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Funeral Burrito

Sloane

The swing creaked rhythmically under me as I used a toe to push off against the porch floorboards. The chilly fingers of January slipped their way under the blanket and through the layers of my clothes. But the joke was on them because I was already frozen inside.

The droopy Christmas wreath on the proudly purple front door drew my eye.

I needed to take it down.

I needed to go back to work.

I needed to go back upstairs and put on the deodorant I'd forgotten.

Apparently, I needed to do a lot of things. All of them felt monumental, as if going back inside and climbing the stairs to my bedroom required the same amount of energy as trekking to the top of Everest.

Sorry, Knockemout. You're just going to have to deal with a librarian with body odor.

I sucked a breath of razor-sharp air into my lungs. It was

funny how I needed to remind myself to do something as automatic as breathing. Grief had a way of infiltrating everything, even when you were prepared for it.

I lifted my dad's OPPOSING COUNSEL'S TEARS mug and took a fortifying sip of breakfast wine.

I would be spending the rest of the day in the cloying heat of Knock 'Em Stiff, Knockemout's irreverently named funeral home. The funeral home's thermostat never budged below seventy-five degrees to accommodate the thinner blood of the elderly crowds it usually entertained.

My breath left me in a silver cloud. When it dissipated, my view of the house next door was restored.

It was a nondescript two-story with beige siding and utilitarian landscaping.

To be fair, my whimsical Victorian made most homes look dull in comparison with its wraparound porch and unsubtle turret. But there was an emptiness to the place next door that made the contrast more notable. The only signs of life for more than a decade had been limited to the crew that came to maintain the yard and sporadic visits by its obnoxious owner.

I wondered why he hadn't just sold it or burned it to the ground. Or whatever ridiculously wealthy men did to places that held shadows and secrets.

It annoyed me that he still owned it. That he still stayed there on occasion. Neither one of us wanted to be saddled with those memories. Neither one of us wanted to share a property line.

My front door opened, and out stepped my mother.

Karen Walton had always been beautiful to me. Even today, even with fresh grief painted on her face, she was still lovely.

"What do you think? Is it too much?" she asked, doing a slow twirl in her new little black dress. The dignified boatneck and long sleeves gave way to a flirty party skirt with dark tulle that sparkled. Her sleek blond bob was held back with a velvet headband.

My friend Lina had taken us shopping a few days ago to

help us find our funeral outfits. My dress was a short, fitted ebony knit with pockets hidden in the seams of the skirt. It was beautiful and I was never going to wear it again.

“You look great. It’s perfect,” I assured her, lifting up a corner of the blanket in invitation.

She sat and patted my knee as I covered us both.

This swing had been at the center of our family forever. We’d congregated here for after-school snacks and gossip. My parents met on this swing for a weekly year-round happy hour. After the Thanksgiving dishes were done, we’d all lounge out here with our favorite books and cozy blankets.

I’d inherited the ridiculous beast of a home with its olive-green, purple, and navy paint two years ago when my parents moved to DC to be closer to Dad’s doctors. I had always loved it. There was no other place on earth that would ever feel like home. But it was moments like this that made me realize that instead of growing, our family was getting smaller.

Mom blew out a breath. “Well, this sucks.”

“At least we look good *while* it sucks,” I pointed out.

“It’s the Walton way,” she agreed.

The front door opened again and my sister, Maeve, joined us. She wore a no-nonsense black pantsuit and a wool coat, and she clutched a steaming mug of tea. She looked pretty as always, but tired. I made a mental note to harass her after the funeral to make sure nothing else was going on with her.

“Where’s Chloe?” Mom asked.

Maeve rolled her eyes. “She’s got it narrowed down to two outfits and told me she needed some time with each one before she could make her final decision,” she said, squeezing herself onto the cushion next to our mother.

My niece was a fashionista of the highest caliber. At least the highest caliber a twelve-year-old on a limited allowance in rural Virginia could achieve.

We rocked in silence for a few moments, each lost in our own memories.

“Remember when your father bought the Christmas tree

that was so fat it couldn't fit through the front door?" Mom asked, a smile in her tone.

"The beginning of our porch tree tradition," Maeve recalled.

I felt a stab of guilt. I hadn't put up a porch tree this Christmas. I hadn't even put up an indoor tree. Just the now-dead wreath I'd bought from Chloe's school fundraiser. Cancer had made other plans for our family.

I would make up for it next Christmas, I decided. There would be life here. Family here. Laughter and cookies and alcohol and badly wrapped gifts.

That was what Dad had wanted. To know that life would go on even though we missed him terribly.

"I know your father was the pep talk giver," Mom began. "But I promised him I'd do my best. So this is how it's gonna go. We're going to march into that funeral home and give him the best damn funeral this town has ever seen. We're going to laugh and cry and remember how lucky we were to have had him for as long as we did."

Maeve and I nodded, tears already welling in our eyes. I blinked them back. The last thing my mom or sister needed was to deal with a volcano of sad from me.

"Can I get a hell yeah?" Mom said.

"Hell yeah," we answered in quavering voices.

Mom looked back and forth between us. "That was pathetic."

"Geez. Sorry we're not chipper enough about Dad's funeral," I said dryly.

Mom reached into a pocket in the skirt of her dress and produced a pink stainless-steel flask. "This should help."

"It's 9:32 a.m.," Maeve said.

"I'm drinking wine," I countered, holding up my mug.

Mom handed my sister the ladylike flask. "As your father liked to say, 'We can't drink all day if we don't start now.'"

Maeve sighed. "Fine. But if we're going to start drinking now, we're taking a Lyft to the funeral."

“I’ll drink to that,” I agreed.

“Cheers, Dad,” she said and took a nip from the flask, wincing almost immediately.

Maeve handed back the flask, and Mom raised it in a silent toast.

The front door banged open again, and Chloe vaulted onto the porch. My niece was wearing patterned tights, purple satin shorts, and a ribbed turtleneck. Her hair was styled in two black puffs on top of her head. Maeve must have lost the makeup battle today, because Chloe’s eyelids were a deep shade of purple. “Do you think this will take too much attention away from Gramps?” she asked, striking a pose with her hands on her hips.

