

EMBRACE THE WORLD IN GREY

by

AnnTony

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ONE

I'm lying on my couch staring at the TV. The curtains are drawn, and I'm chewing loudly on some Doritos. The last item resembling food in my home.

There is a knock on the door.

I lazily lift my eyes in the direction of the door but then divert my attention back to the movie.

They'll leave sooner or later. They always do.

They knock again—a little louder this time. I turn up the volume, dig into the packet of crisps, and curl back on the couch, pulling the blanket up.

"Lizzy, please open the door."

I lift my gaze again and shake my head. *Just fucking leave already!*

There is some more hammering on the door.

"Lizzy, I know you're in there. I saw your car parked in the parking bay. This time I'm not leaving until I've spoken to you."

I increase the volume again.

"Lizzy! I'm going to break this door down if you don't open this instant!"

My mother is shouting now, and I snort.

Well, this should be entertaining . . .

To my surprise, the front door flies open with such force that I grip the blanket tightly. It startles me, but my focus is still on the screen.

"Thank you, Nico." I hear her high heels on the tiles as she walks in. "It's okay—I've got this. I'll phone you later."

The TV's volume is so loud that I can hardly make out what she's saying as she heads my way. She grabs hold of the remote and switches the TV off.

I sigh as I throw the bag of chips on the floor and lie on my back and stare at the ceiling, pulling the blanket tighter around me.

"Lizzy, look at this place!" She throws her arms into the air.

There are boxes and plastic bottles scattered all over my living room. I've been living on takeout and Coke for the last eight days. Not leaving my apartment at all. I've been hiding away in this black hole. *My black hole. Why can't they just leave me alone?*

"Lizzy! Do you have any idea how worried we've been? And where is your phone? I must have left a hundred messages for you."

Ah, my phone. It's been flat, thankfully, for the last five days.

She waits for my response, but I remain passive, staring at the ceiling.

She sighs heavily then shifts some of the boxes out of her way with her foot to make space to reach me.

“Lizzy, darling, please. You have to talk to me.” Her voice is softer as she lowers herself beside me on the edge of the couch. “Darling, please . . .” She’s pleading now.

My eyes glide over to my mother’s scrutinizing gaze.

I raise myself in an upright position and throw the blanket aside. “You just can’t take a hint, can you?”

My mother stands to her feet, pulling a face as she grabs her nose. “Jeez, Lizzy! When was the last time you took a bath?”

I try to think. I have no idea . . . it’s been days.

“No. No, darling, this has gone on long enough. You are going to snap out of this, starting by taking a shower.”

I purse my lips and stand. *If that will get you to shut up . . . and leave!*

My mother reaches for my hand, but I pull away.

“Don’t touch me!” My eyes are blazing. “Why the hell are you even here?”

“Darling, honey, we really need to talk . . . about what happened. I get that you’re upset, Lizzy. The amount of trauma you went through—”

“No, *we* don’t need to talk. You’ve been dead for the last seven years, remember? In fact, you and Colin are *both* dead to me.”

I climb over the boxes, trying to get to the front door. When I reach it, I hold it open for her.

“Lizzy, please . . .”

“Let me make it abundantly clear to you. You, Colin, and everyone else are not fucking welcome in my house or in my presence. Ever! If I never see you again, it will be too soon,” I say, my voice like acid.

I’m so filled with rage it actually feels odd, especially since I’ve turned off all emotion for these last couple of days. That is, until now.

I can see her eyes pooling, and I revel in it because I don’t care. *I don’t care.*

She wipes away her tears, and to my surprise, she takes a seat on my couch, folding her arms.

“I’m not leaving you, Lizzy. Not this time.” She gives me a stern look. “Please go and take a shower. You need one.”

And then she looks away. My anger is building.

“Why are you not leaving?” I hiss at her.

“Because I love you, darling. More than you know.” Her voice trails off as she looks into my eyes. “I’m not going anywhere until you’ve had a shower.”

I stare at her in disbelief. “Just to be clear,” I tell her, “by the time I’m done, I want you out of here! And don’t bother coming back. Run after Colin for all I care. You can both rot in hell.”

By the time I return to my living room, all the boxes and Coke bottles have been cleared from the floor and now fill a garbage bag standing next to my dustbin in the kitchen.

There are two shopping bags sitting on my kitchen counter, and my mom is pouring some boiling water into two cups.

I glare at her for a moment. I know full well I've said some hurtful things to her. I just want to be left alone.

She looks up at me and gives me a friendly smile. She really doesn't look her age.

"Feeling better after your shower?"

"Why are you still here? And don't bother making me coffee. Who knows what you've put in there this time."

I sound bitter. I feel worse.

She ignores my remark and walks towards the couch, holding both cups in her hands. She puts one cup on the coffee table then takes a small sip from her cup before taking a seat.

"Colin has returned to New Zealand. He's been asking about you."

"Oh, spare me the details." I cut her short. "You should really follow your golden boy. Believe me, you sure as hell won't be missed around here."

"Now that's enough, Lizzy!"

Jolene stands in the doorway, glaring at me as she pushes the door open and steps inside.

"Oh, look who the cat dragged in. My dear sister-in-law. Trouble in paradise? Why are you still here?"

"Now stop this, Lizzy. We've all been through a tough time these last couple of days . . ."

I snort. "Tough time, you say? You know what? I don't want to hear it! Both of you can go now."

"Sorry. No can do." Jolene walks in briskly, throws her purse on the couch, and sits down next to Caroline. "We're not moving until we've talked."

I roll my eyes at her and sigh.

"Please, Lizzy. Just sit for a minute. Please . . ." my mother begs. "We'll leave. Just give us five minutes."

Sighing, I walk over to the single couch and sit on the edge, not making eye contact at all.

Jolene nods at Mom before she starts talking.

"Colin took matters into his own hands, Lizzy, because he cares for you and Caroline. He loves you. You've no clue what he's been going through knowing about Hagan and what that disgraceful man has done to your family over these last couple of years! And keeping it a secret from you was very painful for him."

“I’m sure it was. Now can you both please leave? I’m not interested in hearing about my poor little brother’s heartache. I was there! Yes, I was actually there too, Mother, but you’ve only ever had eyes for Colin, your sweet baby boy. I, on the other hand, came from a monster. Someone you loathed. I get it. Really, I do! Now *go!*”

“Lizzy, I disappeared precisely because of this very thing that happened with Hagan. This is exactly what I’ve always feared. I knew he would search for you to try and get back at me somehow. Colin knew that too.” Her face is sad, her eyes wet.

