slowly hits the ground. Aaron's face darkens as I feel the blood drain from my face.

He sets Ruby next to him on the couch and is in front of me in seconds. "Lucy, look at me. What's wrong? Is this part of the game?"

I shake my head, tears stinging my eyes as I flash back to one especially bad episode with Beck. Even Aaron's loving hands on my cheek and shoulder don't comfort me.

Aaron picks up the card and looks at the word. "Girls, go to your room for a few minutes," he says in a voice that doesn't allow argument.

"Are we in trouble?" Pearl asks.

"No, sweetheart. This isn't because you did something bad. I just need to talk to Lucy."

Both girls get up from the couch, and Mickey trails after Pearl. I've noticed the dog is

always near her if he's not under Aaron's feet.

My chest heaves as I try to catch my breath. Aaron bends to my eye level, but I squeeze my eyes shut. "Lucy, look at me. Please. Focus on me."

I shake my head like a petulant child and fist my pants pockets so hard I'm worried I'll rip them. "Baby, it's OK. I'm surprised you don't have more episodes of this, but look at me because you'll see that I'm here. You don't have to be scared. I'll never hurt you. Never hit you. Never even talk to you the way he did."

I slowly open my eyes and take in the room. A pizza box is still open on the coffee table. I'd get hit for that. Paper plates. I'd get a swift kick for not using the good dishes. Throw pillows the girls were sitting on are still on the floor. I'd get hit for that.

I look down at my clothes. Sweatpants in front of my man. I'd get hit or pushed for that if I was lucky. He would often rip clothes he didn't approve of off my body before beating me while I was naked. The little things in the room and on my own body suddenly suffocate me, and Aaron's voice sounds far away.

"Breathe, Lucy. You're safe. I'll be here telling you you're safe until you believe it. Have I ever told you it was OK when it wasn't OK?"

I shake my head, but the memories of being on the floor and kicked by my husband won't retreat. "The pillows are on the floor," I mumble between my heavy breaths.

Thankfully, Aaron understands. He cups my cheeks and presses his forehead against mine. "And it's OK. It's OK to be a little messy in my house. You're safe."

"Paper plates."

“Bad for the environment but OK on a family game night,” Aaron says, grinning a little. “I say it’s OK. And you’re safe.”

“Sweatpants.”

“You don’t have to be perfect all the time. In fact, I like you real. I love you without makeup and with that gorgeous hair in a messy bun. My Lucy. I say it’s OK. You’re safe.”

My hands shake, but I close my eyes when I feel Aaron’s gentle fingers against my own. “Listen to me breathe, Lucy. Do I seem angry with you? Listen to the tone of my voice.”

“H-he was always calm when he beat me,” I stammer. “That’s what made it so scary. It was just another part of his day. Like b-brushing his teeth.”

Aaron walks me over to the couch and pulls me down next to him. He wraps his arms around me and tucks my head under his chin so I can hear his heartbeat. “Listen to my heart. It’s steady, right?”

I nod.

“You’re safe. I will never let anyone hurt you as long as I’m alive. You understand that, right?”

I understand the words, and I trust Aaron. I just wish someone would explain it to my PTSD.

I take deep breaths, trying to let Aaron’s heartbeat calm me. He strokes my back, and I let my eyes close. I’ve had to be strong for too long. The first time I get a night with Aaron and his daughters, this happens. Why? Have I been on a constant adrenaline

kick, and I let my guard down?

“Do you want to talk to someone about this that isn’t me? We have a great counselor at the station who may be able to recommend someone.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. Anyone I told before, well, they either aren’t my friend anymore or it got back to...” My voice trails off. It’s hard to say his name when I remember what happened. “I tried to ask for help once and talk about it, but he found out and hit me so hard my left ear made a ringing noise for a week, and I had to get a veneer for a couple of back teeth.”

“This help is OK, Lucy. She won’t be able to tell...him.” Aaron can’t say the dickhead’s name either.

“I know it won’t get back to him,” I whisper, my mouth wanting to move. To talk. Tell Aaron everything. “I know he won’t find out about any of this.”

“Come here,” he says, leaning back and pulling me with him along with a red blanket that’s draped over the back of the couch.

He tucks the blanket around me, and I close my eyes. I could sleep right here, curled into Aaron’s side with a warm blanket and fire in the fireplace. “It’s OK, Lucy. The door is locked. Murphy Beckett is dead. Almost all of the guys who threatened you are dead. You’re with me. Mickey is here. You’re safe.”

“Safe,” I mumble to myself over and over, willing myself to believe it.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

### Chapter 22

Aaron

Coleson walks into my office, shuts the door so hard that the blinds rattle against my window, and sits in my guest chair without being invited. I freeze with a late afternoon coffee halfway to my mouth. Raising my eyebrows, I smile at him over my mug. “Is something upsetting you?”

“Nothing that should. We scraped Murphy Beckett’s computer,” he says, just as my desk phone lights up with one of the department’s assistants trying to reach me.

“And?” I ask, pressing the ignore button.

“We have a suicide email to the vice president of the motorcycle club.”

“Why are we upset?” I ask, squinting.

Coleson shrugs just as my phone lights up again. I wipe my forehead in agitation and press ignore. “Are you going to take that?” he asks, nodding toward my phone.

“Nah. It’s probably not important. Get back to the Murphy problem.”

“There is no problem. It’s cut and dry, just like my smart boss said. We have a suicide note, and you wouldn’t believe what we found in the library.”

I lean forward in my seat. “Tell me it rained dickhead names.”

He smiles. “Happy Easter, boss. We got the names and offshore account numbers for every member of the mafia and every trafficker we had our sights on from here to Cleveland. I turned it over to the feds. They were pretty happy.”

“Why are you pouting in my office?”

“We got him, but something still doesn’t feel...right. I don’t know how to explain it. You know that pit in the bottom of a police officer’s stomach that says it isn’t as easy as it looks?”

I nod. I know that feeling well. I’ve had it a lot lately, too, but things seem to be working themselves out just fine.

“Do you want to hear my advice?” I ask.

“That’s why I came in here.”

I put my mug down and prop my elbows on my desk. My phone lights up again, and I sigh, looking away from it. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Think of it like it’s college football. We got a win and should enjoy it until we get our asses handed to us the next time a big fish comes into town.”

My phone lights up yet again, and I point toward the door. “I better get this. Someone obviously has their ass on fire.”

As soon as Coleson shuts my door, I pick up the phone. “Yeah, Bertie,” I say, answering the assistant in the nicest voice I can muster. She’s older and sweet. The kind that brings cookies on a random Wednesday.

“Sheriff Dwyer, there’s a man here to talk to you. Says it’s urgent.”

I scowl at the phone. “Did he say what it’s about?”

“Something about a Beck Lenin.”

Cold dread moves to my balls, and I grip the receiver tight in my hand so it doesn’t fall to my desk. Sweat forms on my upper lip, and I clear my throat, knowing whatever I say will come out sounding like gravel. “Send him in.”

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The man in front of me is not Beck Lenin. I’ve never seen this person before in my life, but he’s short, stocky, and waving his Chicago police badge around like I’m supposed to be impressed.

I stand at my desk and wave the man forward. “Sherriff Aaron Dwyer. And you are?”  
I ask, holding out my hand.

