

CHAPTER 1

TWO YEARS AGO.

“Is he here yet?” I asked for the umpteenth time as cold sweat encapsulated my made up face. I paced around in my bridal room like a loose maniac as I waited for Jake. This was meant to be the happiest day of my life—of our lives—so why is he nowhere to be found? Is he okay?

“No. Not yet.” Ana replied as she looked out of the only window in the room. I slumped against the plush chair I had sat in for my make up hours ago. I could not bring myself to believe I had just been ditched on the day of my wedding. What went wrong? I checked the time and realized it was already 3 p.m. We were meant to be at the reception right now. I would be a fool to believe it was just cold feet by this time.

“Lucy!” I watched, defeated, as the door flung open and my brother marched in, his countenance rigid, his face screaming with anger and a dark drive. “You just wait. I will be back with that son of a bitch. Even if I have to dig him out of a hole, Dominic will be here in case he comes back.”

And with that, he stormed out of the room, not paying heed to my mom’s plea to stay back. I flung away my cascading wedding bouquet as the thought of what it meant—or was supposed to mean—flashed across my mind. The image of myself and Ana, my best friend and business co-owner, cooing at the pictures the florist had sent and how red tulips signified perfect love almost made me gag.

I looked in the direction of the door as it flung open yet again and watched as Dominic walked in with so much presence and determination. It felt like an out of body experience as he walked up to me, picked me up in a bridal style, and walked out of the room, much to the chagrin of my mom and best friend.

As he walked out of the room, still cradling me in his arms, I could not help but bury my face in the crevice of his shoulders. I wrapped my hands around his neck, and that was when the tears trickled down. I desperately buried my head in the palms of my hands as he set me in the passenger seat of his car. He shot the tinted door, and I could feel myself breathe for the first time today.

“I’m headed to the beach.” He said coolly minutes into the drive. I barely registered what he said as the tears flowed and my head ached. Moments later, we arrived at the beach, and he escorted me out of his black Tesla. My worries, fear, and shame seemed to melt away as I walked by the shores of the beach. I sat down, closed my eyes, and let the sound of waves take me on a journey—a journey far from my reality.

“Here you go.” I glanced up at Dominic, who held out a soda can, and I could not stop the chuckle that erupted from my throat.

“Really, Dom? A canned soda? Don’t make me laugh.” I said, but collected the chilled drink.

“Well, that is what I was going for.” He shrugged.

I sniffed and cleaned the tears that streamed down my face with the palm of my hand. I flinched as I felt his cold fingers against my cheeks, brushing the sand away from them, but he continued regardless. I blinked rapidly as I locked eyes with his gray ones, and I felt myself being pulled in—towards him.

“You don’t need to cry. I know you can’t see it, but it is his loss.” He broke our eye contact and looked towards the crashing blue waves. Almost immediately, I felt his gaze on me again, and as I watched the conflicting emotions dance across his face, he moved closer to me, cradled the back of my head in his palm, and locked lips with me.

Everything swirled for a moment before I pulled back, confused and bewildered.

“Dom, what...?”

“I can’t hold it any longer, Luce, and I mean it when I say I care about you. It’s been torture carrying it around, watching you with him... I want you, Lucy.” His gray eyes trapped mine, and it was hard to look past the fierceness in that gaze.

When he leaned in a second time, I didn’t resist him. There was comfort in his embrace, in his strong hands moving over my back, unzipping my dress, and unclasping my bra. I pressed back up against him, kissing and moaning, accepting all that he gave.

I bit his ear as he nozzled into my neck, his knees lodged in between my thighs. In a swift motion, he swept me up, so I was sitting on top of his muscular thighs, my opening conveniently nestled on his thick and growing member. Digging my feet into the warm sand, I wrapped my legs tightly around him as we rocked.

The instant feeling of relief I felt as he slid his middle finger into my already anticipating and wet core was insurmountable. I could feel my veins throbbing and my insides pulsing as he doubled his finger, pushing me closer to the cliff. It was almost like an out of body experience as I threw my head back and fully gave him control—I might as well, seeing how I always seem to make the wrongest decision.

