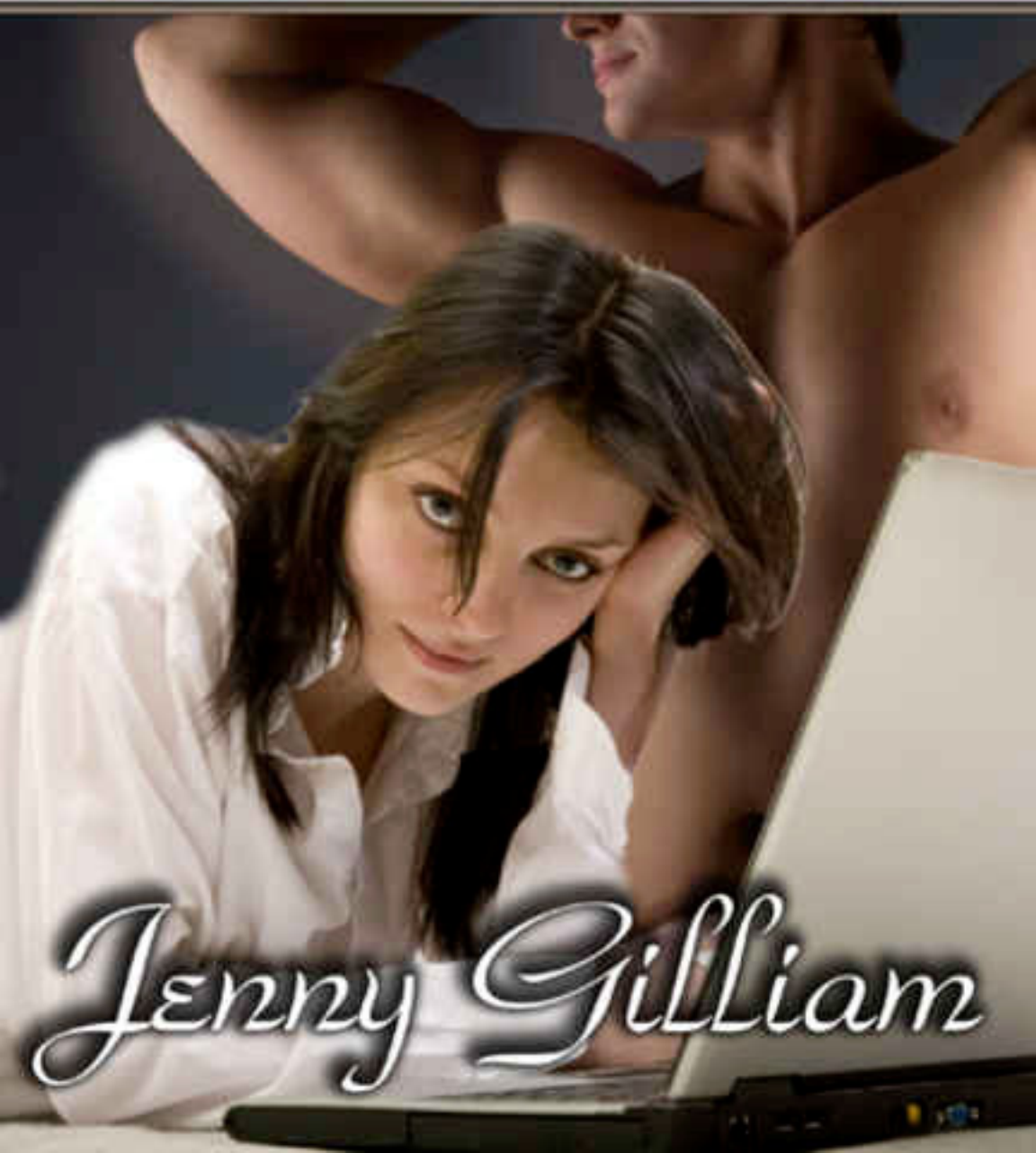


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Letting Luce



Jenny Gilliam

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

Amira Press

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Dedication

To my parents, who always encouraged me to write

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Chapter One

If inanimate objects could talk, Lucy Hollister would lay odds this one was giving her the finger right now.

The ruined computer tower sat on her bathroom floor, mocking her, the tail end of her graphic design project stuck somewhere in its depths.

A project due on her boss's desk tomorrow.

The damn thing seemed to be gloating. "Give me one reason," she taunted it, "why you shouldn't be a recycled can opener. I'll do it."

The phone rang. Lucy picked it up, still eyeing the moronic machine. "Consider yourself saved."

"Yeah?" Fury and frustration burned through her, leaving her manners checked at the door, or, more accurately, on the bathroom floor. At this point, she didn't give a monkey's butt if Emily Post herself waited on the line.

"Lucy?"

Her pulse jumped and little bombs of pleasure detonated in her at the sound of Rory Carlisle's voice. "Hey."

Loud music played in the background, interlaced with several voices. *He must be at Barney's*, thinking of their favorite bar.

"What's up? You sounded weird on your message." His deep baritone, flavored with a thick Texas accent, flowed like warm honey over her bones, warm honey she wanted Rory to lick off her body.

Get your mind out of the gutter, Hollister. Before her temporary leap from sanity, Lucy had placed a Mayday call to her best friend, and incidentally, the IT manager at her graphic design firm, leaving a message that provided only the basics. "My computer's broken," which it was, technically, albeit in actual pieces, and "Help," which she needed.

"My computer's broken."

"Yeah, I got that part. What happened?"

"Um, it just ... broke."

"They don't *just* break, Lucy," he said, in his Master of the Universe voice, the one that hinted at his superiority in matters of technology.

"This one did."

He sighed. "Explain it to me."

In the background, a husky female voice spoke Rory's name in a low tone filled with promise. He murmured something soft to the woman, and when they laughed, and a hot spurt of pure jealousy lanced through Lucy. *Must be on another date.*

Silence stretched over the phone line, and Lucy figured whatever distracted Rory were just boobs and a sexy voice. Nothing unusual there, she thought grimly. The man went through women like a box of Kleenex. A few moments later, Rory said, "Luce? Are you there?"

Her gaze cut over to the bathroom where the evidence of her carnage lay bruised and broken on the floor. This would be the hard part. Rory was of those weird techno geeks who abhorred violence against machines. Go figure.

Then again, she'd committed capital murder.

"Well, see, it started smoking, which I took as a sign of impending doom."

Rory groaned.

"Then it popped."

"What did you do, Lucy?" Rory asked, worry for the fate of technology evident in his voice.

She hesitated a moment. He would take the news hard. Better to give it to him fast, ripping it off like a Band-Aid. She bit her lip, fearing his reaction. "I sort of tried to drop-kick it out my bathroom window."

Lucy winced when Rory didn't respond. Beyond him, guitar riffs and a crooning voice echoed through a microphone.

"Never thought to call me first?" he asked at length.

"Well, I thought that would be evident because you're *returning* my call."

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to regret asking this, but why the bathroom window?"

"The community dumpster is right under it."

"Jesus H. Christ, woman. Where is the damn thing now? In pieces all over the concrete?" His frustration reached her from twenty miles away, and she winced again. "Your damned lucky no one decided to take out their trash when you decided to lose your fucking mind."

"Really, if you want to place blame, my landlord would be a fine start," Lucy said with rancor, referring to Arnold F. Granger, landowner, or "that rat-bastard slumlord" as he was better known by the tenants who occupied his five townhouses. "If he'd decided like a normal person to give

each house its own trash can, I wouldn't have been forced to lob it into the dumpster."

"Taking it down there like a normal person slipped your mind, I take it."

"Had you been listening," she continued, railroading over him, "you would've realized I laid emphasis on the word *tried*. The use of deductive reasoning would conclude my plan failed."

"I repeat, where is the damn thing now?"

Once again, Lucy's eyes moved to the bathroom. "It's on the bathroom floor."

"Still in one piece?"

"Ah, that's debatable. I may have heard a rattle when I kicked it."

"You know what, forget about explanations. Nothing you can tell me will refute this truth. You are one hundred percent nuts."

"This is *not* news, Rory."

"Don't touch the computer. Back the hell away from it, go downstairs, have some tea. I'm on my way. Don't touch it," he warned again before ending the connection.

She'd pissed him off, but that was a natural ability she possessed, and it wasn't just Rory who enjoyed the benefits. Although, his reactions were the most entertaining and fulfilling, at least in Lucy's masochistic mind because he always riled her. Lucy must be insane if she scrambled after the bread crumbs of his ire.

Her two-year-old Boston terrier, aptly named the Beast, stood at her feet, his cropped ears perked and little smashed snout cocked at an angle while he studied his mistress.

"Don't even start with me, dog."

Feeling a throb, Lucy looked down at the thigh she'd scratched during her "episode" and winced. She needed to get that cleaned up.

One floor down, her doorbell rang, followed by a series of rapid knocks. The Beast's black head perked up before he tore out of the bathroom, his shrill barks traveling through her townhouse as he focused his ire on the visitor.

Lucy fished out a few tissues from a box on her desk. She held them to her scratched thigh and hurried down the stairs, trying not bleed on the carpet and incur any more home improvement charges. Between the cost of repairing her hacked bathroom floor and the blasted computer, she'd be broke.

In her mind, she heard her mother's voice. *"You brought this on yourself, Lucille."* Her impulsiveness, or what her mom referred to as her "tendency toward melodrama," had landed in her in one form of trouble or another her whole life. Lucy liked to think it made life more interesting. But to her family, it drove their theory home. Lucy needed divine intervention.

Lucy knew before she opened the door that her elderly and nosy neighbor, Mr. Waverly, would be standing on her front porch step, cane in hand. She already saw him peering in the entry window. After all that racket, he probably thought she'd been attacked.

"Back, Beast!" she ordered.

The Beast ignored her.

She bent down and picked up her little dog, which forced her to remove the hand that staunched the bleeding. Taking a calming breath, Lucy opened the door and forced a smile. "Hi, Mr. Waverly."

He looked at her through rheumy blue eyes. "What the hell's going on up there?"

Although no housing association existed in this neighborhood, Johnny Waverly had elected himself chairman. He took it upon himself to eyeball every tenant's postage stamp front lawn and the condition of their vehicles, and kept himself apprised of all of the goings-on on the street. Lucy knew he meant well, but there were times when she wanted to take that cane and beat him over the head with it.

Gently, of course.

"I moved some furniture and fell down," she lied.

The Beast barked after she spoke, as if revealing her dishonesty. She shushed him. Damn dog never took her side.

Something told her Mr. Waverly hadn't joined the rest of the technological world. Besides, in the wake of recent events, Lucy had begun to think she might well be insane, which would be even harder to explain, and only confirm what he already suspected.

He watched the blood trickle down her leg. "Looks like you cut yourself."

Duh.

"Just a scratch. Thanks for your concern!"

She started to shut the door, but he stuck his cane in.

"It's bleeding," he pointed out.

Thank you, Captain Obvious, she thought, but guilt settled in. *He's just trying to be helpful,* Lucy reminded herself. *He's a lonely old man. He can't help it if that makes him mildly paranoid.*

"I've got some Band-Aids in the first aid kit upstairs," she told him, which was true. Maybe.

Lucy would tell him anything he wanted to hear, to get him out of her house. She didn't want Rory pulling in her driveway to find Mr. Waverly on her stoop. Everyone in Lucy's life thought she showed no common sense. And, yeah, trying to throw a computer out of her bathroom window showed a complete *lack* of said sense, but she was under duress. And, yeah, she'd called in the cavalry in the form of a six feet one sexy god, but this was *Rory*. He was the only person who treated her like an adult.

"You damage anything else?" Mr. Waverly asked, dogged suspicion replacing his concern.

Lucy still wasn't convinced her penny-pinching slumlord hadn't planted Mr. Waverly on-site to weed out information. Of course, *she* might be paranoid.

Must be the blood loss.

"Everything's fine, Mr. Waverly."

He made no attempt to remove the cane jammed in her door. Blue eyes she imagined were once clear and sharp, took in her face, searching, she was sure, for signs of deception.

"Lucy!"

Lucy rolled her eyes when her friend and neighbor, Emily Jenkins, eyes big and blue, her long blonde hair swinging, came strolling around the front walk. She looked all of

nineteen, especially in the blue-and-white checkered jumper, an outfit she *hadn't* been wearing when they'd gone for their standing monthly spa appointment earlier.

"Nice outfit," Lucy said.

"My sister is playing the lead in *The Wizard of Oz* in her town's community theatre. I promised I'd make her costume."

"And that explains why you're parading around in it *how*?"

"We're the same size." Emily raised her eyebrows at Mr. Waverly's back. "What's with all the ruckus?"

Mr. Waverly turned and smiled at Emily, the only person on earth, Lucy was positive, the old man liked. "Your friend's having some trouble." He puffed up like a bird. "I came by to see if she was all right."

My ass.

"I'm fine. Just a little tumble is all. No need to invite the whole damn neighborhood," she muttered.

This was turning from bad to worse. Any minute, Hal and Kate Johnson, who lived in same townhouse as Emily, would come traipsing over with their three kids and golden retriever to join the show.

From the street beyond the concrete walkway that curved around the side of her house, she heard the telltale sound of Rory's 1965 vintage Corvette. The engine roared with three-hundred-twenty-seven cubic inches of pure unadulterated power. The door slammed, and seconds later, Rory rounded the corner, adding to the party. Lucy reminded herself to yank her tongue back into her mouth.

He jammed his keys into the pocket of snug, well-worn blue jeans that molded to him like a soft glove, and Lucy wished she had been reincarnated as a pair of Levis. With a scowl pulled low over his deep set, cobalt eyes, he raked a hand through short, spiky black hair.

Eyes that narrowed with every step that took him closer to her door.

He nodded at Emily. "Hey, Em. Where's your little dog, Toto?" His thick accent tickled over Lucy's skin. The sight of him made little tingles flush over her body. *You are so pathetic.*

Emily used her middle finger to scratch her nose.

"This little spitfire givin' you trouble, sir?" Rory asked.

Mr. Waverly twisted as fast as his old bones allowed and turned those shifty eyes on Rory. "Seems like she's having a bit of trouble herself, moving couches and tables around with just those tiny arms for support."

"Hey," Lucy protested. "I may be small, but I'm wiry."

Both men shot each other a glance that ended with a snort of laughter.

"Face it, Luce," Rory said with a grin, "even if you went head to head with a class full of preschoolers, the odds are dicey."

"If you guys are done with your merciless, and may I add, unprovoked attack, I'll be leaving now." Lucy tried to shut the door again, groaning in frustration when she realized the wily old bastard still hadn't removed his cane.

Rory moved around Mr. Waverly and, in typical Rory fashion, bullied his way inside her house.

He looked down at her. "What happened to your leg?"

"Don't ask."

"Show me the scene of the crime."

Lucy rolled her eyes but led him up the stairs and around the back to her home office and the half bath inside. Rory stopped behind her. She smelled his aftershave and something exotic and *feminine*, which made her think of the sexy voice and boobs. Her heart melted a little bit at the idea that he'd left his date to help her out.

Loud clumping followed along with the click-click-click of the Beast's toenails tapping along the hardwood floor. When Lucy looked up, Rory, Emily, *and* the uninvited, always nosy Mr. Waverly had their eyes trained on the mess that lay below.

"What in name of Ike Turner *is* that?" Mr. Waverly asked.

The "scene of the crime" lay as she'd left it, though she'd hoped the evidence of her temporary leap from sanity had been a bad dream.

Not so much. In fact, it looked even worse. *Maybe I don't have any common sense. Maybe what everybody thinks is true.* Lucy ordered her inner critic to shut the hell up, trying to focus on the present.

"That, my fine man," Rory said, "is an example of what takes place when bad things happen to good computers."

"Them one of those iPod thingies I been hearin' so much about on the idiot box?"

"Close," Rory replied, though how he maintained a straight face, Lucy had no idea.

Emily rolled her eyes.

He crouched down on long, lean legs that pulled against the worn cotton of his jeans and examined the ruined remains. "It looks like you took a sledgehammer to it." He ran his fingers over the twisted, tortured metal.

Touch me like that.

"Oh, Lucy, what did you do now?" Emily asked.

Lucy bit her lip and tried to stem the tide of self-doubt that threatened to overwhelm her. She knew her friend meant well, but it only reinforced Lucy's view of herself. She was torn between the urge to burst into tears or start punching something.

Emily leaned closer and whispered, "You know, they say violence against inanimate objects is a sign of deeper issues."

The tears that had threatened drifted away like clouds after a storm. "Zip it, Dorothy, or I'll sic my flying monkeys on your corn-fed ass."

Rory turned and looked up at her. "Where's your laptop?"

Lucy looked away and stared intently at a spot high on the windowsill.

"Lucy," he said, warning in his tone.

"I wasn't using it! It's so hard to work on that thing with the little ... pad-mouse-thingamajig. I can't create any decent design without it looking like a toddler on crack made it."

"What did you do with it?"

She waited a beat, and then admitted, "I sold it on eBay. I got a really good deal on it, and I used the money to buy that Coach bag I've had my eye on plus the matching wallet. Oh, and the scarf and hat, too," she added.

Rory shook his head. "Well, as long as you got the scarf and hat." He pierced her with his deep blue eyes. "You *do* know your mouse problem is easily remedied, right?"

She sent him a look that said she thought *he* was nuts. "Would we be having this conversation if I did?"

"How is it that someone who hates computers chose a career where she works on one daily?"

Lucy chewed on her thumb. "Still trying to figure that one out myself, sporto." She nodded her head at the mangled machine. "So, can you work your magic?"

Rory let out a short bark of laughter. "Not even I'm that good." With gentle ease, he lifted one end of the silver tower, wincing when a chunk of metal dropped to the floor with a clatter. "I'll see what I can do."

From behind them, Mr. Waverly asked, "Is that a rip in the linoleum?"

Lucy groaned.

* * * *

After Rory carried the mangled PC down the stairs, he made a show of checking his watch and complained about how hungry he was because she'd interrupted him in the "middle of his date" and blah blah blah. She offered to buy a pizza to shut him up.

And to keep him around a little longer.

Emily made a couple more pithy comments about Lucy's "rage issues" before heading back to her townhouse. However, Mr. Waverly showed no signs of returning to his own home where he could sit in his Scotchgard-protected La-

Z-Boy and watch *Wheel of Fortune* and reruns of *Sanford and Son*.

So, Lucy ordered two pizzas—"There is no way one will feed *all* of us, Lucy." One vegetarian—"Are you trying to emasculate us here, Lucy?"—and one half-meat combo and pepperoni and pineapple. Gag. She didn't know why a person wanted to ruin a perfectly good pizza by putting fruit on it.

She opened a couple of beers for Rory and herself and poured a glass of OJ for Mr. Waverly. She then endured fifteen minutes of the old man inspecting her kitchen cabinetry and the entire contents of both her refrigerator and pantry.

"Looks like mine," he declared at the end of his long search.

Lucy pursed her lips and nodded. "Makes sense."

The pizza arrived, and Mr. Waverly proved to have quite the appetite for a man of his age and size. He packed away five pieces and another two glasses of orange juice.

Then, he did the worst thing possible, and leaned back in his chair and unbuttoned his pants.

"Ahh," he sighed.

This is wrong on so many levels.

Rory looked amused throughout the whole meal, sending her smothered grins and knocking her knees with his own under the table. By the time they'd finished their meal, Lucy was mindless with lust. He'd never know how much his touches drove her crazy.

Around eight, Mr. Waverly hobbled on back to his own house, and Lucy stood with Rory on the front step.

He balanced the mangled PC in his arms and lifted a brow at what Lucy now referred to as 'The Incident.' "I'll see what I can do with this. Come by my office in the morning."

Lucy saluted him and watched him disappear into the waning April evening. A minute later, the 'Vette's engine came to life and then the car charged past her house.

She trudged inside, feeling fatigue straight to the marrow of her bones. Her Sunday had turned into a nightmare. It had started out as a relaxing day off, beginning with brunch with Emily followed by their appointment for manicures and pedicures. Feeling pampered and cheerful, she decided to put a dent in some of the work she'd brought home for the weekend.

There's your mistake, Hollister. It was thinking of work that ultimately led the computer on a tumbling trip down a wall and onto the floor, ending its short, miserable life.

Good riddance.

Later, when she undressed, Rory floated on a cloud of cotton candy through her mind. It seemed she was *always* thinking about him these days, or at least since she met him in a stalled elevator at their firm almost two years ago.

Lucy could swear up and down she didn't care who Rory dated or slept with. But it would be a lie. Yeah, she had it bad, all right, for a man who was also her best friend.

Most of the time, she put it aside, but that only worked up to a point. Now, her various defense mechanisms were failing her. Every time she heard about one of his "lady friends," Lucy wanted to jam toothpicks in her eardrums. She needed to find a new system. *Either that or jump his bones.* And

while the latter held enormous appeal, it just wasn't going to happen. Her heart pinched painfully in her chest.

Men like Rory didn't date women like Lucy. She'd had enough experience in the game of love to know the quarterback didn't go for the short, curvy bookworm. Not when the entire cheerleading team waited, bouncing jubilantly in the wings.

She needed to face the fact that she had no chance with Rory. She could do it. It was unrequited *lust*, not love. Right? Yes, she assured herself, definitely lust. If she had any shred of common sense, and Lucy knew she did, she would *never* fall in love with Rory Carlisle.

She'd nip this crush and find herself another man to pine pathetically over.

Her mother and sisters were always setting her up on these ridiculous blind dates. Maybe she ought to give it a go again. Lucy sighed. The only problem was her libido didn't give a damn.

Her libido wanted Rory. And only Rory.

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Chapter Two

An hour before lunch on Monday, Lucy walked through the maze of desks and cubicles, another corporate jungle, that comprised the IT/computer support division of Chase Graphics.

"Hey, Lucy," the assistant systems administrator Adam Bogel called out. "Boss went upstairs, but he should be back any minute."

"Thanks, Adam."

Lucy waltzed into his office and dropped into his chair. She propped her booted feet on the desk and examined her black, thick-heeled Doc Martens. Boots and flats were the only footwear that occupied her closet. Oh, don't forget the flip-flops, a must-have for the late spring and summer months. But no heels. No way, no how. Even if pumps would make her taller than toddler. She had her pride, after all.

His computer hummed quietly, reminding her she hadn't gotten a chance to check her e-mail this morning. No, the first few hours of work had involved scrambling to recreate what she'd lost last night, before the Incident.

No time like the present. Lucy dropped her feet to the ground, turned to the large, flat-screen monitor and moved the mouse.

Apparently, Rory had been browsing the 'Net himself before he'd been called off to rescue some poor associate from certain technological doom. The site on his screen was personalspace.com, one of those "Hi, let's be friends" Web

sites that were so popular these days. Lucy had considered checking it out for about two seconds. But she couldn't conjure up any interest in reconnecting with old school buddies, because her high school experience had been a study in abject horror she had no desire to revisit.

On the other hand, Lucy could imagine how Rory had been in high school—popular, charismatic, charming, handsome, and a little aloof. She'd bet there were tons of old girlfriends wanting to hook up with him.

Don't go there, Lucy.

She stole a glance out his office door to make certain the man in question wasn't lurking around the corner. Out of curiosity, she looked at Rory's personal Web space. A picture of him sat at the top left corner of the screen, along with his first name. The photo showcased his dark hair and good looks, but in Lucy's opinion, any picture of Rory was drool worthy.

A short bio followed, nothing overt and lengthy, just straight and to the point. Height, hair/eye color, and hometown. When she scrolled down, her eyes landed on his Friends List. She clicked on the icon and navigated to another page. Here, his entire Internet posse lay out before her. There were about fifty people on his list. Twenty-five percent were guys, but the remainder were women, and from the looks of it, all of them gorgeous.

She clicked back to the previous page and found the Comments section, where his Friends could leave remarks. Like the Friends list, a few were from guys, but most of them

were from the females. And they were all flirty, with "sweetie" this and "cutie-pie" that.

"Oh, jeez," she muttered. "*Really?*"

The rumbling timbre of Rory's voice sounded outside the office.

Crap.

He would know she looked at his site because the screen saver was down. Thinking fast, she pulled up another browser page. Her fingers flew over the keys as she plugged in the address for her e-mail.

The screen had just changed when he walked in. As usual, he looked gorgeous. She reminded herself not to ogle Rory's butt. At least not while he was looking.

"Hey, woman," he drawled. "You lookin' for a job?"

Act nonchalant. She looked up and smiled. "No, just pretending I had a real office."

He smirked. "It's the penthouse, all right."

"Hey, you should be grateful. All I have is a tiny torture chamber with carpeted walls."

He flashed his white teeth. "Things rough up at the cube farm?"

"Go ahead, rub it in. You'll think rough when I land senior associate and my office is bigger than your house."

"Dream big." He nodded at his computer screen. "What are you looking at?"

"Huh?" Real *nonchalant*, Lucy.

He looked back at her, his eyes narrowed.

Oh, shit!

"Never mind. I don't I want to know. Just make sure you erase the Internet history. I don't want to pull up some random porn site."

Lucy folded her hands on his desk and smiled sweetly. "Honey, women don't do porn. We read erotica. It's much more *stimulating*."

Holy crap, she was actually *flirting* with Rory. She didn't have a coy bone in her body.

He turned and placed the briefcase his briefcase against the wall, giving Lucy a nice view of his butt, which, of course, she ogled.

When he turned, she lifted her eyes. "Any news, Doc?"

His gorgeous face transformed into a scowl. "Don't even start with me, Lucy. The damn thing is toast. You could have saved yourself considerable time and expense—"

She put up a hand. "Before you freak out, *again*..."

"Why didn't you walk away from it?" he demanded.

"I'll be the first to admit I made a stupid, rash..."

"I knew you hated computers, but this is ridiculous." He glared at her, impervious of her attempt to explain. "You ought to come with some kind of warning label."

"...decision. So, I don't need to hear what a destructive, impulsive person I am, or how violence against an inanimate object is a sign of deeper issues..."

"It would say, 'Approach with caution. Operator can go from zero to absolutely fucking crazy in sixty ... no, make that *ten* seconds.'"

"Would you shut up?" she screeched.

He grinned. "See?"

"I'm trying to explain, which you would've understood had you not been so busy with your clever little jokes."

Rory focused his attention on the computer again. "I heard what you said."

He smiled at her, and Lucy's heart all but stopped. Oh, wow. It never ceased to amaze her that after two years of close friendship, he could still heat her blood with one little grin. *He* should come with a warning label, which wouldn't make a whole lot of difference. Rory was the lethal kryptonite for which scores of women would gladly trade their lives.

"Good to see you've wrapped your brain around your insanity. You know, Luce, they say the first step is recognizing you have a problem."

Lucy glared at him.

Rory smirked and stood. He walked to where she sat and rested his most excellent derrière on the edge of the desk.

"Okay, now that the lecturing part of our program is over ... and I have to say, *I* feel much better. Let's, for argument's sake, say your computer is ... broken." He glanced up at the ceiling with a shake of his head. "I think it's safe to say there won't be a resurrection."

Lucy took a breath. Not too big, though, because he sat right next to her, much too close for her mental health. The man scrambled her brain just by being in the same room. This close, he was deadly.

She couldn't think. Well about anything PG anyway. In her mind, they were naked and going at it—*Stop it!* Lucy shut down the browser page, stood, and walked to the other side

of the desk. Her control returned once she sat in one of the visitor's chairs, and she released a pent-up breath.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Why wouldn't I be?"

God, she couldn't lie worth a damn.

Still sitting on the desk, he twisted his head to look at her. In the space of two seconds, all the oxygen in the room seemed to have disappeared.

"You seem a little flustered."

"I'm tired," she said, lying. "I, uh, had an asthma attack this morning."

Concern etched his features, and she felt a stab of guilt. "Maybe you should go see the doctor. You haven't had one in a while."

Oh, that would be a terrific way to turn this into a complete and utter mess. "No, I'm pretty sure it's allergies. You know, spring and all."

Rory didn't seem convinced, but she was saved when a woman poked her head into his office.

"Hey, there!" She glanced down at Lucy and immediately dismissed her.

It was hard to not shoot imaginary daggers at the woman, but she managed. Lucy recognized her as the secretary to one of the VPs. She looked like one of Rory's typical women, pretty with large breasts and legs to the moon. Lucy sat in her chair and tried not to throw up.

"I wanted to tell you I had a *great* time," the woman said, her voice smoky.

A-ha. The boobs and sexy voice from last night now had a face. The woman smiled at him in such a way, Lucy knew she wanted a second chance to win the blue ribbon in the mattress dancing contest Lucy had so rudely interrupted. In her mind, she lifted a finger in the air and marked a point for her side.

"Call me, okay?"

"Sure, Grace."

At least he didn't forget her name, she thought. Although, from the look on his face, she knew he wanted to. That was the trouble with Rory. He tended to move on to greener pastures before the afterglow even faded. Who knew? Maybe they'd had dessert *before* dinner.

Ugh. The image of Rory making love to another woman scored her brain, and that jealousy from last night reared its ugly head again. Drawing a deep breath, she pushed the thought away.

After Grace left, he rose from the desk and folded his muscular six-foot-one-inch frame into his chair.

Lucy smirked at him, deciding humor was better than despair. "You are such a man-whore. You know that, don't you?"

A grin split his face, bringing out the dimple in his left cheek. "I can't help it if the ladies find me irresistible. You want me, too, Hollister. You're just too stubborn to give in." He winked at her.

He was teasing, but a blush worked its way up her neck. She took in the square jaw that already showed signs of a heavy beard, the eyes of cobalt that could, at turns, be

charming and brooding. His lips were full and sensual, almost feminine. But no way would anyone ever mistake Rory Carlisle for anything but one-hundred-percent, hot-blooded male. He oozed sex appeal, like a wickedly intoxicating scent, attracting women in droves. Of course, it didn't hurt that he looked like a dark, yummy god.

"Back to your computer."

Lucy ordered herself to stop salivating over the one man she couldn't have. Of course, her conscience didn't listen ... it never did. Last night's debacle was a prime example. "It's toast."

He gave her one of those looks he reserved for the computer illiterate. "Which we've established."

He sat back, steepling his long fingers in front of his lips. "Here's what we can do. First, we'll figure out what you need and how much you want to spend. You can give me the cash and I can build it for you, or we can go to the comp store and do it that way. It's up to you."

"Hmm, let me think," Lucy said, deadpan. "Of course I want you to build it."

Rory smiled. "Smartass. Okay, it's going to take me about a week, two on the outside. In the meantime, I have an extra tower you can use. You free tonight? We can set it up after work."

"Will I be able to run my publishing programs?"

Rory huffed, affronted. "Please. You're talking to the master."

Adam poked his head in. "Boss, they need you up in Admin. Accounting clerk's PC locked up." He rolled his eyes,

as if to say, "Morons." "I'd do it, but I'm still working on that server problem."

"No rest for the wicked, Lucy." He looked at Adam. "Tell them I'll be up in five."

"Will do," Adam said, and left.

"Did you ride with Emily?" Rory asked. Emily was also an administrative assistant at Chase. Because they lived so close, the two often carpooled.

When she nodded, he said, "I'll find you after work."

"Sounds good," she replied when she stood.

He rose, too. "I'll head back with you."

They walked to the bank of elevators in silence. Rory leaned forward and punched the Up button. The simple act made the muscles under his green-checked polo bulge, hinting at the strength beneath. Lucy tried not to gape, but it was difficult when the man's arms were so powerfully built.

When the doors opened, Rory, ever the Southern gentleman, held out an arm and allowed Lucy to precede him, his hand warm on the small of her back. She felt little tingles all the way to her toes.

Lucy wanted to watch his muscles bunch again, so she let him hit the buttons. He leaned against the wall opposite her and pinned her with one of his intense stares. She wondered if he realized she was crazy with lust for him. What would he do if he knew it would take one word—one!—and she would jump all over him like a dog on a bone.

Probably run screaming in the opposite direction.

Admin was on the first floor, one floor below Lucy's. He winked at her when the door slid open and he pushed off the wall.

"Catch you later, kiddo."

She frowned when the doors shut and the elevator rose. Kiddo? Is that how he saw her? As some kid sister?

Lucy blew out a frustrated breath. Rory needed a woman who could hold his attention longer than it required to zip up his fly, because that's precisely how long it took for him to lose interest. He needed a woman with an IQ higher than her shoe size, someone with whom he could hold an intelligent conversation. Naked. Lucy wanted to be that woman, but the problem was trying to convince Rory, especially if he saw her as a buddy.

Then again, who was she kidding? It's not as if she would ever have the guts to approach Rory with all of these carnal thoughts. He would take one look at her and give her the "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I think this would ruin our friendship" speech men held in reserve when they ran out of viable excuses.

Lucy thought about that Web page and all of those beautiful women. But any schmo with a digital camera could paste a picture. Who really knew if any of those women were who they said they were? How many of them just posted a picture of some random underwear model? Or their prettier, bustier friend?

When she stepped off the elevator, it hit her. There *was* a way to get Rory out of her system without *telling* him she wanted to jump his bones.

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

Why didn't I think of this before? Lucy was forever hearing about someone having an online affair. The trick would be getting him to nibble on the bait. She could flirt shamelessly, maybe even have a little cybersex, and Rory would never be the wiser. Just a quick bang, so to speak. That's what he did, right? She could totally do this.

Just a harmless, little Internet fling.

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Chapter Three

"Alice, right?" Rory asked.

The mousy accountant nodded.

"The problem is really simple to fix. You've got five programs all running at the same time." He rolled his chair closer to her computer. "It helps to think of your computer as a brain. Say you're chopping onions. You're doing fine, focused, but then you decide to dance the tango and juggle at the same time. See how it would slow you down?"

"Normally, the PC can handle it if it has enough RAM. Memory," he clarified, seeing Alice's blank stare. "But all of these programs you're using take a considerable amount of memory to operate, so it gets locked up and confused."

She rose to the task and shut down four of the five programs, then clapped her hands when the computer ran smoothly again.

"Thank you, Rory. I don't know a whole lot about computers, and I appreciate you not making me feel like an idiot."

He stood and smiled at the accountant who gazed at him with earnest green eyes. "No problem. That's why the boss has guys like me on the payroll."

As he left the small accounting office and headed back down to what he and his staff jokingly referred to as the Dungeon, Rory wished all the network problems were like Alice's. There were always the standard server and software problems, sure. The thing that irritated him most was every

time a system had *any* kind of failure, it reduced mature, educated adults to sniveling, temper-tantrum-throwing two-year-olds.

As the elevator took him to the basement, he imagined Lucy trying to push a computer tower out her window because it had crashed.

Everyone saw Lucy as a flighty, impulsive woman who needed a keeper, but Rory knew the truth. His best friend *was* impulsive. However, she was also a quirky smartass with a huge heart and an awesome sense of humor. He thought about her computer again. And she might have possible rage issues.

In the Dungeon, Adam Bogel, his assistant and general boy Friday, sat at his desk, focused on his laptop. Rory moved behind him and peeked over his shoulder.

"Is that the new graphics software?" he asked.

Adam nodded. "Just giving her a test drive. They've updated a bunch of stuff." He maneuvered the mouse to show him. "Soon as we install it, we're gonna have a riot on our hands." He scoffed. "Some of those designers have no business around a computer."

Rory ignored Adam's tirade and said, "Hmm. I had a feeling this would be a good one."

Adam twisted his head to smile wryly at Rory. "You oughta get your girlfriend down here to try it out, see what she thinks."

His girlfriend? Rory didn't know what Adam was talking about. He didn't have a girlfriend. He had women, lots of them, in fact ... but no lone girl to whom he'd pledged his

heart. No, he'd been down that road before. And after what he'd gone through with Carrie Ann, well, he had no desire to go there again. Ever.

Adam must have seen the confusion on Rory's face. "The little one. Lucy," he explained and turned back to face his laptop.

"Lucy? She's not my girlfriend. Well," he amended, "she's a girl and she's my friend, but I haven't slept with her, if that's what you mean. Not that it's any of your freakin' business."

"Whatever you say, boss." Adam chuckled.

"What the hell are you laughing about?"

Adam shrugged. "I've seen the way she looks at you."

"Looks at me how?"

"Like she's been on a diet for two years and you're the buffet."

"Charming, Adam," he said. "Keep working on that software."

He shook his head as he walked to his office, but Adam's words dug in like tiny burrs. They stuck to his brain and annoyed the hell out of him until he pulled them out to be analyzed.

Lucy? She didn't see him as anything more than a friend. Did she? Rory had always cherished her friendship because she was the one woman with whom he could be himself. He never had to pretend with her. There was no dance, no dangerous steps to execute, no rules. They were what they were, great friends.

If, on occasion, he had pictured her naked, or the two of them naked and lying horizontal, well, it was only natural. She was an attractive woman, and they spent a fair amount of time in each other's company. And while he may have speculated, Rory had never considered dipping his nib in that particular ink. He didn't want to jeopardize the one decent relationship he had going. No, there were some lines he wasn't willing to cross.

He sat down at his desk and flipped through the various departments' requests, but Adam's offhand remark still tugged at him. Did Lucy look at him in a sexual way? Rory thought about it, and he didn't think so, but they were so close it made him blind in a way. He was a little surprised he felt excited at the prospect. She wasn't his usual type, but she was female, and he liked women in all shapes and sizes.

The phone at his desk beeped twice, indicating an in-house call. "Carlisle."

"Why do they call it a 'funny bone'?" Lucy asked without preamble. "When I smack it on the side of my desk, it's not funny. *I'm not laughing*. Come to think of it, why do you laugh when you're being tickled? It doesn't feel good, nor is it hilarious." She took a breath. "These are the questions that plague me."

Rory laughed. "It's called a funny bone because the nerve rests against it named the humerus." He tossed the stack of requests down. "Is this what you do up there all day?"

"It's called multitasking."

"Well, get back to work."

"Oh, that's right. You're management. The enemy."

"See you at five."

"You're no fun," Lucy said with a laugh and hung up.

With a smile on his face, Rory turned to his computer and noticed he'd left himself logged on to the Internet.

The boss was considering creating a business page on personalspace.com, and had asked Rory to log onto the site to check it out. While a lot of reputable businesses had added their names to the popular Web site, he'd found it was pretty much an online dating service.

Rory had had a personal page for about two weeks, and already he had scores of people—women, mostly—sending him naked pictures or vice versa. A few who sent e-mails sans pictures seemed nice, but the rest of them were on the freaky side, to say the least. The last picture he'd received involved a naked lady, a leather mask, and a bowl of mashed potatoes.

Some people were plain sick.

After shutting down the browser, he pulled up a spreadsheet that needed finishing for his afternoon meeting. As he plugged in information, his thoughts wandered back to Lucy. Rory pictured her in his mind, petite with lush curves; long, dark brown hair; and bouncing curls. She had the cutest little nose, slightly upturned, and a set of full lips that begged a man to take a sample.

A man other than Rory.

He gave himself a mental shake. Lucy deserved better than his lewd fantasies. In fact, if she knew where his mind had gone, she'd slap him. He resolved to put thoughts of her away and focus on what really needed his attention, work.

Yet, he couldn't get her out of his mind. Several hours later, when he returned from his meeting, he still wondered what she looked like naked.

Which was way out of line. Damn Adam and his stupid comments.

At five after five, he left the Dungeon and headed for Lucy's second floor cubicle. If he knew Lucy, and he did, she would be at her desk, so engrossed in her work that time would've slipped by her.

Close to twenty-five graphic designers, ranging from junior to senior associate, occupied the second floor. The boss, Wyatt Chase, kept his office right there in the melee, albeit several shouts away from the fray.

The company clock read ten after quitting time, but few heeded the notice. A group of designers stood around someone's computer, all four sets of eyes staring intently at a monitor Rory couldn't see. A few others walked around the office while the rest sat in their cubicles working. Lucy's cube was at the back of the office, toward the windows.

Rory zigzagged through the cube farm with the sound of ringing telephones, the humming of computers, and chattering voices as the soundtrack to his journey. He found Lucy at her desk, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses perched atop her nose and a scowl on her face.

He leaned against the cubicle wall and smiled. It never ceased to amaze him that someone with such an inherent dislike for computers had chosen a career in graphic design. He thought of what she'd done to her computer and

shuddered. When it came to woman versus machine, she was a force to be reckoned with.

She muttered under her breath, navigating the mouse around the screen. A pair of ear buds trailed down the front of her neck, attached to a purple iPod lying on her desk.

As he stood there, her scent wafted up, swirling around and tantalizing him. She always smelled so mysterious, so exotic. He had a pretty good nose, but he never could quite pin down what she had on. Until now, other than peripherally, he'd never noticed she was one of the best smelling women around.

She had all of those curls twisted into an intricate knot at the top of her head, secured with two pencils. Eyeing the graceful curve of her neck, he wondered what she would do if he leaned down and took a bite.

Some of the blood left his head and rushed to his groin. He straightened. Any minute, she'd turn around and lock eyes with his sudden and baffling hard on, something that would be mighty difficult to miss. The thought of her eye level with his crotch brought on another wave of unwelcome lust, and he rolled his eyes.

Jesus. He tried to think of something neutral, like his grandmother. Running naked in a field with his granddaddy. Okay, definitely disturbing, but as effective as a cold shower. The pressure eased just as Lucy stood and walked straight into his chest.

She made a strangled sound in her throat and her chocolate-colored gaze rose. He grabbed her shoulders. Even in her boots, the top of her head only cleared the middle of

his chest. She seemed so small and fragile that he wanted to scoop her up into the protectiveness of his arms and keep the world away.

Stunned by the intensity of these new thoughts, he removed his hands from her soft body and tried for a nonchalance he didn't feel.

"Whoa, Luce. Where's the fire?"

She poked him in the gut, and then fairly shouted, "Damn it, Rory! You scared the crap out of me!"

He looked around in time to see several heads turn their way. With a chuckle, he reached down and pulled the earphones from her ears. "Might want to lower your voice a few thousand decibels."

Lucy peered around him and blushed scarlet. "Brilliant, Hollister," she muttered.

She switched off the iPod and laid it on her desk, and then looked back at him, her eyes big and guileless. "What are you doing here?"

Rory shook his head. "And you say IT guys are bad." He brought up his wrist and tapped on his watch. "We had a date, remember? You need a computer, I happen to have a spare one. Any of this registering?"

"Funny, Carlisle. Yes, I know we have plans. I didn't realize it was so late already." She checked her own watch and blew out a breath, disrupting a few inky curls that had escaped the knot.

"Let me wrap this up. Ten minutes. Tops," she added at his quirked brow.

Rory moved aside to let Lucy through. His gaze traveled down her back, enjoying the twitch of her hips, the fullness of her ass, and he found himself wondering. *What the hell am I going to do about this?*

* * * *

Lucy returned to her cubicle and found Rory with his butt perched atop her workstation, his big hands clasped in front of him. Her heart fluttered like a nervous bird in her chest.

God, he's gorgeous.

She pulled her chair out and sat down. Rory sat on her left and made no attempt to shove over. Instead, he invaded her personal space. The air promptly left her lungs. *Mayday! Mayday!*

Lucy smelled his soap and the faint scent of his aftershave, a heady mix that made her dizzy. She stared blankly at her screen, her brain mushy as oatmeal, as she tried to remember what she'd been doing before lust and nerves had taken over her motor skills.

Rory seemed content to sit there, self-assured as always. Lucy's cheeks heated again, and another flush worked its way up from her breasts. Her whole body went on alert. Her nipples, lax before, became painfully erect and pushed against the soft cotton of her bra.

"You warm?" he asked, his voice a low rumble.

"What?" she asked breathlessly.

Lucy looked up at him and saw his eyes glued on the open V of her shirt. *Hello.* She swore the temperature rose ten degrees, if only in her cubicle. For a few tense, scorching

moments, Lucy watched Rory watch her breasts, and his eyes were like a thousand hot caresses.

"Hot flash," she answered finally. It seemed she'd been having a lot of those today. But she wasn't going through menopause. She had the Rory Carlisle Infection.

His cobalt eyes moved up to her face, his expression blank.

With the object of every hot, late-night fantasy for the last two years sitting so close, Lucy could hardly remember her name let alone finish her work. She closed down her computer and then swiveled around in her chair. "Ready?"

He stood. "Let's go."

They chatted about the inconsequential and mundane when they rode the elevator down to the ground level. Did she want to see that new Denzel Washington movie? How was *The Beast*? Although she couldn't say why, Lucy had the feeling Rory used their mindless chitchat as a way to move things back to safer territory after that hot moment back in her cubicle.

I really need to get some action. For a minute, she'd honestly thought Rory's face had darkened with ... lust. Not a total impossibility, she conceded when they made their way into the overcast evening. Just ... doubtful. In the two years they'd been friends, she'd never gotten any inkling he might be interested in taking their friendship further, which confirmed her theory that he didn't find her attractive and made her longing for him all the more frustrating.

Why couldn't I have fallen for a nice, mild accountant?

Because a nice, mild accountant didn't fire her cylinders the way Rory did. Arg. All of this stupid contemplation was pointless.

"What did you bring today?" Lucy asked, and forced her brooding thoughts to the back of her mind.

"The pickup."

"The Penis Truck, you mean?"

"Don't knock it, shorty. At least mine goes over twenty miles per hour."

"Hey, my Beetle goes at least forty. And I'm not knocking it. It's the only penis I get to ride." She grinned and Rory shook his head.

He fished his keys out of the pocket of his slacks and pressed the button on his key fob. A few feet away, an alarm chirped. His black Ford F-150 crew cab sat in a parking space ahead, the front faced out, like usual.

"Do you really think it's necessary to have *three* cars?"

"The Ducati isn't a car."

"Semantics."

"I like to have a broad selection."

"No, what you like is a selection of broads."

"Funny."

Lucy might poke fun, but the F-150 was a beauty in its own right, though it did look like a Tonka truck on steroids. Even with the chrome steps Rory had installed under all of the doors, Lucy needed a rope and grappling hook to hoist herself into the cab.

Because she was fresh out of rock climbing tools, Lucy gripped the windshield frame for leverage and boosted herself

into the truck, no easy task at five-two. Huffing with exertion—*Gotta get back to the gym!*—she sank back into the leather seat and narrowed her eyes at Rory, who hopped in without effort. He stole a glance at her and chuckled.

"Laugh it up, pal," she grumbled.

He was still laughing as he turned the key and the engine roared to life. Aerosmith blasted through the stereo speakers, and Rory reached over and turned down the volume. He shifted into gear and pulled the big truck out of the space.

"Emily seems to like her new job," he said.

"Yeah, she does. I think she did secretarial work down in California before she moved north."

"Is there anything she *hasn't* done?"

Lucy laughed. "She's what you call a 'Renaissance woman.' I think she may have even been a rodeo queen."

"Never a dull moment, I suppose." He glanced at her.

"What about you, Lucy? Did you always want to be a graphic designer?"

"Oh, sure. It's what every small girl aspires to be." She shook her head with a laugh. "I think I wanted to be a princess."

Rory looked at her and snorted. "You? A princess?"

What was that supposed to mean? "Hey! I could be one if I wanted to."

"Simmer down there, Cinderella. All I meant was princess and your personality don't mesh."

"Yeah, yeah." She thought about his question. "Art was always in my life. First love and all that."

"I always took stuff apart. Used to drive my mama nuts."

"Makes sense," Lucy said as she stared ahead at the traffic. "Computers are like big puzzles."

A charged silence descended upon the cab, and Lucy didn't know if it was because of that moment back in her cubicle, or maybe she'd lost her mind and everything she felt was completely one-sided. She suspected the latter.