The man shakes it and sits in the chair Coleson just vacated. “Blair DeLuth. I’m a detective over in Chicago. It’s nice to meet you.”

I sit back in my chair and take a drink of my now cold coffee, more for something to do with my hands. “My assistant said you were here about Beck Lenin. What can I help you with?”

The man tilts his head to the side. He’s missing a back tooth, and I only see that because he’s smiling an odd grin. His face has large pores, and his eyebrows desperately need a pluck up the middle. “Did you know Beck Lenin?”

“Yes, sir. I met him once. I came over to your neck of the woods a couple weeks ago looking around for him.”



“That’s what we heard. Care to explain why?”

“Of course. Lucy Lenin, Beck’s wife, recently moved to our county.” Fuck, I need to wash my mouth out with something stronger than coffee to get the filth out of my mouth after saying his name. “She has a vested interest in finding her husband to serve divorce papers. Since she’ll serve from her county of residence, we have an interest.”

“Some of his coworkers at the firm mentioned you came by and asked a few questions. Was that necessary?”

I put my mug back on the blotter and lean toward the man. I don’t know who this guy thinks he is, but he doesn’t scare me. “Did Jalen Quarry say that?”

The man startles like I slapped him. “You talked to Mr. Quarry?” I nod and furrow my brow. Interesting that he hasn’t. “Mr. Quarry didn’t mention it. Some of the front desk staff mentioned you were there asking to speak with someone about him.”

I need to take control of the situation here. “Let’s back up and slow down. I think we can share intel here. What have you found? Lucy says that she’s been trying to get you guys to look into it for months.”

“Do you know how many missing person reports we get in the city, Sheriff Dwyer? A grown man leaving his wife isn’t exactly top priority.”

I smile at the man and silently chuckle. “I’m sure there’s a lot. Let me fill you in. I talked to Jalen Quarry. He said that Beck Lenin often talked about leaving his wife and disappearing. Everyone at the office in the upper echelon, who you obviously didn’t talk to, thinks he just ran off and disappeared. I’m sure it would have been taken more seriously if work colleagues reported a concern, but they didn’t. They kind of shrugged and went about their business. They say they weren’t surprised he

disappeared. Leaving on his own merit makes sense because some mafia friends of his, who are now dead by the way, came by his wife's house several months ago asking about some money Beck owed them."

Detective DeLuth reddens when I mention I've actually talked to Beck's peers.

"Now, we have a dead human trafficker with mafia ties. I'm sure you've heard the name Murphy Beckett."

The detective nods and looks at his feet. "We're aware of him. What's this got to do with Beck Lenin?"

"Murphy Beckett and Beck Lenin were cousins. I say that in the past tense because Murphy killed himself a few days ago. Ironically, it was the same day we got a warrant to go into the house. If you're a betting man, I'll put fifty bucks down that Lenin borrowed money from the mafia to leave Lucy and now has a new passport and an impressive house in Ecuador. Maybe he was involved in what Murphy had going. Who knows? I don't think we ever will."

"Are you sure the wife doesn't know where he is?"

"Absolutely sure," I say. "I went to high school with Lucy. She's a sweetheart and just wants to divorce the loser." I open a drawer, pull out a file I have on Lucy, open it, and slide it over to Detective DeLuth. "These are copies of her text messages to him. She repeatedly asks for information on where he's at. No response. I also have record of an email she sent to your department about the missing person report. Again, no response. She did her due diligence in Chicago and followed up here when she moved and wanted to cite abandonment." I lean over and flip through a few pages. "Here are the financial records Lucy provided to me. There's absolutely nothing amiss in their bank accounts. He obviously had something we don't know about. In fact, he kept a lot of monetary access from his wife. He didn't allow her to

be on a joint account. She had the equivalent of a kid's preloaded card she could use on makeup and a gym membership."

"What a charmer," the detective mumbles. "Why are we just now seeing this?"

"I don't know. I called over there a few weeks ago and nothing was done. I would have loved to send it then. Lucy says she reported it and your department shrugged at her." A thought comes to mind. "Is it possible Murphy Beckett had Chicago ties that kept it quiet? I'm thinking Murphy helped him disappear. The fact that you're here now after Murphy is dead tells me a lot."

Detective DeLuth stands and adjusts his jacket. "It's certainly possible. I just got this on my desk a few days ago. Can I have a copy of those?" he asks, jerking his chin to Lucy's folder.

I hand the file over to him. "Help yourself. Bertie can make you a copy on the way out. Let me know if you have other questions or need to talk to Lucy. I'm sure she'll tell you anything you want to know. She wants this over."

"Yeah, we couldn't locate her at her address on file."

I blink but keep my face neutral. "She's staying with a friend. She's afraid of her ex-husband if he does wander back into town."

"Ah. I'll let you know if we need to speak to her, but this looks pretty summed up. Glad I came here."

I stand and shake the man's outstretched hand again. "Nice to meet you. I'd also suggest a conversation with Jalen Quarry or one of the other partners. They'll back up what I just told you. Good luck."

I sit at my desk past quitting time, thinking. Coleson's right. Something about all of this gives me the creeps. When Bertie returns Lucy's file to me after giving it to the detective, I go through it with a fine-tooth comb, marveling that I'm flipping through a file about a woman I know so intimately.

I have everything about her past life in front of me. I made love to this woman last night and see the life she lived with a total asshole on paper today. I see what bank Beck did business with. I see when they bought a new mattress and remodeled the bathroom with a contractor. I chuckle when I see Beck made a donation to the police officer's union and to a nearby church Lucy never mentioned. He obviously liked to keep up appearances as much as his cousin.

There's not much with Lucy's account. There's the gym membership and a charge to Sephora around Beck's birthday. Lucy was obviously expected to look nice for an event. There was also a hardware store purchase that must be the new faucet Lucy said she had replaced in the kitchen a few days before Lucy reported Beck missing. There's absolutely nothing that raises my eyebrows.

I want to solve everything for her. Push every obstacle out of her way.

I get up and walk to my window, hands in my pockets, and stare at the town below until long after the orange sunset streaks the sky. Looking down at the road, headlights cast shadows against neighboring buildings and police red and blue lights appear sporadically as officers leave on calls.

My pants vibrate with a text, and I reach for my phone, expecting to see a text from Lucy asking if I'm coming home soon. I should have been home an hour ago.

I don't expect to find a message from Pearl on her kids' messaging app. She never uses that except to message her grandparents on the small tablet we got her for downloading library books. I didn't know she knew how to reach me through it.

Pearl: Daddy?

Me: Yeah, sweetheart. What's up?

Pearl: I'm scared.

Dots fill the screen like she's typing, but I already have my keys and wallet in my hand and am halfway out the door before I get another message.

Pearl: There's a man here. Lucy put me in the closet and went down to look for Ruby.

I grip the doorframe with nausea but force my feet to keep going. Something's wrong. Lucy isn't the type to shut kids in the closet unless there's a good reason. Where's Ruby in all this? I need to keep calm. I need to let my daughter know I'm coming, but I also need more information on what I'm dealing with.

Me: I'm on my way now. What's he look like, baby?

If Beck Lenin is within a mile of my children, much less within a mile of Lucy, I'll kill him. I'll fucking kill him. I check my holster for my gun. For the first time in my career, I know that I'll have no problem using it if that bastard has one toe on my property.

