

Praise for *Tell Me Lies*

Named a Best Book of Summer by *Parade* • *Refinery29* • *PopSugar*
Bustle • *Working Mother* • *Town and Country* • *Thought Catalog*
PureWow • *Betches* • *Literary Hub* • *Brides*

“Think: *The Affair* meets *Animal House* meets your beach bag. Get into it.”
—TheSkimm

“*Tell Me Lies* is a page-turner. I devoured it in forty-eight hours.”
—Jessica Knoll, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Luckiest Girl Alive and *The Favorite Sister*

“Dizzying . . . juicy.”
—*Cosmopolitan*

“Everything you could ever want in a summer read.”
—*USA Today*

“If you were pulled in by Joe’s passion in *You*, you’ll fall for Stephen and his unique charm in *Tell Me Lies*.”
—*PopSugar*

“A sizzling summer read, *Tell Me Lies* is an absorbing novel with plenty of twists and surprises along the way, including a satisfying reveal near the end. But it’s also a fascinating examination of toxic relationships, dysfunctional relationships, and the bad habit we have all been guilty of having: confusing lust with love, drama with maturity, and Mr. Wrong for Mr. Right. Only maybe now, after seeing Lucy and Stephen’s train wreck unfold, we’ll all be able to recognize the signs in our own lives a lot sooner.”
—*Bustle*

“Weaving between perspectives, Carola Lovering’s addictive—and toxic—love story explores the pains of letting go . . . for good.”
—*Us Weekly*

“This story of addictive love is the perfect companion for a day at the beach.”
—*Working Mother*

“A dark, exhilarating coming-of-age story. . . . There might be no better addition to your beach bag.”
—*Town and Country*, Best Books to Read This June

“A coming-of-age story that explores the consequences and tribulations of still being haunted by the wrong one who you just can’t let go of.”
—*Brides*

“As the years pass and shocking twists reveal themselves, the more hooked you’ll be. *Tell Me Lies* is the perfect thrilling summer read.”
—HelloGiggles

“Lovering’s debut is like a chemical reaction, exploding with sex, drugs, and all things that make a relationship toxic. . . . From the emotionally raw, vulnerable, yet addicting lure that Lucy experiences with Stephen to his lack of guilt over his misdeeds, readers will be enraptured by this story that explores the darkest sides of a relationship gone wrong.”
—*Booklist*

“Passion, friendship, heartbreak, and forgiveness ring true in Lovering’s debut, a fast-paced ride through hookups, breakups, and infidelities. . . . There are unforgettable beauties in this very sexy story.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Fans of Colleen Hoover will devour Lovering’s debut that is full of toxic love, secrets, and intense romance.”
—*Library Journal*

“A winning debut.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“A very strong debut; Lovering has not just done great things with her character development, she also has nailed a strong sense of pacing. . . . I already am looking forward to seeing what Lovering writes next.”
—BookReporter

“*Tell Me Lies* is as dark and daring as it is absorbing. Who hasn’t, at one point, fallen this hard and gotten this lost? Carola Lovering has created something unexpected and original, yet deeply familiar.”
—Taylor Jenkins Reid, author of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*

“Riveting. With *Tell Me Lies*, Carola Lovering has given us a keenly observed, no-holds-barred examination of the mistakes we make under the guise of love. If you’ve ever fallen for the wrong person—and let’s be honest, you probably have—this book is for you.”
—Grant Ginder, author of *The People We Hate at the Wedding*

“A dazzling new New York voice. . . . A dangerously delicious cocktail of drama, twisted love, and infatuation, *Tell Me Lies* is the perfect cautionary drama to indulge in.”
—*Modern Jetsetter*

“For fans of Jessica Knoll and Caroline Kepnes, *Tell Me Lies* is a devastatingly accurate portrayal of a toxic relationship. Once its hooks are in, you’ll have no choice but to tear through every page.”
—Georgia Clark, author of *The Regulars*

“This unvarnished look at both sides of a toxic romance is as resonant as it is harrowing, with characters so finely drawn they’ll linger in the imaginations of readers long after the final page. This book is unflinching, unforgettable, and unputdownable.”
—Andrea Dunlop, author of *She Regrets Nothing*

TELL
ME
LIES

A NOVEL

Carola Lovering

ATRIA PAPERBACK

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*For my mother, the original Lucy—
you are the light of my life.*

*And to everyone who's ever had a Stephen DeMarco—
this book is for you.*

Sometimes you make up your mind about something without knowing why, and your decision persists by the power of inertia. Every year it gets harder to change.

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

I shiver, thinking about how easy it is to be totally wrong about people—to see one tiny part of them and confuse it for the whole . . .

—Lauren Oliver, *Before I Fall*

PART
ONE

1

LUCY

AUGUST 2017

I wake two minutes before my 5:45 a.m. alarm goes off, on instinct, like the neurotic, sleep-deprived New Yorker I've become. My head kills from the wine—Dane and I split two bottles with the dinner that *I* paid for—but I force myself out of bed anyway. Three Advil, two cups of coffee, and an Adderall and I'll survive the day. And isn't that what New York is all about anyway—surviving?

Dane stirs in the bed while I'm putting on my Lululemons. The new ones—size 4, not the 2s from senior year. Ugh.

"You crazy?" he slurs, half asleep. "Get back in bed." With his face buried in the pillow he reaches out and grabs for my leg.

"I'm going to six thirty SoulCycle." I fling his hand away. "I already signed up." I squeeze myself into a workout top. I feel disgusting, last night's food baby protruding underneath the spandex.

I splash some water on my face in the bathroom and brush my teeth for thirty seconds. My watch reads 5:56. I'm running late. In New York, no matter how fast I go, I'm always running late. I grab my work stuff, shower stuff, change of clothes, and my weekend bag for Bree's wedding—thank God I had the foresight to pack before getting drunk with Dane.

"Bye," I tell Dane, half hoping he's fallen back asleep.

"Babe . . . c'mere." He rolls over and opens his arms. Dane has been calling me "babe" since the day we met three months ago, that drunken afternoon I stumbled into him at the Frying Pan and couldn't help but nuzzle up to his tanned, good-smelling neck as the sun dropped into the Hudson River. *Corona, babe?* He'd smiled dumbly, one front tooth longer

than the other. Babe is cliché, of course, coming from a guy like Dane. Still, he looks all sleepy and handsome, and I let him pull me in for a kiss goodbye.

“So I won’t see you until Monday?” he mumbles.

“I’ll be back Sunday night.”

“Okay. Let’s do something then. Have a blast, babe. You’re gonna be the sexiest bridesmaid. Wish I could go with you.”

“Me too, babe,” I say, trying out the nickname. I’m sort of making fun of him, but Dane is too oblivious to notice. I do wish he could be my date for the wedding, but Bree and Evan aren’t giving plus-ones unless the couple is engaged. And Dane and I are about as far from being engaged as you can get.

I leave my apartment in the dark. The kitchen is a mess, mostly from Dane and me, but I know Dane won’t bother doing the dishes. He’s not at all helpful when it comes to that kind of stuff. My new roommate, Julie, probably thinks I’m a slob. If Bree still lived here it wouldn’t matter, but she doesn’t. She moved in with Evan three months ago.

By the time I get down to the street it’s 6:08, and I don’t trust the subway to get me uptown on time. I hail a cab. It’s irresponsible, spending ten dollars on transportation that could be free—work pays for my unlimited MetroCard—but I can’t miss Soul.

