



The Dangers of Daydreaming (Love Connections #2)

Author: *Karen Thornell*

Category: Romance

Description: Finn Harrison is nothing like Gilbert Blythe... Right?

Some people collect souvenirs—Lucy Sinclair collects disasters. So, she's settled with traveling via the pages of her favorite books. But when a coveted promotion hinges on a trip to Prince Edward Island—home of Anne of Green Gables—she's forced to swap fiction for the real thing.

Finn stopped making plans the day his dad went to prison. Now he's happy with his predictable life running tours for his grandparents. That is, until his grandpa ends up in the hospital, and his junior high crush ends up in his tour group. Suddenly, Finn's carefully controlled world threatens to unravel... or maybe fate is offering him a second chance at the life he thought he'd lost.

As picturesque destinations, late-night conversations, and unexpected emergencies throw Lucy and Finn together, Lucy starts to wonder: could Finn be more like Gilbert than she'd always thought? And could reality, for once, live up to fiction?

The problem is... Happily ever after might be waiting on the other side of the ocean.

The Dangers of Daydreaming is a sweet romantic comedy with all of the swoon and none of the spice.

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Reality Sucks

Lucy

An office chair was not a comfortable place to read a book.

I tried to pull my legs up, and the armrests dug into my thighs.

When I attempted to recline, I almost tipped the whole thing backwards.

Which had to be similar to how it felt right before you belayed down a cliff, except I'd know I wasn't going to fall.

Mom and I were supposed to go rappelling in Mexico a few years ago, but I'd broken my wrist the day before, so all activities were canceled, and we'd gone home early.

It was too bad, I'd really been looking forward to it.

The lush jungle around me, the breeze in my hair, and the feeling of freedom...

For a moment, lost in a daydream, I actually forgot the pain in my thighs.

Which was unfortunate because then my foot fell asleep from lack of blood flow.

I shook it out, but it just started to tingle.

I scowled. This never would have happened in my extra-deep reading chair at home.

Why, oh why, had fear of being late made me forty-five minutes early today?

Someone tapped on my office door, and my heart jumped into my throat.

Instinct took over, and I quickly tucked away my battered copy of *Anne of Green Gables* and shook my mouse to wake up my computer, still wiggling my foot under the desk.

Not waiting for an invitation, the knocker pushed the door open.

The very pervasive smell of a very particular cologne filled my nostrils, and I knew at once who it was .

Inwardly, I groaned. Outwardly, I greeted the newcomer. “Gary.” I nodded but didn’t look away from the screen. Instead, I pulled up a spreadsheet detailing a client’s travel itinerary and pretended to peruse it.

“Morning, Lucy. Early for the meeting?” he asked.

I couldn’t help but glance at him. How did he know about my promotion meeting?

Regardless, I didn’t want to talk about it with him; my stomach was twisting enough just thinking about it. “Coming early gives me more time to help Ellie learn the ropes,” I said, eyes back on the computer.

“I need an intern myself,” Gary said, chuckling and pushing back his thinning hair. “It would be nice to pass off some of the load. You’re lucky.”

I liked Ellie, but I wouldn’t consider her as taking away from my workload. If I said that, though, it would just prolong the conversation. “Did you need help with something?” I kept my voice neutral. I wasn’t trying to be rude; I just couldn’t help it

with Gary sometimes.

He glanced at my elbow, where Anne was sticking out of a drawer. I avoided the urge to push her further in. I shouldn't feel bad about reading on the job... I wasn't even on the clock yet.

“Nope, just wanted to tell you good luck.”

My brows pulled together, and I actually looked him full in the face. Gary was mostly harmless. Always tried to take over my clients, occasionally made uninformed jokes, and could use a wardrobe refresh. But he was harmless.

So why did I feel a ridiculous surge of competitiveness—of a drive to prove myself to the middle-aged man—anytime we interacted?

Probably because he treated me like he'd been there for decades, and I was a new recruit, when I happened to know he'd started just one month before I did .

I was about to ask him what he meant by that when my phone started buzzing on the table.

“Ope,” he said, pointing, “Better take that. Or not, you are at work, after all.” And he slipped out the door, leaving it ajar.

My lips twisted to the side. Even with Gary's subtle reprimand about taking personal calls at work—which, again, it wasn't actually work hours yet—I grabbed the phone anyway. Except it was my mom.

Feeling like the scum on a doctor's office fish tank, I tossed my phone into my purse. I almost felt worse when the buzzing stopped and had to refrain from grabbing it to call her back. For years, Mom had been one of my best friends—right up there with

my five cousins—but then she'd met Brian.

And now she was marrying him.

I cleared my throat, even though there was no one to talk to, and buried myself in work until my alarm went off, telling me it was time for my meeting with Shannon. Before leaving, I turned off my computer and checked my reflection in the darkened screen.

I didn't usually dress so fancy for work, but promotion day called for an elevation in the standard clothing, so I'd raided my cousin Poppy's closet.

The mid-calf skirt, heels, and flowery blouse felt like the right move for the occasion.

I'd even borrowed a bracelet, though she'd tried to get me to switch to one with better meaning.

I just liked the pretty purples, I didn't particularly care if they didn't grant luck.

With an outfit like this, it was easy to imagine shaking Shannon's hand and thanking her for the new position—and pay raise—then gliding triumphantly down the hall (that was why I wore the skirt, it would billow behind me like Snape's cloak on Harry Potter) to my new office.

With two windows. And room to turn around without knocking something off the wall or desk.

I grabbed my purse—I may need it for the pen and notebook inside, in case there were details to my new position I'd need to write down.

It was also something to hold in my hands to stop their shaking.

I couldn't explain where the all-over tremors were coming from.

Shannon had practically promised me this promotion during our quarterly meeting last week—she'd called me a shoo-in for a position she was creating.

When I'd first joined the company three years ago, I expected to be able to move up the ladder.

Apex Travels had agents of varying levels, as well as managers and board members.

Yet, despite top performance numbers since I started, no movement had happened until now.

And while I didn't dislike my job at all, the paycheck was pitiful.

I needed a much less pitiful paycheck.

I forced my feet to walk at a normal pace, even though I wanted to run down the wood-paneled walls to the conference room, if only to shake off some of this excess energy.

Then, almost like a toddler hiding mischief, I tucked away my excited smile and opened the doors.

But any words of greeting died on my lips when I saw it wasn't just Shannon waiting for me.

Gary.

Of course, Gary was there, grinning at me as he spun his chair back and forth at the table. And next to him sat another colleague of ours. One so new I hadn't even

learned her name... but she always smiled when I saw her.

Why were they here in my promotion meeting?

Maybe they were part of the new program I would be in charge of?

I didn't know a ton about it, only that it had to do with a new service our travel company would be offering.

I lowered my confused self into a chair.

A buzz indicated my phone was going off in my purse.

Cheeks heating, I reached in and silenced the call.

Shannon ignored the interruption, sitting back in her seat at the head of the conference table and smiling at us from behind red, horn-rimmed glasses. "Now that you're here, we can get started. "

My face went hot again, probably starting to match my hair. Had they been waiting? I wasn't late. I was probably even a few minutes early still.

"Some of you may have heard that we'll be expanding our company, but I wanted to give you a general idea of what that will entail before I get into the rest." She pulled out a paper, holding it in front of her, a little closer to her face than was normal due to her aging eyes. I sat a little straighter.

"Apex Travels has decided to offer literary tours. Tours where avid readers can truly immerse themselves in the world of their favorite books. We're thinking England tours specific to Jane Austen or Sherlock Holmes, Pennsylvania tours for Louisa May Alcott.

Any and all of the greats: Edgar Allen Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Shakespeare—you get the idea.

Tours of where they lived and the places that inspired their stories. ”

My mind spun into action at the same moment my heart picked up pace. Planning these kinds of tours would be a dream. Tours to locations like Prince Edward Island for Anne of Green Gables .

I pressed my lips together to hold back my smile at the thought.

She wasn't kidding. This wasn't just a promotion.

This was the promotion. I was made for this.

Years of reading, being raised on the classics...

who said your hobbies couldn't make you money?

This was absolutely perfect. I couldn't keep the fantasies at bay—of researching every little detail and planning every perfect excursion for my fellow book lovers—as Shannon continued explaining that, while this wasn't a new concept, none of our competitors in Salt Lake were offering an option like it.

With the resurgence of brick-and-mortar bookstores and the growth of BookTok and Bookstagram, it was only a matter of time until someone else decided to dip their toes in this possibility.

“Which is why,” Shannon continued, her gray bob swinging as she surveyed us, “we want to get going as soon as possible.” The creases around her lips became more pronounced as she beamed at each of us .

Now it made sense that my coworkers were here.

If she wanted us to start immediately, I wouldn't have time to build an entire team on my own.

Better to get a few in now and then prep me with a hiring budget to grow the rest of the team.

Gary might not have been my first choice, but he did know what he was doing.

My mind wouldn't quiet down—it was bursting with possibilities.

Did I have to plan tours in a specific order, or could I do as I pleased?

How soon was soon? Frankly, I wouldn't mind working a little overtime to get a project like this off the ground.

I forced myself to focus.

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“I’ve pulled each of you in here because I feel that you could bring something incredible to this job,” Shannon said.

I scooted to the edge of my chair, ready to bolt as soon as possible and dive straight into this new project. My hand itched to reach down and grab my purse even though the meeting had barely started.

“So, I’ve decided to give each of you an opportunity to head up the project. A little competition of sorts, if you will.”

Each of us? Competition?

Understanding—horrible, ice-cold understanding—dawned on me, and my spine went rigid.

My proverbial sails deflated. What? My eyes shot to Shannon’s, but she was looking at the other two employees.

When her gaze swung back to me, her glance was so quick I’m sure she couldn’t have computed the expression of terror glazing over my features.

A moment later and she looking at her stack of papers, thumbing through them.

After a few more seconds, in which it felt like the room was spinning and I was falling down an Alice in Wonderland -type hole, she found the paper and pulled it out with a flourish.

“I have a list of seven locations we’d like to have prepped by mid-July for the pilot of this program... and I’ve decided to let each of you pick one location to head up. I’m talking two weeks to physically scout, plan, and prepare an entire literary tour. Completely paid for by the company. ”

“Oh my gosh, isn’t that a dream?” the coworker I didn’t know said, leaning back in her chair with an easy, excited expression that clearly stated she, at least, had not had the rug of a promised promotion pulled out from under her.

Gary was nodding along, his hand extending for the paper Shannon held.

She offered it to him, and the woman I didn’t know—Brooke, maybe?

Bryn?—leaned to read it over his shoulder.

As I watched, Gary pointed at something on the list, and Maybe-Bryn nodded her head enthusiastically.

That dumb competitiveness rose in me. Gary might get my promotion?

I tried to swallow my frustration. This was not my promotion. Clearly.

Shannon’s eyes fell on me, and her smile was broad. Not at all Disney-villainy like I would have expected after she pulled a move like this. My bracelet slid up my arm as I grabbed the papers—I should have worn the one that gave luck.

Shannon had said I was perfect for this position. She had said I would be thrilled and she couldn’t wait to talk more about it with me.

“Didn’t I say you would be thrilled?” she said, smile not wavering.

Well, yeah. I was just remembering that, actually.

“Once you see this list, you’ll understand why I thought you’d be perfect as a candidate for this position. A certain location might be an option on there.” She winked. Winked! And turned back to the other two.

“I need your acceptance of whether or not you’ll be putting your hat in the ring for this position by the end of today.

I know, I know—it’s short notice. I wish I had more time to give, but we’ve been rushing to get to this point as is...

and I’m hoping to have you flown out late next week.

By the end of June, I want each of you to be back and giving your proposals to me and a few company executives.

In the meantime, we’ll review your work history with the company.

Then, we’ll decide who seems best fitted for the manager position on the team, and, bonus, we’ll already have three locations planned. ”

“Could my wife come with me?” Gary asked, looking up from the paper.

“She would have to pay her own airfare, but otherwise I don’t see why not.” Shannon was clearly loving this, eating it all up. They all were. Except me.

Logically, I could see where it had all gone wrong in my head.

Emotionally, though? I was ready to stand, throw down my figurative gauntlet, and demand to know why I wasn’t being handed the position.

Even if Shannon hadn't essentially promised it to me last week, I was a perfect fit.

Right? Not only had I been with the company for years and proven my worth that way, but it was common knowledge how much I read.

Heck, I'd started an unintentional lunch book club after getting so many coworkers in on my favorite novels.

Had I ever seen Gary enjoying a book on his lunch break? No.

Sure, I didn't know Maybe-Bryn enough to say if she was just as qualified, but she was brand new. And now I had to compete against them both for my perfect job? I was simultaneously incensed and depressed. I needed baked goods and a new book.

"Take some time to think it over," Shannon was saying.

Maybe-Bryn had stood. Gary was pushing to his feet.

Shannon handed out a packet of papers to each of us.

I was the only one still sitting. My body was lead, and I didn't know if I could lug it and all its newly accumulated depression from the chair.

"And let me know by the end of the day. If two of you want to scout the same location, we'll give priority by seniority. "

Shannon gathered up her things and left the room as I endured the latest gut punch. Gary had me on seniority, so he would get first dibs if we wanted to go to the same place.

If I took the challenge. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

Not because I was a sore loser—I was, but that’s not why I wasn’t sure I wanted to go on this trip.

No, the real reason was that aside from being a little shell-shocked by the turn of events, I, Lucy Sinclair, top performing travel agent... had sworn off travel.

I was cursed. After she got back on her feet, Mom and I had spent almost a decade traveling together—at least one vacation a year—but a pattern had emerged.

February 2020: California. Wallet stolen, had to expedite a new ID to get back on the plane.

July 2021: London. Food poisoning landed me in the hospital with severe dehydration.

October 2022: New Orleans. Hair caught on fire from a stray Mardi Gras parade sparkler, had to rock a bob cut for a year, and it didn’t look good on me.

The list was longer than that. Trust me, you don’t want the gory details. I’m pretty sure a vacation led to my parents’ divorce, even. Maybe they’d have been fine if I hadn’t gone with them.

Basically, I’d given up on travel. It wasn’t worth the risk anymore, but it didn’t matter too much.

I spend my days planning trips for clients down to the last detail, so I still feel like I’m traveling now.

Plus, Utah is a great place. Tons of national parks.

Lots of sights to see. Cool events. Nice history.

It's wonderful—why would I need to go anywhere else?

Not to mention that the best escape is into a good book, of which I read many, so I really was well-traveled.

.. just not literally. But rather literature-ly.

I did have a passport—it was company policy to keep one up, and they covered the cost. They also often sent agents on travel tours; I just never go.

My phone buzzed in my purse, reminding me of twenty minutes before, when it had embarrassed me at the start of my promotion meeting.

If I weren't so close to crying, I might have laughed.

But the vibration jolted some life into me, and I shot to my feet, grabbing my purse and the papers.

I blinked a few times, trying to erase the residual dejected expression from my face, then I ducked out of the conference room, avoiding eye contact with just about anyone until I got back to my office.

Office was a generous term. It was practically a cubicle, but it had a window and a door, so office was the title it got. And now, as I closed the door behind me and dropped into my chair, I was so grateful for the personal space. My head fell onto my desk.

I was an idiot. Clearly, I had taken Shannon's excitement regarding giving me the opportunity to gain a promotion as excitement to give me the promotion.

And as I pulled out my phone, which had just buzzed again, and read the name of the

group message that had been going off, another wave of embarrassment swept over me.

My cousins had been texting away in our Cheaper Than Therapy text thread.

Dani: Good luck today, Lucy!! You're going to crush it!

Avery: You've got this!

Chloe: Lucy, I've said it once and I'll say it again... They would be idiots not to give you the job!

Sadie: Can't wait to celebrate your promotion with you!!

Poppy: Your horoscope says that when you open your heart to new adventures, the universe is waiting to pave the way for them to find you.

Huh. That last one felt a little too much like Poppy's "inner eye" had seen this whole thing coming. Too bad I didn't have that skill.

I shook my head. My thumbs hovered over the messages, torn between admitting my stupidity and just ignoring the messages for now.

Admittance won out. I needed to talk to someone about this mess .

Lucy: I didn't get it. Apparently, I wasn't getting a promotion... I was getting entered into a promotion competition. I'm so stupid. They want to send me to—

I stopped typing. In my extreme disappointment, I hadn't even looked at the literary tour locations.

Setting my phone on the desk, I reached for the papers.

They were a little crumpled in the middle on the left side, where I'd grabbed them and ran from the conference room.

I flattened them out, flipping past the preliminary details Shannon had covered until I found a page with a list of seven locations and a small summary of each author or book the location would cover.

My eyes landed on number three as if by divine force.

Prince Edward Island.

I froze, not even curious about what the other six options were.

Something that should be known about me is that I am a self-proclaimed Anne of Green Gables groupie.

A devotee. A fanatic. I've read them all.

Multiple times. Multiple formats. Various editions.

A cute Anne doll even sat on my bed at home, and it is important to put it out there that I'm not a doll or stuffed animal kind of girl.

But Anne... Anne was my best friend growing up. Lucy Maud Montgomery was my namesake.

I was obsessed. And I was proud of that obsession.

I scanned the rest of the list. A location in England, a few in the States, one in Italy...

but eventually my gaze was back on Prince Edward Island. It would be a literal dream to visit there. Even under these circumstances, where I'd been planning on a promotion and not gotten it.

Except I was cursed. Plus... I hadn't traveled with anyone but Mom in, well, ever. And she wouldn't be interested in coming with me this time. She had a new travel partner. And wedding planning to do .

So, while this should be my dream vacation, there was this person in the back of my mind who had turned on the fire alarm, and rightly so.

If something happened to ruin the world Montgomery had made, amidst everything else going wrong in my life, I didn't think I'd recover.

And as evidenced yet again by today's events, reality never lived up to expectations, so as stupid as it might sound.

.. I wanted to keep a select few dreams unsullied by real life.

But... my eyes hovered over those three little words. Prince Edward Island. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It was ridiculous that I wasn't jumping up and down with excitement over it. I would have been thrilled to plan a tour to PEI—it would have been the highlight of my career.

To plan the tour.

For other people.

My well-worn copy of Anne of Green Gables was still peeking out of the slightly ajar drawer. Was that a sign? Pinching my lips to the side, I returned to the cousin text. They would tell me to go. And maybe if they did, I could swallow my doubts and just

move to the excitement part.

Lucy: —They want to send me to Prince Edward Island to plan a literary tour from top to bottom... and then the best tour creator will get the promotion.

Lucy: I should go... right?

I stared at the phone, the irony not lost on me that I thought myself competent enough to gain a massive promotion at work, but I couldn't commit to a dream vacation all because I was scared to shatter the idyllic world formed in my head with a possibly (but not probably) fictitious curse.

The texts pinged in quick succession. Commiseration over not getting the job. Indignation on my behalf .

And a resounding, absolute agreement across the board that I had to go.

I was still holding the phone in my hand when a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” I called, and Ellie, my intern, popped her head in.

“Hi, Ms. Sinclair, I wanted to check in and see what you had for me today.”

Her perky eighteen-year-old smile was bright and expectant.

Usually, she helped me with files. Drafted emails, did groundwork, wrote out travel plans, but...

I glanced back at my phone, subconsciously squaring my shoulders.

I was worthy of the promotion I thought I'd had in the bag.

I was capable of planning the heck out of a travel itinerary.

Nothing would go wrong this time. No need to get all sweaty and nervous over it.

I could do it.

What better way to show that I had managerial potential than to help my little intern thrive in her position?

If I was going to do this, there were a lot of loose ends to tie up in the next week.

It would be good to have some help in planning my own trip...

especially the bookings and travel times.

Then I could focus on the research for Lucy Maud and creating the best tour this agency had ever seen.

“Ellie, how would you feel about trying your hand at booking a trip?”

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Surprises Suck

Finn

I tossed the keys into the air, grabbing them again as I used my back to push out the bakery door.

Tour pick-up days weren't my favorite. There was an air of awkwardness, tons of opportunity for delay, and frankly, it was monotonous.

But pickup days always led to tour weeks, and after a long winter and slow spring full of working on my own or with Pops on minor fixes around the farm, I was even looking forward to a day like this.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, maneuvering the fifteen-seater sprinter van onto the main road that took me to the airport, Nirvana started playing on the radio. I reached to turn it up, but my phone kicked into the speaker at that moment, cutting off the song and instead playing my ringtone.

"Hey, Gram," I said, picking up the phone.

She was probably going to berate me for skipping breakfast. But I liked to grab donuts for the tour group on pick-up days, and figured I'd take some sleeping-in and a donut over walking across the farm to the inn to have one of Gram's famous pancake breakfasts.

I know, it sounded stupid to me, too.

“Hey, hun.”

I sat a little straighter, glancing down at the phone with a frown.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Pops fell this morning. I—”

My hands gripped the steering wheel. “Is he okay?”

“The paramedics think he broke his hip.” Her voice was shaky. I looked at the clock—could I get back in time to help?

“Are you in an ambulance?”

“I’m following behind, I—”

“You should have told me.” I didn’t mean to sound accusatory, but the concern for my grandpa made the words come out harsh and clipped. “I could have driven you.” Gram shouldn’t be driving in this state; she was probably out of her mind with worry.

“I know, Finn, but it all happened so fast. Mr. Steel was there having coffee when James fell, and he called the ambulance for me. You have the group and—oh, here’s the hospital. I need to find parking; I’ll call you when I know more. Or, why don’t you call me? I know you’re getting the group and—”

She sounded harried. Talking too fast and leaving half the syllables off her words. I cut in, trying to be the voice of calm I knew she’d need, even if I didn’t feel halfway to calm myself. “I’ll call you as soon as I’ve got the group settled in. Don’t worry about me, just focus on you and Pops.”

“Okay. Okay, Finn, I’ll talk to you later. Love you.”

And without even waiting for me to reciprocate the love, she hung up.

I stared at the taillights of the car in front of me. Pops wasn’t that old. In his seventies. He was driving a skid steer yesterday. But broke a hip today?

No. They didn’t know if he had broken his hip yet. No use worrying about something that hadn’t even been confirmed.

I rubbed my lips together. Despite how logical my brain was being, the worry stayed there, making itself at home in my gut, and I clenched the steering wheel tighter, not allowing myself to think about what this could mean for Pops and for the coming weeks.

I didn’t like planning ahead like that. It was pointless and usually set me up for disappointment.

What I needed to do was get back to thinking about the group starting today.

Something I had some control over. An extended family, which was a little rare.

Usually, we got school groups or a compilation of adults who’d all booked through some travel agency.

But this was two grandparents from the States who’d decided that what their family reunion needed was two weeks of touring Prince Edward Island.

There was a bet going on at the farm—whether it was the grandma or somebody else who was obsessed with Anne of Green Gables .

Someone always was. Prince Edward Island had a lot to recommend, but the vast majority of tourists were pulled in by all the Anne-related sites they could visit.

I shoved thoughts of Pops to the back of my mind. I'd focus on them when I could actually do something about it.

I held the sign that neatly read "Hastings Reunion" as I waited by baggage claim.

There was another tour leader in the crowd that I recognized, and I nodded at him.

His mouth lifted in return. Prince Edward Island was not a huge place.

I'd moved from Utah when I was fourteen, and PEI was a fraction of the size of that state, comparable to two or three counties, but our tourism was rampant, especially beginning in June.

Still, there weren't many tour companies in the area.

Tours to go on, yes. But companies that would take you to several during the course of your stay, no.

So, I knew basically everyone who worked in the industry.

There was a healthy amount of competition between us all, too.

I'd eye Steven's group when they came in, just as I'm sure he'd be eyeing mine.

A little figurative trophy would go to whoever had the larger group .

It was a toss-up who might win today. My group wasn't massive—just seven adults and two children—but it wasn't July yet, so smaller groups were pretty common.

Several people came down the escalator in front of me.

My eyes scanned the travelers, though I didn't know what anyone looked like in my group.

Red hair caught my attention, and while I couldn't see much of her features as her head was on a swivel, taking in the room, something about her seemed familiar.

That was common around here, too, though I would have thought I'd remember hair like that.

An elderly woman, close in age to my grandparents, blocked the redhead from my sight. Her deep-set eyes locked onto my sign, and within seconds, she was bustling towards me, pulling a tall man behind her.

I smiled, relaxing into a more welcoming stance as she beamed up at me. Her face had so many lines that her eyes nearly disappeared into their folds with that smile.

"I believe you are looking for us, sweetheart."

She could only be around four and a half feet. "Mrs. Hastings, I presume?"

"Oh, call me Gemma."

"And I'm Finn." I tucked the sign under my arm, reaching out my hand to shake hers. "I wish they'd warned me you were this charming—I would have worn my fancier socks."

She laughed at that and gestured to the man who'd just stepped up beside her.

As tall as she was short, but just as willowy and with as many wrinkles.

“This is Hank. And...” she looked around, “the rest of them are around here somewhere.” She pursed her lips, but even that appeared more amused than annoyed.

I nodded, still smiling. “Take your time rounding everyone up and getting your luggage. I’ll wait just over there.” I pointed to the chairs beside the rental car counter .

“Absolute perfection, thank you, Finn.”

I almost expected her to pat my cheek, but she just toddled off, pulling the man—Hank— with her again. He gave me a salute as he was dragged away. I returned it with a grin. If the rest of the family were anything like the parents, they would be a fun group.

Duty done for the moment, I sauntered to the rental car station, my stomach growling. The donuts were on the van's front seat, and I probably shouldn't have skipped breakfast at Gram's—had they even had breakfast? Or had Pops fallen before—

My stomach churned with a different feeling entirely, and I pushed those thoughts aside.

As I sat, I vaguely noticed that the red-haired woman was at the rental counter. Bummer that she wasn't in my group for the week. I was not against a little flirting on the job. Had she ended up in another tour group? Did she live in the area?

I couldn't keep my gaze from darting over to her as I slouched into the metal chair, waiting for her to turn so I could get a full look at her face.

An email notification made my phone ping, and I pulled it out, opening the app and skimming the messages.

A handful in my company email confirmed different tours and entrance fees we'd booked for the next week and a half.

But the latest was from my college: an alumni email.

That made me snort with entertainment. I quickly swiped it into the trash, not even reading the subject.

“Um, maybe it's under a different name... try, sorry, one sec...”

The red-haired woman was riffling through her carry-on for something. I would have remembered her if we'd met before, but somehow she seemed like a piece of déjà vu in a person. My brow furrowed. Where could I possibly know her from?

“No, sorry, I don't see anyone under that name,” the rental worker was saying now. I knew him. Simon. Good guy .

The woman blew out a frustrated breath, tapping away on her phone, then holding it to her ear.

“I swear I saw a confirmation number somewhere, but now I can't even find the email, and— Dang it.

She didn't answer.” She lowered the phone.

Then, in a voice full of resignation, she said. “What's the cost to rent a car?”

Simon looked something up on his computer. “Unfortunately, we don't have any more in the size you're looking for. We'll have some returns tomorrow, or we can get you a larger size.”

“Okay. Um...” She looked around, eyes catching on mine for a moment as she scanned the area.

I shifted my attention back to the luggage carousel, so she wouldn’t think I’d been staring.

I had been, but that would come across as pretty creepy.

Bags started to unload onto the metal loop, and I watched as Mrs. Hastings—Gemma—grabbed a toddler who was trying to climb onto the moving machine.

I chuckled at the little guy’s annoyed expression and swinging legs.

Apparently, Gemma was pretty strong for such a little lady.

“Where would I go to find out if my hotel has a shuttle?” I heard the woman ask Simon. “Maybe I’ll just take a shuttle and figure out the rental car situation tomorrow or Monday.”

“Do you know who you’re booked with?”

“The Holiday Inn.”

“Awesome, they’re right over there.”

“Thanks.” She passed in front of me, going to the counter on my right side, about six seats down. I watched her go, looking creepy again, I’m sure. She almost looked like... But no, that would be too big a coincidence.

My phone pinged with a notification. Gram? My heart lurched with the anticipation

of news.

But it was another email from the university.

Jeez, two in one day? I swiped it away .

“No, that can’t be possible—this hotel is right here on my travel itinerary.”

“I’m so sorry, Miss, but we don’t have you down as being booked with us. We don’t have any vacancies for tonight, but I could direct you to another hotel?”

“No... no, it’s fine, I’m going to try to get ahold of my work.

Maybe it’s somehow under another name or—” The redhead blew out another frustrated breath.

I grimaced on her behalf. Sounds like whomever set up her travel plans had screwed up big time.

That wasn’t a huge surprise—plans never seemed to work out perfectly.

Maybe I could help... I knew the inn wasn’t fully booked tonight.

I saw from the corner of my eye as she left the counter, walking slowly toward the luggage pickup.

The toddler from before was sneaking around the luggage carousel.

My gaze flicked back to Gemma. No one in the Hastings group seemed to have seen him playing jailbreak, so I stood, preparing to be a human roadblock if he tried to run out the doors into the busy pickup lane outside.

Eyes on the kid, I sidestepped my way closer to the exit.

And then the little guy bolted. But instead of heading toward the exit like I'd thought he would, he ran for the escalators they'd come down ten minutes before.

And at that exact moment, the redhead stepped into his fleeing path.

The boy collided with her carry-on, sending it skidding backwards, him on top like it was a surfboard and he was its rider.

The collision grabbed the attention of the Hastings family and several of them rushed forward, surrounding the boy and woman. I made my way toward them to see that everyone was alright.

A lady, presumably the boy's mom, had scooped him up and was holding him while he attempted to squirm from her arms. "Luke! That's very dangerous, you need to stay by Mom or Grandma—say sorry to the nice lady. No, hey, stop kicking, just—"

I wanted to help but wasn't sure how, so I just shoved my hands in my pockets, standing on the outskirts of the group in case anyone needed me.

Gemma was picking up the redhead's bag. "I am so sorry, Miss—"

"Sinclair," the woman said.

My head jerked up. My eyes narrowed at the redhead. No way. Sinclair had to be a common last name. It probably wasn't—

"Lucy Sinclair," she finished. My eyes raked across her face while she chatted with the Hastings. There was no way that Lucy Sinclair from my small, Utah junior high was standing in front of me right now on Prince Edward Island. Absolutely no way.

But now that I looked, I saw it. Her hair had darkened but was still red, her face shape had slimmed out as happens when people age, and she... well, she'd grown up. This was not the spindly, nerdy girl that I used to tease at school; this was...

Her eyes landed on mine. Not a single ounce of recognition lit her gaze. I'd like to think that because I had grown so handsome as I aged, I was nearly unrecognizable as the gangly, spotty kid of thirteen.

But it might have just been because I didn't hold such an important place in her past as she did mine. I hadn't thought about her in years, but it's not like you ever completely forget your first real crush. And I had crushed hard on Lucy Sinclair.

My lips quirked up, thinking of her predicament I'd overheard and of my need for distraction in the wake of things going on with Pops. We might just be able to help each other out here...

I suddenly realized that the Hastings had retreated to the luggage carousel, leaving me standing in awkward silence with Lucy Sinclair.

I shook my head. What were the chances?

Her brow was creased and her eyes were narrowed. I saw myself as she must see me: grinning like a maniac, likely having some internal conversation with myself, and staring at her.

No wonder she was slowly backing away. I bet I looked like a wild dog, erratic and dangerous.

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Only Hope

Lucy

The curse was alive and well.

I had let Ellie handle all the bookings, but I had gone over the entire itinerary with her before leaving.

I knew I'd seen confirmation numbers, but now I couldn't be sure if they'd been on the itinerary or just on her computer screen.

And then a toddler had tried to flatten me like a pancake.

That one was a particularly creative plot twist from the curse.

A dull throbbing was starting behind my eyes. Deep breaths. I wasn't stranded—not exactly. I had my credit card and this country had several hotels. Everyone here spoke English. I could make this work.

So why did my heart seem to think a bear was chasing me in the woods?

My eyes caught sight of the man from before. Tall, dark... and familiar? But also not. Really, his most apparent trait was how he was staring at me. What the heck. Had he been watching me have an existential crisis for the last several minutes? Had he asked something?

“Kinda reminds you of the sixth-grade field trip, don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry—what?” I looked over my shoulder. Had I wandered between two people’s conversation? No one was there.

“You know—when you forgot your lunch, and I saved you by sharing mine.”

My mind was whirling to catch up. I felt like I’d just opened a book and started reading from page 93. Characters, situations, and inside jokes I didn’t understand. Except... his words sparked something in me. My eyes swept over him.

No.

Nope. It couldn’t be. The curse wouldn’t be that cruel.

His lips were stretching into a grin I couldn’t have forgotten if I’d tried.

I kept my expression neutral. “You did not share your lunch, you stole half of David Ackleberry’s and pretended it was yours.”

He didn’t look at all repentant. His smile had grown even wider. “It’s good to see you, Lucy.”

Strangely, it was a little good to see him too. Strange, because Finn Harrison was my junior high nemesis. But good because I was mentally drowning, and seeing a familiar face was like a little buoy thrown my way. Who would have thought I’d ever be happy to see Finn, though? Ever?

Finn folded his arms, and I realized I hadn’t responded. “Nice to see you too,” I said.

He laughed. “Once more, this time with feeling.”

I shook my head. It seemed his humor hadn't changed one bit in the last decade.

"Listen," he said, surprising me with a somewhat serious tone. "I overheard you talking to Simon. Your car fell through? And hotel?"

My face went hot. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, I just so happen to have a place for you to stay."

I was not staying at this man's apartment. I didn't care if it was the last lodging available on the island, I'd board a plane and try again next week. Honestly, what did it matter if Gary got the promotion, after all? He was, you know, a whole month my senior.

"So, as I said, I think this will be reminiscent of our sixth-grade field trip—I hope you don't mind being in my debt a second time."

I shook my head at his bad jokes. "I should be fine. I just need to make a few new bookings, and then I'll be on my way. Thanks, though. "

He pushed his hands into his pockets, looking like he was enjoying this all too much.

"My grandparents own a bed-and-breakfast and a tour company. I'm here picking up a group right now.

" He jerked his thumb over to the family whose toddler had launched a human missile attack on my luggage.

His thoughts seemed to go in a similar direction because he grimaced and said, "Don't hold their three-year-old against me. "

That actually almost made me laugh.

“I know they have a few vacancies, and I have room in the van to take you back to the inn.”

I hesitated. Sure, it was nice to have an option...

but did I really want to be reliant on Finn Freaking Harrison for my safety right now?

The guy had made my junior high years miserable between teasing me for my vocabulary and holding my books ransom.

Of course, I was well aware that was standard middle-school-boy behavior, but still.

Did I want to be running into this man the whole time I stayed there?

“I don’t stay at the inn, myself, if that helps,” he said nonchalantly, correctly interpreting my silence.

“Where is it? The inn.”

“Just outside of Victoria. A little over half an hour to Charlottetown.”

Hmm. Not exactly where I wanted to be stationed during this trip, but not too far off. My original hotel had been in Charlottetown, but I’d need to travel around the island anyway.

I checked my phone again. Nothing from Ellie.

I blew out a breath. Should I contact Shannon?

It was a Saturday, so the likelihood of someone being in the office was low.

Even Gary and Marissa (not Bryn, surprisingly) had flown out yesterday to their respective tours.

No one would be around to help me until Monday.

So, I needed a fix now. The itinerary Ellie had sent had the name of the hotel and rental car company, but not confirmation numbers. I'd checked all my texts and emails and couldn't find anything there either .

My chest was tight. This was not helping convince me to travel more. Could I use it as an excuse not to go to Mom's destination wedding? Sorry, Mom, I tried to give the curse another shot, and it attacked with a vengeance—I'm afraid your nuptials aren't worth angering it further.

Finn was watching me with an amused expression, and I realized with a jolt of embarrassment that I'd forgotten to answer again. I couldn't help it that my mind was a very entertaining place.

"Okay," I said.

His brows raised. "Yeah?"

I just nodded. I was feeling a little queasy about the whole thing. Was this a terrible choice? I'd been a travel agent long enough to realize that hiccups and mistakes happened on trips. You just had to pivot.

Cue the Friends scene of Ross yelling, "Pivot! Pivot!" It was an appropriate comparison—I was feeling fairly panicked about it myself.

I grabbed my suitcase off the conveyor belt and stood. That family was starting to gather near the exit.

Finn glanced over at them, then settled his eyes on me. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Cheaper Than Therapy

Lucy : Made it to Prince Edward Island. None of my bookings went through, so I hitched a ride to a B&B.

Hope I see you all again someday. If not, Poppy can have my houseplants.

Dani, Sadie, and Avery can split my books.

I don’t know if I have anything Chloe wants, but feel free to raid my house pre-estate sale. ???

I glanced up at Finn from my window seat in one of the van’s middle rows.

My cousins all knew him. I had spent sixth, seventh, and part of eighth grade complaining about the guy almost nonstop.

About how everyone else liked him—even the teachers—and how he was nice to everyone but me.

It might take them a second to place his name, but if I said Finn Harrison had saved me, they would know exactly who that was.

But something held me back from mentioning him: a desire to figure out just what

mid-twenties Finn was like before I had to justify the weird safety I felt around him.

Especially since there was currently a toddler impersonating a tap dancer on the back of my seat.

Finn glanced back in the rearview mirror, catching me watching him. I quickly pretended I was just looking out the windshield.

The van rocked as we pulled onto a dirt road.

A colorful wooden sign with scalloped edges read The Seaside Barn and Breakfast , and behind it rose a beautiful three-story farmhouse.

It sat, almost cradled in a semicircle of blossoming trees that extended back as far as the eye could see.

A handful of other buildings were scattered amidst the orchard—one that seemed to be a small house and another red, quintessential barn were the most prominent.

It looked like a postcard.

The van pulled to a stop, and I circled it to grab my bag from the back. Finn was already there, pulling out everyone's luggage. He handed me my bag.

“ Thanks,” I said, a bit awkwardly. What was I supposed to do with this version of my junior high nemesis? Yeah, I knew people grew up and grew out of immaturity (some of them, at least), but I was having a hard time reconciling the Finn in my head with the one currently in my face.

Which reminded me that I was staring again. And I think he was silently laughing at me.

I backed away, extending the handle of my rolling suitcase and pulling it behind me, bumping over small rocks as I made my way to the front of the inn.

It was adorable. A porch ran the length of the first story, a gable jutted out with a singular window on the third floor, and flowers surrounded the front while trees hugged the back.

The first step creaked a little as I made my way up, but the door swung open on well-oiled hinges, revealing a wide, wood-paneled entry with cased openings on either side.

One passed what looked like a dining room, and another was furnished with bookshelves and comfy chairs.

Directly in front of me, next to a doorway further into the house, was a long desk with a young woman behind it, smiling.