“Dear lord,” my sister muttered under her breath and stole the flask again.

“You look beautiful, sweetheart,” Mom said, grinning at her only grandchild.

Chloe executed a spin. “Thank you and I know.”

The pudgy, grumpy cat I’d inherited along with the house slunk onto the porch looking judgmental as always. The half-feral fleabag had been given the regal name Lady Mildred Meowington. Over time, it had been shortened to Milly Meow Meow. Nowadays, when I had to yell at her for the eighteenth time not to claw the back of the couch, it was just Meow Meow or Hey, Asshole.

“Go inside, Meow Meow, or you’ll be left out all day,” I warned.

The cat didn’t dignify my warning with a response. Instead she brushed against Chloe’s black tights and then sat at her feet to lavish her feline butthole with attention.

“Gross,” Maeve noted.

“Great. Now I have to de-fur my tights,” Chloe complained with a stamp of one booted foot.

“I’ll find the lint roller,” I volunteered, rising from the swing and nudging the cat with my foot until she flopped over on her back to bare her tubby tummy. “Who wants breakfast wine?”

“You know what they say,” Mom said, tugging my sister to her feet. “Chardonnay is the most important meal of the day.”

The warm, fuzzy, alcohol blur began to wane around hour two of the visitation. I didn't want to be here standing in front of a stainless-steel urn in a room with moody peacock wallpaper, accepting condolences and listening to stories of what a great man Simon Walton was.

There would be no new stories now, I realized. My sweet, brilliant, kindhearted, uncoordinated dad was gone. And all we were left with were memories that would never come close to filling the hole his absence left behind.

“I just don't know what we're going to do without Uncle Simon,” my cousin Nessa said, juggling a chubby baby on her hip while her husband wrangled their bow tie-wearing three-year-old. My dad had always worn bow ties. “He and your mom came over once a month to babysit so Will and I could have a date night.”

“He loved spending time with your kids,” I assured her.

My parents had made no secret about wanting a house full of family. That was the reason they'd bought an eighteen-room rambling Victorian with a formal dining room big enough to seat twenty. Maeve had dutifully coughed up one grandkid, but divorce and a high-powered legal career had temporarily shuttered plans for a second.

And then there was me. I was head librarian of the best damn public library in the tricounty area, working my ass off to expand our catalog, programs, and services. But I was no closer to marriage and babies now than I'd been at thirty. Which was...hell. A while ago.

Nessa's baby blew a raspberry at me and looked exceedingly pleased with herself.

“Uh-oh,” my cousin said.

I followed her gaze to the toddler who was evading his father by running circles around the urn's pedestal.

“Hold this,” Nessa said, handing me the baby. “Mama needs to quietly and gracefully save the day.”

“You know,” I said to the baby, “my dad would probably love it if your brother accidentally dumped his ashes today. He’d think it was hilarious.”

She looked at me with owlish curiosity from the biggest, bluest eyes I’d ever seen. She was mostly bald with wispy blond hair carefully tucked under a sassy pink bow. One drool-soaked fist reached out, and she traced her finger over my cheek.

The gummy smile took me by surprise as did the delighted giggle that emanated somewhere from her round belly. Happiness—the effervescent kind—bubbled up inside me.

“Crisis averted,” Nessa said, reappearing. “Aww, she likes you!”

My cousin took her daughter from me, and I was surprised when I instantly missed the warm, giggly weight in my arms. Feeling dazed, I watched the little family move down the line to greet my mother and sister.

I’d heard of women’s biological clocks kicking in with one whiff of a baby’s head, but a countdown kicked off at a funeral? That had to be a first.

Of course I wanted a family. I’d always assumed I’d make time...after college, then after I landed my first job, then after I landed my dream job in my hometown, then after I got the library moved into its new building.

I wasn’t getting younger. My eggs weren’t miraculously getting fresher. If I wanted a family of my own, I needed to start now.

Well, shit.

Evolutionary instincts took over, and I sized up Bud Nickelbee as he stepped in front of me and offered his condolences. Bud’s thin, reedy frame was always clad in overalls. A glasses wearer myself, I didn’t mind his Lennon-style spectacles. But the long, silver ponytail and his plans to retire and build an off-the-grid bunker in Montana were deal-breakers.

I needed a man young enough to *want* to suffer through babies with me. Preferably here, with a Costco and Target nearby.

My biological clock epiphany was interrupted by the arrival of Knox and Naomi Morgan. The bearded bad boy of Knockemout had fallen hard for the runaway bride when she'd swept into town last year. Together, they'd managed to build the kind of swoony happily ever after I'd devoured on the page as a teen...and a young adult...and as recently as last week.

Speaking of evolutionary instincts, the grumpy Knox in a suit—tie askew as if he couldn't be bothered to tie it correctly—was definitely fatherhood material. His broad-shouldered brother, Nash, appeared in full police uniform behind him. He possessively gripped the hand of his fiancée, the beautiful and fashionable Lina. Both men were stellar sperm material.

I shook myself out of my reproductive reverie. "Thank you guys for coming," I said.

Naomi looked feminine and soft in a navy wool dress, her hair styled in bouncy brunette waves. Her hug smelled vaguely of lemon Pledge, which made me smile. When she was stressed or bored or happy, Naomi cleaned. It was her love language. The library had never been cleaner since she took on the role of community outreach coordinator.

"We're so sorry about Simon. He was such a wonderful man," she said. "I'm glad I got to meet him at Thanksgiving."

"Me too," I agreed.

It had been the last official Walton holiday in the family home. The house had been bursting at the seams with friends and family and food. So. Much. Food. Despite his illness, Dad had been deliriously happy.

The memory had a fresh wave of grief slamming into me, and it took everything I had not to give in to the ugly cry that I managed to disguise as a hiccup as I pulled free of Naomi's embrace.

"Sorry. Too much breakfast wine," I fibbed.

Our friend Lina stepped up. She was long-legged and edgy even in a sexy pantsuit and mouth-watering stilettos. She grimaced, then leaned in for an awkward hug. Lina wasn't the touchy-feely type with anyone other than Nash. It made me appreciate the gesture even more.