I repositioned my head to look at Dom, and I met his piercing eyes boring into me. His eyes searched mine for what I assumed to be the plea for consent, and I dazely nodded as my eyes rolled back into my head in response to him pinching my clit.

He lifted me up slightly, guided my head so our gazes were locked, and in a slow but sure motion, he slid into me, filling me up, my walls gnawing at him as if welcoming a savior. Nothing else mattered at that point as we traveled towards ecstasy, while he made me feel alive with each thrust—making me forget I'd just been ditched on my wedding day nonetheless.

He whispered in my ears, sending little shudders throughout my body when he breathed hot air down my neck. He bit against my collarbone; he sucked on my taut nipples again and again.

“Be mine, Lucy.” He whispered harshly, just before the tremors shot through me in violent, pleasant waves. I tightened my legs around his waist as he groaned and thrust one final time, then slumped back onto the sand beside me.

I don't know how long we lay there, static and unmoving, unless for catching our breaths, with his arms wrapped protectively around me. I didn't want to leave the warm sand or the cove of his warm embrace. I was scared of what lay outside of him, and so I lay there with him and drifted away.

Something buzzed.

I blinked up at the bright open sky confusedly for a while before I saw the buzzing thing from the corner of my eye. It was his phone ringing.

The caller ID read, ‘Jimmy.’

I sat up with a gasp. Striking along with the realization that my brother, my family and friends, would have been looking for me was the disturbing fact that I just had sex with his best friend on my wedding day.

I buried my face in my dress and wanted to scream as everything crashed on me like the waves in the ocean in front of us. I took several breaths to steady myself. Dominic was still asleep, but I couldn't look at him as I took his phone and typed up a note for him.

As quickly as I could, I gathered up my gown and hurried away from him—from the beach—from the events of the past one hour that I would be glad to blot out from my life.

CHAPTER 2

PRESENT DAY, SEATTLE.

There's a saying I try to reach for in my mind as I look up at the inconspicuous building in front of me. Something about large things starting from small beginnings. Or at least, I hope it works the same way for my finance practice.

I lift the box from the hood of my car and turn to head inside when I spot a car pull up close behind mine. I start to tell the driver that he might have to find another spot to park in, as I would drive out soon enough. Then he steps out, and I hold my tongue when I recognize my brother. New car?

"James?"

He hasn't changed much, though he's started wearing stubble. He reaches for the box automatically to help me, but I yank it out of his reach. It's enough that I'm indebted to him for helping me land my business in Seattle. Any other favour, no matter how little, seems like more on the list.

"Still putting up the independent act?" he asks amusedly.

"What are you doing here?"

He opens the door for me and follows me in. The room—the intended lobby—is small and unoccupied, in the early stages of renovation. This is my office, or it's supposed to be.

"Just stopped by to say, 'Hi.'" He says, "And it's a nice place this turned out to be."

"This isn't... Just come this way. This place is still under renovation."

"I had no idea."

He sounds like he's holding back a chuckle. Of course he'd find this all amusing, especially after he offered to help with the design and I refused.

"Shut up." I say and lead him into the backroom.

It's the only part of the building that's really been furnished, complete with a desk and three chairs, a cabinet and a calendar all above it, a small shelf, and Ana drinking coffee next to the window.

She turns sharply when we walk in, about to say something, then she spots my brother and shuts her mouth. I'm surprised her cheeks don't turn red as usual, but it must be the coffee.

"Hello, Ann." James says.

"Hi."

"You good?" I ask her.

"Yeah, yeah, all good." She clearly wants to tell me something—maybe some girl gossip—but his presence deterred her.

I drop the box on the desk and turn to my brother. "Well? You haven't stated your business yet."

He raises his hands in surrender. "Take it easy. Yeah, you've caught me; I'm really concerned about you."

"Me or the business?"

"Both, actually."

Ana clears her throat. "I'm gonna be outside, if you need me." She says and inches out of the room.

James takes off his coat and settles into one of the guest chairs. I wince when he leans into it a little too much, worrying that the new chairs might break.