To give herself something to do, she fiddled with the radio and thought about her plan to seduce Rory via cyberspace. Would it work? Did she even have the gall to carry it through? Or would she waffle when it came time to do it? Under the cloak of anonymity, she would be free of the shackles that tied her to the fears and insecurities that kept her from pursuing Rory in reality. She could be bold, torrid, and brazen—a *different* Lucy, an alter ego waiting for the right moment to make her presence known. The only foreseeable obstacle was *timid* Lucy, who controlled most of her daily thoughts and motor functions.

Quick! Call Planters. I am a complete nut job.

Crazy or no, Lucy's heart pounded at the mere thought of setting free her inner siren. A bubble of near-hysterical laughter threatened to erupt, so she cleared her throat in an attempt to choke it back down. She glanced over at Rory and took in his striking profile.

His eyes were focused on the road with the single-minded intensity he bestowed upon everything. Long fingers wrapped around the steering wheel, displaying strong bones and a light dusting of hair along the knuckles. She couldn't help imagine those hands traveling over her body, and she closed her eyes to savor the vision. In her mind, they lay on a wide

bed dressed in satin. She wore nothing but her curves, and he ran a reverent hand over her flesh. His body was physical perfection, lean muscle, broad shoulders, a defined chest with soft dark hair covering it. In a corner of her consciousness, she realized she'd sighed. Perhaps she might never know the physical sensation, but Lucy had a vivid imagination.

Lost in her fantasy, she didn't realize the truck had come to a stop until Rory cleared his throat. She opened her eyes, surprised to see they were parked in the muted darkness of his garage.

Rory watched her with an expression that bordered somewhere between amusement and unease. He opened his mouth to speak, cleared his throat, and then said, "We're here."

She nodded and opened the passenger door. *He must think I'm whacked.*

At least she had artistic temperament to fall back on.

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Chapter Four

Rory owned a three-bedroom ranch about ten minutes from Lucy's townhouse in a Westside suburb of Portland. It was an older home, built back when craftsmanship still meant something and people treated their neighbors like family. Originally painted off-white, Rory had changed the color to a soft blue last year. With white trim and matching shutters, it boasted a modest front lawn, which he kept ruthlessly neat.

Although he argued that the home's most enticing feature was the large, manicured backyard, Lucy thought the newly remodeled arts-and-crafts-style kitchen made the house. In fact, when he had taken her to see the house before he made an offer, she'd jumped up and down in the kitchen, demanding he throw every last penny at the realtor to secure the deal.

Of course, this was why she still rented.

Rory pushed open the inner garage door and allowed Lucy to walk across the threshold. For as long as she'd known him, he had always displayed perfect manners. Well, except for the cursing. And making fun of her. She liked to think he was the only woman he'd let his guard down around, but she had never gone with him on one of his dates.

And had no desire to.

The beautiful kitchen lay before her in all its magnificent splendor. Marble countertops in shades of cream and muted sage, a side-by-side refrigerator with a stainless steel finish; ceramic, cook-top stove; and a double-convection oven

preened at her when she stepped inside. *I want this house. And its owner, too.*

Rory tossed his keys on the counter and walked to the fridge. He looked at Lucy. "Want something?"

She shook her head. "I'm good."

He perused the contents of the fridge and decided on a bottle of water. He twisted off the cap and brought the water to his lips, his strong throat working as he swallowed half the bottle.

All of the moisture left Lucy's mouth.

He pulled the drink away, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and let the bottle dangle from his fingertips. He opened another door and began the same lazy inspection inside the freezer. With a pensive sigh, he tapped his mouth with one of his long fingers.

"Hmm. We could grab a couple of steaks and throw them on the barbeque at your place." He paused and glanced at her. "That is, if you haven't maimed it, too."

Lucy shook herself from her ogling and dredged up a wry smile. "You're a barrel of laughs today, Carlisle."

He grinned. "It's a gift."

Rory pulled out a small brick wrapped in white butcher paper and placed it on the counter. "I'll go get that tower and we can head out."

He moved around Lucy, his musky aftershave trailing in his tantalizing wake, and headed toward the bedrooms. The telephone rang. He doubled back and picked up a cordless unit sitting on an end table in the living room.

He scanned the display and swore. For about two seconds, he looked like a trapped animal, but he depressed the handset. "Hi, Mama." He paused. "I'm fine. How are you?"

Rory looked at Lucy briefly, his expression drawn tight. "Mmm. Wow, an eight-footer, huh? Sounds like he's still the king of exaggeration. No, I'm not being ugly. Dad knows I'm kidding."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't know when I'll be able to make it down, Mama." His voice softened. "I know. I miss you, too."

Lucy wondered if Rory realized his accent deepened when he talked to his mother. She leaned against the counter and watched, interested in this rare exchange. He seldom spoke of his family. In fact, she knew little about his personal life ... well the life he'd had before he moved to Portland, anyway. Oh, sure, she was privy to everything in the "favorites" category, favorite ice cream—Moose Tracks, favorite movie—*Casino*, and favorite band—Aerosmith.

Lucy knew his family came from Houston, where he'd lived until twenty months ago. When she'd first asked him about the sudden cross-country move, he replied with a rather cardboard excuse, "I needed a change of scenery," leaving no room for further questions. She'd broached the subject a few more times, but Rory seemed resolute in keeping that part of his history to himself.

It stung a little ... okay, a lot ... because they were otherwise so close. But it was if he'd closed an integral part of himself from her, and she'd never figured out why. Sure, Rory was the consummate womanizer, the man who had invented

the term "love 'em and leave 'em," but he wasn't that way with her. Then again, she thought darkly, she wasn't one of his women. She was his pal, his buddy, his kid sister. She thought about how he'd looked at her in her cubicle. Then again...

He straightened suddenly, drawing Lucy's gaze to his tense posture. His eyes flashed a moment before they shuttered. The change was there and gone so fast, she wondered if it had happened at all.

"I have to go, Mama. I'll talk to you later."

He disconnected and then stared down at the handset he still held in his palm. He looked up at her, and Lucy swore she glimpsed pain in those fathomless blue eyes for the briefest second.

"Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," he replied in a clipped tone.

"That your mom?"

"Yep."

"Want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about." He glanced at her briefly. "I'll get that tower."

At a loss, Lucy stood there. She knew she had just witnessed something important, but she couldn't say *exactly* what, only that Rory obviously didn't want to discuss it with his mother. Or her.

What could have happened that might have hurt Rory? Did it have anything to do with his move out west? Lucy didn't have the answers.

She wondered if Rory even did.

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

* * * *

Ever since they'd left his place, Lucy had been eyeing him strangely when she thought he wasn't looking, as if searching for some kind of clue.

His mood had plummeted in the span of a five-minute phone call. The sun rose and set by his mama, but talking to her brought up memories he wanted left buried. That never stopped her though. Jasmine "Jazz" DeWitt-Carlisle had the dogged determination of a pit bull terrier disguised under the veneer of Southern charm.

"It's been two years, Rory," she'd said.

It didn't matter if it had been twenty. He would never forgive what had been done. He had washed his hands and moved to Portland. End of story.

Rory pushed his sordid past from his mind. He wouldn't go down that bumpy road again. He focused on Lucy instead. She sat in the passenger seat and tugged on her unpainted lip, her brown eyes focused on the landscape beyond her window.

Struck by the image of her in his truck earlier, Rory thought about the vision she'd made, her eyes closed, cheeks flushed, a look of complete rapture on her face. When he had turned off the ignition and faced her, he'd been speechless. Whatever she'd been thinking, he had instinctively known it had to do with sex. He wondered if she'd been fantasizing about him. Of course, that sent his body into a frenzy, which he instantly quashed.

He couldn't get involved with Lucy. Her friendship mattered too much to him. Too bad the rest of him wouldn't listen to reason. Besides, Adam could be way off base. For all he knew, she could have been daydreaming about some idiot in accounting. Or Adam. The idea made him clench his fists around the steering wheel.

They approached her neighborhood. He turned the big truck down her street and pulled into the driveway.

Lucy hopped out of his cab and headed up the front walk. She waved at Mr. Waverly, who sat in a chair on his front lawn watching them with open suspicion. Rory opened the back door of the crew cab and retrieved the computer tower.

He nodded to the older man. "Good evening, sir."

Mr. Waverly grunted, and tapped his cane on the arm of his chair with a look of warning.

Is he threatening me?

Rory found the idea that the meddlesome old man might be protecting Lucy both touching and amusing. However, he didn't think Lucy would see the humor in it.

Lucy was unlocking her front door when he approached. She pushed it open and the Beast's furious barking echoed throughout the house. Rory smiled. That dog had the worst Napoleon complex he had ever seen.

"You can go ahead and put it in the office," she said, nodding up the stairs. She closed the door with one curvy hip, drawing Rory's attention to her rounded behind.

Nice, he thought.

He looked back up to find Lucy watching him.

"I'll, uh, put this away," he mumbled.

When he trudged up the stairs, he wished like hell Adam had kept his damn mouth shut.

* * * *

Rory checked out my ass!

Lucy stood next to the open door and gazed at the man of her fantasies walk up the stairs with her temporary computer. She tried to make sense of what just happened. Her rational mind wanted to play it off ... he was really looking at the floor, or something else. But she knew what she had seen. And she had seen Rory Carlisle ogling her butt, the same way she had ogled his this morning.

What in the world is going on?

Today, she'd caught him staring at her not once, but twice. And Lucy didn't think it was harmless, either. Both times, he had a look in his eyes that revealed, if not lust, then at the very least, frank male interest.

Lucy snapped her mouth shut, realizing she still stood there looking like a moron. She closed the door and walked into the kitchen, where the Beast barked his fool head off.

"Just a minute, Beast," she told him.

More barking. How strange.

She lobbed her purse on the kitchen table and the wrapped steaks into the empty sink. She pulled out a couple of beers from the refrigerator and popped the tops.

The Beast, bless his impatient heart, was still barking.

"Okay, okay, you little monster."

She bent down and clicked open the latch on his house. He tore out of the carrier, immediately dashing for the stairs.

"Nice to see you, too," she muttered.

Rory and the Beast had some strange bond that only seemed to exist between males. He hadn't even seen Rory and her traitorous little dog knew instinctively where to find him.

It irritated her to no end that any attempts to train the Beast were instantly forgotten once Rory was within ten feet of sniffing distance. Rory only had to *look* at him, and the little turd would heed every command. It was ridiculous. Lucy suspected it had more to do with Rory having testicles than any special connection between man and dog. At least that's what she kept telling herself.

She poured kibble and water into the little ceramic dishes painted with tiny black paw prints and set them on the floor. After placing the steaks in the microwave to defrost, she grabbed her beer and walked out onto the back patio to start the grill.

Lucy still used the old-fashioned charcoal briquettes for her grill. She had considered upgrading to gas, but given her "affinity" for machines, she could easily envision creating a freak explosion just by turning the damn thing on. The idea of a gas charge and pilot light scared her, and she was skittish enough that it would take her a thousand fearful attempts just to light it. So wary was she of gas that she refused three great apartments merely because they had gas stoves. Lucy was a great believer in renewable energy. She recycled like nobody's business, but she couldn't sleep easy knowing an ignitable fuel source coursed through her house while she slept.

She grabbed the lighter fluid and doused the charcoal bricks. Striking a match, she tossed it in and watched the flames catch. The scent of lighter fluid and burning charcoal assaulted her nostrils, reminding her of summer barbeques as a child.

Of course, that always included her mother harping on her father at the grill, insisting he cook the steaks to *at least* one-hundred-sixty degrees. At the table, she would cut open each and every steak and peer at it under the light, ensuring the meat was cooked.

"Ed, does this look cooked to you?" her mother would ask her father. "Girls, it looks cooked, right?"

Her mother was a germ-phobe who carried out her mildly psychotic cleaning rituals with military precision. One of Lucy's most prominent memories was of her mother following her around with a bottle of 409 and a washrag. She was amazed the woman had made it to the age of fifty-two without psychiatric intervention.

The fence that enclosed her tiny backyard rattled. "Hey!" Emily said. "I smell barbeque."

A slender arm reached over the gate and unhooked the latch. Emily, dressed in the same sweater and formfitting skirt she'd worn to the office, waltzed through. Her friend walked over to the round grill and peered down at the briquettes that burned. "What's for dinner?"

"Steak."

"Mmm. And you didn't invite me? I'm hurt, Lucy."

Lucy shot her friend a wry glance. "You must be crying on the inside."

"Where's Rory? I saw his truck parked out front."

"He's upstairs."

Emily's brows shot up. "Really. This is getting interesting."

"Not in the way you're thinking, gutter brain. He's installing a computer."

"Oh, right. When's the funeral?"

"That computer doesn't even deserve an honorable mention." Lucy took a pull on her beer. "Are you staying for dinner?"

Emily sighed and rocked backward. No small feat in four-inch heels. "As much as I'd like to..."

"Lucy! Where the hell is your keyboard? Or do I even want to know?"

Rory stepped out onto the patio with The Beast following loyally behind. "Oh, hey, Emily. You staying for dinner?"

"I was just about to tell Lucy I have a hot date tonight. So, no, I won't be joining you."

He took a peek at the briquettes. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"His name is Chris. I met him at Starbucks last week when I was getting coffee for the VPs."

"What does he do?" Lucy asked.

"Hell if I know. He's hot, drives a Lexus, and likes his latte with an extra shot of espresso."

Lucy chuckled. Emily approached dating as if it were a competitive sport. The world was her playing field, the entire male population her goal.

"Did you defrost the steaks?" Rory asked.

"Defrosting as we speak," she replied.

Inside, the microwave beeped, and Lucy tipped her beer toward the door. "Like magic."

He went to prepare the steaks for the grill, while Emily decided to stay for a beer. When Rory was around, Lucy wasn't allowed near the meat. He had a "system" when it came to grilling. She figured it made him feel more like a man. One more theory she kept to herself.

"Lucy," Rory began when he stepped outside, a plate of steaks in hand, "where is your keyboard?"

"You know, I have absolutely no idea." She tapped the neck of the bottle against her head while she wracked her brain. "I bet it's behind the toilet."

Both Rory and Emily stared at her.

"When I dragged it to the window yesterday, I was in such a frenzy, I forgot to remove the keyboard, mouse, and speakers," she explained.

"That doesn't tell me how it ended up behind the toilet, of all places." He rolled his eyes.

"Well, before I dropped it, I tried to unplug everything, which is how it ended up falling on the floor and not out the fricking window where it belonged."

"Just so you know," Rory said, "my earlier evaluation still stands."

Lucy lifted her beer to her lips. "Oh, you mean about the warning label?"

His eyes raked over her and she felt a small thrill. "Yeah."

"Can't say as I blame you there."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I second the notion," Emily quipped.

Lucy grinned.

Rory shook his head and flipped the steaks. "Y'all are both nuts."

Emily downed the last of her beer and checked her watch.

"Well, I better go. Gotta get my face on."

"Have fun," Rory said.

Emily shot them a devilish look as she unlatched the gate.

"Oh, I plan to," she replied with a laugh.

They stood in the silence of Emily's departure. Rory poked absently at the grill while Lucy took another sip of her beer and stared at the dark clouds that loomed on the horizon.

Because they spent a fair amount of time in each other's company, Lucy and Rory had experienced several lapses in conversation such as this. They were almost always companionable. She didn't know why *this* silence made her uncomfortable. Perhaps in the past, she hadn't been so hyperaware of him as she was now. Her conscience called bullshit, but she ignored it.

This had turned into a strange day.

"I'm going to go in and finish dinner," Lucy said, placing a hand on Rory's arm. His powerful muscles tensed under her fingers.

He slanted a look at her beneath his lashes. "What else are we having?"

You, naked, on my kitchen table. She wondered if he could read minds. He looked at her, then down at the hand that still rested on his arm. She dropped it to her side.

"A salad or something," she managed.

He was quiet a moment. "Okay. Sounds good."

Lucy hotfooted it into the kitchen, her skin oversensitive and heated.

God! What is wrong with me?

She set her beer on the counter and opened the refrigerator door, reveling in the rush of cold air that blew across to tickle and cool her burning skin. She needed to get herself under control. Had she imagined the fire she'd seen in Rory's eyes? Why today, of all days, was she seeing signs of Rory's interest?

Because today you decided to do something about it.

She would have kicked her own ass if she could reach it. Now that the realization dawned on her, she could easily see Rory had just been being himself. Charming to a fault, and flirtatious regardless of his lack of pursuit.

How many times had he flirted with her? And how many times had she told herself the same thing? Because she had a game plan in the works, of course she saw his charm as attraction. Chances were the man had no idea of his effect on her. She felt like an idiot. She felt like crying. *Why do I keep doing this to myself?*

Strengthening her resolve, she vowed to keep her overactive imagination on a tighter leash.

At least until she had him where she wanted him.

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Chapter Five

"I can have the new one ready by Sunday," Rory told her, standing on the front porch.

Lucy shook her head. The Beast whined pitifully in her arms. "Take your time. Now that I have a working computer, I'm golden."

"Sunday," he repeated. "I'll see you tomorrow." He turned and walked down the sidewalk. He stopped and looked back at her. "And Luce? I've got that one promised to a customer, so don't do anything stupid, okay? Remember, violence is not the answer." He smirked.

"I'll keep that in mind," she replied drolly.

"Later."

Lucy eyed his impressive form as he disappeared. A few seconds later, the pickup's engine came alive with a roar. Men and their toys, she thought, shaking her head as she shut and locked the front door. She put the Beast down, where he planted his little butt on the tile and continued to whine at the door.

"He's not coming back," Lucy said.

The Beast let out a low keening sound.

"Where's your pride?"

She left her dog pining away in foyer and walked through the kitchen and living room, switching off lights and locking doors.

Trudging up the stairs where a hot shower beckoned, she called her dog, who finally left his sentry at the door. He bolted up the stairs, barking at her on his way.

Weirdo. Of course, his personality matched her own. She supposed that's why she'd fallen in love with him at first sight. Maybe she was destined to a single life with only her dog. *God, that's a depressing thought.* The Beast made a nice companion, but he was no Rory Carlisle.

While the shower water warmed, she undressed. The Beast hopped up onto the bed and walked in circles before he plopped down on the comforter. His little black head lay atop his tiny paws, jowls pushing up. He blinked at her.

"Mama's going to take a shower, Beast," she told him.

Her friends and family found it strange how much she spoke to her dog. They were all non-animal lovers, of course. As irritating as The Beast could often be, he was her buddy. Now, she wasn't one of those types who carried him around in her purse—those people needed serious help—but she did have an entire portion of her closet dedicated to tiny, custom-made "Beast-Ware"—black, fuzzy sweaters, which he hated, but she was bigger, so she got the deciding vote; rhinestone studded collars of every color and matching leads; and itty-bitty doggie T-shirts with fun sayings like "Spoiled," "Player," and "Rock Star" embroidered across the back. Rory constantly chastised her for humiliating the Beast, but last month on the terrier's second birthday, he'd given him a shirt that read "Gangster."

The water scalded her skin, but she reveled in the feel of it. The pulsating jets rained down on her tense shoulders and

melted away the stress of the day like butter on a hot plate. When she rubbed her arms and legs with the Origins body scrub she'd indulged in, the scent of lavender and vanilla essential oils filled her senses and calmed her wired body and frayed nerves.

After her shower, she lathered on some of the coconut lotion her mother had bought her from Nordstrom. She pulled on a pair of cotton pajama bottoms and a T-shirt with "Graphic Artists Do It On Computers" emblazoned across the front. She slipped on a pair of thick wool socks and made her way to her office to check out her interim computer.

After they had finished dinner, Rory helped her load her design software. And, bless his hide, he had also reinitiated her DSL connection, so all she had to do was open her Internet browser. She logged on to her e-mail account and downloaded her messages.

There were three messages in her mailbox, one each from her two older sisters, Frankie and Mary Alice, respectively, and the last from her mother. They all conveyed the same announcement. Frankie's husband Alan had a friend the three Hollister women believed would be *perfect* for Lucy. She rolled her eyes.

Part of the problem with being the lone single person in a family of happily married women was that they assumed something was wrong with her because she hadn't settled down. Never mind she'd just turned thirty six months ago. She still had a good fifteen years before her eggs dried up. Lucy pushed that depressing thought from her brain.

In her mother and sisters' minds, a warp in the time-space continuum prevented Lucy from finding a man, and the world would be off-kilter until she did. Perhaps that was a tad melodramatic, but those women and their sadistic matchmaking enterprise were enough to drive anyone to start quoting Shakespeare. In tongues.

At least they were attacking via cyberspace instead of by phone. She stood a chance when she didn't have to talk to any of them in person. Of course, her mother would call her if she didn't respond to her message. She sent off a reply peppered with mindless chitchat and left out any mention of the blind date. Another message popped up into her inbox.

It was from TrueLove.com.

"What the hell?" she muttered. "How did you people get my information?"

To her absolute horror, she realized her second-oldest sister, Julia, had signed her up for a free month of the online dating service. She almost picked up the phone to tell Julia where she could shove the site. She wouldn't, of course. Timid Lucy never did anything to upset the apple cart.

She deleted the message and added the domain to her list of blocked senders. As she stewed, she thought of her earlier pledge to initiate an online fling with Rory.

Timid Lucy wondered, *What in the world was I thinking?*

Bold and brazen Lucy replied, *S-E-X.*

Great sex. Phenomenal sex. Out of this world sex. Well, cybersex, but, still...

The question that loomed in the recesses of her mind now glared, begging to be answered. Could she really do it? Lucy

thought about it. If she went into it knowing her identity was protected, she had little doubt she could unleash her "inner hottie."

There were no guarantees, but as long as she didn't blow it and make a slip, Rory would never know. She was holding the reins, so to speak.

Her heart pounded. She *could* do this. Suppressing a hysterical giggle, she wiggled her fingers like a pianist and poised them above the keyboard.

And drew a complete blank.

What was the name of that Web site? Personalplace.com? She typed that in but it turned out to be another online dating service, which she definitely did not want. She tried personalweb.com and ended up with a picture of a man with a large penis trying to do the anatomically impossible.

"Oh, my," she breathed, and closed the page. "Google, take me away."

Lucy typed "personal Web pages" into the search engine and was rewarded with over a thousand hits. *A-ha*. Now she remembered. She clicked on the link for www.personalspace.com. The home page was bright and meant to attract, but she thought they could have used a decent Web designer. She might have been biased, though.

There were several tabs with labels like "Music," "Movies," and "Horoscopes." She clicked on "Friends," and typed in Rory's name when prompted. An error message flashed at her, fairly shouting, *You have to be logged on to do that! Log on! It's free.*

Argh.

Off she went, creating her fictional online persona. They wanted her name first. Naturally, she lied, but marked it confidential, just in case. Then came time for a screen name. She searched her brain for something un-Lucy-like and a touch obscure. She scanned the office, glancing at the framed artwork on the walls, and then her eyes landed on the brass scorpion Emily had picked up for her for Christmas. And finally, the requisite physical information, which she fudged a little.

Okay, a lot.

Satisfied, she sat back and examined her work.

Lucy was now ScorpioCutie, a twenty-nine-year-old woman from Portland with blonde hair and blue eyes. For the standard bio pic, she used a colorful graphic of the astrological sign of Scorpio, the only thing bearing resemblance to the *real* Lucy. Well, that and her screen name. Maybe excepting the "cutie" part.

She scrutinized her "personal space." The page was everything Lucy was not. Cute, bubbly, flirtatious, and fun. It screamed, "I am a party girl looking for a good time!"

Perfect.

She retyped Rory's name and went straight to his page. To her surprise, under his handsome bio picture, a blinking graphic informed her he was online. And her heart dropped to her feet.

This is it, Hollister. Do-or-die time.

She hesitated a moment before she clicked the icon that would connect them via instant message.

Here we go.

A new screen popped up. Her mind went blank. *What do I say?*

She panicked for a few seconds, her heart thundering in her chest, but surprise hit her when ScorpioCutie took over.

"Hey, there, sexy," she typed.

And waited.

* * * *

Rory stared at the instant messenger box that popped up on his screen.

No bio picture from the sender, just a graphic of some kind of spider or bug. Her screen name said ScorpioCutie. Well, assuming ScorpioCutie was female.

Cocking a brow, he considered. Erotic images of Lucy had filled his brain since he'd left house a few hours ago. He couldn't get his sassy best friend out of his mind. And worse, he kept picturing them naked, their bodies stretched out on soft, velvety sheets while he ran his hands along her lush curves...

Rory stared at the messenger box. Maybe there was a way to get Lucy out of his mind. With his fingers positioned above the keyboard, he hesitated.

What am I doing?

Fuck it, he thought. He had no plans of acting on his sudden feelings for Lucy, so he might as well see where ScorpioCutie took him. Rory lifted his beer and took a long swallow.

"Hey, yourself," he typed.

He waited a few moments before she responded.

"I like your pictures," ScorpioCutie wrote.

He maneuvered the mouse to her page. She had no pictures, other than what he now recognized as the astrological sign for Scorpio.

Duh, he thought, relieved to find she was, in fact, a woman.

He typed, "Where are yours?"

"I don't have any."

One side of his mouth kicked up. "Aww. Come on," he wrote. "That's not fair. You've seen me."

After a minute, she typed, "Use your imagination."

"I've got a great imagination," he wrote.

"Really?" she replied. "How great?"

Rory glanced at her bio info and typed, "I'm betting you're 5'8" with blonde hair and blue eyes. Am I right?"

He stared at his words for several moments, and then she replied, "And I'm betting you're 6'1 with black hair and blue eyes. Am *I* right?"

He laughed. "Touché. I saw on your page you're from Portland. Where in Portland do you live?"

"I don't know if I should tell you," she typed. "We've just met, after all."

Smart woman, Rory thought. "You're right. For all you know, I could be crazy."

"I don't know," she wrote. "You seem pretty sane to me. And cute. Definitely cute."

"Why, thank you," he said with a smile.

"I am definitely cute." He added a winking smiley.

"What do you do?" she asked.

"I work with computers," he responded.

"Sounds interesting," she replied. "Like a giant puzzle."

Something about her response struck him, but the sense of déjà vu left before Rory could grasp it.

"Exactly," he typed. "What about you?"

"Artist," she wrote.

Interesting, he thought. For a moment, he pondered the possibility of Lucy out there in cyberspace. He shook it off. The odds ... no, there were plenty of artists, especially in a city like Portland.

"I have a friend who's an artist," he typed.

"Oh, yeah?" she replied. "What's her name? Maybe I know her."

So not happening. No way would he give out Lucy's name to some random woman he met online.

"I don't think so," he wrote. "She works with computers, too. She's a graphic artist."

"You're right," she typed after a moment, "I probably don't know her. Is she your girlfriend?"

And wasn't that the question of the day? Yesterday, he would've said no. Today, he couldn't stop thinking about her. And damned if he didn't know *what* the hell to do about his sudden infatuation with Lucy Hollister.

"No," he typed.

One minute stretched into two, and Rory wondered if ScorpioCutie had logged off.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked finally.

No, he thought. He didn't have girlfriends. Girlfriends implied relationships, which led to messy emotions and things

better left alone. For Rory, anyway. He liked it that way. No strings. No hassles. The easy life.

"Why?" he asked. He added another winking smiley to soften the question.

"Just checking," ScorpioCutie wrote.

"No," he replied. "No girlfriend." Just the one woman he'd held at arm's length for the last two years. *And why is that?* a voice whispered in his head, a voice he ignored.

"That's good. Really good."

For some reason, he felt like he was betraying Lucy, which was ludicrous. He had no romantic plans for his best friend, he reminded himself. Just because he'd been thinking about screwing her blind all day didn't mean he intended to carry through with it. But still, it unsettled him, and he didn't like the feeling at all.

He forced himself to write, "I'm glad you think so. What about you?"

"What about me?" she typed.

"Any boyfriend?"

"Not at the moment," she replied, "no."

"That's good," he wrote, repeating her earlier sentiment. "Really good."

"I have to go now," she typed.

Foolishly wishing it was Lucy, he replied, "IM me when you're online. I've enjoyed talking to you. I'd like to do it again."

"Maybe," she answered, and the connection was lost.

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

Rory sat back and took another swig of his beer. Maybe if he focused on another woman, he could get Lucy out of his brain and back where she belonged.

Something in him doubted it, though.

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Chapter Six

By the next morning, Rory had his libido back in check, at least concerning Lucy. He'd chastised himself while he drifted to sleep last night *and* continued the same terse pep talk when he drove to work.

This sudden change in how he saw Lucy was based solely on the unsubstantiated opinion of one person. It was irrelevant in Rory's mind that Adam saw the situation with a detached eye.

He needed to put aside these strange thoughts and feelings, if not for his own sanity, then for the sake of his friendship with Lucy. Besides, Adam might be wrong. What he interpreted as a lusty look from Lucy may have just as easily been confusion. Or indigestion.

He frowned.

It didn't matter. Even if Lucy harbored feelings beyond friendship, he knew his best friend wouldn't act on them. She was too reserved, too inhibited to come on to him. Not a fault necessarily, but Lucy tended to air on the side of caution. All the time.

So, if anything came of this ... thing, it would be because *he* initiated it. And Rory intended to keep their relationship right where it was. He frowned, because a stab of remorse sliced through him at his declaration. He pushed all thoughts of her and *them* away and tried to focus.

Rory swung the 'Vette into the employee parking lot, enjoying the raw power under the hood. When he'd bought

the vintage car, it had been little more than a rusted out shell. But with a lot of love and meticulous care, it was now fully restored.

It was only one of the few belongings he'd brought with him from Houston. He thought of the boxes still sitting in his parents' basement. He hadn't been able to bring all of that stuff. Too much of it reminded him of what he'd once had ... and what had been stolen from him.

Pushing more thoughts, more unwanted memories from his mind, he grabbed his laptop. He hit the alarm to engage the locks. Okay, so it wasn't *completely* vintage, but he'd sacrifice a little originality for the peace of mind.

When he walked through the rapidly filling lot, he noted Lucy's Beetle was absent. He was surprised. Normally she arrived before him.

Rory checked his watch and saw he had a few minutes to spare. An espresso kiosk sat in the lobby of the rehabbed warehouse where Chase Graphics was headquartered. The coffee was average, but the cute girl who worked most mornings wasn't. And Rory knew better than most that the best way to get one female out your head was to focus another. Or two. Like ScorpioCutie, for instance.

Rory had to admit he was intrigued by the mysterious woman online. He was still a little uneasy, but it helped to take his mind off a pint-sized siren with a smart mouth and more curves than a country road. His thoughts hadn't been full of the mysterious woman online last night, though. *Okay, maybe not so much.*

He tightened the strap on his laptop bag and got in line. Apparently, his wasn't an original idea. About five men hung around the coffee cart, all vying for the attention of the young woman. It was obvious she was used to the affections of the opposite sex, but then, he knew that from the countless times he'd stood and watched her while he waited for his morning shot of caffeine.

She flirted back with a couple of the guys and laughed coyly. All the while, her hands moved like quicksilver, creating sugary concoctions designed to elevate blood pressure and deliver a quick punch of liquid energy.

As Rory waited, he wondered how Lucy would react to that kind of attention. She would be flustered, he thought. A blush would work up from her breasts and spread to her face, lending an attractive flush to her pretty face. Irritated at how well he could visualize her, he tried to focus on the colorful mural painted above the entrance to the elevators. But she was stuck there, in his mind, to the point he imagined her alluring scent, a mixture of coconut, vanilla, and something else, wafting up to tease his nostrils.

Damn it.

"Tell me something," Lucy said from behind him. "What is it about a pair of breasts that turns otherwise intelligent men into heavy breathing, slobbering cavemen?"

He turned and grinned, absurdly pleased to find her standing there. She wore her long hair down today. The soft, inky waves flowed down her shoulders and over her breasts like silk. She'd forgone the contacts, and instead, her black, horn-rimmed glasses were perched atop her nose. She had a

twinkle in her brown eyes as she peered up at him with a wry expression on her face.

"Easy," he answered. "Breast envy."

She wrinkled her nose. "Breast envy? Is that like penis envy?"

"Exactly. We don't have 'em, so naturally we're fascinated by them."

"That's your answer?"

He nodded. "Yep."

"Just when I think men are evolving," she said with a shake of her head.

He smiled. "I don't know, Luce. It's pretty basic."

She nodded. "Pheromones."

"Well, she does seem to have plenty of those," he noted.

Lucy socked him lightly in the arm. "I know that's manspeak for 'nice rack.'"

He held out his hands in mock surrender. "Got me there. You're running behind today," he noted. Rory wondered if she'd gone out after he'd left. Then he cursed himself for giving a damn.

"Stayed up too late last night," she said and looked back at the kiosk as they moved ahead in line.

Curiosity, and not a small amount of jealousy speared him, but Rory checked the urge to press for details. *It's none of my business*, he thought, while another, primal part of him said, *the hell it isn't*.

The barista gave Rory a saucy smile. "What can I getcha, cutie?"

He didn't have to turn to know Lucy was rolling her eyes. "I'll have a large white chocolate mocha with an extra shot. And a large skim chai latte," he added.

"Christmas must be coming early this year," Lucy said.

"Better be nice, little girl, or you'll get a lump of coal."

"Too late," Lucy informed him cheerfully.

The barista, with whom Rory often flirted, seemed disappointed he'd focused his attention on Lucy. She gave him the total and he handed over a ten. She made change and said, "Be just a few minutes."

Rory stuffed the change in her plastic tip cup and pulled Lucy aside where they waited for their order. While Lucy watched the young woman prepare the drinks, Rory watched her.

She'd worn a dress today. Of course, she had topped the outfit off with a pair of black-and-white striped tights and chunky black boots. Rory could count on one hand the number of times he had seen this woman wear a dress, and that was a damn shame, because with her curves, she filled it out in all the right places, which he had no business noticing, he told himself. But he saw that a few of the other men standing at the kiosk had noticed as well.

"Here's your order," the barista said, placing two steaming cups on the bar.

Rory picked them up and handed one to Lucy. He found himself taking a possessive step toward her and stopped. But his hands were moving of their own volition, and his palm moved to the small of her back and propelled her toward the elevators.

He punched both buttons and waited. Lucy cupped her drink in both hands and blew into the tiny drink hole to cool it off. Goofy woman.

"Thanks for the latte."

"No problem."

Still perplexed over his thoughts and behavior, he tried for a safer topic. "You haven't gotten into any trouble with the new computer, have you?"

For a split second, Lucy's easy expression slipped. "What?" she asked faintly.

"Lucy," he warned. "You didn't do anything, did you?"

"What? Of course not," she snapped. "What kind of person do you think I am?"

He held up a hand. "Hey, calm down. I was kidding. I know you wouldn't destroy my stuff."

"Of course I wouldn't. Because I'm predictable, boring Lucy."

"What? I didn't say that..."

The elevator chimed and the doors opened. Lucy stormed aboard. She punched the button to her floor once, twice, three times. The doors slid shut only to pop back open again. The elevator was headed down to the basement.

Lucy scowled and stomped off. She put one hand against his back and pushed him on, then walked back out.

When the doors slid shut, the last thing he saw was the intensity of her fierce glare and wondered what the hell he'd said to set her off.

* * * *

Lucy was fuming by the time she reached her cubicle. She tossed her purse in a drawer and dropped into her chair.

When Rory had asked her about the computer, she'd thought, *Oh, hell. He's figured it out.* Moments before, she'd been congratulating herself on such a stellar performance, because she'd been masquerading as a hussy with a penchant for astrology less than twelve hours earlier. He hadn't suspected a thing.

This morning, though, she woke in a panic, the impact of her actions the night before kicking in. The whole way to work, she'd staved off anxiety, moving from dread to elation and back again, until she decided she wasn't cut out for this cloak-and-dagger business. Well, she was the only one "cloak and daggering," but still.

When she'd walked into the building, she had planned on deleting her personalspace.com page, eradicating any trace of the fake persona, until she'd realized Rory wasn't alluding to their online conversation last night. No, he'd just asked an innocent question.

Lucy booted up her PC with more force than necessary. She wasn't mad with Rory, per se. Well, maybe she was, a little. Mostly, she was mad with herself.

Of course, Rory would never guess Lucy was ScorpioCutie. Why would he? She had erased all evidence of who she was, and covered it up with idiotic factoids nobody gave a crap about.

Besides, the Lucy Hollister Rory knew never took chances. She only dated freak shows her sisters set her up with, she went to bed at eleven every night, came in to work on time,

never missed a day. She always kept her gas tank at least half full and returned her rented movies the *day* she watched them. Oh, sure, she was impulsive and didn't necessarily think before she made decisions, but even *that* was predictable.

Lucy blew out a breath when she pulled up her design software. When had she become so boring? She was content. Her life may not have turned out the way she'd anticipated when she had graduated from college with her head full of dreams, but she'd done pretty damn well. She didn't go to bed at night wishing for more. When had the tidy life she'd created become not enough?

About two years ago.

Lucy took a sip of her latte. Well, she was doing something about it now. Any and all doubts disappeared. She was going to let it all loose as ScorpioCutie. Rory Carlisle, watch out.

Hell, while she was at it, she was going to Blockbuster. Tonight. She'd rent a DVD and return it *after* the due date. Ha. Take that. Who knew, maybe she'd even reveal herself to Rory.

Well, maybe not.

Baby steps.

* * * *

"I thought I might find you here."

Rory stared at the words that appeared on his computer screen. ScorpioCutie was back.

"So we meet again," he wrote.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

His eyes drifted to the flat-screen plasma television in his living room where the Braves were currently losing. That and a tower he'd been building for his side business had captivated his attention for the last two hours.

"Not much," he answered.

"I was bored and lonely a few minutes ago. Now I'm not," she replied.

Rory quirked a brow. Things were definitely getting interesting. He stretched his arms behind his head for a minute before he replied.

"Glad I can help."

"Oh, I think you can help with a lot more than that," she typed.

Whoa-ho. It looked like Miz ScorpioCutie wanted to bump things up a little.

"Oh, yeah? What kind of help do you need?"

"Like I said," she wrote, "I'm lonely and bored. Got any ideas?"

"A few," he hedged.

Rory was being deliberately coy. He wanted to make sure he knew the score before he pursued this any further. Visions of boiled bunny rabbits, scenes of *Fatal Attraction*, ran through his mind like a loop. Then again, who was to say ScorpioCutie wasn't a cross-dressing lawyer from Jersey who wanted to play hide the wienie? Rory shuddered and tried to burn that disturbing thought from his brain.

As long as he kept it online, it was possible he might never have to meet her in person ... unless he wanted to. And it was too soon to tell right now.

"Do any of them involve me taking off my clothes?"
ScorpioCutie typed.

Despite his reservations, Rory's interest was piqued.
"Aren't you the presumptuous one?" He added a winking smiley.

"Absolutely," she wrote. "It's the only way to get what I want. And I always get what I want."

"Always?" he asked.

"Always."

He waited a beat and took another long swallow of his beer while he pondered her response. A small, sadistic part of him still wished Lucy was on the other end out there in cyberspace, typing these words designed to get his blood hot. But, the chances of that were so ridiculous it was pointless to even contemplate.

Rory had spent a lot of his free time trying to banish Lucy from his thoughts. And it was getting damned irritating, because there wasn't anything he could do about it. Well, there wasn't anything he *would* do about it, anyway.

With a groan born of frustration, he put his focus back on his computer and the woman trying to initiate a little cybersex.

"Have I frightened you?" she wrote.

"Not at all. To be honest, I've never really done this before," he answered.

"Hmm. Well, in that case, I promise to be gentle."

Rory chuckled. "Not too gentle."

"Maybe we should get to know each other first," she typed.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"ScorpioCutie," she answered after a minute.

"I think you know what I mean," he typed.

"And I think we should stick to what we know," she wrote.

Rory frowned. Was she playing games? He was struck by a sudden and unsettling thought. "You're not married, are you?"

"No!" she replied immediately. "But, to be honest, this is a first for me, too."

So, she wanted to keep it impersonal. He could respect that. It made it all the more enticing, a no-strings Internet affair with a woman he didn't know and would never have to meet. It was something to consider, he thought. He liked his women without complications. When emotions got involved, things got messy and ended badly. He had personal knowledge that attested to this fact.

"Okay," he wrote. "Screen names only, then. So, ScorpioCutie, anything else?"

"No," she replied. "Everything else is fair game. But I've run out of time tonight." She inserted a sad faced smiley. "Look for me tomorrow night, okay?"

Disappointment lanced through him, which was surprising. And annoying. His sassy little best friend was intruding on his conscience again. "Sweet dreams," he wrote.

She logged off.

Well, then, he thought. *Let the games begin.*

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Chapter Seven

"Lucille? It's your mother."

"*No habla inglés.*"

"Funny. Did you get my e-mail?"

Lucy sighed and sat back in her chair. At four-thirty on Thursday afternoon, the office was a hub of activity. Printers and faxes beeped, computers hummed, and phones rang. Unrelenting mothers hounded.

"Yes, Ma. I thought it'd be obvious from the *reply* I sent you."

"Sarcasm is unattractive on you, dear," Maggie Hollister said.

"Well, in that case, it's a wonder I've ever gotten lucky."

"What's the matter? Are you sick?"

Lucy dropped her head on her desk. Not for the first time, she wished she had caller ID on her work line. "No, Ma. I'm not sick. I'm in the middle of something. You know how I hate being interrupted."

A little white lie, but her mother didn't get her sense of humor. Lucy didn't know if Maggie even had one.

"Oh, well, then I'll be brief. Have you thought any more about Danford?"

"Who?"

"The young man Alan knows."

"Oh. You mean the guy you're trying to force me to go out with?"

"Sweetheart, you're never going to find a husband."

"Maybe I don't want to get married," she said, feeling ten years old. Of course, being around her mother always brought out her mulish inner child.

Maggie continued as if Lucy hadn't spoken. *Big surprise.* "He's nice, and handsome, too. He's a stockbroker. Alan's already told him about you. I hope you don't mind, but Frankie gave him your phone number."

Great. Lucy banged her head on the desk again and sat up. "Ma, I don't need a pimp. To be honest, you're creeping me out."

"Don't use that language with me. I'm still your mother." She paused. "How long has it been since you've seen a man?"

"Well, I'm looking at two right now, as a matter of fact."

"Would you quit it with the jokes? You know what I mean. Now tell me the truth."

Last night. Wait, did it count if it was online? Somehow, Lucy didn't think her mother would agree. "Why does it even matter? You already have grandchildren." She added, "And 'pimp' isn't a bad word," but her mother railroaded right over her.

"This isn't about babies, Lucy. It's about your happiness."

"Well, in that case, I'm happy without a man." *Not true! Not true!*

"Will you at least think about it?" her mother asked softly, infusing hurt into her voice. She'd brought out the heavy artillery. This had gone from bad to worse.

Lucy caved. *You are so weak.* "I promise to *think* about it. No guarantees? Okay?"

"Oh, I'm so happy! Thank you, Lucy."

"Mother," she warned.

"I'll let you get back to work. Love you!"

Lucy heard the line click and shook her head. Four-star war generals could have used her mother in their pocket. The woman was that good.

She sighed and checked her watch. Already ten minutes late for her lunch date with Emily, she saved the project she had been tweaking and grabbed her purse.

While she waited impatiently for the elevator that would take her to the top-floor café, Lucy thought about the phone conversation with her mother.

You're never going to find a husband.

That may well be true. Lucy had romance running through her veins instead of blood. She had been that way since she'd learned to walk. Just the possibility she may never find her mate depressed her. *Thanks a lot, Ma.*

On the flip side, she considered herself a fairly liberated woman, so if she was doomed to a lifetime of scary blind dates and unrequited crushes, well, she could handle that. She always had the Beast. She wouldn't sacrifice her self-respect so her mother could play matchmaker out of some misplaced maternal instinct.

Lucy punched the Up button again, as if she could command the elevator to move faster by the sheer power of her thoughts.

Her problem was that she had grown up in a family of cheerleaders. In fact, all three of her sisters had, at one point, been captain of the team. Then Lucy came along, to her mother's eternal disappointment. She had little in

common with her mother or sisters, a fact that drove Maggie insane. In high school, she'd been captain of the debate team. The only thing her sisters debated was whether or not to wear white after Labor Day.

As a girl—hell, even *now*—she'd pretended she'd been stolen by a gang of gnomes as an infant and any day, her *real* family would show up and bring her home.

To be fair, she loved her family. It was, of course, a love-hate relationship, but just the same, until that group of fun-loving, smart-mouthed shorties came and laid claim to their long-lost daughter, they were the only family she had. And Lucy knew deep down that no matter how much her mother frustrated her, all of this matchmaking business came from a good spot.

Lucy wished Maggie could find her "happy place" and knock it back a few notches. Seriously, the woman bordered on obsessive.

The elevator finally arrived and she hopped on. When the doors slid shut, her cell phone rang. She pulled it out her purse, checked the display and cursed under her breath. *Frankie*. They were tag teaming her!

Lucy almost ignored it, but her sister was cut from the same cloth as Maggie, so persistence was as normal as breathing.

"Hey, Frank," she answered with a resigned sigh. "What's going on?"

Her sister responded in a rush. "Oh, well, not too much. Kerry has the lead in the spring production at the academy, and I volunteered to make the costumes this time because

the woman who did them last year is a closet alcoholic, and the wood nymphs ended up looking like a bunch of fairies on crack. Alan Jr. got in trouble with the principal yesterday for shooting rubber bands at the substitute teacher and Freddie has a cold."

Lucy smiled and fought the urge to roll her eyes. A stay-at-home-mom married to a rich litigator, her sister put Martha Stewart to shame. She suspected Frankie didn't have too many real friends, or at least any who gave two damns about the things that were important to her, because she always called Lucy instead.

"So Alan has this friend," she began.

"I got your e-mail. I'm not interested."

Frankie may have been an amazing wife and mother, but she was lousy at picking prospective boyfriends. Lucy had yet to go on a single decent date. The last guy wanted her to dress in a frilly skirt and call him Daddy.

The elevator stopped its ascent and the doors opened. She stepped off and headed toward the café, still trying to find a way to dodge her sister's well-meaning ploy. When she'd considered jumping back on the sideshow wagon the women in her family had incorporated, she must have been high. Then again, that was before the birth of ScorpioCutie.

"Lucy, he's a stockbroker. He practices at..." Frankie's campaign shut down mid-sentence. Lucy looked down at her phone. The damn thing had been cutting out on her a lot lately, and if it got any worse, she might chuck *it* into the community dumpster. At least she knew she'd make it this time.

Her cell rang again.

"What's wrong with your phone?" Frankie asked. "Maybe you should get one of those Apple phones. Alan's thinking of getting one. Anyway, where was I? Oh, Danford works at an investment firm downtown, right by you. He's good-looking, charming, and he rakes in over a hundred K a year."

Lucy wove through the lunch time crowd milling through the café's self-service food area. Searching blindly, she grabbed a turkey sandwich and a bag of chips and headed to the register.

"I'm not in the mood for a date, Frankie."

Someone bumped her from behind. She turned and found Rory smiling down at her, a burger and fries in his big hands. She made a face into the phone and mouthed, "My sister."

"But Danford is wonderful, Lucy! He hasn't dated since his divorce, and that was almost a year ago! Can you imagine?"

"Did Ma call you?" she asked suspiciously when she moved forward to pay.

"What? No. Anyway, did I mention he's a stockbroker?"

