

ONE

Two frat boys jostle my shoulder as they tumble from the market shop. Their gazes brush over me. One realizes I'm ten years past his best-before date and pushes by without an apology. The other lets his gaze linger, considering.

"*Buongiorno*," he says, mangling it into something suspiciously close to "Bon Jovi."

"Hey," I say in English. "Watch where you're going, okay? These shops are really tiny."

My American accent dashes the poor boy's hope of a fling with a hot-blooded Italian, and he mumbles something unintelligible as he ducks past me.

An old man sitting at the counter glowers at the departing students.

"*Buongiorno*, Alessandro," I say.

He lifts his afternoon espresso in greeting and then compliments my sundress as his rheumy eyes linger on my bare calves before he mutters, "The tourists have come to Trastevere."

From behind the counter, Davide says, "The tourists have always been in Trastevere."

“They have always been over there.” Alessandro gestures west. “This is not their side of the road.”

“So, I should move?” I say.

“You do not count, Genevieve. You live here. You speak passable Italian. And you are a pretty girl, which they are not.”

I laugh and accept the espresso Davide offers. Then I gather a few groceries as I chat with the old men. Davide rings me through, and I walk less than a hundred feet along the narrow cobblestone street to my apartment.

Alessandro isn’t wrong about the tourists. They used to keep to the other side of Viale di Trastevere, but in the last few years, they’ve ventured farther afield. So have the restaurateurs, and as I approach my building, a young woman in a white shirt and black bow tie steps out to lure me into a new place. At the last second, she recognizes me and withdraws with a nod. The trattoria has been there six months, and my neighbors grumble that the hostess *still* calls to them every time they pass. It’s one of the times I’m thankful for my memorable red hair.

I push on the heavy wood door to my building. It opens silently, and I step out of the hot June sun into the cool dark of the foyer. I glance at the glass front on my letter box. Empty as usual. Local friends text or e-mail, and most of my old ones have no idea where to find me. There was a time when that thought brought a wave of grief, but it’s hard to mourn your past when your present includes a historic Roman apartment with a gorgeous terrace and a schedule that lets you spend the afternoon lounging on it. This isn’t the life I envisioned, but I have fallen for it, like finding true love on the rebound.

Groceries in hand, I climb five flights of tilted, curving steps. There’s no elevator. The building is five hundred years old. If you can’t climb the stairs, you don’t rent the place.

The stairs narrow as they ascend, and by the time I reach the

top, they're so uneven that I slow lest I go tumbling down. I may have done that once or twice when I foolishly wore stiletto heels to a dinner that included a shared carafe of cheap house wine. Luckily, the first landing is only six steps down. Yes, I've counted.

With my grocery bag wedged between my shins and the door, I push the key into the lock and . . .

The door opens.

My heart stutters as the grocery tote drops to my feet. The key is only half-inserted, and the door is already cracked open. My muscles tense to run, but I roll my shoulders and take a deep breath.

Maybe I just forgot to lock it. At this time of year, I often leave the kitchen window and terrace door open. Everyone does in a country where the temperatures hit ninety by June and in-home air conditioning is uncommon. Whatever crime problems Rome might have, break-ins are rare, particularly in this area.

Then I remember that I definitely locked my door today. I'd dropped the garbage bag while locking it. With a four-hundred-square-foot apartment, you do *not* leave overflowing garbage until the weekly pickup. I'd taken a bag to stuff into the restaurant's bins. While locking the door, I'd fumbled the bag, and a wine bottle rolled out, tumbling over the edge—naturally—and shattering five floors below. Always a fun way to start the day. I was so annoyed that I heaved on the door, making damned sure it was locked after all that. It was. And now it is not.

I swallow hard and press my fingertips against the door. It creaks open farther. As I listen, my fingers fist against the wood, and I give a ragged chuckle at that. I'm a concert violist, not a barroom pugilist.