I expect to see the description of Beck from my daughter. Coiffed dark hair. A smirk you want to punch. Something like that with a child's vocabulary. I don't expect one last message to come through as I close the door to my work-issued car and turn the emergency lights on.

Pearl: I didn't see him, but I heard Lucy say the man's name. Geoffrey.

I'm ten minutes from home on a normal day. I'm going to do it in four.

### Chapter 23

Lucy

“Stay here,” I say, my voice shaky with fear. I blow out a breath to keep calm in front of Pearl, but I’m anything but calm.

I push aside Aaron’s old coat and what looks like some of Cynthia’s old scarves. They’re hand-knitted and probably made by Cynthia herself and saved by Aaron for his daughters to wear someday. I pull a red one down and wind it around Pearl’s neck. Maybe one of her mom’s scarves will comfort her enough to stay quiet.

Pearl doesn’t argue with me. She doesn’t put up a fight when I also push Mickey into the closet. I lovingly run my hands through the dog’s fur, trying to comfort myself. “Good dog. Stay with Pearl.”

I hand Pearl her tablet and look into the eyes that look so much like Aaron’s. “Text your dad. Can you do that for me? Tell him there’s a man in the house. After you do that, contact 911. Did Daddy show you how to do that from a tablet?”

She nods, and I shut the door, ignoring her whimper at being left in the dark. I toy with the idea of locking the door, but it won’t do any good. She wouldn’t be able to get out, but Geoffrey would still be able to get in from outside the door.

How did he even find me? I guess he knows I date Aaron and put two and two together. Did he go to my apartment first? Wait around for me? When I didn’t show up, he must have figured out where I was and waited until dark. How long has he

been outside? He obviously waited until Aaron wasn't home and wanted to make sure it was dark.

Of all the nights for Aaron to be late. This is also the one time in a year that I let my phone die and just plugged it in before I heard Ruby's muffled scream. When I went to the banister to check on her, I heard Geoffrey laugh and tell me to come find her.

I knew his voice from the gala, and I'll have nightmares about it the rest of my life if I make it through tonight.

But I have to get Ruby. I can't leave her down there with him. Pearl will contact Aaron, and he'll come. I trust he's on the way and will help me. With Pearl contacting Aaron, there's no use me going back for a dead phone.

I creep down the stairs and pause only a few seconds as my eyes adjust to the darkness. Nothing seems amiss in the living room or dining room. He must be in the kitchen.

Of course, he's in the kitchen. If the door is locked, there's no way police can get in from the outside.

I tiptoe to the kitchen, looking around for a weapon on the way. Grabbing nearby candlesticks off the dining room table, I silently push the door open.

I'm silent and slow, but he's still there waiting for me. Geoffrey jerks me into the dark kitchen and pulls me so hard that I fall forward to the island counter when he lets go, hitting my head. The candlestick holder skitters across the room.

His hands fist my hair from the back, and my eyes flick around the room. In the moonlight, I can barely make out Ruby curled into fetal position on the floor two feet from me. Did he hit her? My blood boils, and I grip the kitchen counter until my

fingertips hurt.

“Hi, bitch,” Geoffrey breathes in my ear.

He jerks me back with him as he shuts the kitchen door, propping a chair under the antique knob so the door can't be easily opened. How the hell will the police get in with the impossible kitchen door and a chair against the door to the dining room?

Fear grips my stomach at the realization that I'm trapped in a kitchen with Aaron's innocent daughter and a mafia thug with a bunch of dead friends and nothing left to lose. “What are you doing here? What do you want from me?”

“I want my money.”

“You can't be serious. Your boss is dead. Your coworkers, or whatever they were, are dead. Why aren't you on a flight to Guatemala? Why are you here for money you know damn well I don't have?”

He lets go of my hair, and I grimace as he pushes my head forward when he releases me. Something pointy pushes against my shoulder, and warm liquid runs down my back. It takes me a moment to realize it's my own blood and that Geoffrey has a knife.

I turn around and frantically look for another weapon. Unfortunately, Aaron stores the knives on the other side of the island, and I'd never get there in time.

Geoffrey points his knife to just under my chin just as loud banging and kicking sounds fill the silence in the kitchen.

“Lucy?” Aaron's voice yells from the other side of the back door, and I nearly sag with relief. Only Geoffrey's slimy hands hold me against the counter. “Fuck!” Aaron



yells, hitting the door one last time.

I know he's notified his staff. They'll get in eventually. Geoffrey turns his head and smiles an evil grin at Ruby, and fear that it'll be too late when they get in sinks into my stomach. I slap his face so he looks back at me, and I hit him as hard as Beck slapped me for fun. "Look at me, asshole. If you're going to pick on someone in here, you pick on me. Don't you look at her again!"

He belts me across the face and Ruby screams my name from somewhere near the floor. I hold my hand out, silently telling her I'm fine. My cheek stings, and my ears ring. But I know Geoffrey's cornered.

Unfortunately, a cornered and desperate man doesn't make the best decisions.

He pushes me to the floor, and I slide until I'm a foot from Ruby. She reaches out, and a tiny hand runs over my shoulder. "Lucy?" she pleads.

But there's a look in Geoffrey's eyes that I know, even in the dim light of the kitchen.

Aaron's given up on the back door, but frantic footsteps come from the entryway as I hear the front door open so hard it hits the living room wall. Aaron's in the house. Geoffrey grips my throat, and my eyes bug out of my head. The door between the dining room and the kitchen rattles, but the propped door on the old brass handle is holding. "Lucy! Fuck. Lucy, answer me, baby!"

"Daddy!" Ruby frantically screams so I don't have to.

My shoes squeak against the linoleum as I squirm under Geoffrey and he reaches to the button of his pants.

Aaron stops rattling the knob and nothing but silence is on the other side of the door.

Did he leave to find another way in?

“Your boyfriend thinks he’s going to interrupt us. Maybe he will,” Geoffrey says, slapping me across the face again. I see stars, but I’ve taken worse from my husband. “But not before I fuck you bloody. I’m going to take out every dollar you owe out of your pussy, bitch. Then, I’m going to take the little girl and get a nice price for her. I have friends that’ll pay for that young of a girl. Murphy knew them, but he’s gone. Guess I’ll have to deal her in Chicago myself. I’ll find the other one, too. The price I’ll get for both of them will more than pay your debt.”

Over. My. Dead. Body.

Summoning all my strength, I ram my head into his jaw as hard as I can, hoping it buys me time. Geoffrey rears back as my forehead hits him so hard that something cracks in his mouth. My reward is a punch across the face, knocking me dizzy yet again. While I’m out of it for a split second, he takes the time to unbutton my pants.

I turn my head and spit blood from my mouth, not caring if I still have my teeth. My eyes lock with Ruby’s wide, four-year-old eyes that are so full of fear I want to cry. Those eyes do it, though. They keep me going. I won’t let him hurt her. I just need to keep him busy until her dad can get to us.

“Close your eyes, Ruby!” I yell as Geoffrey fumbles with my jeans. “Don’t you open them until I say so or Daddy says it’s OK. Do you understand?”

Only sobbing. No yes or no. She’s little and terrified, but if Geoffrey’s going to sexually assault me in this kitchen, she’s not going to fucking watch. She squeezes her eyes shut and covers them with her little fingers.