The class is full, of course, because Courtney is teaching and her classes book up at exactly 12:01 p.m. on Mondays, one minute after weekly sign-up opens online. I set an alarm for 11:55 a.m. on my phone every Monday, so I can be ready.

Courtney is really working us this morning, and my head feels like it’s going to explode. I didn’t drink enough water.

“Tap it back! Tap it back! TAP IT BACK!” Courtney is screaming through the microphone, a Wiz Khalifa remix blaring through the speakers. The pain in my thighs is excruciating, but the calorie burn is always worth it. I turn up the resistance even higher.

“Cardio is your *friend!*” Courtney is pedaling faster than anyone else in the class, a ginormous smile plastered to her face. I wonder where she gets the energy at 6:30 a.m. She probably didn’t stay up until one in the morning drinking copious amounts of sauvignon blanc and eating sweet potato fries with her new, hot, but slightly ridiculous maybe-boyfriend. Dane

barely goes to work. He'll probably lie in my bed for half the day watching surf videos on YouTube before turning his attention to his "remote marketing" job.

After SoulCycle I can barely walk, but I'm thrilled it's over and done with. I shower in the locker room and pull myself together for work—some makeup, not too much. I walk seven quick blocks northeast to my office on Forty-Seventh and Madison.

"You're early," Alanna sneers when I walk in. She's really saying: *You're early but not earlier than me.* Alanna is on a complete power trip because she's an *account manager* and I'm an *account executive*, and she pretends to be my boss even though we both have the same boss, Melissa, *director of sales*. God, I hate titles in the corporate world.

"I went to SoulCycle," I say, watching her eat a strawberry Chobani. Alanna probably thinks she's being healthy, but everyone knows those yogurts are loaded with sugar—you have to buy plain.

She ignores me, unattractively licking the top of her yogurt and sticking the whole thing in the trash. I want to tell her that she should recycle, but she goes back to click-clacking on her keyboard with her burgundy shellacked nails. Alanna's long black hair is pinned up in a bun on top of her head, the way she wears it when she's too lazy to straighten it or create perfect, Victoria's Secret waves. As usual her eyes are coated in black makeup that makes them pop harshly from her face. She isn't naturally pretty, but like lots of girls in New York City, she does everything right. Tweezes and plucks and highlights and diets and morphs herself into something she isn't. I'm not saying I do everything naturally—I still can't help monitoring everything I eat, and I've gone through more Hoola bronzers than I can count—but I would never get biweekly blowouts like some girls I know, or waste \$140 on eyelash extensions. There is a level that certain girls take it to in Manhattan, and I don't have the time or the salary to go there. Plus I think the caked-on-makeup look is frightening. I'm not a supermodel or anything, but I can get away with being a girl who is pretty-without-trying-too-hard. Mascara and a touch of eyeliner and call it a day.

I check my email, my eyes burning with exhaustion. The Adderall is barely helping. I'm going to be a wreck for the rehearsal dinner.

Melissa sneaks up on us without a greeting, her social awkwardness waning as she switches into boss mode.

“Lucy, did you print the meeting agenda?” she asks tersely, averting her eyes. Melissa is on even more of a power trip than Alanna, which, coalesced with her social dysfunction, is a frightening combination.

I hold up a manila folder with ten stapled copies.

“The Expedia client will be here in twenty. Alanna, run down and pick up some pastries from Financier. And a fruit platter if they have it.”

“Sure.” Alanna hates being the one to get sent on errands, and I can feel her seething. That’s the one thing Alanna and I have in common—we both dislike Melissa, and Melissa seems to dislike both of us.

“Lucy.” Melissa turns back to me. “Run me through the agenda.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Harry?” Harry is VP of marketing, Melissa’s boss, who used to be my boss before he and Melissa both got promoted. Harry is my favorite person at *The Suitest*, the middlebrow online publication by which I am employed and “the Internet’s comprehensive guide to the best hotels around the globe.” Harry wears Pucci ties and takes me to sample sales during lunch. His husband, Dominick, is an editor at *Departures*, and they live on the eighty-first floor of the new skinny building on Park Avenue. Harry lets me hide in his office when Melissa is at her bitchiest. He can’t fire her because she’s so good at her job—the woman gets shit done, and fast—but he agrees that she’s got a giant rod up her ass. Harry says a lot of people in our industry have rods up their asses but that you can’t take things personally.

“Harry isn’t getting involved with Expedia,” Melissa tells me importantly, even though he attended last week’s meeting.

“But he always attends client meetings.”

“Not anymore,” Melissa barks. “He has me leading this account now. I’m the one who landed it.”

I resist the overwhelming urge to roll my eyes. Melissa never misses an opportunity to remind everyone that *she’s* the one who landed us Expedia. I honestly have no idea how she pulled that off.

We run through the agenda; Alanna comes back with a platter of shiny pastries; the clients are on time, and the meeting begins. The Expedia people like to keep our meetings speedy, which I appreciate, because my head is still throbbing. I’m on my third coffee. I don’t touch the food, though I want a chocolate croissant beyond badly. I observe Alanna observing the pastries, and I bet she wants one as

much as I do. Maybe she even snuck a bite at Financier. Melissa digs into an apple fritter without shame—she is oblivious to the harm of carbohydrates in a way that almost makes me envy her, except that I really, really don't. Melissa is thirty-one and single and odd and spends all her free time alone with her cat or Instagramming selfies with her cat—I'd feel bad for her if she wasn't a raging bitch.

After the client leaves I type up the meeting notes for Melissa and then remind her that I'm leaving early. She gives me a look like this is brand-new information, even though I told her a month ago and have reminded her every day this week.

"For my friend's wedding in New Jersey? I'm a bridesmaid and the bridal lunch is today. I reminded you yesterday? I have to make the 11:02 out of Penn Station?" Everything I say ends up sounding like a question. I wish Melissa didn't make me so nervous.

"Right." Melissa scowls and darts her eyes away weirdly. Alanna spills coffee on the sleeve of her shirt and scowls. In sales, scowling is protocol.

"Before you take off, I need to see you in my office." Melissa uses every opportunity imaginable to let the world know she has an *office* now that she's director of sales, even though her promotion was more than a year ago and even though her "office" is essentially a cubicle without a door, three feet from my own desk.

"Now?" My stomach plummets instinctually.

"That would be ideal." Melissa sneers, and I can feel Alanna smirking behind me.

I follow her into her "office."

"Want to tell me what the hell this is?" Melissa swivels her laptop screen toward me, displaying an article on Departures.com: "Is It Worth It? The Risks We Take for Travel's Sake" by Lucy Albright.

"It's an article I wrote."

"I can see that." Melissa's face morphs into something ugly and livid. I can see the bad foundation job, the way the yellow skin around her mouth looks like it's cracking. I always feel strange when she confronts me in person. She loves using her authority to get pissed at Alanna and me, but it's usually from behind the security of her computer screen, where she sends passive-aggressive emails or IMs from fewer than three feet away without a spoken word. Melissa has done well enough at *The*

Suitest—Expedia is our biggest client—but she’s too uncomfortable to have an actual, verbal conversation about anything other than meeting agendas.

“I didn’t realize you were trying to be some kind of global health journalist.” Her face is practically twitching with rage or discomfort; I can’t tell which.

“I just freelance on the side. The article ran two weeks ago. How did you find it?”

“It’s on the Internet, so it’s not exactly hidden material. Alanna brought it to my attention.”

Alanna. Of fucking course.

“It’s a piece I wrote and submitted months ago. Dominick gave me the tip.”

“*Harry’s* Dominick?”