"You mentioned that. He could be in a biker gang for all I care. You know," she said, as she gave the cashier her money, "I talked to Ma not five minutes ago and told her I didn't want to go out with this guy. I know he's a friend of yours, but I'm not interested."

"But you would make him so happy, Lucy. The poor man's depressed, thinking there aren't any good women out there. You've got to prove him wrong. Even if nothing comes of it, won't you do it for his mental health?"

She stood at the end of the register and waited for Rory. "I don't even know this guy, Frankie. Why should I be concerned with his mental health? And if he's that depressed, maybe he ought to see a professional."

Her sister gave up. "Fine. Will you do it for me, then?"

She started to refuse again, but looked back at Rory, who flirted with the pretty cashier. Could the man not go *anywhere* without wielding his charm like a freaking sword?

"Lucy?" her sister said. "Are you listening to me?"

With her eyes still on Rory, she thought about it. How terrible could one little date be? It's not like she had to marry the guy.

"Fine. I'll do it," she said on a resigned sigh. "But if this guy even mentions the words 'hot schoolgirl,' I'm outta there."

* * * *

"Hot schoolgirl, huh? What kind of dates have you been going on, shorty?"

Lucy snapped her phone shut and tossed it back in her bag. "You don't want to know."

She scanned the dining area for Emily and found her friend waving at them from a table near the back. "There's Em. Are you eating with us?"

"Yeah, okay."

They passed through tables and chairs filled with their colleagues and coworkers who choked down as much food as they could in as little time possible. Lucy wondered if they sold antacids along with the soup de jour.

"Hey, Rory," Emily said when they reached the table. He pulled out a chair and sat down. "Hey, kid. How's tricks?"

"Kickin' ass and takin' names, as they say."

"How did your date go?" he asked, unwrapping his burger. She took a delicate sip of her soda. "Okay. He's kind of boring, though."

"Boring, huh? Maybe you should have Lucy's sister set you up."

Emily stared at Lucy. "Tell me you didn't."

"It's not my fault. They joined forces!" She shuddered. "They're like this mother-daughter-monster-dating machine."

Rory wiggled his eyebrows. "So, tell me about this hot schoolgirl bit."

"Pervert," Lucy said without heat and tried not to squirm. His teasing gaze detonated a series of warm, tingling bombs throughout her body.

"Damn right," he answered with an engaging grin. Lucy tried not to melt, but it was hard because her body was all tight and itchy.

Emily watched the two of them with a strange look in her eyes. Lucy cleared her throat. "So, how's life up in Admin?"

Emily sat back and let out a groan. "Other than the boss, otherwise known as Satan, harping on me every chance she gets, it's aces."

"Satan?" Rory asked around a french fry.

Lucy snagged one off his plate. "I thought she was Elvira, the life-sucking vampire." She popped the fry into her mouth.

"That was last month. She's been officially elevated to demon status. I swear to God that woman has it out for me. I think she might've been a nerd in high school, and now she's taking it out on me."

"Hey," Lucy protested.

Emily patted her hand. "You're *my* nerd."

"Veronica seems nice to me," Rory said.

Emily glared at him. "Of course she's nice to you. She wants to mount *you*."

He choked on his fry. "Jesus, Emily."

Lucy laughed. "Face it, Carlisle. To the female populous at Chase, you are God."

Rory grinned. "Stop it. I'm blushing."

"You love it, and you know it."

He crumpled up his grease stained wrapper. "Well, as good as y'all are for my ego, I gotta hit it." He stood. "Catch you later, ladies."

Lucy watched him leave, appreciating in the graceful movement of his hard, lean lines as he walked through the dining hall. The man's body was pure sin.

"When are you going to do something about that?"

She whipped her head around to face her friend. Emily watched her with a wry expression, and Lucy felt her cheeks redden.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," she sputtered.

"The hell you don't. You're stuttering! You've got it so bad for Rory you can't see straight."

Lucy almost denied it again, but she knew it was pointless. Emily had her zeroed in the crosshairs. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yeah. But, don't worry. Rory's oblivious to it."

"I know," Lucy said darkly.

"Maybe you should help him out," she suggested.

Lucy thought of the clandestine online affair she'd initiated. Of the harmless flirtation progressing toward something else, something ... edgier. She considered telling her friend but in the end, decided against it. This whole thing with Rory was too new, and she was still a little embarrassed to admit to what she'd done. Better to wait and see if anything came of it.

After a few moments, Lucy said, "I'm not sure how I would."

"How about walking up to him and saying, 'Hey, Rory, let's get nekkid?'"

Lucy frowned and tried to imagine the outcome of such a proposition. Knowing her luck, she'd trip and fall on her face before she could even get the words out. Or worse, he'd look at her, concerned, and ask, "Are you having an asthma attack?"

Emily waved a hand. "It's not brain surgery, Lucy. He's a guy. And let's face it, the man *loves* women. I don't think it would be much of a stretch."

"Thanks, a lot," she said.

"You know what I mean. Hey, for all you know, he could feel the same way."

Lucy snorted. "Yeah. That'll happen."

But, even when the words left her mouth, she thought of those strange moments on Monday, when it seemed like he *had* been interested. Whether it had been a figment of her

imagination or not, she gave into the fantasy for a moment. She visualized what it would be like to have all of that intense, sexual energy focused on her. To be loved by Rory. Spending evenings in his bed, going out as a couple on the weekends. Being more than some fling. Her heart hurt a little, because the dream was like so many wishes, full of intent but low on the probability scale.

She would do better to live off fantasies. At least then she stood a chance.

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Chapter Eight

"At the risk of sounding trite, what are you wearing?"

Lucy's breath caught when the instant message box popped up on her computer screen.

A week later and they'd made progress. Slow, torturously so, but they had moved from flirtation right into foreplay. They'd bypassed the whole personalspace.com business by swapping screen names on a regular instant messenger service, and now chatted online two, three times a day.

Each time, it got racier, bawdier. Lucy was enjoying the hell out of herself. And him. She had never known she'd had all of these needs and urges inside her.

Of all of their online conversations, though, she'd been the initiator. Now, here he was, no-holds-barred, let's go for it. No more dancing, no more foreplay. *Progress.*

She was about to have computer sex. The idea made her want to laugh. Almost. *This* was the most action she'd seen in over a year. And Lucy wasn't laughing. Oh, no. Even when she reread those words, her heart thundered.

She pursed her lips, and gave her clothing a cursory inspection. Thin cotton pants with a drawstring, gray and frayed at the bottom because she was too short and had to hack them off at the hem. A loose, purple T-shirt and thick wool socks. *Call me the Queen of Sexy.*

Lucy tapped her feet a minute before returning her eyes to the computer screen and the erotic words taunting her like a forbidden piece of chocolate cake.

She rubbed her damp palms on her thighs and typed, "A thin, red camisole and matching panties."

She hit the return button, and a rush of adrenaline burst through her when she watched the words appear on the screen. Lucy waited impatiently, wondering about his thoughts, his response.

Then, "Bikini or thong?"

She squealed, embarrassed, turned on and excited all at the same time. It didn't matter that she wasn't a thong fan. She preferred firm cotton and funky designs with as little rear ride-age as possible. Anything goes when it came to fantasy. She would never be this way in real life, so why not run with it? She ignored the irritating voice in her head that asked, *And why is that?*

She typed, "Thong."

"Bra or no bra?"

"No bra."

"I want you to run your hand over the camisole across your breasts," Rory wrote.

Lucy sucked in a breath. Things had definitely taken a turn here. Her blood thickened and throbbed between her legs. Little tingles danced across her flesh, and her nipples pebbled at the mere idea of what he demanded.

Feeling a little foolish, she ran her hand across her shirt and caressed the full breasts that now ached.

"Are you touching yourself?" Rory asked.

"Yes."

"Now run your hand down the front of your panties."

Holy hell. She wanted to, desperately wanted to touch herself like he asked, but hesitated.

She typed out, "You first."

Lucy sat in anticipation as she waited for his response. One minute stretched into two, and she wondered what he was doing as he sat in front of his computer. *This is Rory*. It made things even hotter, more illicit. A flush crept up her breasts to set her skin aflame.

"I'm touching myself. Thinking of you," he typed, as though he could hear her thoughts.

Lucy giggled nervously. God, this was exhilarating, and by far the most erotic thing she had done in a long time, which was rather sad, not to mention pathetic.

"Boxers or briefs?"

"None."

Oh, wow. Oh, crap. If she didn't do something quick, she would spontaneously combust.

"Take off your panties, ScorpioCutie."

"What are you doing?" Emily asked.

Lucy screamed and jumped to her feet, slamming her knee into the desk. "Ow!"

The Beast barked furiously.

Emily asked, "Are you okay?"

"No. Yes. Just a minute. Shit, shit, shit."

Lucy danced around on one foot as she waited for the pain to subside. The Beast bounced in the air with her, and his shrill barks echoed through the room. Out of the corner of her eye, Emily was moving toward her.

"I'm fine," she told her again. "Be quiet, Beast."

Lucy straightened and realized Emily was staring at her computer screen, where the words *Take off your panties, ScorpioCutie* flashed like a big ol' neon sign.

"What *are* you doing?" Emily asked again, this time with a hint of humor in her voice. She squinted. "Funny, I never would have pegged you for the cybersex type."

Lucy moved to switch off the computer just when Rory typed, "Are you still there?"

Emily swatted at Lucy's hand. "Oh, *hell*, no. This is getting good. Who ... well, I'll be goddamned," she said as she stared at the small picture on the messenger screen. "That's Rory."

Lucy forced her way between her friend and the computer and clicked it off. "It's nothing."

"You are such a liar!" she replied with a laugh. "What is going on? And don't even try and lie about this, girl."

Lucy plucked at an imaginary piece of lint and huffed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bullshit." Emily plopped down in Lucy's chair and rubbed her hands together like a child waiting for a piece of candy. "Spill it. Now. I want details. Lots and lots of them."

Lucy blew out a breath and lifted her hair from her neck. She rubbed her lips together and looked down at The Beast, who regarded her with a doggy smirk. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"You're stalling."

"All right, all right. I'm sort of having an online affair with him."

"With Rory."

"Yes."

"Who you said wouldn't be interested in you."

"That's right."

Emily leaned back and propped her feet on the desk. "Why didn't you tell me this at lunch last week?"

"I didn't want to jinx it."

"Hey, I always tell you when I get lucky."

Lucy sat down in the arm chair across from her desk.

"That's hardly the same thing. You get lucky all the time."

"And you get to live vicariously through me. But, no matter," she said. "So, when did this 'online affair' happen?"

"Last week."

"So, it's new. I wonder why I didn't pick up on it at lunch," she said, half to herself. "With what little I saw"—she jerked a thumb back toward the black screen—"you two should have been shooting out 'do me' vibes the whole building could've felt."

Her friend was much too smart for her own good. Before she could explain, Emily said, "Which leads me to believe he doesn't know it's you. Am I right?" She sighed. "This has your fingerprints all over it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, don't get all huffy. I think we both know I'm the adventurous one." She held up a hand. "It's not meant as an insult, but fact. You possess qualities I admire and lack. So, it's a give and take." She shook her head. "But, back to this Internet biz. I'm right, aren't I? He doesn't know."

She was so sure of herself, Lucy thought, and rightly so. Nothing much got by Emily Jenkins. Most people never looked

past her striking beauty and party-girl image to see the core of steel that lay beneath.

"No. He doesn't. Yet," she added.

"So, when do you figure you'll let him in on the big secret?"

Lucy lifted her shoulders in a shrug and brought her thumbnail to her mouth. "I haven't worked out the details." *And I probably won't.*

"So, in other words, you'll tell him if you get backed into a corner, but until then, it's *You've Got Mail* meets *Romancing the Bone*?"

Lucy started to argue, but laughed instead. "Cute imagery, Em, but yeah, basically."

"And when you get backed into a corner? 'Cause you will, you know. If I know you, you'll slip about something you wrote or he wrote, and then he'll be like, 'Hey, what the hell?' because Rory Carlisle is one sharp cookie, and then you'll have your corner. So, then what?"

Lucy scowled at her friend. "Aren't you a ray of fucking sunshine tonight?"

Emily grinned. "Baby, if I was any brighter, you'd have to wear shades."

Lucy laughed again, at her, at the absurdity of the situation in which she found herself. "I don't know," she admitted. "I guess I haven't thought it out that well. It seemed so easy in the beginning, when I first started it all. But, it's getting *really* intense."

Emily smiled. "Intense is good."

Lucy pressed a hand to her stomach. "It is, but this is *Rory* we're talking about. I've always, well, you know, fantasized about what it would be like ... but the real deal is so much different. I can't help but feel like I'm deceiving him."

"Well, you are, to be truthful. But it's coming from a good spot. Misplaced? A little, but good. In fact, I bet once he got over the initial shock that his little Lucy has this she-vamp business going on beneath all of that girl-next-door charm, he'll be into it. Guys get off on that sort of thing."

"Maybe," Lucy said, but she wasn't convinced.

Emily leaned forward, a gleam, one Lucy recognized and feared, in her eye. "So, what we need is a game plan."

"We?"

"Face it, Lucy. You need my help. You're going to do one of two things. A—you'll get off online and that will be the end of it, or B—you'll get off online, tell him about it, and feel too awkward or insecure and bungle it."

"Remind me why we're friends again?"

Emily grinned. "Hey, if your friends can't tell you the truth, then what've you got? So, we need to get Rory to notice you, although I suspect he already does on some level. He is a man, after all."

"You're not going to suggest a makeover, are you? Because that's really clichéd."

"First of all, the reason it's a cliché is because it's tried and true. It works. But, no one's saying anything about a makeover, although..." Emily stood and reached out to frame the curls around Lucy's face. "It wouldn't hurt to do a little sprucing up. Maybe a trim." She walked around the desk and

pulled Lucy's hair back, adjusting it this way and that until Lucy began to feel like a doll.

She slapped at Emily's hands. "Quit it. I'll think about a haircut, but that's it, okay? If I go through with this, I want Rory to want me for who I am. I'm not changing myself so he'll notice me."

"Then why the secrecy?"

Lucy dropped her head in her hands. "I don't know." She looked up. "This is *me* we're talking about. Rory dates women who look like models, and I'm ... little Lucy Hollister. The quintessential girl-next-door. His *buddy*. I can barely squeeze into a size ten, I'm weird, and I'm not beautiful."

Emily rose and walked around to where Lucy sat. She placed her hands on Lucy's knees. "Honey, you are beautiful. I think you're gorgeous. You're sweet and funny. I'd kill to have you're curves. You're built the way a woman is supposed to be." She grinned. "Hell, I'd do you. If I was into chicks, that is."

She stood. "And I'm not talking about changing you." After sitting back down in Lucy's chair, she rested her chin in her hand. "We'll just enhance what you already have. We need to get Rory to notice you as a woman, not this mystery sexpot." When Lucy started to protest, she held up a hand. "What I mean is we need to teach you some moves. This isn't about your appearance. It's about how you walk, your confidence.

"Watch me." She strutted around the small office, a slight smile on her face. "The next time you're around Rory, think about sex."

"Uh, that's not the problem. And if you think I'm going to bat my eyes at him and flutter around, you're nuts."

"You're an artist. You have a vivid imagination. Sit there and think about that take-of-your-panties bit while you're talking to him, or even hanging out. Trust me, it will bring a smile to your face. Men love to think women walk around thinking about sex all the time."

Emily perched on the edge of the desk, leaned close to Lucy. "Invade his space a little. Make him *aware* of you. Spritz on a little perfume. Draw attention to your mouth, your breasts."

Lucy lifted a brow. "At the same time?"

Emily tapped a finger over her lips and sighed. "This is going to be harder than I thought."

"Hey," Lucy protested, "I'm not a virgin, for Pete's sake. I've been doing fine without your help for the last ten years."

"How long have you known Rory? Two years? And how long have you lusted after him?"

"Point taken," Lucy grumbled.

Truthfully, she wanted Rory aware of her as a woman, but on the other hand, she was terrified to make the first move. Lucy understood what Emily said, but her grasp was rudimentary at best.

Lucy Hollister wasn't a man-eater. She wouldn't know how to start. She figured if she stuck to what she knew ... and Emily was right, she had a vivid imagination, especially when it came to sex with Rory ... she might be able to bump things up a few levels. And, if not, well, at least she had her computer.

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Chapter Nine

Lucy shut the door to her boss's office and leaned against it with a disbelieving sigh.

She'd done it. After years of hard work, she'd gotten a chance at a senior associate's position. Wyatt Chase had entrusted her with a large, extensive account from start to finish. She even got her own team.

If she did the job well, she'd have her own office. If she didn't, well ... that wouldn't happen. Lucy might be an insecure, bumbling mess in her personal life, but she was an ace in her professional one. She pushed away from the door.

"Have a good weekend, Lucy," Wyatt's secretary called out.

"You, too, Amy," she replied cheerfully.

Lucy all but floated back to her cubicle. She'd waited for this day from the moment she'd taken the position with Chase Graphics three years ago. Senior associate! She fantasized about her new office, thought of the pay increase and smiled. She could finally afford to buy her own house. No more shucking rent to her rat bastard slumlord. But even better than the money and the private office, she'd have a broader range of projects. She could pick and choose, hone her talents, and bring life to her art in so many more ways.

She plopped down in her chair with a giggle and picked up the phone.

"Em. I've got a job for you," she sang. "No more Satan. We're going to Barney's to celebrate. Bring your dancing shoes, girl!"

* * * *

Barney's was packed, not unusual for any night of the week, certainly not a Friday. The bar, stacked three-people deep, had five bartenders rushing around to fill drink orders, shouting and passing concoctions and beers onto the waitresses' large serving trays. The crowd was raucous, loud and in a party mood. Again, not unusual.

By some miracle, Lucy and Emily managed to snag the last empty booth in a bar filling to capacity.

Barney's was located in the Pearl district, or "The Pearl," as it was known to the locals, two blocks down from Chase. Once an array of old, dilapidated warehouses, the city had given the district a facelift. Now hip boutiques, popular restaurants, bars, and expensive condos replaced the once mostly abandoned area.

Their waitress took their orders and sauntered off through the throng of people about the bar's large dance floor and standing tables. The band had set up on the small stage in back, some local group who fancied themselves the new Beatles.

Emily leaned back in the booth and stretched her arms above her head. She looked beat, but seemed to perk up in the noisy atmosphere. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes, drew one out, and slipped it between her lips.

"I thought you quit," Lucy asked when Emily blew a stream of blue smoke toward the ceiling.

She shrugged. "Crappy day."

"Well, it's about to get better," Lucy said.

"What's this all about?"

Lucy held up a finger when the waitress returned with their drinks. After taking a sip of her lemon drop martini, she said, "So, Wyatt called me into his office today. He wants me to handle an account for a new client. It's big time, some fancy restaurant here in the Pearl. If I do well, I get the senior associate position I've been gunning for." She grinned and finished her martini. "Here's the good part. I get my own admin for the project. You interested?"

Emily swallowed her Cosmopolitan in one long gulp and signaled the waitress for another round. Then she got up from the table and executed a quick dance while she chanted, "No more Satan! No more Satan!"

Rory swooped in out of nowhere and swung Emily around. He led her in a brief shuffle before he dipped her and placed her right side up.

"Whoo!" she said, brushing a few wayward strands of hair from her face. "What a rush."

Rory, looking hot and yummy in a navy blue dress shirt and jeans, slid in next to Lucy, carrying with him a light cloud of aftershave, soap, and man. Her blood began to hum.

Emily sat down and a giggle escaped her lips. "Wow. Must've drunk my Cosmo too fast. On that note," she said and tipped back her second drink.

Heat pumped off Rory in waves. Or the alcohol made Lucy warm. She didn't know for sure. Just the fact that he sat next to her, after what they'd *almost* done last night had the blood swimming in her head.

He leaned over and tugged one of the long braids resting on her chest. When his fingers brushed oh, so close to her breasts, she inhaled sharply.

"What's going on, Pippi? Haven't talked to you in a while."

Since "I've been avoiding you because I'm afraid I might jump you" didn't seem like an appropriate response, she took a large gulp of her second lemon drop and tried for a vanilla version of the truth. "Been busy. And about to get busier." She told him about the proposition from Wyatt, peppered with a punched fist in the air and an "I is free!" from Emily.

"Good for you, kiddo," he said, and Lucy thought, *Kiddo. I'll show you a kiddo.*

She knocked back the rest of her drink. Emily's eyes lit up and she waved her hands over her head like a lunatic. "Sean! Over here!"

"Who's Sean?" Rory whispered in her ear.

Lucy shrugged as his hot breath sent a spear of liquid heat shooting straight to her loins, and she checked the urge to lean over and bite him.

Emily said, "Here comes Sean. He's from accounting. He's a little shy, but he's cute, and he has a lot of potential. Be nice," she warned.

Rory held up his hands.

Sean was shy, but Lucy wasn't holding out for the potential. At least concerning Emily. She'd eat the poor guy

alive in one juicy bite. He wore a three-piece suit and kept his blond hair short. He punctuated his sentences with a lot of *and ahs* and had a habit of adjusting his tie whenever someone asked him a question. No big surprise he worked with numbers instead of people.

Their waitress came back, took Sean and Rory's drink orders, and delivered another round of mixed drinks for the women.

Lucy felt pretty good by her fourth lemon drop. She reveled in the tactile sensation of Rory's warm thigh lying against hers, his delicious scent and the rumbling timbre of his voice. Eying her martini, she thought, *liquid courage*.

Rory fiddled with the label on his beer bottle. Sean seemed to have found his own courage in alcohol, because after two rum and Cokes, he'd loosened up and stopped tugging on his tie. Lucy had counted only two *and ahs* in his last sentence.

The band started up, poetic riffs on the guitar accompanied by the slight whining of the lead singer who sang a tale of a woman who'd cut out his heart and stomped it dead in stiletto heels.

Emily wiggled her eyebrows and pushed Sean out of the booth. "Let's dance, handsome."

Sean blushed, but allowed Emily to pull him onto the floor.

"Poor guy," Rory said.

"Yeah, he's toast," Lucy agreed, pleased to hear the words tumble out of her mouth with minimal slur. "Em's like a praying mantis." She frowned. "But a nice one. She doesn't mean to eat their heads after sex. It's just instinctual. Does that make sense?"

No, you sound like a complete idiot.

"I think you're cut off." Rory pushed her empty martini glass to the edge of the table.

What would ScorpioCutie do? Lucy wondered. What would she say?

She would embrace life with her arms wide open, relish the earthly delights the world had to offer, that's what she would do. Lucy thought about alter egos, internet sex, martinis, liquid courage, and thought, *to hell with it.*

"Wanna dance?" she asked.

Rory hesitated a moment, then nodded.

Get him to think about you as a woman. Emily's words echoed in her head. She took the lead and saw confusion in his eyes, as though she were a glitch in one of his computers that he couldn't quite figure out.

Good.

Recovering the lead, Rory pulled her against him and guided her across the floor. Lucy didn't think she'd ever so much as hugged the man, let alone pressed flush up along all that hard muscle. His body threw off heat like a furnace, adding to her own warmth. She reveled in the feel of his sleek, muscular body, wishing she could climb right inside of him. What a shock to realize the reality was so much better than even her most vivid fantasies.

She laid her head on his chest and felt the beat of his heart thundering, rushed and loud, under her ear. *Is he nervous?* She lifted her head, looked into his eyes, and saw the confusion still shimmering along with something new, desire. She wanted to shake her fist in victory, but it warred

with her own confusion and awkwardness, so in the end, she broke eye contact and laid her head back on his chest.

Rory's fingers rested on the small of her back, tracing lazy circles that belied the tension she felt coiled in the rest of his body. *Something's happening here*, she thought giddily around her own arousal and the haze of too many lemon drop martinis.

"I don't think I've ever danced with you, Luce," he whispered. With his lips against her ear, his breath scorched and tickled. She couldn't suppress the shiver. Be ScorpioCutie, she told herself.

She looked up into his blue eyes and said, "I think that's a damn shame, don't you?" and watched cobalt flash.

"Yeah," he answered roughly. He cleared his throat. "Yeah, I do."

The song ended and with it, the trance that held them captive. Rory stepped away first, dropping his arms as though he'd been burned. Lucy felt the sting of rejection, but pushed it away, her determination railroading past her tender heart. *I want this man*, she thought. *Bad. And I am going to get him.*

"I'll be right back," he said curtly, and left Lucy standing alone.

She pushed through the crowd, a little clumsy on her feet. When she returned to their table, Emily and Sean were snuggled together.

"I got you another one." Emily nodded at a fresh lemon drop.

Lucy had planned on cutting herself off before Rory made the suggestion, but this whole seducing business seemed to require more courage than she thought.

She sat down and drank the lemon drop in two long gulps, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Thanks."

Emily blinked at her for a couple of seconds, and then turned to Sean. "Could you be a sweetie and grab me another Cosmo?"

Sean looked at the drink in her hand, but was obviously smart enough to know when to beat tracks. "Sure."

"Saw you on the dance floor," Emily said without preamble.

"Yeah."

"He looked interested."

"He was. Then he ran away like I had cooties."

She swirled her drink. "Follow my lead."

Rory returned to their table two paces in front of Sean and slid in next to Lucy, keeping a safe distance between their respective body parts. Her stomach dropped while her heart pinched painfully in her chest. Whatever had happened between them on the dance floor had scattered like dust. And obviously, Rory didn't like the idea of being attracted to her. Tears burned the back of her lids. She gave Emily a helpless look.

"Trust me," she mouthed.

"Are you feeling okay?" Emily asked her.

"Great," she answered tightly, then felt a kick under the table. "Uh, actually, I'm getting pretty tired. Are you ready to go?"

"Well, Sean wanted to stay a little longer, I think."

Sean opened his mouth but clamped it shut and turned pink after Emily's hand disappeared beneath the table. "Can you take Lucy home, Rory? That is," she added, "if you're ready to leave."

Rory lifted his hip and retrieved his wallet, throwing a few bills on the table. "Yeah," he answered. "Come on, Lucy." He got up and walked out.

"Good luck," Emily said, and gave her a thumbs-up sign.

As Lucy trailed behind Rory, her newfound self-confidence suddenly fled, and she wondered if she was making a mistake. She hadn't missed the desire she'd seen in Rory's eyes. But if his actions were anything to go on, he'd rather be tarred and feathered than have romantic feelings for Lucy.

She stopped and checked herself. This might be her one and only chance. Damned if she'd bow out.

ScorpioCutie wanted to come out and play.

* * * *

Grateful for the dark cover of the parking lot and the crisp spring air that helped cool his heated blood, Rory stood outside, confused, irritated, and aroused. None preempted manners, which was why he waited for Lucy at the door instead of inside the truck.

He wasn't supposed to have these feelings for Lucy. He didn't want things to change. She was the one constant in his life. He knew he could count on her to be a steady rock in a sea of restless chaos. Now that rock had loosened its grip on the earth and was tumbling into the water.

He still smelled her on his skin, still felt the way her curves had fit so well against him when they'd swayed to the music. He'd been careful to keep the lower half of his body from touching her. Although the way she'd acted tonight told him she might not have cared. Hell, he wouldn't have been surprised if she'd dragged him off to a storage closet. He closed his eyes at the image, and a new wave of lust rolled through him.

He'd tried thinking about ScorpioCutie, but whenever he was online with the mysterious siren, he pictured Lucy on the other end of cyberspace, taunting him with her sexy words and suggestions.

Rory gnashed his teeth in frustration. Things had been so much easier a couple of weeks ago, when Lucy had been his buddy and not the object of his fantasies. Now he couldn't banish her from his thoughts. And he'd tried. Hard.

The heavy oak door opened and Lucy stepped out, wrapping her long black sweater around her. She looked around a minute before she saw him and smiled. She started toward him and stumbled, and he reached out to steady her.

Toasted. He should've monitored her alcohol intake because she rarely indulged in more than one beer or a glass of wine. But, he'd been too aware of her sitting next to him, her tantalizing scent, her soft thigh resting next to his. His groin tightened again.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah."

He tucked her arm in his and led them to his truck. Rory unlocked the doors, but hesitated at hers. He knew she

couldn't make it up into the cab in her current condition, which meant he'd have to put his hands on her.

A deep, primal part of him screamed, *Yes! Now!* But he ignored it and tried being brotherly when he grasped her curvy hips and hoisted her up. Definitely challenging when treated to a view of her sweet, round ass. She smiled down at him, her cheeks pink from the alcohol.

"Thank you," she giggled.

I am being tested.

He rounded the front of the car and hopped up with his usual ease, but there were no pithy comments from his passenger, who leaned back in her seat, eyes closed.

"I appreciate the ride."

"No problem," he said. Christ, he was full of brilliant replies tonight.

They rode in tense, uncomfortable silence for ten minutes. He took in her unique scent under the smell of lemons, and was so aware of her sitting next to him that by the time he pulled in her driveway, he thought his head would explode from the sexual pressure. Or, he thought wryly, another part of his anatomy.

Lucy tried to get out on her own and ended up tumbling out of the truck before he could reach her. She sat sprawled on the ground, giggling. Rory rushed over and crouched down, running his hands over her legs while he checked her for injuries.

"Shit. Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oops."

He pulled her up and the momentum pushed her against his chest. She stared up at him, all soft curves and pink cheeks. Her full lips parted, and he thought, *I'm going to hell.*

"You know, you might think about driving a truck that doesn't take a catapult to get in and out of."

He laughed. "That's my girl," he said, both relieved and disappointed to have the old Lucy back.

She started up toward her front door, leaving her purse on the driveway. Shaking his head, he retrieved it and reached inside to grab her keys.

"Oh," she said when he handed them to her. "Good thing you're here."

The Beast's barking echoed through the townhouse when they entered the dark house. "Just a minute, Beastie-Beasterson." She giggled. "Beasty-Beastly-Boy. Wow, I must be wasted if I'm playing drunk fun with names." She turned her chocolate eyes on him. "Rory. Not Boring Rory. Sexy Rory." She slapped a hand over her mouth. "I cannot believe I said that," she mumbled through her fingers.

Some deep part of him was darkly satisfied. The same dark side that stalked toward her. He put his hands on her shoulders. Again, reason intruded, and he led her to the couch instead of pressing her against the wall and licking his way inside her mouth. He prowled the carpet in her living room while she watched him.

She slapped a hand down on the sofa. "Come. Take a load off."

He knew he shouldn't. Rory knew if he sat down, he would give into the urge to taste that pouty mouth and change

them. Change what they were to each other. But when he stared down at her, with her long braided hair, pink cheeks, full breasts and lush curves, he knew he was a goner.

When he sat, she let out a sigh. "Rory."

He sighed himself. "Lucy."

She turned and faced him. "I have a secret."

"A secret?"

"Yeah," she breathed. "It's a doozy, too."

"What is it?"

She gnawed on her bottom lip, drawing his attention to her luscious mouth and driving him crazy. "I don't think I should tell you."

His body moved closer to hers as if it had a mind of its own. He was drawn to her in a way that was completely foreign to him. He liked being in control with a woman, but with Lucy, he felt like he was on a train headed off of a cliff.

And disturbed to find he liked it.

"Why?"

Her fingers reached out to toy with the buttons on his shirt. He drew in a sharp breath and reached up to still her hands. But he ran his own down her arms and rested them on her hips.

"I can't take this anymore," she whispered.

Her lips were a hair's breadth from his. Her breath smelled sweetly of lemons mixed with the tang of gin. He leaned closer, knowing he was a dead man, but determined to enjoy his demise. He touched his lips to hers, softly.

"We shouldn't be doing this," he said against her mouth.

"I know."

"But I don't care."

"Neither do I."

She hooked her hands behind his neck and pulled his face to hers, plundering his mouth in a kiss that stole his breath. His hands fisted on her hips, and then raced up her sides to frame her face. Her fingers plowed through his hair, tugging then smoothing, then moving over his chest and neck.

Why did I resist this? Her mouth was heaven, her body soft in all the right places, begging ... no, *screaming* ... to be touched. He ran his hands over her velvety soft skin, snaking under her sweater. He was hard enough to pound a dozen nails, and more than ready to plunge into all of her wet heat to alleviate the incessant ache.

Which might have been why it took him so long to notice her moans had turned into pleas.

"Rory, please."

"Let's go upstairs."

"No."

"Okay." God, the woman had the most amazing breasts. Full, high, and firm. He wanted to rip off her top and bury his face in her cleavage. He rubbed the pad of his thumb over one distended nipple. "We can do it here. Anywhere. I want you so bad, Lucy."

"No. Rory ... get off me!"

She pushed him away and leaped off the couch, lurching until she reached the small bathroom off the hallway. The door slammed and moments later he heard her retching.

His head fell against the sofa cushion. He was such an asshole.

Through his lust-hazed mind, he looked back and saw at some point her physical affection had morphed into panic, and she had tried to tell him she was going to be sick. But, had he heard her? No. He'd been thinking with his dick. He'd given no thought to her, just his own needs, and he'd had what? Two beers? And what the hell was *that* about, anyway? What kind of guy took advantage of his best friend when she was so drunk she was puking in her bathroom?

Nice.

He sighed in disgust and looked at the bathroom door. The retching had stopped a few minutes ago, leaving only silence.

Rory rose from the couch and stood outside the bathroom. He knocked lightly. "Lucy?"

"Go away," she croaked.

"Come on, Luce. Let me in."

"Go, Rory. This was a mistake."

Her voice, muffled and thick, carried through the door. She was crying. *Ah, man.* Her tears reached through the door and punched him in the gut.

"Honey, come out of there. Let's talk about this," he said, a little helplessly.

"There's nothing to talk about, Rory. I'm drunk. I made a mistake. I'm sorry I took advantage of you. Please, please, go. Please," she begged, and he knew he would have to leave if he wanted to salvage their friendship.

"I'm going, okay? But we're not done. I'm going to call and check on you tomorrow." He rested his head on the door, and wondered how things had gone so wrong in such a short amount of time.

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He received no response on the other side of the door, but he didn't expect one. Finally, he straightened and let himself out of her house, hoping this whole mess hadn't destroyed the only friendship that mattered to him.

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Chapter Ten

Lucy's face was stuck to cold tile.

That was the first thing that struck Lucy when she opened her eyes. Second, a sadistic troupe of elves gleefully danced a jig on her right temple.

The normally soft, muted lighting of her downstairs bathroom appeared harsh and blinding, so she shut her eyes and drew in a ragged breath. She gagged when she exhaled, because the sour tang reverberated against the tile and wafted into her nostrils.

I am never drinking again.

That thought created another wave of nausea, because she remembered exactly how she'd ended up on the bathroom floor.

Rory.

Oh. My. God.

The details were fuzzy, but not enough for her to succumb to blissful ignorance. She had a vague recollection of a botched attempt at seduction on her couch, which ended with her running to the bathroom to heave the contents of her stomach. She didn't remember Rory leaving, only begging him to go. A request he obviously heeded, unless he had crashed somewhere else in the house.

After her behavior last night, though, she doubted it.

Lucy pushed herself up off the cold tile, her muscles protesting as she stood. And, although it hurt her pounding

head to do so, she rotated her neck and shoulders to alleviate the crick that came from sleeping on the hard floor.

She fumbled with the doorknob for a few minutes before realizing she must have locked it in her drunken stupor. When she managed to wrench it open, the light pouring into the hallway was so bright, she threw up an arm to block the offending glare.

In the kitchen, the Beast was barking, and realized she had left her poor baby locked in his kennel since yesterday morning. Heedless of her throbbing skull, she rushed into the kitchen and unlocked the door to his house. He bounded out and into her arms, licking her face as tremors shook his small body.

"I'm so sorry, honey. Mama's so bad," she crooned as she stroked his little face and nuzzled his neck.

He whimpered a minute more, then decided the reunion was over, wiggling until she put him down. Lucy walked over to the sliding glass door and opened it. The Beast streaked out into the early morning sunshine, running around the perimeter of her tiny backyard until he'd lifted his leg and peed on everything in sight.

Her guilty conscience mandated a longer romp outside, which she would follow up later with—hangover, be damned—a trip to the dog park. After ten minutes, he trotted back to where she stood shivering on the patio, and they went back in.

The clock read just after six in the morning. Because the previous night's events were hazy after her third lemon drop, Lucy had no idea how long they had stayed at Barney's. She

only knew Rory had taken her home, presumably late in the evening.

Thoughts of Rory inevitably led to memories of kissing him on her couch, which should have been wonderful, damn it, but the intrusion of her embarrassing run to the bathroom kept it from retaining its proper lustful glow.

Damn it.

Mentally kicking herself, she measured out coffee grounds, dumped them in the basket, poured water from the carafe, and turned on the pot. She prayed just this one time, the machine would defy nature and brew at the speed of light.

The thought of food made her stomach churn, but Lucy knew she should eat. While she waited for the dawdling coffeemaker to sputter out its contents, she braved a slice of toast with a smidge of butter and washed it down with four extra-strength ibuprofen.

The toast helped, but the coffee made her feel human again. She sat at the kitchen table and sipped the strong brew, contemplating the mess she'd gotten herself into.

Replaying the memory of Rory's hands roving over her body didn't seem to help. It only made her realize that now she'd had a taste, she wanted it all. God, she'd never imagined he'd had all of that passion stored inside him. And *finally*, it had been directed at her. Those long, clever fingers had left a fiery trail across her body when he'd touched her arms, her face, her breasts....

How would things have ended had she not gotten sick? They'd be upstairs in her bed, preferably naked and going for round two or three. Five on the outside, optimistically

speaking, but, hey, this was Rory Carlisle, not Sean from accounting.

* * * *

Three hours later, she felt much better, but still had no idea how to approach the mess with Rory. After showering earlier, she'd stood in her bedroom with the phone in her hand, considering the wisdom of calling him. How would she begin?

"Hey, Rory. Sorry about last night. Want a 'do over'? Better yet, wanna come over and 'do me'?"

Oh, yeah. *Charming.*

But, hey, she'd already made her first hurdle, albeit messy, if not amateurish. That was the hard part, right?

Lucy struggled to put it out of her mind again as she clipped a lead on the Beast and walked out her front door. She slipped on her sunglasses in retaliation against the demon sun and headed toward her Beetle.

She opened the passenger door and The Beast hopped in. Lucy climbed into the backseat so she could buckle him into his car harness. She didn't care what people said ... she was a safety girl when it came to her dog.

Not a freak.

While she buckled her own seatbelt, a tap on her window startled a scream out of her. She looked up and saw Mr. Waverly stooped outside her car, his cane in hand, a scowl adding more lines to an already wrinkled face.

She started up the car and rolled down her window. "Hi, Mr. Waverly."

"You having a party?"

She blinked at him. "Huh?"

"A party. I know what you young people do for fun, you know. I wasn't born yesterday."

That's for damn sure. She looked around her, checking for other passengers, streamers, balloons, a party bong. "Nope. Nothing here."

"You were making a whole lotta racket last night. We got noise restrictions in this neighborhood."

"I had a friend over, Mr. Waverly. I'm aware of the noise restrictions, and the next time I book Kool & The Gang, I'll be sure to let you know ahead of time."

She rolled up her window and shoved the vehicle into reverse, only to slam on the brakes when Emily pounded on her passenger window.

"For the love of Pete, will you people leave me in peace?" she screeched.

Emily opened the door and slipped in. "I take it somebody didn't get lucky last night."

Lucy narrowed her eyes at her friend as she backed out of her driveway. "You're looking chipper this morning. Did you eat Sean from accounting for breakfast?"

Emily clipped on her belt and reached into her Prada knockoff handbag for a pair of sunglasses. "Sensitive. Where's Rory?"

"At home, would be my guess."

"I'm assuming he didn't spend the night. Tell me he at least got to first base?"

Lucy flipped on her blinker, and then made a right turn on to the busy boulevard that led to the freeway. She thought of Rory's hot hands and hotter mouth. "We kissed."

"Kissing is good," Emily said. "Details."

"It's a little hazy, but the gist is he took me home, I attacked him on the sofa, we groped, and then I barfed."

Emily winced. "Barfing is not good. Did you puke on *him*?"

Lucy's hands tightened on the steering wheel, and she sent up a silent prayer to the gods. "No. I think I almost did, though. I have a vague memory of pushing him off me and running to the bathroom. After that joyous moment, I locked myself in the bathroom and asked him to leave."

"No more lemon martinis for you."

Lucy turned onto the on-ramp for the freeway and headed toward the south end of town. "Ya think?"

"Well, at least you got kissed. Tell me, is he a good kisser?"

"What I remember is pretty amazing."

"I knew he would be," Emily said, sitting back in her seat.

"Well, it sounds like your night went about as well as mine."

"Did Sean in accounting turn out to be gay?"

Emily shook her head and adjusted her sunglasses. "No. It seems he's nursing a broken heart over one of the temps in the building next door. So, I let him cry it out, and then I put him to bed. I was too lit to drive, so I took a cab home." She looked out her window. "By the way, where are we going?"

"Dog park. I owe The Beast for abandoning him last night. I'll swing by Barney's so you can pick up your car."

"I'll tag along, if it's all the same." She sniffed her sweater. "Although I could use a shower. I'm not quite minty fresh."

"Compared to what I looked like this morning, you're a spring violet."

"Have you heard from Rory yet?"

"No. I almost called him earlier, but I chickened out." Lucy sighed. "What in the hell am I going to say?"

"How about, 'Sorry I threw up while you were putting the moves on me. It's nothing personal'?"

Lucy turned into the lot at the dog park and switched off the engine. "What a mess. I'm almost hoping he doesn't call."

"Why?" Emily asked when she got out of the Beetle. "The hard part is over. Sure, it'll be awkward, but he wouldn't have kissed you if he's not interested. Now you have to show him it'll be worth his while for a second try. Although you may want to leave your friend Mr. Gin out of the equation this time."

Lucy clipped the lead on the Beast and locked the car. "Thanks for the tip."

* * * *

By Sunday afternoon, Rory still hadn't called.

Lucy tried not to take it personally but found it difficult because the only logical reason he avoided her was because they had crossed "the line." Either that or he had an aversion to drunk, puking females who threw themselves at him.

It was pure Timid Lucy to turn those reasons inward. But she'd gotten to know ScorpioCutie enough in the last few

weeks that she managed to push it from her brain long enough to come up with a way to change his mind.

While she scrubbed the oven Sunday evening, Lucy fantasized about showing up at his place wearing nothing but a sexy smile. That's what ScorpioCutie would do. Or she could act like nothing happened and see where that took them. Timid Lucy would avoid their little incident and ignore it until it went away. She could always claim alcohol-induced amnesia.

She scrubbed harder.

No. No. No.

She'd cleared her first obstacle. Now she had to take the second step. But damned if this one didn't seem harder.

Lucy finished cleaning the oven and pulled off her rubber gloves. She had just tossed them into the sink when the doorbell rang, and The Beast went into a psychotic barking episode. She walked into the entryway and looked through the peephole.

Her heart dropped like a stone, landing somewhere near her feet.

Rory stood on her front step, a computer tower in his arms, looking decidedly uncomfortable, but oh, so sexy.

She looked down at her ragged jeans and old Portland State University sweatshirt and cringed. *Well, at least I don't smell like a distillery.*

She took a couple of breaths and reminded herself to be cool. It didn't help. She felt like a complete idiot and wished she could turn off the lights and pretend she'd moved away. To Africa.

"Hey," she said when she swung open the door. She'd been aiming for indifference, but it sounded like she had choked on a Chihuahua.

Rory nodded his head. He looked even more uncomfortable now that she had opened the door. "Hey. I brought your new computer."

"Oh."

They stood staring at each other for a minute before Lucy snapped out of it and moved to let him in.

"Hey, tough guy," he said to the Beast. He looked at Lucy. "I can go hook this up for you."

"Okay," she replied. *Lame, lame, lame!*

God, if it hadn't been so horrible, she might have laughed. Rory stood so far away. He acted like she had a communicable disease, and she pasted on a big, fake smile and squeaked like there was a stick up her ass.

Resigned, Lucy led the way upstairs. The Beast shot past her and disappeared. When they reached her office, Rory moved over to the desk. He turned off the computer and began unplugging all of the components while Lucy watched.

"So, uh, did you have a nice weekend?" she asked.

He grunted. "It was okay."

"What did you do?"

He glanced up at her. *There*. She could see it in his eyes. Finally. Knowledge passed between them, recognition of what had occurred in this house less than forty-eight hours before. She waited for him to say something, to kick up an eyebrow and offer up some sexy comment.

He broke eye contact and went back to the computer. "I worked on the 'Vette."

"Oh." *Brilliant.*

She searched for something witty and flirtatious to say, but ScorpioCutie had abandoned her, leaving Timid Lucy behind, with her hurt feelings and stuttering one-liners.

Rory grabbed the new tower and replaced it with the old one, working fast, as if he wanted to be anywhere but here. If his demeanor since he'd arrived was any indication, he'd obviously rather get a root canal than talk to her.

Her heart pounded painfully in her chest and heat spread along her neck and up to her face as she stood there, embarrassed. What had ever made her think she had a chance with him? "Thank you for doing this. I really appreciate it. Let me know how much it cost you and I'll write you a check."

Something in her voice must have revealed her hurt, because Rory looked up.

"Lucy."

"Hmm? You know, I just remembered I left the oven on. I better go turn it off." She backed out of the office. "Let me know about that check," she said again and fled.

* * * *

Rory let out an explosive breath when Lucy left the room. Ran was more like it.

Goddamn it. He should've handled that better. He'd planned on calmly discussing Friday night with her, laying out all of the reasons why they couldn't act on their feelings. But

then she had opened the door, her face fresh and scrubbed, all of that hair piled atop her head. She'd looked mussed and sexy as hell, and he had been irrationally *angry* with her for inspiring these lustful feelings in him in the first place. As if it'd been her fault, which was total bullshit. So, instead, he'd been a complete jackass and sent her crying from the room.

He relived those moments on her couch all weekend long, which made for an uncomfortable couple of days. He had volleyed between the urge to drive over here and finish what they'd started and calling to apologize for his behavior.

This was why he didn't want to go there with Lucy. Too many emotions were involved. And now it had affected their friendship.

Regardless, Rory wanted Lucy. He wouldn't deny it any longer. He wanted her on an intense, carnal level that shocked the hell out of him. He couldn't remember ever yearning to tear the clothes off a woman with the strength that grabbed him lately, and it scared the shit out of him. She was making him crazy. He felt like the business end of a tightrope, torn one way by his honor and the other by his intense desire.

Lucy was the type of woman who wanted a "relationship." And Rory could only offer her sex. He had no intention of getting involved in with a woman that way again. And therein lay the crux of his problem.

She was worth so much more than meaningless sex. Even if they rolled around the sheets a few times, in the end, it would ruin their friendship, and Rory couldn't handle that.

He needed to fix this ... thing between them. After finishing up with her computer, he walked down the stairs and found her in the kitchen, standing with her back to him as she watched a teakettle heating on the stove.

"Hey."

She didn't turn around. "All done?"

Rory wanted to go to her, to fold her into his arms and tell her he was sorry, that he wished they could go back to the way things were. But, they couldn't.

"Look, Luce, about Friday night..."

She spun around. He could see she was trying to be casual, but her eyes were a little wild. "Don't even mention it. I wanted to call you yesterday, but as you can imagine, I was a little under the weather. I'm so sorry for how I acted. My behavior was completely out of line. I got wasted and came on to you and ... I really can't begin to say how ashamed I am." She shook her head and gave him a rueful smile while his heart pounded. He should've been relieved, but each word out of her mouth made him angrier.