Although if people didn't stop being nice to me, the dam holding back the endless reservoir of grief was going to crack.

"This sucks," she whispered before releasing me.

"Yeah. It really does," I agreed, clearing my throat and forcing the emotions back down. I could do anger. Anger was easy and clean and transformative, powerful even. But the messier emotions I wasn't comfortable sharing with others.

Lina stepped back and slid neatly under Nash's arm. "What are you doing after this...shindig?" she asked.

I knew exactly why she was asking. They would show up for me if I asked. Hell, even if I didn't ask. If they thought for one second that I needed a shoulder to cry on, a well-made cocktail, or my floors mopped, Naomi and Lina would be there.

"Mom booked an overnight stay at a spa with some friends, and Maeve is doing a family dinner tonight for out-of-town guests," I said. It wasn't a lie. My sister *was* hosting our aunts and uncles and cousins. But I had already planned to feign a migraine and spend the night letting out my sloppy torrent of sad in the privacy of my own home.

"Let's get together soon. But not at work," Naomi added sternly. "You take as much time off as you need."

"Yeah. Definitely. Thanks," I said.

My friends moved on down the receiving line to my mom, leaving their future baby daddies with me.

"This fucking blows," Knox said gruffly when he hugged me.

I smiled against his chest. "You're not wrong."

"If you need anything, Sloaney Baloney," Nash said, stepping in to deliver his hug. He didn't need to finish the sentence. We'd grown up together. I knew I could depend on him for anything. The same with Knox, even though Knox wouldn't actually offer. He'd just show up and grumpily perform some thoughtful act of service and then get mad if I tried to thank him.

"Thank you, guys."

Nash pulled back and scanned the crowd that spilled out of the room and into the foyer. Even at a funeral, our chief of

police was like a guard dog making sure his flock was safe. “We never forgot what your dad did for Lucian,” he said.

I tensed. Every time someone mentioned the man’s name, it felt like a bell rung in my skull, resonating in my bones as if it was supposed to mean something. But it didn’t. Not anymore. Unless “I hate that guy” counted as “something.”

“Yeah, well, Dad helped a lot of people in his life,” I said awkwardly.

It was true. Simon Walton had given back as an attorney, a coach, a mentor, and a father. Come to think of it, he and his greatness were probably to blame for my current marriage-less, baby-less existence. After all, how was I supposed to find a partner in life when no one measured up to what my parents had found in each other?

“Speak of the devil,” Knox said.

We all looked to the doorway at the back of the room that suddenly seemed dwarfed by the brooding man in an expensive-ass suit.

Lucian Rollins. Luce or Lucy to his friends, of whom he had few. Lucifer to me and the rest of his legion of enemies.

I *hated* how my body reacted to the man every time he walked into a room. That tingling awareness like every nerve in my body just got the same message at the same time.

I could deal with that innate, biological warning that danger was near. After all, there was nothing safe about the man. What I couldn’t handle was how the tingling turned immediately into a warm, happy, reflexive *There you are*, as if I’d been holding my breath for him to appear.

I considered myself to be an open-minded, live-and-let-live, reasonably mature adult. Yet I couldn’t stand Lucian. His very existence pushed every button I had. Which was exactly what I reminded myself every damn time he appeared as if conjured from some stupid, desperate place in my psyche. Until I reminded myself that he wasn’t the beautiful, rakish boy of my teenage bookworm dreams anymore.

That Lucian, the dreamy, hopeful boy who carried a burden

much too heavy, was gone. In his place was a cold, ruthless man who hated me as much as I hated him.

“I trusted you, Sloane. And you broke that trust. You did more damage than he ever could.”

We were different people now. Our gazes locked in that familiar, uncomfortable recognition.

It was strange, having a secret with the boy I’d once loved and now sharing it with the man I couldn’t stand. There was a subtext to every interaction. A meaning no one but the two of us could decipher. And maybe there was a small, stupid, dark corner inside me that felt a thrill every time our eyes locked. As if that secret had bonded us in a way that could never be undone.

He was moving forward, the crowd parting around him as power and wealth blazed their own trail.

But he didn’t come to me. He went straight to my mother.

“My sweet boy.” Mom opened her arms, and Lucian stepped into them, wrapping her up in a hug that displayed a disconcerting familiarity.

Her sweet boy? Lucian was a forty-year-old megalomaniac.

The Morgan brothers moved on to join their friend with my mom.

“How are you all doing, Sloane?” Mrs. Tweedy, Nash’s elderly, gym-going neighbor demanded as she took their place. She was wearing an all-black velour tracksuit, and her hair was pushed back from her face with a somber-looking sweatband.

“We’re doing okay. Thank you so much for coming,” I said, taking her callused hand.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mom pull back slightly from her embrace with Lucian. “I can’t thank you enough. I’ll never be able to repay you for what you did for Simon. For me. For our family,” she said to him tearfully.

Uh, what? My eyeballs had no choice but to fly to Lucian’s devilishly handsome face.

God, he was beautiful. Supernaturally molded by the gods beautiful. He would make gorgeous little demon babies.

No. No. Nope. Absolutely not. My biological downward

spiral was not going to make me look at Lucian Rollins as a potential mate.

“You know, they say weight lifting is good for grief. You should come on down to the gym this week. My crew will take good care of you,” Mrs. Tweedy squawked as I strained to eavesdrop on my mother and Lucian.

“I’m the one who owes you both,” he said, his voice husky.

What in the hell were they talking about? Sure, my parents and Lucian had been close when he was the wayward teen next door. But this sounded like something deeper, more recent. What was happening, and why didn’t I know about it?

Fingers snapped in my face, jolting me out of my head.

“You okay, kiddo? You look pale. You want a snack? I got a protein bar and a flask in here,” Mrs. Tweedy said, digging into her gym bag.

“Are you all right, Sloane?” Mom asked, noticing our kerfuffle.

Both she and Lucian were looking at me now.

“I’m fine,” I assured her quickly.

“She zoned out,” Mrs. Tweedy tattled.

“Really, I’m fine,” I insisted, refusing to meet Lucian’s gaze.