My jeans are almost halfway down my hips when another sound from the kitchen door distracts Geoffrey. The sound of loud banging and pushing on the door fills the

room. The chair at the doorknob is sturdy, not a cheap wooden thing, and even Aaron can't push it away. As I watch the door, a hatchet blade comes through the wood. Aaron's voice is talking to someone on the other side of the door, probably explaining the situation to backup, and he grunts with each swipe at the door.

Geoffrey will leave now. He'll flee through the kitchen door and run away. The police are coming. Aaron's on the other side of the door with a hatchet.

But Geoffrey laughs. Is he so manic he's not thinking straight? Is he high on the product he's probably involved with pushing around town? I don't know, and my brain can't focus on that now. All I can focus on is staying alive and keeping Ruby safe until Aaron gets through that fucking door.

Aaron hacks a small, jagged square in the wood, enough for him to see into the room and know what's happening. When I look up as Geoffrey fumbles with his pair of dingy briefs, Aaron's face pales, and there's an expression on his face I've never seen. His nostrils flare, and his eyes widen through the rectangle.

Fear.

I've seen him pissed off. I've seen him orgasm. I've seen him disappointed, and I've seen him smile with sheer joy. I've never once seen him scared.

Geoffrey grips my throat and looks over his shoulder at Aaron. "Glad you could join us in time to watch me sample your favorite pussy, Sheriff."

Aaron's eyes meet mine, and there's a loud thud as the hatchet hits the floor in the hallway. He flexes his jaw and shows me the new object in his hand at the same time he releases the safety. He doesn't yell or draw attention. He doesn't insult Geoffrey or frantically cuss. He looks me straight in the eyes and says two words.

“Our thing.”

Trusting him and understanding Aaron’s direction, I bring my knees to my tits, opening my legs as much as I can with my jeans halfway down my hips as I build my strength. “Yeah, bitch. You want it now, don’t you,” Geoffrey leers, not understanding the reason for getting my legs into position. “You like him to watch, huh?”

I push.

I send every bit of force I can muster into my thighs as I plant my feet on Geoffrey’s chest and push so hard that his eyes widen in confusion as he’s pushed back like I’m doing a leg press. It wouldn’t be enough to get him away from me permanently, but it’s enough to give Aaron a clear shot for a split second. A second is all Aaron needs to know he won’t accidentally get me. I’ve never seen Aaron shoot, but I trust that he’s a good shot because he’s Aaron Dwyer. He’s good at everything.

“Go to hell,” I grunt as I roll to the side and press my body on top of Ruby, covering her face before the blood splatter and brain matter even hit the counter above us.

Ruby screams as her dad’s gun goes off again and again, and I shield her head, aiming for her ears but unsure if I’m covering them as Aaron doesn’t stop shooting until the clip empties like he’s been trained. “It’s OK, sweetheart. It’s OK. Daddy got him,” I coo to Ruby, stroking her hair as she trembles and sobs under me. “Daddy’s here, baby. Your dad will always protect you.”

I stay where I am as Aaron makes a larger hole in the door with the hatchet. Soon, he has it where it’s enough to get his arm through the old wood and push the chair from under the knob. As soon as he’s in the room, he points the gun at Geoffrey, quickly checks the man’s pulse to make sure he’s not getting up, and then slinks next to me on the floor, throwing his arms around us. Ruby buries her head in his neck as Aaron

hugs us both, a tear sliding down his left cheek. After a few minutes, another set of arms snakes around us. Pearl. I look up into her tear-stained face and smile as she holds on to Mickey's collar. That amazing dog stayed with Pearl in the closet, protecting her the whole time.

Aaron squeezes his eyes shut and rocks all three of us like he's never letting go as sirens blare in the distance.

### Chapter 24

Aaron

“I can’t believe I agreed to this,” I say, placing another board on the sawhorse and bringing down the electric saw. “I hope you know this was my football room.”

Lucy smiles at me from her place hammering a nail into a board. Her hair is swept back, and her black sweatpants are covered with paint and dust. “I need an office. Since you insisted on kidnapping me here forever, I need a place to do my work now that I’ve got my own business.”

And what a place it’ll be. Pole fitness is booming, and there’s not anything like it in our county. Women have been making the drive into Chicago for pole and lap dance classes. My Lucy will make a killing at what she does. We already rented the space with some of the money she had saved up to pay the mafia. A small loan I cosigned for to establish some credit for her is going to lighting, poles, installation, and office supplies. The look of pride on her face as she gets her own financial life in order makes me hate her ex-husband even more, if possible. She also needs a home office. I don’t like the idea of her working late nights at the studio. We’ve been working on the room all week.

I smile as I measure because this room being an office may be temporary. Maybe we’ll add on to the house, but we’ll need more room for other reasons soon enough. Lucy and I have discussed it. She wants a child, and I want one more while Ruby and Pearl are still young. I don’t want them spread out too much in age. Maybe it’s too soon, but she’s going off the pill after her next cycle. It’s not like we need to get to

know each other better. I've known her for so long that it seems like we were born at the same hospital on the same day and had a secret code from the beginning.

Lucy's belongings are in storage in my basement since I already had furniture, and we didn't need two coffeepots. After the shooting, Lucy would go down there at night when she couldn't sleep, and I'd wake up to a lonely bed. When she'd pad back to our room, I'd ask her where she was. She said just looking at her stuff in storage to make sure she won't need anything. I know she's thinking about things. Maybe her old life. Maybe she's worried there's another henchman out there with a low bank account balance.

It's been a month since Geoffrey's body was carried out of the house. Since then, Lucy's filed for divorce, citing abandonment in the marriage, and she has the police reports and investigation to back it up. Together with my report to Chicago, the case should move faster than it normally would in these cases. The girls are seeing a counselor, Lucy moved the rest of her stuff in, and I've been a happy man because I have all the women I love safe under one roof.

Mickey skips around at my feet, yipping to get attention, and Lucy drops the hammer to bend down and pet the dog. Lucy's face has been lighter for the past week. There's nothing pulling the smile down. It's like she's finally allowing herself to breathe.

"I'll be back," I say, throwing the pencil that was in my mouth on the table and playfully smacking Lucy on the butt as I pass. "Don't break anything while I'm gone."

She ignores me and turns up the music in her headphones, teasingly flipping me off as I saunter from the room.

When I get to the basement, I pull the string to turn on the single overhead lightbulb. The basement is only partially finished – that's next on the list after Lucy's office –

and the lightbulb casts a dim light across the area as it flickers until it eventually springs to full life. I really need better lighting if I'm going to keep things I'll regularly need down here.

I cross to my tool bench, stepping over Lucy's opened boxes and half climbing over an end table. When I get to my tool bench, I open my drawers, looking for what I need.

Levels. I know I have them here somewhere.

I whistle to myself – an old tune from a nineties band my mother liked. Eventually, I find a level that will do and turn to go back upstairs.

My head tilts to the side as I look at the wall, my brows coming together in confusion. There's a small piece of white tape that looks like drywall tape at eye level. Looking around the area, a bucket of paint sits on the floor behind one of Lucy's boxes, a used paintbrush across the top of the can. We didn't buy that color at Home Depot.