I take a deep breath, but my heart won't stop racing. My apartment door is open when I know I locked it. I should scramble down the stairs as fast as I can, phone at my ear as I summon the police. Yet my feet don't move. Calling the police means also

calling attention to myself. I've spent ten years keeping the lowest possible profile, even here, thousands of miles from home.

I try to calm myself with the reminder that if it's a burglar, he'd better hope he plays the viola. That's the only thing of value in my apartment. I don't own a TV, or a stereo or expensive jewelry, and my phone and my laptop are in my bag, slung over my shoulder.

My viola *is* valuable, though, and I do play it in public—I'm in a small symphony orchestra and a classical quartet. If someone saw my viola and realized it was worth much more than any personal tech, that could be a reason for breaking in.

The other possibility is the one that must rise for every woman who lives alone. I've always felt safer in Rome than I ever did in New York, but that doesn't mean I *am* safe.

What truly sets my heart racing is the fear of a very different sort of intruder. As I stare at the open door, I hurl back into another life, one where I came home more than once to find my apartment broken into. It'd been ransacked twice, and once the intruder took nothing and left only ugly words lipsticked on my mirror. It's the words I remember, though. It's the words that have me swallowing hard, my hand shaking on the doorknob.

That can't be what this is. Too much time has passed, and I'm the only person who still cares what happened to me. Yet it takes only this unlocked door to slam me back to that life.

And *that* is why I decide not to call the police no matter how big a mistake that could be. I've clawed my way from under the shadow of my past, and I will not fall back into that pit of paranoia and grief.

I still unlock my phone, ready to call 113 at the slightest sign of trouble. Then I push the door open enough to peer inside.

The tiny kitchenette and living area are empty. There's no place to hide. Even the closet under the stairs is filled with storage shelves.

My gaze snags on a table. On it rests a cardboard box that I definitely didn't leave there. With an apartment this tiny, it must be kept spotless.

There is a shoebox-sized parcel on my table, wrapped in mailing-paper brown.

Bomb.

Even as I think that, my brain scoffs. A bomb? Really? I'm not a politician, not a person who has been in the news beyond the entertainment pages, and that was fifteen years ago. No one is going to send me a bomb.

Still, I inch toward the table, ears trained for any noise from upstairs. It's definitely a parcel. A courier package with all the appropriate labels and stamps for an overseas delivery. It's from the United States, and it's addressed to . . .

Lucy Callahan.

I haven't used that name in ten years.

TWO

New York 2005

I was replaying the voice-mail message when my roommate walked into our tiny dorm room.

Nylah waved at my cell phone. "It's called *telemarketing*, Lucy. Hang up."

I lowered the phone. "Hmm?"

"You looked confused, which means you're listening to some spiel about duct cleaning, making absolutely sure it's sales before you hang up." She paused. "No, actually, Lucy Callahan doesn't hang up on anyone. That would be rude."

I set the phone down and stepped aside so she could get to the coffee maker. No sane person came between Nylah and her 3 p.m. fix.

"It was actually a voice message from an old teacher," I said. "I took a summer film class with him a few years back."

"Ah, yes, film classes. Before you abandoned your Hollywood dreams for a musical career."

I rolled my eyes. While I loved film, I never earned more than

faint praise for my directing and screenwriting. My viola playing, on the other hand, landed me here at Juilliard on a scholarship.

Nylah added grounds to her coffee maker. “Please tell me this former teacher called to say he’s belatedly realized your brilliance and wants to offer you a paid internship.” She paused, finger hovering over the Brew button. “Unless he’s skeevy. Is there any chance he’s been watching the calendar, waiting for you to turn eighteen? If so, do not return that call.”

“First, he’s in his fifties. Second, he’s gay. Third, he’s offering me a job teaching music.”

Nylah sighed. Deeply. “The fact he’s fifty doesn’t mean he wouldn’t hit on you, Luce. I’ll accept *gay* as a potential disqualifier, but only if you’ve seen him with guys and he isn’t just saying that to put female students at ease. And private music lessons?” She snorted. “It’s not his flute you’ll be blowing.”