“You’ve been up here for over two hours straight. Why don’t you get some fresh air?” Mom suggested. I was about to point out that she’d been standing there just as long as I had when she turned to Lucian. “Would you mind?”

He nodded, and then suddenly he was in my space. “I’ll take her.”

“I’m fine,” I said again, taking a panicky step back. My escape was blocked by a large display of funeral flowers. My butt rammed the stand, and the arrangement from the Knockemout Fire Department wobbled precariously.

Lucian steadied the flowers and then placed a big, warm hand on my lower back. It felt like getting struck by lightning directly on the spine.

I was careful about never touching him. Strange things happened inside me when we did.

I didn’t make the conscious decision to let him guide me

out of the receiving line. But there I was, moving along like an obedient golden retriever.

Naomi and Lina were halfway out of their seats, looking concerned. But I shook my head. I could handle this.

He led me out of the sweltering room to the coat check, and in less than a minute, I found myself standing on the sidewalk in front of the funeral home, the overwhelming press of bodies, the hum of conversation left behind us. It was a bleak, wintery Wednesday. My glasses fogged up at the change in temperature. The swollen, slate-gray clouds hung pendulously above, promising snow by the day's end.

Dad loved snow.

"Here," Lucian said irritably, shoving a coat at me.

He was tall, dark, and evil.

I was short, fair, and awesome.

"That's not mine," I said.

"It's mine. Put it on before you freeze to death."

"If I put it on, will you go away?" I asked.

I wanted to be alone. To catch my breath. To glare up at the clouds and tell my father I missed him, that I hated cancer, that if it snowed, I would lay on my back in it and make him a snow angel. Maybe I'd have time to let out a few of the tears I'd dammed up inside me.

"No." He took matters into his own hands and draped the coat over my shoulders.

It was a thick, dark cashmere-like material with a smooth satin lining. Rich. Sexy. It hung heavy on me like a weighted blanket. It smelled... Heavenly wasn't the right word. Delectably dangerous. The man's scent was an aphrodisiac.

"Did you eat today?"

I blinked. "What?"

"Did you eat today?" He enunciated each word with irritation.

"You don't get to be snappy with me today, Lucifer." But my words lacked their usual heat.

"That's a no then."

“Excuse us for having a breakfast of whiskey and wine.”

“Christ,” he muttered. Then he reached for me.

Rather than jumping back or karate chopping him in the throat, I stood dumbfounded. Was he making a clumsy attempt to hug me? Feel me up? “What are you doing?” I squeaked.

“Hold still,” he ordered. His hands disappeared into the pockets of his coat.

He was exactly a foot taller than me. I knew because we’d measured once. His pencil line was still in the doorway of my kitchen. Part of the history we both pretended not to acknowledge.

He produced a single cigarette and a sleek silver lighter.

Even bad habits couldn’t control Lucian Rollins. The man allowed himself one single cigarette a day. I found his self-control annoying.

“You sure you want to use up your one smoke break now? It’s barely noon,” I pointed out.

Glaring at me, he lit the cigarette, pocketed the lighter, and then pulled out his phone. His thumbs flew over the screen before he stowed it back in his jacket. He yanked the cigarette out of his mouth and exhaled blue smoke while glaring at me.

Every move was predatory, economic, and pissy.

“You don’t need to babysit me. You’ve made your appearance. You’re free to go. I’m sure you have more important things to do on a Wednesday than hang out in Knockemout,” I told him.

He eyed me over the end of his cigarette and said nothing. The man had a habit of studying me like I was fascinatingly abhorrent. Like the way I looked at garden slugs in my backyard.

I crossed my arms. “Fine. If you’re hell-bent on staying, why did my mom say she owes you?” I asked.

He continued to stare silently at me.

“Lucian.”

“Sloane.” He rasped my name like a warning. And despite the icy fingers of cold trailing up my spine, I felt something warm and dangerous uncurling inside me.

“Do you have to be so obnoxious all the time?” I asked.

“I don’t want to fight with you today. Not here.”

In a humiliating turn of events, my eyes instantaneously welled with hot tears.

Another dizzying wave of grief crashed into me, and I fought to push it back.

“There won’t be any new stories,” I murmured.

“What?” he snapped.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“You said there won’t be any new stories,” he prompted.

“I was talking to myself. I’ll never have another new memory of my dad.” To my undying embarrassment, my voice broke.

“Fuck,” Lucian muttered. “Sit down.”

I was so busy trying not to show my worst enemy my sloppy tears that I barely registered him shoving me none too gently to the curb. His hands rummaged through the coat pockets again, and a handkerchief appeared in front of my face.

I hesitated.

“If you use my coat to wipe your nose, I’ll make you buy me a new one, and you can’t afford it,” he warned, brandishing the handkerchief.

I snatched it out of his hand.

He sat next to me, careful to keep several inches between us.

“I don’t want to hear you whining about getting dirt on your fancy suit,” I grumbled then noisily blew my nose in his ridiculous handkerchief. Who carried reusable snot rags with them these days?

“I’ll try to control myself,” he said mildly.

We sat in silence as I did my best to get myself back under control. I tilted my head and looked up at the heavy clouds, willing the tears to dry up. Lucian was the last person on earth I wanted to see me vulnerable.

“You could have distracted me with a nice, normal fight, you know,” I accused.

On a sigh, he exhaled another cloud of smoke. “Fine. It was stupid and selfish of you not to eat this morning. Now your

mother is inside worrying about you, making a bad day even worse for her. Your sister and friends are concerned you're not handling things. And I'm out here making sure you don't pass out so they can keep grieving."

My spine straightened. "Thanks so much for your *concern*."

"You have one job today. Hold your mother up. Support her. Share her grief. Do whatever it takes to be what *she* needs today. You lost your dad, but she lost her partner. You can mourn your own way later. But today is about her, and making her worry about you is fucking selfish."

"You are such an ass, Lucifer." An astute, not exactly wrong ass.

"Get your shit together, Pixie."

The old nickname did the trick, blocking out the unrelenting sadness with a feisty bout of fury. "You are the most arrogant, opinionated—"

A dented pickup truck with Knockemout Diner decals on the doors screeched to a stop in front of us, and Lucian handed me his cigarette.