"The thing is," she continued, "there's this guy ... and I thought I had a chance with him, but it turned out I read him wrong, so I'd been feeling a little lonely. I want you to know I never meant to make you uncomfortable. I would never take advantage of our friendship like that. I mean, you're my best friend. I don't want to ruin it. So, let's pretend it didn't happen, okay?"

He frowned. And who the hell was this other guy?

She took his silence for acquiescence, and moved over and gave him a hug. She smelled like lavender and household

cleaner, and he wanted to hold on a little longer, to feel that soft body pressed against his, but she moved out of his reach.

"Thank you so much for understanding, Rory. I don't know what I would have done if I'd screwed up our friendship over this stupid little thing."

He didn't think it was stupid, or little, for that matter, but he kept his thoughts to himself. The damn woman had turned the tables on him, and he didn't like it one bit.

When he found his voice, it sounded rusty and false to his own ears. "I was thinking the same thing."

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Chapter Eleven

Lucy turned off the projection screen and flipped on the lights in the conference room. She pulled off the copy of her sketches, which she had stayed up most of the night to complete. She'd needed to focus her mind on something other than Rory and their last conversation.

I was thinking the same thing.

When she'd come up with her brilliant little speech, part of it had been to save her pride. But she hadn't expected Rory to agree so readily, considering the way he'd touched her on the couch Friday night. And his admission had been another barb to her already damaged heart.

She focused on the small group of designers before her. "I'd like for each of you to work on a few designs and e-mail them to me by Wednesday. Thanks, guys," she said, dismissing her team. It still felt strange to have a "team," and she might have enjoyed the concept a little more had she not been running on three hours of sleep.

That and the fact a certain bad boy with cobalt eyes and a hot body kept slipping into her mind at the most inopportune moments. Like every waking second.

Emily stayed behind when the rest filed out of the conference room. "You okay?"

Lucy forced a smile. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"Did you talk to Rory?"

"No," Lucy said, lying. She didn't feel like repeating the painful confrontation. Bad enough it kept haunting her thoughts.

"Well," Emily said, "hang in there."

"Thanks."

Lucy straightened up the conference room and gathered her things. When she returned to her desk, her phone rang.

"Lucy Hollister."

"Hey, Lucy, it's Frankie."

"Hi, Frank." If she brought up the stockbroker again, Lucy was going over to her sister's house after work with a pair of cuticle scissors.

"I had to run some errands downtown," Frankie said.

"Freddie and I are in the lobby and want to take you to lunch."

Lucy was pleasantly surprised. While she and her sisters may not have meshed well, she did like to have some sort of relationship with them. If they stopped their ridiculous matchmaking attempts, Lucy figured they'd get along even better.

"I'll be right down," she said.

They took Frankie's Lexus SUV to a vegan restaurant up the street from Chase. Freddie just turned two and Lucy thought he would've enjoyed McDonald's more, but Frankie had recently watched the movie, *Super Size Me*. Since then, she had banished all animal byproducts from her house and put everyone, children included, on a strict vegan diet.

Lucy had seen the movie, too, but she figured anyone who ate three square meals for thirty days at a fast-food

restaurant deserved what he got. Everyone knew the "meat" in the burgers was of questionable origin. That was half the fun.

Of course, Frankie jumped on the trend wagon every chance she got. She once went on a buttermilk diet because she'd heard it "cleansed the fat" in the body. Lucy would let the fat on her hips grow mold before she drank buttermilk for lunch.

The restaurant offered a lot of soy products, which Lucy thought was a lot like crap masquerading as food. Without a cow to sink her teeth into, she settled on a big salad.

Once their food was delivered, her high-strung sister relaxed a bit. Freddie, cute as a button and twice as demonic, stared down at his plate of black beans, soy chips, and corn tortillas, and made a raspberry at his mother.

"Freddie, that's not appropriate table behavior."

Lucy winked at her nephew. She didn't blame the kid.

"So, how's work?" Frankie asked.

"Good. I'm up for a promotion."

"That's fantastic! Have you told Ma?"

"No, I try to avoid talking to her unless absolutely necessary." Lucy stabbed a piece of Bibb lettuce.

Frankie dipped pita bread in something called tofu pate. Lucy tried not to gag. "You know she means well."

"Easy for you to say. She's not nagging you all the time."

"Why do you think I got married so young?"

"Good point."

Freddie snuck a peak at his mother, currently distracted by her water, and then flung a tortilla across the room. It hit a long-haired hippie in the corner.

"Hey!" the hippie said.

"Hey!" Freddie repeated.

"Watch your kid, lady," the hippie told Lucy. *Not my kid, Jerry.*

"Sorry." Her sister gave Freddie a stern look. "No, no. Bad boy."

He blew another raspberry.

"Has Dan called you?"

"Who?" Lucy asked.

"The stockbroker. Alan's friend?"

"Oh, him. No. Why, did you give him my number?"

"Lucy. You agreed to go out with him, remember?"

Oh, yeah. *Crap.* She had forgotten about the date. Since she'd become ScorpioCutie, another man had occupied her thoughts lately.

"Alan talked to him last night, and he said he would call you today."

Thanks for the warning.

"I've already told him you're looking forward to meeting him, so don't screw this up."

"Remind me why I love you again?"

"Mama!" Freddie shouted.

"Because I'm your big sister and I love you, but I want to see you happy."

Lucy pushed her salad away. "What, do I look miserable or something?"

"Mama!"

"No. It's just that family is so important. You're thirty, Lucy. If we left it up to you, you're eggs would be shriveled by the time you settled down."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Sis. For your information, I happen to like my life. I like my independence, I like my job. I don't need a man." *Liar, liar, pants on fire*, a voice taunted. She ignored it. She *didn't* need a man. She just wanted one in particular.

"I don't want you to be lonely," Frankie said.

"Mama!"

"I want you to have what all of us have found."

With one last warriorlike cry, her pint-sized nephew hurled his black beans, and they landed on her sister's hair with a splat.

Lucy cocked a brow. "Yeah. How's that working out for you?"

* * * *

The impromptu lunch with Frankie proved cathartic. It distracted her long enough to take her mind off her current man troubles and left her spirits high. Well, *higher*, anyway.

Most of the conversations she had with her family, excluding her father, who wisely hid in his garage to avoid the onslaught of do-gooding and hormones from the women in his life, were of the "I love you, *but ...* " variety.

"I love you, but I'm worried about your weight."

"I love you, but I'm afraid you'll be lonely."

"I love you, but I don't think being a graphic artist is a good fit for you."

Lucy grew up around those "I love you, *buts*." She didn't fault her mother and sisters. Most of the time. In some deep part of her, she knew they meant well. Over the years, she had learned to nod and smile, occasionally throw up some token resistance, and continue on with her way of doing things. For some unfathomable reason, her mother and sisters felt Lucy wasn't capable of finding a decent man on her own. Granted, her track record wasn't exactly stellar, but it's not as if she was inept, for crying out loud. She'd rather bumble her way through the unholy chaos called dating, even if it meant she became an old maid.

And the way things were going with Rory, it was looking like a distinct possibility.

Despite that depressing thought, when she walked into the second floor cube farm, she was happier than she had been in days. She would get past this whole awkward mess with Rory. They would put it behind them and chalk it up to experience. She'd live on the memory of Rory's hands sliding roughly across her body, as if he couldn't get enough of her, of his slick tongue and hot mouth.

After she sat down at her desk and checked her e-mail, she thought, *of course, there's always cybersex.*

She grinned.

* * * *

Rory wasn't happy.

He'd spent Sunday night and all of Monday in a crappy mood, brooding about Lucy and her little "this was a mistake" speech. While installing new software on the server, his thoughts wandered to Lucy's soft body and the way she had felt under his hands. Distracted by lust, he'd accidentally deleted another program, then bit Adam's head off when the other man pointed it out.

He'd spilled coffee all over his pants and desk while envisioning what might have happened had things progressed as nature intended on Friday night. He was in turns painfully aroused and spitting mad when he left the office.

When he drove home, he wondered if Lucy would've been so receptive to him if she hadn't been helped along by all those martinis. Had she pictured that "other guy" when she'd been in his arms?

He cursed.

Rory pulled into the driveway and hit the garage door opener. He let himself into the house, tossed his keys on the counter, and headed straight to the fridge for a beer. After a day like today, a man needed one.

It didn't help. If anything, it made her more vivid in his mind. He paced the hardwood floors in his living room, and tried to think of something ... anything ... to take his mind off Lucy Hollister.

Goddamn it, this was exactly why he hadn't wanted to get involved this way. He preferred his relationships with women on the light, casual side. He didn't want messy entanglements. He thought of Carrie, cursed again, and

wanted to give up on females all together. Nothing but a damn headache.

His eyes landed on the computer tower he'd brought home from Lucy's house the night before. He had this particular PC promised to a customer, but the guy didn't need it until later in the month. Might as well get it done now, he thought. It's not as if he had anything better to do. Or think of.

Rory grabbed the tower and set off to his spare bedroom. He'd planned to use the extra room for an office when he moved in last year. And while a desk and computer were set up inside, he did most of his office work on the PC in his living room. He used this as a storage area of sorts, a testing place for his side jobs, filled with scores of computer components, all organized according to use.

He put the tower down on the desk and plugged it in to the monitor resting atop the work center. It booted up, humming when it loaded. He walked back into the kitchen and grabbed another beer. By the time he returned, the PC had finished starting up.

He uninstalled the design software, first making a backup of Lucy's work in case she hadn't saved it herself. Then he went into the Internet browser to delete the history.

And stopped.

His blood thundered so loud he heard it pounding in his ears when he saw the amount of time she had spent on personalspace.com. Small world, maybe? Rory doubted it. He deleted the history and turned off the web browser, his mind racing.

The browser hadn't revealed her user name on the Web site, but he had a sneaking suspicion he already knew it.

Rory stared at the monitor as he ran the possibilities in his brain. All the times he'd wished it was Lucy...

Rory clicked on the icon for her messenger service, a recent addition. Another screen pulled up on the page, and he found a long list of chat logs.

Their chat logs.

He clicked on the first one. His breath quickened when he read the first log after they had exchanged screen names a couple weeks ago.

He was shocked, because up until now, the possibility that Lucy could be ScorpioCutie had been a pipe dream. Even now, it still didn't seem possible. The evidence, however, stared him in the face and was hard to refute.

"I'm glad you caught me online last night. I was bored and hoping you would be around," he had written. "I enjoyed our little discussion."

The discussion, he remembered, had been on the finer points of erotica and whether it worked as an aphrodisiac, to which both of them had wholeheartedly agreed. He knew if he opened the following log, it would be about her suggestion they read some together sometime.

Rory scanned all of the chat logs, recalling each one with increasing clarity. When he'd started up this online affair with the mysterious ScorpioCutie, it had been right after Adam suggested Lucy might have the hots for him. Rory had tried to dismiss it, but then she'd started occupying his thoughts. It appeared Adam got the Kewpie doll after all.

When he finished, he sat back in his chair and took a long pull of his beer. He drained the rest of the bottle in one swallow, the cold brew soothing his suddenly parched throat. His groin ached, and he knew if he looked down, he'd find himself fully aroused.

He let out a breath. And grinned.

The thing is there's this guy ... and I thought I had a chance with him, but it turned out I read him wrong, so I'd been feeling a little lonely.

Little Luce was lying. She hadn't come on to him because she'd been drunk. No "other guy" existed. *Rory* was the guy. All that indifference about the whole kissing thing had been B.S.

She knew his online identity. Lucy, *not* ScorpioCutie, had his messenger address, the same one she had sent the ones written under her fictitious screen name. And if that wasn't enough, a picture of him, clear as day, sat next to his bio on his personalspace.com page. Right next to his *name*.

So, Lucy had a sexy little vixen living inside her, huh? She appeared wholesome and guileless to the rest of the world. Damn, but she'd even had *him* fooled. And he knew about her wild side. The way she'd responded to him on the couch Friday night had nothing to do with alcohol and everything to do with her wanting him. But he couldn't figure out why she would engage in subterfuge to do it.

Given this new development, all bets were off. No way in hell he would keep away from her now. It was on. She wanted to play? He smiled again. Oh, baby, Lucy Hollister better watch out.

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

Because when he played, he played to win.

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Chapter Twelve

At half past six on Tuesday evening, Lucy stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows on the east facing side of her office building. The balmy, spring weather had been replaced by a steady rain, socked in by fog. She watched the steam rise off buildings and the streets below, the tops of colorful umbrellas twisting in the wind of those brave enough to face the storm.

She'd worked late for the past week, throwing herself into her project. It helped to ease the ache that lay like a deep pit in her heart.

Rory must've intuited she needed some space, despite her own claims to the contrary. He'd made himself scarce for the last two weeks. They'd passed by each other in the hall a few times, the first of which was tense and uncomfortable. After that, he smiled and said hi, and sometimes they chatted. All the normal things friends did.

She felt like she'd imagined that night on her sofa.

The late nights left her with little free time, but she spent those precious moments on her home computer, continuing her online affair. After that terrible night in her kitchen, Lucy figured that if she couldn't have him in reality, she'd grab technology, or more accurately, Rory, by the horns.

Now, she felt even more deceitful. On some level, she was using him, and each morning when she woke, the guilt settled in and stuck like a barb.

Rory obviously felt theirs was a friendship *without* benefits, and Lucy exploited that all in the name of lust. She felt like an

insect trapped in a sticky web from which she would not emerge unscathed. She'd considered ending the affair, but like a heroin addict, she both dreaded and craved those late-night conversations and couldn't yet bring herself to stop.

In the meantime, the stockbroker, Danford "Just Call Me Danno" Miller had called last Wednesday, apparently feeling compelled to point out he would be busy with "lots of other important stuff" until the following weekend. They had planned for a date this coming Saturday, but after a five-minute conversation with "Danno," Lucy knew this would be one for the record books.

"Hey."

Lucy started and spun around. Rory stood behind her, looking sexy, windblown, and good enough to eat. He smiled his wicked smile and held up a steaming paper cup embossed with the logo from the kiosk in the lobby.

"Large chai latte, hold the fat."

It was an olive branch, and Lucy grabbed it. She missed him. If he could put the awkwardness aside, then by God, so would she.

She took a drink. "Thanks."

"Been busy?" he asked.

"Yeah, actually. Putting the nose to the grindstone, and all that crap. I've been staying late all week trying to tweak the graphics for my new account. I meet with the client Friday." She took another sip. It wasn't difficult to talk to him like this again. But Rory made it easy. "How about you?"

"I've been updating the software and training a few new employees." He reached out, grabbed the latte from her

hands, and took a sip of his own before he passed it back to her. "Plus, I'm wrapping up some things before I leave for that conference next week."

"I forgot about that. Where is it again? St. Louis?"

"Chicago," he corrected.

"Ah ... a computer nerd gathering. Is it like a *Star Trek* convention?"

"Hardy har." But he smiled. "You about done here?"

"Yeah. Why? Wanna grab a bite?"

"Sure. There's a new Mexican place down the block."

"Let me finish up here. Meet you in thirty?"

"I'll have the table waiting."

* * * *

The Mexican place was high on atmosphere but low on taste. Lucy didn't mind. She just wanted Rory's company. They slid back into their old pattern of friendship, as if they had never explored each other's mouths and bodies.

It took all of Lucy's control not to scream in frustration. But she'd made the speech, right? She'd told Rory she had never meant to take advantage of him, when in truth, she wanted to take him home and lick him from head to toe.

When they parted in the parking lot, Rory reached over and hugged her, rubbing his hand in lazy circles over the small of her back, the same way he had when they'd danced at Barney's.

Little tingles flushed her skin, spreading throughout her body. She was almost certain he had no idea of his effect on her, that he was just expressing his relief they were back on

track. *Almost* certain, because she could have sworn while he held her close, his lips made the barest of passes over her ear.

It felt erotic, as she stood in his embrace, his strong arms wrapped around her, his breath hot on her neck. Although it had stopped raining, the stormy May air blew about them, and the dusky evening cloaked them in twilight. As confusion settled in, he released her.

He squeezed her hand. "I'm glad we did this, Luce. I'm glad we're okay."

She must have been imagining things again. Damn it. "Yeah. Me, too."

Like that evening in her foyer a few weeks ago, he stared at her like he wanted her. Like he'd looked at her that night on her couch. She felt like a yo-yo, her emotions and his behavior sliding up and down, whipping her brain this way and that until she felt like nothing but a dizzy mess.

Rory gave her his sexy smile. "Catch you later, kid."

Lucy got in her car, but waited until he left. Her head fell forward and hit the steering wheel with a thunk.

This would be impossible. How had she ever convinced herself things could go back to normal? Just one look, one smile, and she wanted him. And not just on the Internet. Worse, she knew what those hands, that mouth felt like on hers. She didn't have to imagine anymore.

I am so screwed.

* * * *

Late Friday evening, Rory sat down at his personal computer. The plasma was off, and he had a bottle of Beck's on a coaster beside him. He checked his watch. Five to ten.

He wore a pair of loose pajama bottoms decorated with flying pigs, a gift for his thirty-first birthday from Lucy. He found it apropos, because he was about to take their Internet relationship to a whole new level.

Rory had enjoyed himself these last few days. After their dinner Tuesday night, he had purposely dropped by her cubicle each following day. Every time, he sat too close, invaded her space and made idle chitchat inserted with meaningful looks.

She had nearly killed him that night in the parking lot, with her soft body pressed so close to his. He almost decided to chuck the whole thing and throw her in back of his truck. Now that he knew she wanted him, it was excruciating to carry on this charade. This had to be the longest session of foreplay in history. Rory figured when he finally got inside her, he'd last two seconds.

He'd sent Lucy, or ScorpioCutie, an e-mail that morning, letting her know he would be online at ten. Now, he logged onto the Internet and checked his messenger service to see if she was waiting. Not yet. Rory checked his watch again. Five past ten. Maybe she hadn't gotten his message. Part of him wanted to call Lucy to make sure she was home, but that seemed to be giving away his position somehow. He didn't want her suspicious ... not yet.

He rubbed a hand over his bare chest and started a game of solitaire. He was into his third round when the messenger service opened with a chime.

"Hi," she wrote.

"Hi, yourself."

"Sorry I'm late. I was taking a bubble bath."

"I wish I could have been there to see that," Rory replied. The thought of Lucy covered in nothing but bubbles set his blood humming.

"Me, too."

"What do you think about when you're in the tub?" he asked.

A pause followed, and Rory visualized Lucy tugging her lip as she did when she pondered a question.

"Sometimes I think about how good the water feels on my body. Lately I've been thinking about you."

Rory groaned when his body responded to her words.

"He's thinking about you, too," he muttered.

"I imagine your hands traveling over my naked body. Your tongue running across my breasts, belly, thighs..."

Holy shit. Who was this wanton woman? If he hadn't discovered the evidence himself, he never would have believed Lucy had this side to her.

"I want you to pretend I'm there with you right now," he wrote. "I'm there with you, in your house. I'm pulling you inside your bedroom." He paused. "What are you wearing right now?"

"Just my robe," she answered.

He closed his eyes and pictured Lucy standing next to her bed. His cock twitched when he imagined pushing off the robe and laying his lips on those smooth shoulders.

He snapped himself out of his fantasy and continued typing. They would both enjoy this.

"We're standing in front of your bed. I'm slipping the robe off, watching it pool at your feet. I start to touch you. I'm feeling your breasts in my hands, kneading them, shaping them. Can you feel me doing that?"

He waited. And waited.

Finally, she replied, "I want to touch you, too. I push you down on my bed, and you're lying there, waiting. I climb across the bed and straddle you. I can feel you against me, like hot steel. I kneel down and take you into my mouth. Can you feel my mouth hot on you?"

Holy Mother of God, he could. He stroked himself inside his pants. He couldn't help it, his body screamed for release. This had to be the single most erotic moment of his life. The fact he now had a face to picture in his mind ... that it was Lucy ... only made it hotter, more intense.

He stopped stroking and wrote, "I want you to touch yourself like I'm touching you. I want you to imagine my hands on you, like I'm imagining your mouth on me."

"I'm already doing that. I want to feel you inside of me. God, I have to stop writing for a minute, okay? I'm close, so close," she replied, and Rory fought the urge to jump on his bike and break every traffic law to get inside Lucy.

"I want you to read what I'm writing while you touch yourself," he typed, a mighty difficult feat with only one hand.

"I want to make you come. I'm turning you over on the bed. You're staring up at me. I kiss you, and my tongue fills your mouth when my fingers touch between your legs. You open yourself to me, and I push myself inside. Your body is like a hot, wet fist. In and out, in and out. Pushing harder and deeper..."

Rory had to stop because his own release came. He cried out at the strength of it, waiting as the aftershocks rocked his body. He laid his head back against the chair and stared blindly up at the ceiling.

He'd just had the best sex of his life, and the woman was ten miles away. When reality trickled back, he looked at the screen.

"Are you there?" he asked, praying she was. The last time they'd tried this, she had logged off when he'd asked her to take off her panties.

"Oh, my God."

"Is that good or bad?" he asked.

"Good, definitely good. Try incredible. Earth shattering."

He smiled. "I want to meet you. In person."

No words appeared on the screen for a long moment. Lucy was probably panicking.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because if we can create this much heat on a computer, imagine what we could do to each other in real life."

"When?" she asked.

"Tomorrow night. At Barney's in the Pearl. Nine o'clock."

A pause. "Okay."

Keeping in character, he asked, "What do you look like?"

Again, nothing for a long while. Finally, "Why?"

"So, I'll know who to look for."

"Remember my bio? I'm about 5'8 with long blonde hair and a sexy body."

When he stared at those words, he realized he'd just figured out why Lucy played this game ... and perhaps it wasn't a game after all.

* * * *

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Lucy asked for the third time.

"Please," Emily scoffed. "I won the blue ribbon at the county fair three years in a row for best groomed horse."

Lucy stood. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

Emily laughed and pushed Lucy back in the chair. "I'm kidding. Actually, I only got the blue ribbon once."

"I wouldn't brag about that," Lucy grumbled.

"You're touchy this morning."

"I'm nervous."

"About Danno?"

"No. I'm afraid I'm going to look like a horse when you're done."

"A blue-ribbon horse. Sit down, would you? Jeez." Emily chuckled. "I'm yanking your chain. I used to do this for a living. And not on horses," she added.

A half hour ago on Saturday morning, Emily had knocked on her door carrying bags and bags of stuff, which nearly sent Lucy into a panic attack. Now, she sat at the kitchen table

with a vinyl cape secured around her neck, and her hair pinned up with clips.

"Here." Emily passed her a glass. "Have some wine."

"It's not even noon."

"So? If I'm going to do this, I don't want to have to listen to your harping. It's either you or me, and I'm the one holding the scissors."

Lucy took a sip of the wine. "Happy, Mom?"

"Thank you. Now turn around. And *relax*. It's just hair. You're going to look great when I'm done. Besides, it's about time you took a risk."

Oh, I took a risk, all right. She closed her eyes and thought about the night before. She had always known Rory would be an incredible lover, but she'd never thought he'd be a great cyberlover. She flushed thinking about it.

She'd gone to bed all hot and bothered, sated yet unsatisfied, because Rory was across town and not lying beside her. When she'd drifted to sleep, her dreams had been edgy and erotic. She woke feeling the same way.

After last night, Lucy had almost called the stockbroker and canceled. ScorpioCutie demanded to meet the man who had brought her to such an intense climax last night. Lord, her legs still quivered when she remembered their hot conversation. But, then reality intruded. Timid Lucy reared her logical and self-conscious head, whispering words like, "He wants your friendship, not your body," in her ear.

Because Lucy couldn't stand to see the disappointment and confusion in his eyes when she revealed she was his online

lover, Lucy had decided to follow through with her date with Danno. She wouldn't stop to meet Rory tonight.

"Someone must have forgotten to piss in Grandpa Grump's Cheerios this morning," Emily said, bringing Lucy's reverie to a halt. She released one of the clips and let the curls fall down Lucy's back. "He didn't hiss and spit at me when I walked over today."

"Maybe he remembered to take his meds."

"Does he have any family?" Emily sprayed water on Lucy's hair and began combing.

"I think he has a daughter, but I've only seen her a few times."

"That's kind of sad. Well, it would be if he wasn't such an old pervert."

Lucy took another sip of wine. "Hey, at least he's nice to you. All he ever does is bitch at me."

"He's only nice to me because he thinks I'm a working girl. Did you know he asked me if I'd be willing to give him a senior discount?"

She choked on her wine. "You're kidding."

"Swear on my mama's grave. Well, I would if she was dead, but the sentiment's the same."

Lucy laughed. "I cannot believe that."

"I think he must be lonely."

"Yeah, well, you'd be lonely, too, if you treated people the way he does. I think he must have been a cop, the way he's so suspicious of everything." Lucy tried to picture Johnny Waverly as a young man, but she could only conjure his wrinkled face atop Rory's body, which was kinda freaky.

"How's it going with your favorite IT man?" Emily asked. She picked up the shears and began snipping again.

Lucy watched in horror when inches of her hair were mercilessly hacked from her head. "Uh ... we're talking again."

"Well, that's good. What about the online thing?"

"Still going." Another lock at least three inches long fell down the front of the cape. "What are you? A sadist? How much are you cutting off back there?"

"Relax. You'll love it when I'm done. Just think, no more headaches."

Lucy grumbled.

"Drink some more wine. Have things gotten hot and heavy again? Online, I mean." Emily released another clip and began spraying.

Lucy started to pray.

She shut her eyes and told Emily about last night, leaving out most of the intimate details. Some things were too private to discuss, even with her friend. Talking about it helped take her mind off her receding hair, and by the time she finished, so had Emily.

She stood in front of Lucy and ran her fingers through the wet strands. After pouring some mousse from a bottle, Emily worked it through from the roots to the ends. She reached into one of her bags and pulled out a hairdryer with a diffuser attached to the end.

She pointed to it. "This is a diffuser."

"I know what it is," Lucy said defensively. "I have one. I'm not completely inept."

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

"I'm going to show you how to blow dry your hair to give it more body, and then we're going to play around with the curling iron."

Lucy giggled. "That sounds wrong."

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Chapter Thirteen

Lucy had to admit, Emily knew her stuff. By the time five rolled around, she looked like a whole new woman, and not of the equine variety. She loved her hair. Hip, cut to the shoulders, and layered to thin it out. It actually *bounced* when she moved her head.

Because Lucy only wore mascara and lip gloss, Emily had helped her apply her makeup so she didn't leave the house looking like a street walker.

The dress she chose for her date with "Just Call Me Danno"—she already hated this guy—was slinky and red with spaghetti straps, a fitted bodice, and a long, shimmery skirt with a slit up the side. She wore it with strappy red heels and a matching beaded clutch.

"Well, how do I look?" she asked Emily.

"Terrific. It's a damn shame you're wasting it on your blind date. Rory would nail you to the wall if he saw you in this dress."

"Well that's certainly succinct and to the point," Lucy said. "Thanks, I think."

She checked her butt out in the bathroom mirror while Emily put her supplies back in the bags. When she finished, Lucy walked her to the door.

She hugged her. "Thanks, again. I owe you one."

"Go to Barney's tonight after your date. Even if he doesn't realize you're his Internet mistress, it'll be worth the look on his face when he catches you all gussied up."

Lucy toyed with the straps on her dress. "Yeah, maybe."

* * * *

Lucy's instincts proved correct. Danford "Just Call Me Danno" Miller turned out to be a complete and utter ass. He had no social skills whatsoever, which made her wonder who was foolish enough to let him handle their assets. From the way he kept staring at her breasts, it appeared he wanted to get his hands on *her* assets.

No way, boy-o.

He took her to dinner at a stuffy restaurant downtown. She was uncomfortable but tried to take heart in what dinner cost him.

The conversation revolved around him—his record at his firm; the gym where he worked out every day, rain or shine; his "totally sweet" vintage Dodge Dart. If Danno wanted vintage, she would love to show him Rory's Corvette. Now that was a fine automobile.

The Dart was vintage, all right. Vintage junkyard. It smelled like dirty gym socks, and Lucy had to crack her window to keep from choking on the filthy air when they left the restaurant. She should have met him there. Right now, her comfortable Beetle with its fabric seats, FM radio, and working heater sounded like heaven.

Danno plugged an eight-track into the deck. When Twisted Sister came on, Lucy endured sixteen city blocks of Danno screaming, "We're not gonna take it!" while he head banded and slapped the dash.

At least he hadn't asked to spank her and for her to call him Daddy.

Of course, the night was still young.

At nine-thirty, Danno rolled the Dart along Broadway, scoping out folks who walked along the streets. For once, no rain fell, but the air chilled her beyond the open window of the car.

Barney's lay ahead. When they approached, Lucy spotted Rory's red and white Corvette. On impulse, she put a hand on Danno's shoulder. "Let's stop here."

He looked at her hand and smiled. "Sure thing, babe."

Eww.

Once they arrived, Danno barreled his way in front of her to get inside first. She was all for women's lib, but couldn't the guy at least exhibit manners? He walked so far ahead of her, the damn door slammed shut in her face and smashed her big toe.

"You are so not getting laid, pal," she muttered when she heaved open the door.

Lucy stood inside the doorway, looking for Rory. A trio of men on the stage with various instruments, their deft fingers and voices creating a catchy and upbeat melody. She scoped out the vinyl booths along the sides of all three walls. A swarm of people gyrating to the beat of the band filled the dance floor. At the bar, not a single stool remained, and the taps ran quickly tonight.

"Man, this place is packed. Look at all the action in here!" Her moronic date appeared at her side just as she spotted Rory.

He stood at the bar looking gorgeous in faded jeans and a blue ribbed sweater, holding a bottle of beer in his hand. He was speaking to someone, but a crowd of people blocked her view. Impatiently, Lucy craned her neck, trying to get a look.

The sea parted. And there stood Rory, having a wonderful time with a beautiful blonde dressed in a tight, black halter dress. Her hair spilled down her back in waves. She laughed and touched Rory's hand. Jealousy lanced through Lucy, hot and fierce.

She realized her plan had backfired.

* * * *

"I can't believe you grew up in Houston, too," the blonde ... what the hell was her name? ... said. "How long have you lived in Portland?"

"It'll be two years this August," Rory said.

"I moved here last year. It's so different in this town, so liberated."

True enough, Rory thought. When he'd arrived, the relaxed atmosphere of the city was so unlike his hometown, it had been a welcome change, a balm on the heart he'd been piecing back together.

The blonde, Alyson, he remembered suddenly, had been sitting alone at the bar when he'd walked up. She seemed like a nice lady. She was certainly built, but for some strange reason, short, curvy women now caught his eye.

Speaking of short, curvy women, one decked out in shimmering red moved right up next to him at the bar. He glanced down for a moment until he got a look at her face.

Holy shit.

"Luce?"

She looked up at him, a smile touching her lips. She'd cut her hair. All of those glorious curls were now short and sassy, and somehow fitting. She wore makeup, a smoky color on her eyelids that reminded him of silk sheets and naked bodies. *Their* naked bodies. That dress ... God, there couldn't be an inch to spare, and he looked his fill. The satiny material hugged those soft curves and pressed her breasts together enticingly.

She'd come after all. Had she done this for him?

"God, Luce, you look amazing."

Her brown eyes flickered downward, and she blushed prettily. "Thanks."

He offered her his seat, but she declined, her eyes moving around the crowd of people who filled the noisy bar. Even in high heels, she barely cleared his shoulders. Heels. The woman was wearing four-inch red heels. Rory's brain burned with the image of Lucy naked and on her back with nothing but those heels on her feet. He took a deep breath and sat back down on his barstool so she wouldn't strain her neck.

"Want a drink?" he asked.

Lucy glanced around again. "Oh, no. I've got one coming already." She nodded at Alyson, who was chatting with another woman.

"Hot date?"

"Yeah." He looked at her. "I've been waiting here for over an..."

"The bartender didn't know how to make that drink you wanted so I brought you this instead."

A man of about thirty with stiff red hair bleached at the top approached Lucy. He wore slacks and a black dress shirt and reeked of cologne. The smile he gave Lucy looked a little too much like a leer as he handed her a glass of wine.

Rory disliked him on sight.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Rory, this is my date..."

"Just call me Danno, Rory." He stuck out a hand.

Rory hesitated a minute before shaking it. She'd come here on a date with another guy. The realization stung. He thought she was here to meet him. To out herself as ScorpioCutie. Instead, she'd dressed up for some yahoo who looked like Clay Aiken.

Anger he could handle. Hurt—pride, he assured himself, just pride—was another matter altogether, and the anger morphed into raw fury.

Lucy rolled her eyes at her date and took a sip of wine. A red, Rory noted through his wrath. She hated red wine. The jackass should have gotten her a Chardonnay.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He stared hard at her for a long moment. "I guess I got stood up," he replied and walked away.

* * * *

Lucy watched, dumbfounded, when Rory disappeared with what looked like barely controlled rage, down the hallway that led to the bathrooms. If she didn't know better, she would've

thought he'd been jealous. And that would never happen. Only one reason could explain his reaction. He knew she was ScorpioCutie. But, that couldn't be it.

Danno took the wine glass from her hand and placed it on the bar. He dragged her out onto the dance floor where other couples shook their bodies to the music.

"Oh, I don't want to dance," she said.

"Come on, this is a great song!"

Lucy didn't recognize the song, but even so, she didn't think it qualified as great. Still, she tried to move to the music with more enthusiasm than she felt.

Not only was Danno a complete social reject, he danced like a freak. He shook his head this way and that while his body moved in the opposite direction. Occasionally, he shouted out a "Hell, yeah!" or "Bring it!"

They'd come to the dance floor near the finale of the song. When it ended, Lucy turned to go, but Danno grabbed her hand and pulled her into his arms when the band segued into a soft ballad.

She pushed at him for a moment, but he was surprisingly strong. Her irritation then pricked into a sliver of alarm, but she shrugged it off. They were in a room full of people. And she was probably overreacting.

His cologne cloyed at her, like he had sucked all of the oxygen out of the room. He held her flush against him. When he swayed to the music, he pressed his lower body into hers in such a way she couldn't mistake his arousal.

Gross.

"You are so hot," he whispered in her ear.

The compliment sounded more like an insult coming from this oversexed buffoon.

"After this song, let's go out to my car and make a little music of our own."

Oh, for the love of Pete. She pushed him away. "I don't think so."

"What?" he asked. "You're hot for me. I know it."

He grabbed her arms and pulled her against him roughly, grinding his pelvis into hers. The alarm transformed into panic. She looked around helplessly. He couldn't do anything in a crowded bar, could he?

She tried to push back out of his embrace, but he held on tight, once again surprising her with his strength.

"A woman dresses up like that for one reason. You want this."

"Wrong," she said, shoving at him. This was beginning to feel like a really bad made-for-TV movie.

Out of nowhere, a hand reached between them and pulled Danno off her. Rory grabbed her arm and moved her behind him. "The lady said no, Danno."

Danno stood toe-to-toe with Rory, the expression on his face stating his manhood had been tested.

"Look at her," he yelled with a sweep of his arm. Most of the bar's patrons had stopped to watch the show. Lucy tried to blend in with the floor. "The bitch wanted it!"

Rory punched Danno in the face. He fell backward onto the dance floor, and then pushed on his feet, trying to get back up. He slipped. His hand flew to his nose, where blood flowed like a leaky pipe.

Rory grabbed her hand. "Let's get the hell out of here."

* * * *

Lucy shook like she had Parkinson's. Rory saw it in the way her shoulders quaked as she sat in the leather bucket seat of the 'Vette. He'd turned the heater on full, but she continued to tremble. He suspected it had little to do with the cool air and everything to do with being accosted on a dance floor by a jerk named Danno.

He didn't feel so steady himself. Adrenaline still coursed through him, and his hands shook on the steering wheel. He had never felt the kind of rage that'd shot through him in that moment. Looking back, it seemed as if someone else had taken over his body and before he knew it, he'd charged toward the dance floor to protect Lucy.

Rationally, he knew his fierce reaction came from the fact she was his dear friend and a woman, and no lady should be treated that way. On a more base level, it had been some primitive urge that came over him. In his mind, someone had been hurting *his* woman.

Ridiculous. Lucy wasn't his woman. He didn't *have* women for Christ's sake. He had flings, easygoing relationships that never lasted longer than a couple of months. He liked it that way. But things were different with Lucy. They hadn't even gone to bed, well, not in the traditional sense anyway, and he was acting like she was his. A new and entirely discomfiting feeling.

Maybe this whole thing had gotten out of hand. After he'd made his discovery, he thought they could bring their

relationship to a more physical level, best friends with benefits. He'd liked the sound of that. But, the woman had gotten to him, and he hadn't even seen her naked yet.

Perhaps they ought to cool things down before things got out of control. Rory glanced over at her, at the shapely leg that winked at him from the long slit in the side.

Riiight.

He drove aimlessly at first, the silence between them stretching out. He cruised along Front Avenue, watching the dark water of the Willamette River pass by on their left while Lucy stared out her window.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded and wrapped her arms tighter around her middle. He backtracked and headed toward the West Hills.

Rory needed to say something, anything, to break the ice. "I'm sorry that happened." He couldn't dredge up the least bit of remorse for hitting the son of a bitch, but he was sorry the little worm got his hands on Lucy.

She remained silent.

Rory wove through the quiet residential streets until he reached the entrance for the Rose Gardens, a majestic park filled with the lovely blooms overlooking the Portland skyline.

When he switched off the ignition, Lucy opened the door and got out of the car. He followed her.

With her hair shorter, it no longer hid her face. He watched her as they walked along the concrete sidewalk that weaved through the rows and rows of blossoming roses.

She stopped at a metal fountain. Water trickled down a manmade waterfall into a pool reflecting the soft moon

above. Around them, flat, pounded metal beams stood sentinel in the darkness.

They were alone.

Lucy shivered in the cool evening air. She wore only a dress that left little to the imagination. Rory shucked his jacket and settled it around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry you went to all that trouble for that jerk."

She turned her head and looked out at the bright lights of the city. He eyed the long expanse of leg that beckoned him and felt like a dickhead. He wasn't any better than Danno. He noticed her shoulders quaking again, and helplessness lanced through him. She was crying.

"Hey, now. It's okay." He put a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't waste any tears on that asshole."

She looked at him, and Rory realized she wasn't crying. She was *laughing*. Her whole body jerked with movement, and she bent over at the waist, hooting.

He couldn't just stand there, so he joined her.

"Oh, my God. That was incredible." She knuckled the tears gathered at her eyes. "Man, you don't know how bad I wanted to punch that guy myself." She pantomimed the cold cock Rory had delivered to Danno. "Pow!" She laughed again.

"You actually agreed to go out with that guy?"

"Lord, no. Are you kidding? I'd sleep with a monkey before I'd let that clown touch me." She ran a hand over her newly shorn hair. "That's the stockbroker my sister set me up with. Real winner, huh?"

He reached a hand up to feel the soft curls, his relief a palpable thing. Her eyes cut quickly to his, and she drew in a

breath. "What I think," he said, "is that you need to stop letting your sisters pick your dates."

She snuggled deeper into his jacket, sniffed. "If I do that, I won't have *any* dates. Then I won't have anyone to dress up for." She glanced at him, then away.

Here was the opening he'd been looking for, but he felt like he had a mouthful of peanut butter. Rory cleared his throat. "You were wasting your time on him. A guy like Danno, he cannot appreciate that dress."

Her gaze slid back to his. "Good thing I didn't wear it for him, then, huh?"

This was it. He knew what she'd said: that she had done it for him. She was throwing down the gauntlet.

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Chapter Fourteen

"Who did you do it for?" Rory asked.

Lucy's heart thudded in her chest. She couldn't quite meet his eyes. His velvety voice, rough yet smooth, caressed nerve endings strung tight like piano wire.

"Lucy," he said softly. "Who did you wear that dress for?"

Oh, he was good. He knew damn well she'd dressed up for him. In a sudden flash of insight, she realized she wasn't fooling anyone, especially Rory.

"I know you," he said, his voice whispering over her. "ScorpioCutie."

Her breath caught, and her eyes moved to his face. He watched her with the single-minded intensity he saved for naughty coeds and naughtier computers.

"What did you call me?"

"You heard me," he answered huskily.

Silent, she skittered her gaze away from his, flying away like a nervous bird before landing on a spot a few feet beyond his shoulder. She considered denying it all. How much could he know, after all? He might be guessing. Then she thought of his heated gaze, those knowing eyes, that flash of insight.

Her skin heated with embarrassment. "How long have you known?"

God! Why couldn't she be ScorpioCutie? Why couldn't she charge over there and throw him down on the grass? What stopped her?

Three words, Lucille Louise Hollister.

"A couple of weeks."

"How did you find out?"

His heated stare burned her flesh. "You forgot to delete the chat logs."

Duh! "Why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"Why didn't you?"

Good question. She didn't know if he wanted to hear the truth. So she lied. "It was part of the game."

He lifted a brow. "So this is a game?"

Lucy nodded, but she couldn't look him in the eye. With predatory grace, he turned to her, stalked her, and closed her in, forcing her to lean against one of the metal beams. The cold seeped in from the steel, saturating her skin as a prickle of goose bumps spread across her body.

He looked like a large feral animal, and she was his prey. With nowhere to go.

Rory stopped an inch from her. He was so big, towering over her. His hot breath fanned across her cheek. He lifted a finger and ran it down her neck. She couldn't control the delicious tremor that ran through her.

"This?" he asked. His finger trailed down the outer slope of her left breast, skimmed her side. Her insides turned to liquid fire. "This was a game?"

He challenged her with his eyes, with his touch. Dared her to lie, so he could prove her wrong. *Tell him the truth!* a part of her screamed. The rational part that had been tied up gagged. But, the part of her who'd created ScorpioCutie, the part of her who longed to live dangerously, to be wild, to

make passionate love to Rory Carlisle, *that* part stared up at him. And nodded.

"Oh, yeah?" He placed his lips where his fingers had been, right at the sensitive spot where her neck and shoulder met. His tongue darted out, touched her flesh. His teeth nipped gently. "Still a game?" he murmured against her skin.

Lucy's head fell back against the hard metal. She squeezed her eyes shut and moaned. "Yes."

His lips traveled north until he reached her ear. He captured the lobe between his teeth and took a soft bite. She couldn't take it. Her body was aflame. Every cell screamed for Rory. She reached up and grabbed two fistfuls of his sweater and dragged his mouth to hers.

She knew she'd startled him, but he recovered quickly. He took possession of her mouth, using his tongue to force her lips apart so he could invade her with his searing heat. Hot liquid pooled between her legs, as she vibrated, aching with need.

He pressed her up against the wide beam, his hands running down her sides to grip her bottom. Without a thought as to where they were, she wrapped both her legs around his hips. He made a low sound in his throat, shifting their bodies so his erection lined up right where it needed to be, against her throbbing heat.

His lips left her mouth and trailed hot kisses down the length of her throat as his hand snaked down the front of her dress and molded to her breast. Then he traveled farther south and slipped his hand inside the slit of her skirt, running up her leg where he encountered the thigh highs and

attached garter. He moaned into her mouth at the discovery, and then moved inward until he touched her where she burned.

Clever fingers slipped inside the elastic band of her panties, and he was there, inside, around, everywhere. Her breath quickened, and for a moment she swore she saw stars. She approached a precipice, a precarious edge from which there would be no return.

Recklessly, she wanted to sail off headfirst.

Her climax exploded through her, sending ribbons of pleasure spiraling through her body. Rory captured her cry of release in his mouth.

When she landed from that freefall, she heard his ragged breathing, her own panting breaths, and felt the cold steel against her back.

He rested his forehead against hers, his blue eyes piercing her in the darkness. "My God, Lucy," he said hoarsely.

She didn't know what to do next. She'd never been in this place before. At least that night on the couch, she had been able to run away to the bathroom. She knew things had the potential of becoming awkward again. Okay, he'd given her the best orgasm of her life in the middle of one of Portland's most visited city parks. Things were *already* awkward.

"I want to take you to bed and do that over and over again," he said, and the awkwardness was gone.

Lucy smiled. "Okay."

He eased her feet back to the ground. Hands clasped, they hurried back to his car. Rory must have broken twenty traffic

laws, but he got them back to her townhouse in less than ten minutes.

They lost some time in the car when Rory leaned over and kissed her, because she climbed into his lap and deepened the kiss, plundering his mouth.

"Inside," he said against her lips.

"In a minute," she answered, reached inside his slacks, and wrapped her fingers around his thick, pulsing length. His eyes were fierce with passion as he took her mouth again. He shoved his hands through her hair and fisted them.

It took a minute for Lucy to notice the knocking. At first, she thought it was the sound of her galloping heart, but Rory tore his mouth away from hers and said, "What the hell is that noise?"

The windows in the 'Vette were fogged, but as Lucy looked out the driver's window, she made out a huddled shape.

"I think someone is knocking on the window," she said, giggling. She was dizzy, light-headed and drunk on passion, on Rory. She would've easily given up food and subsisted on a diet of Rory Carlisle for the rest of her life.

Lucy let go of him and sat up. He cracked the window. "Yeah?"

"Sorry, guys," Emily said. She sounded worried.

"Just a sec," Rory told her and rolled the window back up.

"Fix your face," Lucy told him.

He chuckled. "Zip it, shorty."

She eyed his open pants. "You better. I don't want Em to see the goods."

They rearranged their clothing and stepped out into the cool night where Emily stood shivering in the driveway.

"What is it?" Lucy asked, pulling Rory's leather jacket around her. She walked around the hood of the car and stopped next to him.

"It's Grandpa ... it's Mr. Waverly. Something's wrong. I called 911."

"Show me," Rory said, and Emily led the way.

The front door of his townhouse stood open, and Emily ran inside, stopping in the living room. The old man lay on his back on the entryway floor, his face pale, rheumy eyes glassy. Lucy realized in horror that his leg was bent at an unnatural angle.

"Oh, my God," she said.

Rory knelt down next to him. He ran his hands along the old man's papery neck and felt for a pulse. "Thready." He looked at Emily. "How long has he been here?"

"I don't know. I was taking out the trash, and I heard this awful noise coming from his house. It sounded like something crashing down the stairs. I came over to check it out and saw him on the floor."

"When did you call 911?" With his fingers still on the old man's neck, he looked grim.

Emily checked her watch. "About five minutes ago. Right before you guys pulled up."

Rory lowered his face. "Mr. Waverly? Do you remember me? My name is Rory Carlisle. I'm a friend of your neighbor's, Lucy Hollister. Can you hear me?"

Johnny Waverly wheezed out a sound, and Rory leaned closer.

Lucy stood next to Emily near the open door, feeling useless. The poor old man ... In the distance, she heard sirens.

"Okay," Rory said. He grabbed Mr. Waverly's hand. "It's going to be okay. Help is on the way. I hear them now." He looked up at the two of them. "He says his chest hurts, that he was at the top of the stairs and it started." He glanced out the door, watching the red lights flash when the ambulance pulled up outside the house, then back at the older man. "Probably a heart attack. Do you know if he has a heart condition?"

Lucy shook her head and looked at Emily, who said, "I have no idea."

Two paramedics rushed up the front walk, wheeling a gurney between them. Rory got up and moved Lucy and Emily aside, then turned and explained the situation to the two men.

They quickly went to work on Mr. Waverly. The taller of the two pulled out a pen light and opened Mr. Waverly's eyes, gently pushing down the old man's hands when he tried to bat the medic's light away.

"God, I feel so bad for him," Lucy whispered.