I shook my head as I sat at our tiny table. “Music lessons for *children*. Their parents have a beach house in the Hamptons, and I’d be there for the summer, teaching music while looking after the kids.”

“Mary Poppins of the Hamptons? Not too shabby. So why the frowny-face when I came in?”

“Mr. Moore said I’d be working for ‘Colt Gordon.’ He repeated it three times like it was a big deal. Is that a person? A company?”

“C-Colt Gordon?” Nylah stammered. “*The* Colt Gordon?”

“You sound an awful lot like Mr. Moore. I should know the name, shouldn’t I?”

“Did I just say you should go into film? I take that back if you don’t know who Colt Gordon is. *The President’s Wife*? *Fatal Retribution* one, two and three?”

“Oh, he’s an actor, right?”

“That is like asking if Pavarotti is an opera singer. Colt Gordon is a bona fide movie *star*. Look up the top-grossing movies for the past five years. He starred in at least half of them.”

“Wait! Isn’t he married to Isabella Morales? Holy crap. I’d be working for *Isabella Morales*.”

Nylah shrugged and spooned sugar into her coffee. “She’s all right. I’ve seen her in a few things. Marrying him certainly helped her career.”

“Helped—helped—?” I sputtered. “A pox on you and your house, girl. Isabella Morales was a national treasure by the age of twelve. A Mexican national treasure. A freaking *legend* in the world of telenovelas.”

Nylah rolled her eyes. “I’m about to get another lecture on the underappreciated art of telenovelas, aren’t I?”

“Isabella Morales is a goddess. Started acting at the age of seven, and by eighteen, she was lead writer on her show. Totally self-taught. She began tweaking her scripts when she was a kid, and the writers humored her, but by the time she was a teenager, she wrote all her own lines and was drafting storylines, too. By twenty-one, she was directing.”

“Then she married a huge American movie star and got to give up all that hard work for a cushy life raising his children.” Nylah lifted her hands. “Kidding. Don’t kill me. I just like to see that temper flare. You’re a redhead and a Latina. You need to let that fire out more often. Live up to the double stereotype.”

I’m only a quarter Latina. The rest is Irish and Italian, but if I point that out, Nylah claims that just gives me more reason to be tempestuous, one word that has never been used to describe me.

“Yes, Isabella did marry some action movie star,” I said. “And she played a few roles in Hollywood movies, but she quit acting when she had kids. She continued writing for telenovelas, and she just started work on an American one she created herself. She’ll be the producer.”

“I get the feeling you’re a fan of this Isabella chick.”

I shot her a look.

“Which probably means you don’t want to work for her, right?” Nylah said. “I mean, that’d be terrible, spending the summer in the Hamptons, living with a gorgeous movie star . . . and a woman you idolize.”

Working for Isabella Morales.

I’d been offered a job working for *Isabella Morales*.

“I . . .” I swallowed. “That could be really awkward, with me being a fan, and—”

“Oh, my God, are you actually hesitating?” She shoved the phone at me. “Call him back, or I will.”

I stared at the phone. Then I made the call.

THREE

The parcel sits on my kitchen table, my former name screaming in block letters, and my past surges again, making my heart pound a drumbeat that steals my breath. My fingers tremble as I reach for the box. Then I remember the unlocked door. The courier service certainly doesn't have keys to my apartment. Does that mean whoever entered my apartment brought this inside for me?

Most considerate burglar *ever*.

I manage another weak laugh and roll my shoulders, struggling to stay calm. I made this choice. I came into this apartment, knowing the door was unlocked. If I'm really doing this, I need to see it through without collapsing in a heap on my kitchen floor.

My gaze slides to the stairs. It's a narrow flight, curving around to the loft bedroom. I back up and slide a knife from the drawer.