He rose as the window rolled down.

"Here you go, Mr. Rollins." Bean Taylor, the scrawny, frenetic manager of the diner leaned out and handed Lucian a paper bag. Bean spent all day every day eating deep-fried diner delights and never gained an ounce. The second a salad touched his lips, he packed on the pounds.

Lucian handed him a fifty-dollar bill. "Keep the change."

"Thanks, man! Real sorry to hear about your dad, Sloane," he called out the window.

I smiled weakly. "Thanks, Bean."

"Gotta get back. I left the wife in charge, and she burns the hash browns."

He drove off, and Lucian dropped the bag in my lap.

"Eat."

With that order, he turned on his heel and strode back to the entrance of the funeral home.

"I guess I'm keeping the coat," I called after him.

I watched him go, and then when I was certain he was inside, I opened the bag to find my favorite breakfast burrito wrapped tight in foil. The diner didn't deliver. And Lucian shouldn't have known my favorite breakfast.

"Infuriating," I muttered under my breath before briefly bringing the filtered tip of his cigarette to my lips where I could almost taste him.

2

Keep the Coat and Leave Me Alone

Lucian

By the time I pulled into the driveway of the house I hated, fat flakes had been falling for nearly an hour. I exhaled slowly and slumped against the heated leather of my Range Rover's driver's seat. Shania Twain crooned softly from the speakers. The windshield wipers groaned across the glass swiping away the snow.

It looked as though I'd be spending the night here, I told myself, as if that hadn't been the plan all along.

As if I didn't have an overnight bag on the back seat.

As if I didn't have this cloying need to stay close. Just in case.

I punched the button on the remote for the garage and watched the door silently rise before me in the headlights. The services and meal had eaten up the remaining daylight hours. Friends and loved ones had lingered over Simon's favorite dishes and drinks, reminiscing while I'd avoided Sloane. I didn't trust myself to keep her at the necessary distance when she was wounded like this, so I'd relied on physical distance.

I dismissed all thoughts of the blond pixie from my mind and focused on other more important, less annoying things. Tonight, Karen Walton and a few of her local friends were safely ensconced in suites at a spa just outside DC where they would enjoy a day of pampering tomorrow.

It was the least I could do for the neighbors who had given me everything.

The caller ID on my dashboard screen lit up.

Special Agent Idler.

“Yes?” I answered, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“I thought you’d be interested to know that no one has seen or heard from Felix Metzger since September,” she said without preamble. The FBI agent had even less enthusiasm than I did for wasting time with unnecessary small talk.

“That’s inconvenient.” Inconvenient and not entirely unexpected.

“Let’s skip to the part where you assure me you had nothing to do with his disappearance,” she said pointedly.

“I’d think my cooperation in this investigation should at least buy me the benefit of the doubt.”

“We both know you have the means to disappear just about anyone who annoys you.”

I glanced again at the fanciful house next door. There were exceptions.

I heard the snick of a lighter and an indrawn breath and wished I hadn’t already smoked my only cigarette of the day. I blamed Sloane. My self-control wavered around her.

“Look, I know you probably didn’t dismember Metzger and feed him to your school of highly trained piranhas or whatever the hell aquatic life you rich guys invest in. I’m just pissed. Our useless crime boss son gave us the name, we did the legwork, but it’s yet another lead that didn’t pan out.”

The longer my team worked with Idler’s, the less annoying I found her. I admired her single-minded quest for justice, even though I preferred vengeance.

“Maybe he went underground,” I suggested.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about it,” Idler said. “Someone is cleaning up their mess. I’m gonna be pissed if this keeps me from personally slamming a cell door in Anthony Hugo’s face. The only two people alive who can corroborate that Anthony commissioned a list of people for his minions to assassinate are his idiot criminal son and his idiot criminal son’s ex-girlfriend. Neither is going to win any points in front of a jury.”

“I’ll get more,” I assured her. I wasn’t about to let a man like Anthony Hugo walk away unscathed from hurting the people I loved.

“Until Metzger or his body show up, we’re looking at another dead end.”

“My team is working on untangling Hugo’s financials. We’ll find what you need,” I promised. Hugo was good, but I was better and more tenacious.

“You’re awfully calm for a civilian who could become part of the mess that needs cleaning,” she pointed out.

“If Hugo comes for me, he won’t find an easy target,” I promised grimly.

“Yeah, well, don’t do anything stupid. At least not before you get me something I can use to nail the bastard with.”

My team had already gotten her several small somethings. But the FBI wanted an airtight case with charges that ensured life in prison. I would see to it they had it.

“I’ll do my best. As long as you don’t contemplate making any deals that impact those I care about.” My gaze flicked next door again. The house was still dark.

“Hugo is the big fish. There will be no deals,” Idler promised.

I let myself into the mudroom, the perfect organizational space for the family that didn’t live here. The furniture, the finishes, even the layout of the house had changed. But even new paint, carpet, and cabinetry weren’t enough to vanquish the memories.

I still hated it here.

It made no financial sense to hang on to this godforsaken place, this reminder of a past better forgotten. Yet here I was. Once again spending the night as if I could somehow weaken the hold it had on me if I just spent enough time here.

It was smarter all around to sell the place and be done with it.

It was why I'd come back last summer. But one look at those green eyes—not a soft, mossy green. No, Sloane Walton's eyes blazed with emerald flames. One look and my best-laid plans disintegrated.

But it was time. Time to free myself from the house, the memories. From the weakness those years symbolized. I'd risen above. I'd made something of myself. And even if I was still a monster under the trappings of wealth and power, I had done some good. Wasn't that enough?

I would never be good enough. Not with this blood in my veins, on my hands.

I'd made the decision to move on in the thick heat of last August. The summer swelter had made me think I'd gotten over the painful hope of spring. Yet here I was, six months later, and the ties that had anchored me to this place felt even more restricting. I blamed Sloane for why I counted down the days until spring.

Until the trees bloomed.

I hated to think the reason for my life in DC was tied to something so pathetically fragile. That *I* was something so pathetically fragile. Yet every spring when those fragrant pink blooms exploded into being, my chest loosened. My breath relaxed. And my oldest enemy stirred.