Jolene reaches for her hand and squeezes it. My mother takes a deep breath before carrying on.

“Colin stumbled across Lance Abbott, a patient who was high up in the Swiss Armed Forces. He’d retired and moved to New Zealand. The two of them started talking and became good friends, and when Colin confided in Lance one day, Lance offered to help. You see, when Lance heard Hagan’s name, he knew all about his shoddy work ethics. He contacted Tyler to help him pin Hagan down once and for all. Tyler’s got quite the reputation. We knew he would keep you safe.”

She pauses briefly, waiting for me to respond. I don’t.

“They came up with a plan where Lance would pose as a business kingpin for human trafficking, just one of many of Hagan’s dodgy deals. Tyler, on the other hand, made himself available to lure Hagan back to you, which we all knew would land up back to me.”

Jolene quickly adds, “And I didn’t know about any of this, Liz.”

“We couldn’t tell you, honey, because we were dealing with a mean, relentless man. I don’t need to tell you what he’s capable of. It was a huge gamble, Lizzy, but with Lance and Tyler’s experience and expertise, we had a shot.”

I close my eyes, hugging myself.

“Such a pretty story, Mom, but it boils down to me. *Me* being used as bait! You all, gambling—as you put it—with my life! *My life!* You *all* betrayed me by keeping me in the dark about my family. About me. Hell, even *Daddy!*”

Tears pool in my eyes as I say the last word.

Caroline gets up from the couch and walks over to me.

“Honey, I’m so sorry about all of this. This is my mess, my mistake! I’m sorry, Lizzy, about every dreadful thing that happened to you. I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“Not as sorry as I am, Mother. I’m going to ask you, for the last time, to just go. You too, Jolene! Go the fuck home and let me be.”

I wipe my tears away with the back of my hand as I stand to my feet.

“There’s nothing more to say. It is what it is.”

I walk over to the front door, pieces of it lying on the floor. Just like my heart. Broken and scattered. Ironic, really. I hold the door open and glare at the two women, now slowly rising to their feet, looking at each other.

No one is saying a word. My mother puts her cup down on the kitchen table and gets her purse. Jolene's cheeks are wet.

They both look at me with so much emotion in their eyes. I look away.

Jolene runs out the door, sobbing. My mother pauses before saying, "This is not goodbye, Lizzy."

I purse my lips and nod. I can't bring myself to say anything more. And then she is out the door.

I want to close it, but I can't because the hinge is broken. I slam it, and the door bounces back. I slam it again and again until I lose focus from the tears in my eyes.

I see a side table standing against the wall, and I grab it with both hands and shove it violently across the floor in front of the door to keep it closed.

The pictures in frames on top of it—one with Matthee and the other one of Luc—tumble to the ground, and the glass shatters.

My blood boils, and with one clean sweep, I let out a cry and knock the rest of the photos to the ground, the glass from the frames shattering everywhere.

I sink to the floor, ruined. My body is shaking violently as tears stream down my face. Rage consumes me. I try to stand, and as I put my hand down to steady myself, it lands on a piece of glass. It stings as it cuts my skin.

I look at my hand. A stream of blood is pouring out, the red dripping on the floor.

The flashbacks are vivid. Peter lies on the couch in a pool of blood. I see Hagan, lying on the floor beside his desk, his pale blue eyes still open. Red blood pools around his face. I close my eyes as I feel a cold shiver down my spine. I'm holding my hand, staring at the blood, when I hear a knock on the door.

I'm brought back to the present, feeling the dull ache in my hand.

"Lizzy, it's me, Nico."

He knocks again.

I struggle to get off the floor, holding my hand up as I quickly walk over to the kitchen sink.

"Lizzy, I'm here to fix your door."

He's trying to push the door open. It doesn't take him long. He pushes the door open and peeks in. I'm standing in the kitchen, rinsing my bleeding hand.

"I'm sorry. Your mother sent me . . . emm . . . to fix your door."

"Oh, the one you fucking broke?"

“Yeah, I . . . It won’t take long.”

I take the kitchen towel and wrap it around my hand, noticing drops of blood on the floor as I make my way back to the couch.

Nico puts his toolbox down and moves the side table away from the door. His voice is even as he speaks.

“What happened to your hand?”

I snort at him. “Isn’t it obvious?”

He bends down to open his toolbox while shoving some of the glass away with his shoe, focusing on the job at hand.

After a while, he says, “Yeo sends her regards.”

Yeo! I look up in surprise and stare at his back. He’s a big guy, wearing jeans and a grey T-shirt.

I hesitate before asking, “How is she?”

“She’s coping.” His back is still toward me. His muscles flex as he removes the old lock and sets it on the floor beside him. “Tyler is helping her to find her feet here in Cape Town. You know, getting the right papers”—he picks up the new lock and screwdriver—“a job, a place to stay.”

Holy crap! Tyler . . .

I grip the cloth tighter around my hand. My eyes sting.

I can’t bear to hear his name, let alone think of him. It’s been eight days of being with just me and myself—no damn distractions. I’ve been happy, content. Well, if I’m honest, more like dead, but I was okay, at least. Not having to feel anything. Not having to cry all the time.

I wipe away a tear.

Damn you, mother! And damn you, Nico.

“Guess you’re not referring to legal papers. Why didn’t she go back with the others?”

He’s busy testing the door by opening and closing it, but he turns and looks at me.

“Her father sold her, Lizzy. She can’t go back. They’re ruthless people. He’ll just sell her off again,” he says and then opens the door and walks outside.

I’m stunned.

Nico walks back in, carrying a ladder. “Tyler is doing his best to try to keep her off the streets,” he says.

I lift my brow at him, looking at the ladder in his hand. “What the hell are you doing?”

He holds up his hands in defence. “Just following orders.”

“Whose orders?” My heart rate picks up.

His brown eyes are soft as he meets my gaze. “Don’t worry, Lizzy. It’s just a safety precaution. I’m putting in an alarm system for you.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

I stand up from the couch and walk towards him, pieces of glass crunching under my bright pink slippers. I stand right in front of him and hold his gaze.

“Tyler and your mother’s orders.”