“Welcome to the Seaside Barn and Breakfast. Can I help you get checked in?” The cute girl had braces ringed in pink rubber bands and was wearing a light green branded T-shirt that matched the sign outside.

“Yes, thank you. I need to book a room...” For how long? It made the most sense to settle in for the full two weeks, but that also meant seeing Finn for that long. Maybe. Maybe all he did was pick up tours. I might not see him again or hardly at all. “For two weeks,” I finished, deciding.

“Perfect, we have our gable room available for that time.” She went over the cost and details, and I filled out all the paperwork and was given a key.

“Oh, and do you have Wi-Fi I can connect to?” I needed to get started booking tours and planning my trip.

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“Oh yes,” she said, lifting her hands to look across the counter at several different piles of papers. She moved some aside, grabbing a small paperclipped stack. She pulled one out. “I should have given you one of these already, sorry.” Her expression seemed so disappointed.

“It’s no problem at all, I’m just here on a work trip, so I know I’ll need the information.”

Her smile returned, and she gestured to the room to her side. “If you want, you can work in the lounge here. This used to be a working farm in the 1800s, and there are lots of fun trinkets and even pictures from its history. Plus, the Wi-Fi is way better down here than up in the rooms.”

“ Oh, awesome, I’ll do that. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome!”

With my check-in papers in one hand and suitcase handle in the other, I headed for the narrow staircase.

The gable room was up two flights, and the walk was just as cute as everything else here.

Dark hardwood treads showed to either side of a red carpet runner down the middle of the stairs.

The stairwell wall was covered in framed photos.

I glanced at them as I went—there were landscape pictures and some cute little sayings, but mostly it was a compilation of tons and tons of different people.

Large groups down to individuals. Probably people who had stayed at the B I just needed to check on the coffee table.

Stephanie said one of the legs is wobbly.

” He crossed the room, coming to crouch beside the table in question and lifting it to examine the legs.

I didn’t feel like I could return to work with him only a few feet from me. “So, you shuttle guests and fix up stuff around the inn?”

“Yep.” He reached around one of the legs, twisting something. “Whatever my grandparents need. I also run the tours.”

My eyebrows lifted. “You must be busy.”

He looked up, nodding at my laptop. “You too. Work trip?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t expound; half his jokes in junior high revolved around my love of Anne of Green Gables. I didn’t need him bringing up the six months I’d spent painting freckles on my nose to look more like Anne when he learned I was here to plan an itinerary around the books.

“ So, how did you end up in Canada?” Last I remembered seeing him, it had been the start of fall break in eighth grade; he’d said nothing about leaving, but had never come back.

There had been rumors about his dad getting into trouble, but I hadn’t paid much

attention to them because I really hadn't liked Finn Harrison.

And I didn't enjoy all the talk about the cute, popular kid.

It had been a bit of a sore spot how much everyone loved him when he was such a menace to me.

Even my friends had harbored crushes on him, though they'd tried to hide it.

"My grandparents live here."

I jumped a little. What had I asked him? "Oh yeah, I remember you mentioning that a few times at school."

His lips stretched at that, but he didn't need to seem so pleased with himself that I would remember things about him.

After all, I recalled that tidbit because he'd made fun of my obsession with Prince Edward Island, stating that his grandparents lived there, he visited every summer, and it was nothing special.

He pushed on the table leg, and it didn't move. Nodding to himself, he lowered it back to the ground. "And what's your work trip for?" he asked.

I sighed internally. "I work for a travel agency. I'm here to build an itinerary. Go on tours and stuff."

"Oh, so you have things planned?" He leaned a hip against the back of the couch as if settling in for story time. Another door opened and closed upstairs.

I, meanwhile, was ready for him to go. I didn't know how to act around this guy that I

had known, and severely disliked, for several of my formative years. “This was a bit of a last-minute trip. I’ll need to book everything here. That’s what I was about to do.”

Noise sounded in the stairwell; it seemed like the Hastings family was headed downstairs for something.

“ You should just join us.”

I lifted my brows.

“You know, on tours. We run tours with the B&B. The Hastings family is doing a two-week-long one starting...” He glanced at his watch, then up at me, smiling.

“Now. Come with us, you already know we have an extra seat in the van. If you call shotgun this time, you won’t be stuck holding the toddler’s used juice cups either. ”

I gave him a tight smile. He wasn’t being unkind at all—really, he’d been nothing but helpful all day.

I could have still been stuck at the airport if not for him.

But I was not exaggerating when I said he was my full-on nemesis in junior high.

Sure, it was just harmless teasing. But ask any twelve-year-old girl if she likes being made fun of every single day for things like being in love with books and big words.

It had left a lasting mark, and I think I liked Finn more like this.

Small talk and little contact. Then I wouldn’t have time to discover that a decade hadn’t actually matured him.

“No, thank you, though,” I said. “I’ve got it covered.” He probably wasn’t going on all the tours I needed to anyway.

He actually looked disappointed, but he pushed himself back to a standing position and nodded.

“Suit yourself.” Then he went to join the Hastings, who, by the sound of it, were almost to the entrance of the old home.

He stopped at the cased opening, though, glancing back at me.

I ignored the small flip my stomach did when our eyes locked.

“You look good, Sinclair,” he said. “It’s good to see you. ” Then he smiled and left the room.

Ugh. Why had that actually given me butterflies?

Thankfully, my phone buzzed, distracting me. Fingers crossed that it was the office.

My stomach dropped. It was a notice from my bank.

The charge for the B&B had been declined.

Embarrassment flooded me even though no one was there.

Quickly, I signed in and changed the charge from debit to my savings.

I honestly think it caused me physical pain t o do so.

The point of a savings account was for savings, but lately, between tickets to attend

Mom's wedding, a bridesmaid's dress, and the amount of junk food I was purchasing to uphold my mental well-being, that number was going down, not up.

The company would pay me back though, it was only a temporary charge.

But the sick feeling in my stomach was reminding me of what was at stake here.

Sure, living out my bookish dreams might have been a big part of pushing me to take this promotion challenge, but ultimately it came down to the fact that I needed the security a promotion would give.

I needed to stay focused: get in and get out with the best tour itinerary planned.

So, I swiped out of my bank app and pulled up the phone. It was time to call some locations and get my tours planned.

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Change is Coming

Finn

The beeping of hospital machines made it hard to pretend this was just a regular evening with my grandparents.

Under normal circumstances, I'd love the chance to be in a hospital and ask questions to the nurses and doctors.

I'd be figuring out what each of these machines was monitoring.

But instead, I studiously avoided looking at the tubes attached to my grandpa as I settled into a chair by his bed.

"Nice dress, Pops," I said, nodding at his hospital gown that disappeared into white and blue blankets on his bed.

He chuckled, his gray eyes twinkling as he glanced at Gram. "I don't know why Jules complains so much. These things are comfortable." He winked.

Gram rolled her eyes, which brought my attention to the dark circles under them. Pops had only been here since this morning, but Gram already looked haggard. Worry wrote itself into every smile line on her sixty-five-year-old face. "Yes, well, my dresses aren't open at the back."

Pops barked a laugh at that.

I appreciated the levity. It was another great distraction from the sterile room we sat in and everything it meant.

“How’re you doing?” I asked, not sure I wanted a truthful answer.

“It’s nothing compared to that time a Massasauga bit me back in the seventies,” Pops said, but I noticed the shadow of discomfort as he tried to lean back.

“Better pain meds this time?”

“Enough to tranquilize a horse,” he responded with a grin that turned grimace.

I couldn’t look at that expression, so I turned to Gram. “Is it broken?”

She nodded. “The surgeon was here this afternoon. He wants to operate.”

“Better to do that soon, right?” I chanced a glance back at Pops.

“Dr. Gulliver doesn’t want to wait more than twenty-four hours, but...” She raised her brows at her husband.

I swung my gaze between the two of them. “Do you not want the surgery?”

Pops avoided my eye. And Gram’s. Instead, he took a sip from the massive cup sitting near him. “There are a lot of risks with surgery.”

“Lots of risks with a broken hip, too,” I replied. This was just like my grandpa. Loved the man, but jeez, he dragged his feet on everything. He called it a “farmer’s pace,” and said he couldn’t afford to go too fast or he would miss something important—the exact opposite of my Gram.

“I’m not saying I won’t get the surgery,” Pops hedged. “I’d just prefer to read through all the information.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said, shaking my head.

“Don’t look at me like that, I get enough of those looks from your Gram.”

I swept aside my annoyance. Pops would get there on his own, just not as fast as the rest of us would like.

And hopefully it wouldn’t cause any long-term medical issues—if the doctor was really worried, he’d probably insist on surgery ASAP, not just recommend it within twenty-four hours.

“Sorry, Pops,” I said, leaning back and feigning nonchalance even though every one of my muscles was tense and begging to get up and pace.

“It’s a hard life when you marry a woman who’s always right.”

Both my grandparents laughed at that.

“I always knew you were my favorite grandson,” Gram crossed the room to pat my head like I was an obedient pup.

“He’s your only grandson,” Pops grumbled with a light grunt as he tried again to get comfortable. He leaned his head back against the flat hospital pillow.

Gram ignored him, looking down at me in my chair. “How did the tour go today?” she asked.

I stood, nudging her into my chair and crossing my arms as I thought over the day.

“Same as usual. Booked an additional guest at the B something about the action looked embarrassed. “To be honest, we’d thought about this before everything. It’s just getting to be too much for us. All the company’s overhead, along with the upkeep of the farm... it’s more than we can handle.”

A hailstorm of disagreements filled my mind, but I closed my mouth against them.

It was harder to tamp down the sensation of frustration that they’d been discussing this without me.

I wanted them to do whatever was best for them...

I just wish it wasn’t this. I honestly didn’t think it needed to be this.

Life was good. They’d been running the farm and bed-and-breakfast for as long as I could remember.

The last couple of years, we’d fallen into a great rhythm with the addition of the tours.

Gram and Pops ran the small tour company along with their B&B.

We had a few employees. I took the tours out and helped with odd jobs around the place, and Stephanie handled the reception desk—her mom came in and helped with breakfast when needed.

We saw to the upkeep of the farm with Pops’ help.

Gram even ran a little social media page for it all, with help from Stephanie, because none of us really knew what we were doing with that stuff.

We weren't one of the bigger groups around, but we had a lot of referrals, and things had really started to grow and take off.

Maybe that was the problem. If things weren't going so well, it would have been more manageable for them.

"We won't make any major decisions till we have more answers about your grandpa," Gram whispered. "I just wanted you to know it was a possibility."

I nodded, my throat too tight to speak. It wasn't so much that I was sad or upset as I was...

worried. I liked knowing what each day would bring and living in the moment without fear for the basics of life.

Just like I didn't have to worry about the sun rising each day, I didn't have to worry about Gram and Pops, my job, or my living situation.

And now I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to me if the business shut down.

I scoffed. Way to be self-centered, Finn.

"You just let me know what you need from me, Gram. I'm happy to take on more if that would help." Whatever she needed, so long as they kept things the way they were.

She smiled, but her eyes seemed pained. Or pitying. Probably pitying me for thinking I could change their minds. Or that I could be more help.

By the time I made it back to the farm, I was exhausted from watching Gram's

exhaustion. I hadn't stayed too much longer, just another fifteen minutes or so, but to see the haunted look of worry in my grandma's eyes had weighed me down.

Gram and Pops had raised me since I was fourteen.

They'd stepped back into parenthood with an ease that made it so I hadn't considered how hard it must have really been.

Until a few years back, I'd never realized how much that must have rocked their lives, but they hadn't batted an eye.

And throughout the next decade, they had met challenges and setbacks in their personal and professional lives with the same ease.

Until now. And it stressed me out.

Lots of people broke their hips, though. And that wasn't a life- or future-ender. We'd work through this.

A light in the parlor had me leaning back to look through the doorway. I had a small duffle of clothes and toiletries I'd grabbed from my house on the way in, and I dropped it on the floor in the middle of the entry so I could go shut the lights off.

But someone was in there. Someone cute with red hair and a smattering of papers surrounding her on the loveseat and coffee table.

When I came in, she looked up, her brows pulling together beneath her upswept hair.

At some point, she must have plopped it all on her head, and curls fell around her forehead and down the nape of her neck.

Dark red that framed her face and accentuated the angles of her nose, cheeks, and jaw.

A bit of my junior high crush might have survived the last decade.

“You wear glasses?” I asked as I stepped further into the room.

Her eyes crossed for a moment, as if checking if there were really glasses on her face.

“Oh, no, these are just for the blue light.” She pulled them off.

“Too bad, they’re cute.”

Her eyes narrowed. It almost made me laugh how annoyed she got with a bit of light flirting.

“Have you moved from here since we left this morning?”

“Yes.” She drew the word out.

“That wasn’t very convincing.”

“I’ve been working. But I did take breaks.”

I picked up one of her papers. It was a handwritten list of tour locations... all surrounding Anne of Green Gables . My mouth quirked up. “Still obsessed?” I asked.

She snatched the paper from me. “It’s for work.”

“How much did you have to bribe them to create an Anne of Green Gables tour?”

She started grabbing all her papers with a disgruntled expression. Seemed my teasing

worked as well on her now as it had in junior high. “If you need to know, my agency has decided to offer literary tours. I am planning out the Lucy Maud Montgomery one.”

I nodded, sitting down on the coffee table as if she didn’t seem like she was just getting ready to leave. “You know, we go to a lot of these places on our tours.”

She stilled. Interesting. She’d been quick to dismiss the idea of joining our tours earlier.

“Yeah,” I said. “We even go to Green Gables. Mrs. Hastings told me today that she and her daughters all read the books together. That’s a big part of why they chose to come here for their family trip.”

Yep, she was definitely interested. Her hands full of papers and her computer had lowered back to the couch, and her mouth was parted as if she wanted to say something. I cocked my head at her. “Still sure you don’t want to just join us?”

She pressed her lips together, something holding her back.

Probably me, to be honest.

“Come on, Lucy.”

“What?”

I gave her a knowing look. “You haven’t been able to book anything, have you?”

She glanced down. “No, I’ve been able to book a couple things...”

“But not the important ones. I’ve lived here half my life.

I know how quickly tours fill up this time of year.

And you said this was a last-minute trip, so you probably haven't had a chance to plan ahead, which means you can't get into any of the important tours.

But I already have reservations for a group.

"My lips lifted in a slow smile. Her eyes fixated on my mouth, and for the briefest of moments, I let myself think there was anything but annoyance in that expression.

Then her shoulders drooped. "I've been planning and calling places all day, trying to get into tours. Half of them are closed for the weekend, and several are booked. I..." Her nose scrunched up, and she sighed. "Yes, Finn, I would really appreciate it if I could join your tour group."

I stood, clapping my hands on my knees as I did. "Perfect. We leave tomorrow at ten a.m."

She pressed her eyes closed, and I thought I read relief on her expression before they popped open again. "Thank you. I'll be ready." And, shock of all shocks... she smiled at me.

I wasn't going to tell her that tomorrow was a tour stop not at all related to Lucy Maud Montgomery.

She hadn't asked and maybe it was a little mean but...

I wanted to spend more time with Lucy Sinclair.

Because, as I stepped from the room and the weight of the evening dropped back on me like a heavy backpack, I realized that I hadn't thought about the problems with

Pops and the farm once during our conversation.

That was the kind of distraction I needed. And I only felt a twinge of guilt to use Lucy that way. But I settled my guilt with the thought that knowing PEI in its entirety would be useful to her.

She just might not agree.

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Potatoes and Plans

Lucy

The cloudless, sapphire sky could have entranced my gaze, or the long grass waving in the breeze, or the glittering ocean water... but I was too mad.

I tried again to, unsuccessfully, catch Finn's eye. He was straight up ignoring me. And by the smirk playing across his lips, he was enjoying it.

I crossed my arms against the chill in the breeze—it was the least of my problems. The biggest one at the moment was that I had just spent the last hour and a half traveling to this location and another touring the West Point Lighthouse.

Which was beautiful and stately and had some fascinating history to it but had NOTHING to do with Anne of Green Gables.

Dang it, Finn. I should have expected a trick like this: offering to take me on tours, but conveniently not mentioning that the first tour would be of zero help to me.

At my breaking point, I stalked toward Finn, ready to interrupt his conversation with Mrs. Hastings, the cute little (emphasis on little) old matriarch of the Hastings reunion, when my phone started ringing.

I pulled it out and looked at the screen in relief. Finally. Turning, I found a bench and sat, answering the call.

“Ellie.” I felt like a mom trying to keep the reprimand out of my tone, but still having plenty of disappointment bleed in.

A hurried voice came through the phone.

“Ms. Sinclair, I just got your messages! I was out all weekend, and I don’t know what happened.

I swear I made the phone calls—I have the bank transactions to show that your car and hotel went through, but no matter what I search in my email, I can’t find the confirmations anywhere! ”

The poor girl sounded close to tears, and the frustration bled out of me.

“Ellie, it’s okay, mistakes happen. Why don’t you send me over what you have, and I’ll look into it?

Maybe it was a scam site—those are becoming more and more common.

” And were something that I should have warned her about.

Management material at its finest. “Don’t worry about me, I was able to get a place to stay. ”

“And the rental car?”

I opened my mouth. Sure, I had Finn offering to chauffeur me around, but after this little prank of his, I wasn’t putting all my eggs in his basket.

“I do still need one of those. Try to find a place between the Seaside Barn and Breakfast and the West Point Lighthouse; I’ll pick it up on my way back from this

tour I'm on. ”

There was some shuffling on Ellie's end, then tapping on keys as she presumably started pulling up car rental locations.

“And, Ellie?”

“Yes?” Background noise on her end halted as she gave me her full attention.

“I'm going to teach you how to fill out a reimbursement form. I need to be reimbursed for the charge of this bed-and-breakfast I'm staying at.”

“Yes, okay, I can do that. Just tell me what to do.”

I explained the basics, including a file in the company database listing everything for reference. I could mentally see her nodding along, her brunette ponytail bobbing.

“Also,” I added as we were about to hang up, unable to help myself, “double check for confirmation on the rental car booking.”

I hoped that was a hint of amusement, not more crying when she responded in the affirmative.

I shook my head as I hung up, the subconscious load of that credit card charge for the B she was the responsible one to a fault.

Honestly, she had helped raise me almost as much as my mother post-divorce, despite only being six years older than me.

Six years older meant she was just old enough to be helpful and responsible and young enough to be around, unlike Mom, who'd had to get a job when Dad left.

Lucy: Sorry, sorry! I am in fact alive, and guess where I am! A lighthouse... with absolutely no significance to Anne of Green Gables . I can just taste the promotion now.

Did I tell them that Finn had saved me? I had wanted to give myself some time to figure out what this older version of Finn was like. But it would seem he was a copy of his junior high self, so right now I needed to vent, and who better to complain to than my five best friends?

Lucy: And I'll give you three guesses on who saved me ??

“Talking about me?”

I jumped in my seat, spinning to where Finn was standing beside my bench—positioned so he could not see my phone screen.

“Still into eavesdropping, are you?” I asked as I tucked the phone into my back pocket.

“I don't know what you're alluding to.” He lowered himself onto the bench a foot away from me.

“Maybe that time you heard me planning a birthday party at the skating rink, and happened to show up?”

“If you'd just invited me, I wouldn't have needed to sneak in,” he said with a shrug.

“It was girls only.”

“All your friends loved me. They were happy to have me along.”

Pushing aside the little trip down memory lane, I said, “Speaking of tagging along places... why am I here?”

His eyes grew innocently wide. I wasn’t falling for it.

“Because you wanted to join our tour group.”

I tilted my head and pursed my lips to the side. “I wanted to join the Anne of Green Gables tour group.”

He watched the ocean, nodding along like he knew exactly what I meant. “Yep, we’ll go to several of those locations too.”

I resisted the urge to punch his arm. “Maybe next time you could tell me beforehand if I’m about to waste my day at a pointless tour stop.”

Finn looked around suddenly, his eyes glancing across the landscape in such a covert way that I couldn’t help but look over my shoulder as well.

He lowered his voice and leaned closer when he spoke.

“Shhh. Don’t use the word pointless around here.

Every place has historical significance.

Every place is beautiful. Every place is worth the visit. ”

Did he take anything seriously?

I started to stand, but he scooted toward me, clasping his hands in front of him and looking up at me with those dark eyes.

“Don’ t go,” he said. And something in his voice actually made me pause. Something with just a hint of that feeling authors described in romance books.

And then he ruined it all by adding, “You’ll miss our tour of the potato museum.”

I threw my hands up. “Finn. I’m here on work—my future with the company depends on this trip going well, and it hasn’t been so far.

I don’t have time to mess around at lighthouses and potato museums, no matter how significant, beautiful, or worthy they may be. I need to be working, not vacationing.”

Finally, that teasing spark left his eyes, and he nodded, brow furrowing in thought.

“I can’t get you home before the museum, but I promise to tell you where the Hastings are going over the next two weeks so you can cross off any you don’t need.

I’ll even be your personal tour guide for any other locations you have to see. ”

Something twisted in the region of my heart when he said that with such sincerity.

Between the anger and the... other stuff... I was feeling, I’d need an antacid if I spent any more time around this guy.

“It’s okay. I’m getting a rental car.” My phone pinged on cue, and I glanced down, then held up the screen. “See? My intern just booked it all.”

“Same intern who booked your hotel and rental before?”

I pursed my lips.

“Maybe I’ll go with you to pick it up just in case.”

“You’ll have to, I need you to drop me off on the way back to the inn.”

He glanced at his watch. “I’ll go inside with you, too.”

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t argue.

He stood.

“In other, more exciting news, it’s time to head to the potato museum.” He held out a hand to me, his smile stretching wide.

“How long do we anticipate being at this riveting museum?” I took his hand, his fingers tightening around mine as he pulled me up effortlessly.

“I have three hours booked for us, but if you need longer, we can make that work.”

“Bummer, I was really hoping for a full day.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, tugging me toward the van, “I’ll bring you back.”

He dropped my hand then, and despite the warmth of the day, it felt cold. I shook it out a bit and stuck it into my shorts’ pocket. “I’ll send you the list of places I need to see.”

“I can just let you know which Anne-related trips we’re going on.”

I nodded. “Okay, go ahead.”

His eyes cut to mine, and he shrugged. “I don’t have them memorized.”

“None of them? Do you not know where you’re going tomorrow?”

“I will by tomorrow.”

“But it’s your job to have the plan.”

“No, it’s travel agencies like yours that have the plan, I just execute.” He waved at a couple in the Hastings’ group, motioning them to the van.

“It would drive me crazy not to know what came next.”

“It would drive me crazy always thinking about tomorrow instead of today. Would take all the fun out of visiting the potatoes today if I was thinking about the turnips of tomorrow.”

“Please tell me there’s not a turnip museum too.”

He lifted his shoulders. “Guess I’ll know when I check tomorrow’s itinerary.”

I shook my head, trying to hold back a smile. With the annoyance slipping away, I couldn’t help but find him a little entertaining. A little. “Well, I need a plan so I can schedule my extra tours around whichever ones you’re going on.”

“I’ll take you on the ones we aren’t already going on.”

This was getting exasperating—we were talking in circles. “One, I’m getting a rental car, and two, you won’t know which tours I need to add on if you don’t tell me which we’re going on.”

We’d reached the van, and he stopped, eyeing me. “I’ll check them tonight. Send me your list... and I’ll send mine.” He opened the passenger door for me, but his face was twisted in disgust as if the idea of a list was truly disdainful.

I smiled up at him, pumping it with sugar. “Thank you,” I sang as I slid in.

And I swear he smiled to himself as he closed the door, patted it, and left to get the rest of the group.

There was one difference between preteen Finn and adult Finn. Somehow, at his current age, he did a really great job of helping me forget that I was annoyed with him.

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We Call That a Crush

Finn

The afternoon sun was low in the sky when I got back from day two of tours.

True to my word, I had gone over Lucy's emailed list and, after digging up the information for the entire two weeks the Hastings would be here, sent her back which ones we would be going to and when.

She'd gotten her rental car the day before, and that meant she hadn't joined us to go to Island Hill Farms and subsequent goat yoga.

It was surprising how much less fun it was to go on a tour without Lucy Sinclair, not just because it would have been a sight to watch her do goat yoga, but because it just felt...

like it was overcast despite the sunny day.

I'd been going on excursions without her for years, yet one day of her in the passenger seat with the group, and I was worried I might be broken for future tours.

My phone rang as I pulled back into the farm's gravel drive and stopped in front of the B I was just reading too far into things.

"On February 30."

She shook her head, the hint of an eye roll in that one expression. “You know your humor hasn’t changed since you were in junior high?”

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“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” I grinned at her, and to my utter shock, she actually smiled back.

But then she started up the stairs, veering to go around me. “I should get back to work.”

“You know, you missed our outing to the beach, and even if it doesn’t have to do with Anne of Green Gables , exactly, you should know the island to plan a travel itinerary here.”

She stopped on the stair just below mine, mouth pinched in thought. “Huh. That’s not a bad idea.” She looked shocked.

I smiled at that, but didn’t say anything, letting her finish her train of thought. It was the right move, because a moment later she nodded.

“Yep. You’re right, I have to factor in a beach trip during my time here.”

“I have an hour right now and there’s a path behind the B it was one of the reasons I was so happy to have my job here, with no need for things to change.

Every day was different; even the sights I’d seen hundreds of times could still be breathtaking and enjoyable to visit one hundred and one.

And now everything might change if Gram and Pops sold the business. I’d have to take a hard look at my future. My stomach twisted itself into knots.

Lucy was picking her way along the shore, just out of reach of the water's lapping edge, her head swiveling back and forth as she took in every inch of the place. As I watched, she pulled out her phone and typed something into it, looked up, then tapped again.

“What are you doing?”

She spun, as if surprised to see me there. Was I so forgettable?

“I’m taking notes on the area and how a visit to the beach might fit in.

You know, there are characters in Anne of Green Gables who visited the beach, even if it wasn’t a prominent location.

One little boy had imaginary friends down here.

He talked to Anne about it, and they bonded over their overactive imaginations. ”

“See? You don’t know what you’re missing out on by skipping half of our tours.”

She gave me a dry look. “Oh yes, I could totally fit in the potato museum. It was a hugely helpful addition to my plans.”

I stifled a laugh. “Yeah, well, we are hitting some antique shops in a few days. That is all about visiting history and the past; I bet your clients would love something like that. And even if they didn’t, I imagine you could phrase it in a way that they would think it was their favorite stop on the tour. ”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I overheard your call. You do a great job painting the ideal vacation.”

“It’s not that hard.” She shrugged. “Once you know the logistics of each trip, it’s easy to spin it all into one great story. Hopefully, the outcome is as fun as the daydream.”

“What’s your favorite vacation you’ve ever been on?”

She didn’t answer immediately, worrying her lower lip as she watched the ocean’s gentle waves. “I have yet to have a good vacation.”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyes met mine, and their magnetic draw pulled me closer. I came to stand beside her, the tide just barely missing our shoes.

“I’m cursed.”

My confusion must have shown because she crossed her arms defensively.

“No, seriously. Every trip I go on starts or ends horribly. Or the whole thing is terrible, like my trip to Italy, where we accidentally booked a single room in this old man’s apartment for the week.

He smelled like cigarettes and alcohol and just stared at us as we went in and out every day.

And that was one of the more tame situations the curse has thrown at me. ”

“Well, nothing bad has happened this—” I stopped, remembering the events that had gotten her to stay at the inn. “Personally, I’m not too mad about your curse this time around.”

“It might not be done yet. I could get eaten by a shark the moment my toes touch the

water.”

My nostrils flared at the attempt not to laugh. “Fancy a dip?”

“I’m going to choose not to take offense at your obvious desire to be rid of me.”

The laugh won the battle. “Sorry, I just never took you for the superstitious kind.”

“It’s not superstition. It’s a fact. I could list something terrible that happened on each and every trip I’ve been on.

My mom loves to travel, so I kept at it, but in the end, it caused me too much anxiety.

I take little trips around Utah every now and again.

Much less dangerous. Why are you looking at me like that? ” She narrowed her eyes at me.

I lifted my brows, trying to wipe the expression from my face. “No reason. Just thinking it’s no wonder you don’t know how to have fun. Most people, even on a work trip, make time for some fun.”

“Hey, that’s unfair. I would say I know better than most how to have fun. I don’t have to leave my house in order to do it; I don’t need some exotic location to enjoy myself.”

I inclined my head, conceding the point. “But still, you should enjoy some of what the island has to offer while you’re here. Come with us on all of our tours, and when the group has off days or short days, I can take you anywhere else you need.”

She looked at me, eyes piercing.

I watched her, just waiting, letting the lazy sound of waves fill the air.

Finally, she spoke. “What’s your angle, Finn? You never seemed to like me much in school. You can’t tell me that after one or two conversations, now that we’re adults, you suddenly want me around.”

I snorted again, almost laughing out loud. “Lucy Sinclair, I had a massive crush on you in junior high. I didn’t know how to show it, but I can promise you, I liked you more than enough. And I enjoy your company now too, is that so bad?”

Her brows lifted, and her mouth parted. It was as if I could physically see her processing the information. I let her process, secretly enjoying watching her brain work through the apparently shocking information.

I guess I really was terrible at flirting. Was I any better now?

She shifted her gaze to the water and danced her toes away from the encroaching tide.

Somehow, in the movement, she put about a foot of extra space between us.

“Okay fine, I will join you on all of your tours. But for now, I do have work to do.” She kicked a rock into the ocean, watched it sink, then spun on her heel and started back up the beach toward the path. I fell into step beside her.

When we were only about fifty yards from the house, and I had accepted that she wouldn’t be talking anymore, she suddenly spoke, her arms crossed over her stomach to ward off the chilly evening air.

“Where did you go? One day, you were at school, and then after fall break, you were gone. What happened?”

The only thing I hated more than thinking about my future was thinking about the past. So, I shrugged. “Moved in with my grandparents up here.”

She nodded as if that explained everything. For the first time, I felt a small twinge of regret that I hadn’t actually explained the messy details. But then she was saying goodbye and running up the steps to the B&B, and I knew I’d be glad tomorrow that I hadn’t spilled it all.

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Stepping into the Daydream

Lucy

It was weird to hear that a cute guy had a crush on you when you were younger.

It somehow changed everything and nothing.

I couldn't stop my brain from reframing all of my history with Finn, despite it changing nothing about my life now.

Stealing my pencils and then forcing me to define a random word to earn them back one by one?

That's how boys show their love? It would have been much clearer if he'd handed me a "do you like me, check yes or no" note in Algebra.

Sure, there had been a time or two when my mom said he probably had a crush on me, but no one ever believed moms in matters of the heart—they had to love you. They couldn't exactly say that somebody else didn't.

But apparently, she was right. I almost wanted to text Mom and tell her—or maybe my cousins. Yet my cousin Chloe had called the night before to talk, and I hadn't told her. A little part of me was embarrassed to admit how big a deal it was in my mind.

Because it shouldn't be; it had been a decade. It meant nothing for the here and now.

I threw a water bottle and a couple of granola bars from the nightstand into my bag.

I had no clue how long we'd be in Charlottetown.

There were several Anne-related and non-Anne-related things to do, but the tour list Finn had sent me had the barest of bones possible, so I had to be prepared for anything.

We could be getting on a plane in Charlottetown, and Finn probably wouldn't have written it down.

We could be walking to Charlottetown, even.

Which would be cruel, but it was only about a half hour away, so not impossible.

I looked down at my feet. Maybe I'd want tennis shoes instead of sandals.

There was a knock at my door, and I shrugged my purse over my shoulder before pulling it open. Gemma Hastings stood on the landing, a head shorter than me and with a smile brighter than a diamond ring.

"Finn tells me you're joining us!"

I froze. I hadn't even considered the fact that this meant I was crashing their family reunion.

Sure, I'd emailed Finn about adding any tour costs to my bill at the B it's been a little bit strange not to have somebody's friend along on this trip. Feels like we're not together as a family if we don't have a bonus friend."

"Oh, well..." I didn't even know what to say.

Back when I was a kid, my family had felt big even though it had just been me and my parents.

Extended trips with my cousins and Grandma Sue and Grandpa Tim were a given.

Sleepovers at Grandma's house were a monthly occurrence.

Sunday dinners. Bike rides with mom and dad.

If I closed my eyes, I could imagine it right back up.

Then my parents had gone and gotten divorced, and that had all ground to a halt.

My family had been broken into two small units: me and my mom or me and my dad.

I still got the cousin sleepovers, but they didn't feel the same after that—almost like I was getting a chance to play house, but then I'd go back to my real life that looked nothing like a happy family.

Dad had gone and gotten remarried two years ago, and I still didn't feel comfortable around my stepmother's extensive family.

And now my mom was getting married this summer, and I didn't imagine I would feel any different with Brian and his kids.

So, the idea of a family that so readily accepted outsiders was foreign to me... and, honestly, made me feel a squirmy bit of guilt inside at how closed off I had been to my own.

I must've taken too long to respond, because Gemma started to say something, but

was cut off with a shout from one floor down.

“Mom! You coming? Mr. Harrison is here with the van.”

Mr. Harrison? Finn, with all of his teasing, pranks, and general childishness, did not seem to fit that name.

“Yes! Be there in a second!” Gemma hollered back, her voice more suited to a rugby player than the five-foot-nothing grandma in front of me. She turned to me, all soft smiles again. “Well, you heard her. Are you coming?”

I glanced back into my room, but I had everything I needed. So, I stepped out the door, closing it behind me.

“Perfect,” Gemma said, slipping her thin hand around my upper arm and using me as support without a word. I couldn’t help wondering how she’d gotten up the stairs to my room in the first place as she leaned her weight on me.

It was a little awkward, not knowing how to be the best help, so I just let her lead, my steps matching hers.

I kept beside her down two flights of stairs as she used me and the railing, then we went out the door together.

The famous toddler zipped between us, but Gemma just tightened her hand and didn’t even sway.

She watched the little guy who’d bowled into me at the airport chase his way down the stairs and into the back seat of the van with a fond smile that I couldn’t help matching.

I'd never seen someone who looked so happy to be nearly knocked to the ground by a two-year-old.

Is this how all large families were? None of my cousins had more than one or two siblings, and no one was married or had kids.

I kind of liked it.

The thought surprised me, and I was dreaming of my cousins having their own kids running around at our family gatherings as I met Finn's eyes.

He had just come around the van, and the intensity when his eyes locked with mine sent an electric charge down my spine.

His lips tilted into an uneven grin, and I had to look away.

Luckily, I had the excuse of seeing Gemma to the car.

According to everyone in the school, Finn had been pretty cute back in the day. He had upgraded since then.

"Do you want the front seat?" I asked as we got close to the car. Finn was only a couple of feet from us, and I still felt his eyes on me.

"No, dear, I'd like to sit with my crazies."

For someone who had leaned so heavily on me, she grabbed the side of the van and hoisted herself into it with surprising ease.

Come to think of it, she hadn't seemed to need much help at the airport either, or when traipsing around the potato museum.

Was she okay? Maybe she had dizzy spells or something.

Finn was still watching me, so I slowly turned back to him as the rest of the Hastings piled into the van.

“Are you excited?” he asked, leaning against the hood of the van.

“Depends, do I get to see any potatoes today?”

“For you, I’m sure that can be arranged.” His smile was wide.

The last of the Hastings had made it to the van, and the back door closed beside me with finality.

I reached for the passenger-side door, but Finn beat me to it.

All I saw was his hand reaching out and grasping the handle, then he pulled it open slowly enough that I could step out of the way.

As I slid in, I met his eyes with a raised brow.

Mostly to cover how my fingers were strangely shaky as I buckled my seatbelt.

He just saluted with those eyes that seemed perpetually smiling, then circled around to his seat.

He adjusted his rearview mirror and then glanced back at the group behind us.

“Everybody ready?” he asked.

A cheer rose up from the back, Gemma the loudest of all, and a smile cracked my

face. Finn and I locked eyes, and I jolted my gaze forward, my face growing warm.

At a look. Just a look.

I didn't exactly like how those smiling eyes were making me feel.

He had been a complete twerp to me in junior high, and while I wouldn't usually hold that against an adult—after all, we'd all done dumb things as kids—it was proving a good squasher of my growing attraction.

I was here for work, not to be someone's two-week fling.

And now my mind was galloping its way into a detailed daydream of a vacation fling. "Summer Lovin'" from Grease was even playing in the background.

My cousin Dani wrote books. Maybe I should give it a try to get some of these wild scenarios out of my head before they leaked their way down to my heart.

Finn cranked the radio and backed out of the driveway and onto the lane.

I couldn't help the way that my eyes drifted over to his forearms, which were surprisingly muscled.

I had never thought of driving as a physical event, but with the way his arms flexed and moved as he turned the wheel, I was seeing it in a completely new light.

"Like the view?" Finn asked, not glancing up from the road, but his voice full of insinuation.

I plastered my heated gaze back out the window. I deserved that. "Yep," I said, my voice higher than usual.

Finn's low chuckle combined with the chatter in the back seats. I settled back into my seat, head turned away from the gun show that was Mr. Finn Harrison.

The view coming into Charlottetown was picturesque.

The tall spire of Saint Dunstan's Basilica topped tree-lined streets, all backed by the blue water of the Atlantic.

Like the carbonation at the top of a shaken Coke bottle, a bubbling sensation filled my chest. I tried to tamp it down—it did no good to get over-excited for something that might not live up to expectation, but the idea of seeing even a handful of Anne-related things made that hard to do.

I was stepping into her world: the world that had helped raise me when my single mom had work, and I'd sat behind her check-out counter and read books. The soda bottle suddenly felt even more shaken up.

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I opted to join the group for the tour of the basilica with its soaring, delicate architecture.

Then we all enjoyed walking through the historic Beaconsfield House that very well could have been Aunt Josephine's grand home, where Anne and Diana stayed in the spare room upon their visit to Charlottetown.

Should I pinch myself? It was like I'd been dropped into one of my daydreams. I felt such kinship with the fictional character that it was hard to remind myself that she was just that: fiction.

We even drove by Holland College, where Prince of Wales College—Lucy Maud Montgomery's alma mater—had once been.

I'm fairly certain that detour was for me, because despite the love that Gemma and her three daughters might have for Anne of Green Gables, they didn't seem overly enthused by the less touristy locations.

Meanwhile, I had stared like a drooling dog at the beautiful campus as we passed, and imagined Queens College, where Anne had earned her teacher's degree.

This was the part of traveling I'd missed. Immersing myself in a new world. Coming to a bookish location though? I hadn't realized vacations could attain this level of fun.

Work trip s, I mean.

But whatever they were called, it made me want this job even more.

To be able to create this experience for other people would make going to work like a mini vacation every day.

Already I was dreaming up what a Jane Austen tour would look like.