Rory stood next to them now, and he wrapped an arm around Lucy and pulled her close.

The medics wrestled a board beneath Mr. Waverly's prone body and hoisted him up onto the gurney. They strapped him in and wheeled him out of the house.

"Where are you taking him?" Emily asked.

"St. Vincent's," the shorter medic answered.

"Didn't you say you saw his daughter here a couple of times?" Emily asked Lucy.

Lucy shrugged. "She was younger, so I assumed she was his daughter." She looked around the living room. "I wonder if he has a Rolodex or something."

"How would we even know who to call?" Emily asked.

"Well, we'll pick one and keep going. Someone's got to admit knowing him." Lucy found an address book in the kitchen by the phone. "Got it," she said, rejoining Emily and Rory. "I wonder if we should go to the hospital. He shouldn't have to be there all alone. At least until we locate his family."

Rory said, "That's a good idea. But I've only got room for two in the 'Vette."

"We can take my car," Emily said.

They rode to the hospital in silence. Rory sat up front with Emily while Lucy stared out the window in the backseat and thought about how rude she'd been to Mr. Waverly.

He was just a crotchety old man. She shouldn't have been so mean. Lucy swore to herself she'd be a better neighbor. She would bake him cookies and invite him over for Thanksgiving. Being grumpy was part of his personality, and he couldn't change it anymore than he could've altered the color of his eyes.

When they arrived at the ER, Rory went to the nurses' desk while Lucy and Emily sat in the waiting area and pulled out their cell phones.

Unfortunately, it appeared Johnny Waverly had not updated his address book in many years and had not cultivated a lot of relationships. Half of the numbers in the book were no longer in service. A couple of the people they reached thought he'd died years back, and a few remembered Johnny Waverly, but didn't know if he had any children. Lucy hit pay dirt when she reached an old neighbor.

Rory sat next to Lucy. He laid a hand on her knee and squeezed while she spoke with the woman. She thanked her and hung up.

"Mr. Waverly has a daughter named Sharon. She's not sure of her last name, but at least we have something." She grabbed the address book from Emily and searched through it anew. She found one Sharon, last name missing, and dialed the number.

She got an answering machine. A woman cheerfully announced Lucy had reached the "Vickers Family," and instructed her to leave a message, which she did, along with her cell phone number.

"What did the nurse say?" Emily asked Rory.

"She didn't have any news. She said she'd tell the doctor we're here waiting."

He slid an arm around Lucy. Emily noticed and tried to communicate with her eyebrows.

"Did you have sex with him?"

"No, you interrupted us and now is not the time or the place to discuss it," she replied with her own eyebrows.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" Rory asked.

Lucy sat up straight. "What? Oh, nothing."

Rory stood. "I'm going to go find a vending machine." He put one long fingered hand into his pants pocket and jingled it for change. "Want anything?"

"I'll take a Mountain Dew, if they've got it," Emily said.

"Luce?"

"Coffee or Diet Coke. Please," she added, and watched his butt as he walked away.

Emily waited approximately two seconds before she pounced. "Okay, okay, okay. We've got about three minutes, tops, so spill it. Was that *coitus interruptus* I walked in on at the car?"

Lucy shushed her, looking around at the other people scattered in chairs in the waiting room. "Would you lower your voice? Jeez. I really don't think this is the place to talk about it."

Emily ignored her. "I take it you went to Barney's."

"He knew it was me."

Emily blinked at her. "Huh?"

"He knew it was me," she repeated. "On the Internet."

Light dawned in Emily's blue eyes and they widened. "Oh. How?"

"I forgot to delete the chat logs." She smiled. "We didn't talk about it much."

Her friend sat back in her chair, looking jealous. "I'll say. That 'Vette was a-rockin' when I walked up. Windows all fogged up and whatnot. So?"

"No, we didn't have sex. I'm pretty sure we were about to, though."

Emily whacked her on the thigh. "Way to go, Lucy. You done me proud, girl."

"If you high-five me, I'm going to smack you."

"I'll try to restrain myself. Shh. Here he comes."

Lucy's tummy dipped when he strode over, his large hands holding their drinks. He tossed Emily a can of Mountain Dew, and sat down next to Lucy. "There wasn't any coffee. Do you want me to find the cafeteria?"

Although he only offered coffee, Lucy's heart melted. Dangerously. She was in deeper than she'd realized. If she wasn't careful, she would lose her heart to this incredible man. And while the ride might be awesome, she didn't know if she'd recover. Rory was not a settling down kind of man.

"No, thanks," she said, accepting the soda. "This is fine."

They settled in and sipped their drinks. People came, left, waited, wept. Doctors exited the steel doors to deliver news, but hours passed and no one came to tell them of Mr. Waverly's fate. The television offered some escape, but few watched it.

The air was thick with desperation and tears, and Lucy felt the walls closing in on her. She wanted to shake off the bonds of the rapidly shrinking waiting room, and run free into the night, but she knew she couldn't.

At three-thirty in the morning, a doctor dressed in blue hospital scrubs emerged from the steel doors. He spoke briefly with the admitting nurse, and she pointed over at the three of them. As he headed over to where they sat, he ran a hand through his hair and removed the surgical cap covering his head.

They stood.

The doctor, in his mid-forties with salt and pepper hair and rimless glasses, thrust out a hand. "I'm Dr. Everett. Are you John Waverly's family?"

Lucy said, "We're his neighbors. We left a message with his daughter."

"How is he?" Emily asked.

The older man looked grim. "I'm sorry. We did everything we could, but he didn't make it through surgery. He had a massive heart attack. Three of his major arteries were at least ninety-five percent blocked. To be honest, I'm surprised he lasted as long as he did. The fall down the stairs didn't help."

Tears gathered at the back of Lucy's throat. "Oh, God."

Emily's eyes filled, too, and Rory reached both arms out and gathered them close. "What do we need to do?" Rory asked, pressing a kiss in Lucy's hair.

"You said you left a message with his daughter?" Dr. Everett asked.

Emily nodded. "Several hours ago. We haven't heard back yet."

Dr. Everett handed Rory a business card from the pocket of his scrubs. "Have her call me at the hospital. My beeper number's on there, or she can ring the switchboard operator."

"Thanks." Rory shook the doctor's hand again. Dr. Everett nodded and walked away.

"Shit." Emily wiped her eyes.

"Yeah," Lucy said.

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She jumped when her cell phone rang. "Oh, God. I bet this is his daughter." She read the display on the phone and closed her eyes.

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Chapter Fifteen

"Hello?"

"Is this Lucy?" the woman from the answering machine asked. She sounded tired. At close to four a.m., Lucy was exhausted.

"Yes." Her voice broke. She cleared it, tried again. "Yes. This is Lucy Hollister. Johnny Waverly is your father, right?"

"Yes," the woman answered warily. "Who are you again?"

"I'm your father's next-door neighbor. He, uh, had some trouble tonight." God, how did cops and doctors manage to do this on a daily basis? The words were stuck inside her mouth. "He had a heart attack and fell down the stairs."

"Oh, my Lord," Sharon Vickers said. "Is he okay? Where is he now?"

"We, um, called the paramedics, and they took him to the hospital. St. Vincent's. I'm sorry, Mrs. Vickers, but he didn't make it. We spoke to the doctor. He died."

She heard the phone drop, heard the cries of John Waverly's daughter. A woman, who, in the four years Lucy had lived next door, had seldom visited her father. Lucy felt horrible for being a lousy neighbor, but she couldn't even begin to fathom this woman's suffering. A man's voice murmured in the background. The phone rustled, and then he said, "Who is this?"

Lucy went through the whole thing again. Mr. Vickers was less emotional than his wife, but it didn't make the telling any easier. He thanked her, and she hung up.

Lucy was completely wrung out. "I'd like to go home now, please."

She waited with Emily while Rory fetched the car. When he pulled up, she crawled into the backseat and laid her head down, drained.

Lucy listened to the rise and fall of Rory's deep baritone, the cadence of Emily's soft voice. She didn't really hear what they said, but instead let the rhythm and inflection wash over her.

She must have dozed. When Lucy opened her eyes, Rory was shaking her gently. "Come on, sleeping beauty."

"I wasn't sleeping."

"Uh-huh." He nodded to Emily, who rounded the car and got in behind the wheel. "Night, Em. Get some rest."

"Make sure she does, too," she replied and backed out of the driveway.

"What time is it?" Lucy asked, stifling a yawn.

"It's almost five."

"Oh, crap. I left the Beast in his kennel all night again."

"He'll survive."

Rory took her purse and retrieved the keys. He unlocked the door and pushed it open, moving Lucy through the threshold with a hand at her back. He dropped her keys and purse on the table by the door and headed toward the kitchen. A few seconds later, the Beast tore down the hall. She scooped him up and nuzzled his soft fur. He licked her cheek.

"Hi, baby," she said. "How's my boy?"

"My guess is he needs to piss." Rory leaned his long frame against the doorway to the kitchen. "I'll take him out. You go upstairs."

Lucy eyed the staircase wearily. It took all of the energy she had left to dredge herself up the stairs and into her bedroom. Her feet felt as though they were incased in cement, her mind a step behind. One story below, she heard Rory talking to her dog in the backyard.

She looked down at her dress, and then longingly at her bed. She had been up for twenty-four hours now, and Friday night hadn't brought a restful sleep. Unzipping her dress, she shimmied out of it and dropped it on a chair. She sat down on the edge of the bed in her underwear, intending to close her eyes for a minute. Seconds after her head hit the pillow, she dropped into sleep.

* * * *

Rory found her sound asleep five minutes later.

She looked like an erotic fairy. She lay curled up on the comforter in a black strapless bra, matching garter and stockings, and a swatch of black lace for panties. Sooty lashes brushed cheeks gone pale in the last couple of hours. Her chest moved deeply with each breath, her breasts straining against the confines of her bra.

Oh, man.

God, he wanted her. But, he thought with a smile, staring down at her, it would have to wait. No way in hell would he wake her, even if it meant putting an end to this physical

torment. They'd have another chance. He looked at his watch. He had a plane to catch in less than four hours.

With care, Rory pulled down the covers and tucked Lucy inside. He leaned down and kissed her pursed lips. "Sleep well, Lucy."

He slipped out of the bedroom.

* * * *

Somebody was licking Lucy's face.

If that's how Rory greeted a woman in the morning, they needed to work on his technique.

"Brush your teeth," she mumbled. "You stink."

Heavy breathing followed the passes of tongue, and Lucy cracked open an eye. It was male, all right, but not Rory. The Beast stood peering into her face, tongue lolling, jowls bouncing.

"Go away."

The Beast barked.

"Leave me alone, monster dog," she said and pulled the covers over her head.

The Beast wasn't amused.

He pranced over her prone form, latched his teeth onto the top of the comforter, and tugged, growling low in his throat. After several seconds of tug-of-war, she gave up and threw the covers off.

Fuzz muddled her brain. Staring down, Lucy realized she still wore the slinky underwear she'd stuffed herself into yesterday evening. A glance at the clock read after eight, but the light beyond her window was too dim for early morning.

She closed her eyes, savoring the memory of Rory's hands and mouth, the feel of him under her hands.

Then reality intruded.

Her neighbor had died last night. Johnny Waverly, that cantankerous old man, had perished by heart attack, and sadness pressed on her chest like an anvil. How strange that someone so stubborn and crabby was gone. Just like that. One day he'd been sniping at her, and the next he lay on a cold slab in the morgue.

Lucy stood and stretched, trying to shake both the cobwebs and sadness from her brain. The sadness remained.

The Beast still growled. "Just a minute, just a minute," she grumbled. "Let me get a robe."

She kept her senses tuned for signs of Rory when she walked downstairs. Lucy guessed he must be awake somewhere in the house. The last thing she remembered was sitting down on the bed. She assumed he'd found her sleeping and joined her. Surely he wouldn't have gone home? No biggie if he had. But when she searched her house and found no trace of him, Lucy grew irritated that he'd left without waking her.

While the dog took care of business in the backyard, she put on a kettle for tea. The oven clock confirmed it was, indeed, eight in the evening. Wow. She'd lost an entire day.

She checked her answering machine for messages. Nothing.

Weird.

Doubts and recriminations wormed their way into her mind as she walked over to the pantry and pulled out a box of cereal. Had he changed his mind about them? Again?

The Beast pawed at the back door. She let him in and filled his kibble and water bowls. Sitting down at the kitchen table, she spooned Lucky Charms into her mouth and wracked her brain for some kind of signal she might have missed.

"Ugh," she muttered around a mouthful of cereal.

This was pointless. She had no reason to freak out. Maybe he didn't like sleepovers. Some people slept better in their own beds. Maybe he preferred his over hers. Just because he'd pulled a Houdini right after they'd almost had sex *again* ... didn't mean he'd had second thoughts. Or lost interest. No, it wouldn't do to get all freaked out. She needed to calm down.

* * * *

Lucy calmed down. She remained relatively calm for the rest of the night and even through Monday. She hadn't seen any of his vehicles in the employee parking lot that morning, but she almost always arrived before him, so that didn't mean much.

Twice in the elevator her hand had inched toward the Basement button, but she'd pulled it back in time. She would wait him out. She'd done it before.

He didn't stop by her cubicle. Nor did she receive any in-house e-mails or phone calls. She checked her cell three times, but he hadn't called.

By the time she jammed her key in her car's ignition after work, she was steamed. Okay, she understood his being a little wary the first time, but this was freaking ridiculous. His constant yo-yoing was driving her insane.

The Beetle stalled the first time she tried to start it, which only fueled her anger. It came to life on the second try, and she peeled out of the parking lot.

A newer model Honda was parked in front of Mr. Waverly's garage when she arrived home. Curious, she got out of her car and walked up to his front door, but the townhouse appeared empty.

A woman stood on Lucy's porch. Lucy recognized her as the lady she'd seen around Mr. Waverly's house a few times.

"Hi," Lucy said.

The woman spun around. Her short red hair framed a pixie face with impish features. There was a vague resemblance between father and daughter. Lucy briefly wondered if that hadn't been the only gap bridged linking them.

"Are you Ms. Hollister?" Same voice from the phone the other night.

"I am. Are you Sharon?"

"Yes." Her hands clutched a pen and piece of notebook paper. "I was going to leave you a note." She put the items back into an oversized black purse. "I wanted to thank you for being there for my father."

Her voice shook, and Lucy's sympathetic instincts reared to the forefront. "Do you want to come inside?"

Sharon Vickers nodded. "Thank you."

Lucy unlocked the front door and pushed it open. Sharon followed her. Lucy led the way back to the kitchen, where the Beast barked his fool head off.

"Quiet, Beast." She bent down to the kennel. "Let me get this little tyrant taken care of."

"No problem. I have three boys at home. And a husband." She smiled faintly though it was traced with sadness. "I understand completely."

Lucy let the dog out back and put out his food. "I'm going to have some tea. Would you like some?" She filled the tea kettle and set it on the stove to boil.

"That would be lovely."

"Have a seat. Can I get you anything else?"

Sharon shook her head. "No, tea is fine. I don't want to trouble you."

Lucy took down a couple of mugs from the cabinet. "It's no trouble at all."

When the teakettle screamed, she filled the mugs with steaming water, and then added the relaxing chamomile she'd chosen. She brought the cups to the table and sat across from Sharon.

The older woman stirred her tea. "I wasn't a good daughter," she blurted.

When her pretty blue eyes filled, Lucy's heart squeezed. Amid the anger and frustration she'd felt toward Rory, her own melancholy over the death of her neighbor plagued her. Sensing Sharon needed the contact ... hell, Lucy wanted it, too ... she laid her hand across the older woman's. "Hon, I

don't mean to speak ill of the dead, but I'm sure he didn't make it easy."

She smiled ruefully. "You must have known him pretty well."

"Not really, no." She chuckled mirthlessly. "I wasn't a good neighbor."

"He'd always been a hard man to get along with, but after my mother died, he became impossible. We'd never been close, you see, and I had hoped after Mom passed we would reach out to each other and finally be able to bond in our grief." She shook her head sadly. "If anything, he pushed me away more. I never did anything right, never could, in his eyes. I tried ignoring it. He is ... *was* who he was, no changing that, but I would get so *angry* at him." She took a sip of her tea, then a breath. Closed her eyes for a moment. "One day, I exploded. Let it all out, everything. I expected him to start screaming and yelling, too, but instead, he got all quiet, turned around, and walked away."

The bridge that gapped between father and daughter had been wider than Lucy anticipated. "How long ago?" she asked.

"About two years. I hadn't talked to him since." Her eyes filled again and a tear slipped past her lashes. She brushed it away. "I inherited his stubbornness, you see. I was tired of being the one who always apologized, who always held back. Damned if I would do it again this time."

Lucy thought of her own mother and tried to imagine how she would feel if she never saw her again. She'd be devastated. Regardless of how much Maggie meddled, she was Lucy's mother. And she only had one.

"Sharon, I really believe your father knew you loved him. I don't think he knew how to show people he cared, didn't know how to let them inside. He wouldn't want you blaming yourself. That I know for sure. He wasn't a cruel man, just lonely. And stubborn," she added with a laugh. "Trust me, there were days I was tempted to take that cane and smack him with it."

Sharon laughed through her tears. Lucy was surprised to find herself joining this woman she barely knew in a good cry. They drank tea at her kitchen table until the late evening, sharing stories about Johnny Waverly. By the end of the evening, the anvil of grief over Lucy's heart had lifted some.

"Please feel free to come back and visit," Lucy told her at the door. "You'll always be welcome here."

"Thank you so much."

"Will you let me know about the funeral?"

Sharon shook her head. "There won't be one. He was explicit in his instructions. I believe his exact words were 'I don't want a bunch of people getting together to bad-mouth me over free food.' Or something like that."

Lucy smiled. "That sounds like him."

"Thanks again, Lucy."

She watched Sharon round the garage, waiting until she heard the Honda's engine start before she closed the door.

Lucy hoped she helped Sharon Vickers. Lord knows, the older woman had helped her. True, her father had been a pain in the butt, but he'd also been human. Mistakes had been made, pain endured. Most of all, Lucy wanted to believe John Waverly had known his daughter loved him.

Lucy was lucky enough to have escaped the death of her loved ones. Although she hadn't loved Mr. Waverly, she had, on some level, enjoyed their arguments. Looked forward to them even. She knew it sounded crazy, but when she thought about arriving home without the old man harping at her, tears pricked her eyes.

One thing her neighbor's death had taught her was that there weren't always second chances. People never came with guarantees, so the best a person could do was let them know how much they meant to you.

With that in mind, she called her mother. She spoke with her briefly, told her she loved her and passed the same message along to her father. Lucy called each one of her sisters, talked with her nieces and nephews, who no doubt believed their Aunt Lucy had finally jumped off the deep end. *Too late for that*, she thought. When she finished her calls, she stared at the phone.

No second chances.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she dialed Rory's cell. It went straight to voice mail.

"It's Lucy. I'm wondering where you've been for the last two days, why you haven't called, trying to figure out whether it's me or it's you. I've decided it's you. I don't know what's going on, but I'm losing my patience here. I want you. I've made that abundantly clear, and I thought we were on the same page. If you don't want to do this, I suggest you tell me instead of stringing me along. I deserve more than that." Lucy paused and took a deep breath. "Good night."

Satisfied, she hung up the phone.

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Chapter Sixteen

At five a.m. Chicago time, Rory woke from a painfully erotic dream starring Lucy. He rolled over in the uncomfortable hotel bed and sighed. The woman occupied his thoughts and now his dreams. He couldn't recall ever being captivated by one woman. Even Carrie Ann had never inspired these intense feelings in him. Lucy had snared him in her trap, and like a hopeless fly, he was stuck inside her web. And he didn't know what to make of it.

He'd tried calling her for the past two days, but they were like ships passing in the night. With the time difference, he had a hard time getting a beat on where she was.

He should have left a message, but he'd wanted to hear her voice. Because he'd been stuck in meetings almost the entire time he'd been in the Windy City, he barely had enough time to scarf down lousy room service and go to bed.

He got up and showered with a broad smile on his face. He was leaving today. Thank God. He used to enjoy traveling, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. Now, he wanted to take care of this last meeting and get on a plane home, where a hot-blooded, sexy-as-sin woman waited for him.

Yeah, he was beginning to think he was some sort of masochist. He actually *enjoyed* the sheer torture his best friend had put him through.

Room service arrived at six, and he ate his eggs while he watched the news. It was too early to call Portland, but he

checked his cell for messages. His heart thumped heavily in his chest when he realized Lucy had called.

His delight rapidly faded when he listened to her voice. What the hell? Was the woman nuts? He'd told her last week about this conference in Chicago. Oh, he'd tell her something, all right.

Rory's appetite fled, and his earlier thoughts of arriving home to make hot, sweet love to Lucy Hollister vanished with it. He jerked on a tie, and marched out of his hotel room with a head full of steam just waiting for enough time to pass so he could call Lucy and tell her exactly what he thought about her little phone call.

* * * *

Lucy listened to her client drone on about his ideas for his restaurant. She had delivered the design suggestions Friday afternoon. After a weekend of perusing the work, he decided none of the designs "are what's right for my baby."

Lucy understood the need for perfection. She strove for it in her own work. But, her temples throbbed from frustration because those were some of the best designs she and her team had created.

She reminded herself that as the client, he was paying through the nose for her services. That entitled him to be as picky as he pleased. The problem was, Lucy didn't think Jacque Louis had a clue as to what he wanted. She'd tried her damndest to lead him in the right direction, but his indecision was driving her crazy, client or no. Her brain already ran in different paths as she listened. She pulled out a

notepad and sketched while he gave her another obscure impression of his graphic desires.

Inside her desk, her cell phone rang. Propping the receiver between her ear and shoulder, she opened her bottom drawer and retrieved the phone from her purse. When she looked at the display, the breath left her lungs.

Rory.

However much she wanted to answer his call, she couldn't. Not with the Mr. Louis still hemming and hawing in her ear. She silenced her cell, placed it on her desk, and tried to return her attention to the conversation.

"I understand completely, Mr. Louis. I'll get to work right away. I should have you something new by Friday."

She thanked him and hung up. She picked up her cell phone again. No messages. She flipped it open and looked at the recent call list, shocked to find Rory had called five times since Sunday.

What the hell? Those hadn't been there the last time she'd checked. Her cell phone must be broken. Why hadn't he left a message? And where the hell was he, anyway?

The phone on her desk rang. "This is Lucy Hollister."

"First of all, I *have* called you. Lots of times. Check your goddamn caller ID if you don't believe me. Secondly, I've been in Chicago for the last two days at this conference, so it's not like I'm avoiding you on purpose. I didn't want to just leave a fucking message after what happened. I've been up to my ass in work, so if you want to act like an idiot, fine. I don't need this bullshit."

The phone clicked smartly in her ear. She stared at it for a few moments, and then slowly replaced the handset in the cradle.

Fucking perfect. She dropped her head onto the desk with a thud. "I *am* an idiot," she said aloud.

"Yeah, you are!" piped some genius a few cubicles down.

"Bite me!" she snapped.

So much for second chances.

* * * *

Guilt and despair made Lucy work two hours past her shift. She'd called Rory back to apologize, but he'd turned off his phone. She left a message, but after the tongue lashing he'd delivered, she doubted he'd respond.

Trying to be proactive for the first time in her personal life had gotten her nowhere. Her stupid epiphany had bungled any chance she had with Rory and probably ruined their friendship as well. Great. Just great.

Unfortunately, she had a deadline looming on the horizon that wouldn't wait while she got her love life figured out. The grand opening for her client's restaurant was only four weeks away, and she still had a ton of work to finish.

With that in mind, Lucy had organized her team and held an impromptu meeting, passing along the bad news. The associates grumbled and bitched, naturally, but they left the room with renewed resolve, and promised to have her something by midday tomorrow. But, through it all, Rory's angry words played in her mind like a loop, wishing she'd left the damn phone alone last night. But, *nooo*, she'd gone

impulsive and landed herself in a heap of trouble. Big surprise.

At ten to seven, Lucy finished her first progress report and shipped it off to her boss via the company e-mail system. She grabbed her purse and briefcase and headed downstairs.

She took one look outside and cursed.

Rain came down in sheets. It pummeled the ground with tremendous force, sounding like soldiers marching to a rapid beat.

Because those bastard meteorologists had predicted no rain, she wore no coat, just her black sweater wrap. Fortunately, it had a hood. Unfortunately, it was made from wool and not Gore-Tex. She tightened the belt, flipped the soft material over her head and made a dash for her car.

She was, of course, soaked by the time she reached it, thanks to Typhoon Mary, who whipped the full-leafed trees around in a frenzy. Rain puddled at her feet as she sloshed through the parking lot. She dragged her keys out of her waterlogged purse and shoved them in the ignition.

The engine made a horrid grinding sound and then quit. Lucy closed her eyes on an oath and tried again. Same thing, only shorter and then nothing. The dash lights and radio worked, so she knew it wasn't the battery. She waited a few minutes and then tried it again, but received the same result, nothing.

What *was* it with her? First her computer, then her cell phone, and now *this*? Was she one of those weird people whose personal energy field broke toasters just by standing next to one? She ought to give up and move to Montana. She

could live in the woods and spend the rest of her life learning underwater basket weaving or something equally absurd. Of course, she would need a car to get to Montana, and right now she was fresh out.

Lucy dug through her glove compartment to find the card for roadside assistance. After placing a call to the tow company, she dialed her mother because Emily was on a date with an investment banker. Given the description Emily had divulged, Lucy didn't expect her friend home before dawn.

"Ma? It's Lucy. My car's broken down. Can you give me ride home?"

Her mother assured her she would be there in twenty minutes. Tops. Lucy knew her mother. Maggie had a wonky internal clock, so when she said twenty minutes, she really meant it would be twenty minutes *after* she washed the dinner dishes, programmed the coffee pot, and freshened her makeup.

An hour later, her parents pulled in next to her car, now attached to the tow truck. She gave her information to the driver, who told her he'd be taking it to the nearest dealership. Criminy, this day had to be one of her worst. First Rory's tirade, then her car. If she hadn't known she was responsible for the latter, she'd have howled at the injustice of it all.

The rain hadn't abated. And because she couldn't start her damn car, she hadn't been able to warm up. Nor could she see whether the tow truck had arrived from the lobby, leaving her trapped inside the Beetle. Steam wafted off of her wet

sweater as she climbed in the backseat of her parents' Town Car.

Her mother turned to face her. "Oh, Lucy, you're drenched. Ed, pop the trunk and get a blanket."

Ed Hollister shoved the car back into park and got out. He rustled around in the trunk and returned with a fleece throw. He handed it to Lucy when he got back in. "Here, cupcake."

"Thanks, Daddy." She wrapped the throw around her shoulders, grateful for the warmth. It smelled faintly of lemon Pledge and rubber, which she associated with Mom and Dad, respectively.

Ed grunted and pulled the Town Car out of the lot. Her father spoke little. Until she was ten, Lucy hadn't known he could speak more than a few phrases ... "Yes, dear." "Listen to your mother." "Ask your mother."

A retired engineer with the Portland Railroad, he had an affinity for toy trains, which he built inside his garage at home. Lucy didn't begrudge his quietness. It was hard to get a word in when surrounded by Hollister women.

Her mother pulled down the sun visor and inspected herself in the small lighted mirror. "You know, Lucille, you really should have bought American."

Here we go. "I like my car. It's cute and it gets great gas mileage. Besides, I don't think American is doing so well these days, is it?"

Maggie clucked her tongue. "That's the problem with our country, Lucy. There's no allegiance. Everyone outsources. You should do something for your country and buy a Ford. Or

before you know it, people will start thinking you're one of those homegrown terrorists."

Lucy whistled the opening bars to *The X-Files*. From behind the wheel, her father snickered. "Ma, spare me, okay? I haven't exactly had a stellar day."

"How did it go with your young man?"

Lucy wondered if her mother's head would explode if she told her the truth. She contemplated indulging the information, but in the end decided the less Maggie knew about how things had changed with Rory, the better. Maggie would've whisked her away to the nearest bridal shop before she could say *cybersex*. "He's in Chicago."

"What on earth for? I didn't realize his firm had offices there."

"Huh? What firm?"

"The brokerage firm. You know, Ed, Alan had some nice things to say about Danford. I think we should make an appointment."

Oh, *that* young man.

Lucy watched her dad's hands tighten on the steering wheel. "I like Morgan Stanley."

"Ed, don't be such a stick in the mud. These brokers are where it's at right now."

"Did you say 'where it's at'?" Lucy asked her mother. Maggie ignored her.

"I don't want some young punk fooling around with my retirement."

"*Young punk*? Have you guys been watching MTV again?" she asked.

"We'll talk about it later, dear." Maggie turned around to look at Lucy. "Why, you've cut off your hair!"

Lucy was pretty sure her hair looked like a wet dog's fur, but she shrugged anyway, and said, "Yeah."

"It makes you look older."

"Well, at least people won't confuse me with a kindergartner anymore."

"Funny." Maggie pulled the visor back down and touched her own curly locks, which she had worn long for the last thirty years. "Maybe I should think about cutting mine." She shook her head. "No, a woman should have long hair. Otherwise, you run the risk of being confused for one of those *lesbians*." She whispered the last part, as though being gay was as socially unacceptable as smoking crack, or worse, voting Democrat.

"I wondered why all those women were hooting at me today," Lucy said.

"You know, Lucille, your father and I did not raise you to have a smart mouth. I really don't know where you get that acerbic tongue."

"Aliens," she replied, and earned another glare from her mother. Had it been just last night she had been feeling so charitable toward her family?

Her father pulled up in her driveway. "Here you are, cupcake."

"How are you going to get to work?" Maggie asked.

Lucy almost told her she'd hitch a ride with a man in a windowless van offering free candy. But, saving herself another lecture, she said, "I'll ride with Emily or Rory."

"Oh, say hello to Rory for me. Would you let him know my computer has been doing that freezing thing?"

"Sure thing, Ma." *If he ever speaks to me again.*

Twilight had descended, turning the stormy night inky and thick, making it appear as though the rain clouds had lowered themselves to the earth and blanketed the air. She got out of the car and waved to her parents, watching the taillights disappear into the fog. Retrieving her keys from her purse, she rounded the corner of the garage.

The rain came down in a torrent now, but Lucy halted, the keys in her hand dropping to the dark ground with a clatter.

Rory sat on her front step, his forearms resting on his muscular thighs, long hands dangling between his knees. Soft light trickled down from the porch, ensconcing him in shadows.

All of the frustration from the day left her body when she looked at him. Her breathing became shallow as awareness filtered through the stormy night.

Dark stubble scored his strong jaw. He pinned her with his piercing gaze, and a million and a half hot, dark thoughts passed between them as they locked in a stare. Her mouth went dry, and all of that moisture pooled right between her legs. Her skin flushed as heat crept through her, creating a slow burn everywhere. The cold rain plunged down and singed her smoldering skin.

Rory rose, and the power of his gaze stole her breath. She had always wondered how it would feel like to have all of that intensity focused solely on her, and now she knew.

Oh, God.

He walked toward her with predatory grace, a sleek, dangerous animal stalking its prey, all of that incredible energy coiled in his hard body, like a cobra ready to strike. Feeling something close to panic, she opened her mouth to speak, but her lips formed no words.

He floated to her on the fog that swirled around them, some dark god coming to stake his claim. He stood close, towering over her, his blue eyes flashing, intense in the murky night. Her breath came even faster, as if she'd run a mile. With those cobalt eyes still pinning her, Rory bent down and picked up her keys.

When he opened her palm and laid the cold metal against her skin, she stared dully at them.

"Open the door, Lucy," he said, his voice rough.

Her entire body quivered with anticipation and he hadn't even kissed her yet. Rory moved behind her when they walked to the front door, and Lucy felt his hot gaze on her. He hadn't touched her, but she was ready to explode. His heat scorched her back while she struggled with the lock, lust having turned her brain to mush, making rudimentary tasks impossible.

His breath scalded her neck, and she wanted nothing more than to lean back into that warmth, feel it envelop her and turn her inside out. She got the key in on the third try. She pushed open the door and he followed her inside.

"Why..."

She didn't have a chance to finish the question. He grabbed her by the shoulders, pushed her against the door, and crushed his mouth to hers. She parted her lips and let

him invade her, his mouth plundering, possessing. Her senses were heightened, her fingertips tuned to the hard planes of his chest under his dress shirt, then the texture of his hair as she ran her hands through it, desperate to touch him. The smell of him, of his aftershave mixed with the scent of aroused male, unique to Rory.

His hands moved roughly across her body, molding to her aching breasts and then traveling lower, down her hips, across her thighs. She wrapped one leg around his hip, pressing her heat into his rock hard arousal. She moaned when he ground himself against her. She needed him inside her, was positively insane with desire.

She pulled off his leather jacket, dragging it down his arms, and let it fall to the floor. Her fingers got busy with the buttons of his dress shirt, fumbling in her urgency to feel his naked flesh. Frustrated, she grabbed both sides and pulled, the buttons popping and raining on the floor with several light clicks. He shook off the tattered remains of his shirt, and her hands were on him, running along the length of his muscled chest, twirling through the dusky hair that spread over his pectorals.

His mouth captured hers again, with an erotic urgency in the kiss, a need that throbbed between them, fierce and demanding. He dragged off her wet sweater and dropped it on the floor without breaking the kiss. He lifted the hem of her blouse and yanked it over her head.

Rory stared at her lacy purple bra, licked his lips, and smiled.

Without warning, he attacked the column of her throat with his mouth like a man possessed. The ferocity of his sensual assault slew her, weakening her knees, catching her insides on fire. She tilted her head to give him better access while she went to work on the snap of his slacks with trembling fingers. With one deft hand, he unclipped the front closure of her bra and her breasts sprang free. Rory looked up at her, and then bent his head to take one tight nipple into his mouth. Pleasure ripped through her so strong, she thought she might climax right there. Her hands stilled at his trousers and moved to his head, locking her hands in his silky black hair, holding him there while he feasted. He moved to the other breast and she moaned when his teeth nipped lightly. He slid a hand down and unsnapped her pants.

Rory left her breasts to drag her slacks down her legs to pool at her feet. She stepped out of them and kicked them off to the side. He gripped her arms, pressing her back against the door. His mouth led a fiery trail down her body, his lips and tongue scorching her breasts, her belly. He licked and nipped the inside of each thigh as he pulled down her panties.

With his teeth.

Her legs shook, her body screaming with want. She could think of nothing but the staggering need that rose inside her. He looked up at her and the raw passion in his eyes struck her with the force of tornado, destroying anything and everything in its path. Then his eyes focused on her. The core of her.

He licked delicately at first, rolling his tongue around her sensitive center. Then he delved one finger inside while his

magic tongue performed tricks she had never imagined possible. She gripped his hair in her hands and threw her head back against the door, thrashing back and forth when waves of pleasure rolled over her.

Her skin heated, goose bumps and sweat covering her body in a contradiction of responses. She was edgy, as if she would burst. A beautiful pressure built, a crescendo that caught like wildfire, until it exploded right there, in Rory's mouth. She screamed his name and her legs buckled. He caught her in his arms and held her when the aftershocks rocked her body.

Rory carried her over to the couch and laid her there, leaving her only to shuck his trousers and roll a condom down the length of his large shaft with trembling fingers. She only had a moment to marvel at the beauty of his nakedness before he was on her, plunging into her, stretching her, filling her, and she cried out at the magnificent force of it.

He stilled a moment and stared down into her eyes. Something passed between them, something that changed everything. But, then it disappeared when he lowered his mouth to hers and began to move, slowly, painstakingly, until again she thrashed, thrusting her hips and urging him to move faster.

"For God's sake, Rory!"

She grabbed his ass and pulled him to her. Whatever tenuous control he'd held snapped. He drove into her faster, harder. He felt so big inside her, and Lucy reveled in the sensation of being filled by him. The crescendo built once more, her skin aflame, and then she was falling, free-falling

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into space. She came explosively, her nails scoring his back as she cried out his name again. His hips pumped faster, deeper until his own release came, and with a roar, he collapsed on top of her.

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Chapter Seventeen

Lucy felt like she'd been dragged by wild horses.

There had been a war of passion, her living room a battlefield of littered, ripped clothes. When awareness filtered back, Rory kissed her nose, and then shifted before he rose and walked naked to the bathroom.

She stared down at her body lying lax upon couch, one leg fallen over the side, her arm thrown above her head. Slowly, reality set in, and with it, doubts. What happened now? Better yet, what would ScorpioCutie do?

ScorpioCutie would meet Rory at the bathroom door to have a go at round two. She'd be the master seductress, with no inhibitions whatsoever. But, Lucy wasn't ScorpioCutie. Not now. Not with Rory.

Lucy had never given thought as to the "What now?" She had never imagined in her wildest dreams she would make love to Rory. Oh, she had fantasized about it, had even initiated an online affair with him. But that was safe. She'd been free to be whomever she wanted without a face, *this* body, attached. She'd never thought he would be interested, that they would bring their friendship to the next level. But, now that they had, where did it go from here?

A blush of embarrassment, stemming from her insecurities and current lack of clothing, burned through her. She grabbed a pink throw draped across the back of a chair and wrapped it around her body. At a loss, nervous, Lucy picked up the

strewn clothes scattered like so much garbage across her living room floor.

What would they say to each other? Did he feel uncomfortable? Was he in there ... for the love of Pete, what was he doing, taking a shower? Wondering if he had made a mistake? Thinking of a way to let her down gently?

Disgusted with herself, she blew out a breath. And by will alone, pushed aside the doubts that clouded her mind.

She folded the tattered remains of his dress shirt—she'd have to replace that—when Rory padded back out into the living room. He looked very much like a satisfied tomcat with a mouth full of canary. Comfortable in his naked skin, he absently rubbed a hand across his bare chest. Lucy tried not stare, but the man's body was pure sin wrapped in one irresistible package.

He arched a brow at her. "We made quite a mess."

"I'm sorry about your shirt. I'll replace it."

He walked over to the chair and picked up said shirt. "I don't know. I think I might like to keep it as a souvenir." He grinned at her. "Didn't know you had it in you, Luce."

Lucy reddened. Okay, so it would be lighthearted. She could handle that. Needing to busy herself, she went into the kitchen and began making tea. A few moments later, he followed.

"What's up?"

"Nothing. I wanted some tea. Are you hungry?"

"No. Lucy." He turned her to face him. When she wouldn't meet his eyes, he slipped two fingers beneath her chin and tilted it up. Concern was etched on his face.

She was blowing this. She had to play it cool. Let him know it was just sex. She needed her heart to believe the lie. "I don't want this to change things."

"Too late," he said softly.

"I want you to know I don't expect anything from you." With false courage, she pressed on. "I understand you were probably caught up in the moment. So, if you want to go back to the way things were, that's okay."

To her surprise, his features hardened in anger and he clenched his jaw. "I'm not interested in going back to being just friends."

Her traitorous heart soared.

Rory moved away from her, went to stand at the window, and stared out into the night. "I don't know where this is going, Lucy. I'm not going to analyze it like you obviously have. I don't see the problem." He turned. "We're attracted to each other. We can make the most of it, or we can let it get in the way of what we already have. It's up to you."

Lucy took a breath. "I'm not like your normal women, Rory."

His face softened, and Lucy's heart stuttered in her chest. He returned to her; placed his big, warm hands on her shoulders; and pulled her close. "Can't you feel what you do to me?" he whispered in her ear.

As if to prove it, he grabbed her hand and placed it around his growing erection. With wonder, Lucy squeezed and felt a surge of feminine power when Rory hissed out a breath.

"See? I've always wondered what it would be like between us, but I didn't want to ruin our friendship."

Lucy could only stand there, dumbstruck. He had thought of them? Together? She smiled, the evidence heavy and pulsing in her hand. She stroked him from root to tip, delighted when he squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them, raw desire stared back at her. "But now that I've had a taste of you, I'm not nearly done."

Putting action to his words, he picked her up in his arms and carried her to bed.

* * * *

"Lucy, wake up."

Lucy's eyes sprang open in time to see a masculine hand snap its fingers in front of her face. She shot forward in her chair, nearly falling out of it, and looked up to see Wyatt Chase standing inside her cubicle.

Oh, yay. Just what I need to secure my promotion.

"Taking a nap?"

Lucy's cheeks heated. No, she didn't think what she'd been doing fell under the "relaxation" category. In her mind, she still felt Rory's strong hands and lips on her flushed body. Only this time, she didn't have to make do with fantasy. Now she had reality. And it had been so much better.

She cleared her throat, tried to clear her mind. "Just going over some things in my head." Not an outright lie. Her thoughts just weren't about work.

"I got your progress report," he said, leaning against the cubicle wall.

She struggled to get her head back in the game. "The client isn't as receptive to our first pitch as I'd anticipated."

She tapped a portfolio on her desk. "Second round. I'm heading over there to deliver these today."

Wyatt smiled. "Jacque Louis is a difficult man. It's part of the reason I chose this project for you. Baptism by fire, remember?"

"Have I told you how much I love you today?"

Her boss snickered. "Smartass." He straightened. "Keep at it. I have every confidence you'll bring him something he likes."

"If I don't, is it possible to work manual strangulation into the contract?"

"We'll discuss it at our next staff meeting."

Lucy smiled when her boss walked away, then winced after she checked her watch. While she'd been lost in her daydreams, recalling in vivid detail the way Rory had fit so snug inside her, touching her core, time got away from her.

They'd spent most of Tuesday night doing anything but sleeping.

When he'd arrived on her doorstep the next night, Rory told her he needed to try it again, just to make sure it was as good as he remembered. On Thursday night, she called and told him her own memory was fuzzy, and she needed him to come over and help her make some new ones.

Lucy smiled.

She had to rush to reach the restaurant. The VW dealership had called Wednesday to inform her that the starter had died and the vehicle was now fixed.

Glad to have her car back, even if her mother thought the Germans who produced it were commie bastards, she zipped the little Beetle in and out of lunchtime traffic.

She arrived only five minutes late ... a blessing. If she wanted this promotion, she'd have to leave fantasizing about Rory to her lunch break.

Jacque Louis was a small, fine-boned man with longish hair he secured in a queue. His soft-spoken voice carried the accent of his native Quebec. As they stood in the dining room of the restaurant, the sound of table saws and hammering permeated the air. While he looked at the graphics, Lucy studied the layout.

It would be hip, she thought when she took in the open ceilings, the hardwood floors. She imagined coming here after a long day at work, dining alfresco, feeling the wind tease her hair. Staring across the table at Rory.

She gave herself a mental slap. Work. She needed to focus on work.

The gods were smiling today. Jacque liked the second set of designs. She promised to be in touch after finalizing them and set off to her car with a bounce in her step.

Lucy returned to the office near two. Realizing she hadn't eaten lunch, she rode the elevator to the café. She walked into the self-serve kitchen area, where she perused the massive offering of edible delights. She stopped at the cooler, debating between a turkey sandwich on whole wheat or a ham and Swiss on sourdough.

She glanced down at her body, at the rounded hips and full breasts, the stomach that wasn't totally flat. She thought of

Rory's usual taste in women, and tall, leggy, and beautiful, she was not. Chewing on her bottom lip, she considered skipping lunch. However, given his responsiveness over the last few days, he didn't seem to mind a girl with a little meat on her bones. Come to think of it, today was the first time in a week that she hadn't been bothered by her body.

"I didn't realize choosing a sandwich was such a philosophical experience," Rory said next to her ear, his husky drawl sending shivers along her nerve endings.

Lucy took a deep breath. "The difference between ham and turkey is a serious issue." She turned to him and grinned. "Making the wrong decision could create a disaster."

He leaned closer, his blue eyes mischievous. His glorious scent wafted up to tease her nostrils. Her skin did that hot and itchy thing she was beginning to associate with Rory. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest and a nest of butterflies had roosted in her stomach. Oh Lord, she was heating up right here in the cafeteria.

"I'd go with the turkey," he whispered, his breath like a thousand wild caresses.

"Turkey it is," she said breathlessly. She leaned forward and picked up the wrapped sandwich. At the sound of a strangled groan, she turned and saw Rory's eyes glued to her rear end.

"Don't do that," he hissed.

"What? This?" She dropped the sandwich back in the case. "Oops." Bending forward again, she stuck her butt out further, a grin on her face. Good God, she couldn't believe her

brazenness. ScorpioCutie had marched right in, tied up Timid Lucy, and taken over her motor functions.

"You're lucky there're people around," he said. "Want to know what I'd do if there weren't?"

She stood and faced him. That mischievous look had been replaced by hunger. His body radiated heat in waves, and she knew if she looked south, she'd see the evidence of his arousal. Lucy wasn't a virgin by any stretch of the imagination, nor was she a prude. She'd had her fair share of sex, had been in relationships, dated. But *never* in her life, had she ever felt so consumed by one man.

God, she had to quit this or she'd burst into flames.

"Want to come over tonight and show me?" she asked.

Rory grimaced. "I don't think I can. Network crash."

Lucy tamped down on her disappointment. "Yeah, I wondered why I couldn't get some of my programs to work this morning."

"We'll probably be at it until late."

She shrugged and tried to act nonchalant. "I have a lot of stuff to do, too."

"That's right. Deadline coming up."

"I just came back from a meeting with the client. Wonders of wonders, he likes the designs."

God, she wanted to touch him. But, she didn't know all the rules yet, so she resisted the urge. Lucy didn't want to slip and make a wrong move. Not when they were already heading in the most delicious of directions.

She headed to the cashier, and Rory fell into step with her. After snagging a burrito on the way, he took her sandwich

and placed it with his burrito on the counter. He pulled out his wallet and paid for both items.

"You didn't have to do that," she told him when they walked to the bank of elevators. "But thank you."

"Hey, after what you did for me this week, the least I can do is buy you lunch."

He pressed the Down button, and the brass doors opened. He ushered her into the empty elevator with a warm hand at her back. As soon as the doors shut, he turned on her, using his body to push hers against the wall. Their lunch tumbled to floor, forgotten.

He crushed his mouth to hers. No gentle exploration of her lips and mouth, the kiss raw and passionate, dark and greedy. She drank him in, giving as good as she got. His hands were fast and rough as they ran over her body, cupping her breasts.

"God, I can't get enough of you," his whispered against her lips.

The elevator stopped. The doors opened and he lifted a brow. "Your floor."

She bent down, picked up her sandwich, and walked off numbly. She turned, feeling paralyzed by his passion, and watched those blue eyes smolder as the doors once again closed.

* * * *

By the time Rory and Adam got the network back online, it was near midnight. Something simple caused the crash, but simple didn't always mean easy.

Rory unlocked the driver's door of the 'Vette and slid inside. The car started with a roar, a raw power he felt in his veins. He pulled the car out of the parking lot. He glanced at his watch and thought about heading to Lucy's. At this late hour, she was probably asleep.

He hadn't let her rest much over the last few days. That, and he imagined he had enough mail to paper a trail to Seattle stuffed inside his letter box. With regret, he headed to his own place.

The woman was a wildcat in bed. Part of him had known from their erotic online messaging affair, but no amount of typed words could account for the deep well of passion Lucy held within her. The thought alone made him want to whip a U-ey in traffic and wake her up.

Following their postcoital discussion in the kitchen that first night, he'd taken her to bed, where he showed her all over again she didn't have to be a raging beauty to make his blood boil. He'd always found Lucy attractive, but now, in his eyes, she *was* a raging beauty. She might not be tall and leggy, but she was soft and curvy, and his hands had trembled when he'd run them across all of that delicate flesh. His response surprised him. Never before had a woman left him wanting more. Not even Carrie had made him feel this reckless, this wild.