I roll my eyes and say, “I’m a big girl. I can look after myself!”

“Like you’ve been doing these last couple of days?” He looks straight at me. “Lizzy, they care about you.” He sidesteps me and carries the ladder towards the wall. “They want you to feel safe.”

There’s that word again. I want to laugh.

“Safe? *Really?* Well, in that case, maybe you can deliver a message to them. Tell them I’ll be safe as long as they stay the hell away from me! Safe?” and I start to laugh.

He doesn’t look at me as he climbs the ladder and drills a hole in my ceiling.

My blood pressure is rising.

“Like I said, they’re just looking out for you.”

“How is stabbing me in the neck with a needle and then disappearing into thin air looking out for me?” My voice is laced with hurt and rejection. I take the cloth from my hand and toss it angrily on the floor.

Nico is focused on what he is doing and doesn’t stop. I hear his gentle voice.

“He gave you a tranquilizer, Lizzy, to help you sleep it off. It helps with anxiety and tension. You’ve had a lot to deal with. You couldn’t have coped without it.”

Oh, this is preposterous.

I look down at my hand. The bleeding has stopped, so I walk towards the bathroom in search of a Band-Aid. Once I get there, I get a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My eyes have dark rings around them, and my hair is curly after the shower. I must admit, I feel much better, and I love the fresh smell of shampoo and body wash. I probably did reek a bit.

I put my hair up in a pony and walk out into the living room.

Nico is now busy in another corner of the room.

I look at the mess on the floor and sigh as I head back into the kitchen to fetch the broom. I guess I need to clean up this mess.

An hour later, I’m still looking at Nico as I hold a cup of coffee in my hands—I didn’t offer to make him one. He’s testing the front door again, and when he’s satisfied, he turns around to face me with a friendly smile.

I think it’s the first time I’ve seen him smile. He’s actually quite attractive. He has short, spiky hair and is tall with a cool gleam in his eye.

“All done.”

"I guess I should thank you now for showing up here uninvited and invading my privacy?"

"I'll just run everything by you, really quick."

He waits for my response.

Reluctantly, I move forward, and he explains how the alarm system works. Sounds easy enough.

Nico bends down to get his toolbox and says, "About the phone calls . . ."

I frown at him.

"What phone calls?"

His brow furrows. "You haven't used your phone?" I'm not sure if he is talking to himself or me. "That's probably a good thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"Lizzy, the press will want to interview you."

He reaches into his pocket and takes out a phone.

"I suggest you use this one."

He puts it on the kitchen counter. "Change your number or screen your calls. Hagan's death was unexpected. Tyler has already arranged for someone to talk to the press, so you don't have to."

I didn't even think about that. I don't even know where my phone is.

"Take care of yourself, Lizzy. If you want my advice, go for a jog. Get some fresh air. Go out. Live your life."

I don't need your advice.

He reaches for his pocket again.

"Tyler asked me to give you this."

He walks over to me, holding out an envelope. My name is written on it. My heart skips a beat.

"I'll be on my way. This is my number, should you need anything or have trouble with the alarm."

I take the piece of paper from him.

"Goodbye, Lizzy. Take care."

He walks out the door and closes it.

Tears pool in my eyes, and I lose focus of the letter I'm holding in my hand.

He is such a coward! He doesn't even have the nerve to show up himself. Drying my tears, I toss the letter onto the kitchen counter.

I walk back to the couch and grab the TV remote. *Ellen will put me in a better mood.*

I curl up on the couch and wrap the blanket around me as I hug one of the pillows. But I can't stop crying, and I find it impossible to concentrate. All I can think about is that damn letter on my counter.

I turn up the volume and force myself to watch the entire episode, constantly checking how much time is left.

By the end of it, I scramble to my feet. I can't bear it any longer. *Just read the damn letter and get it over with. Get him out of your system. The sooner, the better.*

I pick it up, tilt my head back, and close my eyes. My heart is beating rapidly, and my hands are trembling. Why do I feel there is so much riding on this?

I take a deep breath, and with trembling fingers, I open it.

Lizzy,

I'm sorry I'm writing this to you when I should say it to your beautiful face, but yes, you've guessed it—I'm a coward. I would most probably not want to leave if I had to face you again, so this is my lame way of saying goodbye.

I am riddled with regret. So much more than you'll ever know . . . And you form part of this new sense of overwhelming feeling I get. Most of the time, I'm sorry for leading you on. I'm sorry that I'll never be what you want me to be. Believe me, if there is one thing I wish I could change, it's that.

You should know you've touched me in a way that's hard to explain . . . You made me see a different side to life, to living. But you should also know that I'm too dark for you. You are the light, and I am . . . well . . . me. I'll break you, Lizzy, eventually. Just like I do with everything good in my life.

And you are perfect. Just the way you are. You are kind and innocent and fragile in a way that makes me want more . . . so much more. But I'm doomed. And I would never do that to you. So I have to let you go. I care that much about you!

You might not see it now, but Colin did the right thing for you and your mom. For your family.

Spend time with them. Rebuild your relationship with your mom. God knows you've missed out on so much.

I wish you a lifetime of happiness. I hope you will find love and share your days with someone who adores you. I will never forget you and this brief time we've shared. You have touched my heart. I didn't know I had one.

I'm sorry about . . . everything! Take care of yourself and give it time. You've changed me forever.

Tyler

I swallow hard on the big lump stuck in my throat. I read the letter again and again until I lose focus on the words. Tears roll down my face, and my heart contracts as an all-consuming sadness creeps in.

How is it possible that someone you hardly know can creep in so deeply under your skin in such a short crazy space of time?

And why does it hurt so damn much?

TWO

Dammit, nothing looks familiar.

I'm driving down the street, looking at the houses, the trees.

I've been sitting in this car for over an hour now, driving around now after finally having the courage to actually do what I've been fantasizing about for the last two weeks.

I shake my head. *This is crazy, and you are the world's biggest fool for doing this, Lizzy Stuart!*

But regardless, I scan the houses again. I need to see him face to face. He needs to *tell* me! He owes me that much.

I know this is crazy, but I can't seem to let it go. I can't let *him* go! I have to see him.

Ever since I read that damn letter, I can't get him out of my head. He is my obsession. I'm not ready to let this go. I'm not ready to let him go.