"Look, I know business here can be very tough, especially for outsiders and newcomers. I've been there before. And it'd be nice to help in any way I can, really. You know I don't mind."

I shrug. "You helped me set up the office and all of that. What more would I need?"

"Your plans, your next moves on securing your clients..."

"I've got it figured out." He clicks his tongue and sighs. It's a familiar expression, one he pulls off when he's faced with a difficult problem, or me, his sister.

"That's what you keep saying. It's not wrong to have someone help out, you know."

"I've got Ana."

"You know what I mean."

“I don’t.” I turn to the documents in the box and spread them out on the table. Bills from home, tax records, potential cases—but I don’t really know where to put them. I wish Ana’s here. She’s better at organization than I am.

“I did speak to a Mr. Callahan, though.”

“What?”

James raises his hands again. “He’s an interesting person, long standing in the law offices of Seattle, and he’s just opened a business around 4th Avenue. He wants someone who can handle his financial records.”

“Right. Just what I need. My brother gives me my office and lands my first client. What else will he do for me? Give me my first pay?”

“Don’t be silly; I’m only...”

There’s a knock on the door, and almost immediately, Ana pokes her head through. She has that I-got-some-damn-good-gossip-for-you look, but there’s also urgency in her eyes.

“You got a call.” She tells me and pokes the telephone with the receiver at me.

James raises his brows, silently urging me to pick it up.

For whatever reason, I nervously hold up the speaker. “Hello?”

Three seconds of silence on the other end.

I’m about to ask who’s there and if they had all the time in the world, because I sure didn’t...

“Hey, Luce.”

Everything slows down. My breathing, my heartbeat, even the static sounding over the line.

That voice. That pet name.

I can hear the waves on the beach all over again; I can feel his hands on my back; I can feel the sand beneath us; The grayness of his eyes...

“Dominic?” Out of the corner of my eye, I see James’ head jerk up, and Ana inches further inside, as if to hear as much as she can. I don’t acknowledge them. All I can really hear are those waves, and all I can really see are his stone eyes.

“What, no pet name for me?” He sounds amused, and I wish he was close. God, I’d punch the shit out of him.

I close my eyes, steadying myself. Calm down. Find the reason for his call. Find out why he had the guts to call after two years...

His voice cuts through my thoughts. “Are you okay, Luce?”

I want him to stop calling me that, like nothing has changed, but I don’t tell him that.

Instead, I say, “How’d you get this number?”

“Oh, I have my ways. And it was... a bit easy, if you think about it.”

“Congratulations.”

“I’ll be brief and let you know my intentions... I want to buy your business.”

I blink twice at Ana, like she had heard what he said. She raises a curious brow in reply.

“You what?”

He clears his throat and repeats himself, more slowly this time, like I am hard of hearing.

“I said, I would like to buy your business.”

“You’ve got a lot of balls, Dominic.”

He chuckles. “Just two, actually. But on a serious note, Luce, think about my offer. You don’t have to do anything, not really. Just sign some papers and clink some glasses... Maybe we’ll go get sushi after...”

“You’re fucking unbelievable! You just happen to ring my phone, after all this time, and magically want to buy my business. Just like that.”

There’s a short silence on his end. Then he says. “That’s the basics, yeah.”

“You’ve got some balls.” I repeat.

“Look, I’m just trying to help out, Luce...”

“Well, no, fuck you very much.” I respond and slam the landline down.

“Whoa.” Ana says quickly and takes the receiver from me. “Easy there; we’ve only got one of those.”

I drop into the second guest chair when my brother asks what the call was about.

“I haven’t heard from Dom in a while.” He glances at the moving Ana. “Is he okay?”

“Oh, great, that’s your concern? I don’t know; why don’t you ring him up and check on him? Your best friend, right?”

“Take it easy, Lucy.” Ana said, moving tentatively towards me.

I release a breath and rest my head on my hands. “He wants to buy my business.” I look up at Ana. “Our business.”

“He does?” Her eyes widened. “Whoa, that’s... that’s great!”