Or Louisa May Alcott. I could help other people have this same feeling I was experiencing.

Everyone in the group, particularly the toddler, was dragging by the time we got back to Queens Square to enjoy some shopping and food before the Anne of Green Gables musical that evening.

Gemma took her family to a late lunch once little Luke had fallen asleep on his mom, and she tried her best to convince Finn and me to join them, but I'd just seen an Anne of Green Gables store across the street and suddenly wasn't very hungry.

Not even the cute bistro tables covered in dappled sunlight from the trees above could convince me to sit and not explore that store.

"I'll stick with Lucy," Finn said, pushing his hands in his pockets and coming to stand beside me.

Gemma's gaze moved back and forth between both of us, light glinting behind her mischievous eyes as she waved us away.

I looked both ways before crossing the street to the brick building, Finn at my side. "You know Gemma thinks there's something going on between us," I said.

"Someone should tell her that your idea of a pet name is menace."

I laughed as I stepped into the store. Warm light and shelves of merchandise

surrounded me. The Anne of Green Gables —BBC version—soundtrack played quietly in the background. Nostalgia ran over me for the seven hundredth time that day.

“Do you feel like you’ve fallen into a junior high daydream?” Finn asked, his voice teasing.

“Try adult daydream.”

“Still obsessed?”

For some reason, I wasn’t as annoyed as I’d historically been when Finn Harrison had brought up my love of Anne of Green Gables .

Unlike in school, he hadn’t spent every waking minute we’d been together so far teasing me.

Just half of them. So, there was a fifty-fifty chance this wasn’t a tease but an actual question.

“Maybe even more so,” I responded as I walked into the store. “Now I’m not just obsessed with Anne, I’m obsessed with Lucy Maud. She was a genius.”

“Fun coincidence that you have the same name.”

“No coincidence. My mom loved the books too.” I picked up trinkets here and there for my cousins, laughed at a few T-shirts, and just enjoyed the fact that I was here, surrounded by a world that had helped raise me.

Anne of Green Gables was a fantastic story in its own right, but add the fact that Anne had been my best friend when I’d felt so misunderstood and misplaced, and it

would've held a special place in my heart regardless.

Finn didn't stick by me the entire time.

At one point, I saw him chatting with the girl at the checkout counter, and at another time, he was looking at merchandise across the room.

But after a while, he came up beside me again, eyes raking over the armful of goodies I held.

"Once you've bought out the store, I've got something I want to show you.

" He gestured to the door with his head.

"Okay, just let me buy this stuff first."

Again, he looked over my souvenirs and bit his lips together in clear amusement.

I ignored him, also ignoring my better judgment and my bank account as I made for the counter.

Still, at the last second, I did put a couple of things away—only a couple, though.

I had to be forgiven for a lack of complete restraint.

As Finn had said, I had been dropped into my adulthood daydream. I couldn't help myself.

Once I'd paid, Finn grabbed my merchandise bag from my hands and held the door open, leading me down the street. A few shops down, he stopped. I glanced up and read the painted words across the windows. *Anne of Green Gables Chocolates*.

My daydream had just been upgraded.

Finn bought a box of chocolates for me, despite my protestations.

And when he held the door again and purposely walked between me and the street, I almost told him to cut it out.

But I couldn't exactly say I didn't like how nice he was being, so I just bit the inside of my cheek instead.

My mind was in its usual state of overdrive—what did all of this mean? Why was he being so solicitous?

The knowledge that he'd had a crush on me was clearly wreaking havoc with my thoughts.

My brain seemed to think that a decade ago was synonymous with this week.

But it wasn't. Most likely, he'd simply grown into a decent guy.

Just because I hadn't had much experience with men like that didn't mean they didn't exist.

So again, not my fault that my mind was struggling here.

Also, as an addendum to that, it was not my fault that my eyes kept straying to the side, noticing how he'd shortened his long stride to match mine and how the light breeze was ruffling his dark hair.

Thank goodness for the distraction of meeting back up with the Hastings.

Together, we perused shops for another hour before arriving early for the musical.

I was seated between Finn and the eldest Hastings daughter, Martha, or Mar as she insisted I call her.

She had her newborn baby strapped to her chest, snoozing away.

The seats were plush, and the hushed conversation around me reignited that bubbly feeling of anticipation.

I had watched every Anne adaptation there was, but I had not seen a musical, and my leg was bouncing up and down with suppressed excitement.

I stopped myself from taking a picture of the empty stage just for the memory.

Finn's hand landed on my knee, stilling it. I looked with surprise up into his face. He was silently laughing.

"You are shaking our entire row," he said, his eyes crinkling at the sides. The warmth from his hand on my bare knee somehow made me shiver.

As if sensing my reaction, his eyes lost a bit of their humor as he stared at me. There was something in that look. Something in the way his eyes flicked to my lips and back up.

Something I wouldn't name. Nope. Not doing it.

I tore my gaze away, intently watching the stage. After a way too long couple of seconds, Finn's hand lifted from my leg. I breathed a silent sigh of relief.

But then he sank lower in his chair, opened the program, and stuck his elbow across

our shared armrest. Inches from my arm.

In an attempt to distract myself, I opened my own program. Mar leaned across me to talk to Finn, a hand to the back of her baby's head.

"Have you seen this before?" she asked.

He didn't answer, so I glanced up just in time to catch the tail end of him shaking his head.

My brows pulled together. "What do you mean you haven't seen this before? You've taken tours here a ton of times, haven't you?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

Gemma said something from Mar's side, catching her attention. It was just me and Finn again.

"How have you not seen this musical?"

"It's not always running."

I quirked a brow. "But it is sometimes?"

Another moment of hesitation passed before he nodded again.

Then, as if physically shaking off his evident embarrassment, his smile grew, and he sat a little straighter.

The tables were turned faster than when Elizabeth had refused Darcy's first proposal.

I leaned away, but there was only so far I could go in the small seat before I'd run into Mar and her baby.

"Lucy, do you want me to admit I only came to the showing because you're here?"

"Well, no, that's not what I was saying."

"It's the truth. Usually, I just drop tour members off at the scheduled tours. I don't join them in everything. Or anything, really." His voice was low, and goosebumps erupted on my arm. I willed his eyes to stay on mine so he wouldn't notice that.

"But you do buy them chocolates, right?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

He shook his head a little. The lights were starting to dim, and the low lighting made the lines of his face even more attractive. "Only the cute ones."

That checked out. With all his flirting and teasing, he probably had a different fling each week.

Unfortunately, even that thought didn't stop my rising attraction to the guy.

The musical started, but now instead of the sensation of excitement tingling through me, it was an entirely different sensation that had everything to do with the fact that Finn still held control of my armrest and at least half of my attention.

I couldn't help but think back to sixth grade with this guy.

At one point, I had compared him to Gilbert Blythe...

Not the kind, intelligent Gilbert, but the one who had pulled Anne's hair and called her Carrots.

The version whom I would've liked to break a slate over his head.

Back then, I had considered myself Anne and him, Gilbert.

Until I had gone on to read the rest of the series and realized that they were destined to be romantic interests for one another.

This felt like a repeat of that moment. A realization about Finn. But this time, it was that he was dangerous in his control over my emotions. I couldn't afford a distraction on this trip, but more than that, I wasn't looking for romance. Not now, not... ever.

So even though Finn shot me smiling looks, whispered comments in my ear, and kept his leg near mine for most of the musical, I didn't give in to any of it. I'd decided something back in sixth grade, and reaffirmed it now: Finn couldn't be my Gilbert.

Storytime

Finn

I took the stairs to the top floor of my grandparents' B I was worried about the right now.

I wanted to see Pops and be there for Gram.

But the hospital was already in this direction, and if I took Lucy the half hour to the B&B, and then came back, I'd miss Pops.

She must've seen all my concerns play across my face, because she stuck out a hand as if to stop the stream of consciousness, and said, "I'll wait in the car. Let's go to the hospital, and I'll wait in the car."

"I don't know how long I would need to be there," I said, apology lacing my tone.

"Then I'll stay in the waiting room," she offered, her words coming out slowly, as if she was coming up with the plan at the exact moment she said it. She probably was.

"I promise to get you back as soon as I can, or I'll call you a Kari—ah, what Americans call an Uber—to drive you home." I was already putting the car back into drive.

She waved her hand dismissively. "I'm not worried about it, let's just get you to your grandparents."

A surge of gratitude rose in my chest like a wave while we drove the remaining twenty minutes to the hospital. I had dictated a quick text to Gram that I was on my way, and she'd said she would meet me at the front, so I didn't have to wait for them to buzz me back.

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True to her word, Gram met us just inside the automatic doors. She rushed forward as I stepped in, Lucy beside me.

“Thank you so much for coming, I’m so sorry to interrupt your day,” Gram said. I noticed Lucy shuffling away at my side. Gram saw her as well. “Is this your friend?”

I gestured at Lucy. “Yeah, this is Lucy, we knew each other in junior high, and she’s staying at your B Lucy would feel bad saying yes, and Gram would feel bad if she said no. So, I grabbed Lucy’s wrist and gently tugged her next to me. “Come on, you can work with us.”

She didn’t end up doing any work. I would have felt bad if I weren’t so grateful.

After staying outside the room while we saw Pops off in all his surgical outfit glory, she spent the next hour and a half bringing us drinks and crackers, talking with Gram, and just being a generally incredible distraction.

I watched with awe as she tentatively started up the conversations, seeming to feel around for if we’d prefer silence or words.

We both preferred words.

Gram had her ankles crossed in front of her, an empty cup in her leathery hands, and her eyes on Lucy.

“Has Finn ever told you what a menace he was in junior high?” she asked as she passed a fresh water cup to my grandma.

Gram's twinkling eyes shot my way. How could she appear so amused while Pops was in surgery when she'd seemed nothing but frazzled and concerned over the last three and a half days? Lucy was a miracle worker.

"No, but I could imagine." Her gravelly voice had a distinct hint of laughter to it.

Lucy's eyes met mine across the waiting room. It wasn't huge, but she and Gram were in one row of chairs while I was in the ones facing them. My back was to the doors, and I was fighting the itchy feeling that had me wanting to turn and check behind me for the doctor.

I latched onto her look, holding tight to that brown-eyed stare.

"He never did anything overtly mean," Lucy said. "But twelve-year-old Lucy might disagree with me. She felt very offended by the cute boy who wouldn't stop teasing her."

"So, you thought I was cute?"

She made a face. But it was Gram who answered.

"Shush, Finn, your friend is telling me stories." She leaned closer to Lucy, whispering but not really whispering, "He always was a bit vain."

Lucy laughed.

It made me smile as I leaned back into my chair.

"Go on, Luce, tell us a story." Or another, as the case would be.

She'd just finished telling us about the time she and her cousins had tried to toilet

paper a house and had the police called on them, and before that, she'd been coaxing stories from Gram about what it was like to have me on the farm growing up.

We were living in stories for the time being...

which was far preferable to the alternative.

"Well, once upon a time—" she said in a lilting voice, like a fairy godmother about to spin a tale.

Gram smiled, the folds of her wrinkles bunching up in satisfaction.

But I didn't miss her glance at the clock.

She might be enjoying the company, but she hadn't forgotten what we were here for.

It had been ninety-six minutes since Pops went in, and they'd estimated about two and a half hours for the surgery.

Lucy had noticed Gram's glance, too, and she faltered at the start of her story.

"Go on, dear," Gram said, patting her hand.

"Once upon a time," she said again, "there was a girl. Sweet. Smart. Unassuming."

"Pretty, too," I interjected.

"Well, that goes without saying. Heroines are always pretty in their own way." But her cheeks had an extra blush of pink that made me hide away a grin. "This particular heroine loved books. She almost always had one—or two or three—with her at all times."

“So that’s why your bag was always so big,” I said.

“Shush,” Gram and Lucy said at the same time.

My mouth turned up at their united front, and I raised my hands in apology and mimed zipping my lips.

With a saucy look my way, she whispered to Gram, “Later, her mother would buy her a Kindle to avoid early arthritis in her shoulder.”

Gram chuckled.

Lucy straightened up, voice returning to normal. “It was good that she had all the books, because she needed them to avoid a certain boy. He was everywhere. In all her classes. The lunch table next to hers. Even at her thirteenth birthday party that he wasn’t invited to.”

“Aw, you didn’t invite him?”

“That was my question, too, Gram!”

“It was girls only,” Lucy explained.

Gram nodded, accepting that. I shook my head at Lucy’s self-satisfied expression when she looked at me.

“Do you need any more water?” Lucy suddenly asked, looking down at Gram’s again-empty cup.

“No, thank you.”

Lucy stood, taking the plastic cup and walking to the trash cans.

But she kept talking. “Every day, it seemed our poor heroine would have to come face to face with her nemesis in one way or another. If he wasn’t teasing her for using too big of words or making fun of her red hair, he was spoiling the endings of novels she was in the middle of. ”

“How was I supposed to know you weren’t aware that Dumbledore died in Harry Potter? Everyone knew!”

Lucy didn’t even comment on my breaking the vow of silence, rounding on me with flashing eyes. “It had come out just that summer! I hadn’t read it yet because I wanted to reread the rest of the series first!”

“Ooof, still a lot of pent-up anger over that, huh?”

“Understandably, I think.” She crossed her arms as she lowered herself back into her chair.

I looked to Gram for support, and she hooked a thumb at Lucy. “I’m with her on this.”

I gasped. “Against your own flesh and blood, Gram?”

“Those puppy dog eyes won’t work on me here, mister. You owe this girl an apology.”

“It’s been over a decade!”

She just quirked a brow.

I sighed, turning back to Lucy. She was watching me expectantly, her own brows lifted, evidently enjoying my reprimand.

I was, too, but I'd never tell. "Lucy—hey, what's your middle name?"

"Rose," she said, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why?"

"If I'm going to apologize, I've got to do a good job of it." I cleared my throat. "Lucy Rose Sinclair, I am terribly, deeply, horribly apologetic for what I've done. Though it may be in the past, the pain I caused is ever present, and I wish I could—"

"Much as I enjoy this wholly insincere apology, I think I'm good now."

"But I thought you liked elaborate apologies. Isn't that something your Sarah of Blue Fields would have done?"

Her look could have killed a small animal. "It's Anne of Green Gables. You should know, you ruined my copy of it."

"Ruined?" I scoffed.

"Yep." She turned to Gram and prepared to turn the sweet old lady against me.

"Turned over the corner of the page I was on—a huge crease. Didn't stop there either; he folded over about twenty more pages, too.

And his excuse?" Her eyes cut to me, and I was glad to see she seemed just as entertained by her retelling as I was.

She wasn't actually still mad at me, that much was clear, and I was surprisingly relieved at that realization. "He didn't want me to lose my spot."

“It was true.”

“All twenty-three spots?”

“I was marking your favorite parts. You came back from your bathroom break before I could finish, or I’m sure you would have seen the pattern.”

“You’re hopeless.”

I was going to comment on her newest term of endearment, but Gram was watching us, her head moving back and forth, and her smile a little too wide.

Plans were spinning in her head, I could just tell.

Sure, I was attracted to Lucy, who wouldn’t be?

But if my grandma got involved, it would become a lot more than a little flirting and catching up.

So, before she could impose her schemes on me and my love life, I stood up, hands in pockets. “I’m going to find a nurse and see if we can get an update.”

Lucy’s head was tilted as she watched me, but I avoided her look, turning to Gram. “She can malign my character without interruption now. But I beg of you not to believe her entire smear campaign.”

Gram shook her head with a much smaller smile now. “You forget I helped raise you. I bet I could give her a slew of my own stories.”

Now that almost made me pause and sit back down. What if she broke out baby pictures? My ninth-grade dance photo was enough to send any woman running. But

instead, I said, “Have at it, ladies. I’ll get you some paper and a pen to properly map out my miscreant past while I’m gone.”

As I walked away, I heard Lucy ask Gram if she was really okay with how chatty Lucy was being. By the sound of their continued conversation, Gram was.

I stepped out into the hall, headed for the elevators and registration desk.

Either I would run into someone on the way, or else I’d ask the receptionist if she could help me.

The smell of disinfectant was too strong, and the oversized pictures of happy patients on the walls weren’t providing the calming vibe they may have been going for.

Away from Lucy’s distractions, all the worry was slipping in.

Maybe I should have stayed. What was Gram going to do? Try to push me into asking out Lucy Sinclair? I wasn’t against the idea.

My feet stopped, and the soft buzz of the fluorescent lights above me filled the space where my footsteps had been. I was about to backtrack when a scrub-clad man turned the corner ahead of me. He nodded my way but paused when I opened my mouth.

“Do you need something?” he asked.

“My grandpa is in surgery. I was just looking to see if I could get an update.”

The guy nodded. He was maybe five to ten years older than I, with a wide nose and a receding hairline. “What’s your grandpa’s name?”

“James Harrison.”

“I’ll see if I can get you some info.”

“Thanks, man.”

With a smile, he kept going down the hall. My mission complete, I turned around. No matter how meddling Gram decided to be, it would be better than being stuck in this sterile hall with my thoughts.

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Lucy Joins the FBI

Lucy

I hit send on the second to last email I needed to complete today at the exact moment Finn walked into the waiting room.

The surgery had gone longer than expected—a little over three hours, but once done, the doctors said everything went perfectly.

I had excused myself so Finn and Gram could visit with Finn's grandpa.

But something about how Finn was walking now made me worry that maybe it hadn't gone as well as the doctors had said. I stood, tucking away my phone and slinging my purse over my shoulder.

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, he's... he's doing fine." He shoved his hands into his pockets. Did that mean he didn't want to talk about it? Or was it just a sign that he wasn't feeling completely settled after such a big surgery?

Or maybe he was just putting his hands in his pockets. Why did I need to read so much into it?

"Good, I'm glad to hear it. Are... you okay?" I asked.

“Yeah.” It didn’t sound too convincing. “You ready to go?”

I nodded. I was tired. Not anywhere near as tired as Finn and his grandma must be, but I had tried my best to keep their minds distracted during the surgery, and now that he was in the clear, my relief for their family was tangible and left exhaustion in its wake.

I felt a little like I’d been doing mental gymnastics for the last several hours.

I had enjoyed myself too. Finn had clearly gotten his teasing from his grandma, and she was a hoot to be around, even with the heaviness of the situation. But still... tired.

I followed him to the front doors and out into the parking lot.

The sky was full of colors, indicating sunset was close.

There was a hint of salt to the air, in the way there was a hint of moisture before rain.

It made things feel so much fresher, and after only a few days of being here, it was hard to imagine going back to the world that wasn’t only ever an hour or two from the coast.

Finn was quiet. And though I wouldn’t pretend to know him extremely well, it didn’t sit right.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked, glancing at him.

He paused, lifting his hand a little to stop me as a car passed in front of us.

When we started walking again, he said, “I guess I’m just still a little worried.

Maybe it's residual and will go away... like the air pressure light in a car.

Sometimes it takes a minute to turn off after you fix the tires. ”

That made me smile. We were comparing feelings to tires? “So, you just need a minute?”

The van's taillights flashed as he pressed the key fob, unlocking the doors.

I rounded the back and was surprised when Finn followed me, opening my door.

There was a little humor in his eyes, as if he were remembering our conversation about chivalry.

I was happy to see it. Maybe his tire light was turning off already.

He didn't close the door right away when I got in, his eyes growing distant.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I don't know. I can't tell if I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, or if I'm just worried about how this will change things.”

“Change things? Are they worried about his recovery?”

Finn pushed out a breath; he seemed frustrated with himself as he shook his head. “No, but my Gram mentioned closing the B&B.” His hand constricted on the side of the door, so even though his words were said almost offhand, I could tell this was a big deal.

“Oh.” I rubbed the heel of my hand down my thigh to my knee. “I don't mean to pry,

but is that a problem?”

His throat worked in a swallow. “Yeah. Shouldn’t be, but it is.” He closed the door, and I figured that was the end of the conversation, even though I had tons of questions.

I said nothing when he got in and turned the car on. I’d been pulling information out of him that he didn’t seem to want to give, so I just stayed quiet this time.

A minute or two passed. The radio was on from our drive here, but wasn’t loud.

More like elevator music—not enough to fill the silence.

I felt terrible. For Finn and his grandparents.

For pushing as much as I had. For wanting to know more but not knowing how to ask.

I stretched my neck to the side and glanced out the passenger window for something to do.

“It’s just that this is how it’s always been, and it’s been going great. I don’t see the need to change things.”

I nodded, but really I was shocked he’d spoken. “You really love what you do.”

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “I like it.”

That was a lackluster response.

Alright, I needed to decide now. Was I diving all in to my stint as a detective in

search of Finn's real feelings?

Or, more importantly, was I just being morbidly curious for myself or to help him?

He didn't deserve a passing acquaintance digging into his personal life just because he was unlucky enough to have me along when he went to see his grandparents.

It wasn't fair to push if I wasn't going to help.

Yeah, I didn't need to know. I had an inkling that whatever he wasn't saying right now was more than I was prepared to take on.

But one glance at his face, at how his jaw was tense and his hands tight on the wheel, shifted my perspective. This wasn't about me, I could get over my discomfort for a second and try to help.

So, I hiked my left leg up a little and turned in my seat to watch his reactions more closely. He shot a curious glance at me but said nothing.

"Like. You said you like your job. Why are you worried about it changing if you don't love it?"

"I don't think I like how you're looking at me."

"Too bad, I'm locked in now. And you're deflecting."

"I'm not deflecting. I just said a word, and you're digging in like I'm a cold case and you're itching to prove yourself at the FBI or something."

How kind of him to notice my skills for what they were.

I once found out where my friend's ex lived, so I could think about egging his house.

Shelly didn't deserve the jerky way he'd treated her.

In the end, I hadn't been brave enough to do it.

But I stared daggers at that little address on Google Earth for days.

I digress.

"Words matter, and you corrected me when I said you loved your job. Do you?"

He sighed, but gave in as all perps would under a good detective. "I like it." He shot me a look. "Yes, like. I don't plan on being a tour guide for the rest of my life, but it's a good job, and I'm good at it."

I nodded along. "Okay. So, what else would you do if you weren't a tour guide anymore?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, I'll figure that out when I need to."

I hesitated before saying what I was thinking. "But you might need to now."

There. He winced. So that was the problem. "You don't like being forced into figuring it out right now?"

His jaw flexed, and I was sure he was about to shut me down. "You're pretty good at this, you know?"

I leaned the side of my head against the headrest. "Are you deflecting again?"

“Yep. Kill a guy for not enjoying the third degree.”

So maybe I’d come on a bit strong. I was a little out of practice with these kinds of conversations. “Well, if you do decide you want to stop avoiding answering, I’m here.”

“Thanks, Luce.”

“Nicknames now?”

He lifted a shoulder, glancing in his rearview as he changed lanes. “I don’t know, do you have one for me? Besides menace .”

I didn’t answer.

“Your silence is suspicious, Luce.”

“I don’t have a nickname for you.”

“Wow, so convincing.”

“I don’t,” I promised. “But my cousins do.”

He looked my way quickly, brows lifted. “Now you have to tell me. You wrote home about me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Hardly. But of course, my best friends knew about my nemesis. Poppy has a thing for nicknames, so you got one and it stuck.”

“Am I going to need to drag it from you?”

“It would serve you right after the hoops you just made me jump through to get a little information about your feelings.”

“Ew, feelings. I’m allergic to them, you know. Like cooties. Nicknames, however, aren’t so terrible.”

I couldn’t help the bubble of laughter that rose at that.

“Shark attack.”

“Shark—” He laughed, and I bit my lips together to hide my amusement. “Is it because of my name? You made fun of me for my name?”

“No, no , no, you were the one doing all the making fun. Poppy just felt like it was an apt description since every one of our encounters was usually...”

“Deadly?”

I swatted at him. “No. More like painful.”

“Man, I’m sorry.”

I didn’t want the light mood to go again. “Don’t be. Ultimately, your name was just an innocent bystander to Poppy’s brain.”

His grin was broad when he met my eyes again. “How many cousins do you have?”

“Eight, but Kaden doesn’t count, so really just seven.”

“Kaden doesn’t count?”

“He’s an idiot. Anyways, I’m close to five of them. We talk almost every day. Get together at least once a month. Commiserate over nemeses, and such. You know, the usual.”

“I don’t know, actually. I’m an only child, and both my parents were as well.”

“Oh. That’s... lonely.” I was reminded of my feelings about how lonely I’d been after my parents divorced. But at least I still had people, even if I felt like an ill-fitting puzzle piece.

“Sometimes. Tell me more about Kaden. What did he do to get in your black books?”

“Oh, jeez, it’s just that he’s...” My phone dinged twice in quick succession. I was distracted when I saw my mom’s name across the screen.

“Do you need to answer that? Is it the cousins? Let me plead my case for a new nickname.” He reached across the console without looking, grabbing for my phone.

I sat straighter in the chair, holding my phone out of reach. “No, dummy, it’s my mom. She’s—” I opened the text and froze.

“Everyt hing okay?”

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My eyes scanned the flood of images she'd sent. White dresses. Wedding dresses. I swiped through each picture of my mom in various dresses like an accident I couldn't look away from. But then, in a fit of self-preservation, I closed the text app, staring instead at the home screen.

I had a picture of a quote as my background—very 2010 of me, I know—a flowery script with the words Tomorrow is always fresh with no mistakes in it .

I hadn't changed it in over a year, so most of the time I didn't even see it.

But now I read it just to distract my brain.

If only a tomorrow could fix the mistake of my mother's upcoming nuptials.

"Everything okay?" Finn asked again.

I didn't look up, tracing the words with my eyes one last time. "Yeah, of course."

"Could have fooled me."

I met his eyes, innocently lifting my brows. "Totally good."

He nodded slowly. "That would explain why you've been so fixated on your phone that you didn't even realize we're back."

I blinked, looking around. Sure enough, we were in the gravel circle at the front of the bed-and-breakfast, the big red barn set far behind it, tucked between rows of trees.

My cheeks grew hot, and probably the color of said barn.

Curse my red-headed heritage.

“It’s okay, I see how it is. You drag information and—” he faked a shudder, “feelings from me, but get a hall pass on sharing. Fair enough.”

I opened my mouth, but I didn’t know what to say. My mom’s getting married, and I think she’s making the worst mistake of her life but have no real reason for feeling that way?

Yeah, that made a lot of sense.

“Hey.” His voice was quieter. “It’s fine, really.”

I gave him a tight smile.

“Come with me,” he said, pushing open his door.

I followed him from the car to the B instead, he moved along the back of the ring of sand to a spot where a bench sat just below a towering tree. He sat and looked expectantly at me. I plopped onto the seat next to him, brows raised.

But instead of saying anything, he just switched his gaze to the water.

I followed his gaze, but my thoughts were still churning.

Mom in a wedding dress. Did this mean we were past the point of no return?

Was there no hope she’d back out of this engagement like the last two?

I bit my lip at the thought. What kind of daughter wants her mom's engagement to fail?

The kind that knows best for her, that's who. At least, I thought so.

I hated not being sure who was right: my mom, in wanting to get married, or myself, in thinking she'd gone too fast. But over a decade of watching my mom try and fail to be happy in relationships was a pretty clear indication that there wasn't a happy ending to be had here.

The waves were calming—the exact opposite of my feelings—lapping onto the shore, then pulling back into the ocean, swirling water and sand together before another wave came up.

The sun was almost to the horizon, its color spreading across the sky with several clouds gathering and reflecting its light. I took a deep breath, leaning back.

Finn looked over at me. “There you go.”

“What?”

“It's like you've had a stick up your—”

“Excuse me?”

“—Spine,” he finished with twinkling eyes. “For the last ten minutes. The beach always fixes everything.”

“Could it break off my mom's engagement for me? That'd really help.”

His teasing grin turned pitying, and I looked back at the water to avoid seeing it.

“You don’t like him?”

“No, he’s fine,” I said, disgusted that I was even sharing this. “I’m the problem.”

“Meaning?”

“You know, I think you were right. Feelings are gross.”

Half his mouth hitched up in a little smile, but he didn’t say anything.

My shoulders sagged. “Meaning, he seems super nice. He’s got a stable job, doesn’t only talk about himself, and he isn’t my age, which is a bonus.

Woohoo,” I gave a fake cheer, twirling my fingers in the air.

“But my mom’s a romantic—she has thought every guy she dated was fantastic, thought they were all marriage material. And they weren’t.”

Finn made a sound of contemplation. I hated to consider what he might be thinking.

Probably that I was worse than a petulant toddler, complaining over my mom finding love.

Maybe I should tell him I felt exactly like that, but I wasn’t able to do anything about it. Deep down, this all just seemed wrong.

I couldn’t stand the silence, so I filled it.

“Two weeks ago, she moved up the wedding. It was supposed to be a Christmas wedding—she even learned how to use Pinterest to pin pictures of evergreen centerpieces and red velvet bridesmaids’ dresses. But she and Brian decided they

didn't want to wait that long, and now they're getting married next month.

One month. In Mexico. She just sent me a bunch of pictures of wedding dresses, and I feel like a horrible daughter because I am so glad I am here instead of there.

I don't want to watch as she rushes to the altar, blinded by... by..."

"Love?" Finn asked.

I winced and barely avoided wrinkling my nose in disgust. "Sure, that, I guess."

"So that's the problem? You don't think she could be in love with this guy for real?"

It wasn't a question, but I needed to defend myself—to prove I wasn't crazy.

"She's happiest when she's alone, you know. She thinks she's happier when she's in a relationship, but she was miserable married to my dad, and once she gets over the break-up, she's like a new person.

She gets out of the house, does stuff, and makes friends... She's just happier."

"Is she happier, or does she just put on a good face?"

I pressed my eyes closed. I didn't even know why I was telling him all of this, I could barely make sense of it in my own head, but I knew my mom. I had been around longer than anybody. Any of the boyfriends, even my own dad—I knew her better. And love was not the answer to her problems.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to push, just trying to figure out how to help."

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it. I didn't mean to unload my family drama on

you.” And when he’d had such a hard day. Another brick of guilt settled on my chest to add to the lovely little chimney I was building.

His lips lifted in a crooked grin. “I kind of like it, it takes my mind off my own.”

“If you want family drama, let me tell you about this fiancé my cousin has. Talk about someone who shouldn’t get married...”

Finn laughed, his head tipping back with the entertainment. “You really don’t like love, do you?”

“No, seriously, this guy is a piece of work. I’m contemplating standing up and objecting at their wedding like I belong in a Taylor Swift song.”

“Do you need a date for the wedding? I’ll stand up and object with you if this guy is a real jerk.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I think I’m okay on the date front.”

“Is that your way of saying you already have someone going with you?” He wasn’t smiling, but everything in his expression outside of his lips made it look like he was.

His eyes were creased with amusement; even his cheeks looked like they held back a laugh.

There was the Finn I knew—not the sincere, serious one, but the one who would flirt and tease with a scarecrow if it was wearing a skirt.

“No, that’s my way of saying you live in a different country than I do.”

He lifted a shoulder. “They have these things called airplanes.”

“You are very funny. I think I will stick with my tried-and-true date, though.”

“So, there is someone?” His voice was curious, but also something else.

“Yep,” I said, nodding matter-of-factly. “It is called my Kindle and has yet to let me down.”

“Book boyfriends? I have to compete against book boyfriends?”

I ignored his comment about competing; I wasn’t falling for his flirty charms. Instead, I just leaned back on the bench, staring out over the ocean.

The sunset was in its final flare now, bathing the world in warm reds and oranges.

The Salt Lake valley had pretty sunsets, basically just because of the bad air, but this was something else.

“I’m surprised you even know the term ‘book boyfriend.’”

“You forget I run tours on Prince Edward Island. If I had a nickel for every time I had to hear that Gilbert Blythe was somebody’s ‘book boyfriend,’ I wouldn’t need to work anymore.”

I sighed dramatically. “He is pretty perfect.”

Finn made a sound of disgust. “He isn’t real, Lucy.”

I turned my head lazily toward him, half a smile on my face. “But don’t you wish he were?”

“No, yo u know, I really don’t.” He smiled back at me, not a hint of frustration or

annoyance in his gaze.

But then his eyes dipped down to my mouth, lingering for half a second before jumping back to mine.

He cleared his throat and looked away. “So, to recap, if I understand correctly, you don’t believe in love... but you love to read about it?”

I wanted to say his perception was entirely wrong, but was it?

I scrunched up my nose, thinking. “I’ve got to admit that the characters in my books sure seem a lot happier than most of the people I meet in the real world.

” I shrugged. “I’m sure there are plenty of people out there who are happily in love, but the odds of finding the right person at the right time?

” I shook my head. “Slim to none. The odds of picking a great book to read about a love story you know will be satisfactory? Much higher.”

Finn studied me, then, slowly, he nodded. “Challenge accepted.”

I didn’t even want to know what he meant by that. The sun was almost gone now, the light wouldn’t be left for long, and I had a lot of work to do. I came to my feet. “I should get going. Thank you for the sunset.”

“Thank you for distracting my Gram and me at the hospital.” He leaned forward a little as if he would stand. “I’ll walk you back.”

“I think I’d like a minute to compose a pleasantly happy text for my mother, if you don’t mind?”

He nodded. "Can you find your way? It's getting dark."

"I'm not sure, but if I get lost, I'll follow the clearly marked path."

The sound of him chuckling accompanied me off the beach.

I had made it back to my room when my phone dinged. I assumed it was another text from my mom or the cousin chat, but I was surprised to see it was from an unknown number.

Unknown number: I'm currently reading Pretense by Jay Beckett. Feel free to look up the ending and spoil it for me.

Lucy: How did you get my number?

Unknown number: You put it down when you checked in. I figured I should have it, just in case we need to discuss Anne of Green Gables tour locations.

Lucy: How thoughtful of you.

Lucy: The police officer is the murderer.

Unknown number: Gasp! That hurts. Guess we're even now.

Lucy: You've got a long list of grievances before we are even.

Smiling, I saved Finn's number in my phone.

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A Big Rejection

Finn

I got as far as powering on my laptop, opening the webpage, and logging in before the familiar mix of unnamed emotions flooded me, and I decided this could wait. They hadn't officially decided to close the farm and business. No need to do anything drastic.

Besides, planning ahead didn't usually pan out for me. Like when Pops had planned that big campout with some of my friends for my fifteenth birthday, and we'd gotten rained out. When I'd concocted all those great ways to get Lucy to like me in junior high, and instead she'd hated my guts.

Or when I'd planned to go to Disneyworld for fall break in eighth grade, and had spent hours making small talk with a social worker instead.

Nope. Plans weren't my friends. So, I would make this decision when it was a present issue, not a future one.

I slammed the computer shut. What was Lucy doing? We had an outing with the tour group that afternoon, but it had nothing to do with Anne of Green Gables , so she might not come. And there wasn't enough time between now and then to make up another location to visit.

Agh. I needed her, though. Something to pull my mind from that stupid, tight feeling in my chest that had me glancing back at the laptop with guilt, or my phone for news

of Pops.

He was out of the woods following the surgery, and though they wanted to keep him another few days, they 'd transfer him over to a short-term care facility for some PT before he came home.

So, in the meantime, Gram might come back and stay in a place with a mattress more than two inches thick.

That was good. I was worried about her sleeping on those uncomfortable pull-out couches at the hospital.

But what if half of why she was coming back was to get a better look at future bookings and talk more about selling the B I'd always had music playing in the background when I was doing my schoolwork or driving for tours.

Even if it was just a low hum in the background, I preferred it to the silence.

If Lucy's imagination was the same as it had been in school, she probably never had silence in her head, so she didn't need the added noise.

My hands constricted on the steering wheel as I tried to keep my tongue in check. Since I had promised not to distract her, I was flooded with things I wanted to say. Updates on my grandpa, tidbits about locations we were passing, just life between now and junior high.

"I hadn't considered including filming locations in the tour, but I love the idea.

Besides the lighthouse, what other options do you know of?

I'm thinking of having a bonus tour—kind of an addendum to the main literary tour,

for the true fanatics.

It's a great idea because it fits several other books as well.

The Jane Austen novels all have several adaptations... Sherlock Holmes , Little Women ...”

I glanced over at her. Her big, brown eyes caught mine, and excitement sparkled in their depths. I loved seeing her like that—thrilled with her work and her plans.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:21 am

A drop of jealousy ran through me. A wish that I could feel that way about my work. I used to have big goals that got me excited... but now...

I ignored all that and focused on her question, even overlooking the fact that I wasn't technically supposed to be talking right now.

"There are several. It depends on how small you want to get. Dalvay By the Sea, North Rustico. They did a lot of filming in Toronto, so not on the island. But we've got a few. "

I could see her nodding from the corner of my eye. She had her laptop out on her lap and was tapping away on it. Her fingers paused for just a second. "Thank you," she said. "This might give me an edge over my competition."

"Anytime."

Her typing filled the silence again.

When there was a lull in her clacking, I tried my luck at a little conversation. "How did you end up in this job?" I asked.

"A friend worked for the company and told me about the opening."

"You mean, you didn't grow up wanting to be a travel agent?"

I caught the tail end of her lips twitching. "It's a pretty good gig, to be honest. At first, I thought it would get my mom and me discounts on our trips."

“But you don’t travel anymore.”

“We already had this conversation.”

“I know. Do you ever get jealous hearing all the fun stories of your clients when they get back?”

“I don’t usually hear them, actually. I do all the work before they leave, and occasionally handle problems while they are on their trip, but I rarely hear all about it unless they send me a postcard or something.

” She typed a couple of things on her laptop, but hadn’t gotten mad at me for distracting her, so when she stopped, I kept going.

“Our jobs go hand in hand, you know. We both help other people live out their dream vacations,” I said.

I could feel her stare when she looked over at me. “Yeah, but you don’t love your job. What did you want to be when you grew up?”

“A doctor,” I said before I could stop the words.

She nodded instead of laughing at me. I mean, who’d heard of a tour guide-turned-doctor? Especially one who’d, from the outside, given up on the dream. “Right. Isn’t that what your dad was? I remember he came for a career fair.”

“No,” I said. Too fast. The word came out short and angry. I tried to backtrack, delivering the next sentence with nonchalance, so she would n’t see how much I hated this topic. “No, he was on the board of a hospital. Businessman. Not doctor.”

“Did he... Did he pass away?” she asked, every part of the sentence making it clear

she wasn't sure if she could be asking that.

I liked talking to Lucy, and didn't mind her asking questions... just not these questions. A big part of me wished I could just say yes and move on.

"No. He still lives in the Salt Lake area." I gripped the steering wheel just for something to do with my extra energy.

"Gotcha."

And then I felt like a jerk when the car got quiet again. Her typing didn't start up again.