“Yes.”

“Does *Harry* know about this?”

“He knows I like to write and that I’m trying to do more freelancing, so he connected me with Dominick. I don’t see what the problem is.”

“The *problem* is, Lucy, that you wrote an article about Cabo San Lucas and did not mention our Cabo San Lucas *client*, Las Ventanas al Paraiso. You are first and foremost an employee of *The Suitest*. Do you have any idea how this makes us look? What if Sonja sees this? I know Harry would agree, had he read the article, which clearly he has not.” Melissa’s lips are curled into a snarl, and I can see just how much she cherishes the opportunity to make me feel like an idiot. It’s disconcerting to hear so many spiteful words coming out of her mouth rather than seeing them typed out in long, pointed paragraphs on instant message. I can tell she’s pleased with herself for handling this offline.

“I couldn’t have included Las Ventanas in the piece, Melissa. I work on the account. It would’ve been biased and unprofessional.”

“*This* is unprofessional.” She stabs her finger at my name on the computer screen. “You include Casa Dorada, one of Las Ventanas’s main competitors. Have you lost your mind? Please tell me this didn’t run in print?”

“It didn’t.”

“Oh, thank God,” she breathes, as though we’ve just avoided a nuclear war with Iran. “This needs to come down immediately.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am so serious, Lucy.” Melissa folds her pale, flabby arms and focuses her socially anxious gaze somewhere past my left shoulder.

“Melissa, the article is a think piece on the Zika virus and the state of tropical vacationing right now. It has nothing to do with my stance on Cabo hotels. It’s not even *about* Cabo. I only mentioned the other hotel because there was an outbreak there. It’s not even good press for the resort.”

“I don’t care. If Sonja sees this we could lose the account. And if you’re trying to write I don’t know why you’re working in *sales*—”

“Melissa, it’s *one* article. You know I like to write—I’ve done some freelancing and I wrote that post for *The Suitest* last year. But I love working on the sales side.” I taste the lie as it slides from my mouth, bitter as metal.

It’s the lie I’ve lived for more than three years now, sustained by Harry’s advice: *You want to be a travel writer? This is a good place to start and your foot’s in the door, baby. You do sales for a year, make some contacts, then hop right over to editorial. Easy with a side of simple.*

But it hasn’t been easy with a side of simple; a year went by and the sole entry-level editorial opening was given to the publisher’s god-daughter. Vance, *The Suitest*’s editorial director and a friend of Harry’s, agreed to let me write a monthly post reviewing a local hotel bar or restaurant, but the stint didn’t last long. Once Melissa got wind that my review of the William Vale’s new rooftop bar had gone live on *The Suitest*, she informed Vance that I worked for her in the *sales* department and that I didn’t have time to be helping out with editorial projects. Harry says I shouldn’t worry so much, that I should be patient. Get Melissa to love me. *Ha*. Melissa hates me. No matter how hard I work or how much ad space I sell, Melissa will continue to hate me.

“Lucy,” Melissa spits. “You’ve overstepped serious boundaries and the article needs to go, now. Call Dominick or whoever you worked with at *Departures* and make sure it’s down by the end of the day.”

“I think I should at least run it by Harry.”

“Unfortunately Harry is no longer your supervisor,” she spits. “Nor does he lead the Las Ventanas account.”

“But—”

“We’re done.” Melissa turns her computer back in front of her face and pretends to already be engrossed in something on the screen. This is my problem with sales—it’s full of hotheaded, self-important people like Melissa and Alanna who think clients are demigods, who get off on creating problems out of nothing and act like they save the client’s fate, and in turn the world, by solving them. And despite Harry’s encouragement and a promotion that essentially just replaced the word *coordinator* with *executive*, I’m no closer to the editorial door than I was three years ago, especially not with Melissa as my boss. But this job pays the bills, and the \$150 I got for the *Departures* piece didn’t make a dent.

I leave Melissa’s office and grab my bags, resisting the urge to knock Alanna in the back of the head on my way out of the building. Getting my name in *Departures* was a huge step up from the other freelance writing I had been doing. After Dominick had given me the tip, I’d spent two whole weekends researching and writing the piece. It was *Departures*! That’s basically *Travel + Leisure* or *Condé Nast Traveler*—same tier, at least. No way was I having Dominick take it down.

Outside it’s muggy and Madison Avenue is clogged, but I manage to flag down a cab. My meeting with Melissa has set me behind schedule and I’m worried I’ll never make my train if I attempt the subway.

Penn Station is like the crack den of New York transportation hubs. It’s a windowless, drab rat maze with low ceilings, and it’s always so crowded you can barely lift an arm. With my rolling suitcase, tote bag, purse, and the Bergdorf Goodman bag holding Bree and Evan’s wedding present—I still can’t believe *Bree* registered at Bergdorf’s—it’s that much worse, and by the time I find an empty seat on the 11:02 train headed toward Tewksbury, New Jersey, I’m in a full sweat.

My phone vibrates on my lap.

DANE: Come back, babe.

Jesus. One of my best friends is getting *married* tomorrow, and I’m dating Dane: a surf-obsessed skater bro who thinks my name is Babe, consistently “forgets” his wallet, and has a tattoo that reads *DON’T TALK ABOUT IT, BE ABOUT IT* in block lettering on one of his beautiful, muscular shoulders. Such is the strange reality of life at twenty-five: the

newfound threat that everything—jobs, people, decisions—*matters* in a way it never seemed to before. Wasted time is a luxury I'm worried I can no longer afford.

I watch the city slink away from the window of the train. I close my eyes, still exhausted, but I know I won't be able to sleep. I can never sleep on any form of transportation. I'm too frantic to read, so I listen to Fleetwood Mac in a nervous frenzy and pray that the bruise-colored bags under my eyes will magically disappear before we reach Tewksbury.

Now that I'm on the train, actually going there, I'm too preoccupied to think about Melissa and the *Departures* article and what I'm going to do. Because Bree is marrying Evan. Bree is marrying Evan, and *he* is going to be there; *we* are going to be there, sans plus-ones, and I don't know if I can stand that. The sickness in my stomach is growing worse by the minute, the familiarity of the pain creating a nauseating déjà vu. The same gut-wrenching dread I lived with for years.

The rehearsal dinner is in a matter of hours, and even though Bree promised only the bridal party and family would be there, she could be wrong. She wasn't looking at the actual list when she said that.

I still can't think about him without thinking about sex. Even after a lot of the emotional residue has cleared, the physical stuff continues to sneak up on me. I close my eyes and there I am, on my hands and knees with him behind me, and I picture the hungry expression on his face, and it has nothing to do with love or missing him, it's just raw and animalistic and I like to think about it. There is something about that kind of sex that bites into me, that causes the memory to shoot up every once in a while, like something chronic. He's not the only person who's fucked me like that; he was just the first.

My phone vibrates again. It's my group text with Jackie and Pippa. Their flight got in from LAX this morning.

PIP: I think we're close, but our Uber driver is confused. How do you spell Tooksberry, Luce? Tooksbury? We can't wait to squeeze you!!!

Tewksbury, I text them. Underneath my anxiety I am ecstatic about seeing Jackie and Pip. I chug water from the liter I bought at Duane

Reade and remember to cut myself some slack. If it was anyone other than Evan who Bree was marrying, none of this would be happening and I would be a good, normal friend and bridesmaid instead of a panicked, perspiring wreck busting out of a size 2 Self-Portrait dress. I'm not a size 2 anymore, and, after three years of therapy and numerous conversations with my nutritionist involving the potential harm to my fertility, I can live with that, but for this wedding, I had to make a size 2 work.