Hope. Some of us didn't get the luxury of hope. Some of us weren't worthy of it.

Soon, I promised myself. Once I knew the Waltons were taken care of, I'd sever ties with this place. I'd give myself one last spring here and then I'd never come back.

I flipped on the lights in the kitchen, a clean space of grays and whites, and stared at the stainless steel silhouette of the refrigerator.

I wasn't hungry. The thought of food made me feel vaguely nauseated. I wanted another cigarette. A drink. But I was nothing if not disciplined. I made choices that made me stronger, smarter. I prioritized the long game over short-term fixes. Which meant ignoring my baser instincts.

I opened the freezer and grabbed a container at random. I pried off the lid of some chicken dijonnaise and threw it in the microwave to defrost. As the timer counted down, I bowed my head and let the tight leash I'd kept on my grief loosen.

I wanted to fight. To rage. To destroy.

A good man had been taken. Another one, an evil one, had escaped without suffering his full punishment. And I could do nothing about either. With all the wealth and favors I'd amassed, I was once again powerless.

My hands fisted on the counter until my knuckles went white and a memory surfaced.

"Place is looking better," Simon had told me when he wandered in through the open garage door.

I'd been covered in sweat and dust, sledgehammering my way through drywall and ghosts.

"Is it?" my twentysomething self asked. It looked like an explosion had hit the kitchen.

"Sometimes in order to build things back up, you gotta tear them down to the studs. Want some help?"

Just like that, the man who'd saved my life picked up a hammer and helped me raze the ugliest parts of my past.

The doorbell rang, and my head came up. The anger retreated dutifully back into its box. I debated ignoring whoever it was. But the bell rang several more times in rapid succession.

Irritated, I yanked open the door, and my heart stuttered. It always did when I saw her unexpectedly. Part of me, some small, weak splinter buried down deep, saw her and wanted to draw nearer. Like she was a campfire beckoning with a promise of warmth and goodness in the dark night.

But I knew better. Sloane didn't offer warmth. She promised third-degree burns.

She was still wearing the black dress and glittery belt she'd worn to the funeral, but instead of the heels that brought her higher on my chest, she had donned snow boots. And my coat.

She pushed past me carrying a paper bag.

"What are you doing?" I demanded as she ventured down the hall. "You're supposed to be at your sister's."

"Keeping tabs on me, Lucifer? I didn't feel like company tonight," she called over her shoulder.

"Then what are you doing here?" I asked, following her toward the back of the house. I hated her here. It made my skin crawl, my stomach churn. But some sick, stupid part of me craved her proximity.

"You don't count as company," she said, tossing my coat on the counter. I wondered if it smelled like her or if, by wearing it, she now smelled like me.

Sloane opened a cabinet, then closed it and opened the next. She rose on tiptoe. The hem of her dress inched higher on her thighs, and I realized she'd also removed her tights. I wondered for one brief, moronic second if she'd taken off anything else before I forced myself to drag my attention away from her skin.

I didn't know exactly when it had happened. When the kid next door had turned into the woman I couldn't evict from my brain.

Sloane found a plate and dumped the contents of the greasy brown bag onto it with a flourish.

"There. We're even," she announced. The tiny fake diamond stud in her nose twinkled. If she were mine, it would have been a real stone.

"What is this?"

"Dinner. You made your little point with your breakfast burrito. So here's post-funeral dinner. I don't owe you anything."

There were no "thank yous" or "you're welcomes" between us. We wouldn't have meant them. What did exist was a compulsion to balance the scales, to never be in debt to the other.

I glanced down at the plate. "What is it?"

“Seriously? How rich do you have to get to not recognize a burger and fries? I didn’t know what you liked, so I got what I like,” she said, snatching a fry off the plate and polishing it off in two neat bites.

She looked tired and wired at the same time.

“How’s Karen?” I asked.

“Mom is holding up. She’s spending the night with a few friends at a spa. They’re having facials tonight and the works tomorrow. It sounds like a safe space to let her feel sad and…” Sloane closed her eyes for a moment.

It was more words and fewer insults than I was used to from her.

“Relieved?” I guessed.

Those green eyes fluttered open and bored into me. “Maybe.”

“He was suffering. It’s natural to be glad that part of it is over.”

She hopped up on the counter, planting herself next to my fast-food dinner. “Still seems wrong,” she said.

I reached around her and snagged a French fry from the plate. It was just an excuse to get closer to her. To test myself.

“Why are you here, Sloane?”

Even as I conspired to get closer, I was still pushing her away. The dynamic was taxing on a good day. On a day like today, it was fucking exhausting.

She took another fry and pointed it at me. “Because I want to know why my mom greeted you like you were a long-lost Walton today. What does she think she owes you? What were you talking about?”

I wasn’t about to begin that conversation. If Sloane had any hint of what I’d done, she’d never leave me in peace again. “Look, it’s late. I’m tired. You should go.”

“It’s 5:30 in the evening, you grumpy pain in the ass.”

“I don’t want you here.” The truth snapped out of me in a desperate rush.

She sat up straighter on the counter but made no move to leave. She’d always been too comfortable with my temper. That

was part of the problem. Either she overestimated her invincibility or she underestimated what raged beneath my surface. I wasn't going to let her stick around long enough to find out which.

She cocked her head, sending that long swing of blond hair over her shoulder. She'd changed up the tone, going from a faded raspberry to a silvery shimmer at the tips. "You know what I kept thinking about today during the services?"

She as well as her mother and sister had spoken in front of the crowd, eloquently, emotionally. But it was the single tear that slid down Sloane's cheek, the ones she dashed away with my handkerchief, that had sliced me open and left me raw.

"A dozen new ways to piss me off, starting with invading my privacy?"

"How happy Dad would have been if we'd ever pretended to get along."

It was my turn to close my eyes. She landed the strike with expert precision. Guilt was a sharp weapon.

Simon would have loved nothing more than to see his daughter and his "project" at least friendly toward each other again.