I eye the wall again and flip on my phone's flashlight. As I shine it all over the wall, a small square appears from the bad tape job. Did Lucy have something fixed while I was at work?

Carefully, I scrape the end of the tape until I grip it between my thumb and index finger. Once I have a firm grasp, I pull the tape from around the square, watching it slowly peel. If I wasn't so confused, it'd be satisfying to watch. Once the tape is off, I go back to my tool bench, remove a wrench from the table, and shine the light on the square before knocking a hole in my own wall. Why would Lucy re-drywall the basement wall? Did she hide something of Beck's she didn't want to see in her boxes?



Moving chunks of semi-fresh drywall, I freeze and suck in a large breath. My mouth dries until it feels like I'm eating a wad of cotton. I push aside a few pieces of drywall and reach into the rusty toolbox that's seen better days. As soon as the rusty hinges open, I know. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I've known for a few weeks. I just didn't want to see it. It's amazing how our minds make us believe what we want to believe.

But I can't unsee this.

I bend forward, gasping and trying to catch my breath as I stare at the flathead screwdriver. It's clean and just a screwdriver, but I get it now.

### Chapter 25

Lucy

“What next?” I ask.

Aaron doesn't turn around and he doesn't answer. His hands are braced on each side of the hole, and he pants with his eyes squeezed shut. He didn't hear me when I came into the storage room, that much is obvious. But my shit drywall job is open, and his hand is still on the metal of my uncle's old toolbox. Peter didn't want it when my uncle died, and the tools in it were old and not something that forensics could trace to a recent Sears purchase.

“Why?” he asks, his voice husky like it is when we fuck. But there's no desire in his voice. Just shock. “How?” he stutters.

“Have you ever been threatened with bodily harm?” I ask, walking a large circle around the area and moving boxes aside. “I'm not talking about the danger of being shot on the job. I'm talking threatened with harm every single day of your existence. Kicked. Punched. Sodomized. Raped by his friends while he watched and smoked a cigar or held you down. Raped because he wanted to impress a client. Choked until you lose consciousness. That's what I went through with Beck every fucking day of my life while you were here in your safe world.”

Aaron turns to me, his face unreadable, but his eyes don't leave my gaze. A tear fills his left eye, and he blinks to keep it from spilling onto his cheek. He may be crying about discovering what I've done, or maybe this is the first time I've really told him

what Beck did to me. What Beck had his friends do to me. Something tells me Aaron's tears are more for what I endured. He knew I was hit and kicked. He didn't know Beck let his friends and clients rape me.

I wave my hands and pace, energy flowing through every vein. I've been holding this in for months, and I finally get a chance to get this out. Damn the consequences. This is Aaron. My Aaron. Not some beat cop that hates women. I should have told him months ago. I wanted to tell him all along.

"That does things to a girl. I often marvel how you didn't piece it together."

"Was this a fun fucking game for you? Did you do this to laugh at me? Was it fun to watch me chase my tail? Was it fun to watch me worry about you?"

"No." I shake my head and stick my hand up in a stop motion. "I would never laugh at you, Aaron. No matter what you think right now, you're my person. You always have been. I just questioned if you were blind to what was right in front of your face. You had to have suspected."

"How could you think I'd ever suspect you?" He clutches his chest like he's having chest pain. I hope he's OK. After all I've been through, I can't lose him that way. His girls can't lose him. "I love you so much, Lucy."

"What did you come down here for?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

"I needed a level to add some more boards and noticed the drywall tape. No offense, but it looks like a girl did it."

"That's insulting and probably the most misogynistic thing I've ever heard you say, Aaron Dwyer." I wag my finger at him. "I think the last few months have shown that I shouldn't be underestimated."

Aaron takes deep breaths through his nose, and his hands flex at his side. His chest heaves like his breath is catching up with the conversation. His jaw ticks, and he blinks like he's waking up from a deep sleep.

Or recovering from a shock.

I back up against the wall. Beck beat my ass every day of our marriage, and I know the look as it forms on Aaron's face in real time. It's pure anger, but I'm not sure exactly what he's angry at. Fear grips me, and my stomach lurches as Aaron crosses the room in two quick steps. His hand goes to my neck, and he shoves me gently against the wall like he still doesn't want to hurt me, pushing my legs apart to stick his thigh between them. His hand not at my throat gently grips my hair, almost like he can't help but lovingly stroke it, and our eyes lock. "Tell me everything!"

I don't believe for a second that Aaron Dwyer will be the death of me, but he's unhinged. "Tell me right now!" he yells an inch from my face, a drop of spit hitting my skin.

If he wasn't filled with blind rage, it'd be a great time to fuck him with some passion. I could just turn around and bend over, letting him take me hard and fast. He's the only man that could ever do whatever he wants to my body. Something deep in my soul tells me we'll get through this, and the makeup sex will be insane.

"Beck was first."

Aaron shakes his head and blinks like I hit him. "Beck's dead?"

"He was never missing. I've always known exactly where we put him. I told you on charades night. I know he's not coming here."

"We?"

I hold up a finger. I'll get to that. "I texted him for months, acting like I needed to find him to serve him papers. I had to keep you busy and your mind off Cannon and the two dipshits. Funny what Ellen's campground can cover. You'll never find him. We burned him in a fire pit, and he's dust in the wind. Just in case anything was left of the ash, we took care of it with a shovel and Ellen's fishing pond."

"Ellen was involved?"

"Let me guess. You went to talk to her and she said nothing except that she had an abortion, and that was the last she saw of Beck? Yeah, did you really think she wouldn't tell me you went sniffing around? I should have given her a heads up you were going to look, but I didn't get a chance. We talked about it over one of our monthly lunches. I have lunch with her once or twice a month, we act like we're old friends, and we share if anyone is on to us or sniffing around. We turn our phones off while we lunch. Can't text and call with that kind of information, you know?"

"That's why you go back to Chicago a couple times a month."

I nod. "There was no abortion." I pause, closing my eyes at the memory of the worst day of Ellen's life. "I was the one that found her. After he kicked her stomach until she lost the baby, I found her on the floor and helped her. I had followed him with the tracking app and was outside her house. He left, and I heard her crying and screaming from almost a block away since that entire neighborhood has the acoustics of a concert hall. She didn't want a hospital, so I held her hand for hours as she miscarried while her husband was at work. She screamed in pain the whole time, and I just held her hand. I cried for her. With her. It was all I could do for her at the moment. I held her head as she threw up and writhed for hours.

"Here was a woman that was fucking my husband. I should have hated her. I felt sorry for her, though. He treated her the same way he treated me. He killed her child because he was out of town the two weeks the baby was conceived. It was Jalen's

baby, and he was jealous. He wanted children with me. Did I ever tell you that?” Aaron shakes his head. “Beck wanted kids so bad. I’m sure it was a pride thing with him. Vanity. I often wondered if the beatings would stop if I got pregnant, and I was tempted for that reason alone. But I also knew that I’d be forever tied to him if I did conceive, and the beatings would start again at some point. Hell, I couldn’t take a chance he’d hurt our child, and I didn’t want a child to witness the daily abuse I went through.