"My dad's a deadbeat." I regretted the words the second I said them. She didn't need to know my life story. It was more tragedy than happily ever after, and I happened to know that was not her cup of tea.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Not your fault." Yeah, those kinds of warm and fuzzy responses really made me feel like less of a jerk. I mentally chilled myself out before adding. "He did some stupid white collar crime stuff, got himself thrown in jail, and didn't want me to come live with him again when he got out."

More silence. I wasn't making this any better. Did they create erasers for conversation? I'd like a redo.

"That makes me sound like I'm all bitter about it. I'm not. I got to come here, and Pops and Gram were amazing. Plus things weren't great with my dad before that all happened anyway, so really it's been fine."

“Wait.” Her decade-long silence was finally broken. Praise the heavens. “When did this all happen?”

“Eighth grade. Fall break.”

“That’s... that’s why you never came back?”

My eyes flitted over to her and again to the road. “Yeah. I thought it was common knowledge. Small-town headline news.”

She closed her laptop. “My mom was never interested in the news. All I heard was from a few people at school that you moved. Maybe something about it... but no specific information.”

“Well, I did. Move.”

“Jeez, Finn, that must have sucked. That must have really sucked.”

“Yeah.”

“Crap.”

I looked over again. “What?”

Her hands twisted around the edges of her laptop, nervous. “I was so mean.”

“I’m pretty sure we’ve established that that was me.”

“No, you were a teenage boy. Ah—no, I’m not saying you were perfect, so you can wipe that unrepentant grin from your face, but...

I was, I was—" she waved her hands wildly.

"I was so happy you were gone. You were my tormentor. My nemesis. The shark attack to my beautiful beach day—and then you were gone, and I was so... glad." She spun in her chair, facing me head-on though I couldn't do more than shoot quick glances her way.

"I'm such a jerk. I had no clue why you'd left, and I'm so sorry.

" She paused. "What about... what about your mom?"

"Dead," I said, the cherry on top of this uplifting conversation. "When I was three."

"I am so sorry." She honestly sounded on the verge of tears.

"Hey, it's totally fine, it's not your fault my home life was a mess."

Her hands were still in the air, and she let them fall with a sigh.

I tossed her a grin. "Your 'shark attack on a beautiful beach day'?"

Silence, then, "I may have gotten a bit carried away."

"You should write a book."

"And use all those big words you used to make fun of me for?"

"I notice you don't use quite so many. Has your vocabulary diminished or has mine grown?"

"Are you implying that you have, at long last, succeeded in transcending the

limitations of your rudimentary lexicon?”

I burst out laughing. “Lexicon?”

“It just means vocabulary.”

“Thank you, dictionary.”

She gave a little bow. But after another moment, she said again, “I am really sorry, Finn. That’s a rough... that’s a lot.”

“Yeah, sorry to dump it all on you.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant it’s a lot for a teenage kid to go through. I’m glad you had your grandparents, but I wish you didn’t need to move.”

“But if I hadn’t, I would have dug a deeper hole with you. There would have been no saving us. And look how good we’re doing now.”

She smiled over at me, those pink lips all sorts of tantalizing, but I forced my eyes back on the road as I flipped on my blinker, turning onto the red dirt drive flanked by green pastures that led to the Seacow Head Lighthouse.

Lucy leaned toward the windshield. “Oh my gosh, it’s perfect.”

I pulled into the dirt parking lot. The lighthouse was across the street, and only a handful of cars inhabited the lot with us, so it wouldn’t be very busy. That was perfect. It wasn’t a large lighthouse, so when it was overrun with tourists, it was a lot less enjoyable.

We got out of the van and started walking. I tried to see the lighthouse as Lucy might

see it. It had a stark white, wooden exterior with a bright red cap. It was cute. Well-maintained. Charming.

And Lucy had a huge smile on her face.

I shoved my hands in my pockets to keep from grabbing her hand or putting an arm around her to bring that happiness even closer. She was like a sun with that smile, and I was cold after that conversation about my family.

“I feel like I’m in a movie,” she whispered as we approached the door.

The inside was a mix of white and natural wood with a few people milling around looking at some of the things on display in the lower level.

Mostly, though, the inside was all staircase.

I gestured with my head, my hands still firmly contained, and she proceeded me up the steps.

It was a bad idea. She filled the space in front of me. All Lucy. Nowhere else to look.

So, I stared at my feet.

I knew the moment she glimpsed the windowed room, because her little gasp had me looking back up. What I didn’t expect was for her to look back at me with eyes wide in amazement. Her smile stretched even wider, and she hurried the rest of the way.

There were two teenage girls in the little circular room, but just as we exited the stairs, they switched us spots and headed down, leaving Lucy and me alone with the view.

Three hundred sixty degrees of view.

The tour guide in me tried to take over.

Facts upon facts of this place threatened to spill out of my mouth, but I kept them back.

Lucy was standing, framed perfectly within the sill of one of the windows, staring out with complete ecstasy.

I couldn't blame her. One hundred and eighty degrees was sparkling blue water and cloudless blue sky, and the other was half sky, half lush green farmland.

It felt like being inside whatever the summery version of a snow globe would be.

I leaned against the back windows, a bit to the side so the rotating light in the center wouldn't block my view of her.

And it hit me. I really liked this girl.

It felt stupid saying that in my head—like, duh, of course I liked Lucy.

But this “like” was eerily similar to my massive junior high crush version of “like.” She made my chest all hot and excited to see her. She filled my thoughts more than I'd like to admit. She brought a smile to my face even when she was cranky with me.

As any romance-obsessed nine-year-old might say, I “like liked” her.

“Lucy,” I said. Her gaze snapped to mine, hers still filled with awe reflective of the beautiful world around us.

Her brows lifted with a question.

“Let’s go on a date.”

Her lifted brows turned surprised as her head tilted to the side. “I’m sorry, what?”

“A date. You and me. Let me take you to dinner tonight.”

She blinked. “No.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. More out of surprise than anything. “No?”

“Yes. I mean, no. No, you’re crazy.”

“What’s crazy? I like you. I want to take you out.”

She was shaking her head. “So, you take me out and then what?”

I shrugged. It didn’t matter. It was one date, and we would have fun. Why did it need to have a “then what?”

“And that’s why my answer is no.”

“Because I don’t have a life plan for us?” I was grinning. Was it a defense mechanism? Because, honestly, it felt like I’d been kicked in the gut.

“No, because I’m just a fling for you. You probably had one in your tour group last week, and I’m here for work, so I can’t really go out with you, then have you turn tour guide again tomorrow.”

“Why not? I doubt things would be so bad at dinner that I wouldn’t let you on the

tours anymore. Unless... wait. Do you secretly hate chocolate? Am I going to find out when dessert comes that you're some health nut? I can't date someone who will judge my health decisions."

"Be serious, Finn. I—"

Heads popped out of the staircase. People who'd probably heard at least half that conversation as they came up the stairs. Could I use that in my favor? A little peer pressure to get Lucy to go out with me?

Because, not to be a typical guy, but her "hard to get" act was not helping her cause here. I suddenly had my competitive nature joining in with my interest in her, and it was a lethal combination.

But Lucy was turning red and avoiding the looks of the couple entering the observation room, so I decided not to play red rover and send them on over to my team. Instead, I crossed the little room, joining her on her side and letting the new couple have mine.

"Just one date, Luce. I just want to take you out. I promise to be a gentleman and not to make it awkward. Just one date." I stared down at her, willing her to say yes.

She swallowed, and her gaze drifted to my left ear, not able to maintain contact with my eyes. "I'm sorry, Finn. I do think you're great—I just don't think that's a good idea."

I stepped away. Now I was the one turning red.

I stuffed my hands back in my pockets. "No big deal. I get it—it's hard to get over the whole shark attack part of our history.

I've got more ground to make up." I winked because I wasn't sure what else to do right then.

I felt like the floor beneath me had suddenly—not quite disappeared, exactly, but gotten really unsteady.

Ex tricated

Lucy

Crap. I couldn't look at him, and it wasn't because of how bright it was up here at the top of the lighthouse. I was such a jerk—I should have just said yes to the date, but old habits died hard. I hadn't said yes to a first date in a year. Hadn't said yes to a second in even longer.

And really, it was true that it wasn't a good idea.

But that didn't mean I wasn't interested. A date with Finn? He already opened my doors and let me control the AC, so things wouldn't be that different, would they?

Except I would know we were on a date. I would know we were there because he liked me and wanted to spend more time with me. He might hold my hand. Split dessert with me. Tell me I looked good. Kis—

My eyes caught on Finn, hovering by the door, still watching me, and my cheeks burned. Okay, the overactive imagination needed to take a breather.

My phone started buzzing, and I was never so grateful for an interruption. I didn't even glance at it before I sent an apologetic look to Finn while pointing at the phone and answering.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Lucy!”

Had I just answered a call from my mother? Seriously? Of all the people it could be... Anyone from work. Any of my cousins. A friend. A freaking tel emarketer... it had to be Lisa Sinclair, the woman who’d birthed me, raised me, and I’d been rudely ignoring?

“Oh, hey, Mom, what’s up?” I did a fantastic job of hiding my dismay. Go me!

“I’m so glad I got ahold of you. I was starting to think your phone must not be working in Canada... I was about to send you an email.” She laughed, and I gave myself a stern talking to. This was my mom. I loved her. I disagreed with the decisions she was making right now, but I needed to be nice.

“I’m so sorry, service has been spotty.” Which was true. Usually, I had to leave the B&B to get calls and messages.

“I completely get it. It’s good to know, actually, since Brian is finalizing the honeymoon plans, and maybe those international phone plans aren’t worth it then.

We wanted to stay in touch with our kids, but you guys might just have to get emails when we’re on Wi-Fi.

Honestly, you’d probably prefer that over constant updates, although Alexandra has said she wants all the pictures.

She is so jealous that we’re headed to France.

She says she wants to live vicariously through us.

I told her she and John should go next summer.

Brian and I will keep the kids, and they can go on a vacation.

I don't think they've had one since they were married five years ago, so it's definitely time, and what else are grandmas for?"

There was so much to unpack there. The fact that my mom hadn't used me to plan her honeymoon—though really, I wouldn't have been thrilled so I was trying to keep that in mind.

The fact that my mom's future stepdaughter was everything I wasn't—namely excited for the marriage.

The fact that said future stepdaughter talked to Mom more than me.

The fact that Mom already considered Alexandra her kid and Alexandra's children her grandkids.

Why did that hurt? Why did that feel like I was being replaced?

I pressed my eyes closed. A hand touched my arm, and I jumped.

Sorry, Finn mouthed. Do you need an escape?

I nodded, not even caring that I probably looked crazed and frantic.

"Hey Lucy!" Finn called, way too loudly for someone right next to me. The couple across the room looked over at him. "Time to get going! We're going to miss the train!"

I gave him a shaky smile. "Sorry, Mom," I said into the phone. "I need to run, but I will text you tonight. Promise." I would. I needed to connect with her, and I missed

talking to her as much as I used to. I just needed to not be blindsided by the conversation.

“Oh sure, sure, honey.” She didn’t even sound too disappointed. Was this just the new normal, so it was no shock that I was evading a conversation with her? “Brian and I need to go meet with the florist in half an hour anyway. Love you.” So, no, she just had more wedding stuff to deal with.

“Love you.” I hung up. Or she did. I’m not sure which of us got to the red button sooner.

I stared down at the phone, blinking back dumb, unnecessary tears. What was wrong with me?

“You okay?”

I bit my lips together, nodding but not meeting his eye.

“Well, come on then, we’re going to miss the train, after all.”

That made me laugh, a stupid watery chuckle. But it was forward momentum, so I wasn’t complaining.

We made it out of the adorable lighthouse.

I felt like I was leaving a scene from Road to Avonlea behind when we walked down the dirt path toward the van, and I glanced over my shoulder to capture a mental image.

And then a physical one with my phone. “Thank you,” I said, when enough time had passed that I wasn’t afraid of crying.

“You probably think I’m crazy for needing an escape from my mom.”

“Not crazy. But I hope you’ll return the favor. I told you about my dad—if he comes calling, I may need you to extricate me.”

“Extricate? Yes, your vocabulary is definitely expanding. I’m so proud.”

His eyes crinkled, and he opened my door.

“I think that’s my problem, though,” I admitted when he turned the car on. “Outside of the occasional forgotten dentist appointment, my mom has never let me down. I should be happy for her.”

“It’s a big change, Luce. Lots of emotions are going to be involved. That’s okay.”

For some reason, that made me feel all teary again, so I just nodded. Finn’s phone started buzzing.

“We are so popular today,” he said, picking it up. “Oh dang, it’s my Gram. I forgot she might be coming home today.”

“That’s great news,” I said, smiling and pulling my laptop from the bag I’d stuffed under the seat. “Go ahead.”

He answered the call, and I got back to work.

And just like that, everything was normal again. No crying Lucy. No Finn saying he liked me. No date.

Committed

Finn

Lucy's rejection still stung. I'd admit to spending a good portion of the evening wallowing in self-pity and my stupidity at trying to take a step forward.

That wasn't the kind of guy I was—the wallowing or the getting attached.

Sure, I went on dates, but they were always no strings attached. Always just a good time.

And though I'd like to pretend that had been my plan with Lucy too... I knew it wasn't.

Which was why I wasn't giving up.

I'd gone in too hard, too fast, and scared her off—almost ruined what we had going—and I wouldn't do that again. But I was going to prove I was serious in how I felt about her. I liked Lucy Sinclair.

A lot.

I didn't even care that she lived in a different country.

I had spent more than a decade of my life in a different country than my grandparents, and I'd still seen them a ton and had a great relationship with them

even before I moved in.

Plus, I still had just over a week of daily interaction with Lucy left to gauge the situation and its potential.

Since it had taken less time than that to willingly make a fool of myself for a date with her, I had a feeling the potential would be impressive.

After a requested late start, the Hastings had all recovered from their bout with the big FP, which was good because if today had been cancelled, the tour would have been derailed.

Today was the start of the overnight trip to Cavendish—all the things there made such a long list that we did it in three days with a two-night stay in the city to keep us close to the action.

And the best part was that it was all Anne-related, so Lucy wouldn't miss it.

I ushered people to the car, eyes traveling over the group for the cute redhead.

She hadn't come down yet. And when Lily Hastings, the youngest of Gemma's three daughters, close in age to Lucy and me, asked for the front seat because she was still feeling a little queasy, I couldn't exactly say no, even though I wanted to.

Lucy was the last to arrive. She took the lack of available front seat in stride, tossing her overnight bag into the back and climbing to the van's third row with her laptop and purse like she'd planned it all along.

I bet she was even a little relieved not to have to sit and talk with me the whole time.

I scowled at the radio, debating whether or not to turn it on.

And then went through the same runaround with the AC.

In the end, I left the latter off but turned on a 90s station in the background.

Lily chatted with me but spent most of her time staring out the window or fielding questions from her family in the back.

The drive was about forty minutes away—plenty of time to have made some headway with Lucy—if she hadn't been two bodies behind me.

We made it to Cavendish just in time for our check-in. I went ahead of the group to get everyone's keys and book an extra room for Lucy. She hadn't been part of the group when the reservations had been initially made so it was likely she wouldn't even make it onto the same floor as us.

Again, she probably didn't care. But I did. Maybe I could move my room next to hers.

Was that creepy? That was probably creepy.

"I'm checking in for the Hastings group. And I need to add a room. "

Gemma and her grandson fell into the lobby in a tangle of little shrieks, arms, and legs. I looked back to check on her, but she gave me a thumbs-up that they were fine.

"Okay, I've got you checked in, but we are at capacity for the night. I apologize, but we won't be able to add a room." The front desk lady tried to hand me several key cards, but I was still computing what she'd said.

"You don't have any extra rooms?"

She shook her head. “I’m so sorry. We just had a large conference group check in—we are at capacity.”

Crap. I should have planned ahead for this one.

“What’s wrong?” Gemma had untangled herself and stood next to me, coming up as high as my shoulder.

“I was trying to add a room, but they’re full.”

Lucy walked into the lobby behind me. I thought fast.

“But it’s okay. My room is a double, so Lucy can just stay with me.

” I squirmed under Gemma’s look. I wasn’t even watching her, but I could feel it burning into the side of my face.

I wasn’t up to any funny business; I just wanted Lucy to have a place to sleep.

And this was my fault for not calling earlier.

Plus, if it meant getting to spend some time ingratiating myself to Miss Lucy Sinclair, I wasn’t complaining.

Lucy’s head shot up at my statement, brows lifted. Gemma offered, “We have an extra bed in our room too—she can stay with us.”

I met Lucy’s eyes. “The hotel is at capacity,” I said by way of explanation.

Her eyes widened, and I could see her mind working. What would it be? Me or the old married couple? I felt like one of those might be a little more awkward than the

other, but what did she think?

Her head swung between us as she adjusted the strap on her shoulder. “No, I don’t want to impose... I can... Is there another hotel nearby?”

The rest of the Hastings made it in. Mar and her husband, who had the baby’s stroller, were followed by Ciara and her husband, who grabbed their son, while Lily came up to her mom.

Seeing them all in a line emphasized how much they looked like Gemma.

Petite, light hair, big smiles. Poor Hank’s genes just hadn’t been able to compete.

“Yeah, there are a few,” I said, slowly. “And I can help you get into one of them if you’d like. But we have the extra beds, just not a room.”

She seemed frozen in indecision. I didn’t blame her. She was probably imagining what the night would look like with either of us. Cute, snoring old couple or guy she’d just turned down. Incredible options.

“Oh, do you need a room? I’m in mine alone... is it a double?” Lily asked, looking over at the front desk employee.

“Yep,” the woman said brightly. “All of our standard rooms have two queens.”

I was a little disappointed. I’d had the slightest likelihood of convincing her to stay with me over the elderly couple. But a single woman with an extra bed? That was a no-brainer.

Lucy clearly agreed. “That would be amazing, Lily, thank you.” Then, to the rest of us, she said, “I’m sorry to cause a big hiccup.”

“This is nothing. There’s almost always some sort of snafu when checking in,” Gemma said with a pat to Lucy’s arm.

It looked like the little old lady had adopted Lucy into their family.

And when Lucy and Lily grabbed their keys and started for the elevators, talking about some book they’d both read recently, it was clear she wasn’t the only one.

I stayed behind, ensuring the rest of the Hastings made it okay before grabbing my own key and going for the hall. Apparently, I was on a different floor than everyone else. Great, even less reason to see Lucy.

My plan to win her over was off to an awesome start.

Only One... Hotel Room?

Lucy

I knocked on the bathroom door. “Lily? You okay in there?”

The sound that reached my ears then was not one for polite company. I suddenly felt terrible for even asking. I was drawing attention to the fact that her insides clearly wanted to be on her outsides.

Sure enough, a completely mortified voice called back. “I’m so sorry. I just feel—” It was cut off by the sound of her heaving.

I had to check myself to stop the sympathetic barfing that was about to occur.

I’d already had a close call fifteen minutes before when we’d been chatting about books and work and what life looked like for each of us, and she’d suddenly grabbed her mouth and run for the bathroom.

“Can I get you anything?” I called, my voice a little mangled.

I really should just leave. Sleep in the lobby or something.

Hit up Gemma’s room. Anything to be away from poor Lily and her even poorer stomach. For her and for me.

“No. No, I’m fine, just g—” She didn’t get to finish the sentence, but I got the

picture.

She did not need an audience right now. I swiped my key card and phone from the top of the dark wooden dresser, then grabbed some crackers from my bag and a water bottle from the fridge and set them next to the bathroom door without a word.

I should have just done that from the beginning.

A knock sounded at the door. Still clutching my things, I peeked through the peephole.

Finn. Crap. I kind of wanted to avoid him after yesterday.

Between him asking me out and me turning into a puddle about my mom's marriage, I was feeling a little exposed and hoping some distance would create much-needed amnesia.

But I couldn't stay in this room. The sounds from the bathroom agreed with me.

So, pulling the door back, I slipped out.

Finn's eyes were wide when I essentially jumped into his arms. But I was just trying to get around him, and he was in the way. I shuffled awkwardly to the side, meeting his laughing gaze.

"I came to check on you guys," he said. "I'm just going around making sure everyone is good and knows the plan for tomorrow."

"Yes," I breathed. "Green Gables. Eight a.m. I couldn't forget." My eyes slipped back to the door, grateful the sounds hadn't followed me out here. Poor Lily.

Poor me getting to spend the night with her. Or...

“How are Gemma and Hank?”

“Gemma was already asleep when I went by. Hank was getting in bed, too.”

Dangit. I couldn't wake them up.

“You look disappointed by that. Are you judging the old people for getting to bed so early?”

“No... I...” I heaved a sigh. I knew what I had to do. “Lily is sick.”

His brows lifted. “She okay?”

“She thinks it's just a resurgence of the food poisoning. And she says she doesn't need anything...”

“You can't stay with her.” He said it decisively, almost like an order. Little did he know, I needed no convincing.

“It's probably not contagious,” I said, in a halfhearted attempt to not look desperate.

He shook his head. “I don't care. You can't stay with her. Get your stuff and come with me.”

I gave him a little salute and didn't even pretend to fight it. I just walked mutely back into my room, closing the door behind me for Lily and Finn's sake, gathered up my stuff, wrote a little note on the back of a takeout menu, and escaped into the hall.

Finn was waiting, hands in pockets, leaning against the far wall. The second I

appeared, he pushed off and reached for my bag.

It would be easier to ignore this man's charms and pretend he was still the junior high tease I'd known if he stopped acting like a fairytale prince with all this chivalry.

Michael had never opened my car door—sure, he'd open the door we were walking through, but he didn't cross around the entire vehicle just to open my door.

He never offered to carry my stuff. He also didn't watch me like Finn was right now.

And it made me feel all warm in my midsection, which was a serious problem, since I was about to stay the night with the guy.

In different beds, of course.

This was not a romance novel's only-one-bed situation. I think I needed to repeat that in my mind about seventeen more times.

"Hey, I've got something for you," Finn said as he pressed the button for the elevator. It dinged immediately, and he held the doors back while I stepped in.

"Should I be nervous?"

"I hope not." He chuckled as he reached into his back pocket. He drew out a little strip of laminated paper.

It was an Anne of Green Gables bookmark. My eyes flicked up to his, and he seemed a little abashed. I swear his cheeks had a tinge of pink, which was usually my territory, being a redhead and all.

He gave it a little shake until I grabbed it. It was so... cute. The bookmark itself was a

miniature Anne, with clear lamination around it. “It’s to make up for the dog-eared pages that one time. Plus, I just thought you’d like it.”

I think my mouth was hanging open in surprise. I shut it with a click of my teeth. “Thank you,” I said.

“You don’t need to sound so shocked. I’m a nice guy, Lucy,” he teased. But his eyes were on me in a very serious way, crinkles around them not from smiling but something more solemn.

“I know you are. I just didn’t expect a gift. I didn’t get you a gift.”

He laughed, and the elevator doors opened, letting us out. “What would we be celebrating if you had? Our six-day anniversary?”

“I just meant that... oh never mind. You ruin your nice-ness with stuff like that, you know.” I used the bookmark as a pointer to indicate his face.

“Balance,” he said decisively.

My eyes traced the cute bookmark so I didn’t have to look at him. “Why did you dog-ear all my pages anyway? You couldn’t have thought I would like that.”

“Oh, it was stupid.”

He left it at that, but I wasn’t letting it go so easily. I stayed quiet till he sighed.

“You’d been carrying around that book for weeks, so I looked it up online and got the summary of it so I could talk to you about it.

” He stopped in front of a door and crossed his arms. “I found a bunch of popular

quotes—page numbers too—and wrote them down... so when I chickened out on talking to you about the stuff in the book, I decided to mark them instead. I thought you'd notice and think I was so smart and we had so much in common.

It was a long shot, and, like I said, stupid.

” He unlocked his door and pushed it inwards.

I couldn't move; I was too busy staring at him. “And instead, you got me marching up to the teacher and demanding you get detention for defacing my book.”

Finn crossed his arms, grinning at the memory. “Yeah, she held me back after class, and when I told her everything, let me off with some advice: to n ot include destruction of personal property in my attempts at getting your attention anymore.”

I laughed and shook my head. Mind-blowing. All this stuff about our past not being what I thought was blowing my mind.

He walked into the room and flicked the lights on, holding the door open with one hand until I was through.

It was an exact mirror of mine and Lily's: the bathroom just to the side when we walked in, two queen beds with a nightstand between them on the left and a dresser with a TV on the right.

A large window filled most of the back wall, though the curtains were pulled over it right now.

There were differences, too, between this room and the one I'd occupied for the hour and a half since we'd gotten back from our afternoon exploring Avonlea village and relaxing on the beach.

Sneakers were tossed off to the side of the dresser, a green jacket draped over the edge of the bed furthest from the door, and men's deodorant on the bathroom counter.

I felt like I was intruding.

Studiously ignoring his eyes, I grabbed my bag from him and tossed it on the bed closest to the door.

"You mind if we switch, actually?" Finn asked.

"Oh, sure, of course. I just thought you were staying in that one." I pointed at the jacket on the other bed.

"Yeah, I thought I'd sleep with the shades open and watch the stars, but if you're here, I'd rather be in the other bed."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Why?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "Ah, in case there's an intruder or something. I can't help you if I'm behind you."

I pressed my lips together. "You think there's going to be an intruder?"

"Well, no, but I don't think that's really something you schedule into your planner... it's more of a surprise situation. And it's better to be prepared."

"But you never prepare."

"What do you mean?" There was a crease between his dark brows.

I picked up my duffle and put it on the other bed, sitting down with a plop.

“You know. You couldn’t even tell me which locations you were going to this week.

You said you don’t like to plan ahead.” I didn’t mention everything about selling the Barn and Breakfast, since it was likely still a sensitive subject.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. He did that a lot. Nervous tick? His shoulders lifted in a shrug. “If you’re going to go all Dr. Phil on me, then you can go ahead and have the other bed. I’ll climb out the window while you fight off the bad guys.”

My lips twitched. “So much for chivalry.”

“You can only press so many buttons before I break.”

I grabbed my toiletry bag and a folded set of pajamas from the top of the duffle, using the conversation to hide that I didn’t know what to do with myself here.

I was aware of what happened in books when the main characters had to stay in the same room.

Of course, usually there was only one bed, so I was at least doing better than those heroines.

“I’m going to get ready for bed. Knock if there are any bad guys?” I asked.

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Finn's lips lifted into a lopsided smile as I moved past him.

He was standing at the foot of the bed, and I had to fit myself between him and the dresser at my back as I turned sideways.

That smile of his stayed in place as he looked down on me, holding me there for the barest of moments.

Caught by his stare. Caught by whatever was deep down there.

Except it wasn't some unnamed emotion. I knew exactly what it was because he'd told me. What I was seeing was attraction. Appreciation.

And I'd said no to a date.

I was starting to regret that decision. But that in itself was reason to stick to it. I couldn't let attraction—because yes, I could admit I was attracted to Finn—cloud my logic.

I averted my eyes, making it the last inch and a half past him, then beelined for the bathroom.

It didn't feel fully safe until I had the door closed behind me and the bright lights above the mirror providing much-needed clarity.

I had seen time and again, in myself and in others, what falling too hard, too fast did.

I was watching it play out in real time with my mother and her fiancé.

Add in a guy in another country? How could that possibly work?

No, I'd be better off pretending nothing had happened in that lighthouse and finishing what I came here for.

I may not know him well, but I did know that Finn never seemed completely serious about anything, and he had said himself that it didn't matter what happened after a date between us.

It might not matter to him, but I wasn't up for a little fling.

Not only would it be pointless and go nowhere, but it would distract me from my real goal: getting the promotion.

When I got home in a week, it wouldn't matter if I'd had a good date or even four or five; it would matter if I had a good presentation to get me the job. That's where my focus needed to be.

I got ready for bed, definitely not lamenting how I'd chosen to pack sweats and a faded T-shirt that said a book a day keeps real life away rather than something cute, took off my makeup, threw my hair on top of my head, and exited the room.

Finn was reading Pretense on his bed when I came out.

His legs were crossed at the ankles, and he was wearing black joggers.

The bathroom had apparently been a buffer, not a cure, from my feelings, because seeing him relaxed like that sent electricity down my spine.

Why was a man holding a book so attractive?

As I tucked my things back into my bag, his eyes flicked up over the top of the book. Slowly, they dropped down the length of me, then landed on my hair piled on my head. His lips quirked up.

“You’re cute,” he said.

I shook my head, pulling my phone charger from my bag and plugging it in.

“What?” he asked. “Is there something wrong with complimenting a woman?”

“Yes, when you’re just teasing her.”

“I would never joke about how cute you are, Luce.”

“You’re doing it right now.”

His eyes were on mine, his lips still lifted in a dangerous smile. “No, I’m not.” He set the book down, pages splayed open on the white comforter. “Is it the adjective you take issue with? I could come up with a different one. Pretty. Attractive. Bea—”

“Okay, okay, you make a good thesaurus, I get it.”

“Guess that means we’re a good match,” he said. “Those can be our first Halloween costumes: Dictionary and Thesaurus.” He was sitting on the side of the bed now, leaning back with hands on the blankets and a crooked smile on his face.

“I’ve got some work to do,” I said, deciding that ignoring him was my best bet. Obviously, I couldn’t engage anymore—with that grin on his face and that fire in his eyes, I wasn’t about to win any conversation, no matter how advanced my vocabulary

might be.

I pulled out my laptop, lay back on the pillows, and stared at the screen. It took me several long moments to remember what I was supposed to be doing.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Finn said, standing.

“Sounds good.” I didn’t look up. I couldn’t. That expression was going to wear me down, I just knew it.

He rummaged in his bag and then walked to the bathroom. The tension in my shoulders eased when I heard the shower turn on. And when it later turned off, I quickly slid my laptop onto the nightstand and ducked under the covers; I didn’t want to risk another conversation.

When the door creaked open to the bathroom, I was on my side with the blanket pulled up to my chin. It took him a few minutes, but eventually he flicked the lights off, just leaving the lamp between us on, and I heard him climb into his bed.

How the heck was I supposed to go to sleep like this, knowing he was RIGHT there?

If I rolled over, I could probably reach a hand out and touch his bed.

My heart would not turn to sleep mode and was distinctly stuck in just-saw-a-cop-while-speeding mode.

Another minute passed, and my phone buzzed.

I had it under the covers with me, so I quickly dimmed the screen and pulled it close to see who had messaged.

Finn: You don't need to pretend to be asleep to avoid me.

The entirety of my body reacted to that little message. It vibrated again.

Finn: Sweet dreams, Luce.

I was sure he was watching me for a reaction, so I just quietly slid the phone under the pillow and shut my eyes tight, trying to pretend that every single one of my nerves wasn't standing deliciously on end from his nearness.

Would You Rather

Finn

I kept my phone close for the next ten minutes, struggling to keep my eyes on my book

instead of straying to its dark screen. If Gram wasn't an early-to-bed person, maybe texting her would have been a good distraction, but she'd already given me the update on Pops, and now I was left with this book I already knew the end to, and my empty phone screen.

Lucy didn't text back.

She also didn't move even an inch, and her breathing didn't even out, so she was definitely still awake.

I felt bad for Lily's resurgence of food poisoning, but I'd hoped it had meant a little time to plead my case with Lucy. Or even just play cards or something. Not fake sleep when the sun had barely gone down.

Well. Two could play at that game.

I tossed my book to the other side of the bed and made a big show of turning off the lamp and getting under my covers. I waited a minute, maybe two, before I faked a tired roll to my side to face her, eyes still closed, and started talking.

“What do you mean you don’t actually like Anne of Green Gables ?” I mumbled, trying my best to make my words slurred and sleepy.

The sheets on the bed beside mine rustled.

“It’s outdated? Silly? No... You can’t mean that.”

I felt like I could feel her eyes on me. I almost peeked one of mine open.

“You mean it’s my fault? It’s because I’m so attractive? I’m so sorry I’m making you like me more than Gilbert Blythe—I know... I know that must be hard to wrap your head around.” I faked a snore. It was honestly terrible—I was surprised Lucy didn’t break into laughter at that alone.

“No... I don’t know if I can keep this secret. I think you—” A pillow hit me in the face.

I ignored it. “Okay, fine, if you’re going to beg, I’ll go out with you.”

Another pillow whizzed past my head.

I popped one eye open. “Really? I’m two feet away, and you missed?” The last word was muffled as another pillow hit me in the face. I caught it before it fell to the ground and raised it like a weapon, eyebrows lifted. “You sure you want to start something you can’t finish?”

The room was dim, yet I could still make out her features because of how close our beds were. But I couldn’t tell if she was about to laugh or yell. Her face was contorted somewhere between a smile and a scowl. I started to throw the pillow I held, but at the last second, didn’t let go.

It worked. She tried to retaliate with a throw of her own. Her fourth pillow smacked into mine.

Her last pillow.

I scooped up the two on the ground and tossed them behind me on the bed. “Thank you,” I said. “I love a few extra pillows while I sleep.”

She seemed to realize her mistake, and her mouth turned down.

“Don’t worry, I’ll share... for a price.”

“Nah, I’m good. I like a, ah, lack of neck support while I sleep. Better for your spine.”

I nodded sagely. “Awesome. Well, goodnight.” I dramatically gathered up all the pillows and lined them around me before plopping onto my back on top of them. I sighed deeply, stretching out.

“Hope you like scoliosis,” she muttered.

I turned, propping my elbow on a pillow and my chin in my hand. “Hey, Luce, I hate to tell you this, but... You aren’t sounding particularly grateful that I’m helping your spine health. You sure you don’t want one of my pillows?”

“I think you mean my pillows.”

“Don’t see your name on them.” I peered down at the few in front of me.

“If I wasn’t so tired, I’d match your junior high humor with some of my own, but my brain can’t seem to come up with any bad jokes.”

I laughed. “Come on. One little game and you can have your pillows.”

She lay on her back and pressed her eyes closed, as if asking for divine help. “What’s the game?”

“Would you rather.”

Her eyes were on the ceiling. “So, I don’t have to move? Just answer questions?”

“Yep.”

“Deal. But only because it’s my own fault for throwing the pillows, otherwise I’d just demand them back.”

My mouth hitched up. “Fair enough. You have to answer... three questions for each pillow.”

“I only need one pillow.”

I assumed as much. “Then three questions.”

“Okay, shoot.”

I was still on my throne of pillows, turned on my side, watching her. She was more shadow than light, and I tried to keep myself from thinking about the fact that she was right there . In her bed. Right in front of me, but just out of reach.

Maybe I should have just gone to sleep.

“Would you rather...” Several options came to mind. None of them would probably deserve answers. “Do karaoke in our room or have a fashion show in the hallway.”

Her shadowy head turned toward me. “I don’t actually have to do either, right?”

“No, ma’am. I promised you could stay in bed.”

“Then karaoke. I would turn the volume down.”

“Good loophole.”

She dipped her head gracefully. “Thank you. Next question?”

My fingers tapped against one of the pillows. “Would you rather have just one perfect night or a thousand ordinary ones?”

For a second, she was quiet. “So, like, only one left?”

“Yep. But it’s perfect. Everything you could want.”

“But then I die?”

“Yep.”

“Jeez, Finn, that took a dark turn.”

I snorted. “Sorry, I didn’t have much time to think. What’s your answer?”

She thought for a moment longer. “Ordinary days.”

“Really? I kinda thought you’d want the perfect day. The happily ever after moment.”

I thought I saw her shrug, but clouds must have drifted across the moon because even the scant window light had gone. Just her voice floated across the expanse to me.

“That’s a lot of pressure for one day. Plus, there’s beauty in ordinary days, too. Not every page in a book is a quotable moment.”

We were both quiet, then she said, “Last question? I’m ready for my pillow, please.”

“Give me a sec to think.”

“Okay, but only because I don’t want another morbid question.”

I chuckled, and the room lightened a little with pearly moonlight. “Alright... Would you rather... relive your best day, or get a glimpse into the future?”

“Best day,” she said. “Pillow, please.”

I tossed her a pillow. One of the ones I hadn’t mangled with my elbow or a knee.

She immediately stuffed it under her head, shifting down until she was burrowed in the blanket.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off her. Something about this little conversation in the quiet and dark of our own bubble had done something.

Moved something. My chest was aching with the desire to keep talking, keep watching each of her small movements, and hear her laugh.

“What was your best day?” I asked.

I saw her blanket rise and fall with a breath. Had she already fallen asleep?

“I don’t know,” she said, her words soft.

“But you answered so quickly.”

She shifted onto her side, her eyes on mine. “I imagine my best day is worth reliving, whatever it was.”

“Better than seeing into the future?”

“What if... what if there aren’t any better days to come? What if the future just depresses me?”

The air in my lungs froze as she put words to feelings I’d had for years. What if the future just depressed me? What if it was bleak and disappointing? But I couldn’t say that. I couldn’t just let her be as pessimistic as I was.

“There has to be good—lots of it. You’ve only been alive twenty-four years, and already you’ve had highs and lows. The future will probably have more lows... but lots more highs too.”

She nodded, tucking her arm under her head.

“Need another pillow?” I asked.

“I don’t think I have it in me to answer three more philosophical would-you-rathers,” she said, her voice smiling.

I tossed a pillow to her, making sure it wouldn’t hit her in the face. “This one’s on the house.”

She grabbed it, bunching it up beside her other one. “Thanks.”

“They are your pillows after all.”

A yawn took over her mouth for a moment before she said, “Weird, I don’t see my name on it.”

I chuckled, forcing myself to turn and stop looking at her.

Her bed shifted too, and I guessed she’d turned as well. “What was your best day, Finn?”

I had to think about it. I could call up a ton of bad days—why was it that the crap stuff stuck with you more than the good? But the best day?

“Sixteenth birthday. All my friends came, Pops hooked up the trailer, and we listened to music on a hayride, then played night games.”

“Sounds like a fun birthday.” There was a smile in her voice.

It was, but that wasn’t why it was my best day. And for some reason, I wanted to tell Lucy about it. All of it. “I think the real reason it was the best was because it... I... That was the first time I remember feeling like this was home.”

She was quiet, but I didn’t give in to the pull to turn back toward her bed.

“I’d been there for a couple of years by then, but two months before it had been decided that I was staying permanently. Dad was out of jail... and he didn’t want me back.”

She made a sound that was pure disgust. “I don’t like your dad much.”

“Me neither.” My chest swelled with the appreciation of her disdain on my behalf. “But until that day, I didn’t ever feel like I could settle down. That day... on my birthday... something changed. I showed my friends around like it was my home, not

my grandparents’.”

“I’m so glad you had people there for you... But I’m sorry it was so hard for so long.”

I shrugged, then remembered she couldn’t see me. “It’s okay. Life happens. You’ve talked about your mom a bit... but what about your dad? What happened there?”