"I guess there's no reason to start now," she continued. Her eyes were locked on mine. There was nothing friendly in her gaze. Only a pain and grief that mirrored my own. But we weren't going to mourn together.

"I guess not," I agreed.

She heaved a sigh, then hopped off the counter. "Cool. I'll show myself out."

"Take the coat," I said, holding it out to her. "It's cold."

She shook her head. "If I take it, I'd have to bring it back, and I'd rather not come back here." Her gaze flicked around the space, and I knew she too had ghosts here.

"Take the fucking coat, Sloane." My voice was hoarse. I pushed it into her arms, not giving her the choice.

For a second, we were connected by cashmere.

"Are you here for me?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"You heard me. Are you here for me?"

“I came to pay my respects. Your father was a good man, and your mother has always been nothing but kind to me.”

“Why did you come back this summer?”

“Because my oldest friends were behaving like children.”

“And I didn’t factor into those decisions?” she pressed.

“You never do.”

She nodded briskly. There was no hint of emotion on her lovely face. “Good.” She took the coat from me and slid her arms through the too-long sleeves. “When are you going to sell this place?” she asked, fluffing that silvery blond hair out of the collar.

“Spring,” I said.

“Good,” she said again. “It’ll be nice having decent neighbors for a change,” she said.

Then Sloane Walton walked out of my house without looking back.

I ate the cold burger and fries instead of the chicken, then washed the plate and returned it to the cabinet. The counters and floors were next as I wiped away any trace of my unwanted visitor may have left behind.

I was tired. That hadn’t been a lie. I wanted nothing more than to take a hot shower and go to bed with a book. But I wouldn’t sleep. Not until she did. Besides, there was work to be done. I headed upstairs to my old bedroom, a space I now used primarily as an office.

I sat down at the desk under the large bay window that overlooked the backyard and offered a view of Sloane’s. My phone signaled a text.

Karen: We’re having a wonderful time. Just what the soul needed today. Thank you again for being so thoughtful and generous! P.S. My friend has a daughter she wants you to meet.

She included a winking smiley face and a selfie of her and her friends in matching robes, all with green goop on their faces. Their eyes were red and swollen, but the smiles looked genuine. Some people could withstand the worst without it damaging their souls. The Waltons were those people. I, on the other hand, had been born damaged.

Me: You're welcome. No daughters.

I scrolled through the rest of my text messages until I found the thread I was looking for.

Simon: If I could have chosen a son in this lifetime, it would have been you. Take care of my girls.

It was the last text I'd ever receive from the man I'd admired. The man who had so foolishly believed I could be saved. I dropped the phone, my fingers flexing, and once again I wished I'd saved the day's cigarette for now. Instead, I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes, willing away the burn I felt there.

I tamped it down, picked up the phone again, and scrolled through my contacts. She shouldn't be alone, I rationalized.

Me: Sloane isn't at her sister's. She's home alone.

Naomi: Thanks for the heads-up. I had a feeling she was going to try to wrangle some sneaky alone time. Lina and I will handle it.

Duty performed, I booted up my laptop and opened the first of eight reports that required my attention. I'd barely made it through the financials on the first when my phone vibrated on the desk. This time, it was a call.

Emry Sadik.

Deciding to wallow in my misery instead of discussing it, I let it go to voicemail.

A text arrived moments later.

Emry: I'll just keep calling. You might as well save us both the time and answer.

I had barely finished rolling my eyes when the next call came through.

"Yes?" I answered dryly.

"Oh good. You're not completely spiraling into self-destruction." Dr. Emry Sadik was a psychologist, elite performance coach, and—worst of all—an accidental friend. The man knew most of my deepest, darkest secrets. I'd given up trying to disabuse him of the belief that I was worth saving.

"Did you call for a specific reason or just to annoy me?" I asked.

I heard the unmistakable crack and clink of his predinner pistachios shells as they hit the bowl. I could picture him at the table in his study, a basketball game on mute, the day's crossword in front of him. Emry was a man who believed in routine and efficiency...and being there for his friends even when they didn't want him.

"How did it go today?"

"Fine. Depressing. Sad."

Crack. Clink.

"How are you feeling?"

"Infuriated," I answered. "A man like that could be doing more good. He should have had more time. His family still needs him." I still needed him.

"Nothing rocks our foundations like an unexpected death," Emry empathized. He would know. His wife had passed away after a car accident four years ago. "If the world was a fair and just place, would your father have had more time?"

Crack. Clink.

In a fair and just world, Ansel Rollins would have lived out his full sentence, and the day of his release, he would have suffered a painful and traumatic death. Instead, he'd managed

to escape his punishment due to a stroke that had quietly ended his life in his sleep. The unfairness of it had the rage rattling that locked box inside me.

“You haven’t been my therapist for fifteen years. I don’t have to talk about him with you anymore.”

“As one of the few people on this planet who you tolerate, I’m only pointing out that two father figures dying within six months of each other is a lot for any human.”

“I believe we’ve established that I’m not human,” I reminded him.

Emry chuckled, undisturbed. “You’re more human than you think, my friend.”

I scoffed. “No need to be insulting.”

Crack. Clink.

“How did it go with Simon’s daughter?”

“Which one?” I hedged deliberately.

Emry snorted. “Don’t make me come up there in a snowstorm.”

I closed my eyes so I wouldn’t feel compelled to look toward Sloane’s house. “It was...fine.”

“You managed to be civil at the funeral?”

“I’m almost always civil,” I snapped wearily.

Emry chuckled. “What I wouldn’t give to meet the infamous Sloane Walton.”

“You’d need more than one session if you wanted to get to the bottom of what’s wrong with her,” I told him.

“I find it fascinating how she’s lodged herself so securely under your skin when you’re an expert at surgically removing annoyances from your life.”

Crack. Clink.

“How did Sadie’s piano recital go?” I asked, changing the subject to one my friend couldn’t possibly ignore: his grandchildren.

“In my humble opinion, she outperformed all the other five-year-olds with her stirring rendition of ‘I’m a Little Teapot.’”

“Of course she was the best,” I agreed.

“I’ll send you the video as soon as I learn how to text ten minutes of shaky footage.”