“It’s funny that I used to judge women who had children with abusive men. I guess I looked down on them because women should leave and certainly not bring another human into that situation. But after being married to that piece of shit, I get it. It’s terrifying. It’s indescribable when they threaten your life and everyone you’ve ever loved if you leave. You think about it – you actually think about having a child just so you may not get abused for nine months. It’s crazy, isn’t it?”

Aaron grits his teeth and nods.

“He was enraged when Ellen’s baby wasn’t his. She told me he yelled at her because she was now going to get fat with another man’s spawn, and he didn’t want her fat. She was his property. At least, that’s what he said. Beck kicked her stomach over and over while he tied her hands up so she couldn’t defend herself. Beck’s death can’t all be pinned on me for that one. There’s at least one other woman in the world that felt like he deserved what he got.”

“Ellen helped you?” he asks again like he can’t believe two women didn’t give him the information he needed when he asked.

“I drugged him when he came home by using Murphy’s shit I knew Beck was helping run. I called her, using our code of coming over for a cup of coffee like normal wives of coworkers, and we dragged him to her campground. The summer season was ending, so a section was empty. If you want the full details, and I think

you just asked for everything, we sawed him apart piece by piece with a rusty saw from the toolbox as he was coming to. It's in there if you're going to take it for evidence," I say, gesturing toward the hole in the wall with my chin. I think I cleaned it well, but who knows. "Ellen laid on top of him while I sawed his legs and arms off first. She cried the whole time, telling me to hurry up."

I pause and swallow. I had a hard time sawing a man apart while he was alive and gaining consciousness, even if he was awful to me. I did that to the same man I shared a bed with and whose wedding pictures hung on my mantle.

Aaron turns his head and makes a gagging gesture. He swallows and turns back to face me, releasing his grip on my neck a little. His face crinkles like he's holding back sobs. "The hardware store wasn't a purchase for a faucet, was it?"

I shake my head. "Lighter fluid and a shovel. It's surprising neither Ellen nor I had either of those. Women, huh?"

"George Cannon?" he asks in a whisper.

"Ah, I didn't know anything about George Cannon until he came looking for Beck and Beck's money. I still have no idea what Beck was going to do with the cash. I liked your theory of using it to run away from me, but we now know that didn't happen, don't we? Beck wasn't going anywhere. Did he have a second mistress on the side that Ellen and I didn't know about? A gambling problem? I'll never know. I knew damn good and well that Beck wasn't able to pay, though. He was sawed into pieces and burned in a firepit on Ellen's land after being doused with lighter fluid. But I could hardly have said that, right?"

"How did you find out who Cannon was?"

I reach up and run my hand down Aaron's cheek. "I'm so glad we're finally having

this conversation. See, Murphy Beckett likes to talk about his business associates when he's getting his dick sucked by Sheri on the next couch over. Why are men like that?"

Aaron cringes and ignores my question. "Murphy talked about Cannon?"

"I pieced a lot together over a couple weeks when Murphy came in during my day shifts. He was going on and on about how he was going to be the new big dog for the mafia in the county. Only George stood in the way. From the description, I pieced together that George Cannon was the guy who sat on my couch and had his thugs threaten me. It was easy to find him after I had a name.

"Murphy hated that son of a bitch. There was a little turf war bitch slapping going on between the two of them. Something over George wanting to get into the girl trafficking business and Murphy not wanting to share the county. Once I had a name, I didn't want any neighbors involved or kids if he had them. I waited until the neighbors were at work. The only problem was the dog. Poor thing. I gave it food and water before I left, hoping someone would find George sooner rather than later so the dog wouldn't go hungry."

I take a deep breath and keep going. "I came in under the pretense of giving him his money. If he suspected something weird, I'll never know. Maybe he was going to kill me for finding out his name and where he lived, but I got to him first. I hit him with a wrench, and he went down. He was still alive, so I tied him up. Don't think I just went to work right there, though. I asked him questions." I stare at the wall behind Aaron, remembering the conversation. "I told him it was my turn to ask him questions while he was on his knees. He told me the names of the guys that he hired to threaten me. He told me every name but Geoffrey's. I didn't know who he was until the gala. I'm not entirely sure if Cannon even knew it since he didn't even say it when I chopped four fingers off."



“You didn’t bring Ellen in to help on the other guys?”

“Come on, Sheriff Dwyer, you know too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the soup. It wasn’t Ellen’s battle to fight. Ellen had a reason to keep quiet about Beck.

“Cannon’s the only one I panicked on. It was the first guy I killed by myself. Having Ellen with me on Beck’s death made me feel safer. The neighbors were starting to come home from work and check their mailboxes. They were doing all the neighborly things. Delivery people were dropping off dinners. I wasn’t sure if someone would come for a meeting with George, so I left out the back door and jumped a fence, hoping there were no cameras. If there were, nobody flagged it or reported it. I left him like that because I couldn’t get him out of the house. I didn’t think that one through except to be careful and clean up after myself. I’m sure I left some stuff behind, but I’ve never been in legal trouble and had no motive.”

“Murphy didn’t kill himself, did he?”

“Last to go. But you knew that. I told you that day, baby. I told you I had stuff to do, and I was a busy bee that morning. Why can’t you understand I did it when I thought you were in danger? I’m not letting something happen to you when you have those little girls to take care of, to say nothing of how I feel about your personal safety. I couldn’t bear the thought of you being hurt, and you gave me the exact times when everything would happen on the police end. I had enough time to go to his house and offer to dance for him. I made up some shit about how I’d always preferred him to Beck, and he bought it without question. Dumb mother fucker. I slipped him a little too much of his own product that my coworker, Cheryl, kindly provided for his drink, took off my clothes to dance for him to buy me some time, and then slit his wrists to make sure it took. Easy as pie to make it look like he did it himself. His laptop was right by the couch, so the email was easy. Did you even check for prints?”

Aaron shakes his head. “It looked open and shut.”

“Irony. That was the only one I was sweating because I forgot to wipe the glass I put the fentanyl in. I was good about wiping down every other scene and rubbing out footprints. It also helped that I wore the club high heels. It’s amazing how my own boyfriend didn’t recognize the flat smoothness of high heels on the carpet at these guys’ houses.”

“Space shoes,” Aaron mumbles, closing his eyes.

“I’ve never been arrested or held a job that required fingerprints on file. I’m not in the system even if you found some DNA or prints. If I left fibers behind for your forensics, I’m sure they put them aside to see if they could compare them to someone with a motive, but who suspected me?”

He pulls back from me a little, his face turning from blind rage to sheer exhaustion.

“As for Cannon’s goons in the middle of all that, I took care of them in the order you found them, except for Geoffrey, of course. He’s a tough guy to find since he spells his name with a G instead of a J. I didn’t figure that one out until after he attacked us and I saw the news report.”

Aaron looks at the floor, and I keep going. He asked to hear everything. “They had to go, too. I couldn’t have them point a finger at me as a person Cannon was after. I was worried that they may start looking around for people who had reason to take out Cannon. Sure, I’m a woman. A stripper. I’m sure I wouldn’t have been their first choice as a suspect because a lot of men don’t think strippers have two brain cells to rub together. That’s total bullshit. I walked into work with stained shorts the day I killed Todd Daniels, but I quickly threw those away as soon as I could. Peter didn’t notice the blood on them when I sat in his office and talked to him. I also waited three months before making a move on any of the men. Most people think a suspect would act immediately after being threatened. No, I took my time. Geoffrey sure didn’t suspect I was capable of anything at the turtle gala. I was so used to biding my time

to get away from Beck that I turned into a patient woman, and a patient woman is a dangerous and powerful force to reckon with.”