I take a left turn and scan the road. Nothing looks familiar.

My mind is wandering . . .

The minute he opens that door, I'm going to strangle him. And then I'm aiming for those abs. I'll hit him when he least expects it, just to get my point across . . . that'll be for the needle he stuck in my neck. And for leaving me hanging like this. And for writing that damn letter! He's going to have to man up and talk to me face to face!

And then I'll run back into his arms . . . I want to tell him that he has crawled under my skin so deep, that he took a piece of my heart—a giant piece.

I shake my head and turn into the next street—and then my heart skips a beat.

Holy hell, I'm here!

I drive up to the familiar white gates. My heart is racing, and my hands feel sweaty. I can't believe I've found it. My hand is shaking as I press the button on the intercom.

It rings, and I think my heart is about to leap out of my mouth.

A woman answers. "Reeves residence."

I hesitate. *Shit, am I ready for this? It doesn't sound like Mary.*

"Hi, this is Lizzy Stuart. I'm here to see Tyler Reeves."

"Tyler?"

I can hear the surprise in her voice.

"Tyler isn't . . ."

I can hear someone talking in the background, but I can't make out what they are saying.

"Just a minute . . . oh, all right."

The gates start to open. My heart is racing, and all of a sudden I start to doubt this bright idea of mine.

When I pull up next to the big oak tree in the driveway, I see Lucy running towards the car.

When I get out, her tail wags wildly, and she barks excitedly. I greet her with a smile and pat her head.

The front door swings open, and Mary is standing there, smiling as always.

"Well, hallo, dear! It's so nice to see you. What brings you here?"

I walk towards her, but before I can greet her, another elegant brunette, wearing black trousers with a black blouse, appears in the doorway. She has beautiful long hair. There are fine lines in the corner of her eyes, but she is striking, nonetheless.

The woman studies me with a cool gleam in her eyes. "Mary?" she asks.

"This is Elizabeth Stuart."

She gives me a tight smile. "Elizabeth. Hi, I'm Gail Reeves. Pleased to meet you."

Reeves? I frown at her and try to swallow. *Shit! I shouldn't have come.* I clear my throat as I stretch out my hand. "Hi. Please call me, Lizzy. Lizzy Stuart."

She grips my hand and squeezes it softly.

She gives me a scrutinizing gaze, and I feel like the biggest fool. *What the hell was I thinking?*

"Please come in, Lizzy," Mary says and gestures me inside.

It feels like a lifetime since I've been here. I walk inside, and Gail closes the door behind me and stands to face me in the foyer.

"You mentioned that you're looking for Tyler?" Her blue eyes penetrate mine. I can see she is sizing me up, and my face flushes.

"I am. Is he home?"

"I'm afraid he isn't."

I lower my gaze, feeling like a complete fool.

"I'm sorry, I should have phoned. It's just . . . I don't have his number. I thought he'd be home."

"Home? But Tyler doesn't live here. Why would you think—"

"Lizzy?"

We both turn around to see Alec standing in the doorway of the living room. He brushes his hair out of his face as he approaches us. He is all dreamy eyes and lavish smile. Gail is frowning at him.

"Alec . . . hi."

"Well, there's that smile I was thinking about!"

Smiling broadly, he walks over to me and engulfs me in a hug, pressing my breasts against his chest. He is wearing a charcoal T-shirt and black jeans.

Gail is glaring at us, her arms folded. I feel my cheeks go red.

“Well, don’t just stand there, or are the two of you sizing each other up?” Alec says and laughs at his little joke. Then he puts his arm around my shoulders and says, “Play nicely, mother! Lizzy is decent.” He winks at her then starts leading me towards the lounge.

Gail is their *mother*? I can feel my eyes getting bigger. She looks so young. I can see why Gail’s sons are so beautiful.

“What can I get you to drink?”

I hold out my hand to stop him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come here unannounced. I was in the area . . .”

Gail is right behind us. She glances at me and fakes a small smile.

“No, please, stay. What can Mary get you to drink?” She gestures to me to walk towards the lounge.

Embarrassed, I follow them, dreading the questions that will follow.

“I’m fine, thank you. I had something before I came here.” I lie.

A middle-aged man sits on the couch, reading a newspaper, as we enter. He looks up from his glasses and stares at me.

“We have a guest, Jonathan. Lizzy, this is my husband, Jonathan.”

He puts the newspaper down and smiles at me.

“Hi, Lizzy. Nice to meet you.”

“Hi. I’m sorry, I was in the area . . .” I say, not really knowing what to say.

He stretches his hand out to me, and I shake it firmly.

“Please, take a seat. Make yourself at home.”

And then reality strikes me like a freight train. This must be their home. My eyes drift to a painting of little kids playing on the beach.

He lied to me.

I try to swallow. My mind is reeling. It all makes sense now.

That’s why Alec felt so at home the previous time.

When I look up, all six eyes are staring at me.

“I’m really sorry. This was a mistake . . .”

I turn around and walk towards the front door. Alec comes charging up behind me as I open it.

“Lizzy, wait!”

Tears are threatening.

“Hey, I said, wait up!”

He reaches for my arm and pulls me to a halt. When I turn to face him, he frowns at me.

I wipe the tears away. “I’m sorry, Alec,” I say. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“You were looking for Tyler, weren’t you?”

He puts his big hands on my shoulders, his gaze steady. He draws in a breath and then looks away, gathering his thoughts.

“Look, I don’t know what beef you’ve got with my brother, and frankly, I don’t give a rat’s ass about it, but I’m sure as hell glad to see you, Lizzy.”

He cups my cheek with his hand.

“I want to fucking *know* you, Lizzy Stuart. And this time, you will not say no.”

I’m shocked by his sincerity.

“Come on . . . you know you want to go out with me. Just one drink?” he says when I don’t respond, his lips quirking up in a gorgeous smile.

“I’m really not up for—”

“Yeah, okay. Then we’ll drink at your place. Tonight, say seven?”

I close my eyes, trying hard to hide my frustration.

“Alec . . .”

He surprises me again when he bends down to look at me, eye level. His face is close.

“You’re wasting your breath. I want to see you, Lizzy. I’m not going away.”

Away, like your brother . . .

His grey eyes are playful, and his gorgeous smile has so much power.

I roll my eyes at him and push him away lightly. I’m a mess, and I’m broken, but I know he is not going to drop this. Looking at a big old tree towering high above the house to my right, I close my eyes and sigh.