The problem with curving stairs is that there's no way to sneak up. The top of my head will appear before I can see anything.

I proceed slowly, holding my breath. I'll admit I'm starting to feel a little silly. I haven't heard even a floorboard creak since I've come in, and in a place this old, *every* board creaks.

The stairs open right into my bedroom. It used to remind me of an attic garret, the sort of place I'd read about, where the family stores their crazy aunt, saving themselves the embarrassment she might cause. It's a little late for my family. Not that they'd ever complained. I stashed *myself* in Italy, and my garret cell has become a gorgeous nook instead, a cozy attic bedroom straight out of a little girl's dream.

From the stairs, I can see that my bed is empty. It's within arm's reach, a double mattress on the floor with no space for anyone to hide underneath. The minuscule bathroom is off to my right, and I can see it's empty. Across the room, the terrace door shutters stand open.

I didn't leave them like that.

I creep to the terrace door . . . which is actually a window. When I rented the place, the landlord told me to crawl through it to see the terrace. I thought he was joking. I'm accustomed to it now, and it's been at least a year since I bumped my head.

I crouch and peer through as I scan the sun-bright terrace. To my left, there's a pergola, the wooden frame lost in ivy and climbing flowers. Under that is a lounge chair . . . with a man sprawled on it, sunglasses propped on his head, his eyes closed as he dozes in the afternoon heat, wearing only his boxers.

I eye him, my head tilting. The incredible terrace view sold me on this apartment, but the current view under my pergola is even better. Marco lounges there, black hair curling over his forehead, brown skin glistening with sweat, athletic body showing off just the right amount of lean muscle. Excellent scenery, indeed. The problem is that he shouldn't be here. As I try to figure out why he is, my gaze crosses keys on the patio table.

As I lift the keys, they scrape over the glass top. My sleeping guest wakes, and gorgeous thick-lashed dark eyes travel up to my face.

"Forgot you gave me those, didn't you?" he says.

“No, I, uh . . .”

When I trail off, Marco sits up, legs swinging over the chair side.

“You do remember giving me your keys when you went home last month,” he says. “But you forgot telling me I could hold on to them. Or that I could pop by if I had an extended afternoon break.”

“Right. Sorry, I . . .”

He’s on his feet, arms going around me, lips coming to mine. As I kiss him back, he takes the keys and tucks them into my back pocket.

“Yours, *dolcezza*,” Marco says.

“No. I said you could hold on to them.”

“Only because it was awkward taking your keys back from the guy you’ve been sleeping with for two years.”

“I—”

Another kiss, cutting me off. “I’m teasing, Genevieve. For the past month, I’ve been telling myself you didn’t really want me hanging out in your apartment, but today, my Colosseum tour was canceled, and I decided to test my theory.”

I hold out the keys. “Keep them. I forgot, so I was surprised. That’s all.”

Which is true, but he *is* right. Taking the keys back after he house-sat would have been awkward, so I’d mumbled something about him using my apartment during breaks.

I also don’t fail to notice he said we’d been “sleeping together” for two years. Not seeing each other. Not dating. Sleeping together. That isn’t Marco being a jerk. He’s phrasing it that way for my benefit, because every time he calls me his girlfriend, I tense as if he’s shoving a diamond ring onto my finger.

In my mind, Marco is my lover, which sounds very sexy and European, when really, it’s just me drawing a line. A meaningless line when we’ve been together exclusively for twenty-eight months.

I have relationship issues, and Marco respects that. But if I’ve

fallen in love with this new life, a lot of it is due to the guy standing in front of me. I won't say I'm in love with *him*—I'm not quite ready for that—but if I deny this is serious, a little voice calls me a liar.

So I give him back the keys, and put my arms around his neck and whisper in his ear, telling him how sexy he looked in that chair. That makes him chuckle and accept the change of subject . . . and accept the keys.

"Sit," he says. "I have prosecco chilling, and I grabbed an anti-pasto tray."