“Why kill Murphy? He didn’t know you were involved.”

“Why the fuck not?” I close my eyes for a moment. “He’d bring whatever girlfriend he was seeing into the club and make us girls go down on each other while he watched. Maybe he thought it was fun to have power over his cousin’s estranged wife. I’m sure that was part of it. He bullied the other women and made them sell his trash, taking Sheri’s tips like he was her pimp. Once Cheryl told me he was threatening her kids and that he had raped Sheri, I was done hemming and hawing about killing him. I am so done fucking around with every piece of shit like them.”

Aaron rolls his neck like his body doesn’t know what to do with the adrenaline rush.

“Anyway, I was done with him after I knew everything I needed to know about Cannon and his dudes. Does anyone really miss him?” I ask. “I know he trafficked and moved drugs. He pissed off a lot of people. Threatened kids. Spoiler alert, zero people have missed that piece of shit since I took care of him. I knew you were on to him, so he was an easy setup. Then, when you got close, it was easy to make it look self-inflicted.”

“You should have let me get him.”

“Should have. Would have. Could have. He’s not a player in the game now. You should really thank me.”

“Someone will fill his shoes, and I’ll have to start from scratch to build a case, Lucy.”

“True. But you’re a good cop, Aaron. Your detectives are good. Everything will unfold as it should. Besides, once you got him, someone would fill those shoes. It

doesn't matter which way he was taken out."

Aaron lets go of me but runs his finger over my lips as he backs away. "Did you get a taste for it? Is this who you are now?"

I snort and rub my neck, laughing. "Are you really asking if I'm a serial killer now?"

He gives a short nod, and his eyes flick to the ceiling, probably worried about Ruby and Pearl being around a serial killer. The tear that's been in his eye finally spills over, and he doesn't wipe it away. My fingers itch to touch it, but would he even let me?

"I did what I did to protect myself, Aaron. That's it. Protect myself. Protect Peter. Love him or hate him, he's the only family I have left, and they threatened to hurt my family. I couldn't have anything with you with those men alive. That's why I fought us and pushed you away until I just couldn't anymore. Beck would never have let me leave if I hadn't killed him. You would have been in danger from Cannon. The girls would have been in danger. Hell, with those men in the world, every woman and girl would be in danger."

"We would have dealt with it like we did when Geoffrey showed up. Together."

I snort laugh. "I told you, Aaron Dwyer, I'm bad news. I've tried to tell you all along. When I told you I'd done bad things, did you just think I meant the dancing? I kill awful men. I'm angry, Aaron. I'm still angry about being beat on for years. Then, when I get some fucking peace, some mafia henchmen show up at my door and threaten me. I am done being a punching bag, and I am done being a victim."

"You don't regret it? Do you consider yourself some sort of vigilante?"

I don't blink, and I lift my chin, straightening my shoulders until I'm at my full

height. “I regret nothing. I’m what happens when men fuck around. They find out. I woke up one day and realized I could either cower and cringe for the rest of my life or I could fix the problem. I righted some wrongs for myself. For Ellen. For all of the women and girls trafficked and hurt by Murphy. For any other woman that would have been beat on by Beck in the future. For every person, male or female, who was scared for their lives and their families by George Cannon and his band of little bitches. So, you ask if I have a taste for it – fuck yes, I do. I have a taste for justice. I won’t go looking for a fight, but if someone starts shit with me, I’ll fucking finish it. The legal way of doing things and the people that were supposed to help let me down too many times.” I pause and take a breath. “Present company excluded.”

His chin quivers, but he clears his throat, trying to get control of his voice. “Will you ever hurt me if you get mad at me? If we argue or this doesn’t work out?” His eyes flick to the ceiling again, probably worried about leaving his daughters alone in the world. Is he having second thoughts about bringing a child into the world with me?

I hope not. I want a life with him more than anything.

“Never,” I whisper, meaning it with all my heart. “I would die first. I’d never hurt you. You’re everything to me, and you’re a good man. Even if you break my heart twenty years from now, you’ll never be akin to Murphy, Cannon, or Beck.”

A tear comes out of my eye at the very thought he can even think I’d hurt him. Something about crying with him in his basement over our future moves me. I want to wrap my arms around him. Not in a sexual way. I want to hold him, rock him, and tell him it will be OK.

“I need to know if you want to do this again!” he yells, pointing to the floor. “Is it a compulsion?”

I step forward and finally wipe the tear trail off his face. Surprisingly, he doesn’t

flinch at my touch. “I’ll only do it again if trouble comes for me. And I’ll damn well do it if trouble ever looks in the direction of your girls or any child of ours. I love you. I love your girls, and I’ll do whatever the universe says to do to protect everyone in this house. Consequences be damned, Aaron. But you’ll need to tell me what those consequences are.” I back away and hold my hands out like they’re ready to be cuffed. “After all, you’re the law in this county.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:54 am*

Aaron

I fixed the drywall that night. My father was a drywall and construction contractor, so I learned drywall at age fifteen when my first summer job was working for my father. Ironically, it was also the summer I worked up the nerve to ask a beautiful, auburn-haired girl with a few freckles across her nose to the movies.

I taped my basement wall just like my father showed me and covered the hole, finally finishing at two in the morning, tears running down my face the entire time.

I still don't know why I cried. I bawled like a child for days when we broke up in college. I cried harder the other night for the innocence she lost. She's no longer my sweet Lucy with nothing staining her life. Blood will forever stain her hands, but now we'll both have to live with it.

Does it make me culpable? An accomplice? Maybe. Either way, the toolbox was in my house. The killer was in my bed all along.

In my heart all along.

The toolbox is still in my house, and it'll stay there. My heart still belongs to Lucy, and that won't change, either.

What was I going to do that day in the basement when she came clean? Cuff the woman I've loved for over half my life? Take in and question the girl I lost my virginity to because she offed her shit ex-husband, killed a child trafficker, and took care of some mafia henchmen that threatened her life? She also told me that Geoffrey

threatened my girls. That shook me to the core, and a shaken man doesn't take any shit when his daughters are at stake.

In the end, George Cannon, Beck Lenin, and Murphy Beckett were boils on the ass of humanity. If you look at it from a societal standpoint, my girl saved innocent lives down the road. She also saved the taxpayers of this county and state from having to pay for life imprisonment, death penalty fees, lawyer fees, and appeal costs. The lawman in me knows vigilantism is wrong. But when it's your own girl killing the feces of my county, especially when it's to protect my own children, I'll sure as shit turn a blind eye.

I should have been her hero a long time ago. She was bent and broken by Beck, and she put herself back together again as her own hero. How can I fault her for that?

I went to bed with her that night – climbed into bed next to a woman who brutally murdered five men without a drop of remorse. She rolled over and asked if I was going to turn her in the next day, a tear trailing down her face.

I didn't even think twice about it with her in my arms.

The answer is never. I whispered that word into her ear and then fucked her raw. I fucked a killer, this time knowing she was a killer when I did it. Over and over, I thrust into her that night, and I loved every inch of her. My hands roamed every place on her body. Her hips. Her ass. Every crease and crevice I could touch. I came hard, moaning the name of the woman I love more than my own life and career.