“Alec . . . Okay, Tropez. That’s all I’m giving you,” I say, thinking if I’m vague enough, he won’t show up.

I turn around and head towards my car and press the central locking. When I get to the door, I open it, but a big hand reaches in front of me and slams it shut again.

“Not just yet . . .” he says as he presses me up against my car, both his hands on either side of me. He towers above me, and his eyes are alive as he lowers his face to mine, and I feel him on my mouth. He parts his lips, and his tongue is urgent, grazing mine hungrily. Then he backs away and looks down at me.

“Seven it is!”

I try to catch my breath. This was unexpected.

He opens the door for me and gestures for me to get in.

“I want to fuck you senseless, Lizzy. And one of these days, I will.”

He walks backwards towards the house, watching me.

I shake my head. *He is so different . . .*

Still feeling a bit flustered, I get in the car. As I turn the key in the ignition, I get a glimpse of someone peeking through a side window of the house. I see the curtain moving, and then the person is gone.

I know it's Gail. It doesn't take a genius to see she doesn't like me.

Back at home, I fall onto my couch and cradle my face in my hands. *Why, oh why, did I agree to this?*

Maybe I should just cancel. I'll tell him I feel sick. Stomach bug. One of those twenty-four-hour things . . . And then I realize I don't have his number.

Dammit, Lizzy. And you gave him your address! Well, kind of . . . I only gave him the name of the complex. He might think it's a street. He won't find it, and he'll give up.

I look at the time. It's 18:55.

The TV is blaring in the background because I can't handle the silence. Wearing tights and a red jersey, I stare at the TV as I put my hair up in a bun and slide my feet into my pink slippers. *He won't come*, I tell myself. *Guys like Alec have girls falling at their feet. He's probably forgotten all about me.*

I make myself a cup of coffee and resume play. Ellen is my saving grace right now.

I've watched three and a half episodes when I hear the doorbell. It startles me, and I look at the time. It's 20:22.

I scramble off the couch in search of my keys, but as soon as I find them, I remember Nico's words to check the small screen next to the front door to see who it is.

And there is Alec, brushing his hair back with his fingers.

I really didn't think he would find it.

He shifts on his feet, stroking his hair. He seems nervous . . .

I'm tempted to make him wait just to watch his reaction, but I don't.

I press the little button on my remote, and the buzzer goes off. I reach for the door and open it.

And then I'm staring into his grey-blue eyes, which shine with excitement. He looks amazing in distressed dark jeans and a grey vest under a black leather jacket.

His mouth slowly curls up, his top lip damp from sweat. He leans forward, his hands against the doorframe.

"You have thirty fucking units in this complex." His breathing is heavy.

I smile at him and then start to laugh my first real laugh in I don't know how long.

His smile broadens, and he shakes his head as he walks in.

I lift my hand to my mouth, trying to contain my chuckle.

"I'm sorry. I told you I'm lousy company, but you refuse to listen. And yet, here you are."

His eyes burn into mine.

“Damn right, I am.”

He looks around the apartment as he moves in further and removes his jacket. His biceps bulge, and I see his ink. He lays his jacket down on the kitchen counter.

“Please tell me you have beer?”

I purse my lips and slowly shake my head. He rolls his eyes.

“Water, by any chance?”

I walk into the kitchen and smile as I take out a glass.

“Tap water fine, or are you feeling a bit hot after your sprint? Fridge water instead?”

“Yeah, whatever, young lady.”

He takes out two tablets and pops them into his mouth before taking the water from me.

“And now, I want you in your bedroom!”

I look at him and fold my arms. “You think I'm that easy?”

He winks at me.

“Playing hard to get, are we?”

I snort. “What makes you think I want to sleep with you?”

His eyes are shining wildly. “Are you saying you don't?”

“Are we playing twenty questions?”

He shrugs. “You like playing?”

He moves closer to me, holding my gaze.

“No, actually. I hate playing games. I like it straight up.”

I see a slight frown on his face. He puts his hands on my shoulders.

“Your bedroom. Now.” He gently turns me around and ushers me forward. “And I'm not planning on fucking you—yet. You need to get dressed. I'm taking you out, and then maybe, just maybe I'll fuck you senseless when we get back. If you ask nicely.” He hits me on the bum as we reach my bedroom door. “Go! Get dressed. And hurry. I'm thirsty and horny.”

I shake my head and smile at him.

“Kiss me before I kiss myself, huh?”

He stops. “You wanna kiss?”

I grab my door and shake my head.

“Oh no you don't, Alec Reeves. Get out of my way. I need to get dressed.” I close the door on this handsome guy who's gawking at me and smile. He really is super-hot.

I walk over to my cupboard, reach for my jeans, and grab a black tank top and my black leather jacket.

Hastily, I get dressed and then reach for my boots. After I pull them on, I loosen my hair and ruffle it with my fingers. I walk into the bathroom and apply some mascara and nude lipstick and, as I walk out the door, I make quick work of putting on some hoop earrings.

Alec is standing at the kitchen counter, and he smiles at me as I walk in.

“You look wild, baby! Ready to go?”

“No.” I smile at him. “I’ll just get my bag.”

I feel nervous, but he is such a breath of fresh air. And besides, I’m really not staying out long.

Shimmy’s Beach Bar is packed. The atmosphere is electric, with lights shining brightly in pink and blue and purple. The music is pumping, and everybody is ready for a good time.

Wherever I look, I see people laughing and smiling. Everyone except me.

I sigh.

Who am I kidding? I’m not ready for this! A night out with Alec of all people. My gosh, what am I thinking? I went looking for his brother just hours ago, hoping for a sweet, fairy tale reunion . . .

I feel a hand on my shoulder. Alec leans in with bright eyes.

“Come, our table is this way.”

He leads me up a flight of stairs.

The bouncer blocks our entry, but as soon as he recognizes Alec, he lets us through. This must be the VIP section. It’s not as busy as it is downstairs, and it has a separate bar area.

Alec stops to greet a few people before we reach our table. It’s got the perfect view, overlooking a few people gathering next to the crystal-clear water of the pool in the middle of the venue.

To my right is a huge stage for live entertainment. It really is an upmarket bar.

I turn my gaze back to Alec. His eyes are on me, that exquisite smile never leaving his gorgeous face.