"I'll get it," I say. "We won't deprive the neighbors of the lovely scenery." I waggle my brows suggestively.

His headshake teases me for my very American sensibilities. No one will be shocked to look out their window and see a guy in his boxers. They'll either enjoy the sight or ignore it.

Marco is very familiar with those American sensibilities, having lived in the US for a decade, going to college and then staying until . . . Well, I'm not sure what. Something brought him home, and I get the feeling it wasn't homesickness, but if I'm not going to discuss my past, I can't press him on his.

Having lived in the US, though, means that while he might tease me for my American ways, he never judges me for them. Nor does he need American idioms and pop culture explained. He's also been invaluable for improving my Italian and my accent, and when it's just us, we surf between languages, often switching midsentence.

I insist on bringing the snack and nudge him back into the lounge chair.

"Oh," he calls as I walk away. "There was a package at the door. I brought it in, but they have the wrong person."

I pause, having forgotten all about the parcel.

"It's for a Lucy Callahan," he says. "Someone must have looked up Callahan online and got your address. Not sure how you confuse Lucy and Genevieve."

“Weird,” I say, crawling through the door-window before he catches my expression.

“I can drop it off at the mail depot tomorrow,” he says.

“No, I’ll handle it. Thanks, though.”

I continue downstairs, where the parcel waits, my old name in those huge black letters. So I’ve solved the mystery of how it got into the apartment. The mystery of what’s inside remains, but it pales next to the question of who sent it. The few people who know I’m here would never make the mistake of using that name.

Someone has tracked me down.

I approach the box and look for the sender. There’s only an account number. When I gingerly turn the package over, I see the transit stamp. Originating in New York.

Has an enterprising journalist found me? That’s always possible, but a journalist isn’t going to bribe me with a gift. They trade in the currency of promises and threats. Threats to expose me if I don’t cooperate and promises to tell “my side of the story.” I learned my lesson the hard way.

Thinking of New York and publishing, my mind moves to books. Did some enterprising junior editor dig up my story and see a tell-all book in it? Send me a box of their other books to entice me?

No, thank you, junior editor. My story is my own, and my past can stay buried.

I lift the box and shake it, listening for the heavy thunk of books. Instead, I hear the whisper of something light and soft shifting from one end to the other.

I set the parcel down. Stare narrow eyed, as if I can switch on Xray vision.

Or I could, you know, just open the box.

I run a nail over the packing tape, creasing it. Then I tuck the box under the small kitchen table and head to the fridge for our midafternoon snack.

It's 2 a.m., and I'm lying awake, thinking about that damned parcel. I can't open it until Marco leaves. It's a lovely excuse. And total bullshit. Marco's so deeply asleep that if the apartment burst into flames, I'd need to fireman-carry him down five flights of stairs.

As a tour guide, he's the one who handles all the physically challenging excursions from rowing the Tiber to climbing Mount Vesuvius. He also moonlights as a bike courier, which is still rare in Rome, city of scooters and mopeds and tiny trucks. When he sleeps, he's dead to the world.

As if to test my theory, I brush a curl from his face. His breathing doesn't even hitch. I smile and settle in, watching him sleep. His face would be model handsome if not for a broken nose that didn't quite set and an upper-lip scar from cleft lip surgery. Yet the flaws only improve the package, making him a real person with a face that tells a story. A face that also complements his personality—easygoing and authentic, relaxed and charming. Tour guides make minimum wage, but Marco's tips triple that with twenty-euro bills from the middle-aged men who enjoy his camaraderie, elderly women who appreciate his old-world manners and college girls who fold their phone numbers inside those bills.

I met him on a tour myself. It'd been the Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius one. I'd arrived late, and the only seat left on the bus was the one beside him. During the two-hour ride, polite conversation had turned real as we discovered shared passions for medieval history and old movies.