A little warning bell sounded in the back of his brain. Rory assured himself he felt this way because of the uniqueness of their situation. They were new lovers. And in the way of new lovers, everything was exciting, heightened, heady. Perhaps

more so because they'd been friends first, and because of their Internet games.

He hit the garage opener and pulled the 'Vette in next to his pickup and the Ducati. With the large door sliding shut behind him, he walked inside his house. The usual quiet greeted him. The silence had never bothered him before. If anything, he savored it. But now, when he opened the front door and grabbed the mail, he wished for noise, for the wacky chatter of Lucy's sweet voice.

Rory tossed the mail on the kitchen counter and opened the fridge. He pulled out a bottle of water, and then walked over to the put the phone on speaker to check his voice mail.

Two hang-ups, a canned message from a mortgage company. Nothing from Lucy. As he sifted through bills, credit card offers, and other junk, he heard the soft voice of his mother come to life.

"Rory, baby, it's your mama. I need to talk to you. There's something you need to know, and I'd rather you hear it from me. Please call as soon as you get this message."

He knew what his mother wanted to talk about, and he'd been avoiding her calls all month. In the last two years, he'd made it clear he had no desire to hear or talk about Carrie or Brad. But his mother was determined to bring peace back to her family, if not her oldest son.

Good luck with that.

His hands stilled on a large, heavy envelope with his name written elegantly on the front. He recognized the hand that had penned it.

As if he could ever forget.

Willing his hands to stop shaking, he tore open the envelope and dumped the contents onto the counter. A soft piece of light blue tissue paper fluttered out and landed on the floor. He hardly noticed as he stared at the invitation in his hands.

Aaron and Isabella Childs are pleased to announce the marriage of their daughter, Carrie Ann, to Bradley James Carlisle.

Your presence is requested on Saturday, the twenty-first of June at the United Southern Baptist Church at four o'clock in the afternoon. Reception to follow at the Houston Heights County Country Club.

No wonder his mother had been trying to get a hold of him.

A dull buzz started at the back of his brain, like a thousand stinging bees. He stared so hard at the words, his vision blurred. The old pain came back, but instead of pushing it away as he always did, he let it wash over him, opening wounds barely closed.

His hands fisted, crumpling the expensive paper, and he went to tear it into a thousand pieces, as if destroying the invitation would make the event disappear.

He didn't tear it. He let the crumpled invitation drop to the counter where it sat, mocking him.

Disgusted, he turned away and opened a cabinet door. He grabbed a bottle of Wild Turkey and tore the seal. The first gulp went down his throat like liquid fire, and he reveled in the sensation, chasing it down with a second, then a third.

He took another long swallow.

Rory grabbed the bottle and stalked into his bedroom. He stood staring at the top drawer of the bureau, the whiskey dangling from his fingers. He opened the dresser, moving aside his socks until his hand brushed soft velvet. Fortifying himself with another shot, he pulled out the small jeweler's box and opened it. A large, brilliant diamond solitaire winked at him. Memories whispered over him as the alcohol began to do its job.

* * * *

The diamond ring in Rory's pocket felt like it weighed thousand pounds.

He couldn't stop the grin that broke onto his face as he drove home. Today he'd turned thirty, and had taken the day off to pick up his grandmother's antique wedding ring from the jeweler's. Two carats and perfect, it sparkled like liquid fire.

Rory tried to imagine the look on Carrie's face when he gave it to her. She had been acting strange lately, but he knew his long hours had taken a toll on her, on their relationship. He'd tried explaining he was working so hard for their future.

Although Rory wanted to buy a house on the outskirts of town, with a little land, maybe, Carrie Ann had her eye on the affluent neighborhood where they'd grown up. Rory wanted to make her happy, so he was willing to put in the time, climbing the corporate ladder to accommodate the lifestyle in which she'd been raised.

Carrie Ann hated being alone. She'd hated it as a child, following Rory and his brother, Brad, around like a lost puppy. At first, the two Carlisle boys had blown her off, avoiding her like she had cooties, which she did, since she was a girl.

Looking at her had always made Rory feel a little weird inside, like the time he and Brad had made themselves sick on the plums growing in their backyard one summer.

By the time they hit puberty, Carrie Ann had wormed her way into their hearts, and the three of them became inseparable. When teenagers, that strange feeling intensified, Rory and Carrie Ann gave into years of yearning, and the two became a duo.

Initially, the brothers had vied for the affections of the girl, but in the end, Rory won her heart. Brad never seemed bothered by it, and it hadn't caused a rift between them.

When Rory left for college, Carrie Ann insisted they see other people, which just about destroyed him. He had left both Carrie Ann and his brother behind, but he'd known she was in good hands, even though it tore him to shreds when he'd heard she started dating again.

Time moved, years passed. Rory graduated from Texas A&M with a degree in computer science and application. He landed a job at a large software company. His brother went to the same college as Carrie Ann, and Rory got occasional updates. He had moved on, living on the bittersweet memories of childhood.

Five years later, his mother threw him a surprise party for his twenty-seventh birthday. Carrie Ann was there. Unattached. They spent the whole night talking, reminiscing

about old times, while the memory of that first hot time when they'd given themselves to one another lurked between them.

She called him the next day. He called her the following day, and they started seeing each other again. By his twenty-eighth birthday, they had moved into an apartment near their old neighborhood. They threw dinner parties for her friends, went to football games, spent the holidays together.

And tomorrow was their three-year anniversary. He had an antique diamond engagement ring in his pocket, and a smile on his face. Life was good.

They were going out tonight to celebrate his birthday with some friends. He'd planned on waiting until tomorrow to propose, but the ring was burning a hole in his pocket. Maybe he should do it tonight, he thought, as he mounted the stairs that led up to their plush, three-bedroom apartment. Then she could show it off to her friends.

His smile broke into a grin as he pulled out his keys and slipped them into the lock. He'd light candles, a whole room of them. She'd get home from work and would see the candles and Rory, down on one knee.

He pulled out the ring when he let himself inside. So caught up was he in his planning, he didn't notice Carrie Ann's purse sitting on the table. He tossed the box in the air and caught it, whistling "Here Comes the Bride," knowing he sounded like a sappy fool, but not giving a damn. He was in love. He was getting married.

Rory opened the bedroom door and froze. The life in him drained from his body as sure as if he'd been stabbed in the

heart. He stared at the bed, the jeweler's box in his hand forgotten.

"Oh, my God. Rory," Carrie Ann gasped.

She lay in bed, long red hair spilling over her naked breasts when she rushed to cover herself with a sheet. A dark haired man scrambled off of her. When Rory saw his face, what was left of his heart squeezed and died.

"Brad."

"Rory," he said.

He didn't think. He stalked to the bed ... *his* bed ... and yanked his brother out of it. Fury had given Rory twice his normal strength, sending Brad tumbling out of the bed and landing with a resounding *thump*. Rory stared down at his best friend, his *brother*, sprawled naked on the floor.

"You son of a bitch," Rory swore. "Get up, you piece of shit. Get up!"

Brad rose, held his hands out. "I love her, man."

Carrie Ann shouted, "Rory, no!" right before he ran his fist into his brother's face.

He left the apartment, drove to Galveston, where he proceeded to drink himself into a stupor for the next three days. When he returned, Carrie Ann had moved all of her things out of the apartment.

A piece of notebook paper sat beneath the black jeweler's box.

Rory,

You cannot know how sorry I am about all of this. I never intended to hurt you. But, I love Bradley. I always have. I

*thought I was over him, that I could move on, but I couldn't.
I'm sorry.*

She had signed the note with a "C."

I love Bradley. I always have. I thought I was over him.

In some vague recess of his mind, he wondered how long Carrie had been fucking Brad. How he could have been so blind. He felt like the worst kind of fool. But under the humiliation, the rage, and the betrayal lay a cauldron of grief so fierce it nearly knocked him to his knees. Rory and Brad had been unusually close. He hadn't just been his brother, but his best friend, his confidant. And Brad had taken that bond and broken it over a woman. *Rory's* woman.

That night, in his empty apartment, he'd posted his résumé online. Two weeks later, he loaded boxes into his parents' basement and drove the 'Vette to Portland, Oregon.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Until now.

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Chapter Eighteen

At a quarter to five on Friday, Lucy delivered the good news. After she reminded them of the approaching deadline, she dismissed her team. Lucy was looking forward to a long, erotic weekend with her favorite IT man.

Emily stayed behind. "Haven't seen much of you after work lately."

Lucy shot her an innocent look. "I've been busy. Doing things."

"Doing Rory is more like it. You've been walking around with the afterglow for the last two weeks."

Lucy grinned. "The man should bottle his mojo and sell it on eBay. He'd make a fortune."

"Maybe he could pass some on to the losers I've been picking up recently."

Compassion flowed through Lucy. "Honey, don't worry. You'll find the right one soon."

Emily screwed up her face and held out a hand. "Oh, yuck. Don't do that."

"What?"

"Give me that 'I'm in love so everyone else should be' nonsense."

How ridiculous! Lucy opened her mouth to defend herself, but her lips only opened and closed like a guppy's. Finally, "I'm not in love with Rory. I just like him." A lot.

Emily folded her arms across her chest. "Uh-huh. I believe you. Next, you'll tell me it's just a sex thing."

"It *is* just a sex thing," she insisted, even as a little voice in her head said, *Liar*.

* * * *

Rory had the mother of all hangovers.

For most of the day, he'd been accompanied by a troll inside his head who kept stabbing his brain with an ice pick. Rory awoke in the predawn hour, sprawled in one of the Adirondack chairs in his backyard with a wad of cotton in his mouth, and no idea how he'd ended up there. A half-empty bottle of Wild Turkey sitting next to the chair answered his first question. When he sat up in the cool morning, covered by dew, he remembered *why*.

He forced a cup of coffee down his gullet and took a shower, when all he'd really wanted to do was fall into bed and sleep for about a year. But he wasn't about to allow himself an easy out because it had been his own bad behavior that landed him in this sorry state in the first place.

He felt strangely empty, as if by allowing those memories to play out had exorcised him somehow. In the two years since he'd found them together, Rory had *never* given into the luxury of reliving that life-crushing moment. But now that he had, Rory was surprised how easily he was able to put his brother and ex-girlfriend's impending nuptials out of his mind. Of course, the fact they lived over fifteen hundred miles away, and he wouldn't be making an appearance, might have something to do with it.

At work, Rory still had to catch up on the paperwork from his brief absence. He stayed an hour late to wrap up the last

of his projects. By the time he called it a night, his eyes were crossed and his brain was ready to explode. But none of those things prevented him from heading upstairs to see if Lucy was still around.

Her cube was tidy and empty. Disappointment shot through him, but he tamped it down. He'd spent four out of the last five nights in her bed, or more accurately, in *her*, so why was he still acting like a moony teenager?

Rory gave himself the equivalent of a mental bitch slap. He needed to rein in these sudden intense feelings. He was slipping. First, letting Luce get under his skin and, second, allowing the memories from that fateful night to fill his consciousness. From the insight he'd gained from his little bender last night, he knew he needed to guard his heart and keep it light.

Obviously, his dick had other ideas, because he headed toward Lucy's. He'd put some space between them. He *would*.

After he saw her first. Screw the goddamn alarms going off in his head like a dozen blazing fire trucks.

By the time he pulled the Ducati in behind her Beetle, he had himself convinced he was just dropping by to say hi, to visit with his best friend. The front door lay open, the screen door shut. Inside, the Dixie Chicks were killing Earl.

With his helmet in his hand, he opened the screen door. He walked into the house where the scent of something heavenly cooking permeated the air. The stereo blasted, so Rory doubted she would've heard him had he even bothered knocking.

He found her in the kitchen.

Rory had to stop for a minute to catch the breath her beautiful body had stolen. She wore a pair of shorts so small they were almost nonexistent. Slim legs stretched downward, tapering off to tiny bare feet with dainty toenails painted a bright purple. A tight tank top stretched over her large breasts, skimmed down the dip in her waist, and accentuated the lush flare of hip, hips that shook to the chorus of the song. She stood at the counter chopping vegetables. On the stove, a big pot sat simmering. The air was redolent with spices.

She picked up a large carrot and held it in her hand like a microphone. Rory leaned against the wall and enjoyed the show. When she sang in a terrible, off-key voice, dancing and shaking her round booty to the song, Rory's dick jerked. Arousal pulled low in his groin, hardening, lengthening him. Lucy, spinning around and landing with a slap of her foot on the linoleum, hit a high note.

And screamed.

"Sweet baby Jesus!"

"No, just me," he said cheerfully.

"Why are you always sneaking up on me?" She threw the carrot at him. He caught it and took a bite.

"What's for dinner?" he asked, stalking up to her.

She grabbed the carrot from his hand and turned around to resume her chopping. "Chicken and dumplings."

He leaned in behind her, smiling in satisfaction when she pressed her rump against him. He nuzzled her ear. "From scratch?"

"Maybe."

He bit down on her ear and she gasped. "Better put that down." He took the knife from her hand and laid it on the cutting board. He put his hands on her hips and pulled her tighter, rubbing his erection against her ass.

"What else?" he murmured.

"Some ... wine?" She tried to turn.

He clucked his tongue. "I don't think so." He put his lips on her neck, nibbling his way down to her shoulder. One hand moved across to cup her breasts.

"You're not wearing a bra, Lucy," he whispered in her ear. He was so overwhelmed by lust that he had the urge to push those ridiculous shorts down and take her right now, but he wanted to draw out her pleasure. He wanted her shaking with need by the time he got to the good part.

"I'm not wearing any panties, either," she said softly.

He groaned. "You're killing me."

"Turnabout and all that."

"Those shorts are the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

He moved his hand down the front of them, slipped inside the waistband, and found she was, indeed, telling the truth.

"You're wet."

Lucy threw back her head and moaned.

He traced lazy circles around her, teasing. She thrust against his hand, and each time, her luscious ass rubbed on his aching cock. He inserted a finger inside her and felt her muscles clench around him, heard her gasp his name.

"Do you like that?"

"God," she moaned.

His thumb found her clitoris, and she came explosively, her knees buckling, her sweet voice crying out. He growled low in his throat, his need for this woman a strong, palpable thing. He had to have her. *Now.*

He turned her around and she attacked him, leaping into his arms, running her hands through his hair, over his face. She crushed her mouth to his, her tongue entering his mouth, sliding in and out, an invitation of what was to come.

"I can't make it to the bedroom," he said, and carried her to the kitchen table.

She went to work onto his shirt, freeing buttons and pulling it from the waistband of his slacks. There was a frenetic energy at work now, and they rushed to shed their clothes as quickly as possible. He fairly tore the shorts off of her in his rush to join her, but he no longer cared ... driven by the need to *possess* Lucy.

Lucy ripped at the button fly of his pants, and he shoved them down over his hips. He eased her down on the kitchen floor and drove inside her, groaning when he stroked into her wet heat. She wrapped her legs around his hips, her heavy breasts bouncing when he pumped into her. He leaned down and took one distended, rosy nipple into his mouth while she thrashed beneath him.

Lucy convulsed around him, and that was all it took. The power of his own orgasm slashed through him, spreading along his body from his hairline to his toes. He was vaguely aware of a hoarse cry ripping from his throat, and then it was only the sound of his galloping heart mingled with their labored breaths.

He rested his head on her breasts, enjoying the feel of her fingers sifting through his hair. He nuzzled her soft skin.

"God," he breathed.

She had been so responsive, sheathing him like a hot, wet fist. Like a thousand spikes of pleasure tipped pain raking over his body. So good ... *too* good. "Oh, shit."

Lucy lifted her head. "What is it?"

Rory pulled out of her and confirmed his worst suspicion. "I forgot to use a condom."

She met his gaze, her brown eyes in stark contrast against her suddenly pale face. For the briefest of moments, Rory thought of Lucy pregnant with his child, her belly round and full. The vision was so *real* that it scared him shitless, and he shoved the image away with ruthless force.

Then she smiled. "I'm on the pill."

Rory yanked up his briefs and pulled his pants over his hips. "Still. That's only so effective."

She bent down to retrieve her shorts, her face hidden. That picture filtered back into his mind again. But, he didn't reminisce about the outcome. What if she got pregnant? Fear, the likes of which he'd never known, lanced through him, and he ran a hand through his hair. "Where are you in your cycle?"

Lucy pulled her top back in place. "I'm okay. It's not the right time even if I wasn't taking birth control, which is ninety-nine percent effective, by the way."

He shook his head. "I don't like taking stupid chances."

She frowned. "It's not like we did it on purpose."

Rory stalked across the kitchen, pacing. "You don't understand, Lucy. I've *never* made that mistake before. It's unacceptable."

Rory swore he caught a flash of hurt in the depths of those chocolate eyes, but it was gone so quickly he figured he had imagined it, as her lips moved into a seductive smile. "We'll make sure we're more careful next time." She walked up to him and placed a hand on his arm. "Relax. I'll start keeping a cache of condoms hidden all over the house." She grinned. "That'll give us an excuse to do it in more interesting places."

Maybe he'd overreacted. Her smile eased the frisson of panic out of his system. *How did she do that?* he wondered.

He reached behind her and pinched her butt. "Baby, you better buy stock in the company."

* * * *

On Thursday evening, eight days to deadline, Lucy stayed up late, putting the finishing touches on her designs.

Jacque Louis had commissioned a local artist to paint the interior of the restaurant. Her client had a mural of the Italian vineyards and countryside in mind, and he wanted it incorporated with the logo for what Mr. Louis called Bistro 411. It was, perhaps, the most difficult of all Lucy's tasks, because she had to work with the artist to ensure their differing styles melded into the client's vision.

The artist, Erik Fischer, was a flake. Lucy had spent most of the week trying to nail him down for a meeting. They'd scheduled the first at Chase on Monday, for which he had not

shown. After a second no-show, she'd said screw it and tracked him down at his southeast Portland studio.

She had reached into a dwindling well of patience, reminding herself the artist wasn't her responsibility. But if the guy did shoddy work, it would reflect badly on her firm because they were supposed to be *professionals*.

She slid her glasses back on her nose and looked down at the sketch Erik had given her, then back up to her publishing program, where she'd scanned the drawing. Feeling her brain pinch, she saved the work on her hard drive and then her flash drive.

Stretching her arms above her head, her thoughts wandered to Rory. After the condom episode, he'd relaxed enough to enjoy dinner, and they'd spent the weekend together.

On Saturday, they rode his bike to Multnomah Falls in the Columbia River Gorge and hiked to the top of the magnificent waterfall. Of course, it took almost two hours, between Lucy's repeated demands for rest and Rory's insistent need to pull her off the trail and torment her with his hands and mouth. In the end, it'd been worth it. Standing at the top of the beautiful falls with Rory's arms wrapped around her and the gorge the backdrop, Lucy had felt so peaceful and content.

Saturday night, they'd rented a movie, but she couldn't remember the plot, because they hadn't watched much of it. Lucy was beginning to think Rory was a nympho. Wait. Could men be nymphomaniacs? It didn't matter, the man was simply insatiable. They'd spent almost the entire night making

love, dozing an hour or two at a time, then awakening to each other's erotic touch.

When Rory told her he'd forgotten the condom, her first reaction, of course, had been alarm.

Then ... hormones, it had to be hormones ... she'd imagined herself pregnant with Rory's child. She'd even gone so far as to picture what their baby would look like, a fantasy she'd pushed away. The intensity of those feelings and how vividly she *saw* it frightened her.

All that aside, she didn't think it was the national tragedy Rory made it out to be. True, she wasn't ready for kids, but who was ever really ready? It had been hard to push away the irrational hurt his reaction had caused, but she'd managed. If she was this scared about her feelings, she couldn't even think how Rory, the reigning King of the Uncommitted Relationship, would respond. He'd likely run screaming.

Lucy wasn't quite ready to let him go yet.

As it was, she hadn't seen much of him since the weekend. They'd had lunch on Tuesday, but it'd been brief. Lucy wondered if he had distanced himself from her, and then pushed that thought away. It wouldn't do to get all insecure about something she didn't have any idea about.

Just in case, though, Lucy decided to give him reminder. Recalling how excited he had gotten about her garter belt and stockings, she went to her bedroom and put them on, adding her black demi bra and matching panties. She turned her head upside down and fluffed up her hair, added some red lipstick and gloss, and then checked herself out in the mirror.

Momentarily stunned by the image that greeted her, she stared openly at her reflection. She looked ... hot. And sexy. It was the first time in her life she had felt like either. With someone like Rory worshipping the altar of her body, it worked wonders on the soul.

Standing in front of her mirror, staring at the lush curves she'd despised her whole life, she realized ScorpioCutie wasn't just some alter ego. She existed in Lucy. It had just taken a man like Rory to bring her out. The constant doubts and poor self-esteem she'd carried with her all these years seemed to dissolve in an instant when she stared at her body.

And she liked what she saw.

Breathless from her discovery, she grabbed her digital camera from the office and took it back to the bedroom, positioning it on the dresser. She hit the self-timer and jumped onto her bed, aiming for a seductive pose. It took her five tries to get the right one. She downloaded it onto her computer and sent it to Rory's e-mail address with a wicked smile.

See how he feels about that.

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Chapter Nineteen

Late the next morning, Lucy hopped on the elevator and headed down to the Dungeon.

The computer support division was a flurry of activity this morning. All of Rory's staff was present, unusual because at least two people were off saving the company from the end of the world as they knew it.

Adam sat at his desk. He looked up when she walked by and gave her a lascivious wink. "Well, *hello*, Lucy. And how are *you* this morning?" Another wink.

Lucy frowned. "I'm fine, Adam. And I'll have some of whatever it is you're smoking."

He responded with a diabolical chuckle.

Lucy shook her head and kept heading to Rory's office. These guys needed more human contact. Between the lack of human contact—*normal* human contact—and making love to machines all day was whacking them out.

She knocked on the open door. Rory sat hunched over his desk, reading a computer printout. He wore a white dress shirt. Lucy tried not to drool at the slice of tanned throat, and the muscular forearms that peeked out of the cuffs he'd rolled to the elbow. She thought about all of the times they'd made love, and realized there wasn't an inch of his body she hadn't explored and conquered. Just the idea made her grin.

At the knock, he glanced up and flashed that killer smile. "Hey, hot stuff," he said, leaning back. "That was some picture."

Lucy's grin expanded. "Did you like that? My mother would be proud. Those photography classes she insisted I take were finally put to good use."

Rory chuckled. "One thing. Next time ... and I *really* hope there will be a next time ... you might want to send it to my home e-mail."

Lucy's head snapped up. "What are you talking about? I did."

Laughter shone in his blue eyes. "Shut the door."

"Why?"

"Because when I show you your picture, I don't want my entire department seeing it. Although I have to say, Adam suddenly finds you a whole lot more interesting."

This certainly explained his odd explanation, if what Rory claimed was true. But it couldn't be. She shut the door and moved behind his desk. "You're wrong. I swear I..." Her words trailed off as she stared his screen and her cheeks flamed.

The final picture displayed Lucy with one leg and both hands wrapped around one of the cherry poles on her four-poster bed. Her nipples played peekaboo through the black lace of her bra. Her dark hair was a cloud of rioting curls around her head, her cheeks pink from anticipation and full lips painted fire-engine red. She looked like sex personified. If she hadn't been so embarrassed, Lucy might've marveled at how damn *good* she looked. "Oh, my God," she moaned. "This tops it all, Hollister."

Rory tugged her into his lap. "I am so mortified," she said into his shirt. He smelled so good she took another sniff.

He rubbed her back and laughed softly into her ear. "You sure do know how to make a guy feel good. Well, guys. Adam was standing next to me when I opened it. I think it's safe to say you certainly made *his* day."

She sat back and smacked him in the chest. "This is so not funny, Rory!"

He tipped his head back and roared with laughter. He looked so damn happy, and she wanted to kiss him silly, even if his mirth was at her own expense. Her lips twitched, and she strengthened her resolve. Lucy stood. "I don't have to take this."

He pulled her back into his lap and wrapped his strong arms around her. "Come on, baby. You've got to admit it's pretty amusing."

She folded her arms across her chest and huffed, even when a part of her warmed at his endearment. *Don't make it into something it's not. He could call of his women "baby."*

"It's only a *little* bit funny. Not the barrel of laughs you made it out to be." She turned around and smacked him again. "And why are you laughing and showing it to your techno-buddies anyway?" *Only one way to find out.* Lucy drew a deep breath into her lungs. "You're supposed to be my boyfriend. Shouldn't you be protecting my honor?"

He became quiet. "Is that how you think of me? As your boyfriend?"

Biting her bottom lip, she searched his face, trying to determine the tone of his words. His eyes gave nothing away, but neither did he look uncomfortable. He seemed genuinely interested in her answer. Taking another breath to fortify

herself, she gave him the truth. "Well, yeah. Am I wrong in making that assumption?"

Again, he was silent for a moment. Then, he shook his head. "No. Not at all."

Lucy didn't realize she had been holding her breath while she waited for his answer. When she let it out, she felt the world tip.

Oh, God.

"That's good," she said faintly.

Rory lifted a hand to cup her cheek. "Yeah, it is."

He pulled her down and touched his lips to hers. Lucy closed her eyes when his lips teased and coaxed, tempted. When she opened her mouth to let him in, the hand resting on her hip squeezed. She sighed a little, enjoying the zing and sizzle that always exploded between them. She was no femme fatale by any stretch of the imagination. But neither was she a virgin, and she'd had her share of kisses. But none had ever made her head spin, the way it did with Rory.

The kiss deepened, turning from gentle to full of fire and need. His hand moved from her cheek to the back of her head, where he fisted in her hair. She ran her hands over his hard chest and tried to get impossibly closer.

Rory tore his mouth away and pressed his brow against hers. "This probably isn't the best place we should be doing this."

"Oh, I don't know," Lucy said with a teasing smile. "Adam's already seen the goods."

Rory smiled. "I've missed you."

"Me, too."

He seemed on the verge of saying something else, but a knock on the door interrupted them. Lucy jumped out of Rory's lap when one of the techs poked his head in. "Sorry, boss. We've got a problem in here."

"I'm on it." The tech, Dan or Derek, nodded and shut the door. Rory ran a hand through his hair, giving it a disheveled look that only made him more appealing. "Shit."

Lucy smoothed her skirt. "Never a boring day."

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked when he stood.

She gave him a seductive smile. "I'd planned on spending all evening in bed."

He groaned. "Hell. In that case, I better get to work."

"Uh, you might want to wait a few minutes," she said, nodding her head at his impressive erection. Her mouth watered and blood pooled between her legs. If the techie hadn't interrupted them, Lucy would've seduced Rory right there in his office. The idea sent her pulse skittering.

He looked down. "Oh. Yeah. That might be a good idea."

"I'll see you later, okay?"

"Count on it."

Lucy made it to the ladies' room with what she considered amazing aplomb. She locked herself in one of the stalls with unsteady fingers and sagged against the closed door.

Damn it, damn it, *damn it!*

How in the hell was she supposed to guard her heart when the man had already captured it? Her hands continued to shake as she ran them over her face. How could she have been so careless? Ignoring the *scores* of pep talks she had

administered to herself, she'd gone and done the stupidest thing possible.

She had fallen in love with Rory Carlisle.

Not only was the man a living, breathing god, he also had the potential to smash her heart into a thousand pieces, the likes of which would destroy her. Because if he ever found out, Lucy had the feeling he'd disappear faster than a wraith.

Lucy unlocked the stall with steadier fingers, and then ran her hands under the tap. She stared at herself in the mirror, ensuring she looked the same, that under no circumstances could Rory tell she'd broken the rules and fallen for him. She could see the difference, though.

Lucy only hoped to God Rory didn't.

* * * *

At ten to six, Rory called Lucy on her cell.

"Hola. Speak."

"Hey. It looks like I'm going to be at this a while. Why don't we shoot for tomorrow night instead?"

Lucy told herself not to be disappointed. Her heart and brain weren't listening, but hey, she gave it the old college try. *You are pitiful*. "Sure. I've got some stuff to do. Your libido has been distracting me."

He laughed low, and then said in a soft voice, "It's not my libido you're fascinated with."

"Pervert."

"Damn right."

"Don't work too hard."

"Me? Never."

"Bye."

She snapped her phone shut and tried to figure out what to do all by herself.

* * * *

When she arrived home, the Beast was barking. Big surprise. She went through her normal evening routine. Let the dog out, feed the dog, brew some tea, and stare at the contents of her pantry with little interest. Lucy wondered what time Rory would finally get away from work. Probably not until late. She wondered if he would eat or forget about food in his haste to fix the server.

Why do I care if he eats or not?

Because he's my friend, she assured herself.

Quit lying.

She knew it came from her love for him. She'd never given a second thought to what the man ate before. She let out a huge sigh. And why she was even pondering this was beyond her.

Although, it did give her an idea.

* * * *

With the Beast tucked away at Emily's for the night, Lucy grabbed the spare key Rory kept hidden under a rock and let herself into his house.

In her arms, she juggled two large paper sacks that contained the makings to her famous spaghetti, Rory's favorite. Under her jeans and T-shirt, she wore the garter, stockings, bra, and panties.

She hoped he didn't freak out.

Lucy didn't think he would. But she worried about coming on too strong now that her feelings for him were serious. The man had to eat, though. Right? And he would need his strength for what she had planned later.

Lucy had spent enough time in Rory's kitchen to feel at home. She mixed Italian sausage and hamburger meat together with some thyme, sage and oregano, and placed it on the stove to cook. She sliced and diced half a sweet Walla Walla onion; a mixture of green, red, and yellow peppers; olives; and fresh organic mushrooms and sautéed them in olive oil. While the water for the noodles heated, she placed six large, plump tomatoes in the blender and added it to the veggies for the sauce.

While a bottle of chardonnay breathed, she slathered butter, garlic, oregano, and rosemary on a loaf of ciabatta bread and popped it in the oven.

She doubted he'd arrive before she finished, but at least he'd have a home cooked meal waiting when he did. It was domestic and homey, and Lucy told herself because it was just her, she could enjoy it for a few minutes. It's not like she was moving in or anything. Just cooking dinner. For her lover.

For a few precious moments, though, she gave into the fantasy of a life with Rory. They'd live here, she thought, in this house, with its grand kitchen where she could cook and brew tea to her heart's content. They'd have backyard barbecues and invite all of their friends while their children played in the grass.

Lucy shook herself. *Stop it!* her brain demanded, but her heart wouldn't listen. If the condom episode was any indication, Rory didn't want children. At least not with her, anyway, and the knowledge hurt. Rory Carlisle was a serial dater, and while she suspected he treated the women like a cherished gift when they were around, eventually he cut ties and moved onto the next. Lucy wondered when he'd cut *her* loose. Her doubts and recriminations trickled back into her brain. But he *had* called her his girlfriend, she reminded herself. Not once in the two years she'd known him had the man ever called one of his lady friends a girlfriend. Maybe it wasn't impossible, after all.

She ate her meal at the bar, and then made a plate for Rory and placed it in the warm oven. By the time she'd finished the dishes, it was after nine.

Her mother's training still engraved in her, she grabbed the broom and dust pan and swept the kitchen floor. She swung the broom down, getting in between the refrigerator and countertop. When she heard a rustling sound, she crouched down to see what the broom had caught.

It looked like a crumpled note or ad, made from heavy bond paper, smashed in a ball as if Rory had clenched it in his fist and meant to toss it in the trash. Lucy smoothed out the paper on the counter and held it up to the light.

Aaron and Isabella Childs are pleased to announce the marriage of their daughter, Carrie Ann, to Bradley James Carlisle.

Your presence is requested on Saturday, the twenty-first of June at the United Southern Baptist Church at four o'clock in

the afternoon. Reception to follow at the Houston Heights County Country Club.

Lucy frowned. Bradley James Carlisle? The address of the on the invitation was in Houston. A cousin? Brother, maybe? Rory had never mentioned a brother. Hell, she didn't even know if he had any siblings. If it was about current stuff, Lucy had free reign, but anytime she inquired about his past or tried to delve deeper into his personality, he cut her off at the pass.

When Lucy thought about it, she realized once again she knew little about Rory other than what lay on the surface. He kept all of his deep thoughts from her and the world at large, which seemed wrong. And stung.

Regardless of the fact they were now sleeping together, as his best friend of two years, she should have known *something* about his background. Criminy, he knew all three of her sisters, their husbands, and their kids. He'd been invited along to enough Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter dinners that her parents considered him a surrogate son. Hell, her family liked him more than her. He knew Lucy better than anyone. Possibly better than she knew herself. There wasn't much she kept hidden from Rory, ScorpioCutie excluded. But, even then, he'd discovered her attempt to seduce him online. It was almost as if he *expected* her to open herself to him. But damned if he'd reciprocate.

If he was related to the man on the invitation who shared his last name, why had it been crumpled and torn? Did it have anything to do with his move to Portland? She remembered the phone call he'd received from his mother

several weeks ago, and wondered if this invitation had to do with the pain she'd glimpsed on his face.

She didn't know, and frankly, she wasn't in the mood to run hypotheses in her mind. Thinking of Rory's lack of trust in her had popped a hole in her bubble of happiness. Struggling to push the pain, the thoughts of Rory's past away, she placed the invitation on the counter. Maybe she'd confront him in the morning. Her confidence had grown in leaps and bounds in the last few months. If she chickened out, Lucy could always summon ScorpioCutie to do the job right.

Lucy yawned and poured herself a second glass of wine, which she carried with her as she walked into the backyard to admire the view. Summer was coming, finally. The mornings were no longer cold, and the smell of blooming vegetation ripened the air, bringing with it a punch of heady intensity. Lucy adored the spring and summer months. She loved the promise of new life, new beginnings, renewal. Things seemed so much more powerful. All of the energy and vitality that floated around carrying the potential of possibilities that appeared bleak in the winter months.

She listened to the crickets and cicadas compete for song while she sipped her wine and contemplated *her* possibilities. If someone had told Lucy six months ago that she'd be romantically involved with Rory, she would've laughed and politely asked the inquisitor if he or she had recently hit the bong. But here Lucy stood, said six months later, in Rory's backyard, awaiting his return so she could seduce him.

She jolted when hit with a sudden realization. If she, timid, self-doubting Lucy Hollister, had managed to capture the

dream she'd desired for the last two years, perhaps it was possible that she and Rory stood a chance.

She frowned. Of course, they'd have to work on his need to keep everything close to the vest, but Lucy had the unexpected determination to break down every wall Rory had erected around his heart. Something had happened to him ... something that caused him to pack up his life in Houston and leave his friends and family behind. And Lucy knew instinctively that something had to do with those walls. She had no clue as to what might have happened, although for the life of her, Lucy couldn't wrap her brain around someone deliberately hurting Rory. The idea left a bad taste in her mouth.

Her sturdy purple Timex beeped the hour ... ten o'clock. Lucy walked back inside the house and eventually found her way to his bedroom.

Rory's bed was neatly made, the spread a utilitarian beige that went well with the warm brown walls and white wainscoting. There were no 'Vette pictures, but several vaguely familiar framed black and white photographs adorned the walls. Most of them were landscapes, desert scenes, mountain ranges, open fields with abandoned barns. They were all exceptional, but Lucy was drawn to a particularly striking picture of a woman on an empty beach, her body facing the sea, arms held high above her head as if embracing the heavens.

What would it feel like to be that free? That's the first thing that struck Lucy as she gazed intently at the photo. Freedom. Lucy had made great strides toward embracing her own

sovereignty in the months she'd spent with Rory, but she was still light years away from being completely happy with herself. When she stared at the woman in the picture, she was overwhelmed by a fierce *need* to love herself, flaws and all.

Lucy shook herself from the spell in which she'd been caught and set her wine down on the night table. Pressing a hand down, she tested out the mattress. Lucy had yet to spend the night at his place. So far, he'd always shown up on her doorstep on his way home from work.

She chewed on her bottom lip. Maybe she'd made a mistake coming here tonight. Rory hadn't invited her over, and perhaps he had a reason for it. Likely, it was his way of distancing himself ... keeping his true self at bay. She brought her thumb to her mouth. It was too late now. Dinner sat in the oven. It's not as if she could hide the fact she'd sneaked inside his house and cooked him dinner.

Screw it. If it scared him, whoopee. He was a big boy. He'd get over it. *"Ooh, my girlfriend snuck in my house and made me dinner. I'm so frightened."*

She shouldn't make light of his skittish nature when it came to relationships, but it helped ease her nerves. Nerves strung tight because she doubted herself, her actions. Well, Lucy knew of one relaxing activity that would take her mind off of things.

Lucy stood and peeled off her jeans and T-shirt until she wore nothing but the sexy lingerie. She lay back on the soft bed, sank into the full pillows, and tried to imagine Rory's reaction when he found her here.

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

* * * *

Lucy's car sat in his driveway.

Rory pulled in next to it and switched off the ignition. Staring at the Beetle, he waited for that ripple of unease, the urge to bolt, to wash over him. When it didn't, he looked at the house. He should have been freaked out. After all, the woman had snuck into his house. He *never* brought any of his women home. He preferred keeping that part of himself separate. And while he hadn't invited Lucy to stay over yet, he realized he didn't mind. Not one bit.

Which scared him.

Even scarier was that he *liked* the idea of her in his house, liked it so much that he ruthlessly tamped down on the pleasure and got out of the car.

He left his 'Vette parked in the driveway, and went in through the front. He sniffed the air. Spices, tomatoes ... spaghetti ... his favorite. He grinned. He tossed his keys on the counter and looked around at his spotless kitchen. A note on the oven scrawled in Lucy's messy script read,

Dinner's in the oven ... dessert is in the bedroom.

Luce

He may have been hungry for her world-class spaghetti, but he was starving for dessert.

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Chapter Twenty

Despite a significant lack of sleep, Rory woke early Saturday morning.

Lucy lay tucked against him, his arm wrapped possessively around her, a soft, heavy breast in his hand. He considered waking her to put his morning erection to good use, but decided to let her sleep instead. She'd been working hard, putting in long hours for her upcoming deadline, and she needed the rest.

He got up quietly and put on a pair of jeans. In the kitchen, he pulled out the makings for omelets and a package of bacon from the fridge and started on breakfast. While the bacon sizzled in a skillet on the stove, Rory filled a mug with steaming coffee. He had just taken his first sip when his eyes landed on the crumpled invitation to his brother's wedding lying on the counter.

It had been smoothed out. He couldn't remember what he'd done with the damn thing after opening it. Because it hadn't been there the day before, Rory assumed Lucy had found it, which meant she would have questions. He had managed to avoid any discussions relating to his family and past up to this point, but how much could he hide now?

He didn't know why he was wary of telling Lucy. It's not like she was some random woman. She was his best friend and lover, and if anyone deserved the details of his past, she did. But some part of him cringed at the idea of her knowing he'd been betrayed and vulnerable.

That night a couple of weeks ago had been an aberration. Rory never thought about what had happened between Brad, Carrie Ann, and himself. In fact, he had pushed all thoughts of them out of his mind after he'd moved to Portland. No sense dwelling on a painful past, best to move on. And imperative to protect his heart.

He frowned. So far, he hadn't been doing a good job.

But, this is Lucy, a voice in his mind whispered. She's your pal, your buddy. It's not the same.

Rory shoved the unwanted thoughts from his mind and went back to work on breakfast. He had just finished the second omelet when Lucy emerged from his bedroom wearing nothing but the dress shirt he'd discarded last night.

She looked adorable with her hair tousled and her lips full from his kisses the night before. She walked over to the coffee machine, poured a cup, and took a large sip. Setting the mug down, she moved behind him at the stove and slipped her arms around his waist. "Morning." She yawned. "Breakfast?"

"Figured it's the least I can do because you put out last night." He turned his head and gave her a cheeky smile. "I mean put yourself out."

"Ha, ha," she said, and went back to her coffee. "Yeah, it was a hardship, but I managed to survive."

He grinned at her over his shoulder. "Sit down and I'll feed you."

After they'd finished breakfast, Lucy got up to refill both their mugs. Placing his before him, she asked, "Do you have a brother named Bradley?"

Rory took a sip of the scalding brew, and tried to latch onto that detachment he'd cultivated over the last two years. Unfortunately, those old emotions bubbled back to the surface. Why the hell wouldn't they stay buried? "Yeah. Back in Houston. You found the invitation?"

She sat down and watched him over the rim of her mug. "I wasn't snooping. I found it wedged between the fridge and stove when I swept the floor last night."

Rory believed her, but he didn't say anything.

"Are you going?"

"To the wedding?" he asked, struggling to keep the incredulousness he felt out of his voice.

Lucy nodded.

He was silent for a moment. He hadn't planned on attending. The idea of Carrie Ann marrying his brother had sent him drinking his weight in alcohol. He couldn't imagine how he'd react if he bore witness to their nuptials.

Intending to tell her no, he shocked the hell out of himself when he said, "Yeah, I am. Want to go with me?"

Lucy blinked. "Me?"

Rory forced his lips into a smile, all the while tamping down on the panic that threatened to sweep him away. "No, the Blue Fairy. Yes, you."

"It's two weeks away."

"I know," he said.

"Um, okay. I'll go."

Rory sipped his coffee, and tried to tell himself the reason he invited her along was for her company, and not out of

some twisted desire to prove to everyone, most especially Brad and Carrie Ann, he had moved on.

Now he just needed to convince his conscience to listen.

* * * *

The next week kept Lucy busy.

With the deadline for Bistro 411 rapidly approaching, she worked fourteen hours a day, leaving little time for anything other than dropping like a rock into sleep.

The design templates had been shipped to the printer on Monday. Lucy spent all of Tuesday and Wednesday at the restaurant, going over the sketches with Erik Fischer, assisting him in the preparations for the mural. He was easygoing except when it came to sharing responsibility. They could have saved valuable time had the artist not insisted on drawing the logo onto the wall himself. After a full day of arguments and restarts, he finally threw up his hands and conceded.

Although Lucy had chosen to express her art via technology, she was still an artist at the core and could sketch and paint with the best of them. Because she created the design logo and had Erik's vision locked in her mind, she drew the outline in a few hours.

On Thursday, she left the rest of the mural in what she hoped were Erik Fischer's capable hands and prayed he would finish it on time. If not, she would add him to her hit list titled "People to Kill with Cuticle Scissors." Her sisters and mother were the top four. Five was a nice round number.

She saw little of Rory. He had stayed the night Tuesday, but her distraction must have been obvious, so he kept the slumber parties to one. She was too close to the wire to handle the diversion Rory's presence created.

On Thursday night, he sent her an e-mail with the words "Houston Trip" on the heading. With everything going on, she had almost forgotten their plans.

Last Saturday, after Rory had surprised her with the invitation, Lucy had blabbed on and on excitedly about the trip and all of the things they could see and do. She'd been so overcome with relief that he had finally offered a deeper piece of himself.

All of her fears and doubts about them vanished, and she began to think there might be a future for them. Dangerous thinking, she knew, but how many of his other women had he brought home to meet the folks?

She opened the e-mail and saw he had attached a copy of their electronic airline tickets. Her stomach dipped when she thought about getting on an airplane because she wasn't what anyone would call a "calm" passenger. But when she linked onto the Web site for the hotel Rory had booked and got a look at their lodgings, she forgot about her fear of flying.

"Wow." At her feet, the Beast perked his head up. She looked down at the dog. "Sorry, guy. You're staying with Auntie Em."

He whined, but she ignored his attempts at manipulation. Lucy clicked through the Web site, marveling at the pictures she knew weren't doing the elegant hotel justice. It boasted a

grand ballroom, a five-star French restaurant, two bars, and a full spa. "Definitely gonna get me some of that."

She'd figured that if they went to all the time and expense to fly down to Houston, they might as well make a vacation out of it. Rory hadn't been as excited as she at the prospect of spending a week in his hometown, but he'd come around. She glanced at the pictures of the hotel again. Obviously.

Lucy wrote him a quick reply and sent it off before she saved the last minute changes she'd been working on. With Rory on her mind, she fell into an exhausted sleep.

* * * *

"Here's to each and every one of you. You guys kicked ass!"

Her team lifted their respective drinks with Lucy and toasted.

They'd done it. They made the deadline. Lucy had delivered the menus, sandwich boards, and sign templates herself that afternoon to a happy client. Erik Fischer had surprised the hell out of her, working until the wee hours Thursday night to finish the mural, which looked amazing. The blending of Italian countryside and her logo design had been fluid, as if they were meant to be created together.

The senior associate position was as good as hers. Wyatt had been out of town for the last couple of days, but the mere fact he was comfortable leaving the account in her hands for the deadline spoke volumes. And by this time next week, she'd be in Houston with the man she loved.

Now, she treated her team to a celebratory dinner, and the atmosphere was triumphant. They all swapped nightmare client stories and got a little toasted enjoying great food and good company. By the time everyone filed out the door, Lucy was pleasantly tipsy.

"Maybe we should call a cab," she suggested.

"I only had one glass of wine," Emily said checking her watch. "Two hours ago. I'm okay to drive."

Inside her bag, Lucy's cell phone chirped. She pulled it out, hoping it was Rory, but she didn't recognize the number on the display. "Hello?"

"Congratulations, Lucy," Wyatt Chase said.

"Thank you!"

"I just got off the phone with Jacque Louis, and he had nothing but praise to sing for you. He's a satisfied client."

After everything I did, he ought to be.

"I'm calling to offer you that senior associate position. That is, if you still want it."

"You bet your ass I do!" Emily stared at her. "I mean ... well, sir, what I meant to say..."

Wyatt laughed. "It's okay, Lucy. You deserve it. One thing I forgot to mention is that you'll have your own personal assistant now, so if there's someone you have in mind, let me know."

Lucy gave Emily a thumbs-up sign. "I'd like to request Emily Jenkins, sir."

"Quit calling me 'sir,' and you've got it."

"Thanks, Wyatt."

"Thank yourself, Lucy. You've earned it."

Lucy shut the phone, and the two women embraced, squealing like a couple of whack jobs. They earned stares from people strolling by, who then gave them a wide berth.

After calming themselves down, they got into Emily's car and headed home. Lucy pulled out her cell phone. "Rory's going to flip."

But he wasn't home. Neither did he answer his cell phone. Probably out with some of his buddies, she thought. This was information she wanted to deliver in person, followed up by a long bout of hot, sweaty sex, so she didn't leave a message.

Emily quirked a brow. "Romeo not home?"

"Must be out gallivanting."

"I think this calls for another celebration."

"I agree." Lucy shook a triumphant fist in the air.

"I've got a bottle of champagne at home. Want to break it out? Have a little party?"

They decided to celebrate at Lucy's, because the Beast was likely chewing through the metal to get out of his kennel. They retrieved the bottle of champagne from Emily's refrigerator and headed down two doors.

Emily snagged a corkscrew on their way out and managed to pop the top in the driveway. They each took a sip and were giggling by the time they got to Lucy's door.

Lucy crossed her legs and dropped the keys, trying to catch her breath. "Stop, I'm going to pee!" The admission sent her into another fit of laughter, and Emily took the keys and opened the door.

She followed Emily in, but stopped abruptly when she ran smack into her friend.

"My eyes! My eyes!" Emily screeched.

Lucy moved around Emily, who had slapped a hand to her face, and found Rory lying naked and aroused on her couch.

The absurdity of the situation coupled with the alcohol caused both women to burst into another fit of laughter. Rory, who had leaped up and covered his masculine body with a feminine, fuzzy pink blanket, obviously didn't see the humor.