She made a noncommittal noise, then yawned again. I let myself turn back and watch her shadowy figure.

“I don ’t really know, to be honest. I remember they fought more before it happened—the divorce.

But I’m not sure what the deciding factor was, if there was one.

Too often, I think people just stop seeing the good in the other person and the stuff they could improve in themselves.

Relationships don’t work after that. But my parents did a good job shielding me from it, at least. Mom, because she let me be a kid and didn’t rag on my dad; and Dad, because he just stopped talking to me. ”

“Ouch. That’s terrible.”

“Yeah. I could defend him and say it was new territory for him too, and he married a woman who wanted to build her own family... but at the end of the day, he was my dad, and he should have tried harder.”

“Yeah, he should have. I’m sorry, Luce.”

She yawned, and it was contagious. “Enough questions from you, we need sleep.”

“Would you rather sleep now or give that karaoke plan a go?”

Lucy laughed, but it was cut off by another yawn.

“Okay, okay,” I said, making myself roll over and face the wall. “Goodnight. We can do karaoke tomorrow.”

Another small laugh, this time slower, more sleepy. “Night, Finn.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:21 am

Lu cy of Green Gables

Lucy

The sight of the Green Gables house made the whole trip worth it. Straight from the pages of my imagination, just past the red barn, there it was. With the white exterior beautifully maintained, trees swaying in the light breeze, and the most charming green shutters adorning each window.

I think I sighed with ecstasy. It was perfect. And a little surprising that it so perfectly lived up to my expectations—exactly as I'd imagined.

I went ahead of everyone, partly because I couldn't wait to get inside and partly to avoid Finn.

He'd been polite, charming, and not overly flirtatious all morning as we danced around one another, getting ready and heading to breakfast, but that look in his eyes was getting to me.

It was like every time he looked at me, he was taking me in. All of me. And he liked what he saw.

Even now, I was ninety-seven percent sure I was blushing.

I slowed on the packed dirt path after walking through the barn-turned-mini visitor's center.

A weathered, but still white, picket fence spilling over with large bushes of pink flowers surrounded the house, and the glass on the windows glinted in the bright sunlight.

The breeze seemed to carry a hint of nostalgia from my past, and it was as if...

well, as if my soul was sighing with content.

Is this how Anne had felt when she first arrived at Green Gables?

I'd stood transfixed for so long that the group caught up.

Everyone except for poor Lily, who had stayed at the hotel and would be missing at least the morning tours.

Gemma had assured me that Lily liked Anne the least of them all and was really just there for the vacation, so she wasn't too upset.

I still felt a little terrible for abandoning her.

"Go ahead, guys," Finn called from behind. Not one to disobey a direct order—especially one that would take me inside a literal fairytale—I walked through the white picket gate, enjoying the light creak of extensive use. It would have felt wrong if it had been perfectly well-oiled.

Entering the house was like I'd stepped back in time.

The papered walls of the entry were idyllic, and my eyes skipped right past the ropes keeping us from touching everything in the rooms, just taking it all in as if I were the little orphan girl who was supposed to be a boy but had ended up being exactly what Green Gables needed.

I caught Gemma's eye, who seemed just as enthralled as I was, before I pulled out my phone and began taking notes and pictures.

This was one of those places I didn't strictly need to visit.

Yes, a person attending a literary tour here absolutely had to go into the house that had inspired L.

M. Montgomery and had been staged to be as close to what the fictional Anne, Marilla, and Matthew would have experienced, but that very fact was why I didn't need to come.

It gained a spot on my tour list on its own without my visit.

But I wanted to come, and I also figured some pictures in my final presentation were sure to add interest.

The tour was self-guided, and everyone eventually split off. About ten minutes later, I found myself standing beside the pantry, just outside the plexiglass half-door, looking in and living a waking daydream when I was discovered.

"You fit right in," Finn said, coming to stand beside me.

"It's the red hair."

"That definitely helps." His eyes traveled across the hair in question, a smile playing on his lips. Before I could ask what he was thinking, he reached out and tugged lightly on a strand. "Would you be offended if I called you carrots?"

"Honestly, not at all." I tamped down my smile.

“It doesn’t really fit, though—your hair is too dark.” He let the strands fall, watching them slide between his fingertips.

My neck prickled with awareness that only intensified when he glanced up and we locked eyes. “I never asked why Anne of Green Gables ended up being your favorite?”

I tore my eyes away, blowing out a breath. What had he asked? Anne. Right. “My mom gave it to me when I was a preteen. Just after my parents’ divorce. I’d worked my way through all the usual suspects, and I guess she decided I should take on the classics.”

He nodded along, waiting for more. I had considered this a lot, actually.

I loved books. All books. But something about Anne was different.

And something about Finn made me feel safe sharing my thoughts.

“Books were my escape during the divorce—I was really lost for a long time... and they gave me someone else’s life to hide in.

But Anne...” I watched my hands. “Anne taught me that I could escape without the pages of a book. She taught me the importance of humor and daydreams and reframing the world around you.”

Finn was nodding. “Yes. I see that in you. You always dreamt big—it used to make me a little jealous in school when you’d talk about what you did the past weekend or what plans you had coming up. I thought even going to the grocery store with you must be fun.”

I laughed. “I think I’ve lost a bit of that magic, then, because my grocery trips are

downright boring these days.”

“You mean pirates don’t attack you next to the deli meat?”

I pretended to pout. “No. And no princes ever save me from dastardly broccoli.”

He chuckled at that. “Anne grew up, too, you know. She wasn’t the same crazy daydreamer in later books as she was in the first couple. That didn’t mean she lost her magic.”

I froze, watching him. Behind us, someone else walked into the kitchen, I scootched out of the way so I wouldn’t be blocking the pantry. Finn followed. “You’ve read Anne of Green Gables?”

“Of course. My crush liked them in junior high. I had to do some recon.”

I gasped. “You’re lying.”

“Nope. My dad thought I was weird when I asked him to buy me the set.”

“You read all of them?”

“I admit to getting bored after Anne of the Island, but I picked them back up a few years ago and finished. Hey, don’t look at me like that, I’m sure many grown men have enjoyed classic literature.”

“Wait... is that why you pulled my hair when we had the seat change in History?”

“Guilty.” He was grinning. “I knew it was a long shot since it didn’t even work for Blythe, but you had your hair in braids, I couldn’t help myself.”

I was once again re-examining every one of our childhood interactions. Had he been trying to be my Gilbert Blythe in junior high? If so, he'd gotten a bit stuck in the teasing part of the fictional hero's personality. Would he have grown to be the charming, sincere one if he'd stayed in the States?

The answer to that was obvious. Yes. That man was standing in front of me now.

Heaven help me.

I shook my head, walking toward the door. Finn fell into step with me as I left the kitchen and went for the stairs. "I feel like I didn't even really know you despite having more than half our classes together for a year and a half."

"You could get to know me now. At dinner tomorrow?" His eyes were slanted toward me, though the rest of him still faced forward as we ascended the stairs.

I sighed. "I don't know, Finn. I still don't think it's a great idea. This is a work trip. You live in a different country."

He stopped on the landing, so I did too.

"It's not like I live in England or something. There isn't some big ocean separating Canada from the U.S."

I quirked a brow. "You live on an island."

"Yes, but it's very close to the rest of Canada. Don't hold it against me."

I laughed despite myself. With him looking down on me like that, and the whole last twenty-four hours leaning heavily on my mind—and heart—I was this close to giving in. "This" being a forefinger and thumb just a centimeter apart. "Let me think about

it.”

His face registered success. So, I put on a stern expression.

I don’t think it worked very well because his smile didn’t even waver.

“It might still be a no, Finn. I... I don’t date. Not much, anyways.”

“Okay. Okay, if it’s really a ‘no,’ I won’t push you. But I make no promises against a little enticement until then.” Something glinted in his eye, and he took a step closer.

Almost against my will, my chin lifted to maintain eye contact. But his eyes dropped to my mouth.

So, I did what any sane woman who was in my position would do.

I ducked around him to escape.

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Rollercoaster of Emotions

Finn

The trees nearly swallowed us as the group began down the path into the Haunted Wood.

Lucy had her phone out and a document app open, but her eyes were anywhere but on it.

A group was coming toward us from the other direction, and Lucy had positioned herself smack dab in the middle of the trail, chin lifted as she gazed at the tops of the trees.

I waited, but she didn't move, so I walked up beside her, placing my hand on the small of her back and guiding her to the side.

She didn't jump or glare at me. Instead, she turned that beautiful smile on me. "It's perfect."

I didn't move my hand. I was happily pushing my luck here, but I'd warned her I planned to convince her to go out with me. My hand was warm, and I itched to tiptoe my fingers around her waist and pull her to me.

And why not? Again, I'd promised enticement.

So, I let my hand skim across her thin cotton shirt until my palm was against her side

and I could tug her just a little closer. Not as close as I wanted. But closer.

She shivered, and her cheeks turned pink.

I felt an almost primal level of pride at that. I'd better watch out—my attempts to convince her were just digging my hole deeper and deeper, and if she turned me down, I'd be stuck at the bottom with no ladder.

My brain didn't particularly want to listen to logic right now, though.

It took longer than I'd expected, but she disentangled herself from me, sending me a halfhearted glare. It was the halfhearted part that gave me hope.

"Gemma," she said, skipping forward away from me. "I don't think I've asked where your family is from. Are you guys in the Salt Lake area?"

The sweet woman shook her head, her hand clasped in her husband's. "We are in Arizona, but we had a layover in Salt Lake."

They struck up a conversation about that, and I was content to just trail behind them, listening and enjoying the scenery.

It had been a while since I'd gone on this tour.

The last time had been the previous fall, but I hadn't joined the group, opting to stay in the car until the tour was finished.

We weren't particularly busy in the winter and spring, but there had been a Green Gables Christmas event last year, and I'd just dropped our guests at that and then picked them up after.

Really, most of the time, I was just an overpaid chauffeur.

Seriously overpaid, considering my qualifications, which equaled living on the island and happening to be the grandchild of a couple that ran a popular B&B.

Lucy glanced back briefly, catching my eye, but then focused again on her conversation. I smiled to myself. She wasn't as unaffected as she liked to pretend.

My text tone went off, so I pulled my phone out.

Until Pops had ended up in the hospital, I hadn't bothered to check my phone hardly at all, but despite knowing Gram was still sleeping at the B&B and Pops was slowly getting his energy back, another update could come anytime.

And being so far from them today made me want to stay on top of things even more.

Dadbeat: Hey Finn, I talked to Gram today and heard your Pops hasn't been doing well. I'll be headed up for a few days—would love to get together and get something to eat or catch a movie while I'm there. Let me know your availability.

You've got to be kidding me.

It had been two and a half years since I'd seen my dad. He texted on my birthdays and major holidays, but that was it. And now he was just going to drop in and wanted... to get a bite to eat or catch a movie? Like we'd seen each other last month?

Man, he could at least pretend to butter me up a bit first.

A dozen responses filtered through my mind, none of them nice and most of them straight up mean, so I pocketed my phone. I'd deal with it later.

We finished the walk through the Haunted Wood, and I probably had several missed opportunities to make jokes or insinuations about Lucy and me on Lovers' Lane, but like usual, even just the thought of my dad was ruining my day.

What would it have been like to have a real dad? Not a perfect one, but maybe one that didn't end up in jail. One that didn't decide after he'd served his time that a kid seemed like too much work. One that...

"You okay?" Lucy asked quietly from next to me.

I looked up. We were at the van and everyone was standing around waiting for me to unlock it.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," I said, unlocking and opening her door.

She shot me looks all through the drive, but I wasn't about to say anything.

My phone with that text burned a hole in my pocket the whole way.

I almost waited in the car while the group visited Lucy Maud Montgomery's grave, but at the last second, I pocketed the keys, chunked my phone down by the van pedals, and jogged after them all.

Lucy saw me coming and broke off from the group. Her eyes took me in, and I half expected another interrogation like after the hospital.

"Don't want to talk about it?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Okay." She fell into step beside me.

I shook my head at her.

“What?” she asked.

“That’s all it takes for you to drop this, but I can’t convince you to go out with me?”

Her hair was coming out of its braid, and it reminded me of the unkempt style she’d had last night... and how it had looked that morning. The bun had been lopsided, and more than a few hairs had escaped. Freaking adorable.

“I’ve told you my reasons about the date,” she said, but her eyes were smiling.

“I know. So trivial. Something about an ocean between us.”

“Yeah, trivial.”

We grinned at each other for a minute before she seemed to realize what she was doing.

Another point for me.

We caught up with the group who were around the gravesite and spent a few minutes there.

Lucy sighed. “Do you think she knows that she created a world better than reality?” she asked as we turned to walk back to the car. It seemed rhetorical.

I was answering anyway.

“She created an incredible world. But she based it off the real one.”

She waved me off. “And made it better.”

“I don’t know about that. There was plenty of heartache in her stories. You can’t tell me you didn’t cry when Matthew died.”

“Absolutely sobbed. My mom came up to my room to see if I’d broken a bone or something.”

“So, what makes them better than reality?” The group was again back at the van, but Lucy and I weren’t quite there. I clicked the unlock button and stopped at the side of the parking lot, waiting for Lucy’s answer.

She paused at that. “The happily ever after.”

“There are a lot of happily ever afters in life. It just depends on when you end the story.”

She sighed, scrunching up her nose. “You just can’t convince me that real life holds a candle to fiction. That’s why it’s fiction.”

“I think you’ve got it backwards. Fiction doesn’t hold a candle to real life.”

She opened her mouth to respond, then snapped it shut. “Agree to disagree.”

I wanted to continue disagreeing actually.

Maybe it was because my dad’s text had me feeling antagonistic.

Maybe it was partly because I really liked this girl and was actively trying to get her to reciprocate—or realize that she reciprocated—those feelings.

But it felt like I was personally offended by her outlook on life.

As if she was standing there telling me I could never measure up to Gilbert Blythe.

Sure, I probably couldn't, but having it said to you stung. And it was ridiculous to measure reality against fiction. They were dinner and dessert. Both great in their own right, but we lived in reality—we needed dinner.

And frankly, why couldn't reality be dessert too? I—

I needed to stop having a metaphorical discussion in my mind. Lucy had her head tilted and was watching me strangely.

“Sure,” I grumbled. “Agree to disagree.”

“Hey, ” I said, as we pulled back in front of the hotel and everyone started to get out. Lucy turned to me in the passenger seat, eyebrows lifted.

Gemma called a goodbye, and I waved over Lucy's head. The van door shut, leaving just Lucy and me.

“I want to show you something.”

“Okay.”

“We've got to go somewhere first.” I hadn't turned the car off yet and was hoping she'd buckle back up and we could go.

“Where?”

“Do you trust me?”

She pressed her lips together. “Depends, are you trying to trick me into a date?”

“Lucy, when I take you on a date, you’ll be very much aware.”

Her cheeks went rosy. “Okay fine, I trust you.”

“Perfect. Buckle up.” I put the van into gear and pulled out of the lot. It was only a few minutes to our location.

“An amusement park?” Lucy asked, looking up at Sandspit with surprise in her voice.

“A small one, but the best this island has to offer.” I parked, unbuckling. “I have a proposition for you.”

“That sounds scary.”

I ignored that. “They’ve got these great carnival games here, I used to come with friends all the time in high school. I thought it would be more fun to play these than have you pretend to go to sleep at like seven p.m. tonight.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, but her voice was threaded with laughter.

“Sure, sure. I’d just hate to have to steal your pillows in order to get you to wake up. But I’ve also got lots of inaccurate Anne of Green Gables facts up my sleeve that I intend to share if you won’t stay and hang out with me tonight. Your choice.”

“So, this is coercion?” Her eyes were sparkling with amusement.

“One hundred percent. You in?” I asked.

“Okay, sounds fun.”

I was honestly shocked she said yes. Maybe instead of asking her on a date, I should have just driven her to a restaurant and asked if she was in for a free meal.

Except I wanted a date in every sense of the word. And I wanted her to know it.

We entered the park, buying two passes for carnival games. I loved this place, but it had been years since I'd come. The flashing lights, crowds, and smell of carnival food immediately filled my senses in the best way.

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“Come this way,” I said, gesturing her over to the booth. “You’ve played carnival games, right?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never been to an amusement park at all.”

“Not even Lagoon? That’s got to be like an hour from you?”

Again, she shook her head, then shrugged. “After the divorce, both of my parents were pretty busy with work. We didn’t do a ton of activities.”

“Never went with friends or anything?”

“My cousins wanted to plan a day there once; I can’t remember what ended up happening to derail that.”

I stared at her, boggled. “Okay, change of plans.” I grabbed her hand, pulling her back to the ticket booth.

I had done it so quickly and without thought that it wasn’t until our palms were pressed together and our fingers interlocked that I realized.

Maybe I had accidentally dragged her into a date, just without classifying it as that.

The thought made me feel like a dirtbag, so I dropped her hand, even though I didn’t want to .

I bought us evening passes and led her back into the park. “Alright, what’s first?

Rides, roller coaster, Ferris wheel?”

She seemed to be in a state of shock, but then her eyes glittered and a smile lifted her lips. “Roller coaster.”

“I take it back, let’s just go play carnival games.” She had her eyes clamped shut as the roller coaster attendant checked our belts. My lips twitched—really, this wasn’t a huge rollercoaster.

But the fear painted in broad strokes across her face made the smile drop.

I wanted to reach out and grab her hand, but the chivalry my grandparents had instilled ran strong, holding me back.

Being the nice guy really sucked sometimes.

“The scariest part is the start, as soon as we get going, you’re gonna have a blast.”

She was shaking her head back and forth. “Is it too late to back out? It’s probably too late, isn’t it? Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, what have I done?”

My hand flexed against my knee. “I can flag down the attendant if you want to get off.”

My eyes scanned for the guy; he wasn’t checking belts anymore.

Suddenly, our cart jerked forward. Lucy let out a yelp, her hand darting out and grabbing mine in such a vice grip that it was an impressive feat of my nervous system that it still managed to feel every inch of her skin against mine.

I curled my fingers around hers. She had grabbed my hand, so I was no longer the

bad guy for holding on.

I would earn that title only by letting go now, and I'd hate to hurt her.

I felt a little bad enjoying this when she was so terrified.

Her other hand snaked around my upper arm, pulling herself close.

Roller coasters. The key had been roller coasters, and I'd stumbled upon this Holy Grail of information totally by accident.

I closed my freehand over hers on my arm.

"It's the scariest part, remember? You can do this.

It's going to be okay." She was still shaking her head, and a sound half between a groan and a whimper escaped her lips.

I moved my hand to hold her head against my shoulder, as if I could shield her from the fear.

My gut felt like it was tumbling around in a dryer, having nothing to do with the steady incline as we went up to the first drop.

And then we were off, flying down the track, the wind blowing her hair across my neck.

She had her whole body pressed into mine, clinging for dear life, and I held her right back with a grin as wide as the Grand Canyon on my face.

Would I be able to get Lucy to go on it again? I would love a repeat of this.

The ride was short. Too short by my estimation. And when our cart slowed to a stop, I regretfully removed my hand from Lucy's hair as she pulled back.

Her eyes flipped up to mine, moisture clear in their chocolate depths, and for a second, my heart lurched at the sight. But then a one-thousand-watt smile split her face.

“That. Was. Amazing.”

Yes, it was, but I had to admit to a level of shock at hearing it from her. “It was?”

She laughed, the sound bright and unburdened, and swiped beneath her eyes with her hands. Then she pressed her hand to her chest.

“Oh my gosh, I thought my heart was going to pound right out of my chest. Is this what it feels like to be high?”

I snorted. “No, I don't think it is.”

She ignored me, hands waving in an attempt to express her apparent excitement. “It is amazing. Incredible. Let's do it again.”

We stood in line and rode it two more times, and to my complete and utter dismay, she didn't hold onto me once. The third time, she even threw her hands in the air, screaming with delight the entire time. My eardrums might never be the same, but I was more worried about my heart.

Eventually, after touring the whole park, we made it back to the carnival games, where I had the satisfaction of beating her soundly at every single one.

“What happened to chivalry?” she asked after my tenth straight win.

“I am pretty sure there is no part in the definition that says I need to let you win.”

She pouted, and it was adorable. “Still would have been nice.”

“No, you would have gotten annoyed at me for pretending to lose.”

Her hand was wrapped around an almost-gone cotton candy cone, and she pinched her lips to the side in thought. “Yeah, I probably would have.” Then she sighed. “I’m totally forcing my cousins on that day to Lagoon.”

I felt strangely jealous of her cousins.

“You’ll have to tell me all about it, their roller coasters are much larger than ours.”

“I will.” The park was closing, or else I would have found more ways to keep her out with me, but as it was, we’d had a long day today and had an early morning staring us in the face.

So, we walked back to the van and drove to the hotel with her verbally reliving every moment of the amusement park.

It made me happy to listen to her rattle on about each of the things that I had been doing right beside her.

Because it meant that because of me, she’d just had an incredible evening.

My head was growing big from all the unspoken praise.

I parked at the hotel, held open her doors, and made it up the elevator before I couldn’t help myself.

“So, dinner?”

She didn't glare, and her smile didn't fade. “Maybe.”

“Still just maybe?”

She nodded, biting her lip, but her smile was still there. Was she actually teasing me now? I thought that was my territory, but I was more than happy to share. “Let me check my schedule,” she said, and the absolute cheek in her tone made me want to push her against the wall and kiss her senseless.

“I can check it for you, it's the same as mine.” I used my key card to get us into the room.

She went straight for her bag, pulling out pajamas, and then passing me on her way back to the bathroom. But she paused, with her hand on the doorknob. “Probably,” she amended.

“I will take probably.”

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Old People Games

Lucy

After returning to the inn from the trip to Cavendish and the incredibly immersive Anne experience I'd had, I'd been flooded with ideas for my tour.

It took a super late night and half of the morning, but I was now nearly done with the actual tour part; I had the itinerary on paper, including the bonus movie-based itinerary, and I had a rough outline for my actual presentation as well.

I'd skipped the tour that day. It wasn't Anne-related, but I'd still been interested in going...

except for the need to work. In addition to the literary tour plans, I finalized a few clients' itineraries and had a conference call with Ellie while walking down the lane.

It was the kind of day that had me exhausted but so satisfied with my work.

Better even than when I manage to get all my laundry washed, dried, folded, and put away all in one day back home.

So, I was taking a break.

I sat up on the bed and stretched my back. The one downside to this cute room was the lack of a desk or table to write on, so I'd been hunched over my computer most of the day.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” I called.

It opened, revealing Finn.

That man was too attractive for his own good. And it was somehow worse when he showed up unannounced. Like my body didn’t get a chance to prep itself for seeing him.

“Hey, what are you up to?” he asked.

“Just finished my presentation outline and finalized some tour details.”

“So, you need a change of scenery?” He held the “so” out, his smile showing up.

“Yes.” I didn’t even think twice about my answer, though a small part of me said I should have.

“I’m headed to the hospital to bring Gram home for the night and to see my Pops.” He shifted his weight, pushing hands into his pockets. “Gram mentioned she’d like to see you again. Want to join me?”

I’d already met his grandma before. Yet somehow this moment felt more like a “meet the family” situation than the last did. I squirmed where I sat. But ultimately, I knew the answer I wanted to give. “Sounds fun. Are you leaving right now?”

He grinned. “If you’re ready.”

I looked around for my phone and purse and grabbed them. “Yep.”

“Perfect.” He held open the door for me from inside the room. Which meant I had to squeeze past him and his defined shoulders and chest.

By the look on his face, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Not against a little enticement, he’d said. The man was taking that pledge very seriously.

He followed me down the narrow staircase. On the second floor, we passed Lily heading into her room.

“Hey!” she said to me after a quick hello to Finn. “I’m so sorry for being a terrible roommate.”

“No, I’m sorry,” I said. “Are you feeling better?”

She nodded emphatically . “Yes. Thank goodness. It’s going to be a long time before I can eat seafood again, though. If ever. Yeah... Come to think of it, I think it’s officially off the menu.”

I grimaced. “I don’t blame you.”

She looked between the two of us and, for the first time, I realized that she had to be close in age to Finn and me, with sleek, chin-length hair that appeared to always be perfectly in place and light eyes that gave her an almost ethereal appearance.

If Finn was such a tease and a flirt like I’d always assumed, why wasn’t he flirting with her?

“Where are you headed?” she asked.

“Lucy is coming with me to pick up my grandma,” Finn offered. He didn’t seem uncomfortable, just standing there with his weight equally balanced on both legs and an easy smile on his face. But he wasn’t putting off any flirting vibes. Not even a little.

Men like him were always putting off flirting vibes...

weren’t they? It was like they got a handbook at birth.

You’re going to grow to be an attractive and socially capable man.

Therefore, it is your duty to flirt with every female you cross paths with.

It’s in the rules: you’ll find it on page thirty-seven.

Lily was looking at us with curiosity now. What did she see? What did I want her to see?

“Well, have fun,” she said brightly, opening the door to her room.

“Thanks,” Finn said, reaching a hand out to me.

I grabbed it without thinking. We both looked down, but when I didn’t let go, neither did he.

Instead, he tucked his hand tighter around mine, the warmth of his sending pinpricks of feeling through mine and up my arm.

He went first down the next staircase, but folded his arm behind his back so he could keep a hold on my hand; a secure hold like he was weaving through a crowd and didn’t want to lose me.

How had I gotten myself into this position?

And why did I seem incapable of wanting to get myself out?

Something about our hands together felt natural.

But also not, because at least eighty-three percent of all my attention was on that small bit of skin that touched Finn's. It was currently creeping up to ninety.

As if realizing how much I was enjoying our point of contact, he squeezed my hand then let it go, opening the door for me.

I tried not to pout as I glanced down at my suddenly cold hand. The pout turned to a glare when I saw Finn tuck away a smile.

He was playing with me. And I couldn't even be that mad.

As usual, he held the door while I buckled my seatbelt, then went to his side.

"Do you have your own car?" I asked. "Or do you take the van everywhere?"

"The van is mine," he said, turning it on. "I bought it when Gram and Pops decided to start offering tours. I needed a new car anyway, and it saved them an extra expense."

"How are you feeling about all of that? Are they still planning on selling, with your grandpa doing better?"

He tossed me a sheepish look. "I don't know, I've been avoiding the conversation."

"Oh yes," I said gravely. "The old, 'I can't see you, you can't see me' trick. If you don't talk about it, maybe it doesn't exist."

“Exactly,” he said with mock enthusiasm and a lifted fist.

I shook my head but let it drop. This was his problem to work through, it wasn’t my place to butt in.

“They want to hire a harvester for the orchard this year,” he said, as if that were an explanation of sorts.

He glanced over at me. “They’ve never done that.

Every once in a while, we use one to help us out, but never to do it all.

For the last decade, each summer they’ve held a big U-Pick event—where they invite people in for a fee to pick the fruit?

It feels wrong not to have one this year, but Gram asked for the harvester, so I know she’s not planning on the event.

I thought about trying to do it for her, but I don’t have those skills. ”

“I can help you plan one if you need,” I offered. “I’m really good at planning stuff.”

“I know you are... but I can’t ask you to do that. I’m just thinking out loud here, really. Financially, it would probably help them out to not have to pay the harvester... but I don’t really want to be bugging her with a ton of questions if I decide to do it. I don’t know—I’ll keep thinking.”

I nodded. “Your Gram is coming back to stay at the B&B?”

“She has been for the last few days. Usually, she drives to the hospital every morning—the bad beds finally got to her. But today I dropped her off on our way to

the tour.”

“How’s she doing?”

His mouth turned down, and his answer was slow.

“I’ve been avoiding asking that, too.” His jaw worked.

“But before you judge me too harshly, I have been checking in. So much that I think it’s starting to get annoying.

I just worry that if I ask how she’s doing and the answer isn’t good...

then maybe I’ll have to... face the reality of that. ”

“That makes sense.” I squeezed his forearm, and he rewarded me with a small smile.

But he looked like he needed a distraction from the conversation more than he needed to work through it.

I gave it another thirty seconds, to be sure he didn’t have anything else he wanted to talk about, before saying, “It’s been at least twenty minutes, and you haven’t tried to get me to go out with you once. ”

His eyes flashed to mine, entertainment lurking behind the residual pain of our conversation. “Now that you mention it—”

I laughed, shaking my head. Of all the topics I could bring up, I’d chosen this one?

“There’s this super good Italian place a few miles from here. Probably some of the best pasta I’ve ever gotten.”

“So now you’re trying to sell me on the food?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “I wasn’t making much headway selling you on the company.”

If only he knew how wrong that was. “I don’t know, Italian isn’t my favorite.”

“Then allow me to provide a list of potential dinner locations. We have several.”

By about the third place I claimed not to be interested in, he started to figure out that I was exaggerating my picky eating.

Conversation about dinner turned to conversation about our favorite foods, which turned to even more general likes and dislikes.

I laughed a lot, didn’t think about work hardly at all, and by the time we got to the hospital, it was like the ride had been five minutes rather than over half an hour.

Finn’s Gram met us in the lobby like before, but this time she didn’t seem as tired, and there was a more genuine smile on her face. Rather than talking first to Finn, she turned to me. Her eyes were crinkled at the edges, reminding me a bit of Finn but with more lines from age.

“I’m so glad you came. I told Finn to bring you back after the surgery—James has wanted to meet you, and I never got to thank you properly.” She reached out and squeezed Finn’s hand before gesturing us to the elevators.

I fell into step beside them. “I had no clue he wanted me to come along until today,” I said, fully throwing Finn under the bus.

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“Sorry, Gram, I’ve been trying to convince Lucy to go a few other places with me, too, and those haven’t been working. Guess I thought I wouldn’t be too capable of getting her out here either.” His eyes met mine over his Gram’s head. I scrunched my nose at him. He winked at me.

“Lies. He knew I’d come,” I said. “He’s just worried you’ll like me more than him.”

Gram laughed. “He’s right to worry. After how sweet you were during James’s surgery, I’m definitely partial to your company.”

“If you two like each other so much, Gram, you should ask Lucy to join us for dinner tonight.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Underhanded tactics.

“Oh, I would love to, but I had a large lunch and I’m not sure I’ll make it to dinner. I usually fall asleep the moment I lie down, no matter what time.”

“That has to be exhausting, all the going back and forth,” I said.

Gram nodded as we all stepped out of the elevator.

“It is, but I don’t mind. I don’t like to be too long from James.

” She reached a door and put her hand on the handle before looking over at me.

“It’s been fifteen-odd years since we’ve spent a night apart.

If I could just stay at the hospital, I would, but he worries about the B it doesn't bode well for a blossoming love life.

Chloe: Aren't you supposed to be the happily ever after one of us? I don't know... maybe take the chance.

I stared at the screen. No one else chimed in, but Chloe's words seemed to float above the rest. Dang it, Chloe. I blamed it on her sudden change of fortune in her love life—but right now, I wanted more pessimism and less optimism.

Because my heart was already leaning toward optimism.

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Do g-trapped

Finn

It was Saturday, and a free day for the tour group, which meant a free day for me.

Gram was back at the hospital for the afternoon, and I was just out of the shower after a run with Wes.

He'd given me the harvester's number, and I should call the guy, but something stopped me.

We didn't use a harvester—the U-pick had always been a summer tradition, and I wasn't mentally ready to give it up.

Putting it off a day wasn't going to ruin anything.

The room was heavy with hot steam from the water, and the mirror had fogged despite my using the fan. My phone lit up, but its light was dimmed by all the moisture-tinged air around it. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I grabbed it.

Lucy: Help.

Finn: What happened?

Lucy: I'm dog-trapped on the beach.

Lucy: Ah! Quick! He looks hungry!

I didn't even know what that meant, but I grabbed a pair of shorts and some sneakers and shot out the door, rounding the house into the orchard and toward the little path to the beach.

The laugh that came when I saw her was not my fault. Any innocent bystander would definitely side with me on that front.

"Lucy, that's barely a dog." I struggled to keep my expression neutral as her eyes turned to slits.

She didn't look at me, though; her eyes were glued to the little schnauzer on the path between us.

It had taken a defensive stance and was definitely staring Lucy down, but it was also no higher than her calf.

"Stop laughing!" she demanded, glancing up. But the second her eyes moved, the dog jumped forward, yipping at her.

Yes, yipping. Its voice box couldn't have been large enough to manage an actual bark.

"See!" she pointed, flinching when the dog jumped into the air again at her movement. "It won't let me pass!"

"I feel like I should be making a Lord of the Rings joke right now, but I don't know that you'd fully appreciate it."

"I wouldn't. Help me."

I whistled, and the dog immediately turned on me, tail wagging. I could see Lucy wince, as if expecting my immediate demise. So glad to know she cared that deeply about me... and held me in such low esteem as to think this oversized rat could take me.

Really, this thing appeared to have taken several dips in the ocean, followed by a roll around the beach. It was looking a bit rodent-esque.

I slapped my thigh, and the dog trotted up to me as I bent to grab a stick.

Once it reached my side, I waved the stick a couple of times, then tossed it far to the left, in the direction of our nearest neighbors, since that was the most likely place he'd come from.

The dog crashed through the light undergrowth after it, and I tried to tamp down my proud smile, but was unsuccessful.

Lucy ambled up next to me, sighing deeply.

"I know what you're thinking," I said before she could speak. "Not all heroes wear capes."

"Or shirts, apparently?"

Oh yeah, I'd overlooked that particular clothing item.

"Do you hulk out when headed off to hero duty?" she asked. She seemed to be making a great effort to keep her eyes on mine, but they kept slipping down my body. And the red in her cheeks was beginning to match her hair. She cleared her throat. "Tear the shirt in half?"

“You know books and pop culture?” I ask. “Wow—you’re a catch. Someone should really snatch you up before the other guys do. Take you to dinner at least.” My tone was leaning heavily to sarcasm, but hopefully my expression helped her see the joke.

Except she was, again, not looking at my face.

I was strangely proud of that. I’d worked hard for these abs. Sure, they were currently only a four-pack, but some might say that was just a discounted six-pack, and who doesn’t love a good deal?

“But really, where’d you lose half your clothes?”

“Bad game of Texas Hold ‘em,” I deadpanned.

“And they took all your shirts? You didn’t think to bet a couple pairs of pants instead to even it out?” She started walking back to the house as she talked. I could only assume it was too hard to keep her eyes off me, so she needed something physical to do for distraction—poor thing.

“What, you want me to be without pants too?”

“That is not at all what I meant.” She said it breezily enough, but how she crossed her arms and walked a little faster spoke louder than words.

I jogged to keep up with her. “So, how did you get trapped by the dog?”

“I was down at the beach when it ran up to me. I’ve never been much of a dog person, which I know probably makes me seem heartless, but in my defense, I did have a dog growing up, but neither parent wanted custody of it after the divorce.”

I stopped. “Your parents took away your dog when they got divorced?”

Her lips were flat and humorless when she smiled. “Yeah. Salt in the wound, right?”

“Serious,” I muttered. “So, the dog came up to you...”

“And I tried to leave, and it ran ahead of me and wouldn’t let me pass. Every time I made a move, it barked or ran at me, and I swear I’d been stuck down there for twenty minutes before I texted you.”

Good thing too, or I would have been in the shower still and missed this delightful little tête-à-tête. “There’s another path, you know. Maybe ten yards to the left of that one.”

It was her turn to stop. “Seriously?”

I nodded. “Sorry.”

She opened her mouth to say something but paused, pulling her phone from her pocket. Her brow furrowed. “Oh,” she said. “Sorry, these guys are supposed to be on their way to Costa Rica.” She pressed a button, lifting the phone to her ear and turning away a bit. “Hey, Charlotte, is everything okay?”

Should I stay? How long would her call be, and would it seem weird to just hang around waiting for her?

Nah, not weird. After all, she called me.

Sure, she probably didn’t have the contact info for anyone in this country except me, but that was beside the point.

I walked the last few feet to the back porch of the house, settling into a chair there.

My leg bounced up and down with the sudden requirement of being left alone with just me and my thoughts.

My dad was coming in a week.

I pressed my eyes closed at that. I hadn't ever answered his text, Gram had told me the details of his plans.

When was the last time I'd seen him—honestly?

He had called to tell me he wasn't coming to graduation three years back— that I would never forget.

After all, it had set in motion several dominoes that I preferred not to think about.

We texted every now and again, but I hadn't seen him since... Christmas. Three and a half years ago.

That's right. Gram flew him up because I was coming back to spend the holiday.

It had been a surprise. Not one of her finest.

I didn't want him to come, but his dad was in the hospital—he would be stupid not to. More stupid, that was. I just wished I didn't have to see him, too. His presence reminded me of the past. And of my mistakes as well as his.

Lucy signed off on her call, and I looked up to meet her gaze.

Her eyes were big and tired, and she sighed.

“They missed their flight. I need to rebook them and call the airline to see if I can get

them some sort of refund. But I wouldn't be surprised if they end up having to spend the night in the airport—there's enough of them that getting them a same-day flight is going to be impossible. ”

She was still holding her phone, but it was hanging down by her side.

I stood and walked to her. “Remember,” I said, grasping her upper arms and bending to look her in the eyes. “You stared down death just a moment ago—you can do this.”

Her eyes became determined slits and she nodded, a little quirk to her lips. “You're right. After the dog, I can do anything.”

I let my smile free at the same time she did, and for too long—or not long enough—we just stood there, me holding her not quite the way I'd like to, and her smiling up at me as if she wouldn't be upset if I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers.

My eyes dipped to her mouth, and my hands began to slide down to her arms.

She stopped me with her voice. “I have an overactive imagination, Finn Harrison. Don't think I don't know what you're doing.” But there was a hitch to her words. A tremor.

“Yeah?” I asked, eyes catching hers again. “And what is that?”

Her eyes narrowed, and red bloomed faintly in her cheeks. “You know.”

“Something about being with a beautiful woman makes me strangely forgetful. I'd be most appreciative if you could tell me what I was about to do.”

She took a step closer. Just a small one.

It ratcheted my heart up as if a real dog had been about to attack her, though.

With lips bit adorably together, her hands lifted to my chest. My bare chest. And her eyebrow quirked when her palm discovered how fast my heart was beating.

Was hers going as quickly? Did I affect her the same way she was affecting me?

I stood frozen, afraid to scare her off.

“You,” she said, leaning in even more and bringing her lips tantalizingly close, “were about to cross a line.”

She started to pull away, but I palmed the small of her back. Not forcefully; she could have broken the contact if she wanted to.

But she didn’t.

“What are lines but arbitrary boundaries we didn’t need to put in place?” I murmured.

The wind picked up a few strands of her hair, and they blew between us, fluttering against her mouth and making me unbelievably jealous.

“Arbitrary boundaries?” she asked quietly. “Who’s the one with the big vocabulary now?”