I've forgiven her for all of it. I knew I would eventually, but I can't be mad at her for Beck, and I can't be mad at her for the others. Hell, I wanted to kill Beck. The only emotional butthurt I have about it is that I feel stupid for not seeing it earlier, but that's just my ego talking. She did what she had to do, and I don't, for one second, think she'd hurt me or my kids. I saw her protect Ruby that night in the kitchen. She'll scoop a man's intestines out with a spoon before she lets someone hurt the



family she finally has.

The family she deserves.

“What you got there?” Mitchell asks, knocking on the door frame of my office. He’s holding a stack of folders. “Jewelry?”

I look down at the small black box I’ve been turning over in my hands. It’s the same black box I bought two weeks ago. I was saving it for a special night. The special night I had in mind involved flowers and getting down on one knee on the Chicago lakefront on a star-filled night. Who knew a special night of finding my girlfriend’s murder weapons in my drywall would happen before then?

“I was going to ask Lucy to marry me.” I say it deadpan, finally saying the words I’ve thought for weeks out loud.

Mitchell leans against the door frame. “Was? Shit, boss, you make it sound like you changed your mind. Everything OK?”

“Fine. What you got for me?” I nod to the folders tucked into his armpit.

“Todd Daniel’s case.”

I straighten in my chair. Did Coleson find something? Then again, they won’t find a murder weapon unless they look through their boss’s basement wall, and Lucy doesn’t have a clear motive for anything. The only thing linking George Cannon and Beck Lenin was some borrowed money no soul alive, save Lucy and me, knows about. Without Beck’s body and with Lucy’s texts and calls to his phone over months trying to find him, would anyone really question her? She reported him missing. To say nothing of Jalen Quarry willing to tell everyone that Beck talked about leaving all the time. I often wonder exactly how much he really knows. Has Ellen ever cracked and told him everything?

“What do you think about this case?” He hands me the top folder, and I open it like I’m actually looking for something. “I’m fascinated by it. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Coleson so turned around. He has some minuscule evidence, but we can’t do much without a suspect to get a warrant to check their clothes and shoes. Nothing in the system. Pretty scary, if you ask me.”

I’m not scared at all. Mitchell and Coleson have nothing to fear from a five-foot-seven stripper who was only protecting herself and the people she loves.

“I’m at a loss. Talk through it with him.”

“I want to hear your opinion. You’re the sheriff. Coleson still doesn’t know what to do with it, and we need direction here, sir.”

I bite my lip and stare at my desk, crossing my arms in front of me. “I think Murphy Beckett either killed or had those men killed. They all had ties to him. Maybe he had remorse. I don’t know, and I don’t give a shit. He offed himself, and we haven’t had a dead body show up in this county since he slit his wrists. That tells me all I need to know. It’s not a coincidence.”

“Coleson mentioned the same theory, but it’s the evidence that’s bothering him.”

“We can’t get a warrant to go through the closets and carpet of every citizen in the county to look for some collected fibers that could have been completely benign. It’s a witch hunt, and it’s a waste of taxpayer money and a waste of resources. We have no murder weapon, no matching prints in the system, no matching DNA in the system, no video evidence, and no suspect with a motive other than the one dickhead that killed himself. We had a warrant for Murphy because of his ties. This case is shut as far as I’m concerned. Done.”

Mitchell sighs and leans against the door frame. “It was lucky, really.”

“What was?” I ask.

“That a bunch of trafficking, drug-dealing dickheads took each other out, and the head fucker of them all killed himself. It’s kind of a neat little bow. Practically a gift from the universe.”

The universe is a dark-haired beauty that scrambled my eggs for breakfast this morning and made our little family matching cereal bowls with our names on them at a paint-your-own pottery joint last week.

I flip the folder closed and hand it to Mitchell, smiling. “Tell Coleson to file this with the other unknown open cases. Put it in the basement.” The basement is what we call still active cold cases where we have no idea where to look. It’s reserved for cases we’ll get to if we notice a pattern in other crimes. The basement refers to the old manilla folders in filing cabinets in the literal basement from the time before computers. Now, we have a cloud file by that name.

Lucy’s told me she won’t kill again unless it’s self-defense. Nobody seems to give two shits about the whereabouts of Beck Lenin, and I can’t say I’m surprised. They’ll have nothing to connect Lucy to any of this except for a lone hair from Todd Daniel’s house that will never be matched with her unless she’s arrested and has a sample of her DNA taken.

I took the hair out of pending evidence without anyone seeing it. Sure, they can still see the results in the system, but there will be nothing to hold up for the jury to prove there was ever a hair. There’s nothing tangible to show. I could lose my job for it. It would be a huge scandal, and I could even go to prison for it, but I don’t think anyone will ever piece any of this together. Given the fact the victims were all criminals, it’ll blow over in a few weeks when another crime is committed or something newsworthy happens.

I don’t regret driving to another suburb and throwing the bag that contained the hair

into a dumpster behind a bakery. The hair itself floated away in the same alley after I released it from the bag. Why I didn't notice it was a gorgeous copper color when I looked at it before, I don't know. Maybe I noticed, but my brain wouldn't let me connect the dots. I'm obviously blind to a lot when it comes to that woman.

If this is the worst thing I do in my career, come after me. If someone asked what happened to the evidence, I'll say it's a damn shame the evidence was lost.

The only other person who knows anything is Ellen Quarry, and to point her finger at Lucy would be to expose her own role in Beck's disappearance. Lucy assured me that Ellen has no desire to upset her marriage with Jalen and go looking for trouble. She didn't break that day I went to her house and questioned her. If I placed bets, I'd bet she'll never speak of word about it for the rest of her life unless she tells Jalen. Lucy and I wish nothing but happiness and a quiet life with plenty of children for them both.

The only other soul that may suspect something is Cheryl because Lucy borrowed some fentanyl from her the day Murphy died. If she suspects something, she's not talking. Her twin boys are safe.

"The basement? You sure, boss?"

"Given who he was, are we really going to dedicate resources to this? We'll keep it open until we notice a pattern and can get more evidence. Otherwise, let Chicago or the feds handle it if they ever get a hair up their asses. In my opinion, it's already been taken care of."

I get up from the seat, grab the box off my desk, and shove the ring in my pants. I stretch like I don't have a care in the world. And I don't. Even if I was blind to Lucy's charms, Mickey sleeps at our feet every night and loves Lucy. If my dog is sure about her, that's all I need.

“Where are you going?” Mitchell asks with a smile.

I smile and pat my pocket containing the ring. “You know, I think I’ll take Lucy to Chicago for a romantic evening after all. I need to stop and get some flowers. I’m going to ask the woman I’m in love with to marry me, even if it is fifteen years too late.”

Nothing in the world is going to stop me from making a life with her. Not Beck Lenin. Not George Cannon. Not Murphy Beckett. Not even my wounded pride. She’s my girl. Always has been, and always will be. I’m going to give my girl everything she deserves in life.

Marriage. Happiness. A child we’ll conceive together.

Mitchell smiles and taps the door frame as he leaves. “I don’t think it’s ever too late, boss.”

The End

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Thanks for reading Copper !