Part of my panic is missing Bree, I know. Watching Bree pack up her half of our apartment after two years together, having *Julie* move in with her frilly couch pillows and loud food processor.

The train rolls into the stop for Tewksbury, my head pounding harder with the brakes. Outside, the August air is hot but less humid than Manhattan, thank God. I haul my bags into the first cab I see and give the driver Evan's parents' address. They decided to have the wedding in Evan's hometown in New Jersey instead of Darbydale, Ohio, where Bree was born and raised. *A more convenient location—just outside the city—it's easier for everyone*, Bree had explained. And the unspoken: Evan is the one with the stunning, ivy-adorned mansion in one of the most expensive counties in suburban New Jersey. Or maybe it is spoken—it probably is. Bree doesn't come from much money, and she's open about it. Her grades won her a scholarship to Choate for high school and then a full ride to Baird College. But she's the opposite of a gold digger—Bree wouldn't marry Evan for his money. Since day one she's been determined to become self-sufficient, and now she's an associate at J.P. Morgan. She would be just fine without Evan, financially.

Evan's house is at the end of a long, curved driveway, nestled into a green hillside. It's gorgeous, and at least twice the size of my family's house in Cold Spring Harbor. I let the driver swipe my Visa and then haul all my crap out of the cab like a crazy bag lady. A butler, or someone who seems like a butler, rushes to help me. The foyer is giant and airy and extends to the back of the house, where I can make out Bree's profile on the terrace. She is chatting with Evan's parents, who I met at the engagement party at the Pierre. Her white-blond hair is swept back in a low bun and she's wearing dark, stylish sunglasses that must be a recent purchase.

As I watch this new, sophisticated version of Bree talking closely with her soon-to-be in-laws, I can't help but feel nostalgic for the girl I met the first night of freshman year seven years ago—the scrappy, never-done-drugs, never-had-sex Bree.

I don't miss college—I basically took my diploma and beelined for my packed U-Haul. Still, nostalgia has my stomach in knots, because I remember that first night by heart.

My mother stood in the doorway of my dorm room, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, glancing around as though something had been forgotten. My dad was calmer, smiling his usual *I'm comfortable anywhere* grin. I sat on my freshly made twin bed, because the room was tiny and there was no place else to sit. My roommate, a tennis player named Jackie Harper from Wilton, Connecticut, sat across from me on her own bed. Her parents had left hours earlier, and I wished mine would take a hint and do the same.

"Oh, I almost forgot," CJ said. She pulled a liter of Diet Coke and a handle of Absolut vodka out of her oversize purse and placed them on one of the desks. She looked at me with annoyingly pleased eyes—it was her parting gift, her attempt to keep the peace between us and say to the world: *I'm a cool mom*.

Jackie looked impressed. A flash across my dad's face told me he didn't agree with his wife on this one. But my dad never crossed CJ.

"If you're going to drink, you should drink your own stuff," CJ said. "Don't *ever* drink from a cup that's been sitting out at a party. That's how people get roofied. And if you're going to try drugs, call me with questions. I'm not a dinosaur. I know that college is about experimenting."

My father's mouth formed a straight line, and he looked at his watch. I hadn't heard this side of CJ in ages—she was usually a warden when it came to my drinking—but deciphering her unpredictable personality was like trying to order dinner from a menu written in foreign characters. She was probably just trying to impress Jackie because she thought Jackie was pretty, and because Jackie's mother had been wearing Gucci loafers.

“Lucy.” CJ crossed her thin, tanned arms, her aqua eyes wide. “Last chance. Are you *sure* about Baird? You don’t have to go to college *all* the way out in California, you know. If you went to college on the East Coast, you’d still be away at school, but you could see your friends and sister whenever you wanted. Isn’t that worth considering?”

CJ always asked questions like this, illogical ones with no answers. I’d already unpacked; she’d already made up my bed with her lid-tight hospital corners. Freshman orientation had already started. CJ wasn’t done being pissed that I’d turned down Dartmouth for Baird (a lot of people seemed shocked by that), but what she didn’t understand was that if I didn’t get as far away from her and the tri-state area as soon as possible, I was going to implode.

“CJ . . .,” my father started. I could tell he was getting antsy. It had been a long day.

“Okay, okay. *Ugh.*” She looked at me. “I’m just going to miss her too much. Fuck, Ben. We’re empty nesters now.”

CJ swore a lot, which was kind of nice because, growing up, my older sister, Georgia, and I could swear as much as we wanted. Whenever we went out, Georgia and I knew to tame our speech, but CJ didn’t, and her swearing could be embarrassing.

Jackie was sitting on her bed chewing gum and pretending to read from the orientation packet, but I could tell she was listening.

“One more thing.” CJ pulled out a small white box and handed it to me. Inside were two tiny gold studs—one letter *L* and one letter *A*, my initials.

“For your second holes,” CJ explained. CJ had flipped her shit when I got my second holes pierced over the summer. She’d said they were “extremely tacky,” but now, apparently, she had decided to support them.

“Thanks, CJ. I love them.”

CJ flinched. She’s used to the fact that I don’t call her Mom anymore—I haven’t in years—but she still hates it, especially when we’re around new people. “They’re going to think I’m your stepmom,” she once said, and I’d shrugged, because after she did the Unforgivable Thing, I stopped caring what she thought.

“I’m so glad. Here, try them on.”

CJ placed one stud in each second earhole. Then she hugged me so

hard I could barely breathe. For such a small woman she's freakishly strong—it's all the Pilates. I inhaled the scent of her Fekkai shampoo and swallowed over the lump lodged in my throat. I couldn't see her face, but I could tell from her short, uneven breathing that she was crying. I bit the inside of my cheeks so I wouldn't cry, too.

My dad is less complicated. He hugged me like he always did—lifting me off the ground and giving me a butterfly kiss with his eyelashes. As usual, his face smelled like Noxzema. He placed me back down and I took in the sight of him—kind blue-gray eyes, dark hair sprinkled with gray. I felt grateful for him in a way I no longer could for CJ.

"Be good, Sass." He winked. My parents have called me Sass since I was two and used to parade around the house wearing sunglasses and a feather boa.

When my parents finally left, Jackie and I looked at each other. Our dorm room was small, but it was all ours. I felt a stir in the base of my stomach at the knowledge that I could finally do whatever I wanted. No curfew, no sneaking around, no asking permission. The expression on Jackie's face revealed a mutual feeling. We were exhilarated and terrified, all at once.

We decided to put CJ's vodka to use immediately. Jackie mixed the drinks in a couple of mugs she'd brought and accidentally tipped one over, spilling the spiked Diet Coke all over my bed. The soda hissed and I watched as the tar-colored liquid soaked my new white sheets and duvet. CJ bought all my bedding at Saks—it was some European designer she loved. CJ always spent *way* too much on stuff like bedding. My father never seemed to mind.

Jackie covered her mouth. "Shit! I'm an idiot. Sorry, Lucy."

I shrugged, barely caring. I kind of liked seeing CJ's efforts unexpectedly negate each other. "It'll come out in the laundry."

"We should wash them now, to be sure. I'm an idiot," Jackie repeated. "You're really not."

Jackie stripped the sheets. The hospital corners would never be as perfect again—I don't even tuck in my top sheet when I make the bed, which CJ hates.

I could tell Jackie felt really bad, and I wished that she didn't. I watched her rub a Tide stain stick over the ruined part of my sheets.