I turn sharply. “And whose side are you on?”

“Well, he wants to help out, doesn’t he?”

I wave a hand and return to placing my head on my hands. He actually called. But all he cared to talk about was buying my business. Why? And how would he know when to make the offer this appealing?

“We both know he’s being generous, Lucy.” Ana says, sitting on the desk next to me. “He just wants to help. We could return to our business in California and make something out of it.”

I shake my head. “Everyone wants to help these days. It’s getting exhausting, honestly. Is that how much of a failure you all think of me to be?” I glance at James.

“Fine. I’ll respect your wishes.” James says and gets to his feet. “But I’ll also ask you to think carefully before doing anything with Dom.” He heads out of the office, and moments later, I hear his car zoom away.

“I think you pissed him off.” Ana reports.

“Yeah, no shit.”

She caresses my cheek. “Least you can do is listen to him. I mean, we’re not exactly making waves with the business, not even back in California. Who knows how much he’d be willing to offer for the whole thing?”

“Why would he come back now? How’d he get my number? Why, how, why?”

“You should probably go meet him. Get those answers directly.”

I lower my head on the desk and shut my eyes. “Fucking unbelievable.”

CHAPTER 3

It was four in the evening when we both left the office, with Ana being increasingly annoying while she asked me to consider his offer. She wouldn't shut up about seeing Dominic. And frankly, I could do without her breathing down my neck the whole day about the one man I had spent the past two years trying to forget.

"Fine." I had agreed halfheartedly. "Give me the address. He did drop an address, didn't he?"

She had grinned like a little girl—one who was promised ice cream after incessantly bothering the mother. "Here it is. I wrote it out. Don't fuck it up."

And that's how I find myself here, driving down 4th Avenue. It seems like the business center of the city, with the intimidating skyscrapers and giant buildings glaring down at me. I wonder what it'd look like from all the way up there, if we'd all look like little ants in cars. I return my focus to the road, to wondering how I let Ana talk me into this, to imagining what it would look like when we meet and what he would look like.

"I suppose I'll find out soon enough." I mutter to myself as I stop at the traffic light. I looked at the address on the paper Ana had given me. '512 Pym Ave N, Seattle.' Next to the name, 'Mr Dominic Gray.'

I take a deep breath as I cross the street to the spectacular building that fits the location. It looks like a company building, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was his. Once I spot the men and women milling about in the lobby, I wonder if I had made a bad choice to come here in the first place—I look out of place.

I walk up to the receptionist and try not to look patronizing. "Hello. I'm here to see Dom... Mr. Gray."

"Do you have an appointment?"

A frown pulls my brows in, but I smooth it out with an apologetic smile. "I... do, actually. He asked me to be here." Even as the words leave my mouth, I feel infinitely stupid.

"Name?"

"Lucy. Lucy Standford."

"One moment, ma'am." She reaches for the phone and puts a call through. When she's done, she smiles thinly at me. "Right this way, miss."

I follow her as she leads me to the elevator. She's pretty, possessing long, elegant legs in black stiletto heels and wearing a smart black skirt and blouse. For one silly second, I consider the possibility that Dominic has laid her on that same beach...

'Shut the fuck up, Lucy.'

The elevator takes us to the twelfth floor, which opens up to an entire office block. It is a broad space of desks, chairs, and people sitting in them, busy at work, separated by pillars placed at strategic intervals. The ceiling is laced with squares and squares of light, along with the evening light from the large windows. It is the ideal office I dream of having. The thought of it pushes me towards depression, but I spot the large door at the end of the office space, and I'm jolted back to reality.

The sign on the door reads, 'Gray, Dominic.' A thin line separates it from the next words, 'President, CEO.'

Of course, he owns the company.

She walks in and after a few seconds, walks out and motions me in. I ignore the envious look on her pretty face and move past her into an office that takes my breath.

It's an exquisite display of beauty. From the white floor tiles to the ceiling that's strung with lights, from the rich furniture to the view that the windows have to offer, I can see the entire skyline and Pungent Sound, the water body of Seattle.