“You’ve performed here?”

“Yeah, quite a few times. The vibe is epic, and the sound is good too.”

He gives me a secret smile.

“What?”

He shakes his head.

“Oh, Lizzy, Lizzy, Lizzy . . .” He talks slowly and shifts back into his chair, his legs spread. “So what do you want with my brother when you can have me?” He shrugs.

I can’t help smiling. He really is charming—and arrogant and adorable at the same time.

“Anyone can have you, Alec,” I say and play with my straw, stirring my cocktail, knowing full well he knows that too.

He leans forward and puts his elbows on the table.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m real easy like that.” He admits it without batting an eyelid, and he watches my reaction, licking his lips. “Want to try some whiskey? They’ve got five on offer for tasting. What do you say?”

I don’t answer him immediately. I stare at him for a moment, contemplating whether I should even consider drinking with him at all, thinking back to when we took him to the hospital.

Well, you’re already in a bar with him, drinking a cocktail. It’s a little too late to think about that now.

“Yeah, what the hell,” I say.

He leans forward again and winks at me.

“Now that’s my girl.”

He looks up and signals to a waiter.

Four hours later, our entire table is full of glasses and empty beer bottles.

I burst out laughing, almost spilling my drink all over me. Alec has got his arm draped around my shoulders, and he’s kissing my neck. We both had way too much to drink, but we are past the stage of caring. I am, anyway.

Our table is crowded. Michael, Alec’s manager, has joined us, and he is hilarious. A real joker. He’s tall and lean and in his early thirties, so relaxed and at ease with himself. I like him.

Kim, his girlfriend, has long blond hair. She’s slim with a beautiful face. She downs a shot and bangs her glass loudly on the table. Dale and Tim joined us too. Each brought a young girl with them, but I’m not sure if they’re just friends or friends with benefits. Everybody cheers as Alec downs his shot.

I look around in search of a restroom sign so I can stop my bladder from bursting. When I turn back to the table, bold grey eyes are staring back at me.

“Over there.” He gestures with his index finger to one side of the bar.

I see a sign. **Toilets.**

He stands from his chair and, like a true gentleman, waits for me to get to my feet.

“Age before beauty.”

I roll my eyes and giggle at his joke.

“Excuse us. Just showing *my girl* to the restroom.” He winks at Michael and the guys.

My girl? Yeah, right, Alec Reeves!

I feel his hand on the small of my back as we weave through the tables.

I'm so drunk, and it's a struggle to focus on my walking. I wonder how much alcohol I actually did drink.

Alec slides his arm casually around my hips, and I'm grateful. I feel unsteady on my feet.

When we get to the bar, a few ladies corner Alec. They all reach for their cell phones and start to take photos of him.

I stumble out of the way and signal to him that I'm going ahead. He nods and turns around, hugging all of the women with affection. I can tell he thrives on the attention.

When I reach the bathroom, there is a line. I sigh, thinking I can't hold it in much longer. I count the women in front of me. *Five.*

I glance at the men's room. No one in sight over there. I lean against the wall. Take out my cell phone to see what time it is. Then I slip the phone back into my pocket. The line still hasn't moved.

I nearly trip over my own feet as I head to the men's toilet. When I open the door and walk in, I see a tall guy in front of me. His back is to me, and he's pacing, talking on his cell phone.

I stop in my tracks, blink a few times. His thick hair is familiar. My heart rate picks up. Without thinking, I grab his arm. I lose my balance and try to steady myself against the wall as the man frowns at me.

"Just hold on . . ." He lowers his phone. "What the hell, lady?"

I try to bring his face into focus, but I know it's not Tyler's voice . . .

Alec rushes to my side and grabs my shoulders.

"Lizzy! Come, I'll take you."

I stare at the man's bewildered face. *Shit, what am I doing?*

Without hesitation, Alec flings open the door to a stall and holds it for me. I stumble in and head straight for the toilet. I don't bother to lock the door. I just tear my panties down and finally—*relief!* But the room is spinning. I plant both hands on either side of the stall as I try to steady my drunken head.

When I finally flush the toilet and step out, Alec is gone. There are two guys in the restroom. They smile when they see me walk out.

When I exit the restroom, Alec is posing for a photo with two young girls. When he sees me, he smiles, backs away from the ladies, and slowly walks over to me.

I grab hold of the wall next to me. I close my eyes for a second, but that makes me feel even worse. I feel two large hands grabbing my face, pushing me against the corridor wall. Alec presses his body against me, and then his mouth is on me. He licks my lips, forcing my lips open, brushing my tongue with his. He grabs my hands and pushes them up against the wall on either side of my face.

I can hardly make sense of what's happening, but I kiss him back. My head is spinning, but damn, he can kiss.

When he pulls back, he smiles broadly.

"I wanted to do that to you all night . . ."

He lets go of one of my hands and grabs my face.

"My pants are going to burst for you," he hisses in my ear and then gently bites my earlobe. "Come, let's get out of here!"

He folds his arm around my waist to steady me as he leads me back to our table.

Michael and Kim are laughing at Dale as we approach.

"Hey, guys and gals, it's time to take this pretty lady home. I'll catch up with you tomorrow."

Michael grabs Alec's hand.

"Sure thing, Slug! Lizzy, take care."

I manage a smile. I feel so tired.

Alec caresses my back before snaking his arm around me and leading me to the opposite side of the room. He takes me to one of the back exits and opens the door.

The cold air hits me, and I feel like I'm going to be sick.

THREE

I wake with a jolt.

Where the hell am I? With effort, I try to sit up. I look around, confused, but immediately regret it as my head feels like it's about to explode. The damn sun shining in from the window is too bright.

Next to me, Alec is fast asleep, and I desperately try to recall what happened last night.

Alec stirs, and I stare at him, lying on his back, chest bare, inked arms casually draped over the sheets. He looks so peaceful. His hair is tangled in a thick mess, and I study his face, his jawline, his slightly parted lips. His face is dark, tanned like he's been in the sun.

He shifts again, and my eyes drift to his tattoos, the armbands on both his arms. I see a blue eye tattooed just below his elbow. A lone tear falls from it into a pool of water below the eye, and there's a guy there, gasping for air. It looks like he's drowning. His hand is thrust into a tattoo of a fresh flesh wound and, on the side of that, a beautiful black crow sits on a fallen tree. The images are all entwined, and they flow perfectly into each other. They're dark and beautiful, and it makes me curious to know what secrets he might be hiding.