“I thought it might tip the scales in my favor.”

“Underhanded tactics.”

I tucked back another errant strand of her hair, enjoying the silky feel against the back of my fingers. “Go on a date with me, Lucy. Just one date.”

She bit her lip. Then nodded.

“Yes?” I asked. I needed to hear it before I got my hopes up.

“Yes,” she said. Then her expression scrunched up teasingly. “You’re pretty impossible to say no to. I hate to think how much practice you’ve had.”

I heard the bit of worry laced between her flippant words. “Just you, Luce.”

Her mouth tipped into a lopsided smile. It was freaking adorable. My hand constricted on her shirt, but then I forced it to loosen and let go. I still wanted to kiss her, but I didn’t want to screw up the possibility of more.

More. What did that even mean? I knew I didn’t just want one date with Lucy, but I had never been one to plan ahead.

The future was uncertain, and I didn’t like the disappointment that came when plans didn’t pan out.

I didn’t like planning to go to Disneyland with my dad and ending up hanging with a social worker.

I didn’t like it when I planned to move back in with him after he got his life figured out, and he’d made Gram tell me I was staying.

Even the small times I made plans with a friend, and they bailed last second.

It just didn’t usually go well to live in the future rather than the present.

And I knew that if this thing with Lucy didn’t work out, the pain would be a lot.

I didn't even want to think about it right then. Or ever. One day at a time, that's what I was going to do. One day... with the hope for more.

"Tonight?" I asked.

A breathy laugh escaped her that had me wanting to grab her back in my arms. But I didn't—this time. "You don't waste any time."

"Making up for lost time, in fact," I replied, pushing my hands into my pockets to secure them against acting on their own.

She shook her head, still laughing. "Yes. Tonight."

"I'll pick you up at five."

She nodded, and we stood there a moment longer before her eyes shifted to the house.

"Okay, so this is usually where a chapter would end," she said, gesturing between the two of us. "But do I just walk away now? Are you walking me back up to the house?"

I grabbed one of her hands mid-gesture, securing it in mine. I couldn't help the laugh that rumbled through me. "Yes. I'll walk you to the house."

Her shoulders were stiff as she glanced down at our hands, but then, with apparent effort, she lowered them, giving a little nod that seemed almost to herself.

"Okay. To the house then." Her eyes suddenly grew. "Rats, I forgot about Costa Rica! I need to go take care of this!" She pulled her hand from mine and started jogging toward the inn, but turned just before she rounded the house and called back, "See you at five!"

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One Date

Lucy

Lucy: I need to confess that I ignored almost everyone's advice. I said yes to a date with Finn.

Dani: You're living your own enemies-to-lovers story!

I bit my lip to keep the goofy smile at bay as I watched all their responses come in, my hands still a little shaky from the encounter outside with the dog.

The dog, I told myself firmly. Not the almost-kiss with the man I'd spent my formative years hating.

Which was part of what made Dani's response so funny, because from the outside, yes, we'd gone from nemeses to this, and it would be hard to see where that shift happened.

But from my side, we'd probably only had maybe a day where I'd been at odds with him.

Bygones had pretty quickly been bygones, and I wasn't about to hold the actions of his thirteen-year-old self against his twenty-four-year-old self, but it was still hard to see where we'd turned the corner into possible romance.

And what did it even mean? I'd said yes to a date, sure, but all the other concerns

didn't just disappear. The man lived in another COUNTRY. Were we just going to gloss over that fact?

Was I getting ahead of myself, though? It was one date. Before this trip, I'd gone on first dates a ton. Setups. Dating app matches. People I met through work. I didn't say no to first dates.

I did, however, say no to the second ones. I wasn't looking for a repeat of Michael. Or to mimic my mother.

So why, in my head, did I already expect there'd be a second date?

Time to put on the brakes. One date. I could enjoy one date—even if I did feel a little guilty to be going on it when I was on a work trip.

But Gary, my competition, had brought his wife to England. Surely, I could go on a date.

Still, just thinking about it was causing this tight feeling to claw its way from my chest up into my throat. Someone needed to tell my nervous system this was just a date.

I was pretty useless the last hour before Finn was supposed to get me. I'd settled the Jenkins' family vacation mishaps and checked in with Ellie about finalizing details for a handful of clients. Finn had taken the Hastings on an afternoon outing, but I'd opted to stay back and work.

Partly because I didn't think I'd take in much information on a tour if I was spending the whole time fielding we're going on a date later looks from Finn, and keeping my own nervous system in check.

Finally, a half hour before five, I got up from the bed and changed from my shorts to linen pants and a breezy top—the best clothes I’d brought—fixed my mascara and brushed my hair.

My mom had texted with more wedding-related details.

Napkins and cake options. I shot off a quick text with a smiley face and “All sounds great!” then silenced my phone so I wouldn’t know if she responded. My worries were high enough tonight.

I went downstairs instead of waiting in my room for him to come up, which might have led to running into all sorts of B&B guests and having to explain where we were going. I could just see Finn taking the opportunity to tell everyone I’d been begging him for a date, and he’d finally given in.

The thought actually brought a smile to my face. I loved that he didn’t take things too seriously. Loved that he always made me laugh—sometimes in the most unconventional of ways.

“Is that an ‘I’m excited to go out with you’ smile or something more sinister? Should I be concerned that I’m going to end up on an episode of *Dateline*?”

Finn was sitting at the check-in counter, leaning forward onto his forearms. He was in a light blue button-up, and my eyes swept across it, thinking of that morning and his all-too-impressive shirtless physique. I yanked my gaze up. “Is that show still going?”

“No idea.” He rounded the counter, holding out a hand. I took it. Was this something we did now? Held hands. It was the second time, if anyone was keeping count.

I liked it. But I couldn’t help overanalyzing it.

There was a quiet buzzing around us as we walked out of the B&B and toward the van.

It seemed to fill the space between us with electricity.

So many times over the last week and a half, we'd done exactly this: walked across the gravel drive in the warm sun to the oversized van. But this time was different.

As usual, he opened the door for me, waited till I was in, then went around the car.

I pressed a hand to my chest before he climbed in. Stop. Stop it right now . A single date was not a reason to go into cardiac arrest.

He got in, smiling over at me as he put his buckle on. "Please stop looking like I'm about to drive you into the woods and bury you beneath my favorite tree."

I pressed my lips together. "You have a favorite tree?"

"Yes. I'll show it to you right before I put you six feet under."

"Perfect, at least I will get out of giving this presentation."

He put the car into gear, glancing in the mirror before backing out of the drive. "Tell me about that. Where are you at with your proposal? Who are you up against?"

He'd picked the perfect topic. For ten minutes, we went back and forth, talking about my job and goals for my time at the company.

I tried to turn it onto him and his future plans a time or two, but he always returned the topic to me.

And since it had been weighing so heavily on my mind this trip, I was pretty happy to share and talk through some of the things I hadn't had a chance or a person to discuss with.

"Have you thought about what you'll do if you don't get the job?"

I thought about making a joke about how he had such little faith in me, but I couldn't, because I knew it wasn't true. He was probably actually interested in my answer. He always seemed interested in what I had to say.

"I don't know," I said, truthfully. "If I'm not offered upward momentum soon, either through this position or some other avenue, I'm not sure I can stay there. It's a great job, but it's been pretty stagnant in the three years I've been there."

He turned into the parking lot, and before he had a chance to respond, I looked through the windshield, leaning forward to see the entirety of the building. "Where are we?"

"Dinner." He put the car in park, smiling innocently at me as if he knew how frustrating his lame half-answer was. But instead of elaborating, he just got out of the car and circled the vehicle, opening the door for me.

I paused before getting out. I'd swung my feet around and faced him, but didn't stand up.

He leaned into his hand, holding the top of the door. "Second thoughts?"

I shook my head.

"You hesitated," he said. He didn't seem mad, but he also wasn't his usual teasing self. "Hey, if I pressured you into this..."

I jumped out of the car, the guilt getting to me at the look in his eyes.

Because, honestly, I really wanted to be here.

I was excited for this date in a way I hadn't been for any date in a long time.

I was just nervous to be that excited, and that was a hard thing to put into words, so instead I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the building.

It was a whitewashed cottage-type home that seemed to have been converted to a business. A metal sign stuck into the yard read "Lasting Moments Photography."

I stopped, and in another step, Finn was beside me, watching me with amusement. I pointed at the sign. "That's not dinner."

His smile appeared. "It is. Trust me."

"There's a closed sign in the window."

"Ignore it."

This time, I let him pull me forward. If we were going to be arrested for trespassing, I'd like to be able to say "he dragged me in."

The lights were on inside, and quiet music was playing.

"Hey, Trish!" Finn called, looking around the corner of the little entryway we were in.

I felt an unreasonable flash of jealousy when the petite brunette came in.

Her hair was short and super curly, and she was also super adorable.

Her smile was wide, and even her teeth were white—the kind of white that I never seemed able to achieve with Whitestrips at home, no matter how sensitive they made my gums.

“Finn!” She spread her arms wide as she walked into the entry, but not for a hug, more just like a you’re here!

She didn’t seem surprised to see us, and I thought back to the photography sign in the yard. So help me... If he had just roped me into some awkward photoshoot, I was walking out.

Her smile included me, and curiosity but not animosity was sparkling in her eyes while her gaze swept me from head to toe. She looked back to Finn, her smile growing. “The back studio is open.” She crossed her arms and tilted her head to the rear of the house.

“Thanks so much.” Finn looked down on me, smiling as he squeezed my hand and tugged on it. “Come on.”

Trish went back to whatever she’d been doing as Finn led me the other direction, down a softly lit, wood-clad hall, through a door, and—

“What did you do?” I glanced from the table in the center of the room to Finn. He was holding back a smile pretty unsuccessfully.

“You claimed not to like any of the food options I presented... so I didn’t know where we should go.”

“So, you... what?” I walked into the room that appeared to be an unused studio with

white walls, a warm wood floor, and several photography props lining the back wall. A round table with a tablecloth and a dozen to-go boxes was in the middle. “Burglarized half the restaurants in the city?”

“Pretty much. Minus the stealing.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Too much?” he asked. “You look a little horrified.”

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I swung to face him. I might not have exact words, but I needed him to know that this was not too much.

Not at all. “No.” I shook my head to punctuate the single syllable.

“No, I just never expected this.” No one had ever done anything like this for me—not even close.

Had I just been picking a bunch of lemons?

Or was Finn some rare specimen of man I’d never met?

“I hope you don’t go on too many first dates. Your wallet would feel the pain.”

He was standing at one of the chairs, hands on the back, waiting for me to approach the table.

The expression on his face would best be described as chagrined.

“This isn’t what most of my first dates look like, Lucy.

” He watched me, letting that sink in. “Come on, let’s eat before it all gets cold.

” He pulled the chair out for me. To see that this date meant as much to him as he’d been acting like it did—to really see it outside of charming words and excessive flirting that could easily have been turned on any other attractive female—somehow made the remaining nerves I’d held onto on the drive slide right off.

Suddenly, surrounded by the wafting scents of so many amazing meals, I was ravenous.

I sat and Finn explained, with a smile on his face that would have been just as appropriate on the face of a little boy who'd gotten a bullseye with his brand-new BB gun, what each of the dishes was.

There were ten in total. Ten different meals and two plates onto which we shoveled heaping spoonfuls while we talked about life in the past ten years.

Finn told me about his dad, including that he was apparently coming for a visit despite not doing so for almost four years.

I told him about how my mom had only known Brian for two months before they'd gotten engaged, though they'd been friends in high school.

We talked about what college had looked like—me in the States at the University of Utah and him in Canada at McGill University.

I leaned my chin onto my palm, resting my elbow next to my plate that still had the remains of about seven different food types. “And you were able to walk away from your dream to help your grandparents? Just like that?”

Finn stabbed a piece of orange chicken, staring at it for a moment before he answered. “I think it was a revenge dream.”

My brows lifted. “What?”

He met my eyes. “Becoming a doctor. I wanted to show my dad that I sided with the people he screwed over. He was a business guy—one of the bigwigs writing the doctors' checks. And he embezzled from them. From the hard work they did, taking

care of people. Saving literal lives.” He shook his head, eating the chicken with an expression of disgust that I don’t think had to do with the food.

He swallowed. “In the end, I wanted it to be clear which side I was on. When the seed was planted, I couldn’t let it go. All through college. Up to the end.”

“So, you didn’t want to be a doctor at all?”

His shoulders lifted and fell with a sigh.

“No, I did. I really did love the subject matter. Several more years of school didn’t exactly appeal to me, but do they ever appeal to anyone?”

I did well, too. Had great grades.” He paused, mouth parted as if he was going to add more to that. Then he just shook his head.

“But then you came home.”

He nodded. “They needed me.”

I waited, pushing food around my plate. “And now?” I was hesitant to bring it up. Last time, he hadn’t been thrilled.

His eyes met mine. “I don’t know. It’s pretty scary, honestly.”

I nodded. “With your dad... how did that all happen? You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but... did cops show up? Were your grandparents already there?”

His gaze didn’t leave mine, but flicked between both my eyes. Was he deciding how much to share? If he really wanted to get into it all with me?

“Social workers came by while my dad was at work. Cops, too, I think, but they let the social workers take the lead. They brought me back to their office—I remember thinking it looked a lot like our cafeteria. Clean. White. Kinda old but in good condition. Then they called my grandparents.” He cleared his throat.

“Gram got a flight within a couple of hours. Pops had to get things in order here, so he came the next day.”

I reached out and grabbed his hand across the table. Immediately, he locked his fingers around mine, and all the tension he must have been feeling but was barely showing revealed itself in that grip. “I’m so sorry. It must have been terrifying.”

“For a preteen kid, yes. But mostly I remember all the disappointment. Obviously, I didn’t grasp the whole situation, but I did know that it meant all our plans were going to be disrupted.

He was taking me to Disneyland the next day, which never happened.

He’d promised this big party for my birthday, which I knew wasn’t going to happen.

Years later, I felt some guilt over how selfish I’d been. ”

“But you were only a kid. Your dad was the selfish one.”

“So my court-mandated therapist told me.” He winked, and some of his regular humor came back. I was hit with the realization of just how strong this guy in front of me was. How much he’d gone through and come back from.

He glanced down at his watch and sat up straighter. “Crap, we’re going to be late.” He pointed at my food. “Want to take any to go?”

I shook my head. “I couldn’t fit a single mini M&M in my stomach at this point. Not even the delicious peanut butter ones. But I feel bad that all of this will go to waste.” I looked around at the remaining containers, some barely touched.

He waved his hand as he stood. “Trish has two kids and a tank of a husband. They’ll take care of it.”

Suddenly, Finn’s friendship with the studio owner seemed much brighter.

He reached out his hand. “Come on.” Something in his expression sparkled with barely restrained excitement.

I took his hand, and we went out the way we came. Finn called a thank you to Trish and opened my door for me as usual.

“Where are we going?” I asked when he started up the car, though I didn’t really expect him to answer.

“Boat ride,” he said, grinning over at me.

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Lies and Mistakes

Finn

I was enjoying the play of emotions across Lucy's face, but eventually had to go back to watching the road.

I'd shot off a quick text on our way out from dinner, but the docks didn't have great service so it may not have gone through.

Wes had offered use of his boat for the evening, but I'd lost track of time at dinner and now we were going to be fifteen minutes late to meet him at the dock.

It was a twenty-minute ride, and we talked on lighter topics than we had at dinner.

Favorite board games. Her cousins. My college friends.

Whether we liked spearmint or wintergreen mints more.

Since she'd gotten over her annoyance with me that first day, she'd always been easy to talk to, but it was even more obvious tonight.

Time was just slipping by like water through my fingers.

Would I be able to get her out on a second date?

We pulled up to the docks, and I jogged around the van to grab her door handle and

let her out.

She grabbed my offered hand, letting me pull her to her feet.

The sun was setting, and the warm light made her eyes sparkle like the ocean's surface.

They drew me close—tempted me to dive into their depths.

“Finn!”

I looked over my shoulder to see Wes striding up the path from the dock. I turned, holding Lucy's hand tight in mine. “Hey man, sorry I'm late.”

“No worries, just glad you got here.” He handed off the keys, pointed down the row to his boat, and slapped me on the shoulder with a glance Lucy's way. I knew I'd be hearing from him later, though, once he put two and two together and realized why I'd never agreed to be his wingman.

I got us out into the water without much trouble, remembering yet again how I should look into getting a boat. They had a lot of nuisances attached to them, like docking fees, but man, they were the best sort of recreation.

I sailed us out a safe distance, then along the shoreline rather than into deeper water. The boating itself was fun, but it wasn't the end goal tonight.

The sun dipped below the horizon as I found the little inlet I'd been heading for. I steered us in, setting anchor a good distance from shore, then stood and walked to the front of the boat on slightly unsteady legs courtesy of the rocking waves.

Lucy had been sitting at the front of the boat, her head tipped back as she let the air

run through her hair and droplets of water spray up on her.

It had been pretty distracting while I was trying to drive, honestly.

She opened her eyes as I approached, smiling up at me.

That smile got me. Really got me. Like a punch to the gut, but the kind you want over and over again.

Obviously, I wasn't great at similes.

"It's beautiful out here," she said.

With a smile of agreement, I lifted the bench of seats across from her and pulled out several blankets Wes had stowed for me there earlier that day.

I flicked one out, laying it on the open space between the controls and the bow of the boat, then I put another down as a barrier to any moisture that might have been on the floor.

Then I rolled one up like a burrito and laid it across the top. I gestured with my head at it as I sat.

Her eyes were wary, but it was a mark of growing trust that she followed me to the makeshift bed, laying her head back on my burrito blanket. I mimicked her movements, lying back and looking at the sky as it grew dark.

There were about eight inches of space between us. I was greedy to close that space, but wouldn't force it. Instead, I pulled my arm up to add cushion to my head, and turned a bit her way.

“I need to tell you something,” I said.

“That’s tantamount to ‘we need to talk,’ but we aren’t even officially dating, so I’m hoping I don’t have anything to stress over from it.”

I gave her a stiff smile; hopefully after I revealed my big dark secret, she’d still be interested in me. In a second date. A third and fourth.

Because my mind had started making plans. Me. Finn Harrison, king of living in the moment, was making plans that included the beautiful redhead next to me.

“I haven’t told anyone this. In two years. I always planned to say something, but now I’m worried it’s been too long and…” I took a deep breath, forcing my eyes to stay on her face and steeling myself against her reaction. “I didn’t actually graduate college.”

A divet appeared between her brows. “But… biochemistry.”

“I tripped at the finish line. Didn’t take two finals and missed a final project… made for one four-credit class short of graduation.”

She blinked, taking in the information. “And your family doesn’t know?”

I shook my head. “Nope.” I felt like I was watching her through a squint. Just waiting for her to realize exactly what this meant. The extent of the lie.

She lifted one shoulder. “That’s kinda a big deal, but… A couple of tests? A project? That doesn’t negate all the work you put into the four years before.”

That was nice of her, but didn’t show the whole picture. “My grandparents, though. I’ve been lying to them for years. They tell everyone about my college degree. You saw how proud they were.”

“Again, they are proud of you and your hard work. Not the piece of paper you got.”

I let that sink in for a minute. It rang true, but I was so against the understanding I’d developed of myself that I didn’t know if I could agree.

“Could you go back and finish if you wanted?”

I nodded. Slowly.

“Do you want to?”

I met her eyes, my jaw set. “I don’t know. To be totally honest, Lucy, I hate the future. I hate the uncertainty of it, and I don’t like to make plans.”

“Yeah, I know.” She gave a small smile. “Some things are worth going out of your comfort zone for.”

Despite the lack of cold, I sat up, rubbing my hand up and down my bicep. “Do you think less of me now?”

She sat up too and frowned. “No, of course not. But I do think you should tell your grandparents.”

I pushed out a long breath. “Yeah. I will. I guess I just haven’t wanted to face it.”

“Why did you miss the finals? The project?”

That was the million-dollar question. “My dad,” I said quietly.

“He was supposed to come for graduation, and I’d...

” I scoffed at myself just remembering. “I’d gotten excited for the first time in...

well, in a while. I had all these plans for us.

And then he called—no, texted—to say he had something come up, and he couldn’t make it. ”

“To your graduation?” She sounded incredulous. It was actually pretty nice to hear how shocked that made her.

“Yeah. Classic dad for you. It felt like... Why had I tried all this time to stick it to him, just for him to not even see the work I’d done and how far I’d come ?

I know it sounds super petty, but at the time, it put me into a bit of a tailspin.

I was already so overwhelmed with the higher-level end-of-term projects and tests, and I guess it was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

I’m still pretty shocked that it was bad enough to make me miss the finals, though.

And I’d almost finished the project. If I could have forced myself to do a little more or even turn it in unfinished, I wouldn’t be in this position. ”

She grabbed my clasped hands. “Mental health doesn’t really listen to reason or logic. I’m sorry. You’ve... you’ve gone through a lot.”

I let out a short laugh. Not a very humorous one. “You’re being too nice. I thought you’d hate me for lying.”

“Nope.” She shook her head. “Anything else you need to get off your chest, though?” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Did you really steal all that food?”

An actual laugh burst from me. “No. I paid for the food. And I think this is the only skeleton in my closet unless you count the fact that I was a little twerp to this cute girl back in junior high.”

Her teeth flashed in a wide smile. “You were, weren’t you?”

I nodded. “Definitely.”

Smile still in place, she leaned back again, lying down and looking up at the sky. It was full dark now, and the stars were popping out, which was the whole reason I’d brought us out here.

It was that easy expression on her face that sealed it for me. She wasn’t lying about her reaction—she really didn’t think I was a screw-up. This news hadn’t changed anything for her.

Relieved and honestly a little shocked, I laid down beside her, reducing the space between us to about four inches this time. I figuratively patted myself on the back. Smooth move.

“This is kinda nice,” she said after a few seconds, her tone light. “All this time I’ve been thinking you were so much smarter than me with your degree... turns out I’m the only college graduate here.” She turned her head and gave me a smug smile that faltered almost immediately. “Sorry. Too soon?”

I couldn’t help myself; I leaned onto my side, reaching a hand out and brushing the pad of my thumb along her jaw. “No, I love your jokes.” My voice was rough, and I knew why. By the look in her eyes, she did too.

Her eyes dropped to my lips, and a fire started in my midsection.

Not something small, either—the equivalent of a forest fire was suddenly loose inside me.

The combination of how much I cared about this woman and how free I felt having been vulnerable with her twisted in a lethal mix.

I was going to kiss her. And it was going to be life-changing.

“Finn,” she whispered.

“Mmhmm?” My hand was at her neck, tickling her beautiful hair.

“I can’t kiss you.”

I blinked, trying to pull myself from the self-made haze as I pulled my hand back.

She rushed on. “I can’t. Not until I figure this out.” She gestured between the two of us. “I like you, Finn. A lot. And that scares me because I’m not looking to have my heart broken here.”

“I’m not looking to break your heart, Lucy. It’s the last thing I want to do.”

She nodded. “I know. But life might do it for us.”

I could have groaned. I might have, actually. But I wasn’t about to force her into something, no matter how much I wanted to kiss her. “You’re right. It might.” My voice was unsteady, and I cleared my throat. “But I don’t plan to let it.”

Her eyes were intense but gave away nothing of what she might be thinking.

But again, they dropped to my lips.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” I murmured, even while I couldn’t stop my hand reaching out and tucking a hair back behind her ear. “We can just enjoy the stars. Enjoy this.”

She bit her lip.

It about killed me. But I couldn’t look away even if I’d wanted to. Everything I’d ever desired was right here in front of me, and I wasn’t taking my eyes off of her until I absolutely had to.

Subtly, she shifted closer to me. An inch, maybe.

I kept my eyes steady on hers. I meant what I’d said—we didn’t have to do anything she didn’t want.

And I wasn’t going to pressure her. I didn’t know everything, but I knew she’d been burned before.

I knew she was worried about the long distance between us. About me, even.

Her chin tilted up and she came even closer. The tips of her fingers grazed mine where they lay on the blanket between us.

The wildfire raged.

I saw the decision in her eyes seconds before her whisper-soft hand landed on my chest. Her fingers splayed out, and for a moment, her attention dropped there. Her palm brought a heat worse than the fire inside me, but it was nothing to the flames in her eyes when they met mine again.

We moved in tandem, our mouths meeting in the middle in an explosion of sensation.

My hand was at her back, pulling her closer, hers was on my chest, fisting the fabric there.

Lucy had always said her mind was overactive—that her imagination often took off without her.

I didn't have that skill, and I couldn't have imagined how good this moment would be. I couldn't have thought up how soft her lips were against mine. The faint scent of lilac that filled my senses. I could never have created the waves lapping against our boat as our lips moved against one another.

Her mouth parted, and I pulled her lower lip between my teeth. My hand slipped up her back and into her hair. Hers were on my face, keeping me against her—as if anything but lack of air was going to pull me away. There was only me, Lucy, and our kiss that existed anymore.

It was minutes before we drew back. Around us was darkness broken only by the moon shifting between clouds. I felt light-headed. When it came down to it, I'm pretty sure I'd chosen Lucy over air, and I would do it again.

Her eyes were dilated, her lips swollen, and I'd done a number on her hair.

She was perfect.

I dragged in a deep breath, watching her for signs of regret. Just like when we'd pulled up for dinner, I had a sinking feeling that I'd pushed too hard. That I was falling so quickly for her that I was dragging her along with me.

But a smile broke out along her lips. Lips that had just been on mine. I mirrored it with my own.

“So much for figuring all this out,” she whispered, but the smile didn’t waver.

“We will. Together.”

She nodded. “Okay. Together.”

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Failure to Thrive

Lucy

It felt a little bit like I had been living a fairytale for the last twenty-four hours. I had a great imagination, but for all the time I found myself staring unseeing at the wall, lost in a daydream, I couldn't seem to accurately revisit that kiss.

That. Kiss.

My chest got hot thinking about it.

What a time to need to focus. Because I did—need to focus, that was. On getting the promotion. Instead of getting lost thinking about Finn and the boat and the amazing kiss that had reordered my brain cells.

Promotion.

I needed to focus.

Putting on some music in hopes it would drown out my inner daydreams, I buried my head in work.

If I got enough done this morning, maybe I could join the afternoon tour.

I'd lost a lot of time over the last few days, but I could make up for it now.

Had to, because if I didn't, it was no longer just my promotion on the line, it was also time with Finn.

Time to figure things out like he'd promised we would.

After a few false starts, I was extremely productive.

I had a jam-packed, electronic portfolio, all prepared with Anne of Green Gables tour information.

Everything from itineraries ranging from three to nine days, a bonus two-day tour for movie locations on the island, and even one for those in Toronto, tour stop information, hours, and best times of year to visit.

I had my presentation written out, and a slideshow of pictures I'd taken ready, and was generally happy with what I had accomplished.

Something still felt like it was missing, that extra something that would provide the last layer needed to get me this promotion, but I still had three more days before I even needed to be home.

Was anyone else this far along? Two weeks had always been a generous amount of time to give us to plan these tours, and I'd managed to fit in a couple of recreational activities as well, including the best first date I'd had in a while. Maybe ever.

Just in time, I finished everything I needed to.

More could always be done... but it was enough for today.

Grabbing my things and unsuccessfully squelching the fluttery feeling taking flight in my chest, I ran down the stairs.

The Hastings group was already gathered together for the outing.

Honestly, I had no clue where we were going today. I'd neglected to check.

I stood on the final stair, looking over everyone's heads out the window for a glimpse of Finn's van.

"Hey, Lucy."

I turned to see a smiling Lily coming down the stairs.

"Hi," I said, "How are you? Excited for the day?"

She nodded. "I can't say I fully understand what a singing beach is, but I'm excited to find out."

Ah, so that's where we were going.

She looked past me for a moment, then lowered her voice. "Did I see you and Finn headed out together last night?"

I nodded, matching her volume. "We went out on a date."

Her brows shot up in clear excitement. "Where did you go?"

I quickly recapped the whole night. Well, almost the whole night.

She leaned against the stairwell in a sort of faux swoon. "Oh my gosh, that sounds amazing. I didn't know first dates like that actually existed."

"Me nei ther," I confided.

“Does he have any friends?”

I thought back to the night before. “Someone lent us the boat. Maybe he’s single.”

Lily held up two crossed fingers. “I can only hope.”

The door opened, and we both turned with the rest of the group. But it wasn’t Finn standing there. I didn’t recognize the tanned-skinned man at all.

“Where is Finn?” I asked without preamble as the guy held the door open for Ciara and her little Tasmanian devil. It was Gemma who answered though, on her way out behind the little rugrat.

“He had something come up and arranged to have Ishmael here take us to the Victoria Seaport Museum.”

What had come up? He hadn’t mentioned anything that would keep him from going on the tour today when we were together last night.

I waited until everyone was on their way to the van—one that appeared rented instead of the silver one Finn drove—then caught Ishmael’s attention before he stepped off the porch steps.

“Do you know if everything’s okay?”

The man shrugged. “Sorry, ma’am. I just help the Harrisons run tours every now and then; I don’t really ask questions.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Are you part of the tour?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, I’m staying here.” There was no point going without Finn.

The guy dipped his head at me and went to join the group. Lily waved as she got in the van.

My lips were pinched in thought as I watched them drive off. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I shot off a quick text to Finn.

Lucy: You OK?

Three dots immediately appeared, indicating he was texting me back. But then they disappeared. I waited for thirty seconds, and they didn’t come back. My stomach twisted itself into knots. This couldn’t have anything to do with me, could it?

We’d had a great night last night. An amazing night. After the earth-shattering kiss, we had ended up holding hands and watching the stars until I started to shiver. Then Finn had draped the blankets over my shoulders and driven us back to the dock.

He wouldn’t just ghost me today. He wouldn’t.

My hands tapped against my jeans. I considered going over to his house and seeing if he was there, but if his van wasn’t, he wouldn’t be either. I would just have to wait until he texted me.

Slowly, I trekked back up to my room. The window looked out over the front, and I opened the blinds just in case Finn pulled in while I was up here, but I also forced myself back to my computer.

If I weren’t on a tour, I should keep working.

I’d barely sat down, though, when my phone buzzed. I pushed the laptop aside,

grabbing it.

Finn: At the hospital with my grandparents. I'll fill you in when I'm home.

I stared at the two little sentences. Something was up. Had Finn decided that coming clean about his lack of a college degree was worth missing a day of tours? Or... Had his grandpa taken a turn?

Having this little bit of information almost felt worse than having none at all.

I typed out a quick text telling him I hoped everything was alright. But when no indication that he would text again showed up, I did my best to bury myself back into work.

It didn't work. I tried beefing up my presentation and got nowhere.

I paced the room, brainstorming ideas to elevate my plans, but I spent most of my time watching the mostly empty driveway.

I even tried changing rooms to the parlor.

Nothing helped. My mind had shut down and was stuck on Finn and what could be happening.

One date and my brain had broken. Just one date, and the smallest—hopefully—hiccup in plans, and I was useless to productivity.

It didn't bode well for my future, but I wasn't even able to think about that right now.

I was just worried about what I didn't know.

Half a dozen times, I opened my texts to beg for more information, but stopped myself.

He would have texted me if he could...or wanted to.

By the time the Hastings got home, I almost wished I'd gone with them for the distraction. And now they were headed out again, for dinner this time.

“Want to join us, Lucy?”

I glanced up to see Gemma standing at the door, Lily looking over her shoulder with a wide, welcoming smile on her face.

I hesitated; they were a great group to be with, and I was really hungry, but I also wanted to be here when Finn came back.

A pit in my stomach had been growing all afternoon as I thought about what might have been keeping him at the hospital.

Every scenario from his dad showing up early to his grandpa unexpectedly passing away had played out before me, and I wanted to get the information as soon as possible.

I would just order something in if I didn't hear from him.

Oh man, I hoped I heard from him.

“No, thanks, I...” I didn't have more work to do that night—I couldn't do it if I tried, my brain was so fried—but I didn't have another ready excuse.

Gemma's face softened. “Waiting to hear from Finn?”

I dipped my chin. “Yeah,” I admitted. “I’m worried something’s up.”

“I get being worried, especially after last night. He didn’t tell you anything?” Lily asked, her face full of curiosity and no malice. But having to answer that question was admitting that even after our great date... he was keeping me in the dark.

“No. Well, he said he’s with his grandparents.”

Lily nodded. “I’m sure he’ll fill you in soon.” She looked over to her mom. “They went on the cutest date last night. How romantic, right? A vacation fling.”

I winced without being able to stop myself.

“I don’t think it’s just a fling, dear,” Gemma admonished, putting a hand out as if she could physically restrain Lily’s enthusiasm.

Lily’s face fell. “Sorry, I realize that probably didn’t come out great.” She walked into the room, leaning on the back of one of the armchairs. Slowly, her smile returned. “It’s just so romantic to meet a man in a new country.”

I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “We actually knew each other already. And before you get some star-crossed lovers picture in your head,” I added, knowing that’s exactly where my brain would have taken me if I’d been in her position, “I hated him. He was such a little bully in junior high.”

“Aw, he must have had a crush on you,” Lily gushed.

I pressed my lips together against a self-satisfied smile. “He says he did, actually, but believe me when I say he had a crap way of showing it.”

Lily laughed, but Gemma’s eyes were more serious as she watched me. What was she

thinking and seeing in this situation? I was a little afraid to ask.

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Her grandson came running in, bowling right into her legs and almost sending her pancaked onto the floor. Gemma's husband appeared behind the little tyke, breathing heavily. "The car's here," he panted. "And I think getting Luke restrained for a bit would be good."

Gemma's eyes were still on me, but she nodded and smiled. "We're coming." Then to me she said, "Let us know if Finn needs anything. Or you."

"Yes, " Lily echoed. "Here's my number so you can text if we need to grab you guys anything." She rattled off the digits, and I scrawled them onto a scrap piece of paper beside me.

"Thank you both," I said.

The adults filed out after Lily scooped a shrieking and laughing Luke into her arms. A ghost of a smile lingered on my lips long after the sound of a car driving away disappeared.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to bring my own family here one day? To have my own grandkids running around like little savages? My lips lifted at the thought of a little boy like Luke, but with my red hair wreaking havoc on a cute B&B.

My fingers paused in the action of gathering up my things. When was the last time I'd considered that kind of future? The kind that included a family... and a husband?

Ever since Michael had left, I'd sort of given up on things like that. Not that he had broken my heart so badly, so much as...

I'd felt relieved when he'd ended it.

What did that say about me? That I would have married the man, yet felt relief that we broke up? Probably that I was clinically insane. Yet here I was, with sudden visions of little grandkids and family and a husband and... A future filled with love.

I blew out a slow breath. Words Finn had said a week before filtered back through to me. Something about how I didn't believe in love—I'd analyzed what he was saying then, but quickly dismissed it. I mean, who didn't believe in love? Most especially me, who lived and breathed happily ever afters.

Maybe he'd been right, though? But wasn't anymore?

My head spun with it all.

Soul-searching was exhausting. I needed a nap, but first, I really needed to know what was going on with Finn.

I pulled out my phone. I wouldn't call—that might interrupt something with his grandparents—but I could send another text.

The front door opened with a long creak and my head shot up, craning to the side to see into the entryway better. I stood up.

"Finn?"

He appeared in the doorway, and everything about him was wrong. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week, his hair was mussed as if he'd just woken up, and his shoulders were slumped. Worst of all, though, his smile was gone, replaced by worried lines.

My heart fell to my toes. “What happened?”

He shook his head, dropping onto the couch and cradling his face in his hands.

I sat beside him on the edge of the couch, my hand rising to his upper back. “Pops... he...” he spoke to his knees.

My heart clenched at his words. Had his grandpa... had he...

“A coma. He’s in a coma. They... they don’t know if he’ll wake up.”

The full force of the situation slammed into me.

As if on autopilot, my hand ran the length of Finn’s back, creating long, oblong movements up and down and around, trying to comfort him when I hardly knew how.

“What happened?” I finally managed.

His hands clenched in his hair, and my stomach mimicked the action.

“They say it’s sepsis. They’re treating it, but...

he might not make it.” He finally lifted his hands just enough to turn his head and look at me.

The pain in his eyes cut through me. “He might never wake up, Lucy. What am I going to do if he doesn’t wake up?”

” His voice broke, and I felt heat rush to my eyes.

I kept on trailing my hands up and down his back. I didn’t know if it was helping, I

just wanted to do something, and I had nothing else.

My complete uselessness here was crystal clear. But if I could provide even the smallest bit of comfort, I wasn't leaving.

"Oh, Finn." Saying sorry felt so empty. "And Gram? How is she coping?"

"She just stands next to his bed, holding his hand. Watching him as if she can't miss a single breath. For hours, she just stood there, wouldn't even sit."

The image was more than heartbreaking.

"She finally gave in to the exhaustion and fell asleep. I came back to grab some stuff for her. I think I'm going to go stay at the hospital. I want to be there when... if..." He couldn't finish the statement. I didn't want him to.

"Let me drive you. You have to be exhausted."

"Okay," he said, not even fighting it. "Let me get Gram's things."

I quickly packed up my things and ran them upstairs, grabbing a jacket, my wallet, and the keys to my rental car I hadn't touched all week, then taking the steps two at a time on the way back.

My mind swam, but for some reason it had latched onto this idea that I wanted us gone before anyone came back to the B&B.

I didn't want Finn to have an audience or have to explain anything to anyone.

He was only a few minutes behind me, coming out of a room past the kitchen, holding a little duffle bag in his left hand.

“I need to grab a few of my things too,” he said, meeting my eyes with that same hollow look he’d worn since he walked into the house.

I nodded, holding out my hand. He took it in a firm grip, as if I were a lifeline he needed.

I could feel every inch of his fingers and palm on mine as he wrapped them around me.

Every callous and groove. Tears kept surging, but I pushed them back.

It wasn’t my grief to show right now. I needed to be here for Finn.

I put his Gram’s bag in the back and started the car while he ran into his house. Minutes later, we were on the road. I vaguely remembered the way we were headed and assumed he would direct me if needed, so I just stayed on the main road north out of Victoria .

He reached across our seats, grabbing my hand back in his, and tilted his head against the headrest. I thought maybe he’d sleep, and I was considering using a voice command on my phone to give me directions when he spoke.

“He’s too young to die,” he said, his voice sounding as if he hadn’t used it in hours.

“They’ve just always been there. Up until my dad’s incarceration, every holiday and birthday, they were either there or called and sent a gift...

and then after... I mean, you know. They were always there.

Gram came that night, and Pops navigated all the legal stuff to take me home with them.

They were the one future I never needed to worry about planning for. ”

I wanted to provide comfort, distraction, or whatever he needed, but I didn’t know what that looked like here. In that moment, as much as I wanted to help and be here for him, it was blatantly obvious how much I didn’t know how. What would he want right now?