She was beautiful in that idyllic way—the effortless blond, blue-eyed, stops-you-in-your-tracks beautiful like CJ and Georgia. My sister looks much more like CJ than I do. I have brown hair and my dad’s eyes, a darker, grayer blue than CJ’s and Georgia’s translucent, shocking aqua ones. People tell me I’m pretty, but I’m not Georgia pretty. People tell me I look like the brunette version of Georgia, but nobody ever says that Georgia looks like the blond version of me.

Jackie insisted on washing my bedding (blue-blood manners—I could tell), and I mixed us new drinks while she ran down to the laundry room. When she got back we sat on our beds, talking, playing the do-you-know-this-person? game for a good half hour, because Wilton, Connecticut, isn’t that far from my hometown in Cold Spring Harbor, on Long Island. The vodka made us chat faster and deeper, until we were both stretched out on our beds, the last of the light spilling through our single window. We had a view of palm trees and in the distance the San Gabriel Mountains, a purple ridge in the dusk. Mountains were still so new to me then, and I shivered at their potential, at whatever it was they would promise.

Talking to Jackie was almost as easy as talking to Lydia, my best friend from home. I knew I’d lucked out on the roommate front. Georgia’s freshman-year roommate at Yale had been from a farm in Kansas, and she said they’d never had anything to talk about besides chickens and organic fruit.

“Your mom is awesome,” Jackie said, gesturing toward the half-empty bottle of vodka.

As usual, I hated hearing this. But I didn’t hold it against Jackie, because if I didn’t know CJ, I’d probably say she was awesome, too.

Jackie opened her laptop and turned on “Rhiannon.” I felt even surer about her.

“You like Fleetwood Mac?” she said when I smiled.

“If I could have lunch with one person in the world, it would be Stevie Nicks.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, hoping my answer didn’t sound too rehearsed. It had been the personal-essay question on my application to Dartmouth (I was surprised they’d accepted me based on that answer—Stevie isn’t close to being intellectual enough for Dartmouth). I grew up listening to Fleetwood Mac like it was a religion,

especially that really bad year, the year that followed the Unforgivable Thing. Lydia and I used to play *Rumours* from start to finish and smoke cigarettes out her bedroom window. Well, I smoked. Lydia never smokes.

Jackie grinned. "Stevie's the queen."

The Absolut was making my limbs pleasantly heavy, and I felt as though I could stay there talking to Jackie forever. She asked me about boys, if I had a boyfriend, so I told her about the Parker part of my past, making sure it sounded like I cared more than I did. It actually bored me to talk about Parker—I'm much more interested in other people's love lives—so I quickly moved on to ask Jackie about her own love life. She'd broken up with a high school boyfriend over the summer, she said. He was going to college in Virginia and they didn't want to do long-distance, so it was mutual.

I wanted to ask more questions, but our door swung open and a tall girl with long, glistening black hair walked in, followed by a skinny girl with white-blond hair, the color of saltine crackers.

The dark-haired girl's eyes were so crystal blue they looked fake.

"*Finally*, Bree," she said. "I think we found normal people." She ran her fingers through her dark hair and looked at Jackie and me. "I thought I heard 'Rhiannon.' Have you guys noticed that everyone in our hall is either international or a dreadlocked lesbian?"

"*Pippa*, you can't talk like that," the blond girl said. She shifted her weight to one foot and placed her pale, pin-thin arms on her nonexistent hips.

"Why not? I have nothing against lesbians. My cousin is a lesbian. For a while I thought *I* was a lesbian. I'm just *saying* that I don't have anything in common with someone who chooses to do that to their hair."

"Not all lesbians have dreadlocks," the blonde said.

"I know *that*, Bree."

The dark-haired girl looked at us and rolled her enormous eyes. "I'm Pippa McAllister. And this is Bree Benson."

Jackie and I introduced ourselves.

"Are you roommates?" Jackie asked.

"No," Bree said. "I have a single in Pitney. I wish I were in Kaplan, though. This dorm is so much nicer. But I met Pippa last week. We were on the same Orientation Adventure."

I nodded. Orientation Adventure was part of Baird's freshman orientation program—camping trips that took place the week before the semester began. They were optional, though, so I opted out. I hate camping. Turns out Jackie did, too.

"My dad made me go," Pippa sighed. "It was kind of brutal. Two of the girls on our trip didn't shave their armpits. Thank *God* I found Bree."

The way she carried herself, I could tell Pippa had been popular in high school. She seemed like someone who did whatever she wanted without worrying too much about the consequences. I liked her instantly—probably because I've always lacked that *I don't give a fuck* quality in myself. Even if I don't want to give a fuck, even if I convince myself I don't, I always do.

"And I live on this hall," Pippa continued. "My roommate is from Seattle, and she and her boyfriend came here *together*, so she's like, off with him somewhere. He came to the room earlier, and they were basically making out in front of me; it was *disgusting*. He's one of those dudes with the big holes in his ears."

"Gauges," Bree corrected. She sat down in my desk chair and crossed one of her chopstick legs over the other. She was so thin she looked like a thirteen-year-old boy. "Have you guys eaten? Maybe we should order a pizza? I'm starving."

"I *cannot* eat pizza," Pippa whined. "I've already eaten a muffin today *and* a sandwich. I refuse to gain the freshman fifteen."

"Pippa, you had a gluten-free muffin this morning and like, one bite of my sandwich. You're fine."

"Easy for you to say, you can eat whatever you want and not gain weight."

I eyed Pippa, who wore a black cotton dress. She wasn't fat by any means, but she wasn't super skinny like Bree. It's how I would've described my own body, until Pippa turned to Jackie and me and said, "But you're both rails, too. Ugh! Not fair. My metabolism is failing me with age."

I looked down at the tops of my thighs, tanned from the summer but suddenly fleshy-looking. Fleshier than Jackie's, and definitely fleshier than Bree's. It hadn't even occurred to me to think about the freshman fifteen. I'd heard Georgia mention it, but only in passing—the *inevitable*

fifteen pounds everyone gains their freshman year because of all the beer and pizza.

I'd eaten a cheeseburger and a bowl of ice cream at the orientation barbecue earlier that day. CJ had nibbled on some potato salad. I'd never had to think about what I ate, but maybe I needed to start.

"Anyway," Pippa said. "We're supposed to find people to bring to this party. Some guy invited us and said to bring more freshman girls. 'Fresh meat' is actually what he said, which is kinda gross, but hey, it's a party. Wanna go? It's at a house on Hutchins Street."

"Sure," Jackie said.

"Now? Should we change?" I was still wearing jean shorts and a white tank top, grubby from moving in all day. Pippa and Bree were in sundresses, and Pippa was wearing eyeliner and something glossy on her lips.

"If you want." Bree shrugged.

"Nah, let's just go," Jackie said. She untwisted and retwisted her blond hair into a messy bun and stood. In a navy T-shirt and track shorts, she looked like a gorgeous tomboy—the kind guys are obsessed with. I wanted to at least put on some mascara and change my shirt, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want to come off like some superficial girly girl who can't go to a party without makeup on.

"Let's take a shot before, though?" Pippa said, gesturing to the Absolut. "If it's okay with whoever's vodka that is."

"Mine," I said. "Go for it."

The four of us passed the bottle around. When it was Bree's turn, she hesitated before taking a swig, then her expression morphed into one of disgust.

"Yuck." She passed the bottle to Jackie.

"It gets easier," Pippa said.

"Easier?" Jackie asked.