A week after that, I bumped into him at my favorite morning cappuccino spot. It wasn't until months later that he reminded me that he'd asked for coffee shop recommendations under the guise of passing them on to clients. Then he'd popped in for cappuccino every now and then, hoping for that "casual encounter."

The trip down memory lane, though, doesn't divert me. That package waits downstairs, and I could safely open it while Marco sleeps.

I need to open it. I won't rest until I do. I'm just afraid.

Afraid? No, terrified.

Ten years ago, I fled the US, planning to live a transitory life abroad. See the world while never settling in one place. I'd spend two years in France, two in Germany, two in Italy . . . That was four years ago. Rome stuck, and I will not allow that box to detonate my life here.

I didn't fight hard enough the last time. I was too young, too bruised. I will fight for this, and the battle begins with opening the damn package.

Marco doesn't stir as I slide from bed. I tiptoe down the steps. They creak, as usual, and I pause at the bottom, straining to listen as the apartment remains silent.

I lift the package and set it on the table. Then I ease a knife from the drawer, slit the tape and tug one cardboard flap. It opens to show another box inside. A glossy snow-white box with a crimson lid, wrapped in a thick, black ribbon shot through with glittering silver thread. In silver script, the lid proclaims, "Ainsworth & Kent." It's a gift box from a Fifth Avenue staple, one I wouldn't dare set foot in.

I tug one end of the bow, and it dissolves into a puddle of black velvet. Inside, bright red tissue paper is fastened with a silver Ainsworth & Kent seal. I peel back the seal and unfold multiple layers of tissue, first red and then gray and then white. The final layer reveals folded cashmere. I pull it out and find myself holding a silver-gray cashmere shrug with a single ebony button in the shape of a violin.

I lift the shrug for a better look. It's like hoisting a cloud, and I can imagine draping it over my shoulders when Marco and I go out at night. Light enough to tuck into a bag, the color suitable

for any dress. The button shows this is no random present. Someone took great care with their selection.

I remove the gift box from the cardboard package. It seems empty, but as I lift it, something shifts in the bottom. It's a white envelope with "Lucy" written in looping script.

I touch my name, and a memory nudges. A letter with my name written in the same hand. The memory sinks leaden in my gut, and my fingers tremble. When I try to snag the memory, though, my mind slams shut and refuses to divulge a name.

I slit open the envelope. Inside is a folded sheet of paper. As I pull it out, my gut twists. That flash of memory again. My name on an envelope. Pulling out a folded sheet. Reading . . .

The memory reel snaps, leaving only my clenching gut and the smell of . . .

Jasmine?

I lift the paper. It doesn't smell of jasmine. Doesn't smell of anything. That's the memory, jasmine-scented paper, and I'd opened the envelope, my heart lifting, so certain that that letter would contain . . .

Again, the memory clamps shut.

Just open the letter, Lucy.

I still call myself Lucy. My full name is Genevieve Lucille Callahan, after my two grandmothers. According to family lore, my dad struggled with Genevieve. It didn't roll off his tongue, and he misspelled it on my birth notice even though it was *his* mother's name.

Dad used Lucy as his pet name for me. He died when I was five—Tboned by a drunk driver—and I started going by Lucy in tribute to him. I'd reverted to Genevieve when I decided to make a fresh start in Europe, but in my head, I will always be Lucy even if, at times, that feels like self-flagellation, the occasional lash to remind me I will never truly be Genevieve with her quirkily unorthodox and deeply satisfying life.

Just open the damn letter, Lucy.

Yes, I'm procrastinating. I know from experience that it does no good. How many days did I tell myself that if I just didn't look at the news, it wouldn't exist? The news exists. My story exists. This letter exists.

Deep breath . . .

I unfold it.

Dear Lucy

I know I'm the last person you want to hear from—

I freeze. I'm not even certain I process the words. I see that salutation, in that script, and the memory slams back, that jasmine-scented letter in this same hand.

Dear Lucy,

I trusted you. With my children. With my home. With my husband.