“I’m so sorry, Finn. I wish there were something I could do.”

His hand constricted around mine. “You’re helping.”

I swallowed. “Tell me more about him,” I asked. “What was it like when you first moved in?”

To my surprise, he actually chuckled. “He had no idea what to do with me. I think in his head, he’d lumped me a little with my dad, who was obviously a full-grown adult, so the night after I got there, he sat me down with his expectations.

No girls, no drugs, and no drinking. Since I was thirteen, that wasn’t a problem. ”

I grinned at that, imagining the cute older man I’d met trying to lay down the law.

“Was he like the bad cop and your Gram was the good cop then?”

“Not at all. After that, he was fantastic. Always snuck me home candy bars from the gas station, even though Gram said they were bad for my teeth, let me drive the tractor, and taught me how to fix stuff. Gram wasn’t really a bad cop either, but she was definitely the backbone of the household.”

“They are a great couple.” Not for the first time, I thought about how they reminded me of my grandparents. Grandma Sue was a force to be reckoned with, but Grandpa

was just a good time, always the easygoing one.

My heart broke all over imagining my own grandpa in this position. And he hadn't raised me.

Cars zoomed past us, headlights blinking in the approaching dusk. How interesting it was to know how everyone's lives just kept going while Finn's seemed to have ground to a halt... a moment in time where things were suspended until he had answers. Until his grandpa improved... or didn't.

"Turn here," Finn said, pointing.

I turned where he directed, letting the steering wheel unwind beneath my hands as it straightened out. He gave me a few more directions until I was in the hospital's parking lot. I pulled into the drop-off zone by the main entrance, parking the car just past the doors.

"Can I help with anything?" I asked.

Finn unbuckled as he shook his head. "No, you've been great. I'm so tired. I don't know that it would've been smart for me to make this drive."

I gave a small smile. "Text me when you're ready to come home tomorrow, I'll come get you."

He nodded. Then, as if it was almost instinctual, he reached out, cradling my face in his hand and leaning towards me. His lips landed on mine. Soft. Sweet. He pulled back, then pressed one more kiss to my mouth.

I ran my fingers down his cheek, feeling the stubble there.

“Thank you again,” he said in a whisper. Then he left, grabbing his and his grandma’s bags from the back and walking into the hospital.

I waited until the automatic doors closed behind him, staring at the large expanse of black glass, my mouth pinched in thought.

My eyes hurt. My heart hurt—physically hurt. It was like my chest had begun to collapse, pressing in on it. The grief that I felt not only for the health of a man I’d only met once, but also the pain of his family, threatened to wash over me now that I did not need to be strong or brave for Finn.

My mind fixated on him as I drove, instead of on the pain that nothing could be done for his grandpa. It fixated and struggled to make sense of him and me.

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Somehow, things between us seemed like so much more than two people who had just reconnected barely ten or eleven days ago.

There appeared to be more to our relationship, and this situation had made it seem like we were more important to each other than we were.

In some alternate universe, I would have been going into that hospital with him, hugging his grandma, kissing his grandpa's cheek.

Being there for him like I wanted to be, but didn't feel like I had the right to because all I really was, when it came down to it, was a girl he'd taken on one date.

My imagination may have gotten away with me and made me feel like I was more, or could be more, but the reality was what it was. One date. No more than that.

This was why I preferred books. There was always a happily ever after around the corner, no matter how gut-wrenching a scene might be.

But there was no guaranteed happily ever after here. Not for Finn's grandpa, or Finn and me.

I blinked back tears, pushing them aside but not disregarding them because somehow, even with all the pain and confusion, I didn't want to be driving back to the inn alone right now. I wanted the alternate universe.

Lights from other cars flashed past me with the same sudden illumination I was experiencing internally. This wanting to dive headfirst into the pain for the sake of

the people involved was unexpected. I'd been avoiding the hard stuff. For years now, when life gave me a painful plot twist, I'd run.

Like when my parents broke the news of their impending divorce to me, and the first thing I did was hop on my bike and ride down the street to my cousin's house.

When Michael broke up with me, and the first thing I did was solo road-tripped to southern Utah.

Like when my mom said they were moving up the wedding.

Or when she first told me she was engaged.

I didn't even like when big, bad events that didn't affect me happened.

How many times had I not been there for a cousin going through a breakup or a job loss?

How many times had I dropped off cookies at a friend's house who was going through a rough time, but had made sure not to ring the doorbell so I wouldn't have to talk about it with them.

I was a jerk.

I was not one of those nice heroines in my stories.

Oh my gosh, I was a complete and total shallow jerk.

Yeah, real life wasn't always better than fiction.

Sometimes it was really crappy, but had my desire to avoid all of that made me miss

out on real human connection like what Finn and I had?

I'd missed out on giving grace and empathy.

I'd missed out on getting to know the real people behind my "adversaries" and "supporting characters." My mom, my coworkers, even my cousins—I'd kept them all at arms' length.

Maybe, in the end, my lack of commitment to the "for better or worse" had been what made Michael end things.

I parked the car outside the inn and leaned my head back, pressing the palms of my hands into my eyes.

I needed to help Finn through this, but more than that, I needed to reach out to all those people in my life with whom I had been living half a relationship.

I needed to be there for them, and that meant I needed to talk to my mom.

I needed to get to know the guy she was marrying, and to get behind this step in her life.

I grabbed my phone, scrolling through previously ignored messages.

They'd been piling up for days, but that had always been my way.

I'd told myself I was too busy to respond, only answering on my timeframe.

But that wasn't the truth. I was just not willing to commit to the emotional load that came from giving my all in a relationship.

One from my mom. I'd call her back, she deserved a call.

Several in the cousin chat. A picture of Chloe and her boyfriend, Holt. Poppy saying she'd sold seven copies of Dani's book that day. A handful of others. I sent messages back in response to them all, taking the time to make sure each was sincere and thought out.

And then there was one from Ellie.

Ellie: I just got notice that your flight was cancelled. We've rebooked you for the evening before, I'm emailing over the confirmation information now.

I stared down at the screen until it turned black.

My little time left had just been cut by almost twenty-four hours, which meant that much less time to finalize my presentation and plans, to come up with something to elevate the entire pitch, and to enjoy the place that was the birth of my very favorite character and book series.

That was everything that should have been going through my mind, but instead, all I could think about was Finn. Twenty-four hours less time to be with him and help him. Is there anything I could do before I had to leave that would help?

Staying wasn't an option. I had to admit that the thought crossed my mind—a great, grand gesture moment where, instead of getting on the plane, I decided to stay and be with him.

But that stuff didn't happen in reality.

In reality, I had to keep my job. In reality, we'd only kissed a couple of times. You don't throw a life away on that.

But I still wanted to do something. Even with all the work-related things weighing down on me, I knew they could wait for something more important—for Finn.

I just had to come up with—wait. I remembered a conversation we'd had a few days ago. It was a small thing... but what if it would help?

Even if only a little bit, it was worth it.

Shifted

Finn

The hospital room was too quiet. Gram was sleeping, the nurses were out at their stations, and there was no sound outside of the machines monitoring Pops. I glanced at the clock on my phone.

There was a light knock at the door, then a nurse came in. I glanced at Gram, but she didn't stir, so I stood.

The nurse gave me a small smile. I hadn't met her before, and she seemed close in age to what my mom would be had she not passed when I was a kid. "How are you holding up?" she asked in a whisper as she moved to the computer.

"Fine," I said. What else could I say?

She nodded, glancing over at all the monitors. I'd learned what each of them did, but still watched the nurse's face for any sign of worry. She nodded again, this time to herself, then tapped a few notes into the computer.

"He is stable, and I don't see anything of concern right now," she said kindly, entering a few more things into the computer.

Nothing of concern except the coma, of course.

"Thanks ," I said, crossing my arms. I wanted to ask what the prognosis was. I

wanted to know what tomorrow and the next day would look like, but what if the answer was negative? I didn't want to risk it.

"Call if you need anything," she said, then left the room, quietly closing the door behind her and leaving me again in semi-darkness.

I was still standing when Gram's hoarse voice startled me. "Has the nurse been by?"

I spun to face her. She was pushing herself up from the blankets on the pull-out couch, rubbing her eyes.

"Yes, just a few minutes ago."

"What did they say?"

"That there's nothing of concern."

Gram blinked sleep-filled eyes, nodding along. "Good. And what's the next step? What are we looking for moving forward?"

"Oh. I, uh, I didn't ask."

She didn't look disappointed or judgmental, just pushed all the way to a stand. "I'll go ask them."

She was past me and into the hall before I could say another word.

I should have just asked the nurse myself—it was an important question, and I should have known Gram would want to know all the information she could.

But I couldn't do this one thing for her.

One small question, and she wouldn't have needed to drag herself from bed in the middle of the night to make up for my deficiencies.

Somewhere in my head, I knew I was being too hard on myself, but it was all crashing in on me at once.

Like too many large waves in sequence, I couldn't get my head above water to take a deep breath.

Everywhere I looked in my life, I felt like I was failing.

I'd failed out of school, lied to my grandparents, been an extra concern to them during this hard time instead of the help I should have been...

all because I'd been focused on myself instead of others.

I'd told myself it was because the future was unreliable. I'd told myself that I was just living in the moment and more people could stand to do that, but in reality, I was being ultra-controlling. I was controlling how I lived so tightly, it had bled into others' lives.

Even with Lucy. I'd used her for days as a distraction.

Straight up used her. And would I have taken no for an answer if she'd continued giving it to me about the date?

No. She'd told me up front that she was worried about what happened next after a first date.

But instead of making her feel better about the future—being willing to plan ahead a bit and think about a second date or a third and reassure her this wasn't a fling—I'd

just wormed my way into my one singular date.

I knew I wanted more than that. So why, for her sake, could I not just allow myself to look a few steps ahead and swallow the fear that in planning for the future, the universe would somehow get wind of my desires and toss them back in my face.

I paced to the window, knuckling the windowsill and leaning closer, watching the stars.

Trying to think beyond myself. Trying to place myself in this massive world and figure out what I'd been doing wrong and...

and how I was going to get the courage to change it all.

In a way, I guess I was becoming a little like my dad.

He'd always chosen the easy route—embezzling, ditching his kid, even only coming to visit when it pleased him instead of anyone else.

If I didn't make some change soon, I could very well become him.

And I would not do that.

The door opened behind me, and I spun. Gram was coming in, a slight limp to her walk that was evidence of how stiff her sleep had been.

I walked forward. I still didn't know exactly how or what to change, but I was going to give it an effort.

"What did they say?" I asked.

She looked surprised. “Well, they said there’s no handbook for this sort of thing. His breathing is stable, and his brain waves are healthy. He just hasn’t woken up.”

“And the plan?”

Her brows lifted a little. “Tomorrow, they will continue the antibiotics and monitoring. The nurse said that the coma, though scary, is his body’s way of protecting itself while it heals, so they will be doing everything they can to aid the healing before attempting to medically wake him.

They want to give him a few days first. But he’s stable, and that’s what matters. ”

“Okay.” I pushed my hands into my sweatshirt pockets. “And what do you need from me?”

She gave a small smile. “It would be great if you could keep things going while I’m gone. Of course, you can be with Pops as much as you need, though.”

“And selling? How can I help with that?” It was clear now that it was the best way to relieve some burden on my grandparents. Stupid of me not to see it before.

To my horror, moisture filled her eyes. She grasped my upper arm and gave me a smile. “Thank you, Finn.” She swallowed, and shuffled to her bed, then sat. “Let’s talk more tomorrow.”

“Of course. Goodnight, Gram.”

My stomach felt like it was full of snakes at the instability of everything around me, but I also felt a strange sense of calm. For the first time, despite everything, I was doing the right thing.

Changing

Lucy

I stayed up too late. For someone whose mental capabilities had given up in the early afternoon, I was shocked by how long I lasted. But I had a new project and food ordered in from one of the amazing restaurants Finn had gotten on our date.

Somewhere around one o'clock, there was a light knock on the door. Surprised, I unfolded my stiff legs to get it.

“Lily?” I asked in surprise.

She dipped her head in embarrassment. “I’ve been worried about you and Finn and saw that your light was still on. Is everything okay?”

I opened the door wider, letting her in.

Her brows raised at the mess on the bed—papers, food containers, my computer, and phone were strewn wildly across it.

It was my turn to look embarrassed. “I’m trying to do something for him—his family is going through some stuff.

” I didn’t give any details, they weren’t mine to share.

She seemed to understand that, just nodding along as she picked up one of my papers.

Her eyes lifted to mine. “Can I help?”

It was little moments like this that I’m sure were going to pop up a lot in the next several months of my life.

Little moments when I realized that my initial inclination was to push her off and say I could do it myself.

I didn’t want to ask for help or risk being in someone’s debt.

Another way in which I avoided discomfort.

So instead, though it still made me squirm a bit, I nodded. “That would be amazing. Let me just... clear a spot first.”

She laughed at that, helping me stack up some of the food containers and papers. Then she sat on the bed and we got to work.

Running Out of Time

Finn

I adjusted the strap of the duffle bag that was digging into my sore shoulder.

I'd done something to that entire half of my body by sleeping in the recliner.

The stress of the day had carried through the night, and every inch of me had sighed in relief to wake and know Pops had made it through the night.

With no change on the horizon, Gram encouraged me to get home and shower.

To maybe even run the afternoon tour group if I was up for it.

I think she thought I could use the distraction, and I could, but I was no longer looking for ways to suppress my concerns or feelings.

Yesterday had shown me in stark, painful detail that no matter how few plans I made, no matter how much I lived in the moment, no matter how much I distracted myself from things I didn't like, life's plans had a way of making themselves known.

And I'd made it through intact, despite the knot still in my stomach. Now it was time to act like a grown-up, face the future, and stop worrying about myself so much.

So, I was standing out on the curb, waiting for Lucy to pick me up.

Even through all of this, my heart still beat double at the thought of spending time with her.

But in the spirit of putting others first, I needed to figure out what she needed from me.

Help getting her job? Leave her alone? Attempt some sort of long-distance dating when she went back to the States?

I wanted the last. I really, freaking wanted the last. But I would do what she needed.

At the sight of her rental car pulling into the parking lot, I lifted a hand to flag Lucy down.

“How are you?” she asked once we were driving. She didn’t ask for an update on Pops, I had texted her one that morning already.

“Better.”

She shot a quick smile my way. “I’m glad. Does your grandma need anything?”

I shook my head. “She has some friends from the neighborhood coming to sit with her today. She asked me to handle things at the B&B, so you’ll get me instead of Ishmael today on the tour. I hope that’s okay,” I said in an attempt at lightheartedness.

“I don’t know if I can come today. My flight got changed.” She looked over at me, and I noticed for the first time the tightness around her mouth and eyes. “I... leave tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow,” I repeated.

She nodded, swallowing before she said in a rush, “I don’t want to. I want to stay, and I want to help you, but I don’t have much of a choice—my company made the change.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said, though I was currently trying to find my mental footing with this news. “We’ve always known you were only here for a while. Does this put extra stress on your timeline? Are you ready to present your tour?”

“We don’t need to talk about that right now. It seems pretty inconsequential in light of everything.”

“My hard stuff doesn’t negate yours. Besides, I want to know how things are going for you—how are you feeling about the presentation?”

She sighed but answered, glancing out the window as she changed lanes. “I’m mostly ready. I’ve got the tour all figured out and most of the presentation as well. But I feel like I’m missing something. I’m worried it’s not enough.”

“I’ll help you tonight. Maybe going through it all will help?”

“You don’t need to help me. You have enough going on.”

“I want to help you. Plus, if my grandpa knew that I wasted my last night with you, he’d hit me upside the head.”

Her lips lifted in a halfhearted smile. “Is he known to be a violent man?”

“Nope. That’s how you know how serious this is.”

She let out a light chuckle. “Okay, if you’re sure, I would appreciate the help. I was thinking I might need to FaceTime one of my cousins and talk it through, but you

would be even better.”

I reached over and grabbed her hand almost without thinking. I was just grateful that what she needed in that moment was my help.

Gram: No change, but that’s not a bad thing. The infection is responding well to antibiotics. The doctors think his brain just needs a rest. I will keep you updated.

I tucked my phone into my pocket and pushed into the B&B looking for Lucy. The Hastings family was playing a game of what appeared to be charades in the main area. Lily caught my eye and pointed upstairs. I nodded my thanks. I felt her gaze on me as I made for the stairs.

“Come in,” Lucy called when I knocked. I pulled the door open and took in the room.

She had stacks of clothes on the bed, and her bag was open on the top of the dresser.

My chest squeezed uncomfortably at the sight of her preparing to leave in less than twenty-four hours.

I felt a bit like I was being waterboarded with feelings lately—everything with my grandpa was hard enough, but add to it the situation with Lucy, and I was about ready to give up the ghost.

But I wasn’t going to.

“Hey,” she said, turning to me while folding a shirt. She tossed it into the bag and looked around, grabbing her laptop. “Any update on your grandpa?”

“No, but Gram reminded me that’s not a bad thing.”

She nodded, her expression pensive. “You sure you’re up to helping me?”

“Honestly, it sounds pretty amazing.”

She lifted a brow. “Oh yes, helping someone with work that isn’t your own sounds like the best way to spend a random Wednesday night.”

I shook my head in amusement. “No, Lucy,” I said, reaching for her laptop and holding it while she gathered whatever else she needed.

“I mean spending the evening with you sounds amazing.” And not even as a distraction.

I cringed to think how often I’d used her as one in that first week, simply because I couldn’t face everything going on with my grandparents. She was so much more than that.

She froze for a moment before smoothly getting back to grabbing papers from her side table. Her eyes lifted to meet mine from the other end of the bed. There was a question there. But then she blinked, and it was gone.

“It will be easier to work at a table,” she said. “Do you mind if we go downstairs?”

“That’s fine, but the Hastings are playing charades. Want to go over to my place?”

Again, there was the briefest of pauses before she nodded. “That sounds great, thanks.”

I followed her down the stairs and out the door, then walked side by side with her across the gravel drive. She had her folders and papers held to her chest so I couldn’t hold her hand. Had she done that on purpose? Was she putting distance between us in

preparation for her leaving?

When we reached my house, I gestured her inside.

“You don’t lock your door?”

“Not when I’m right across the parking lot,” I said, chuckling.

She walked in, eyes immediately skimming the entire space.

There wasn’t much to see: a little kitchen tucked into the corner with wood cabinets, dark counters, and a peninsula, a TV too big for the space, a leather sectional, a couple of bookshelves, and a bar-height table for four.

That’s where I headed with her laptop, setting it down on top, then making for the kitchen. “Want something to drink?”

“Water would be great.”

I grabbed a water bottle for her and a couple sodas as well, setting them on the table as she spread her things out.

“Okay, so what are you worried about?” I asked.

She bit her lip and shifted her feet. “I wondered if I could show you a different presentation first.”

My mouth turned down. “Sure. I’m here to help.”

Pushing aside a few papers, she grabbed one near the bottom of the pile, then she got something set up on her computer and turned it around to me, a PowerPoint

presentation open.

“I want to pitch this year’s Barnside Pick n’ Picnic.”

My startled eyes met hers.

“I looked up what you guys usually call it—I figure for marketing it’s best to keep the same name, and this one is so cute.

Anyways. My pitch.” She gave a sharp dip of her head, and immediately, I saw her transform before my eyes.

She brushed her long hair back into a bun, straightened her shoulders, and held her papers in a relaxed hand as she launched into her plan.

“I propose a week-long event, but with emphasis on the weekend. I believe this will give ample opportunity for guests.” She leaned forward, clicking the arrow on her laptop, which moved to the next slide with dates and a schedule.

“The U-pick will be open all week long. Anyone can come by, rent a basket, pay the entry fee, and pick, but I think we should have evening events as well, to draw people in. Nothing fancy—” She clicked the arrow again.

“I’m thinking karaoke night, yard games, maybe even a treasure hunt through the orchards.

” Another click. “On the weekend, I want to increase the fun a little. I think we could get local shops to put up some stands—kind of like a farmers market. There would be a small entry fee, but nothing exorbitant. I would also like to connect with businesses to put together a silent auction. The goal is to get your trees completely bare by the end of the week, but if we haven’t...

I talked to a few school groups this morning who would be interested in donating their time to help.

And, if your family wasn't against it, we could donate those final proceeds to the hospital your grandpa is in. ”

I hadn't even had a chance to sit down. A cold soda was slowly numbing my hand, but I couldn't take my eyes off the laptop.

“I know. I know it's a lot, and we can totally scale back if you want.

And... and if you hate it completely, that's fine too.

But if you like it, I want to plan it. All of it—I want to handle the whole thing, and I think I could, even from Utah.

I think we could easily get it set up for early next month—we just want to give ourselves enough time to market and the businesses enough time to plan booths... ”
She trailed off, staring at me.

“You remembered,” was all my brain managed to produce.

She nodded, still watching me.

“This is amazing.”

“You think? You don't hate it?”

I was shaking my head. Slowly at first. “Not at all. Lucy, this is incredible. It would be fantastic for the inn and the farm but I also think it would be the perfect send-off for my grandparents and their plans to sell.”

Her gaze locked on mine, and silent communication passed between us. Yes, I was on board with the selling, but no, I wasn't really ready to talk about it yet.

“Okay. Okay, if you're sure, I'm going to nail down the schedule. I don't want to bug your grandma with this, but I don't want to overstep either.”

I waved her concerns aside. “Let's not tell her. She'll love the idea, but let's keep it a surprise.”

“Sounds good.” She flipped her paper over and produced a pen that I'm pretty sure she'd tucked into her bun at some point and made a few notes on the back.

“Once you have a tentative schedule, send it to me and I can reach out to the businesses about the silent auction. I have connections that I think might help.”

“Perfect, I'll do that.” She was scribbling away.

“And Lucy?”

“Hmm?” She tucked the pen between her teeth and skimmed over her notes.

“I don't want this to interfere with your promotion. Let's get all of that nailed down, too.”

She grabbed the pen and nodded. “Yes. Okay, good point. But this is a priority too. I need you to know that.”

I took the pen from one hand and the paper from another and set them on the table, cradling her face between my hands. “I know it is. Thank you, Luce. This is all... It's incredible, and I know I couldn't pull it off without you.”

She beamed up at me, her hands still raised a bit into the air where I'd removed what she was holding. I couldn't help it, I pressed a kiss to her smiling lips, restraining my hands from sliding around to the back of her neck and deepening it.

I was supposed to be following her lead, doing what she needed, not what I wanted. But I was still a man, and how could I not kiss her after everything she'd just done?

Her eyes were a little glazed when I forced myself to step back again, and she cleared her throat.

Pink touched her cheeks. I almost kissed each one of them, but backtracked to my seat again.

If I were to keep kissing her, it would be hard to stop.

And then it would be hard to keep my newfound pledge to be less selfish.

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The Missing Piece

Lucy

“So, your presentation—the one for your job—how is it coming?” Finn’s voice was there, but my mind was still on the kiss.

I mentally smacked myself, forcing my brain back to the present.

My presentation. Yes. That. The whole reason I was on this island in the first place.

I hadn’t worked on it anymore since dropping Finn at the hospital last night—so as much as I’d rather dive into the U-pick event, I really did need the help.

“I don’t really know,” I admitted. “I think the addition of the movie location tour is great and maybe I should leave it at that, but I just want more, you know? Something to set me apart.”

He nodded, opening a can of soda. “How long is your presentation?”

“I’ve got about twenty minutes to talk, and then ten for questions. I don’t need to take up all the time, though, and honestly, I wasn’t planning to—I figured I would be concise and hopefully hit enough great points and ideas that it was memorable.”

“Alright. Start from the beginning and give me the presentation.”

Okay. I mentally regrouped, taking a deep breath as I pulled out the stuff for this

presentation, then I started.

It was a little rough, but I explained the tours I wanted to run, showed Finn some pictures I'd taken, talked about how there would be adjustable timelines for all the tours based on how long a vacation would be, and then went into the top locations and seasons for visiting.

My goal was to paint the picture so well it almost made the company executives want to go on the tour themselves.

When I finished, after approximately seventeen minutes, I looked at Finn with raised brows. My confidence that came when I was talking about something I was passionate about slipped from me like water from a faucet. "What did you think? Was it terrible?"

"You're a natural," he said, grinning.

My shoulders relaxed at the praise, and I picked up a pen.

"What if I did something like what you've done for me on this tour?"

Partnered with a tour company to simplify our overhead.

Then my company wouldn't need to do all the legwork of booking tours and taking groups, but rather would just find the customers and take a percentage. "

"When I first learned why you were here, I actually wondered if you could do that for my grandparents."

"Really?"

He nodded. “Gram had mentioned selling, and I thought, what if I could get Lucy to partner with them and then they wouldn’t need to sell. It would cut their work in half as well as yours.”

“So, you like the idea?” Earlier, he’d seemed on board with his grandparents selling for the first time in over a week. But what if he wasn’t? “I could easily recommend your grandparents if that’s something you still want.”

He tapped his fingers on his soda can. But after only a few seconds’ hesitation, he said, “No. They’re selling. But I can get you in touch with some other groups.”

I felt inexplicably proud of him. “Okay.”

He set down his soda. “Should the presentation only be about this tour? What if you included some general thoughts on marketing and the team that would be needed to run the literary tours?”

“Yes, that’s a great idea. I actually considered that in my plans and have several thoughts, but didn’t add it to the presentation because I didn’t want to appear like I was overstepping.”

“But if you present it as how you would do all those things for this particular tour, then you don’t need to worry about overstepping—yet everything you say could be used in a broader, more general way for the other tours.”

I pointed my pen at him. “Great idea.” Then I tucked it behind my ear and started typing. This was what I’d been needing the last week and a half as I’d been planning the tour: someone to bounce ideas off of and get reassurance from. It was a synergy that always left me excited.

“Okay, so with marketing, I’m thinking we’ll partner with some local photographers

and videographers.

And then wouldn't it be so fun to have something like a video introduction on our site for each location?

Something short—maybe one to two minutes or so that talks about the location in cinematic detail and really makes it feel like you're there. ”

He sat up. “That sounds great. What if we got that ready for your presentation? Could that be what you're missing?”

I nodded without even thinking. “It would be pretty amazing, but I don't know that I can do that in less than twenty-four hours.” Plus, I didn't want to take any time away from the U-pick.

Emotion crossed his face, almost like disappointment. Had he, like me, just realized how little time was left? “I know people. Trish does videography, she may already have some work we could use. How soon after you get home do you do your presentation?”

“It's next Wednesday.”

“So, we have almost a week. Easy! Anything we don't get done before you leave, I can send to you.”

I pushed to a stand and started pacing, unable to stop my feet from mimicking my mind's movement.

“Okay, okay, this could be perfect. I'll need to compile possible shot lists.

And find a voiceover? Or just text. No, a voiceover would be better—you'd actually

be great, with that low voice.

"I spun, standing in front of two floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and pointed at Finn.

His brows lifted, but he splayed his palms in front of him. "I'm all yours."

A little smile lit my face. A larger warmth exploded in my stomach at the words. But I forced myself to keep thinking about the work. Once that was out of the way, I could think about us. About what those kisses we'd shared meant. About what next week would look like and the week after that.

Had it been in the back of my mind that, in organizing the U-Pick, I was ensuring I'd get to keep in touch with Finn? It wasn't my main priority... but it had definitely been there.

Back to work, though. "And then I'll need to find someone who can edit it all together.

I'm terrible at that stuff, but maybe I can find someone who's willing.

Maybe Avery... though she'll grumble about it taking her from wedding planning.

If not, I'll hire someone. I don't know that I can consider this a business expense right now unless Apex goes for it.

How much do you think Trish will charge? "

"I'll see if she'll handle it as a favor to me. Maybe you have her logo in the video?"

"Yes, yes, that would be amazing, and I could totally do that." I paced back to the table, then immediately back to the shelves.

Something on his shelf caught my eye. “Hey.” I pulled up short, staring at the bookshelf.

At one book sitting there. “I have this same edition of Anne of Green Gables . I’ve never seen another one.

I got mine as a gift.” I grabbed it from the shelf, turning and lifting it up.

“It was wrapped and on my porch two days after you’d gone and dog-eared all the pages in my last one.

” I think my mom felt bad for me, or maybe it was one of my friends or cousins.

I’d complained to all of them about the incident, but no one fessed up to getting me the fancy edition.

He just smiled at me. Like he knew something. Like—

“Wait.” I stared down at the book. “That wasn’t... You?”

He nodded. “I felt terrible.”

I blinked. Why was I continuously surprised by how much of a jerk he hadn’t been?

“I love this edition. I honestly think I fell asleep with it several times. Still have it, obviously. You gave it to me?”

“Guilty.”

My lips turned down, and I registered Finn standing and walking toward me. When he was only a foot away, I looked up. “I had you so wrong.”

“No, I did everything wrong back then.”

I couldn't help laughing. “Maybe a bit of both. Do you think... if you'd stayed... would we have...”

“Dated?”

I nodded.

“I don't know. Who knows how long it would have taken me to figure out that you didn't find my teasing charming. I may never have been able to dig myself out of the hole I'd created.”

“And now you live in a different country.”

He swallowed. “Yeah. Now I live in a different country.”

I sighed. I really wanted to figure all of that out. Finn and I. But would I scare him away by asking?

I put the book back on the shelf. “Thank you so much for all of this. Seriously—this could be what gets me the job.”

“No, you'll get the job because you're perfect for it. This will just help them see it even more.”

“Thanks, Finn. You're the best.” I went back to the table and started to pull my things together.

I could hear him following behind me. Could feel him just behind me.

With the buffer of the U-Pick and my presentation settled, another issue surfaced from where I'd been trying to ignore it.

I wanted to spin and ask him what we were doing, what was this between us?

But he had so much going on in his life already, I couldn't pressure him with that.

Besides, we now had two things to keep us in touch once I left.

We could... we could figure this out when things calmed down a bit.

He walked me back to the main house. It was dark now and quiet except for our footsteps crunching on the gravel. Was he thinking about the same stuff as me? Probably not. Finn didn't plan ahead like this.

"Thank you again, Finn," I said as we approached the steps.

"Anytime. Let me know if you need more help." He shoved his hands into his pockets, and I tightened my grip on my computer and papers, stepping up the first stair backwards.

"I will."

"Any help," he said, and if I wasn't mistaken, there was a slightly suggestive tone there.

It broke the tension building between us, whether for good or bad, and I laughed, taking another step backwards. "Okay, I will. And you let me know about your grandpa."

"I will."

He smiled. I smiled. And I disappeared into the house.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:21 am

Finn: I know you have work to do, but I would like to formally request your presence on our final day of the tour.

Lucy: What a fancy invitation. Is it black tie?

Finn: This one time, I'll let you wear your shorts.

Lucy: Okay, then I'll be there. ??

I joined Finn and the Harrison group in touring the Orwell Corner Historic Village for my last day on the island.

It was a beautiful, clear morning. The hour drive was spent listening to music, and the three-hour tour and lunch were spent avoiding any topic deeper than the here and now.

He bought me ice cream; I got him a funny little keychain.

The Harrisons provided the perfect amount of chaos, and overall, it was a fantastic last day on the island.

On the way home, the little kids and their parents fell asleep. Gemma and Lily were deep in conversation about where to get dinner, and Hank had borrowed one of his daughter's headphones to listen to an audiobook I'd recommended.

Finn turned down the music, glancing over at me. I tensed. Was this the moment? When he cut things off and said goodbye? I'd assumed it would be right before I got

in my rental car to head to the airport, but maybe he didn't want to put it off.

"Can I drive you back to the airport?" he asked instead.

My shoulders relaxed. "I'll need to return my car."

He nodded, fingers tapping on the wheel. "What if we drive separately to the drop off, and then I can take you the rest of the way? Then you don't need to hire a car or shuttle to the airport."

I wasn't going to overanalyze his offer. "Sure, that would be great."

"Awesome, when do you need to leave?"

I glanced at the dash and the clock there. "An hour or so."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll plan on it."

Dropping off the rental was a fairly painless process, and then I found myself back in the car with Finn.

Back to wondering how I was supposed to say goodbye to this guy who'd come to mean so much to me.

Except it wasn't really goodbye—we had projects to see through to the end.

I just hoped this toe-curling relationship wasn't going to downgrade to a few texts and some emails.

"Gram just texted," he said.

“Yeah?”

“No change.”

I sighed back into the chair. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. But I’m glad nothing negative is happening. The doctors are reassured that his vitals still look good, but tomorrow, if there’s no change, we’ll be exploring options to entice him to wake up.”

“Please keep me updated.”

We turned onto the road to the airport. “You know I will.” He took a deep breath, glancing over at me. “We should talk.”

I fisted my hands in my lap. Clearly, we’d both put this off as long as possible. “Yeah.” I had about twenty minutes before I needed to check my bag. “We should.”

He parked in short-term parking and turned to face me, his forearm resting on the wheel.

“I don’t want to get in the way of your work, and I don’t want to pressure you into anything, but I need you to know that I care and I...

” He seemed to be searching for the words.

“I want something with you, Luce. I want to make this work if we can.”

His words sent a tingle of pleasure down my spine, but for all my promises of not pushing him to be someone he wasn’t, I had to stand up for myself and what I needed.

I needed to be practical. “What would that even look like, though?” So help me, if he said we could just play it by ear...

I wasn’t looking to get hurt. I liked him too, and I didn’t want to make him change who he was, but if he wasn’t willing to put in the work to do what he said he wanted, I wasn’t sure I could commit.

“Talking, for starters.” He smiled. “They’ve got these great things called phones. And video calls. Texts. I just want to see what’s here. I’m not asking for a big commitment, but I really like you, Lucy. I want to see where this can go.”

“It wouldn’t be easy.”

“I’m not looking for easy.”

“Planning ahead would be necessary. There’s a time difference, and we both have our lives. I know how you hate to—”

“Luce.” He grabbed my hand that had started to wave in the air, punctuating my words and giving release to some of the anxiety I was feeling.

“I know I don’t have the best track record, but I can do all of that.

I promise. I’ll not just plan, I’ll overplan.

You’ll be getting a schedule from me within the hour, detailing every moment I expect you to talk with me.

FaceTime or Zoom invites are going to overwhelm your inbox. If you’ll give me a chance.”

I couldn't help smiling. Even when I was so filled with anxiety over this conversation and what the future would look like, he could still make me smile. And just like that, the ball was in my court. I needed to face it head-on even if it meant some pain. Maybe lots of it. I took a deep breath.

"Okay," I said.

"That sounded like a question." If he hadn't been holding my hand so tightly, I might have thought he was relaxed and amused. But this was a big deal to him, too.

"It's not. It's really not." I took a deep breath. Now or never. Time to jump into the deep end. "I like you. Let's try this. Let's..."

He cut me off with his lips on mine. Evidently, all he'd needed was permission.

Warmth immediately enveloped me, shooting to every limb and pooling in my stomach as his lips moved over mine.

There was a hunger to his kiss this time, a hunger that echoed the one I felt deep down, not knowing when this might happen again.

Texts and FaceTimes were great... but I couldn't kiss him through the phone.

And I meant to take advantage of every second now.

His hand came to my jaw, wrapping around the back of my neck and gripping me to him as if he never wanted to let go.

His lips teased mine open, deepening the kiss, and it was perfection.

Kissing Finn was like all things with him—all encompassing.

It was our mouths and our hands. But also how it felt in my stomach and my chest and everywhere.

He pulled back, but not for long. My chest rose and fell heavily as he pressed a kiss to my lips, each cheek, my nose, and forehead. He peppered me with kisses until I was laughing.

And then his lips were back on mine, making my mouth swollen and my heart so freaking happy.

“You’re going to miss your plane,” he said between kisses.

“At the moment, I can’t bring myself to care.”

I felt his smile just before he pulled away. But his hands stayed. His fingers brushed back my hair and trailed delicious, feathery lines along my jaw, down my neck, across my shoulders.

“But I can’t have you missing your plane. Not after how hard we worked on getting you that job,” he said, his voice rough.

I nodded, reaching out and smoothing down a part of his shirt I had grabbed in my fist during our kisses.

He captured my hand before I could pull it back, pressing a kiss into the palm, looking up at me with sparking eyes.

“I’m going to come visit,” he said, kissing the tips of my fingers.

“We’ve got a lot more of this we need to do.”

I knew my face was growing warm, but I didn't care. Let him know how much he affected me. He was willing to cross the Canadian border for me, the least I could do was let him see that I appreciated it.

He lowered my hand from his mouth, but kept it in his as he put the car in reverse and backed out of short-term parking. In less than a minute, we were in front of the gates. Goodbye was here, but it didn't seem as scary as it had.

He got out and ran around the car, opening my door then going for the back where he got out my bag and brought it up to me.

I took his face in my hands, feeling the rough stubble from his beard beneath my palms as I pressed my lips to his. His hand snaked around my waist, holding me flush to him, and forcing my head back into an even deeper kiss. Somewhere, someone catcalled.

He looked the tiniest bit chagrined, but mostly proud of himself when we pulled apart. He pushed his hands into his pockets as if he couldn't be trusted to have control over them and took a step back. "Coming to visit, don't forget. Clear your schedule. We'll celebrate your promotion."

Long-Distance

Finn

“Can you hear me better if I stand over here?”

I couldn't help smiling as I watched Lucy shuffle to another corner of her apartment. Sure, the reception was a little spotty on our video call, but it might be worth it to get uninterrupted time just taking in her beautiful face.

It had been three days since I'd seen her. Three days... ish. Really just one full day, and the end of the day I'd dropped her at the airport. And half of today.

Really, all anyone needed to know was that it had been too long since I'd seen this pretty redhead. We'd texted, but it wasn't the same.

“Yeah, I can hear you great there.”

“Awesome. I wanted to go over some of the details for the U-Pick event. I reached out to a few businesses regarding our farmers market, and so far, we have gotten six or seven on board. I'll send you their names in an email.”

My same, stupid smile was plastered on my face as she tucked the pen she was holding into her bun. “Lucy, you're amazing and wonderful, and I appreciate all of your help... but can we not start this like a business call? I've missed you. I want to know what's going on in your life.”

She bit her lips together, but her eyes scrunched on the sides in a smile. “Sorry. I think part of me still believes you just want me for my brain.”

“That too, but I like the person it belongs to more.”

She sank into a chair, holding the phone in front of her, but for a moment it dipped and all I saw was the top of her head.

It had only been three days and already I was realizing what she’d been worried about.

Not to say I wasn’t just as committed in the relationship as I had been at the airport, but it was a lot of moving pieces.

Last night, while we’d been texting way past my bedtime, I’d had the thought of moving to Salt Lake.