And there he is. Standing by the desk in an expensive suit, staring down at a book. His blonde hair is brushed and styled backwards, complete with a clean line at his temple. He's clean shaven, and those keen eyes soon look up at me, freezing me to the spot.

"Hello." He says simply.

I forgot to reply. I stood still, staring at him, like he's a ghost.

"Are you okay?"

I reminded myself of the reason I'm here and took a step forward.

"I'm fine."

“Let me pour you a drink.”

“That’s not necessary.”

He chuckles. “It’s Cognac. No one says no to a Cognac.”

I watch him take a bottle from the shelf and pour out two glasses. I imagine those same hands sliding over my back again...

“Here you go.” I accept the glass from him, but I don’t drink. I’m here for business and nothing more. I remind myself again.

“You called.” I say simply.

“I did, I did. Please, sit.” He doesn’t say anything more, taking a long sip from his cup. He wants to drag this out; he wants me to say something.

I settle into the chair, and I wait. “Well?”

“You’re not looking bad, Luce.”

“Thank you.”

“How long has it been? Two...”

“You called.” I repeat, cutting him off.

A dark look passes over his face. Clearly, he’s not used to being interrupted.

“I’m offering a million dollars for your venture.” He says promptly. “Your options, cash or stock.”

“And what makes you think I’d want to sell out?”

“You’re broke.” He says simply. “You’re struggling. You haven’t had a decent client in months. The business atmosphere in Seattle is more choking than you thought it would be. All I’m offering is a way out.”

“How dare you?” I dropped the glass so hard on the table; it’s a miracle it didn’t break.

His face does not change. “A million dollars. Think about it.”

“Well, you can take your million and shove it up your...”

“Lucy.”

“You show up after all this time, and all you care to talk about is buying my business? After all that’s happened?”

“All that’s happened? What do you mean?”

Of course, he doesn’t know. I close my eyes and ask. “Why now? And how do you know... this much about me?”

He doesn’t respond; his face blank. It must be one of those things they learn in business school; the poker face, keeping one’s true expression shut off from the rest of the world. He looks heartless.

“My offer still stands.” He eventually says.

I purse my lips and rise to my feet. Profanities and curses fill my head, along with the secret I’ve kept for so long. My head hurts. But I don’t say a word, and neither does he. I turn calmly and head straight for the door. As I open it, I tell him over my shoulder. “I don’t know you, Dominic. I don’t think I ever did.”

He doesn’t come after me, and I wish I could go back and slam the door again or cause some sort of damage to that office. Tears threaten to leave my eyes as I enter the elevator. My phone buzzes against my coat pocket, and I take it out. A sigh escapes me as I recognize the caller ID; she’s the last person I need to talk to right now.

“Hello, Mom.”

“Lucy! Are you alright?” Her voice is laced with worry.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

I try to smile at my reflection in the elevator. Yeah, I don’t look so good.

“It’s just a slight headache, mom.” And here comes the pity talk.

“Oh, my poor darling. You’ve been working your ass off since you moved to that place. I told you, a little surrendering wouldn’t hurt. You would have had a better chance here in California.”

“I’ll be fine, mom.”

“You keep saying that...”

“I’ll be fine, mom.” I repeat firmly.

There’s a pause on her end. “Alright, dear. Remember, you can still come back home whenever you want to.”

“Yeah, mom.”

“How’s Ocean?”

For a second, my head goes blank. “What?”

“My grandson?” She asks again. “How is he? The elevator’s doors open, and I walk out as if in a daze.

“Yeah, he’s... he’s okay. I could place him on a call with you once I get back.”

“Where are you?”

“Um, can I call you back, mom? Give me an hour.”

“Alright, dear. You take good care of yourself... and your son, alright?”

“Mm hmm.”

I turn off the call and walk straight to my car. I rested my head on the steering wheel once inside and closed my eyes. This was a bad idea, coming here. I turn on the engine and step on the pedal. I retrace the road while I think of Ocean back home. He would be crying for me already. Or, hopefully, he would be sleeping or playing some game with Aunt Ana, where I am sure he is safe.