The letter falls to the floor as I clench the table edge. The floor seems to dip under my feet, and I want to drop to it. Drop and bang my head against it for not recognizing that damned perfect handwriting.

I snatch the letter from the floor, march across the tiny kitchen and yank open a drawer. I have to dig to the back of the assorted junk—paper clips, elastic bands, take-out cards—until my fingers close around a small cardboard box.

I strike a wooden match, flame hissing to life. Then I hold up the letter and . . .

I hesitate there, the flame an inch from the paper. Hesitate and then snuff out the match with my fingers and let it drop to the floor.

A fine sentiment, but if I burn this letter, I'll only spend more sleepless nights wondering what she'd said, what she wanted, what she was threatening to do if she didn't get it.

Isabella Morales knows where I am.

Of all the people I fear having that information, Isabella tops the list. I haven't heard from her since that infamous letter, and now something has happened to make her reach out, and that bodes no good.

I turn the letter over and begin reading again.

Dear Lucy

I know I'm the last person you want to hear from, but we need to talk. While I understand you're in Italy, I'm hoping I can persuade you to come to New York for a weekend, at my expense, of course. If you would prefer I came to Rome, I'd happily do that, but I suspect you won't want me intruding on the life you've built there.

I have never forgotten what happened fifteen years ago. I suppose that goes without saying. But as time has passed, I've gained enough distance—and, I hope, wisdom—to look back on the events that transpired and realize you were little more than a child, and he took advantage of that. In my pain, I needed someone to blame. I should have aimed that anger at him. Instead, I turned it on you.

I know I cannot make amends, but I would like to talk. Please call me on my private cell so we may arrange a visit.

She gives her number and then signs with a familiar flourish.

This is exactly what I wanted to read fifteen years ago when my trembling fingers tore open that first letter. I hadn't spoken to Isabella since the incident a month earlier, and enough time would have passed for her to realize there had to be more to the story. She would contact me, and I would tell her everything. I would apologize—fall on my knees and apologize—and she would hug me and tell me it wasn't my fault.

Of everyone I'd hurt that day, this was the trespass that kept me awake at night. Isabella had been nothing but kind to me, and I'd

made a stupid and juvenile mistake. She needed to know it wasn't what the tabloids said.

I hoped for an opening into which I could pour my apologies. Instead, her letter swam blood-red with hate and invective that sliced me open worse than any screaming tabloid headline.

And now, fifteen years later, she has sent the letter I dreamed of that day.

I read it again, and I do not fall to my knees with relief. I feel only emptiness edged with annoyance and, if I'm being honest, a hint of outrage.

Now she feels bad? *Now* she realizes she was wrong? *Now* she wants to talk to me about it?

I reassemble the package with the cashmere shrug and put it into the closet under the stairs. Then I strike another match, set the corner of the letter alight and watch it burn, charred bits dropping into the sink. When the flame warms my fingers, I drop what's left and watch the paper curl and blacken.

Then I run water in the sink and let the tissue-thin black pieces dissolve and run down the drain.

Footsteps sound on the stairs. I grab a glass from the drying rack and fill it as Marco descends. It's only when I turn that I see the opened envelope still on the table, with "Lucy" screaming on the front.

I dart between the envelope and the stairs.

Marco blinks at me. "Everything okay?"

I lift the glass, half-filled with water. He nods and yawns.

"You want one?" I ask.

He shakes his head. Then he sniffs. "Is something burning?"

"Outside, I think." I wave at the open window.

When he reaches for me, I hesitate. I want to go to him, to fall into his arms and take comfort there.

I have this new life, Isabella, and you cannot touch it.

Except she can touch it. The envelope proves that, and I cannot let Marco see it. So when he reaches for me, I lift the water glass. He takes it with a chuckle and says, “I’ll put it on your side of the bed,” as he retreats.

Once he’s gone, I snatch the envelope and tuck it into a stack of music books for later burning. Then I follow him upstairs.