I shake my head and feel the throbbing and wince.

Nervously, I rack my brain, trying to recall what happened last night. I can't even remember leaving the bar.

Crap! Did we . . . ?

I'm wearing my bra and panties, and I frantically search the floor, looking for my clothes.

Oh, why did I drink so much?

I don't have a clue where we are, but looking at the railing, I think we're upstairs—in what must be Alec's bedroom.

I scramble out of bed. *Where the hell are my clothes?*

Heading to the railing, I look down to a massive open area below, a large living room. It's a loft. Big and spacious with old wooden floors. Not a lot of furniture, just the basics.

I turn back to look at the room again, which is relatively small, with a king-size bed and a dressing table to the left. Next to it is a door that leads to the bathroom. There are built-in cupboards in front of the bed, but I see no clothes.

I head for the stairs and start to descend them. In the vast room below, I see a leather couch facing a big screen TV mounted on the wall. A glass of whiskey, seemingly untouched, sits on the coffee table next to some gaming remotes.

As I walk further down, I see a kitchen to my left. He's got an old bright-red vintage Shelverator.

Such a cool place! But the thing that catches my eye immediately is the elegant shiny black grand piano on the opposite side of the loft. There's a set of drums against the wall to the far left, and a few guitars rest on stands. This must be where all the magic happens.

I take another step and freeze. Our clothes—my clothes—are scattered around the room. I cradle my head in my hands. This doesn't look good.

I start to dress.

Dammit, Lizzy. What the hell did you do?

Eventually, I find my handbag lying next to the couch. Digging for my phone, I check the time. It's just past 10.00. I'm trying to think what day it is, but everything is fuzzy. I check my phone again. Wednesday.

I have two missed calls from my mother and another one from an unknown number. My blood stirs.

I need to get home. And I need painkillers and some coffee.

Just as I start to tiptoe towards the door, I hear a voice from above. When I look up, Alec, his hair framing his face, is standing at the railing, wearing only his tight white boxer shorts.

I have to blink a few times to sober myself up.

"Well hallo, gorgeous! Leaving so soon?"

He has a cool gleam in his eyes as my face reddens.

"I hope you were planning to leave your number this time . . ."

I arch my brow. "Oh, you should be so lucky . . . besides, you know where I stay." *I hope that didn't sound like an invitation.*

He laughs and stretches, and all I see are bulging muscles. Before I know it, he's bounded down the stairs to me.

"Some coffee before you run?"

Hell, I really should go. But coffee sounds kinda good right now . . .

"Emmm, yeah . . . thanks."

He smiles, and his eyes are dazzling. How is it possible for anyone to look so good when they first wake up?

He grabs me with his strong arms, and then gentle lips kiss mine. "I'm glad I caught you!" he whispers before he lets me go.

He chuckles as he walks to the coffee machine and switches it on, leaving me reeling and suddenly nervous as hell.

When I turn to face him, I clear my throat, not knowing at all how to react.

"Nice place you have . . ."

"Ahh," he says with a shrug, "this hole?" He smiles as he opens a drawer and takes out a box of headache tablets. After popping two, he hands the box to me.

I'm wary of taking the pills and read the box label. When I look up, he's holding my gaze.

"How are you feeling after last night?"

"I'm certainly thankful for these this morning. Thank you."

"Nothing some pain meds and a good old cuppa can't fix!"

I look at him for a moment before putting the box down on the counter.

"Are you always this carefree and happy in the morning?"

He arches his eyebrows.

"Carefree, you say . . ." He snorts. "When I'm sober, I'm pretty fucked-up. Most of the time."

He walks up to me and snakes his arm around my waist, pushing hard against me with his morning wood as he gently brushes my hair away from my face with his hand.

"Stay. Spend the day with me." His eyes are serious. "We can get to know each other," he says and winks, pushing himself further against me as he strokes my lower lip. "Your mouth is so sexy." His voice is soft and husky. "I want it on my dick."

"Alec Reeves, what do you take me for?" I frown playfully but then remember our clothes, scattered around on the living room floor, and my eyes go wide and serious. "Alec, did we—"

He pouts and shakes his head.

"Nope. You were a complete spoilsport, and to be really honest, I think you broke my fucking ego."

Relief floods me. "We didn't—"

"No. I still haven't seen your cunt, baby, but now"—I feel his arms around me—"I want you even more!"

His thumb brushes over my lower lip, and his bold gaze lingers on my mouth. I feel his fingers moving down, touching my neck, making their way towards my chest. Gentle fingers graze my breasts. His eyes don't leave mine.

I swallow.

His voice is raspy as he says my name.

I'd be lying if I say I'm not turned on by this fierce, bold man standing in front of me, but I'm not ready. My head is pounding.

"Alec . . ."

He stops and drops his hands, but he leans in. His mouth is inches away from mine as he hovers over me, and I can feel his warm breath on my lips. He moves to my ear and whispers.

"I'm going to fuck your brains out, Lizzy, like there's no tomorrow. You think too much. Soon, baby, soon!" A gentle kiss on my cheek follows, and then he walks towards the fridge,

leaving me standing there with goose bumps all over my arms, and I don't know if it's from the chill in this vast room, or if it's just my reaction to his sensual touch.

We both look up as the doorbell rings. Alec heads to the door, but I'm still a hot mess, overwhelmed by his exuberance.

I walk over to the couch and reach for my bag, thinking I should probably go.

Alec greets the person, and when I turn around, a blonde girl, wearing tight black leather pants and a matching jacket, walks in, her long curly hair swaying from side to side. She kisses Alec. *Patricia Lewis would be jealous.*

"Hi, darling. Miss me?"

She glances at me and realizes they're not alone. Her eyes travel over me, from my head to toe, but then her attention is back on Alec, ignoring me flat. She lifts her arms around his neck, kissing him passionately on the lips, staking her claim.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

"Stacey, this is Lizzy. Lizzy, Stacey."

"Hi." I stretch out my hand towards her, but she ignores me, so I smile sweetly at Alec and say, "Thanks for last night, Alec. It was fun, but I really should go!"

I head to the door, but Alec blocks me with his hand.

"You're not staying for coffee?"