"I didn't drink that much in high school." Bree blinked her hazel eyes.

"Well, there's plenty of time to catch up now." Jackie smiled.

"What *did* you do in high school, if you didn't drink and you didn't have sex? You went to boarding school. Isn't that what people do there?"

"Pippa, you're annoying." Bree glanced away before looking at Jackie and me. "I went to Choate and spent most of the time studying my ass

off so I could get a good financial aid package for college. I'm not trying to make you feel bad for me; I'm just telling you," she said quickly, as if she had rehearsed it. Then she looked down and smiled ruefully. "But yeah, I've got to lose the v-card."

"Well, don't give it up to just anyone," Jackie said.

I nodded in agreement, though I felt bad for Bree for getting put on the spot. I would've hated going to college a virgin.

"We'll get her laid, ladies." Pippa grinned. "And with someone worthwhile. You're gorgeous, Bree. You can afford high standards."

I wouldn't have called Bree *gorgeous*—she was more *cute*, with her freckles and button nose—but I understood that Pippa was trying to redeem herself for making Bree feel self-conscious. Bree's prettiness was mostly accentuated by her thin figure. Skinny people just look better, I realized then.

Jackie took her swig of Absolut, and my stomach churned in anticipation. We were going to a party, and there wouldn't be a curfew. I would probably never have a curfew again. I felt the corners of my mouth poke into a smile. I fingered the backs of my new earrings, twisting them around and around as I waited for my turn to take a pull of the lukewarm Absolut. Jackie handed me the vodka and I winced as I swallowed it down—not a new feeling. I'd done my fair share of vodka pulls in high school, first for fun and then just to dull everything away. But things were going to be different now, I knew.

I felt a pleasant rush to my head as I stood. I was still touching my new earrings as I caught a glimpse of them in the mirror hanging on the back of the door. *L. A.* They looked expensive—definitely real gold. I actually liked them a lot (I'm a sucker for a tasteful monogram), but they screamed *gift from CJ*. They would never be anything else. I pulled them off discreetly, quietly dropping them into the trash bin as we left the room.

2

STEPHEN

SEPTEMBER 2010

The first time I saw Lucy Albright was at a party at Wrigley's house on Hutchins Street. Wrigley and his roommates threw down a lot our junior fall, and the best-looking freshman girls always showed up wasted, wearing tight jeans and revealing tops. But Lucy was different from the rest of them. She's beautiful, but it's more complex than that. Lucy is beautiful in the way that makes it hard to stop staring, in the way that the attractiveness becomes something you have to *figure out*. The best part is, she has no idea.

She stood in the living room by the fireplace, holding a plastic red cup and wearing shorts, I forget what color, but I remember that they were shorts because I took note of how long and slim her legs were. Not too skinny, but perfect. Tan, creamy skin, like a coffee milk shake. Her arms were the same, lengthy and thin like string beans. Every move she made seemed graceful and honed; she was feminine and delicate in a way that made me want to hold her hand. I couldn't stop watching her.

Her face was incredible, too. Perhaps not perfect—no, not perfect—but holy hell pretty. Dark blue eyes, a straight nose between defined cheekbones. Her long, chestnut-colored hair spilled down over her neck and down through the middle of her exposed shoulder blades.

I watched her for a long time. Sometimes I catch myself staring at people for too long without realizing it. I'm only curious. Why do they laugh? How do they speak? What do they do? What do they feel? I want to know.

Lucy's smile spread across her whole face. It was pretty, like the rest

of her. You have to be careful of girls that are too pretty, though. They hold a power that they never had to earn.

I finished my seventh beer. I'd already had two whiskey shots, but I still felt a creeping sense of anxiety right at the base of my brain, so I did another with Wrigley in his room. Charlie took out the little white bag and shook a small pile of blow onto the mirror lying on Wrigley's table. He used his driver's license to cut us each a generous line. Long and thin. Like Lucy's arms, I thought, as I inhaled and felt the *whoosh* hit my brain. Like a blast of cold, sweet air that made life come into focus.

I didn't talk to her that night. Not because I was nervous—I don't get nervous talking to girls—but because I got shitfaced and ended up in Diana's room again, fucking her, and then sitting up in bed until three in the morning listening to her whine about what a horrible person I'd become.

I did catch Lucy's eye, though, across the room, and I held her gaze for a couple of seconds. She looked at me with an expression mixed with interest and fear, like I was going to do something terrible to her. But when I smiled, her expression softened. That was when I knew. It's usually fairly easy to tell, but with Lucy I knew for sure. There was something about her, a fragile sense of blind conviction. I knew that she would trust me.

3

LUCY

OCTOBER 2010

Pippa started seeing Mike Wrigley the second week of freshman year. Everyone called him Wrigley, not Mike. Wrigley and his friends were in charge of planning the annual trip to Lake Mead the first weekend in October. They were part of the underground fraternity Chops, short for Lambda Chi Alpha, Pippa explained. Baird had shut Chops down a few years ago after a drug bust, but Wrigley had since spearheaded its underground revival. Freshmen weren't supposed to go on the Mead trip, but with her new semi-girlfriend status, Pippa got the four of us invited.

We hit the road at dawn on Friday in Pippa's Touareg, tailing Wrigley in the weak gray light, the sun a thin orange line on the horizon. Pippa offered to drive while the three of us slept, but I can never really sleep in cars, so I talked to her while she chased Adderall with her latte and balanced the wheel in cruise control—it was a straight shot on I-15 across the border into Nevada.

I'd been perplexed by the collective enthusiasm surrounding the five-hour drive to a random desert lake, the Pacific Ocean being a mere fifty miles from Baird. But pulling into the marina midmorning, the sun a giant tangerine orb casting rays onto the velvety blue water, I understood. Mead was more than just a lake. Massive red cliffs rose around the shorelines like something from another planet, the surface of the water iridescent under the cloudless dome of pure blue sky. It was a landscape starkly different from anything I'd ever laid eyes on. New frontiers. The possibilities filled me. I watched as the rest of the cars pulled in and bleary-eyed kids climbed out, yawning and stretching in the sun. There must've been sixty of us, maybe seventy. Some were cracking open beers

already. Wrigley appeared from the marina office with two keys and tossed one to a guy with longish dark hair. Someone else in Chops, most likely. They were wearing matching captain's hats.

"Anchors aweigh," Wrigley said, and everyone followed him and the dark-haired guy onto two houseboats at the end of the marina.

Lake Mead was the most spectacular place I'd ever been, I decided after day one of cruising through the endless lake, through canyons that seemed to stretch on forever. It was October but still summer weather on the lake, even hotter than my first month in Southern California, and I could feel the sun baking me a shade darker. There were fresh thirty-racks in every corner and plastic pouches of pink Franzia dangling above our heads. Wrigley turned up the music as loud as it would go and it didn't matter—there was no one else around for miles.

At night the two boats docked on a wide-enough beach. When Jackie, Bree, and I couldn't keep our eyes open for another drink, the three of us crawled into whatever vacant space we could find and crashed into sleep. Pippa slept with Wrigley in his tent on the beach. The queen of Mead, I heard one girl deem her, because Wrigley was the king.