"That's some welcome," Emily managed.

Lucy hadn't thought it possible, but Rory actually *blushed*.

Emily handed her the open bottle of champagne. "Here. You're going to need this more than I am." She laid a hand on Lucy's arm. "Don't let that go to waste," she said, and Lucy knew she wasn't talking about the bubbly.

Emily's laughter carried out with her when she left. Lucy stared at the naked man in her living room. "Hi, honey, I'm home."

Rory did an excellent job at pretending to be affronted. He turned his nose up in the air despite the pink blanket still wrapped around him. "I assumed you'd be alone."

Lucy chuckled. She set down the champagne and walked over to him. "Poor baby." She tugged on the soft blanket until it fell to the floor. Lucy placed hot kisses on his chest, swirling her tongue around the flat disks of his nipples, watching with satisfaction when his erection bobbed once again. "Let Mama make it better."

She trailed her mouth down his thighs, feeling a surge of feminine power when his hands fisted at his sides, then tunneled through her hair. She placed her fingers around his shaft. Meeting his eyes, she took the long length of him into

her mouth, twirling her tongue around the plump head. She reveled in his musky scent and the velvety steel that tasted like heaven.

He stared down at her with a feverish intensity in his eyes. She licked him masterfully, matching the fire in him with her own. With a growl, he moved his hands to her shoulders and pulled her up, then took her mouth in a ravenous kiss. Their tongues tangled, and heat exploded between them. His mouth was hot and urgent, and Lucy felt that familiar pressure build inside her.

He broke away. "Take off your shirt," he said roughly.

With trembling hands, she slipped each button free, never taking her eyes from his. She dragged the soft cotton from her arms. His hungry eyes feasted upon her breasts, all but spilling out of her bra. Under his erotic scrutiny, her nipples hardened into stiff peaks.

Her skin felt hot and flushed. She popped the button on her slacks and let them pool at her feet. She stepped out of them and was left standing in nothing but her bra, panties, and high heels. She felt another surge of power when those cobalt eyes flashed. She pushed him down on the couch.

When she straddled him, he gripped her behind. He kneaded her flesh, and then worked his fingers under the lace. With defiance in his eyes, he grabbed the material and the lace ripped. The act was so erotic, Lucy almost climaxed. She felt drunk, but she knew it wasn't the alcohol making her blood hum and her heart trip.

Rory leaned down and suckled her breast through the satin of her bra. He dipped his tongue under the scalloped edge,

eddy around her nipple, making her arch with the incredible sensation of it. She went to clasp his shoulders, but he grabbed her wrists and pinned them behind her back. When he went to work on the other breast, she moaned at the exquisite torture he carried out on her body.

She felt his erection, hot and insistent on her inner thigh. He shifted imperceptibly and slid inside her.

She gasped. "Rory, we forgot..."

But, the pleasure was too intense. She shattered around him, and he groaned out a curse when her inner muscles clenched in blinding pleasure. "We don't need it. I want to feel you." He shuddered. "You feel so good, baby."

With sudden fury, he released her wrists and moved her hips on him. Lucy didn't need any more encouragement. She placed her hands on his shoulders and took over, riding him hard, drawing him all the way out, and then sheathing him completely again.

"You drive me fucking crazy," Rory breathed into her ear.

His words drove her near the edge again. Lucy wouldn't have thought it possible, but she had learned nothing was impossible with this man. He had repeatedly shown her what her body was capable of, even when she thought there wasn't any more she could take.

"Come for me, Lucy," he whispered, and the dam burst again.

She bit her lip when pleasure exploded in her body, snaking out and grabbing her. Rory grasped her hips again and pumped hard into her, then wrapped his arms around her as he shouted her name.

In the aftermath, she laid her head on his shoulder, her breathing ragged. His arms were like a vise around her, and she wondered blissfully if she'd ever be able to walk again.

Rory tipped his head back and rested it on the couch.
"Mother of God."

She smiled into his shoulder. He loosened his hold but kept his arms around her.

"At the risk of repeating Emily," Lucy said, "that was some welcome. If it weren't so damn funny, I might be feeling a little jealous."

"You're hilarious, Hollister."

She grabbed his chin and turned it toward her. "I knew it. You are blushing! The mighty Rory Carlisle reduced to a quivering mass of embarrassment by two women. Who knew you were such a prude?"

She squawked when he tickled her sides, then flipped her so their positions reversed, all the while remaining snug inside her. He withdrew a fraction, then surged back in. Lucy's eyes widened.

"I'm certainly not over it yet," he told her, a wicked gleam in his eye. "In fact, I'm not sure I'll ever recover."

Lucy wiggled her hips, and then clenched her muscles around him, darkly satisfied when his eyes went opaque.

"Guess I'll have to administer some more therapy."

And she did.

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Chapter Twenty-One

"I want to take you out tonight, to celebrate your promotion."

Lucy paused, a spoon full of Lucky Charms midway to her mouth. "Like a date?"

Rory shrugged. "Yeah, why not? Dinner, dancing. Yada, yada."

"Why Rory Carlisle, you romantic fool."

"Zip it."

"I thought we celebrated last night."

Rory pointed his spoon at her. "No, you and Emily celebrated last night. We engaged in hedonistic pleasure."

"Can we do some of that, too?" Lucy asked with a cheeky grin.

"I don't put out on the first date."

"Wow, this *would* be our first date, wouldn't it?"

Rory looked flustered. He stood and carried his dishes to the sink. *Must have hit a nerve*. Before she could say anything else or wonder at the source, the phone rang.

Rory picked it up. "Hello?" He paused. "Hey, Mrs. Hollister.... What's that? ... No, just over visiting Lucy.... Mmm. Dinner? ... Next weekend won't work. We're going to Houston for my.... "Another pause. "Brother's wedding.... Yes, Lucy, too.... Tomorrow? Yeah, I think so.... Well, that sounds great." He looked at Lucy and laughed. "Yes, I totally agree. Sure, she's right here."

He held out the phone, impervious to her manically waving hands.

"I hate you," she said without heat.

"Lucy!" her mother squawked in her ear. "What are you doing going to Houston? Do you know how hot it is down there this time of year?"

"Hello, Ma. Rory invited me. And yes, I'm familiar with the weather patterns of the South."

"Rory has a brother?"

"Yeah." She glanced over at him. He stood at the sink with his back to her, cleaning the breakfast dishes. "Who knew?"

"You know, you might want to think about losing some weight for the wedding."

"Ma, I'm not having this conversation with you." *Again.*

"Frankie told me that vegan diet is working wonders for her."

"Frankie never had a weight problem before. Now she looks anorexic. Besides, I can't function without protein."

"What about that South Beach diet? One of the ladies from my bridge club went on it, and she lost twelve pounds in the first week."

Lucy looked down at her body. She had spent last thirty years of her life criticizing her looks. And she was goddamn sick of it. For once in her life, she was happy with her body, imperfections and all. The self-doubt ended here. "I'm happy the way I am, Mother." As usual, Maggie ignored the warning in Lucy's tone.

"Sweetie, you're never going to find a husband if you don't..."

"Look, Ma, let's shelve this, okay? You think I'm too fat to find a husband, and I think you're old and bitter, so why don't we agree to disagree. I'll see you tomorrow."

She slammed the phone down and took a breath. "Think your parents are looking to adopt?"

Rory dried his hands on a towel and walked over to her. He placed two fingers under her chin and tipped up her face. "You are not fat. Your body is the most fantastic piece of beauty God ever created. When I look at you, all I see is how gorgeous you are." He smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry your mama upset you."

Her heart melted at his words. *He thinks I'm beautiful.* Lucy smiled, then grimaced when her eyes filled with tears. She swiped at them. "I know she's not trying to be an evil hag, but I wish she would quit." She laughed bitterly through her tears. "But that's like trying to stop a leak with your finger when the whole boat is already full of water."

He kissed her. "Maybe you should try telling her it hurts your feelings when she says things like that."

"Share our feelings? Nice try, Dr. Phil, but Maggie doesn't operate that way."

Rory didn't laugh. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" she asked.

"Use jokes when you're upset."

"I don't know."

"I think you do it to keep people at a distance. Maybe you oughta think about letting someone in."

The irony of his comment hit her hard. *Like you do?* she almost said, but the words stayed bitter on her tongue. Lucy

wasn't the one keeping people at a distance. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

She'd never confront Rory. She was too scared he would bolt, like he always did. And didn't that make her the world's biggest coward on top of everything else?

* * * *

"I'm not sure why I'm surprised, but you really can move."

Rory twirled Lucy, and then drew her back into his arms. He moved with such grace she felt like a bull with two clubbed feet in comparison.

"I took dancing classes."

Lucy lifted a brow. "*Really*. That's something I'd never have guessed."

"My father didn't have time to take them with my mama, so, being the good son I am, I offered to take them with her."

This is a good man. "That's so sweet." He'd never mentioned his parents before, so she chalked another point up for her side.

He smirked at her when he glided them across the ballroom floor. "Actually, it wasn't totally altruistic. I was gunning for a car for my sixteenth birthday. I thought it might grease the wheels, no pun intended."

Lucy looked up into those magnificent blue eyes. "You don't fool me, Rory Carlisle. You would've done it even if you didn't have to."

He spun her around, pulled her back, and dipped her in such a way that she gasped and giggled in delight when he finally lifted her.

Rory, true to his word, had taken her on a spectacular first date. After their strange conversation earlier, he had left, instructing her to "be ready at five wearing that hot, little red dress."

Lucy spent the remainder of the day scrubbing her house and attending to the myriad of chores that had been neglected while she'd been focused on her project at work and Rory, not necessarily in that order.

The River Room was a well-known restaurant located at the top of a historic hotel with five-star accommodations. Situated in John's Landing, on the south end of the Waterfront District, it overlooked the Willamette River from its perch under the shadow of the Ross Island Bridge.

Rory made the reservations in advance, snagging one of the waterfront tables on the balcony. With white twinkle lights and paper lanterns adorning majestic columns and the low-hanging rooftop, they'd enjoyed a relaxing dinner and excellent wine while looking out over the river and city skyline as it receded into darkness.

Inside the plush dining room, a baby grand piano sat to the left of the bar, in front of a dance floor comprised of smooth Italian tile where couples glided and swayed to the soft music the pianist created. He finished the song, and the dinner crowd applauded.

Rory held her in his arms, staring down at her with a twinkle in the depth of his cobalt eyes, a smile flirting with his lips. "Have I mentioned how gorgeous you look tonight?"

"About five times, but you can tell me again."

He kissed her nose. Rory wore a charcoal gray suit with a white dress shirt topped off with a silk burgundy tie. Lucy couldn't remember seeing him in a suit, and she thought he ought to do it more often. Of course, he could wear a gunny sack cinched with rope and she'd still want to lap him up.

"Rory!"

He released her, and they both turned toward the voice who'd called out to him. Three men stood at the edge of the dance floor, drinks in hand. When Rory acknowledged them, they approached the pair.

The shorter and obvious leader of the three clapped Rory on the back. He wore a brown checked sweater and jeans that complemented skin the color of dark coffee. Snazzy brown sneakers that were more for fashion than exercise peeked out from his hems. A hat of the same design of his sweater rested on his head. All he needed was a monocle and pipe, and he'd be a well-dressed, African American Sherlock Holmes.

"Where the hell you been, man?" Sherlock asked.

"I've been around, Chuck. How you been?"

Chuck, not Sherlock, mimed a two-armed punch and laughed, throwing his head back to showcase a full set of straight, white teeth. "Keeping the ladies insane with my mighty mojo."

The two other men sidled up to Chuck. "Haven't seen you around much, Rory, my man," one of them said. He was tall, ridiculously so, but most ten-year-olds were bigger than Lucy. Spiky blond hair topped a long face with myopic brown eyes,

and a mouth that barely moved when he spoke. It was disconcerting.

This guy would make a great ventriloquist.

"Who's this?" the third man asked, nodding down to her. Lucy had forgotten all about him. He wore a nondescript button-down shirt and slacks of a similar nature. With unremarkable brown hair and eyes, it was easy to see how she'd forgotten him.

Rory placed a hand at her back. "Guys, this is my girlfriend, Lucy Hollister. Luce, the guy with the funny hat is Chuck Yober, the giant is Joe Sumner, and this other fool is Patrick Dolan."

Lucy shook Chuck's hand, and then moved on to clasp hands with Joe of the Motionless Mouth and Utterly Forgettable Patrick.

"Lucy and I work at Chase together."

Rory's friends muttered a collective "Ahh," as if the answer to some life-altering question had been revealed.

Lucy placed a hand on Rory's arm. "I need to go to the ladies' room." She nodded at Rory's friends. "It was nice to meet you."

Definitely techno-geeks, she thought when she walked away.

* * * *

"Girlfriend, huh?" Chuck asked, elbowing Rory.

Rory looked at his friend. "You've been spending too much time with your motherboards, Yober."

"Come on, Carlisle," Joe chimed in. "You're the creator of the no-strings affair."

"You, yourself, said that marriage was *not* online with your life plan," Patrick reminded him.

Those little fingers of panic returned. "No one said anything about marriage."

"Maybe not, but that lady's got stars in her eyes." Chuck winked.

"In all of the months we've known you," Patrick said, "of all the women who've entered the revolving door into your bed ... and the numbers are in the mind-boggling digits ... none, and I mean *none*, have ever earned the title of 'girlfriend.'"

"Must be serious," Joe added with a laugh.

His friends were enjoying his discomfort, which increased with every second of this conversation.

Did Lucy have stars in her eyes? Rory hadn't noticed, but he didn't think so. Things were more comfortable for them because they'd been so close before their physical relationship had evolved. He cherished the time they spent together, and he *loved* making love to her. True, he hadn't made a habit of sleepovers with the other women in his life. But Lucy ... she was different.

He liked being with her. It was as simple and complicated as that. He was still dead set against marriage ... no way would he test those shark infested waters again. He wasn't husband material. Carrie Ann had known it and had run for the hills, or more accurately, to his brother's bed.

Oh, shit.

He'd gone and done it. Rory had entered a "relationship." His friends were right. He'd never had girlfriends, at least not before Carrie Ann. And now he had Lucy.

When she returned from the ladies' room, he searched her face. She looked the same, a tiny, smart-mouthed siren with gorgeous black curls and sharp brown eyes. A kick-ass, take-names fairy. When her eyes locked on his, she smiled, and Rory relaxed. Things were fine. They might have a relationship, but it didn't put fear in his gut. No expectations, just laid-back and easygoing. A relationship didn't always lead to marriage. Certainly Lucy knew that, especially given his recent history with women. She wouldn't expect anything more than he could give. And if she did, well, he'd have to end it. The idea of losing Lucy, of another man spending his life in her bed sent a queer emotion he recognized as jealously coursing through his veins. He mentally shook himself from his reverie.

They bid good-bye to his friends, paid the bill, and headed back to her place.

They drove down the highway in the 'Vette, the top down and the warm June air rushing past them. Lucy's small hand rested on his thigh. Rory breathed a little easier. She knew the score. As long as she didn't pressure him for more than he could give, things would work out fine.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

"I want to warn you, her insanity has reached new heights."

They stood in front of the rambling house of Lucy's youth in the warm sunshine. Rory whipped off his sunglasses and hooked an ear on the open V of his blue polo.

"I can handle your mother."

Lucy put a hand on his arm, her tone insistent. "You saw her on Easter. Three months ago, Rory." She cast a furtive, if not terrified glance toward the house where the whirlwind of patronizing condescendence that was Maggie awaited. "She's gotten worse. It's possible she has any number of small children and/or animals locked away in the basement for later torture."

Rory pried her fingers off his arm and tucked her hand in his. "Relax, Luce."

"Easy for you to say," she grumbled when he urged her forward.

The house loomed before them, an American Foursquare made of brick with white trim on the eaves and windows. Slim columns, also white, supported a narrow front porch, where an antique rocker rested. Her mother's vast gardens rioted with color, ensconced within a black wrought iron fence that circled the property.

The hinges on the iron gate squeaked when Rory opened it and ushered Lucy through. He fairly dragged her along the quaint cobblestone walkway and up the cement steps leading

to the front door. Before Lucy could take a fortifying breath, the door swung open, and there stood Maggie, five feet three inches of oppressive fury disguised under the premise of "I know what's best for you."

"Oh, you're here! Wonderful."

Maggie moved onto the porch and bustled past Lucy. She wrapped her arms around Rory, fussing at him like it had been years instead of months since she'd seen him last.

"It's so good to see you!" She held him at arm's length and examined him. "Still such a handsome boy." She linked her arm in his and led him inside, leaving Lucy to trail behind.

"Hello to you, too, Ma."

The front door opened into a large entryway with hardwood floors buffed to a spotless, glossy shine. To the left of the foyer sat the living room, more for show than anything, because no one was allowed to actually *live* inside.

Persian rugs decorated the floors below shiny antique end tables topped with fresh flower arrangements. A stack of gardening books and other things no one ever read were strategically placed on a coffee table that had never seen a pair of feet or a cup of joe. A thick taupe sofa and matching loveseat surrounded the table, and the room smelled of lemon Pledge.

It looked like Pottery Barn had thrown up in her mother's house. Lucy didn't say it, however, for to do so would be an invitation to discuss the state of her own home, which according to Maggie, needed the touch of a decorator, or a family.

Either would do.

Voices carried out from the rear of the house. The whole family had joined in the festivities, from the sound of it. Maggie led them back to the kitchen where Frankie and Mary Alice stood sipping iced tea and discussing the merits of sending their children to a regular preschool—gasp—as opposed to Montessori. Julia sat at the kitchen table while her five-month-old, Avery, nursed at her breast.

"Lucy!" Frankie rushed forward to crush her in an embrace. "How are you?"

"I'm good," she choked out, her lungs somewhere near her throat. *Can't breathe, can't breathe.* Frankie released her and Lucy took in a mouthful of much needed air. "How about you?"

While Frankie exploded into a diatribe of the latest in the life and times of a busy, vegan lawyer's wife, Lucy slid her eyes to Rory, who'd been captured once again by her mother. Maggie tugged him out in the backyard where the rest of the family stood out in the late spring day.

"It's so good to see Rory again. It's been too long," Mary Alice said.

"Hey, Lucy, did you ever check out that online dating site I got for you?" Julia asked.

The three elder Hollister sisters stood as a united front, bubbly, beautiful, and confident, ready to forge ahead in the battle to marry off Lucy.

She nodded her head at the baker's rack against the wall. "Hey, is that a new piece?"

"You know Ma," Julia said.

"Remember that time we went with her to the San Juans?" Mary Alice asked.

Lucy rolled her eyes. "The cat figurine? She knocked that poor lady down who had it in her hand."

Frankie laughed. "Ma had the thing paid for and wrapped up before the woman knew what hit her."

"I thought antiquing was supposed to be fun," Julia said.

"Maggie doesn't do anything for fun," Lucy informed her. "You'd think she might enjoy it a little, have some fun, but for her it's a blood sport."

"So, tell me about that Web site, Lucy. It looked really promising," Julia said.

Thankfully, her father, decked out in a red checkered apron complete with a ridiculous chef's hat, came traipsing in through the back door, saving her from answering. A plate piled precariously high with burgers, hot dogs, and ribs wobbled in his hands.

Lucy rushed forward. "Daddy, let me help you."

"I've got it, cupcake." He dropped the plate on the counter and wiped his brow. "Mary Alice, go tell everyone chow's on."

Mary Alice walked two paces to the open door and shouted, "Dinner! Move your asses!"

"Christ Almighty, girl," Ed said with a shake of his head.

"You spawned her," Lucy reminded him.

Julia disengaged her daughter from her nipple and laid her over her shoulder, patting the baby's back. Lucy walked over to the table and started making kissy noises at her niece, to which Avery replied with a large burp.

"Way to go, champ." Lucy held out her hands. "Let me have her."

She cradled her niece in her arms, staring down at the big, guileless brown eyes locked on her face as if Avery were trying to memorize every detail. Lucy laid a kiss on the baby's soft hair and murmured to her. Her heart pinched painfully in her chest as she gazed at Avery. She'd always wanted children. And now, she didn't want to have them with anyone but Rory, which, in all likelihood, was never going to happen.

Her morose thoughts were pushed to the back of her mind when the rest of the family jammed up at the back door as they all fought to get to the grub.

Rory trailed in last, chatting with Julia's husband, Mark. He caught Lucy's eye, watching her hold the baby. She lifted Avery's tiny fist and waved at him.

The next few minutes were a buzz of frenzied chaos while thirteen people scrambled in the kitchen to make their own plates of food. By the time they were all seated, Frankie, who was high-strung, and at the least had anxiety issues, looked ready take her steak knife and jam it in her throat.

Maggie settled at one end of the large dining room table, Lucy's dad at the other. Lucy sat somewhere in the middle, with Rory on her right and Frankie's husband Alan to her left.

Across from her sat Mary Alice's fifteen-year-old son, Josh. He wore a royal blue, shiny jogging suit several sizes too big and a white golfer's hat cocked to one side. A large dollar sign, fashioned from what had to be cubic zirconium, hung from his neck. Aliens would land in the Hollister backyard and

join their family for dinner before Mary Alice and John would buy such a tacky diamond necklace for their oldest child.

Apparently, Josh was going through some sort of phase.

He winked at her from across the table. "Hey, Aunt Lucy." He ran his tongue over his front teeth. "Got my grill waxed."

A few chairs down, John, Mary Alice's husband, translated. "He saw Dr. Wesley for his semiannual cleaning."

Lucy couldn't think of anything to say, so she nodded. Under the table, Rory placed his hand on her thigh and squeezed.

"Next year, when I turn sixteen, I'm going to get diamond inlays on my two front teeth."

"What happens if you get a cavity?" Lucy asked, forking up some potato salad.

"Oh, for God's sake," Mary Alice said in disgust. "He's not getting anything inlaid."

Under the table, Rory's fingers crept upward. Lucy squeezed her legs together, although whether it was to stop him or keep him there, she didn't know.

"Woman, I told you not to embarrass me in front of my people!" Josh said indignantly.

"Joshua James Tanner." Mary Alice shook her finger. "You listen to me. You are not a pimp, nor will you ever be one. You were raised better than that, so please disabuse yourself of that ridiculous notion."

"You always humiliate me!" Josh cried, his postpubescent voice cracking. He shoved back from the table and stormed out of the dining room.

"Wonderful," Lucy's oldest sister said, and shoved a hot dog in her mouth.

"I'll get him," John said.

Rory's hand had slid under the cotton skirt of her sundress and crept along her inner thigh. Her muscles quivered in anticipation. She squirmed in her chair when his hand slipped over the front of her panties, which were getting wetter by the minute.

When he slipped a finger inside the elastic along her inner thigh, her ears started buzzing. Someone spoke her name, and her knees jerked upward and hit the table, rattling the silverware. "What?"

Everyone eyed her strangely. Everyone, that is, but Rory, who hid his mouth in his napkin. She thought she heard him chuckle, but it was hard to hear anything with the blood pounding in her ears. She wanted to smack him upside the head, right after she dragged his hand back where it had been.

"I've been meaning to call and ask how your date with Dan went," Alan said.

"'Just Call Me Danno'?" Lucy's pulse returned to normal as Rory decided to be a good boy and keep his hands to himself. Damn it.

Alan laughed. "I forgot he likes to call himself that." He took a sip of his water, and then asked, "So? Is there a second date on the horizon?"

"Uh, no. I don't really think he's my type."

"You say that about all your dates," Frankie complained. "You probably didn't even give the poor guy a chance."

"Well, Lucy," Julia chimed in, "I know a guy who'd be perfect for you. He works..."

Rory cleared his throat and set his napkin down. "Actually, Lucy is being incredibly gracious, considering Danno is a douche ... begging your pardon, Mr. and Mrs. Hollister ... and got grabby on their *date* and continued to do so after she specifically told him no.

"If those are the kind of guys y'all are setting her up with, then I don't think she needs your help. Lucy is more than capable of finding a man, which she has by the way." He lifted her hand and kissed it. "And, no, I'm not interested in sharing."

A stunned silence rent the air. They all stared at Rory, mouths agape. Lucy looked at him while she tried to get her heart dislodged from her throat. No one had ever defended her honor before. She felt the sting of unshed tears against her eyelids and bit her lip to keep the waterworks from coming. Her heart swelled with love for this amazing man.

Her father's laughter broke the uncomfortable quiet. He threw back his head and roared with it. When he finally stopped, he knuckled tears from his eyes. "Damn son, I've been waiting thirty-five years for that. Welcome to the family."

Olivia, Mary Alice's five-year-old daughter, who Lucy figured was the sanest of the bunch, said, "I'm done. I want to play a game." She pointed at Rory. "With you."

He winked. "Guess I've been summoned. Thank you for a lovely dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Hollister."

Rory stood, and Olivia clasped his hand and led him into the family room.

"Lucy, help me clear the table," Maggie said.

With a resigned sigh, Lucy started piling used dishes on top of one another. She carried the load into the kitchen where her mother filled the sink with hot, soapy water.

Lucy dumped the dishes next to the sink and opened the dishwasher. The rest of the family had the good sense to stay away. They all knew when Maggie was going on the offensive.

Preparing herself for the inevitable, Lucy stood next to the dishwasher and held out her hand. Her mother remained silent for a moment, washing her earthy green crockery before passing the sudsy dish to Lucy.

"Growing up, I wasn't pretty or popular."

Definitely not the words she'd expected. More startling was the confession itself. Her mother had led them all to believe she had been the "it" girl throughout high school and college.

Lucy said nothing, sensing her mother hadn't finished.

"I never got invited to any parties. I had no boyfriends to speak of. Barely any friends, come to that. Oh, I had a few, mind you, but we were all of a certain class, I guess you'd say. Us against them. I was definitely not one of *them*." She used a sponge to scrape potato residue off another plate and handed it Lucy. "When I went off to college, I thought, here it is, my fresh start. A chance to become a new me. That girl I'd always longed to be." Another dish handed to Lucy.

Lucy put it in the dishwasher with the others. "What happened?"

"Well, it started out well enough. I got myself out there, socialized. Started wearing makeup, paying attention to those fashion magazines." She smiled wryly. "Your grandmother never let me look at them, wear makeup, or date. It was a fight to let me go away for college." She sighed. "Anyway, there was this boy. His name was Randall Haskins." Maggie's smile was tinged with sadness, her eyes lost in the memories of her youth. "Oh, he was magnificent, Lucy. Gorgeous, charming, funny. Everything I thought I'd ever wanted. We shared an economics class together our freshman year. We were paired up in class, became friendly." She stopped washing and stared wistfully out the window.

"Now, for all of my forays into this brave new world, I was still a little lost. Shy, mostly, and clumsy to boot. Stumbled over my words. But, with Randall, he was so patient, and when I talked, he listened, like he really wanted to hear what I had to say. When he asked me out on a date, I was well and truly floored. I'd never believed I had a chance with him. He was the epitome of every boy I'd ever dreamed of as a girl. I was so awkward and miserable, and the most popular boy had asked me out."

Maggie went back to washing dishes, ferociously, as if her life depended on every last spoon and fork. Lucy had a bad feeling where this conversation was headed, but she let her mother continue.

"Did you go out with him?"

"Of course. And it was wonderful. He took me to a little Italian restaurant, bought me flowers from a street vendor.

He brought me back to his dorm room, my head full of romance. I gave myself to him when he asked."

Maggie passed Lucy the last of the dishes. She loaded them and started the dishwasher. "Then what happened?" Lucy asked, leaning against the counter.

"We made love, obviously. He took me home, kissed me tenderly, told me I'd been his first. Said he would see me soon." She shook her head. "The following Monday at school, I saw him walking with one of the pretty blonde sorority girls who'd always stuck her nose up at me in class. He had his arm around her. When he saw me, he deliberately kissed her. All the while his eyes were on mine, and afterward, he smirked. I found out later he'd made a bet with his one of his friends to see which one of them could deflower a virgin first."

"That cocksucking son of a bitch!" Lucy exclaimed.

"Normally I'd scold you for that language, but this time ... yes, that's exactly right."

Maggie grabbed a handful of paper towels and a bottle of 409 and wiped the counters, putting her kitchen to rights.

"It was the most humiliating experience of my life. I met your father not long after. Thank God for Ed. He saved me. I was a mess after what happened with Randall. Most of the school knew about it, and the change I'd hoped would come didn't. I was an outcast, someone to be laughed at. Your daddy wasn't a charmer like Randall, but he was solid, honest, and, most of all, kind. We married after college, and I vowed if I ever had daughters, none of them would be forced to grow up feeling like they never fit in."

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

Maggie had tried so hard to meld her daughters into perfect girls. Then came Lucy, a square peg that wouldn't fit into a round hole no matter how hard you stuffed her in. In her quest to find normality for her daughters, Maggie managed to alienate the one most like her. Perhaps the irony was lost on her mother. Lucy hoped not. She *really* hoped not.

* * * *

Rory had his ass handed to him not once, not twice, but three times to a pint-sized five-year-old. And at Candy Land, no less.

He was a disgrace.

Mary Alice's boy had recovered from his tizzy and now played against Frankie's two older children on the Xbox. Alan, Mark, and John sat in armchairs talking quietly while Mary Alice, Frankie, and Julia cast furtive glances Rory's way and whispered.

Well, family time at the Hollister house was about over. He stood, stretched, and held out a hand to Olivia. "Thanks, kid. You've humbled me."

"I beat your socks off."

"This is true." He looked at John. "Precocious, isn't she?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. You heading out?"

"Yeah. I'm going to get Lucy." He nodded at the women when he passed. "Ladies."

Rory figured he'd given Maggie and Lucy plenty of time to dish, although he hoped they weren't talking about the size of his package. If so, he didn't think he'd be able to look Lucy's

mother in the eye again. He stopped outside the door leading to the kitchen, though, to make sure.

"Your sisters..." Maggie said. "They came by their gregariousness so easily. It was as natural as breathing to them. And when you came along, it was obvious you were marching to the beat of a different drummer. The harder I pushed, the further you dug your heels in. There were so many days I felt like pulling my hair out. I realize now it's because we were so much alike." A pause. "I know I push you, honey. I know it hurts you, and I'm sorry. I truly am. It's never been my intention. I don't want you to suffer like I did."

"But, I'm not miserable, Mom," Lucy said. "I love my life. I love who I am, what I do. Being different makes me *me*."

Way to go, Luce.

"I know that now, baby." Another pause. "I can remember when you were a little girl. You had all of these visions in your head, such an imagination. And your heart. It was so big, full of these romantic dreams. I recall this one day, in the middle of winter and we'd had this huge snowstorm. You barricaded the door in the attic with some old boxes and told us you weren't coming out until your Prince Charming came and rescued you."

Rory smiled at the image of Lucy locking herself in the attic. He could picture it perfectly. He felt kind of guilty for eavesdropping, but they were having some kind of mother-daughter moment, and he didn't want to spoil it.

"Daddy had to break down the door," Lucy said, her sweet voice infused with a touch of humor.

"You were about blue with hypothermia by then. We bundled you up by the fire, and your sisters and I sang to you until you feel asleep with tears still in your eyes. You were so disappointed your prince didn't come." Maggie paused again. "The reason I told you all of this is because I want you to know I understand. But I also want you to know the truth before it hurts you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Honey, Rory is not your Prince Charming. A harmless fling is fine, even fun, but men like Rory aren't in it for the long haul. You know his history. They want trophy wives, arm candy if they ever do settle down."

Hey, now. She was right about the settling down part, but he wasn't so shallow that he would choose arm candy. Well, okay, he had for a while until Lucy came along.... But why was Maggie telling her all of this?

"I'm being honest with you because I don't want you to be hurt," Maggie continued. "You may be thirty, but inside, you're still that little girl waiting for her prince to come."

"Ma, Rory is not Randall Haskins. He wouldn't hurt me intentionally. Right now, we're enjoying each other." Lucy was quiet for a moment. "I doubt it's even serious. But I'm not going to run away because I'm afraid. I'm not going to do that anymore."

"I know, baby," Maggie said. "But, you can't fault me for trying."

"Thanks, Ma. Thank you for sharing that with me. I feel like I understand you better now. But, do you think you can

call off your dogs on the whole dating thing? It's really getting on my nerves."

Maggie laughed. "I'll try. Best I can do. I am your mother, after all."

Did Lucy see him as her Prince Charming? Did she think things would progress that far? Maybe he should have been more upfront about his position in the beginning, but he thought Lucy knew what she was getting into. It's not as if he hadn't given her ample opportunity to see how he operated.

No marriage. No way.

Those fingers of panic were back, and this time, they snaked through his spine and grabbed him by the balls.

Unbidden, the image of Lucy holding Julia's baby floated into his mind. When he'd seen her with Avery, something inside him had pinched painfully. He'd ached in a way he'd never felt before and wondered what it would've been like if he *had* gotten Lucy pregnant last month. Rory imagined her ripe with his child, then later, nursing the baby at her heavy breast. The image had been so real, so *vivid*, he'd squelched it ruthlessly, because he knew it would never happen. But in some small part of his mind, a place he absolutely did not want to examine, Rory longed for a life with Lucy like he'd never wished for anything else.

As if out of nowhere—because Rory had been lost in dreams of an unattainable future—Lucy appeared out of the kitchen, and he knew he'd been caught. She flushed scarlet and stared at him for a long moment, obviously embarrassed. She recovered quickly, something he'd recently discovered

she did well, which made him wonder if she was hiding other things. Like her real feelings for him.

"Ready?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

He nodded, following her out as they made their good-byes, reminding himself Lucy hadn't told her mother she wanted something permanent. For some strange reason, and despite the fact he felt the same way and panicked at the thought, the idea that she saw him as a fling bothered him.

More than it should.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

I am trapped inside a giant death machine.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the tower has cleared us for takeoff. Please place your seats in their upright positions and lock your tray tables. When we begin our taxi, please take a moment to watch our flight attendants as they go over our safety instructions."

Lucy gripped both the armrest and Rory's thigh with white knuckles. He winced, pried her fingers off, and held her hand.

"You okay?"

"Sure, I'm okay." Her voice came out high and breathless. "It's not like we're going to die or anything." She looked to him for confirmation. "Right? We're not going to die, are we?"

Her voice rose in pitch, and a couple passengers regarded her warily.

The plane taxied to the runway. It stopped for a moment, and then moved again, picking up speed until the g-force pressed Lucy back into her seat. Her breathing accelerated, her pulse hammered. She knew she fought a losing battle, knew she should try and calm herself, but she couldn't.

Then, the rough ground gave way to the smoothness of air followed by the sensation of weightlessness before they began to climb.

"Luce."

She stared straight ahead, focusing on and memorizing each stitch of the patterns in the cloth on the seat in front of

her, her breath becoming shallower with each foot the plane rose.

Rory took a hold of her chin and turned her to face him. "Breathe, baby, breathe. We're going to be fine. Millions of people do this every day." The terror strangling her gave, just a fraction, as she stared at the kindness in his beautiful blue eyes.

"Look around you, Luce. Everyone else is fine. There's nothing to be afraid of."

She turned her head and studied the other passengers. They sat comfortably in their seats, some dozing, some reading, others chatting. Like nothing was wrong. Like they weren't about to plummet to their deaths.

Breathe.

After a few tense moments, her chest loosened and her breathing leveled out, even if she couldn't completely relax her muscles. She squeezed Rory's hand. "Thank you. I'm sorry I lost it there. I hate flying."

"You should have told me. We could've taken the train or driven."

Lucy narrowed her eyes. "You mean to tell me I could've avoided climbing aboard this shiny vessel of death?"

Rory chuckled, placed his hand on her thigh, and sat back in his seat. "That's my girl."

Aside from a little turbulence over the Rockies, the flight from Portland to Houston was uneventful. Lucy experienced a moment of panic when they started their descent, but she managed to rein it in. Once they hit terra firma, though, she

had to stop herself from dropping to her knees, kissing the ground, and shouting, "Land!"

When they departed the plane, a hot, wet blanket covered Lucy and stole her breath. "Whoa."

"Yeah, it's humid. You'll get used to it," Rory said, hitching his carry-on over his shoulder.

"It's two-hundred freaking degrees!"

"Wait till we get outside."

"You're a goddamn sadist, you know that?"

He said nothing and kept his eyes straight ahead.

They exited the Jetway and began their long trek through the Houston Hobby Airport toward baggage claim. When they passed the throngs of people waiting for travelers, Lucy asked, "Where're your parents?"

Rory grabbed her elbow and led her away from the crowd. "At home, I guess," he replied.

"They're not meeting us? Hasn't it been two years since you've seen them?"

They entered the baggage claim area. Rory released her and walked ahead. When they reached their carousel, he stared straight out at the mass of machines, his jaw clenched.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah." He still stared, keeping his face half-turned from her. "They visited me last year," he said, as if that explained everything. "I didn't tell them I was coming."

"What? Why not?"

"Slipped my mind, I guess."

Lucy seriously doubted that. Little got past him. She suspected it had more to do with his life before he moved to

Portland. Who wouldn't call his parents and let them know he was in town? Especially for his brother's wedding? That evening months ago, when Rory had spoken to his mother, he'd seemed sincere when he had told her he missed her. But why wouldn't he inform them of their arrival? Before she could comment, the baggage carousel sputtered to life and suitcases started ejecting from somewhere below.

"Ah, here we are," he said in a voice that left no room for argument.

Something is wrong here.

The chute spit out their suitcases, and Rory moved away from her to retrieve them. He pulled up the handles on both and rolled them toward the exit without a backward glance.

What the hell?

"Hello," she muttered. "Girlfriend waiting here." *You jerk.*

Lucy struggled to catch up, her mind still reeling from his admission and this sudden change in behavior. He moved a few steps ahead of her, and he passed through the revolving glass door. She made it in time to jump into the glass enclosure behind him.

"Rory, wait!"

The Texas sun beat fiercely upon the ground, scorching the pavement. The air was as thick as a mud bog. A boiling mud bog. Why in the world would anyone willingly live here?

"Sorry," he said.

He didn't seem sorry, but Lucy decided to let it go. She didn't want to make a scene in the middle of the busy terminal. Rory pointed across the terminal street to where a

bus bearing the name of a major car rental company waited, belching plumes of black exhaust.

"That's us."

By the time they boarded the bus, sweat dripped from her pores, and she'd only walked across the street. She fanned herself with her hand. "God, how do you stand it?"

Rory shrugged, his eyes taking in their surroundings. "I'm used to it, I guess. Grew up here." His voice lacked the humor, the wryness that was essential to Rory. It was as if he'd turned his emotions off the minute they'd exited the plane.

"Give me rain any day."

The bus was packed full of weary looking travelers. The smell of diesel exhaust carried through cracked windows, and the hum of an overtaxed air conditioner groaned over the crackle and hiss of a CB.

The ride was short. People jumped up before the bus stopped, seemingly eager to get on with their trips. Rory remained seated and waited until the crowd diminished before he rose and retrieved their luggage.

Lucy hoped some meteorological miracle might've diminished the heat and humidity during their brief jaunt inside the bus, but found the weather even more oppressive when they stepped outside. Her T-shirt stuck to her back as she followed Rory into the car rental joint, which was, thankfully, air conditioned.

Twenty minutes later, they were headed down I-45 with the AC on kill. Lucy lifted her shirt so the vents blew on her sweaty skin.

"You're going to get us pulled over."

She looked down at her bra. "Guess the decency laws are stricter down here." She pulled her shirt back down and fiddled with the radio. "Are we going to the hotel?"

"I want to stop at my parents' first."

Lucy chewed on her thumb nervously. She had never met the Carlises, and she wanted to make a good impression. Unfortunately, Lucy Hollister and first impressions were *not* a great match. It usually took a few good whacks before people realized she wasn't a complete social moron. Repeated attempts to remove her foot from her mouth weren't conducive to second meetings, so she focused on thinking before she spoke as they drove along in silence.

When Rory pulled in the driveway of a large, fancy colonial home in what appeared to be an affluent neighborhood, Lucy let out a whistle. "Wow. Didn't know you were loaded."

He shot her a sideways glance. "I'm not. My parents are."

"Right."

Open mouth, insert foot. Excellent. Let us commence with the social faux pas now.

When they got out of the rental and made their way up the front walk, Lucy tried to fashion her face into a warm, friendly smile. Or at least what she *hoped* looked like one. Knowing her luck, she'd end up resembling a clown on crack.

He twisted the knob on the huge oak door and pushed it open. Lucy almost wept with gratitude when a rush of cold air greeted her. Rory shut the door and moved past her into a hallway ahead of the foyer.

To Lucy's left was a large, formal dining room with a glossy oval table and several high backed chairs. An enormous hutch sat against the far wall, filled with china and crystal that gleamed.

On the right was a library. Built-in bookshelves occupied all three walls. They were crammed with hundreds of books ... paperbacks, leather bounds, hard covers, and huge, legal texts. The urge to stop and browse was strong, but she contained her enthusiasm.

"Wow," Lucy breathed. "You actually grew up here?"

"Home sweet home," he muttered. He didn't sound happy about it.

She followed Rory down the long hallway, noting the framed black-and-white photographs that adorned the walls. They looked similar to the ones she'd seen in Rory's bedroom a couple of weeks ago.

The hall opened up into a bright, airy kitchen. Large, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked at least an acre of lush green lawn and blooming flowers. A stainless steel, Sub-Zero refrigerator hummed quietly. Granite countertops surrounded a mammoth butcher's block, and above it, copper pots hung on hooks extended from the ceiling. Pleasant new age music drifted through speakers inlaid in the walls.

A tall woman with long black hair generously streaked with gray stood at the sink with her back to them. She wore a red sarong and a black silk tank. Her long, elegant feet were bare.

"Mama."

Rory's mother turned around. Her pretty face registered shock for a moment, then her wide mouth split into a grin. "Rory." She rushed forward and wrapped slim arms around him, squeezing tight. She released him and held him at arm's length, her mother's eyes taking in every detail. Moms were weird like that. They knew when something was wrong. It was like that eyes in the back of the head thing. Eerie. "I can't believe you're here. I didn't think you'd come." Her drawl was lulling, soothing.

"Change of plans."

"Yes, so I see. Well, I'm glad." Cobalt eyes, identical to Rory's, shifted behind her son, and she spotted Lucy. "And you've brought someone with you." She let go of Rory and padded over to where Lucy stood, trying to blend in with the fridge.

Rory said, "Mama, this is Lucy Hollister. Lucy, my mama, Jasmine DeWitt-Carlisle."

"Call me Jazz, honey," she told Lucy.

"It's nice to meet you." Lucy stuck out a hand. Jazz moved it aside and hugged her, too.

"Any friend of Rory's is family here." She smelled faintly of roses and dish soap. Her hair was soft as silk, and her hands were warm and strong when they caressed her back. When she released Lucy, something clicked in her brain.

"You're Jasmine DeWitt."

The older woman lifted a brow. "You've heard of me?"

"I took a photography class in college. We studied your work. When I saw your pictures in Rory's house, I thought they looked familiar, but it didn't register." She glanced over

at Rory. "You didn't tell me your mother is a famous photographer."

Jazz waved a hand. "Oh, I don't know about famous. That makes me sound like a celebrity. I just like to take pictures."

"Modest, too," Rory said with a smile.

"Can I get y'all something? Sweet tea? Lemonade?"

"I'll get it, Mama," Rory said, moving to the fridge.

"Nonsense. Sit down. I'm sure y'all are exhausted from your travels."

Lucy sat down at the long kitchen table. Rory glanced at the empty seat next to her before moving to the opposite end.

Okay. What the hell is up with him? This is getting frigging ridiculous.

Jazz pulled out a pitcher of iced tea and lemonade from the refrigerator and carried them over to the table, following with three tall glasses.

"How's the weather up there this time of year?" She poured sweet tea into two of the glasses and passed one to each of them.

Rory took a deep swallow of his drink. "Pretty mild. It's getting warm now, but it's nothing like Houston."

Jazz turned her gaze on Lucy. She tried not to squirm. "Is this your first time in Houston?"

Lucy nodded. "I thought I was going to pass out when we got off the airplane." She winced. *That was brilliant.*

But Jazz didn't seem to mind her flip answer. "It takes some getting used to."

From the front of the house, a door slammed followed by a deep voice strikingly similar to Rory's. "Jazz!"

Rory's mother rolled her eyes. "That would be your father. Man still doesn't have the manners the good Lord gave a hound. In here!"

Heavy footfalls preceded a large man with Rory's dark locks and jaw. He wore plaid pants and a yellow polo, his face flushed and half covered by a trim gray beard. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut short and looked as though he'd raked his fingers through it, a trait that obviously ran in the family.

"Whose car is that in the driveway?" he asked. Then his green eyes locked on his son. "Well, I'll be goddamned. Rory."

"Hey, Dad."

"Don't you 'hey, Dad' me. Get your ass up, and give your old man a hug, boy."

Rory smiled and did that. Hands the size of bear claws thumped Rory's back. "Damned good to see you here. Didn't think you'd make it," he said, repeating Jazz's earlier sentiment. "When did you get in?"

"About two hours ago. Came from the airport."

"Well, that's fine."

Apparently, his parents didn't find it odd he hadn't contacted them prior to their arrival, either.

Rory gestured to Lucy. "Dad, this is Lucy Hollister. Luce, meet Thomas Carlisle."

Lucy stood and watched her hand disappear in Thomas's. "Hi."

"Call me Tommy."

There was a brief meeting of eyes between his parents, and then Jazz stood. "Lucy, why don't we let the men bond and you and I can go take a walk in gardens."

"Sure."

Jazz led her to a glass door next to the kitchen table that opened into a large screened porch. Empty picture frames lay stacked against one wall. Along another, a couple of fishing poles. Patio furniture sat near another door, this one leading down a set of stairs.

Jazz opened the door and led Lucy down the steps. The air was thick and wet, and she heard the steady buzz of locusts all around them. The backyard, a study in landscape design, with its rolling expanse of verdant grass extending to the far end of the property, made Lucy wish she had more than her tiny twelve feet at home.

A pea gravel path wound around from the base of the steps to the left side of the house, ending in several rows of rose bushes. They were a riot of color ... reds, yellows, pinks, and oranges.

"I love roses," Jazz said, stopping to run her finger along a soft petal. "When Tommy and I visited Rory last year, he took us to that fabulous garden."

"The Rose Gardens?"

Jazz nodded. "That's it. So pretty. My roses don't thrive as much as the ones where y'all live, but they do all right. We get our share of rain here, too."

Against the base of the large house lay more flowers, hyacinths, petunias, jasmine. Some lamb's ear sprouted from a place in the ground along with rosemary and sage. The

scents of the garden wafted up to Lucy's nose, and she breathed deep.

"You have a lovely home."

"Thank you. I don't do as much photography these days, so I spend most of my time in the garden." She looked over at Lucy. "How do you know Rory?"

Lucy blinked, not certain she'd heard Jazz right. "How do I know Rory?" she repeated.

Jazz nodded.

She'd assumed Rory had mentioned her to his parents. She was, after all, his best friend, had been for the better part of two years. But it was obvious from his mother's curious stare she had no prior knowledge of Lucy's existence. Her heart pounded rapidly as she floundered for an answer, but she couldn't hear anything beyond the roaring in her ears. A strange pain pinched her chest and trailed down her belly, and Lucy realized how badly this realization hurt.

"We work together at Chase," she managed.

"Ah. It's good he has someone here with him. He'll need the support," she said cryptically. Before Lucy had a chance to comment, Jazz continued, "Are you in his department?"

"No, I'm a graphic artist."