Gram and Pops were going to sell, so once Pops was better—because he would get better, he had to—they wouldn’t need me so much.

It would be pretty easy to slip back into life in Utah.

I may have been young when I left, but it was still familiar.

But that was crazy. You didn’t just move to a new country because you liked a girl. Even if you really liked her. Even if other “L” words had started coming to mind.

“Any change in your Pops?” she asked.

“You mean since two hours ago when you asked?”

She chuckled. “Yeah.”

I leaned back into my couch, holding the phone out. “No, nothing yet. But the doctors are still hopeful.”

She nodded.

“And you? Did you get to see your cousins yet?”

“Sadie came by for a minute to drop something off, and I ran into Dani at the grocery store, of all places, but we’re all supposed to get together next weekend for a going-away party for Chloe and Holt.”

“That’s the cousin following her boyfriend to North Carolina, right?”

“Correct. I should send you a family tree. They will be offended if you don’t remember who they are, what they do for work, and probably their favorite color when you meet them.”

I loved how she said it like that. Like it was a given—because to me, it was too.

“I’ll send you mine too. Gram would be offended if you forgot her name and occupation when you see her again.”

Her smile was wide. “Could you let me know her favorite color, too? And Pops’, of course.”

“Can do. Just give me a minute while I find it out myself.”

“Grandsons,” she scoffed. “What are you good for?”

“Manual labor, mostly.”

“I could do with some of that. My dishwasher broke the day I left for Canada, and I forgot until I got home. One of my neighbors offered to help me fix it, but then what do I do? Pay him? Make him a casserole? I don’t know the protocol here.”

“I’ll hire someone and send him over. Text me the address.”

Her eyes went wide. “I didn’t mean that, I can figure it out.”

“No, please, let me help.” Because there was no way I was letting her cook for another guy, even if he was in his seventies, and I currently had my fingers crossed that this neighbor was old. Very old. I reined in the jealousy, just barely.

Not just jealousy over the neighbor—though there was a hefty amount of that, for sure—but jealousy over the guy’s proximity. What I wouldn’t give to have Lucy still staying at the inn.

Again, the idea popped into my head about moving.

But that was crazy.

“Why a casserole?” I asked, instead of voicing my thoughts. Seems a bit 1950’s, don’t you think?

“A good casserole is never out of fashion,” she said with a sniff. “Besides, I can’t bake. I burn even store bought cookie dough.”

“How did I not know this?”

“Is it a deal-breaker?”

I smiled. “Not at all. I make great cookies, you know. Gram taught me.”

“Perfect. I’m on dinner, you’re on dessert.”

Now we just needed to get back into the same zip code to make good on that.

“Oh, hey Finn , Avery is calling. She’s so busy lately, she never calls. I should probably see if something’s wrong.”

Another cousin. I couldn’t wait to meet them all. “No problem, just call me back when you can.”

“I will. Talk to you later.” She blew a kiss, then ended the call.

I didn’t want blown kisses. I wanted the real thing.

The Promotion

Lucy

It felt a little like déjà vu. I was standing in front of the elevator wearing another borrowed outfit from Poppy—with a bracelet of her choosing—and headed up to work.

Except this time, I wasn't so confident.

Finn: As soon as Pops is in the clear, I'm booking my flight. I hope you don't mind having to wait a little to celebrate your promotion. Good luck today. You're going to be amazing. ??

The dopamine shot of Finn coming to visit so soon—even if I didn't know exactly when—did its duty, and my confidence in today grew with my smile. I wanted to spend more time letting his potential visit take up brain space, but I needed to focus on this meeting.

I was going last. Each of us candidates would go in, present to Shannon and the execs, and then they'd make their final decision by the end of the day. Bryn was first, then Gary, then me. I sat in my office waiting for the official summons, trying and failing to be productive for the first hour.

Then the knock came, and they were ready. I went down the hall to the conference room, feeling a little like I was marching to my own death.

I really hoped that wasn't an omen.

As I reached the room, Gary popped his head out of his office a few doors down. He gave me a thumbs-up. Was it a pity thumbs-up? An overconfident one?

Or maybe he was just being nice. Sure, it was Gary, and he was always a little condescending... but he wasn't mean. I took a steadying breath before pulling open the door.

Shannon was at the head of the table. She stood as I walked in, her smile wide. "Lucy, good to see you. You know Dave Jones, Emily Freewater, and Thomas Falkner, yes?" She gestured to the VP of the company and two of the board members.

"Yes," I said, smiling and reaching out a hand to each of them in turn. "Great to see you all."

"Perfect. Well, the floor is yours." Shannon sat again, pointing up to the other end of the table and the large TV that was waiting for my presentation slides.

My fingers were trembling, making the papers I held rustle against one another, but I forced air into my lungs and pushed back my shoulders as I began the presentation.

I'd given the entire spiel to my cousins the night before.

Everyone but Avery had been able to come.

I'd ordered pizza and forced everyone to come to my condo for last-minute practice.

They'd been great. Everyone had been attentive to the whole thing, and they had clapped, gasped, and cheered at the little promo video Finn and Trish had helped me pull together.

It was a good thing I had their assurances that they liked it, because the four people in front of me now had serious poker faces, and the closest thing I got to validation was a smattering of nods when the video finished.

“That was great, Lucy,” Shannon said. Was it though? Based on her reaction, it was just middling. Mediocre.

Had Gary or Bryn blown them away? Had either of them gotten a standing ovation?

I pasted a smile on my face as I closed my laptop and stacked my papers on top of it. “Do any of you have any questions I can answer?”

They wanted to know more about partnering with tour groups and my thoughts on marketing, but the poker faces never shifted from the occasional nod or “mmhmm” accompanied with a scratching of pen on paper.

“Thank you all for your time. This entire process has been more enjoyable than I could have hoped.” Then, in a show of great benevolence that I’d be proud of later that day, I added, “I hope it is not overstepping when I say that any of the candidates you’ve chosen would be a great fit for the job. ”

Shannon nodded and smiled, and I shook each of their hands before I left the room, my mind immediately filling with all the things I missed or should have added.

I was sure I’d be useless the rest of the day, but I trudged my way back to my coat closet and called Finn.

He didn’t answer, but I left a quick message.

He was probably out on a tour. I think he had a new group to pick up today.

We would video call that night, and I'd get to tell him everything in excruciating detail, and he wouldn't even act bored or try to get me to wrap it up.

A satisfied smile spread across my face.

Somehow, even if I didn't get the promotion, I knew everything would be okay. My priorities had shifted, and while I did want to move forward in my career, there was a lot more going on in my life to be excited about.

Awake

Finn

I was fixing the roof when I got the call.

It was stupid, but we'd had a little storm and several shingles had come off, and I didn't want a single thing added to Gram's plate, so there I was, on top of the roof, when I saw her name flash across my phone.

Dread pooled in my stomach. Gram had been sending me updates two or three times a day until I could get there to visit, but she didn't usually call. Why was she calling?

I couldn't wait till I got off the roof. I needed to know now, even if it was bad news.

My fingers answered the call and pressed the phone to my ear in a dreamlike state.
"Gram?"

"Finn! He's... he's awake!" Gram's voice was halting and wet from sobs or hiccups or something, but her words were clearly heard.

"He's awake?"

"He's awake!"

I jumped to my feet, tossing the hammer to the side and making for the ladder propped against the side of the house with nimble feet.

“I’m coming! I’m on my way now, I’m—” My shoe caught on a loose shingle, and I tripped on my feet, stumbling forward.

My phone flew from my hand, over the edge, and my arms pinwheeled.

It was hopeless. I tipped over the edge, the wind pushing against me as fruitlessly as my attempts at grabbing the ladder. Then I hit the ground.

Making Progress

Lucy

I frowned down at my phone, which was still completely lacking in messages at seven that night.

“Everything okay?” Mom asked from across the table where she was tucked under Brian’s arm.

I looked up, chagrined to be caught checking out of the conversation.

“Is it Finn?” she asked. One of the first things I’d done after getting home Friday evening was call my mom. It was a mark of motherly love that she’d not questioned my sudden increase in interest but just accepted it and let me move myself slowly back into her life.

So when she’d called and asked if she and Brian could take me out to celebrate the promotion, I’d been able to actually happily say yes, expecting a little, but not a lot, of awkwardness.

Which was the big news I was waiting to share with Finn—I’d gotten the promotion! Shannon had brought me into her office at four o’clock to offer me the position. Then she’d told me I had the weekend to form my team, and Tuesday morning, they wanted us to hit the ground running.

And yes, there was a pay increase. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t looked at that number

and thought about how much easier it would be to visit Finn with a salary like that.

I was overjoyed . Thrilled. I'd stopped and bought myself a cake on the way home, even. But the excitement was a little dampened by the fact that I couldn't get ahold of Finn. Was everything okay?

"Yeah," I said in a belated response to my mom's question. "It's not like him to be this unreachable."

It was another mark of my mom's complete acceptance of me that she didn't point out that I'd only been reacquainted with Finn for two and a half weeks. She seemed to understand that sometimes we get a crash course in getting to know someone, and that some connections are just immediately deeper.

Which was nice of her because, logically, I was still a little in shock over the whole thing.

Several of my cousins were, too. Namely, Avery, but honestly, had she met her own fiancé?

None of us liked that guy, but she was still planning to marry him in August. At least Chloe was happy for me.

That was probably because she was in her own little love bubble right now after her crazy second-chance romance story.

I was attending her going-away party in a few days—going away to move across the country with her boyfriend.

Meanwhile, my own romance story was giving me second thoughts already.

Small ones... but still. Had my imagination gotten ahead of me in thinking this thing we had going was more serious than it was?

Was it possible Finn had finally cracked and realized he didn't want to do long distance?

Had he found another fling in the next tour group?

My heart twisted at that, but that wasn't like him. I wasn't going to believe the worst.

I'd just like him to answer me.

"Have you tried calling the B&B? Maybe they know if something's going on?" Brian suggested.

"Oh. That's a great idea that I probably should have thought of."

Mom smiled. "We don't always think straight in matters of love."

I cleared my throat and gave a little nod so I wouldn't have to come up with an actual response. Love? That was a big word. A serious word. One I'd thrown around once before, only to realize how little I knew what it meant.

I wasn't in love with Finn. I just liked him. A lot.

My brain firmly agreed. My heart seemed to be beating abnormally fast so I decided not to ask it for a comment at that moment.

We finished dinner, went our separate ways after agreeing to carpool to Chloe's going-away party together, and I tried Finn one last time in the car.

This time, it went straight to voicemail instead of ringing.

I frowned down at the phone, not bothering to leave a voicemail.

He had three others waiting from me, after all.

Taking Brian's advice, I googled the Seaside Barn and Breakfast and found the phone number, clicking on it to call. It rang three times before someone picked up. Probably Stephanie.

"Hi, ah—" Did I say my name? Would she remember me? She hadn't been at the desk every time I was there. "Is Finn Harrison available?"

"No, sorry, he's not here right now."

That was helpful. "Will he... be in tomorrow? This is Lucy Sinclair, by the way. I was there last week."

"Oh, hello." Based on that generic reaction, she didn't remember me. "He had a personal matter come up and will be taking a hiatus for the foreseeable future. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

My voice had ceased to work as the woman's words hit me. His grandpa. My heart plummeted. "No," I croaked.

"Have a great day, buh-bye."

I stared at the phone as my mind clunked back into motion. If something had happened to his grandpa, Finn would have told me. He would have. But he hadn't answered my messages since about ten o'clock that morning. I sent another text, just in case.

As I was tuckin g my phone away, it buzzed. I pulled it out fast enough to strain a muscle, but it wasn't Finn's name on the screen.

Lily: I need another cute story about you and Finn to live vicariously through. All the guys here suck.

We'd been texting back and forth since leaving PEI, and she was quickly becoming one of my favorite people, but her text didn't make me smile like it usually would. Instead of sending a cute story, I just sent a gif hug. She hearted it.

I couldn't bring myself to call back and bug Stephanie to share personal information with someone she didn't seem to remember. But if I didn't hear anything by morning, I was going to do it anyway.

My phone ringing woke me up at five-thirty the next morning. My alarm wouldn't go off until six-fifteen, and I didn't recognize the number on the screen, but in my groggy state, I answered anyway.

"Hello?" I should have cleared my throat before attempting to speak.

"Lucy?" The voice was a little loud and a little familiar.

"Yes?"

"Hi Lucy, dear. It's Gram. I know it's still early there —I'm sorry if I woke you up."

I sat up in bed, unplugging my phone from the charger so it wouldn't yank me back down. "No, no, it's okay. Is... what's up?"

"Finn had an accident."

My brain had barely woken up, but it comprehended that. “Is he okay?” I jumped out of bed and started pulling on last night’s jeans.

“He is now. He broke his femur and had to have emergency surgery.”

I turned the phone on speaker, yanking my head through a shirt. “Oh my gosh. What happened?”

“He fell off a roof.” Her voice was shaky, but I couldn’t tell if she was scared or sad or on the verge of laughter. Honestly, maybe a bit of each. “He was fixing some shingles that came off, and I called to tell him that Pops woke up—”

“Pops woke up?” I was putting toothpaste on the toothbrush when I suddenly realized what I was doing.

Where was I planning to go? Canada? The island?

Did I intend to row there? I dropped onto the edge of the tub, suddenly purposeless and only able to cling to the information Gram was sharing over the phone.

Her voice was brighter now. “Yes! He is doing so well. He’s trying to convince the nurses to take him down to Finn’s room so he can give him a firm talking to about proper roof safety.”

I giggled despite myself, all my emotions and sleep deprivation colliding in one. I had to put a hand over my mouth for a moment to stop the delirium.

“That is amazing! I am so thrilled for you!” But Finn. Oh my gosh... Finn.

“Thank you! Finn has... he’s been asking for you. He’s on major pain killers, though, so I don’t know if that’s the best idea.”

“Oh, I don’t care if he’s a little loopy.” I was desperate to hear from him, actually. He’d fallen off a roof? I wanted to pull a Pops and give him a piece of my mind!

“He might care later, but if you won’t hold anything against him...”

“Cross my heart.”

I heard movement in the background, then muffled voices.

“Luce? That you?” He was drawing out his vowels, but I still recognized his voice.

“Finn? Oh my gosh, are you okay?”

“I fell off a roof.”

“I know! Your Gram told me.”

“I might have some scars.” He paused. “Do you like scars?”

I laughed a little. “Love them if they’re on you.”

“That’s good. I love you, too.”

I froze, holding the phone that was still on speaker close to my mouth. Did he—
What was I supposed to say? I didn’t know what to think. Did he mean it? Did—

“The doctor says I can’t fly a plane next week, Luce. I want to kiss you real bad, but he says I’ll be stuck here for like a year.”

“Okay, I think that’s enough,” came Gram’s voice in the background.

“Let me see that, hon. Yes, yes, I will tell her you’ll call soon.

” Another muffled exchange, then “He’s not allowed to fly on a plane, actually.

No one here thinks he suddenly has his pilot’s license.

I’m sorry, Lucy, I know he was planning a trip, but he’ll have to postpone. ”

“No, no, it’s okay,” I hurried to assure her. “We’ll figure it out. He’s not... really stuck there for a year, though?”

Gram laughed. “No. He’s got at least three days at the hospital. If he’s able to get moving adequately, then he’ll go home. He’ll have months of physical therapy, and it could be a year before he’s fully recovered, but probably only a couple of months until he’s walking and mostly back to normal.”

“Okay. Thank you. Will you keep me updated?” My heart was still racing, like I’d just sped past a cop and was waiting to see if he’d turn on his lights.

“Of course, dear. And Finn is trying to get me to tell you he’ll call soon. Maybe when he’s off the strong stuff.”

I let out a singular laugh. “Thank you.”

She clicked off, and I was left staring at my bathroom floor, trying to put all the mental pieces together.

Finn was hurt—badly. And he couldn’t come visit.

That was more crushing than I’d like to admit.

He had a long road of recovery ahead of him, and I did a mental check on myself to see how that made me feel.

After my realization that I shied away from anything hard or painful, I'd been trying to be more aware when I wanted to do just that, so I could fight back against the impulse.

But this time, the only impulse was to finish getting ready and get to rowing.

Like a lightbulb turning on in a dark room, it became clear to me.

I was in love with him.

I was in love with Finn Harrison despite it only being a few weeks.

And hearing what he was going through just made me want to be at his side.

Desperately. So much so that my chest ached at the thought of staying here doing nothing.

Not only did I not want to shy away from Finn's hard stuff, I wanted to wade through it with him.

To experience it by his side. I wanted all the hard, messy, and difficult things as long as they were with him.

I was in love with him.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:21 am

Dad + Deadbeat = Dadbeat

Finn

I could see the corner of my phone's screen when it lit up in Gram's purse.

The despot had grounded me from using it until they weaned me off my pain meds, but now she was in the bathroom, and if I could just lean a little out of bed, I might be able to find out who was messaging me. My fingers were crossed for Lucy.

I missed her. Physically missed her like it was a weight on my chest. And if I wasn't confident that she liked me too, I might have been embarrassed by how bad the pain was of her being thousands of miles away, and my only way to contact her being just out of reach.

Maybe I'd use my nurse call button and have her grab me the phone. That definitely wouldn't be a misuse of power.

The door opened—either Gram was back, or the nurse heard my telepathic plea.

The hopeful smile on my face slid right off when I saw the man there.

“Dad.”

“Hey, kid.” He stepped hesitantly into the room, and my hand fisted around the blanket on my hospital bed. Why was he here? And how could I get him to leave?

His eyes looked everywhere but at me, eventually focusing on the screen by my bed that constantly beeped my vital signs. There was a furrow between his brows and a tightness to his jaw, and I hated to see it all. Hated that there was a small part of me that was relieved to see his concern.

Abruptly, he turned, pushing his hands into his pockets and setting his steely gaze on me. “They treating you okay?”

“Why are you here, Dad?” The word felt foreign in my mouth.

I wasn’t even sure why I called him that.

Physically, he was clearly my father, with that dark hair and green eyes.

Even his build was like mine—not massive, but enough to fill a shirt like the button-up he wore now.

It was almost like looking in a mirror, except for the gray starting to streak his hair and the excess lines around his eyes and mouth.

It was cruel that I looked so much like the person who’d let me down most in my life.

To his credit, he didn’t back down from my point-blank question. “Mom called me.”

Someone needed to take away Gram’s phone, too, apparently.

“Oh, yeah. Pops is down the hall.” I’d forgotten about his promised visit. Frankly, I’d assumed he’d cancelled. He always cancelled.

He shook his head. “She called me about you, too, not just Pops.”

I met his eyes, forcing myself to stand up for the younger me that had always been let down and had been too young to feel capable of changing that.

“She shouldn’t have. You didn’t need to come.”

His jaw worked, and I braced myself for the excuses I always got. He was really busy, flights were hard to find, and he didn’t think I’d want him there.

He was right about that last one.

And yet, something deep down had loosened a little to know that a broken femur and a coma at least warranted a visit. What a high bar.

“I’m really sorry, Finn.”

I stared at him . Had those words really come from his mouth? And without a single excuse piling up behind them like a multi-car accident?

He swallowed, shaking his head. “I know I’ve screwed up. And I’m sorry.”

What was I supposed to say? I didn’t forgive him. It couldn’t come that easily, and I frankly wasn’t sure how much he meant it. I cleared my throat to give myself a moment of procrastination.

“I haven’t even seen you in years,” I finally said.

“Yeah, but—” He cut himself off, and my brows raised.

He wasn’t going to defend himself? “You’re right.

I should have been around more. I... I don’t mean this as an excuse, but I didn’t think

you'd want that.

You guys have such a good thing going here.

"He waved around the room, and I almost laughed.

Two-thirds of our little three-person unit were currently in the hospital. "I didn't want to screw that up."

I pushed out a heavy breath. Having a heart-to-heart had not been in my plans for, well, ever.

But here we were, and after taking time to think about my future lately...

I was pretty tired of hanging onto all the crap in my past. I nodded at my dad.

"Yeah, I can see that. But you were the adult, you should have put in the effort, even just a little. It shouldn't have mattered that I was happy with Gram and Pops. You were my dad."

He nodded, his throat working in a swallow. "I'd like to change that, Finn. I want to be here more, and for us to talk more."

My defenses were still up. I wanted to rain down all of his misdeeds on him.

But watching him now, standing so stiff next to my bed, and his eyes so intently on me, the air left my sails.

We all make mistakes. I wasn't about to absolve him of literally abandoning me as a kid—that was a lot to work through, and I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to move completely past it—but he was, at the end of the day, a human.

And just like Lucy had been willing to take a chance on me changing and planning for our future, I wanted to give that same chance to my dad.

Plus, I wanted to not have to fall off a roof to see him again...

it didn't seem like a situation I wanted to repeat.

"Fine. What does that look like?"

Dad's eyes widened just a hair. "I'll stay as long as I can. And then... I'll visit. And if you'd like, you're always welcome at my place too."

I gave a sharp nod, treating this like a business agreement. "Okay. I'll be in Utah quite a bit once I take care of all this." I gestured at my leg. "Maybe we can grab dinner." I wasn't about to agree to stay with the guy. Mountains aren't hiked in a day, after all, especially with a broken leg.

"That sounds great, Finn. Really great."

The door opened, and Gram stepped in. I wouldn't have put it past her to have had an ear to the door, waiting for our conversation's resolution. Even now, she seemed to tuck away a smile. I'd let her have the win, even though I still wasn't sure how I felt about her calling my dad.

"Christopher," she said, coming up to him with a hug. "I'm so glad you were able to make it." It might have been wishful thinking, but I'm pretty sure there was a reprimand in her voice.

"Hey, Mom." Dad returned her hug, but his eyes stayed on me.

I nodded. He smiled.

And something... untied inside me. It felt lighter. Free.

I Miss Him

Lucy

I sat in my aunt's backyard, watching the chaos around me with a smile on my face.

I was happy just to be here in the sunny yard surrounded by family.

I loved my family—always had—but for the first time since Mom and Dad had split, I didn't feel like an outcast. And I wasn't spending my time hoping to avoid any serious conversations with anyone about anything.

It was nice not to feel so tightly wound.

Like a loud fan I hadn't noticed until it turned off.

In fact, I was kind of hoping someone would come over and spill some big news so I could fully embrace the moment.

Mom and Brian were talking with Chloe's mom—the aunt whose backyard we were in.

Sadie, Dani, and Poppy were filling up drinks.

Grandma Sue was in the middle of a conversation with Avery, who had thankfully not brought her fiancé—wait, no, maybe I should get behind those upcoming nuptials like I had with Mom and Brian's.

But bleh, I just didn't like the guy. Well, maturing took time—I'd put Avery's fiancé on the list and deal with him later.

Chloe and her newly reconciled love of her life, Holt, were in the middle of the sunlit yard, laughing at something Grandpa had said to them both.

She was glowing. And I was jealous of the arm Holt had around her.

Why did Finn have to live in a different country?

And now he was in possession of a broken femur—it was, frankly, rude.

I watched them all as Avery excused herself from Grandma Sue. That furrow between her brows was deeper than usual, and she flexed her hands as she walked away. Was everything okay? Maybe my first big conversation needed to happen now.

I started to stand, but just then Sadie plopped onto the seat beside me, leaning back and shading her eyes with her hands. I turned to her instead, and before I could ask about the exasperated look in her expression, it transformed into a smile.

“Congrats on the promotion!” She wiggled her shoulders. “But more importantly, how's Finn? And how are you being away from him?”

My lips lifted. I had filled all my cousins in on the situation when they'd come to help me prep for the presentation. And of course, I'd told them about his fall only minutes after I found out.

“His Gram won't let him call me again until he's off his pain meds. We've been talking through her.”

She snorted. “Smart woman.”

I tapped my fingers on the table, ready to burst with my plans. I hadn't wanted to say anything before—today was about Chloe and Holt. But Sadie wouldn't be mad at me. She'd probably be more mad if I didn't say anything. "Full disclosure... I bought a plane ticket."

Her brows shot up. "Like... you're running away? You're eloping? You're..."

"Visiting," I cut her off. "I miss him." I shrugged. Not able to keep from playing it at least a little easy, I added, "Also, Poppy hasn't been working either time I've flown this month. Figured I'd give it another try."

She ignored the Poppy comment. "You're in love with him."

I bit my lip. "I think I am."

Her face split into a grin. "Lucy!"

"I know."

"You are so sweet to surprise him with a visit."

I tilted my head back, letting the sunlight splash over me.

It was like a physical representation of how I felt: bright, warm, happy.

"It's more selfish than anything. I feel a little like I'm the heroine of my own book here, getting swept up in a grand love story."

Maybe I should dictate my experience to Dani—she can put it in her next best-seller.
"

“All she needs to do is add some dragons, and it perfectly fits her genre.”

I laughed. “Shouldn’t be too hard.”

She gave a half-happy, half-exasperated sigh. “I wish my job would let me find the man of my dreams.”

“Maybe you’ll meet a hot guy in Alaska. You’re going to the family reunion next month, right? There’s gotta be someone there that isn’t related to you.”

She nodded. “I think I’m more likely to fall in love with a moose there, though.”

I snorted at that. “I’m going to channel Poppy and say you’re next. The stars are going to align for you and the moose.”

She rolled her eyes, but her mouth was still smiling. “Can I come visit you in Prince Edward Island? Get the full grand Anne tour from you and maybe find my own guy there?”

“It’s a great spot for that, and you totally should come. Finn’s grandparents are planning to sell the B&B sometime soon, so maybe we can get everyone together before that—plan a big trip.”

She leaned her chin into the palm of her hand, looking out at all our cousins. Except Chloe. She’d disappeared somewhere. I twisted around in my chair but couldn’t see where she and Holt had gone off to.

“A cousin trip would be amazing—before you and Chloe go and get married and have babies.”

I held my hands up. “Maybe slow down with the marriage and babies talk... but I

wouldn't actually hate that future. Isn't that crazy? I can't believe I started the month wanting a promotion and now I want a husband." The sun glinted off my lemonade cup as I picked it up and took a sip.

"It's not crazy at all! Eventually, I want a family of my own, so I get it.

I'm just so happy you and Chloe found your happily ever afters.

And before you come at me saying it's too soon for you and Finn to discuss marriage, I'm calling BS on that.

You are the biggest romance lover I know.

If Finn's managed to win you, he's a keeper."

Impulsively, I leaned across and hugged her. She stiffened for a second—I'd never been known to be too physically affectionate—then hugged me back.

It was just a hug from someone I'd been friends with since birth, but it was more than that.

It was like a physical representation of everything I wanted to change.

One more little brick I'd built up to keep my emotions safe was torn down with that hug.

It was one more reminder that these moments of real connection were what I wanted and needed in life.

And it also made me miss Finn even more. My flight couldn't come soon enough.

I Might be Hallucinating

Finn

Everything hurt, even through the pain meds—probably because it was a lower dose today.

“When do I get my phone back?” I asked Gram, leaning on my pillows to look at the white ceiling of the hospital room.

“When I’m sure you’re not going to embarrass yourself with it. It’s for your own good.” She was gathering up her things to walk down the hall to Pops’ room. How lucky for her that she got to visit both her invalids in a mere sixty seconds.

“What did I even say that was so bad?” It had been three days since the surgery, and evidently, I’d lost phone privileges in the early hours of day one.

She gave me one of her you don’t want to know looks, but I threw it right back. I really did want to know. She sighed. “You told Lucy you’d be stuck in the hospital for a year and that you couldn’t fly a plane.”

“That’s not so bad—”

“And that you really wanted to kiss her, that you would have scars—would she like them? And that you were in love with her.”

I blinked at her.

“Yes. Based on her reaction, I assumed those were not words that had been shared yet. So, I took your phone.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Well, that wasn’t the most romantic way to relay that information.”

Gram chuckled .

“Do I want to know her reaction?” I couldn’t help but ask it, though I also couldn’t meet her eyes.

“She didn’t have much time to answer. You kept talking. She was... pretty quiet though.”

“Quiet is better than hanging up.”

She pierced me with a look. “Lucy clearly cares for you. Just because she didn’t tell your drugged self that she loved you back doesn’t mean she’s not halfway there already.”

I nodded. The empty feeling growing in my chest was stupid. We had been dating for basically a week. I couldn’t expect her to be in love with me yet.

But unfortunately, my subconscious hadn’t really been jumping the gun, because despite how short the time was... I was in deep. Love-level deep.

Gram was watching me, and slowly she set her purse back down, coming to sit on the side of my bed. “What are your plans, Finn?”

I gestured around the room. “Doesn’t matter much now. They’ve been a bit derailed.”

She shook her head. “Wrong answer.”

I sighed. “I planned...” Well, crap, to share this meant coming clean about more than just my feelings about Lucy. I met her eyes. “I’ve got something to tell you and Pops.” I rushed into it before I could lose my nerve. “I never got my degree.”

The lines around her eyes became more pronounced. “Yes, you did.”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t. I failed one class after missing the end-of-term project and the final test.”

“One class?”

I nodded. “Stupid, I know.”

She smacked my leg. The good one—she wasn’t that mean. “What’s stupid is that you let it stop there. Finn— It’s been more than two years. You missed out on your degree by a single class, and you haven’t done anything until now?”

I winced. “Yeah. I know.”

“And you let us believe you’d graduated.”

“Yeah. I’m so sorry.”

Her face softened. “What happened?”

I set my jaw. “Dad.”

Understanding lit her eyes. “I see. Well, then I’ll ask again... what are your plans?”

I didn't really think I was getting off that easily. Likely, the real Gram would return once Pops and I were feeling better—really, falling off a roof was probably the best way to get off easy on this little issue.

“My plan was to help you and Pops get going on selling the farm and then go finish school. Then... apply for med school. Maybe in Utah.”

Her brows lifted. “So, you do love her?”

I nodded. “I love her. And I didn't even need pain meds to admit it. I... I keep telling myself it's crazy, but I also know this more than I've known anything in a long time. I'm in love with her.”

Her thin mouth lifted in a smile, and she grabbed my hand in her papery one. “Good. I like her.”

I grinned. “I know.”

A nurse came in then. “Time for a vital check, Mr. Harrison.” While I was confessing things, I may as well bring Pops into the loop. I stuck my arm out for the blood pressure cuff and turned on my best puppy dog face.

“Any chance of a wheelchair to my grandpa's room?” I asked.

She pursed her lips, but couldn't hide the smile. The entire hospital was entertained by the fact that I'd landed myself on the same floor as my grandpa. “Your doctor actually did approve that if your vitals look good.” She removed the cuff, took my temp, and checked my lungs. “Which they do.”

I gave a little fist pump.

“When would you like to go?” She draped her stethoscope back around her neck.

“Now?” I asked hopefully.

She chuckled. “Okay.”

It was only a few minutes—one or two of them rather painful—before I was in the wheelchair headed down the hall. I looked up over my shoulder at Gram, who was walking beside the nurse. “Can I have my phone?”

Gram’s mouth was twisted in an unrecognizable expression. She looked almost mischievous. “Left it in your room, sorry. But you can have it tonight.”

I narrowed my eyes on her but agreed to the plan. “Do we need to shake on it? By your expression, I’m a little worried you’re going to go back on your word. And I’d really like to call Lucy.”

“Do not question my word, Finn Harrison,” she said as if I were thirteen again, and in need of scolding.

I lifted my hands in surrender. “Okay, okay.”

The nurse stopped in front of Pops’ hospital room; he’d been moved to a new one after waking from the coma, or so I’d been told. Gram stepped inside, holding the door wide for me.

If I had been walking, I would have frozen in place. But since the nurse was pushing me, she pushed me all the way up to Lucy’s side.

She was sitting beside Pops’ bed, seemingly deep in conversation with him. But now she turned to me, her smile wide.

“Alright, which of my pain medications causes hallucinations, and can I have more?” I asked, my eyes greedily taking in each of her features that I had missed so much in the last week.

She pressed her lips together, but the laugh escaped her regardless. “Harrison, you look terrible.”

I grinned. “Well, you look fantastic, so hopefully it makes up for me.”

Lucy glanced up at Gram, who had come to stand on the other side of Pops’ bed. “He’s not really high on pain medication, is he? Is it safe to have a conversation?”

Gram chuckled. “He’s in his right mind. Anything he says is his own fault now.”

“I understand it’s the first time you’ve seen your grandpa in a while, I’m sorry to interrupt. I can wait out in the waiting room?” she asked.

“No,” Pops, Gram, and I said at the same time. The nurse may have said it too, it was that unanimous.

It was Pops who spoke first, though. “I’m glad to see my boy alive and well, but you could take him away for a while.”

I grabbed Pops’ hand, squeezing it and gratefully having an equally strong squeeze given right back. “It’s good to see you. You gave us a scare.”

He nodded. “Don’t keep the pretty lady waiting.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

Lucy looked up at the nurse who had tucked herself into a corner by the door and the

computer. “Can I take him for a few minutes?”

“Several minutes,” I amended. A couple of people laughed. I didn’t see what was so funny, I was completely serious.

“Keep him on this floor, and that should be just fine. You can go back to his room, or there’s a surgical waiting room a few doors down that’s usually fairly empty.”

We knew the room. I think seeing how Lucy had interacted with my Gram and distracted us from our concerns and fears during Pops’ surgery might have been where I first started to fall in love with her. Or maybe that had happened all the way back in junior high.

She pushed me down the hall to the room in question, and I leaned forward to open the door into an area that was blessedly free of people. I could already tell this wheelchair was about to get in the way of just how badly I wanted to hold her, touch her, kiss her.

“You scared me to death when I heard what happened,” she said, as she set us up in a corner, her in a chair and me in my mobile one.

I grimaced. “I’m sorry.” My hand grabbed her wrist, and my fingers played their way into hers.

She watched our hands, a small smile growing on her lips. But then she took a deep breath, eyes still down. “I’ve been thinking about Anne of Green Gables lately.”

“Yeah?” I could tell this was just the start of a conversation. Her version of dipping her toe into the water. My eyes traced the way her hair fell in front of her face.

“Yeah. Our story reminds me of hers a little.”

“Does it?” My throat constricted over the words, as thoughts of what that could mean washed over me.

Her eyes flicked up, catching mine. “Mmhmm. We got a few things wrong—like the first kiss shouldn’t have happened so soon.”

“I’m pretty sure Anne and Gilbert got that one wrong, not us.”

Her lips quirked. “But I misunderstood you when we were in school. You were a tease... but you weren’t mean.”

“I didn’t mean to be, at least.”

“And life kept us apart for a while.”

I nodded.

“And I got a few things wrong about love along the way,” she added.

I searched her eyes, not wanting to get my hopes up.

I didn’t expect the hard way her next words came out. “I know Anne needed to think Gil was dying in the books... But dang it, Finn, you didn’t need to fall off a roof to get me to realize I was in love with you.”

I tugged on her hand to pull her closer. “I’m sorry, would you repeat that?”

She immediately turned a delightful shade of red, but her brown eyes met mine. “I was wrong about real life versus fiction. I love you, Finn. And it’s better than any book.”

My smile grew so wide it started to hurt my face. “I love you, too. More than any two-dimensional character could ever love someone.”

“Oh, I know. You already told me,” she teased.

“And look at you, you didn’t even need to be under the influence to get the courage.” I swept the pad of my thumb across her lower lip, then up her jaw. Gooseflesh erupted on her neck, and I smiled to see it.

“I remember something else you said under the influence,” she added, in a not-so-innocent tone.

“Was it the part about kissing?” I asked. “Please let it be the part about kissing.” I was already guiding her head towards mine and contemplating how bad it might hurt if she were to end up on my lap.

Probably pretty bad. But what was a little pain?

“No, actually, something about flying a—”

I cut her off with my lips on hers, feeling her laugh against me in the most incredible of ways.

And for a moment, the wheelchair, broken leg, and long recovery didn’t even matter.

Because I’d found something—someone—in which I could put my trust and hang my future on.

This might have been the beginning, but I was already thinking about the end.

About two people growing old together. About a life that was more than just the

moment, but that also included plans for the future.

And Lucy was it for me.

Epilogue

Lucy

Finn was squinting down at the envelope, one eye shut and the other barely open, as we sat on my couch in Utah.

“Go on!” I said, bouncing in my seat. “What does it say?”

He still didn’t open it, instead looking over at me.

I settled my excitement a little when I saw the apprehension in his face.

He swallowed, tapping the thick white envelope in his hand. “But what if it’s a no?”

I twined my fingers with his. “Then we’ll figure out the next step together.”

“But I want to be here. With you.”

It had been a long eight months of him finishing up his last semester while applying to medical schools.

Eight months of getting to know each other even more.

My heart had known he was it for me, even before I knew if he was the kind of person to leave the toilet seat up (he wasn’t) or who always forgot where he left his keys (he was), but it was still good to get all those little ticks figured out.

We'd managed a visit—me to him in Canada at school or him to me in Utah at my job, which I'd shockingly not lost by running off to PEI days after getting the promotion—at least once a month, but neither of us loved the setup.

Plus, the curse was still alive, even if it was a bit less vindictive.

I mean, how many times can one lose their luggage, have their flight canceled, or discover they were allergic to a very specific species of bee?

But I guess that was just life , and each misstep ended up making for a good story later.

“Alberta accepted you. If that's where you choose to go, that's where we'll go.”

He turned to face me fully on the couch, the letter forgotten in his hands for the moment. “You're not moving for me.”

“Honestly, I think I'd be moving for me as much as you,” I said with a kiss to his lips.

He captured my face before I pulled away, making my peck more of a mini make-out sesh, which I happily allowed.

“But your job. You worked so hard for it.”

“I might have been working with them on the possibility of a remote position.”

His brows lifted. “That would be amazing. But you love Utah.”

“I love home. I'm a homebody... But...” I looked down at our entwined hands, his thumb brushing across the top of mine. “But you're my home, Finn. Wherever you are, I'll be happy.”

He squeezed my hand. “Okay. This doesn’t seem so scary anymore, then.” He lifted the letter. “I was really worried it was going to spell the end of my plans to kiss you every day.” As if making a point, he leaned over and planted one on me again. Then another to my forehead.

“And here I thought you wanted to get into medical school, not just get closer to me.”

“It’s all about priorities, baby.”

I laughed and swatted him, pointing at the letter. “Well, open it! I’m dying here.”

Slowly, he peeled back the top of the letter. I would have just torn it, but the only indication I gave of my impatience was the bouncing up and down of my leg. He unfolded the paper and held it so we could read together.

My eyes skipped down, landing on a few select words, and I threw my fists into the air, screaming as I launched myself at him. “You got in! You got in!”

His arms snaked around me, keeping me close and burying his face in my hair. I felt him give a massive sigh. “Every day,” he murmured. “I get to kiss you every day.”

And he proved his point by starting right then.