“I can’t wait,” I lied. “Have you gotten up the nerve to ask out your neighbor yet, or are you still lurking behind your curtains?”

My friend had developed a crush on the stylish divorcée across the street and, by his own account, had only managed to grunt and nod in her general direction.

“The right opportunity hasn’t presented itself yet,” he said. “I would also like to point out the irony of you encouraging me to start dating again.”

“Marriage is right for some people. People like you who can’t stop burning casseroles and need a nice woman to force you to stop dressing like a 1980s sitcom star.”

Headlights next door skimmed the fence that divided my backyard from Sloane’s. I got to my feet and went to the window on the other wall that overlooked the front of her house. It looked as though Sloane was getting company whether she wanted it or not.

Emry chuckled. “Leave my cardigans out of this. Are we still on for dinner next week? I think I’ve finally figured out an opening that will tame your infuriating knight.”

Emry and I had graduated from therapy sessions to a friendship that required dinner and chess matches every two weeks. He was good. But I was always better.

“I doubt that. But I’ll be there. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

“No rest for the wicked, eh?”

None.

“Goodbye, Emry.”

“Good night, Lucian.”

I immediately pushed the conversation out of my head and had opened another report when the doorbell rang.

“Why won’t people leave me the fuck alone?” I muttered as I opened my security app and found both Morgan brothers, shoulders hunched against the cold, at my front door.

On a growl, I slammed my laptop shut.

“What?” I demanded when I opened the door a minute later.

They tromped in, stomping snow from their boots on the entryway tile. I would clean up the puddles later, I told myself. Waylon, Knox’s basset hound, marched inside, headbutted me in the knees, then trotted into the living room.

Knox held up a six-pack of beer. Nash hefted a bottle of bourbon and a bag of chips. The furry white head of his dog, Piper, poked out above the zipper of his coat.

“Girls are next door,” Knox said as if that explained everything and headed for the kitchen. “Told you he’d still be in a suit,” he called out to his brother.

I ran a hand down my tie, noting that they’d both changed into the standard Knockemout winter uniform of jeans, thermal, and flannel.

“Figured we’d stick around to keep an eye on them to prevent another last time,” Nash said, putting Piper down on the floor and following his brother. The dog was wearing a red sweater with white snowflakes. She cast an anxious look at me and then trotted down the hall after Nash.

I closed the door and resisted the urge to knock my head against it. I didn’t want company. And I didn’t want to be drawn into whatever drunken escapades Sloane and her friends got themselves into. “Last time” had involved Naomi and Sloane getting heroically drunk and “helping” Lina catch a bail jumper with their wits. Well, with Naomi’s wits and Sloane’s spectacular tits.

I was still furious I’d missed that.

“I have work to do,” I said.

“Then we’ll just watch a movie with explosions quietly while you run your evil empire,” Nash said cheerfully.

They helped themselves to paper towels and glasses, then wandered into the living room, more comfortable here than I had ever been.

The room was staged with a family in mind. There was a deep sectional couch and an upholstered ottoman facing a large

flat-screen TV. The white bookshelves that lined one wall had plenty of space for books, games, and photos.

There hadn't been any family photos here when I was growing up. At least none past my midteens when everything had gone to hell.

"Your security cameras get any good angles on Sloane's place?" Knox asked.

"I don't know," I hedged. "Why?"

"Wouldn't put it past them to sneak out to build an army of snowmen in the middle of the highway," Nash explained.

"I'll see what I can do."

I headed back upstairs and grabbed my laptop, but not before peering out the window into the gloomy winter night. Sloane's bedroom lights were off. I'd spent too many nights wondering why she'd kept the room she'd grown up in instead of moving into her parents' room. I hated how many questions I had about the woman I didn't want to care about.

On a testy sigh, I cued up the security feed that I staunchly refused to open. The one that angled toward Sloane's front door and driveway. It was a point of pride that I never looked at it, even when I felt homesick for a home that had never been mine.

Hearing the brotherly banter in the living room, I reluctantly changed into sweats and a T-shirt, then shoved my feet into the sherpa-lined house slippers Karen had given me two Christmases ago. I clomped back downstairs where I found my friends and their dogs lounging comfortably on the sectional.

"He's human," Nash observed when I walked in.

"Only on the outside," I assured him.

He had taken two bullets this summer when his name had landed on that list of obstacles for Anthony Hugo's crime syndicate in the DC area. After a few hairy months, Nash had managed to pull himself out of a downward spiral with the help of the stunning, monogamy-averse Lina.

While he'd convinced her to let him put a ring on her finger, I was still attempting to convince her to work full-time

for me. She was smart, devious, and better at managing people than she gave herself credit for. I'd win eventually. I always did.

I dropped down on the couch and opened the laptop to the camera footage. "Here," I said, angling it toward the brothers.

"Perfect," Knox said.

"What are we watching?" I asked.

"Narrowed it down to *Shawshank* or *Boondock Saints*. Your choice," Nash said.

"*Boondock*," I answered automatically.

Knox cued it up while Nash poured the bourbon. He distributed the glasses and held his aloft. "To Simon. The man all men should aspire to be."

"To Simon," I echoed, keenly aware of a fresh stab of grief.

"Think Sloane will be okay?" Nash asked.

I crossed my arms and pretended I didn't get that nagging little rush whenever someone mentioned her name in my presence.

Knox shook his head. "It's a tough loss. She held up today after Luce here force-fed her a burrito."

Nash's eyebrows rose as he cut a look in my direction.

"Not a euphemism. It was a literal burrito," I explained.

"Sloane would break his euphemistic burrito in half," Knox predicted with a smirk. It disappeared quickly. "Naomi thinks she's gonna have a rough time and try to hide it."

"And Naomi is usually right," Nash pointed out.

"Let me know if there's anything she needs," I said, automatically distancing myself from the responsibility of looking after her.

Knox smirked. "Like a burrito?"

I glared at him. "Like moral or financial support that can be provided from a distance. My burrito wants nothing to do with Sloane Walton."

"Yeah. Keep telling your burrito that," Nash said, picking up his phone. He winced. "Great. Lina just texted. The girls are making margaritas."

Knox put down his bourbon. "Fuck."