I shake my head. "I'm afraid not."

He looks disappointed and slowly walks me towards the door, casually leaning against it.

"So, how long are you going to make me wait?" He winks.

"Are you even capable of waiting, Alec Reeves?"

"Oh, I've got stamina and a degree of patience, but the real question is, do you?"

"Ah, twenty questions again?"

He laughs.

"How long?"

I start walking down the corridor and glance back at him over my shoulder.

"Don't hold your breath, big boy. I think *Stacey* might be waiting for you." I smile at him and wave goodbye.

I'm standing in my kitchen, staring at the glass of water in my hand as I pop two headache tablets. My head feels like it's going to burst.

As I put the box of pills away, my thoughts go back to Hagan for a split second—and then I see Tyler's face, his eyes. I think of his touch and sigh heavily. He's never far from my thoughts.

My bag vibrates on the counter, and I realize it's my phone ringing.

"Hallo?"

“Lizzy Stuart?” The man sounds annoyed.

“Yes, speaking.”

“You had an appointment with us this morning at ten, to do our baby shoot? It’s now 11:25.”

Oh, fucking hell! I completely forgot about my diary. I haven’t looked at it in days.

“My apologies . . . I’m actually running late. Would it be possible to reschedule?” It’s a lie, but he cuts me off.

“No, we don’t want to reschedule. Goodbye.”

Shit! Shit! Shit! I’m not like this. I’ve never missed an appointment in my life. I love my work. I dash over to my camera bag and pull out my diary and page back a few pages. I’ve missed several appointments. *How could I be so careless?*

I slam the book shut and fire up my laptop and go to my emails. There are over six hundred unread mails in three weeks. I stare at the unopened mail and feel overwhelmed.

Who am I kidding? I can’t do this. I’m not ready.

Deflated, I go to the fridge. My eyes land on the carton of orange juice in the door. I throw my head back. *Why does every damn thing remind me of him?* And instantly, I feel the sadness.

But the sadness turns into embarrassment and resentment as I think of the past twenty-four hours. *I’m such a fool! Running after a killer! A killer who doesn’t want me. How could I disrespect myself like that? And then, going out with his brother?*

I stop at the thought of Alec. He’s really been great. He took my mind off things for the last few hours. Tears fill my eyes. I want to feel numb. I want to feel nothing. It was different with Alec. I didn’t think about his brother when I was with him.

I open a bottle of chardonnay because, frankly, I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know how else to numb this damn pain in my chest. Opening my top cupboard, I grab the biggest wine glass I can find and fill it to the top. I take a sip and close my eyes.

My hands move fast over the keyboard. The message is simple, a direct note.

Thank you for your email!

I regret to inform you that I’ll be taking some time off. Be sure to follow me on Twitter or Facebook for notification of future shoots.

Kind regards,

Lizzy Stuart

I post the same message on social media, change my personal message on my cell phone, and voila! My mind is made up. I’ll live off my savings for a while. I need time. I’m sick of always doing the right thing.

I'm on my third glass of wine as I stare at my profile picture on Facebook. I remember when I took that photo. *I was happy then. I was naïve then . . .*

I click on the Search menu bar at the top of the screen and stare at the cursor, blinking as I tap my fingers impatiently. Contemplating . . .

I take another sip before looking down at the keyboard and then back up at the blinking cursor. I take a deep breath before my fingers start to type *Tyler Reeves*, and then I hit enter.

A few random pictures of various Tylers come up. I know I'm being stupid. I know he won't be on social media, but I can't help myself. I scan through all of them. Then I'm on Twitter, Instagram. Nothing.

Maybe he uses a different name, I think. I tap my fingers on my lips, wondering what it might be. *Why am I even doing this? It's pointless.*

I pick up the glass of wine and walk over to my couch, but for the life of me, I can't let this go. I pace the floor a bit, but then I turn back and look again at the computer screen. Before I know it, I'm back behind the counter, trying YouTube.

Tyler Reeves comes up.

My heart rate increases. There are only two links. One is a subscription to *Best Carpentry*, and the other is a playlist called *Lost Soul*.

I click on the first one.

Guy Makes Art with a Semiauto Nail Gun. Impatiently, I watch the video then scan the rest. *Basic Tools for Woodworking Beginners, Learning Carpentry, Woodworking for Beginners*.

I skip it and instead click on the playlist.

What kind of music does he like besides Pearl Jam? I wonder, and once again I'm reminded of how little I really know about this man who consumes my thoughts.

I scan the list: *The Eden Project-XO, Slipknot-Snuff, Troye Sivan-Lost Boy*. I don't know any of these songs. And there are no songs by Alec's band either.

I click on *Play All*.

The Eden Project-XO starts to play. I tap my foot impatiently, waiting to skip the ad. Eventually, the music starts, and I listen, taken aback.

Tears pool in my eyes, and my heart constricts as I listen to the words. They sting, and a sob escapes me.

I sit through the first song, covering my mouth with my hand as the tears fall down my cheeks. The second song starts to play.

So, if you love me, let me go, and run away before I know. My heart is just too dark to care. I can't destroy what isn't there . . .

My shoulders shake, and I cover my eyes as I replay the words in my head . . .

This is all I have . . . This is all I have . . .

I try to convince myself that it's just a song. It's just a stupid song. But the words cut so deep!

I'm now on the third song.

I'm giving you the runaround. I'm just a lost boy, not ready to be found . . .

I slam my laptop closed. *Yes, Tyler, you are lost—and now I'm lost too. All because of you!*

Anger is taking over.

I down what's left in my glass. This is not what I expected to find.

My thoughts go back to his letter, and he has said it all before.

I should just let this go. Let *him* go!

A horrible sob escapes me as I cover my face with my hands, feeling so angry inside. And just as I'm about to get up, the doorbell rings.

Who the hell can that be? I roll my eyes, thinking maybe it's my mother, but as I walk over to the door, I see it's Alec. His timing couldn't be better. I buzz him in—I need a distraction.

Alec walks in, all bright-eyed until he sees my face.

"What the fuck? Who did this to you?"

Tears are rolling down my face as I shake my head.

"I have broad shoulders, love! Come here."

I step into his arms. He holds me tight, and I smell the cigarette smoke on him—and some bourbon, but I don't mind at all because I'm totally focused on his arms around me.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess. I told you that, right?" I ask and step away.