Jazz's blue eyes lit up. "Oh, goody. Another artist." She clapped her hands together. "Like minds and all that. Tell me about what you do."

Pushing the hurt away, Lucy did that.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Inside, Tommy Carlisle glanced out the window. "Let's retire to the den, shall we?"

Rory followed him down the stairs into what his mother called The Cave. Tommy was a retired district court judge, but the evidence of his penchant for hunting had replaced the legal texts that had once graced the walls of his den. A large, eight-point buck held the place of honor on the wall behind his desk.

Tommy went over to the wet bar and pulled out a decanter. "Brandy?"

Rory shrugged. "Sure."

He poured two fingers into a highball glass and handed it to Rory. He knocked it back while his father filled his own. From a drawer in his desk, Tommy retrieved a wooden box filled with cigars. He bit the tip off one and lit it.

"Keep an eye out for your mother."

Rory chuckled.

"Surprised to see you here," his father said again.

Rory figured a lot of people would feel the same way. He was still a little shell-shocked himself. He knew he'd been behaving strangely, knew Lucy could see it, but something inside him shut off when they'd walked through the airport. The heart he'd guarded so well had kicked into protective mode. "Kind of surprised to be here."

He scanned the den. A picture of the three Carlisle men sat in a frame on his father's desk. Tommy stood with his arms

around his sons, Rory and Brad holding four- and five-foot bass, respectively. A formal portrait of Brad and Carrie rested on the credenza. They looked the same, but happier. He glanced away.

"Who's your young lady?"

"Just a friend. From work," he added. Rory didn't know why he'd kept their relationship a secret. He didn't know much of anything at the moment.

Tommy watched him over the rim of his glass as he took a sip. Then he puffed on the cigar, and smoke swirled up to the ceiling. "Y'all stayin' here?"

Rory lifted his brows. "I don't think that's a good idea, all things considered."

"I suppose you'd be right." He swallowed the rest of his brandy. "You doin' okay, then?"

"Sure. Right as rain."

Before his father could respond, the door to the kitchen slammed and footfalls sounded above their heads. Tommy stubbed out the cigar in a crystal ashtray and waved his arms about to disperse the smoke. "Your mama's gotta nose like a basset hound." He sniffed himself. Seeming satisfied, he gestured for them to head upstairs.

"You didn't see anything, you hear?"

"See what?"

Behind him, Tommy Carlisle chuckled. "That's my boy."

* * * *

By her estimation, Lucy figured she'd sweated half her body weight in the last three hours. A constant sheen of

perspiration dotted every pore on her skin. She felt slimy and longed for a shower the way a crack addict craved his next hit.

The sweet tea she hadn't touched still sat on the kitchen table, condensation beading on the glass. Lucy headed straight for it, and drank it in three long gulps.

"You're going to want to stay hydrated while you're here, honey," Jazz said. She looked much the same as she had before they'd gone outside. Not a drip of sweat to be seen. Lucy was insanely jealous.

"Make sure you drink a lot of water."

Lucy nodded as a door opened in the short hallway, and Rory and Tommy walked into the kitchen. Jazz sniffed the air and narrowed her eyes at her husband and son.

"Thomas Carlisle, is that cigar smoke I smell?"

Rory's father grinned sheepishly. "It's a special occasion, sweet pea. Rory's homecomin'."

"Baloney." She turned her fierce glare onto her son. "You know better, young man."

Rory threw up his hands. "I didn't see anything."

"Yeah, yeah. The blind, deaf, and dumb bit."

Rory checked his watch. "We better get going, Luce. Check-in is at four."

"Where are you staying?" Jazz asked, as she and Tommy walked them to the door.

"The Old River Oak."

"Good. You'll be close by."

After hugging his parents, Rory and Lucy walked down the front steps. He turned and looked up at them. "I'll call you later."

"Rory? The rehearsal dinner is tomorrow night at the country club," Jazz said. "I expect to see you there."

Rory's features tightened. "We'll see. Bye, Mama." He nodded at Tommy. "Dad."

The Carlises went back inside and closed the door. Rory walked ahead of her at a clipped pace, like he led a race, and whoever got to the rental car first won the purse.

When Lucy reached the passenger door, she heard another car approach. A shiny, convertible BMW pulled up on the street in front of the Carlisle residence. A couple emerged, and one look at the man told Lucy knew this was Brad, Rory's brother.

They could've been twins. There were differences, of course, but the similarities were striking. Both had the thick, black hair of their father. The same strong, square jaw and aristocratic nose. Rory had a fuller mouth, the lips more sensual. Brad lacked the cobalt eyes, instead favoring Tommy's green gaze. Rory stood taller than his brother, heavier in the shoulders and chest.

The woman, Brad's fiancée, Lucy assumed, was quite frankly, gorgeous. She had thick red hair, cut stylishly above the shoulders with the ends flipped out. She showcased her body in chic clothing that screamed money. On her left hand, a huge diamond winked in the Texas sunlight.

Brad and his fiancée stopped when they spotted them. Rory, too, stilled. His eyes shuttered, and his mouth formed a

tight, thin line. A muscle in his jaw ticked as he stared at the couple. The air was so rife with tension that Lucy knew her hand would've sizzled had she lifted it in the air.

Brad's fiancée broke the tense silence. "Rory."

Rory said nothing, just opened the car door with jerky movements, got inside, and slammed the door. Seconds later, the engine roared to life. For the first time, the couple became aware of Lucy, who stood by watching the fireworks with confusion.

She smiled awkwardly at them and joined Rory in the car. He jammed the gearshift into reverse and tore out of the driveway, never again sparing a glance at the couple who stood in the street, watching them drive away.

Anger vibrated off of him in waves even a blind man could see. Lucy longed to know what had happened to make him so hostile toward his brother. Was this why he had moved to Oregon? Her earlier suspicion deepened and told her she was on to something. Maybe if she *asked* Rory....

"What's up?"

"Nothing," he replied, his voice tight.

"Was that your brother? Brad?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Lucy. Drop the fucking subject, okay?"

Stung, Lucy shut her mouth, and stared out the window.

The hotel was a five-minute drive from his parents' house. When Rory pulled the rental car into the lobby drive, he got out without a word and stalked toward the entrance. He disappeared through a pair of beveled glass doors.

What in the world had she gotten herself into? From the moment they'd stepped off the plane, Rory had become a different person. Was this the man he'd been before? Normally such an easygoing guy, this sudden change in personality startled her. And why hadn't he mentioned her to his family? Damned if she wasn't still ticked about that.

There were so many questions to which she had no answers. And underlying everything was the feeling she'd walked into something that would change the way she saw Rory Carlisle forever.

* * * *

Goddamn it.

Rory walked into the hotel with barely suppressed rage. He snapped out his information to the front desk clerk, gave her his credit card, and took the two key cards she offered.

Lucy waited in the car.

Lucy.

Inviting her had been a mistake. He knew that now. Hell, he'd known it two weeks ago. What in the hell had he been thinking? Why he had even come was a mystery. While Rory knew he'd run into *them* eventually, he hadn't been prepared for it to happen so soon. They'd looked equally stunned. And now he had to go to the rehearsal dinner and play nice. More grist for the fucking gossip mill.

He got back in the rental and parked the car. Lucy gave him space, treating him with kid gloves, like he was about to explode any second, which he immediately resented. Resented her presence and her calm, uncomplicated life.

Their suite was near the top floor. He slid the card home, and the lock snicked. He pushed the door open and dragged their luggage inside. The room was big, fancy, and expensive.

He didn't give a damn.

Before she had a chance to shut the door, Rory turned on her. He grabbed her shoulders and pressed her against the thick wood, using the momentum of their bodies to close it. His lips went to her throat, nipping, biting, sucking. A sharp intake of breath was her only response.

He wanted it fast, he wanted it rough, and he wanted it now. He shoved her T-shirt up and tore at her bra, profoundly satisfied when her heavy breasts popped free from the confining satin and lace. He attacked each one with the same ferociousness he'd shown her throat, and she threw her head back, banging it against the door.

Abandoning all rational thought, he fumbled with the snap on her shorts and yanked them down with her panties, placing his foot in the crotch to get them off. With one hand, he ripped at the button of his slacks, pushing them down around his thighs. With the other, he hoisted her up against the door and plunged into her.

She cried out and came immediately, convulsing around him like a hot, wet glove as her head lolled against the door. He thrust into her like a man possessed, not caring that anyone in the hall could hear their bodies slapping against the door. He focused only on release, for a measure of peace amid this storm of emotion.

His orgasm crashed through him and he groaned, placing a hand against the door to support both himself and Lucy. Her

legs slid limply to the carpet, and she straightened, her eyes glazed and a little wild.

Rory pulled away from her, removing himself from her heat. She put a palm on his chest and pushed him away, heading into the bathroom. His head hit the door, and he let out a ragged breath.

Jesus H. Christ.

What he'd done was out of line. Beyond out of line, it bordered on assault. If she hadn't come, he would've hauled his own ass in to the cops. He walked over to the closed bathroom door. He lifted his hand to knock, but dropped it. Inside, he heard the water running, and wondered if she was washing him from her body.

Turning away, he grabbed his suitcase and tossed it on the king-sized bed. He unzipped it, rifling through the clothing until he found a pair of gym shorts and a T-shirt. After he changed, he located a pen and a pad of paper on a table near the telephone. He wrote Lucy a brief note, pocketed the room key, and let himself out.

* * * *

Lucy's entire body shook.

She stood at the double sink in the bathroom, her trembling arms resting on the counter as the water ran. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Face flushed, skin splotchy with color. Pupils dilated, neck red and scratched from Rory's rough mouth and whiskers. She drew in a shaky breath, then splashed cold water on her face.

On quivering legs, she grabbed a soft towel and patted her face, then pulled her T-shirt over her head and discarded her bra. She wrapped the towel around her body.

What in the *hell* had happened?

There had been nothing gentle moments ago. Nothing playful. Lucy wasn't even sure it had anything to do with her. It was if Rory had released some unknown demon and used her body for the exorcism. That's how she felt. Used. Dirty. And on some level, her traitorous body had enjoyed it.

She opened the door, ready to confront Rory.

He'd disappeared.

Even with the room shrouded in darkness, Lucy saw Rory's suitcase on the bed, clothes strewn across the spread. With the towel wrapped around her, she found the light switch.

The suite was beautifully appointed. She already knew the bathroom boasted a large, Jacuzzi tub as well as a glass enclosed shower big enough for five people. The king-sized bed sat on a raised platform in the middle of the room. A sitting area off to the side was near windows draped in red silk.

With a sigh, Lucy walked over to the bed and picked up Rory's clothes. On a pillow rested a slip of paper bearing the hotel's name and logo.

Went to work out in the gym. Be back after while.

She put it aside and resumed folding his clothes. She placed them inside the bureau opposite the bed. After she took care of the mess, she unpacked the rest of his suitcase. She dipped her hand in, ensuring she'd emptied the luggage.

Her fingers brushed against something else. She pulled her hand out and stared at the small velvet box.

A jeweler's box. No question.

Her heart pounded. Carefully, she opened it. Inside lay a diamond ring the size of Rhode Island. Even in the room's soft, muted light, the gem flashed like fire and ice.

Why did Rory have this? Only one reason came to mind.

"Oh, my."

After his behavior today, she'd been pretty much ready to concede defeat. She wanted to confront him about his attitude, his secrecy, and if he didn't give her the answers she sought, she would've been on a plane back to Portland. Well, maybe. Hell, probably not. Any confrontation would lead to the mother of all arguments. Lucy was sure. *The* argument that might end their relationship. And despite his baffling behavior, she didn't want it to end. Not now. Not ever. And he certainly hadn't been acting like a man preparing to pop the question ... that was the understatement of the century ... but this....

This changed everything.

With trembling fingers, she tucked the jewelry box back inside the suitcase. His actions still confused her, but now she had the courage to confront Rory about his brother. She would encourage him to open up to her, to discuss whatever bothered him, especially if he wanted a life with her. Lucy smiled tremulously.

Lucy put her own clothes away, stacked both suitcases in the closet and headed back to the bathroom. She wanted to take advantage of that gorgeous Jacuzzi.

Letting Luce
by Jenny Gilliam

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Chapter Twenty-Five

When she emerged from the bathroom, Rory waited.

He sat on the edge of the huge bed, muscular forearms resting on his thighs, head hung low. He didn't look up.

Wrapped in one of the fluffy white bathrobes provided by the hotel, she paused while toweling her hair and watched him. He looked so forlorn, so lost that it broke her heart. *Who hurt you, Rory? What did they do to you to make you this way?*

Despite her earlier resolution, Lucy didn't know what to say to him, what to do. Every attempt she'd made to reach him so far had been rebuffed. She tossed the towel on the bed and walked toward the bureau. When she passed him, he reached out, twisted his arm around her waist, and drew her to him. He pressed his head into her belly and nuzzled the giving softness. She ran her fingers through his damp hair.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry I was so rough."

She laid her lips on his head. "Are you okay?"

He looked up at her, his blue eyes fierce. "I am now."

* * * *

That evening, he took her on an abbreviated tour of his hometown. The dark cloud following him since they'd arrived had dissipated, and the old Rory, the one she knew and loved, returned. They held hands and strolled along the streets, ate hot dogs from a street cart while he regaled her with tales of his youth.

As the twilight gave way to inky darkness, they sat on a park bench on the outside of the Wortham Fountain, listening to the soft trickle of water, the people passing, the city making the gentle passage into night.

"I can see why you love it here," Lucy said. "Aside from the humidity, that is."

"Houston will always hold a place in my heart." He leaned back on the bench and stretched his arm behind Lucy. "But Portland is my home now."

"No burning desire to move back?"

He chuckled without mirth. "None whatsoever." He picked up the hand resting on his thigh, kissed her fingers. "Why would I want to leave when you're there?"

Her heart made a slow turn and little bombs of happiness detonated inside her. "Good answer," she managed. She took a breath to calm her stuttering heart. "Still, it must be hard having your roots so far away. I guess I've always taken for granted that I've lived in one city my whole life."

"It was strange at first," he admitted. This was the first time he'd spoken of the move. Lucy took it as a good sign.

"I didn't know anyone, had no friends." He shot her a sideways glance. "Till I got trapped in an elevator with you, that is."

"Well, there is that."

"It got better with time. I wanted to move, didn't just do it for the job, so I think I had an easier transition than most."

"Why did you move to Portland, Rory? If it wasn't for the job?"

He said nothing for a moment. When he finally answered, tension tightened his voice. "I'd had enough, I guess."

"Enough of what? Did it have to do with whatever rift is between you and Brad?"

He looked sharply at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Rory. Ever hear that shopworn line, 'if looks could kill'? Well, I'd say Brad would be dead on his feet."

Rory pulled his arm back and leaned forward. His withdrawal made her stomach curdle like spoiled milk. Frustration burned through her. If he couldn't share his worries and anger with her, how did he expect them to share a life together?

"Brad and I ... I don't even know where to begin, Luce. It's not something I even like to think about, let alone speak of." His movements were jerky, the hostility from earlier returning.

She was sorry to have caused it, but she couldn't take back her words. She didn't want to. For the last eight hours, she'd tiptoed around him and his sudden, baffling mood swings. And she was damned sick of it.

"Our beef has been going on for years. I'm not even sure how it started." He stood and held out his hand. "Ready to go?"

She stared at his outstretched hand. *That's it. End of discussion.* Her frustration spiked into fission of anger. Lucy was getting tired of going along with this craziness. She stood, but didn't take his hand. It was petty, but it made her feel better.

The Houston Heights Country Club was a study in excess wealth and the privilege that said wealth could buy. Lucy tried not to gawk.

The ballroom where the Carlisle-Childs wedding reception would be held tomorrow was a huge, glittery affair, comprising three thousand square feet of polished hardwood imported from Spain, twelve cascading chandeliers made of Waterford crystal, and picture windows with beveled glass inlays.

Lucy came from a middle-class family. She worked for a company that had nearly one hundred clients, many of whom were fancy, well-established businesses. But she feared the moment she stepped inside the ballroom, red lights would start flashing and a canned voice would scream, "Ghetto white trash has entered the facility. Security, please remove the individual."

Or maybe Lucy's overactive imagination had gotten the better of her.

A sizable stage occupied the north end of the ballroom, and below it was a glossy floor with enough room for thirty couples to dance the funky chicken without rubbing elbows.

Fifty round tables dressed in white linen lined the perimeter of the room ending in a cluster near the door. On the far wall, a bartender manned a full bar for a dozen or so people.

The wedding rehearsal had taken place at the church earlier in the evening. Rory had opted out, deciding they would make an appearance at the dinner instead. Now, she

stood next to him and scanned the faces of people she didn't know, feeling like the proverbial fish.

From the looks of it, Brad and his bride-to-be were having a large, grandiose wedding. Lucy counted ten bridesmaids, which had to be some kind of record. She didn't think anyone short of British royalty did that. This meant the ladies were evenly matched, which brought the wedding party up to twenty. Add in the parents, flower girl—probably more like three—and ring bearer, and the event became a veritable circus.

Rory looked nervous. They'd stood at the open doorway watching the fray for a couple of minutes before taking a tentative step inside. She kept waiting for him to assume the lead, but his feet seemed glued to the floor.

She nodded to the bar. "Drink?"

"Yes," he breathed.

He placed a stiff hand at her back, and they walked to the bar, an alcoholic's wet dream with scores of bottles from top-shelf brandy to José Cuervo. If liquor was water, then the Houston Heights Country Club had tapped into an underground spring.

The woman standing in front of them took the glass of wine the bartender handed her and turned, stopping short when her eyes landed on Rory.

"I don't believe it," she said, her accent thick and smoky. "Rory Carlisle."

"Hi, Angie."

"Give me a hug." She wrapped her arms around him, mindful of her full glass. When she released him, she said,

"How in the hell have you been? I heard you moved north. Seattle?"

"Portland."

"It's all Yankee country to me." She looked at Lucy and held out her hand, not waiting for him to make the introductions. "I'm Angie Grayson. I went to school with Rory, Brad, and Carrie."

"Lucy Hollister." Because it seemed he didn't want to recognize her as his girlfriend, she took the initiative. "I'm Rory's girlfriend."

Angie's brown eyes narrowed in speculation, but it seemed good Southern manners kept her from asking questions. She turned her gaze back to Rory. "It's good to see you, handsome. Don't be such a stranger."

Lucy watched her walk away to join a few of the women she assumed were part of the bridesmaid brigade.

"I'll take a Jack Daniels, straight up. Luce?"

"Chardonnay, please." While the bartender made their drinks, she looked at Rory. "Old home week."

Because he looked like a rabbit ready to bolt, she put the Jack in his hand. "Fortify yourself."

He grimaced and knocked back the drink. He pulled a few bills from his wallet and tossed them on the bar.

Within a few minutes, Rory loosened up enough to introduce Lucy to a few of his old friends. She listened to tales of Rory's misspent youth, laughed at a couple of lame jokes, and bore the brunt of questioning stares.

"Oh, I'm so glad you decided to come!" Jazz said, walking up to where they stood near the windows.

She gathered Lucy in an embrace, the scent of lavender and roses circling around her.

Rory kissed his mother's cheek. "Where's Dad?"

"Swapping hunting stories with Carrie's father."

He placed a hand on Lucy's shoulder. "If you ladies would excuse me a moment."

She watched Rory walk toward the exit, presumably to find the restroom. Lucy hoped he didn't decide to jump in the car and ditch her with the wedding party.

"Lucy, I want you to meet someone," Jazz said, taking her elbow and leading her to where Brad and Carrie stood chatting with still yet more bridesmaids.

Jazz pulled the couple aside. "Brad, Carrie, this is Rory's friend, Lucy Hollister. They work together in Portland."

Lucy shook both their hands. "Nice to meet you."

"Have you known Rory long?" Carrie asked. The stunning red pantsuit she wore should have clashed with her hair, but it only made her look more beautiful.

"About two years."

"Since he moved there then," Brad said. "Hey, if all the women in Portland look like you, maybe I oughta move up there." He winked and Carrie elbowed him.

"Don't mind him, Lucy," Carrie said. "He's nervous because he has less than twenty-four hours left before he loses his freedom."

"Now, come on, Carrie Ann. A man can't be married to a woman like you and see that as the end of his life." He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "I'm the luckiest man alive."

Oh, yes, charm ran in the Carlisle family. Carrie Ann blushed prettily and smiled. "You're so full of it." But she leaned into him and nuzzled his throat.

Now, here's a couple in love and not afraid to show it, Lucy thought with no small amount of envy. She wondered how they'd met, and opened her mouth to ask, but Brad asked, "Where *is* my brother?"

"I think he went to the men's room," Lucy said.

"Probably for the best," Carrie murmured.

Lucy watched the conversation volley back and forth, feeling like she had missed something crucial. It seemed a little rude to knock on Brad's forehead and say, "Hello? What the heck is going on here?" so she relied on her tried-and-true, nod-and-smile method.

* * * *

Rory's hands were sweating like his pores had sprung a leak.

This is ridiculous. He was a thirty-one-year-old grown man. Almost thirty-two. The time had long past for him to be done with this whole mess. Riding a roller coaster of highs and lows, he'd spent the last two days feeling like the business end of a Ping-Pong ball, shooting wildly to and fro.

Rory knew he'd left Lucy in good hands. His mother had taken a shine to his girl. Some part of him he didn't want to examine secretly was thrilled at the knowledge.

He wiped his palms on his slacks and walked back into the ballroom to find the one person who would calm him. He

spotted his mother first, speaking with Brad and Carrie. And Lucy.

When he saw her with *them*, instead of the chokehold of rage he'd expected, he felt nothing. Well, nothing for Brad and his bride-to-be.

He only saw Lucy. So tiny, standing there amid his family, looking up, nodding, and smiling. That smile. As though he was seeing her for the first time, something in his chest tightened, and he lost his breath. The soft curl of her dark hair rested on her shoulders. He took in the sweet curve of her cheek, that full mouth made for sin. The breath he'd lost came back in a rush, and the room spun for a split second, and then all was right again.

He walked toward the four of them, his eyes trained on Lucy. When she caught sight of him, her brown eyes danced, and her mouth moved into a brilliant smile. Brad noticed him next, then Carrie, and the happy couple tensed as one. His mother's smile slipped for a second as he joined the group.

An edgy silence ensued. He knew people were watching, waiting to see what he'd do next. If he would draw back his fist and plant it in his brother's face. Strangely enough, he felt no anger, just mild regret. And a queer sadness, the source of which he couldn't name.

He wrapped his arm around Lucy and pulled her close. "Ready to go?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Okay."

He kissed his mother. "See you tomorrow, Mama. Tell Dad I said good-bye." He nodded to the bride and groom. "Brad. Carrie."

He felt the collective eyes of the entire ballroom on his back when they left, but he didn't give a damn. He felt free for the first time in two years. He squeezed Lucy tighter.

It was about damn time.

* * * *

"Brad and Carrie seem nice," Lucy said neutrally as she slipped out of her pumps.

Rory came out of the bathroom wearing nothing but his boxer briefs, and vaulted onto the bed, settling back on the pillows. He watched her intently.

He'd been acting weird since they'd left the country club. Not weird in a bad way. Just ... off. Like he was giddy or something. Maybe he'd snuck back to the bar while she wasn't watching.

His eyes, like heat-seeking missiles, trained a hot blue gaze on her body as she undressed. Her body was so tuned into him her blood hummed from his stare alone. She needn't look at him to know he already tented out his briefs.

Feeling shy, she shimmied out of her clothes and laid them on the bureau. She arranged them just so, trying to give herself time. Time for what, she didn't know. Why was she feeling this way?

It was this change in him, she realized. *The Rory who opened his heart in her dreams.*

"Luce."

She turned, her cheeks heated as he looked at her hungrily. "Yes?"

"Come here."

Lucy stood frozen for a moment, then shook off the nervousness that had taken over. She stepped up onto the platform. Put one knee on the soft bed and crawled toward her man. Placing her hand on his chest, she pushed him farther into the pillows, and then straddled him.

She lifted her hands to her breasts and unsnapped the front closure, sliding the silky garment down her arms. "Is this what you want?"

He placed one big hand along her throat, let it trail down to tease her nipples. "I want you, Luce. I want all of you." He drew her down, his lips whisper soft on her heated flesh. "Let me have you."

"I'm yours," she said against his mouth.

He kissed her gently, tasting her as though he wanted to savor her with every sample of his lips and tongue. His hands skimmed up her sides and molded to her breasts, fingers feathering lightly over her, driving her mad. She fought against the need that rose inside of her, threatening to take over. He was setting the pace tonight. And he wanted soft.

Their sighs mingled as he lay her down on the bed and covered her body with his own. As though he were blind, he seemed to memorize each valley and peak of her body with touch and taste. He brought her to climax slowly, until she was half crazy with it, and when she felt herself fall, he slipped inside her.

He linked his hands with hers, moving above her with deliberate slowness, as if they had the rest of time to take and delight in each other's bodies. He stole her breath with this unexpected tenderness as he loved her body.

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Above her, he stared down. His eyes met hers and never wavered, keeping the connection. When she felt the pressure surge again, she whispered his name.

He moved faster, his own need taking over, but still, he kept his gentle gaze on her. When his release came, his hot eyes bore into hers, and she knew this wasn't just sex. They'd shared a moment of bonding she couldn't quite name. She only knew her heart was now forever lost to this amazing, complicated man.

He laid his head on her breasts, and she ran her fingers through his hair. After a few moments, he pulled away and switched off the light. Before she could protest the lack of contact, he turned and drew her against him, her back to his front. He wrapped a possessive arm around her.

Lucy lay there in his embrace, listening to the sound of his breathing. She felt the tension in his body ease as he drifted away into sleep. Content in his arms, she followed.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

The knocking woke him.

Rory pulled Lucy closer, getting ready to settle back into sleep when he heard it again.

Rat-a-tat-tat.

Soft and hesitant, as though not to disturb the occupants. He raised himself up on one elbow and looked down at Lucy sleeping beside him. She snored. She would slap him upside the head and force him to admit to lying if he ever told her. He thought it was cute.

He smiled. There must be something wrong with him.

He rose quietly, pulled on a pair of pants and walked over to the door. He checked the peephole and cursed.

Grabbing his key card first, he opened the door and slipped out to where Carrie Ann stood looking lost in the hotel hallway. He closed the door gently behind him.

"Hi, Rory," she said.

"What are you doing here?"

She wore a pair of those pants that weren't quite pants, the ones that looked like they'd been cut off mid-calf. A plain blue T-shirt showcased the body she worked so hard to maintain. She'd swept away her shiny red hair from her face into a ponytail that made her look younger than her thirty years.

She fidgeted. "I wanted to see, I guess."

He folded his arms across his chest, trying to appear nonchalant, but he worried about the sleeping woman in his bed. "See what?"

"You. I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Well, you can ease your conscience. I'm fine. Go home, Carrie Ann."

She fidgeted some more and looked pained. He took some satisfaction in that, though he knew it was petty. "Your girlfriend seems nice."

"Does my brother know you're here?"

She shook her head. "I had hoped enough time had passed ... you might be able to mend fences with him, if not me."

Rory scoffed, his earlier peace vanishing. "Did he send you here?"

"No. Look, Rory, I know we hurt you. I'm sorry. We never meant to do that. He misses you." Her eyes searched his. "He misses his brother a lot."

Something pinched inside Rory's chest, something perilously close to longing, not for this woman, but for his brother, whom *he* missed terribly but was loath to admit it. And the sadness he'd experienced earlier in the evening suddenly made perfect sense.

"Go home, Carrie Ann," he repeated wearily. He slipped the key into the slot, opened the door, and left her standing outside in the hall. He shucked his pants and crawled back into bed with Lucy.

She stirred, then mumbled, "What was that? I heard voices."

"Just someone looking for the wrong person," he said, and tucked her tight against him, closing his eyes.

But sleep eluded him.

* * * *

The ceremony was beautiful.

Friends and family packed into the large Baptist church, stuffing themselves into pews so they could watch the nuptials.

The bride wore Vera Wang, her hair coiled into a fancy updo, soft red tendrils trailing down her cheeks. She carried a simple, elegant bouquet of blue tulips tied at the stem with white ribbon. There were tears in her eyes when her father walked her down the aisle.

Lucy's romantic heart soared in longing and happiness when the preacher pronounced them husband and wife. She stood with Rory and his parents and threw birdseed at the couple when they escaped into a long, white limousine.

The worker ants at the country club had been busy. The grand ballroom had been transformed into absolute beauty, if that were possible. Each chair was wrapped with a white cloth secured with a fancy blue bow. Place cards with the names of guests embossed in pretty script rested atop the tables. Candles flickered in crystal bowls filled with water and sprinkled with tiny blue and white flowers.

Four bartenders worked today, and from the looks of it, they were all earning their keep. A band had taken up residence on the stage, and they played a bluesy number while couples danced.

Lucy did not dance. She had been born without the gene to boogie. Dancing at Barney's in a room full of drunken people was different. Even when they'd been at the River Room, she'd only danced with Rory because he'd gone to so much trouble. When she tried to explain this to him, he roared with laughter and pulled her out on the floor anyway.

Of course, he wasn't content to leave it at one dance. After two, he passed her off to his father, who was surprisingly agile for such a big man. Then, Rory's great-uncle broke in and took her for a spin. She began to feel like a car on a test drive, especially when Rory's uncle slapped her ass when he walked away.

With all of the fun and festivities, the romance in the air, it was easy to believe Lucy had imagined the tension between the brothers.

She sat with Rory at one of the fancy tables. Lucy sipped a glass of wine and watched people mill about, a good percentage of them already taking advantage of the open bar. He held her hand, tracing her fingers with his own, occasionally lifting them to his lips.

"You look gorgeous, by the way," he said, his eyes on her. "Every time I see you in that red dress, it makes me want to find a storage closet."

Lucy laughed, but her insides warmed up. She would never tire of hearing those words from his lips. "You're insatiable, you know that?"

"Only when it comes to you." He seemed to be on the verge of saying something else, and Lucy thought about the diamond ring she'd found in his suitcase. Her heart pounded.

"Rory, honey," Jazz said, appearing from behind them. "We're going outside to take some pictures on the balcony. Your presence is requested."

Rory looked at Lucy. "You want to come along?"

She shook her head. "Nah. I'll get in the way. Go ahead, I'll be fine."

He leaned over and kissed her. "Be right back."

Lucy finished her wine and decided she wanted some water. She had adjusted, marginally, to the humidity, but she wasn't willing to become sick with dehydration.

She walked up to the bar only to find it close to ten people deep. She scanned the ballroom until she spotted a long table lined with the extra plates and silverware, and what looked like several pitchers of ice cold water.

Three women with what Lucy called "country club hair"—high, teased, and coiffed, with enough hair spray to sustain category three hurricane winds—stood at the end of the table. Two held flutes of champagne, and the third, pregnant, sipped cola. They chatted softly, but when she grabbed a glass and poured some water, she heard one say, "I can't believe Rory even showed up after what those two did."

Lucy paused, her curiosity piqued. She pretended to admire the china, all the while managing to inch closer.

Another woman, with blond hair and a high, nasally Southern voice, said, "Apparently after he found them, he started tomcatting around. He hasn't settled down since. Looks like Tommy and Jazz will have to look to Brad and Carrie Ann for those grandbabies."

"I heard he brought his latest flavor of the month with him. Can you imagine? How tacky," said the brunette who'd spoken first.

Obviously, the catty women had no idea Rory's "flavor of the month" stood five feet from them.

The bitches.

"Wait, back up a minute," said the pregnant woman. "Who did he find together?"

"You don't know?" the snooty blonde asked, one shapely brow raised. "I thought everyone did."

"I've only known Carrie Ann six months," she said.

"Oh, honey. You've missed out." The blonde leaned closer, a predatory look in her eye. "Carrie Childs is Rory's ex-girlfriend. They almost got married."

Lucy stiffened and nearly dropped her water. Her heart pounded fast and furiously in her ears, drowning out the rest of what the woman said.

"It gets better," the blonde continued. "The three of them were inseparable since childhood. Rory and Brad were both sweet on Carrie from the first time they locked eyes on her all those years ago. But, Carrie chose Rory. Everyone assumed they would get married and have a houseful of babies. Even when Rory went away to college and they split up, people knew they'd get back together."

She waved her hand, her fingertips painted blood red. "She's the same age as Brad, you know. Well, I think that's when it must have all started, though it ended some years later. About two years ago, Rory had planned on proposing to Carrie. He even gave her his grandmama's two-carat antique

wedding ring, I've heard. Well, Rory had taken that job with Allegiance Software, and he was working all of those hours and away on business."

"That's no excuse," the pregnant woman interjected.

"I absolutely agree," her friend said. "But imagine how lonely Carrie must have been. And there was Brad to keep her company. If you ask me, I think she carried a torch for both men secretly. But that's neither here nor there.

"As I was saying, Rory was away a lot. Brad and Carrie were spending a lot of time together. One day, Rory came home early from work and found Carrie and Brad..." She cleared her throat delicately, more for effect, Lucy was sure. "Well, let's say they weren't playing Scrabble. Rory got violent with Brad, and then stormed out."

Lucy couldn't breathe. She turned and pushed past the gossiping women, beyond caring when the blonde said, "Well, that was rude!"

She had to get out there. She ran for the exit, needing space, privacy, before she completely lost it. Her eyes stung with unshed tears.

She heaved open the bathroom door down the hall and locked herself in a stall. Her hands shook as she leaned over and rested them on her thighs to steady herself.

God, she was such an idiot! Everything made sense now. Rory's strange behavior, his anger. His animosity toward both Brad *and* his bride. She'd assumed the rift had only involved the Carlisle brothers, but she'd been wrong.

Our beef has been going on for years. I'm not even sure how it started.

She closed her eyes, her thoughts going back to when he'd taken her against the hotel door. The whole time she'd thought he'd been using her body to rid himself of something. And she was right. He had rounded on her less than thirty minutes after seeing his brother and ex-girlfriend for the first time in years. Had he seen Carrie when he'd been plunging into her? Was he still hung up on the woman who was now his brother's wife?

Lucy moaned when a fresh wave of pain hit her.

The ring.

When she'd found the jewelry box in his things, she'd stupidly assumed he planned to propose. It was the ring he'd given Carrie. She was sure of it, knew it with certainty. That he'd kept it with him after so long made the truth painfully obvious.

Rory didn't love her.

He still loved Carrie Ann.

He had lied to her. It may have been a lie of omission, but in her eyes, it was one and the same.

Now she knew why he had packed up and moved to Portland. He spent his free time adding as many notches on his belt as he could. It made so much sense now, the endless string of women, his eternal bachelorhood.

Until Lucy.

Why had he brought her here? She had the awful sense he'd been trying to prove something to Brad and Carrie. And didn't that make her the biggest kind of fool? Here she'd thought they were making a future together, and he'd used her to show Brad and Carrie that he no longer cared. She'd

been a pawn in some wicked part of his past he'd never shared with her.

She unlatched the door and walked to the sink, staring hard at her reflection. *I don't even know him.* She had been his friend for two years, yet he'd kept this huge part of himself hidden. For Christ's sake, he hadn't even mentioned her to his family.

Even after they'd become lovers, he had never really shared himself with her. He'd had ample opportunity since they'd arrived in Houston to reveal all of this. Instead, she'd heard it secondhand from a bunch of gossiping hens.

It's time to face facts, Hollister.

Lucy took a shaky breath. She loved Rory. She had a terrible feeling she always would.

It was ironic. She had spent her entire life trying to measure up, to find Mr. Right, and never felt up to par. When she'd finally found him, he'd taught her that to prove her worth she would have to leave him.

Yes, Lucy loved Rory, but she wasn't willing to settle for someone who wouldn't give her one hundred percent of his heart. She may have been ready to take less than that a few months before, but she was seeing clearly now, maybe for the first time in her life.

She deserved more.

Lucy pushed away from the sink, not caring her eyes were red from holding back the flood of tears. When she opened the bathroom door, Rory stood there. He leaned against the opposite wall, his hands tucked in his pockets, his eyes on

hers. He looked so handsome it broke her heart all over again.

He straightened. "Have you been crying?" he asked, reaching up to touch her face.

Lucy resisted the urge to turn her face into his hand and moved away instead. He stiffened and dropped his hand, his wall going back up. Lucy knew she'd help him replace every one of the bricks around his heart with what she said next.

But, she couldn't wait. She couldn't hold this inside. Not any more. Not after he'd lied. "I know about you and Carrie."

He didn't deny it. He stared at her, his face expressionless. "And?"

"And you lied to me, Rory."

"No, I didn't."

Lucy felt him slipping away, and the loss kicked her damaged heart. She had to do this. This time, when the tears came, she let them fall. "Please don't insult my intelligence."

Rory looked away. "What do you want me to say?" He met her eyes again, and lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "We were together. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with her. It's something I don't like to think or talk about."

"Ignoring it won't make it go away. I don't know anything about you, Rory." She swiped at her tears. "We've been best friends for two years. Two years! You had this whole other part of you I never knew about. Friends are supposed to share these things. *Lovers* share these things."

"I told you I don't like to talk about it," he said through clenched teeth.

"Tough. Relationships are about give and take. Let me ask you a question." She took a deep breath. "Are you in love with me?" she asked.

Panic lit up in his eyes, and Lucy had her answer. She'd known all along, but she didn't know it would tear her in two. "I can't be with you any more, Rory. I love you, but I can't do this."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I know I don't want you to go. I know I don't want this to end." He reached out a hand, dropped it. "But I don't know what you want from me. I can't give you the life you want. I don't have it in me."

She felt that final brick lay in place with those words, and her heart shattered. "I want it all. I want you ... *all* of you. I deserve that. We deserve that."

He stood there, his face a hard mask.

She hitched her purse on her shoulder. "I'm leaving." When he straightened, she put a hand out. "Don't."

"Luce..."

"Good-bye, Rory."

She held her head high as she walked out into the hot Texas afternoon.

And broke.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

On Monday, two days after his brother's wedding, Rory sat on the back steps of his parents' house. In his hands, he held the velvet jeweler's box containing his grandmama's antique wedding ring.

Lucy had left him. She'd packed up her things from the hotel room and vanished. He didn't know if she was still in Houston or back in Portland. Maybe Timbuktu.

He felt hollow, empty, like she had ripped something out of him when she'd stormed out of the country club, her head held high. Goddamn woman. He was so angry with her that he wanted to strangle her. Right after he wrapped her in his arms and begged her not to go.

Rory was a coward.

He should have told her the truth. From the beginning. He knew now that on some level, he must have sensed that she had the power to rip his heart out. All this time, he'd been acting out of some misplaced sense of self-preservation. And now the one person who'd pushed past his barriers and wormed her way into his heart had gone.

He loved her.

Over the last few days, he'd done a lot of soul-searching. He had been forced to take a long, hard look at himself, at what he had become.

He didn't like it.

Rory had spent the last two years trying so hard not to feel anything, to shut off the pain and anger that spurned him.

When a little, smart-mouthed vixen sneaked under his radar, he didn't know he'd lost his heart until it was too late. Now he felt *everything*.

He thought of the past two months. Of the peace and happiness he'd found with Lucy. She was his. *His*. But, he'd fucked up. When she'd confronted him, he had shut it all off and turned it back onto her out of fear.

That made him an idiot, too.

But at least he'd done something right. Yesterday, he and Brad had talked for the first time. It had been awkward, yes, but Rory felt like he'd attempted to bridge the gap between them. Rory promised Brad he'd keep in touch. And he would. He no longer cared about Brad and Carrie Ann's betrayal.

He only cared about one thing. And he'd lost her.

From behind him, the screen door squeaked, and then slammed shut. He heard footsteps and looked over when his mother sat down beside him.

She didn't speak, just sat there, and stared out across the yard in easy silence. He longed to lay his head on her shoulder, for her to take him in her arms and tell him everything would be all right, as she had countless times when a boy. But he remained seated, forcing himself to be content with the tranquil stillness she brought.

After a few moments, she said, "Carrie Ann was never the right woman for you."

He looked over at her, but she continued to stare ahead. "Why?"

"I love that girl like a daughter, but she's high maintenance. She's got a need for the finer things, for

money." She took the velvet box from Rory and set it down on the stairs before she held his hand in hers. "I hated what they did to you, Rory, but I like to think something good may have come of it."

He didn't comment. He'd spent the last two years trying to exercise the demons of his past, only to realize it wasn't his heart he'd been guarding, but his pride. It was a bitter pill to swallow. And he'd lost the one woman who'd made him feel whole because of it.

"You were working yourself to the bone, trying to provide the kind of life she wanted, when anyone with half a brain could see you were unhappy."

He had come to the same conclusion himself recently.

"I worried about you for so long. I knew you needed to work this thing out, tried to give you space." She turned to him and took his face in her hands. "My sweet boy. In all of the years you were with Carrie Ann, I never once saw you look at her the way you did with your Lucy."

He laughed softly, but there was no humor in the sound. "Doesn't matter now. She's gone. I screwed up, Mama."

She regarded him with fierce eyes. "Rory Thomas Carlisle, that is about enough self-pity."

He drew back. "What?"

"You've been moping around here for two days, wallowing in it. Well, you've had your time to brood, but now it's over." She stood, held out her hand. "Are you going to let that girl get away? Allow the best thing that's ever happened to you to walk out of your life?"

He stared at her outstretched hand, then up to her face.
"No. I'm not." He clasped her hand.

"That's my boy."

* * * *

Lucy stood at the window in her home office, staring out into the cloudless blue sky. Four days had passed since she'd left Rory. She'd hoped the distance would help her forget her heart wasn't quite whole.

Right, Luce. That's a good one.

When she'd made the decision to leave Rory, she never thought he'd let her go. The optimistic fool inside her believed he would profess his love for her, would beg her to stay.

What a joke.

Rory didn't love her. Worse, she'd lost a friend. Now she understood why Rory had been so hesitant in the beginning, why he hadn't wanted to complicate their friendship. She should have listened. But, she couldn't quite bring herself to regret the time she'd spent as his lover. Those were memories she would have forever, kept secreted away in some dark corner of her battered heart.

She wanted to believe it hadn't all been for revenge. That he truly cared for her, wanted her, loved ... She shook the foolish dreams from her mind.

A chime on her computer startled Lucy from her reverie. She walked over to her desk and sat down. The instant messenger box on her screen popped up, and she gasped.

"ScorpioCutie?"

She sat there and stared at the name that had gotten her into this whole mess in the first place.

After a brief hesitation, she wrote, "What do you want, Rory?"

"Meet me at the fountain in the Rose Gardens at six tonight."

Lucy sighed. Her heart couldn't handle another rejection, and she feared he only wanted to ensure she was okay.

"I can't do this," she typed. "It hurts too much."

"Please," Rory wrote. "Meet me. Six o'clock. I'll be looking for you."

He logged off.

Damn, Lucy thought, sitting back in her chair with a sigh. What in the hell was she supposed to do now?

* * * *

Rory checked his watch. Five to six. He had a perfect view of the fountain from his perch on the stairs behind it. But the view wasn't nearly as perfect as it should be, because Lucy had yet to arrive.

When six-ten rolled around, Rory started to sweat. Maybe it was too late. Maybe he had hurt her so badly that the damage was irreparable.

No, he told himself. He refused to let her go. For the first time in two years, he had his head on straight, and he knew what he wanted.

He wanted Lucy.

Rory would break down every defense she had until she conceded defeat. He'd play dirty. He'd be merciless.

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After all, he'd spent enough time building castles around his heart, and he knew just how to break them down.

* * * *

Sitting on a bench in the Rose Gardens, Lucy stared blankly at the metal fountain in the park.

Why am I here?

Memories of the night Rory had pressed her against those beams assaulted her. In her mind, she felt the cold metal pressed against her back, and Rory's mouth and hands on her. He'd challenged her here nearly three months ago.

And her life had never been the same.

She feared it never would be.

"Luce."

Lucy closed her eyes, her traitorous heart reveling in the sound of his voice. That rich baritone and thick Southern accent that always drove her crazy.

When she opened her eyes, Rory stood before her, his handsome face different somehow, as if he, too, felt the loss.

Keep on dreaming, Hollister.

"I can't do this, Rory. I thought I could, but I can't," she said quietly.

"Lucy."

His eyes were kind when he looked at her, and she didn't think she could take his pity on top of everything else.

"I'll have to quit," she continued. "You're management, so you should stay, right? Or will you quit?"

Rory crouched in front of her and took her hand. "I talked to Brad. I made my peace with him. And Carrie Ann," he added.

The sting of tears pricked her eyes, and she shook her head wearily. She was happy he'd made peace with his past ... she really was. But what did it have to do with her sitting on a park bench? "Is that why you asked me to come? You could've told me that over the phone." She drew in a ragged breath. "You're making this so much harder." The tears spilled over her lashes, and she cursed both them *and* her love for this unobtainable man.

"I'm sorry." He grabbed her hand. "Lucy, I need you to listen to me."

"I can't, Rory. I can't listen to you, I can't be around you."

"You don't have to."

Oh, God, Lucy thought. Was he leaving? Would he move back to Houston? Emotions swirled madly inside of her. She didn't want to see him every day flirting and dating other women, but neither did she want him to disappear from her life. But could she handle seeing him all the time? Knowing what they'd shared? And that they'd never have it again?

Rory gently wiped her tears. "I owe you an apology, Lucy. You were right. I did lie to you. About Brad and Carrie, about everything." He took a breath. "When I found them together, it destroyed me. I turned myself off emotionally, packed it up, and moved out here. I tried to put it past me. I thought I had locked that part of me up and thrown away the key." He kissed her knuckles. "Until I met you."

Lucy's heart pounded. These were not the words she'd been expecting. She wanted so desperately to believe him, but...

"I think I was already in love with you before we ever made love. You opened me back up. You made me see I was unhappy, and that what I had with Carrie Ann couldn't even *begin* to compare with what I feel for you." He placed his hand on his heart, and then touched hers. "I love you, Lucy. I want it all. I want all of you."

Her tears fell harder as she listened to the words she'd waited so, so long to hear. He reached into his back pocket and withdrew a black velvet box.

With trembling fingers, she took the box from his hands. When she opened it, she said, "It's not the same."

"What?" he asked.

"The ring. It's not the same one you gave to Carrie."

He scowled. "Of course not, Luce. What the hell do you take me for?" He frowned. "How do you know what that ring looks like?"

"I found it in your things when I was unpacking at the hotel." She left out the fact she'd thought he had been planning to propose to her.

He smiled tenderly. "That ring has been in my family for years, but I don't want it on your hand. I wanted something as unique and special as you are."

Lucy stared down at the princess cut three-carat diamond. On each side were their respective birthstones. "It's perfect."

"Will you be with me? Marry me, and make a life with me?"

She could barely see for all the moisture in her eyes. "Oh, God." She leaped off the bench and into his arms, raining kisses over his face, his throat as they fell backward on the ground.

"Is that a yes?" he asked with a laugh.

"Of course it's a yes, you big dope. I love you, Rory. I love you so much."

He closed his eyes at her words. "I was afraid I'd never hear you say that again."

"I'll say it every day for the rest of our lives. I'm going to make you so happy."

He touched his lips to her in a kiss that held promise and love. "You already have."

The End

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About the Author

Jenny began writing at the age of twelve, when she realized the voices talking in her head were characters, not a result of pre-teen induced psychosis. She has been writing on and off for almost twenty years, but actively pursuing publication for the last two. Jenny lives in Oregon with her husband and two children

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