I felt farther away from home than I ever had, and happier than I had since before the really bad year, before the Unforgivable Thing. Baird kids seemed to have a kind of fun that was new to me, the fun that came with open-mindedness and experimenting and genuine self-confidence, an entirely different kind of fun than the Cold Spring Harbor, Southside-induced fun we had in cocktail dresses on the golf course, where fun had become another word for *competition*—a night out was a contest to see who wore the cutest outfit and who flirted successfully with the most attractive guy. I'd gotten so sick of all that at the same time that Lydia and Helen and my other Long Island friends had absorbed it into their identities. They would build their lives around it—preppy Long Island kids turned preppy Long Island moms. I wanted to run away from it; I was afraid of what might happen if I didn't. I craved something more when I put my head down on the pillow at night, and the longing stretched all the way to my toes.

I had tried to explain all this to Lydia without sounding condescending, but I never succeeded. I knew I sounded spoiled, patronizing, criticizing a life I should've felt lucky to have. It wasn't that I wasn't

grateful—I was, I tried to be—but by the beginning of senior year I knew that if I didn't get out of there, I would shrink. It was a point of contention between Lydia and me right up until the day I left for Baird and she for Amherst. She wanted me to want the things she wanted, but I just didn't.

Except for a few of the older girls who stared at us like they wanted to throw us overboard, the kids at Baird were sincerely nice. Funny and interested and offbeat and smart—a collection of personalities that inspired me, that made me feel a new part of myself. I watched them take drugs like it was nothing, and not because they were trying to impress anyone. If you didn't do drugs, no one cared, either. There were loose social circles but no cliques; it felt like you could really do whatever you wanted and no one was going to judge you. Baird kids wore neon one-pieces and gold shorts and said things like *hella* and *let's kick it*. Lydia and Helen would've thought they were weird.

The third and final day on Lake Mead, I leaned against the railing on the upper deck of one of the houseboats. I was physically exhausted but still mentally jacked up, fueled by beer and adrenaline. Pippa leaned over Wrigley, her hands pressed to his sun-kissed shoulders, as he used a credit card to separate a mound of white powder on a hand mirror. Pippa had been doing coke with Wrigley all weekend. I watched her suck the skinny white line up her nostril with a rolled twenty-dollar bill.

Pippa passed the mirror to Jackie, and I felt a stab of betrayal when Jackie sucked up one of the lines. Until this weekend, I hadn't known Jackie did coke. She said she doesn't "do" it (i.e., doesn't buy it), but that if it's there, she might dabble. I was relieved when Bree declined and passed the mirror to me, because it meant I could do the same. Part of me wanted to try it, but there are those stories about people passing out and never waking up the first time they do coke, and I just knew I'd be one of them.

I passed the mirror to the guy next to me and stood. My fingers gripped the thin railing of the boat, and it was then that I turned around and saw his eyes. I'll never forget his eyes. I think I'll lie in bed years from now, when I have children and my children have children, and I'll see those two bottle-green orbs, watching me, on the precipice of changing everything. The eyes were small but luminous—they could've been woven with strands of silk they were so bright. They pierced me from the deck of the other houseboat, a good twenty feet away. It was

crowded—people stood all around, wet elbows bumping into sides and heads turning, shielding the eyes from my view every couple of seconds, like clouds passing over the sun. But the eyes never looked away.

“Luce, we’re funneling!” Jackie yelled. The coke was finished; there was a new activity. “You first.”

Everyone was shouting my name, and Jackie grabbed my hand, pulling me down. I anticipated pain as my knees scraped the rough fiberglass surface of the deck, but in my drunken blunder I was having too much fun to notice if it hurt.

Jackie handed me the plastic tube and lukewarm beer rushed down my throat so quickly I nearly gagged, but I managed to swallow it in full, fast gulps until the can above my head rattled empty. Jackie helped me up, my head so dizzy that I lost footing in the sunny haze, falling backward, when a thick arm caught me from behind. Thick but soft, like the punching bag my dad keeps in our basement.

“Watch it.” The voice was hard and quick.

I looked up, my heart hammering in my chest. The bright green eyes stared down at me sharply. I felt as if they could see into me, as if they had jumped inside my body and were wandering around the inside of my soul, taking notes.

“Have we met?” He released me.

I recognized him. I’d seen him at a party once, and he was the guy Wrigley had tossed the other set of keys to on the first morning of Mead. Chops captain number two. He was taller up close, with curly dark hair all over his chest. Parker didn’t have any hair on his chest.

“I don’t think so,” I answered. “I just saw you—on the other boat? How did you get over here so quickly like that?”

“Magic.” He winked. His dark hair was shiny and coarse. It fell in tousled waves around his face. Olive-toned skin.

I couldn’t decide if he was handsome. He looked like a younger Christian Bale, maybe, but thicker. A weaker chin. Not as overtly good-looking. But there was Something About Him. A pinch in my stomach.

“You must be one of the aesthetically pleasing freshman ladies Wrigley brought along, bless his heart. I’m Stephen DeMarco.” He held out a hand, his eyes locked to mine.

“I’m Lucy Albright.”

His hand felt thick and cold from the beer he'd been holding.

"Lucy. Like the song?"

"The song?"

"'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.'" He smiled, using his hands to make a panorama in the sky.

"My dad used to sing me that song."

"Picture yourself in a boat on a river, with tangerine trees and marmalade skies . . . And we're on a boat on a river. It's too perfect." He laughed. I noticed a little pudg e spilling over the waistline of his red bathing suit.

"Except we're not on a river. It's a lake."

Stephen tilted his beer bottle in my direction. "That it is. You're smart. I see why Baird had the good sense to accept you."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I grabbed another beer from an open case at our feet. I felt like I was surviving on beer at that point. I'd barely had anything to eat in three days. I'd been eating less in general, actually, ever since the freshman-fifteen conversation. My stomach grumbled.

"So what do you think of Lake Mead, Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds?" Stephen asked. The sunlight was splintering, but he kept his sunglasses on top of his head, his eye contact unyielding. I knew if I looked away it would seem rude.

"It's amazing," I said.

"You never forget your first trip to Mead."

"I don't doubt it. Nice hat, by the way."

"Thanks. Wrigley is the true captain, but I convinced him that the cocaptain deserves a hat, too."

"Of course. Your efforts are appreciated. Thank you for keeping us afloat."

"Not a problem. Only following my orders, Lucy." When he said my name, there was a jolt in the nerves wrapping my spine. "It was nice to meet you."

"You, too." I was locked in my head, momentarily stunned by a foreign feeling. I was relieved when he wiggled three thick fingers before turning away.

Then he looked over his shoulder, piercing my gaze again. "By the way. You look so good in that bikini, it hurts."

4

STEPHEN

OCTOBER 2010

I knew it when Lucy became interested in me. I could sense it at Lake Mead; when we talked, I could taste it in the space around her, like salt in the air.

The only problem was that Lucy's interest was, for her, a subconscious yearning. A feeling she would not yet face, one that clashed with her naïveté and limited sexual scope. She wasn't a virgin—there was no way—but her demeanor seemed raw, youthful. I need to know more. I needed to know what it was like to fuck her.

I knew how to catch the interest of girls like Lucy. It would take time and effort, like most good things in life, but I wasn't in a rush. I had plenty to keep me occupied, including the dilemma of Diana Bunn.

Diana has been my on-off girlfriend throughout Baird. I never envisioned myself staying with the same girl for all of college, but whenever Diana and I broke up, life turned into an exhausting series of long, drawn-out conversations that stalled my productivity in other areas. Our worlds had become so intricately intertwined on the tiny campus of Baird—same friends, same schedule—that I literally couldn't imagine my life without her.

Diana was a sociology major, so most of her classes were in the Edmonds Center, and as a political science major mine were mainly in Fielding Hall. Our routine was on lockdown. I left class in Fielding and walked across the quad to Edmonds, where Diana waited for me to walk to lunch. Charlie or Evan or one of the science majors saved the corner table in the dining hall. All the buildings were made of the same pale gray slate. All the quads were well-kept squares of kelly-green grass

year-round, the Southern California climate void of seasons. I ate at the same lunch table with the same kids. Had the same shitty beefsteak sandwich on rubbery bread. And the same unwavering girlfriend.

No wonder I'd become restless. But last time Diana and I did take a time-out, she went into a histrionic state, everyone else got involved, and it was all completely draining. I escaped by going into town and eating lunch alone at the deli, which was fine except that paying for my own meals started to get expensive. But if I ate at another table in the dining hall, I'd spend the entire meal being stared down by Keaton and Josie and all of Diana's friends (who are *my* friends, too, I should add). I could have made Wrigley come sit with me, but then everybody would've hated him, too. It was just a big mess.

So dating Diana made everything easier. And we got along well when she didn't hate my guts. At times I have even loved her. Not in the way most people portray love, which is fine by me, because that kind of love is just a form of weakness. It holds people back.

I've always been attracted to Diana, even though she isn't Miss America. She has curly, caramel brown hair that falls just above her shoulders and almost precisely matches the color of her eyes. Her chin is a little too prominent, but it gives her character. The thing is, I know I'm no movie star. I'd be better looking if I lost fifteen or twenty pounds, but I carry most of the extra weight around my middle, so it's not as noticeable, and most girls don't seem to mind. That was another good thing about Diana—she didn't nag me about going to the gym like my ex from high school had. And though Diana knew about Nicole, she was willing to talk about it—which probably meant that she didn't know about the others. Hence the overly dramatic breakup that was four hours of a precious September Saturday.

Diana: I know you slept with Nicole Hart after Hawaiian Luau last year. Don't even try to deny it, because I know.

Me: It was a mistake, but I did. *I did.*

Diana: You're a fucking piece of shit.

Me: I am. *I am.*

Diana: Seriously, you are beyond selfish.

Me: I know. *I knew.*

Diana: You're a disgusting, worthless excuse for a human being and I hope you rot in hell.

Me: I understand why you say that. *I understood.*

Diana: This is over.

I hate when Diana tries to call the shots in our relationship. It was a month ago that she called me out, right when we got back to school, after Wrigley's party. She didn't even come to Lake Mead she was so mad at me, despite the bouquet of white lilies (her favorite) I'd placed on her doorstep alongside a heartfelt, handwritten letter. But now that some time had passed, I could tell she was ready to forgive me and get back together. Diana is emotional, and emotional people count on time for fucking everything. It takes *time* for them to regain their so-called sanity. Diana was always testing me with her so-called needed *time*, as though *time* may or may not be enough to save our relationship. It was hypocritical. She always came back. Despite her threatening declarations, she would never have the final call—I made sure of that.

Diana finally stopped by yesterday afternoon, while I was sitting on my couch reading articles online. I love being by myself in the afternoon, after class is over and I've eaten a good lunch. My roommate, Evan, was normally at lacrosse practice until dinnertime, so I usually had the room to myself.

I was reading about the guys on the "30 Under 30" list in *Forbes*, about how they climbed the corporate ladder quickly and effectively. I've always known that I wanted to be a lawyer, and I know I'll make a good one. Everybody says do what you love, and I love the law. It's fun—it's like a game, the way you work your way around the different constitutional limits and push the boundaries to work in your favor. People like to speak about justice as some fantastical idea, some invisible measure of what is "right," but justice is following a fair procedure—that's all. In that sense, the most successful lawyers craft justice. They configure it. What many people fail to understand is that the world is carved by nature's laws, not moral values.

Plus if there's one thing I'm sure of it's that I'll make a shit ton of money. My father has never been successful—he's a very mediocre accountant who's poured most of his energy into dealing with the

nutcase that is my mother. My mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder the year after I was born, and they thought it was going to be manageable, but she refused to take her damn medication. So you'd have thought my father would've divorced her *then*, but no, my parents decided to stay together and to have a third child together—my little sister Sadie—before finally splitting up when Sadie was four. When my parents did divorce, the judge took one look at my mom's medical history outlining her numerous manic episodes, and full custody went to my father. My mother proceeded to buy a house on the water in Port Jefferson with her half of the divorce settlement, which had been most of our college savings. The house is nothing insane, but a place ideal for one person, and my father didn't even put up a fight. He borrowed money from my uncle to cover our mortgage, and my older brother Luke and I had to take out student loans. We're not in *poverty* or anything, but we're not exactly rolling in it, and I sure as hell am not going to have a life like that when I'm out on my own.

Anyway, I was dreaming of seeing my own picture on the "30 Under 30" list: a twenty-nine-year-old associate at a top firm, well on my way to partnership, a brownstone in the West Village and a wife with a banging body who cooks me steak. Who lets me fuck her in the ass once a week. Maybe we have a kid on the way or something. That's the dream.

The fantasizing was getting me pretty turned on. So I was just about to put on some porn when my door flung open and Diana stood there, her curls damp from the rain.

"You could knock." I hate when people barge in without knocking.

"Sorry," she said.

"What's up?" I eyed her, trying to gain a read. She stood in the doorway, her bottom lip trembling a little. "Di? Come here." I knew she was going to start crying.

She closed the door and sat down next to me on the couch, and it was already waterworks central. Porn would have to wait, but that was okay. Crying girl next to you on the couch leads to sex, regardless of the circumstances. I swear. Ask any guy.

"I miss you," she choked through tears.

"I know. I miss you, too. But you broke up with me, remember?" I smoothed the side of her wet hair. I knew it; she was considering a

reconciliation. Probably because Nicole was the only cheating episode she knew of.

“I know, but I think I made the wrong decision,” Diana blubbered, her toffee eyes watery and red around the rims. “I just want everything to be okay again. Like it was in the beginning.”

In the beginning, I only remember things when someone reminds me—I’m not a naturally reflective person. But when Diana said that I suddenly saw her, two years earlier, standing in Charlie Rosen’s dorm room wearing jean cutoffs and a white tank top, drinking a red plastic cup of something. Her soft curls were tangled where they hit her shoulders, and she wore a clump of silver bracelets on one of her arms. I remember admiring her small, athletic build, thinking she was cute in a messy sort of tomboyish way. There was something about the manner in which she carried herself that drew me in—I think it was the way she smiled at the things she thought were worth smiling about, and not about the things she didn’t. I could tell she did that, just by observing her in conversation. At the end of the evening I walked her home and kissed her in front of Kaplan. I was pretty confident she’d let me. She did, and afterward I asked for her phone number.

When I decide I like someone, my first step is to gather as much information as possible about every aspect of her life in order to more closely resemble her ideal partner.

I found out as much as I could about Diana: she was born and raised in the suburbs of Milwaukee, wanted to be a sociology major, had two younger brothers, went to Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin every summer with her family, had a cocker spaniel named Lola and a cat named Madge, went to sleep-away camp every summer until she was fifteen, loved hiking, canoeing, the Green Bay Packers, and baked brie. Her father was a high school history teacher, her mother a real estate agent; they had some money but not tons; one of her brothers had Celiac disease, and she tried to support him by avoiding gluten; she’d read *Hooking Up* over the summer and adored anything by Tom Wolfe; her favorite storybook character as a child was Stuart Little; she loved silver jewelry, not gold; she’d had a boyfriend junior year of high school but it had lasted only three months.

I memorized the clothes she wore; the titles, times, locations, and