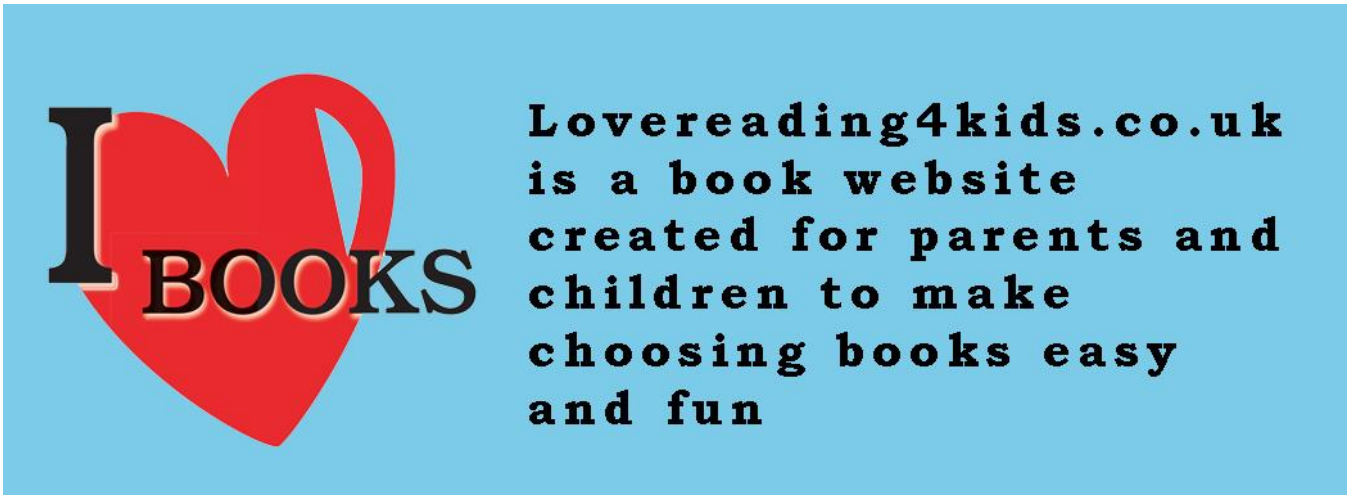


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APRIL

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST PROM CRISIS IS MANAGEABLE. I'M REAPPLYING MY LIP color in the ladies' room when one of the swim team girls bursts in, sobbing. Our senior captain, Mallory, is right behind her.

"Brianna?" I spin, red mouth dropping open. Her cheeks are lashed with watery, gray mascara trails. "What's wrong?"

"He's been dancing with Chloe. For, like, half an hour!" The scent of spicy, floral perfume has flooded in with them. It takes a lot to cover up the chlorine smell that sticks to our hair and skin.

"Mark's a jerk who doesn't deserve you," Mallory says.

Brianna huffs. "But I *like* him!"

As newly appointed captain for next year, I feel a sense of responsibility here. Part of Coach's announcement speech was about my leadership abilities and dedication.

"Okay, first of all, deep breaths," I tell her. Like many

asthma sufferers, this is my go-to mantra. "Is he really worth ruining your makeup over?"

When she glances at her streaky face, Brianna lets out a horrified sob. Okay, I need to fix this.

I reach for my satin clutch, which took my mom and me hours of shopping to find. This purse was our holy grail: elegant, a deep red to add color to my ensemble, *and* actually big enough for all my essentials. "I can redo your makeup, if you'd like."

"You'd do my makeup?" Brianna asks.

"Of course!" I open my bag like it's a medical supply kit and I'm the first responder. It's going to take me at least four Q-tips to clean up the mascara stains. "Do you think you're all cried out? We can wait till you feel better."

"She's done," Mallory insists. "Because if someone asks you to be his date and then ditches you, he's not a good guy. So, no loss."

I have to agree—especially since Mark's a senior and Brianna's a sophomore. She knows the junior and senior girls on the swim team, but there aren't many people in her grade here.

"I'm done," Brianna says, concentrating on a slow inhale. I begin the careful work of desmudging without taking off all her foundation. Her skin has warm undertones, so my tinted moisturizer won't look right on her. "But it's, like . . . I got this dress and these shoes, and I was so excited. This is so humiliating."

"It is not, and you look *great*!" Mallory says, handing her a few squares of toilet paper. "Let's think of Mark as a free ticket. He bought yours, right?"

"Yeah." She sniffles into the makeshift tissue.

"And now you're here in your beautiful dress," I add. "Look up. No blinking. This makeup is salvageable, and so is your night."

"But what am I supposed to do?" she asks as I reline her eyes, smudging the edges with a careful fingertip. "Dance alone? That's so pathetic. Everyone else is with their dates!"

"You can dance with the girls," I suggest, meaning the swim team. I apply the first coat of high-drama mascara, as wet and black as ink.

"With other girls?" Brianna asks, confused.

"Ahem." This is from Mallory, who is here with her girlfriend. "Lucy means you should have the best time possible with everyone, even if it feels like you're faking it. Then you can remember this as the night you rubbed it in his face."

She smiles a little. "I do like that."

"Final touch," I say, dabbing a few dots of concealer on her now-pink nose. It's a bare-bones patch job, but it works. "You know what? Hold on."

I have to add a little more blush, and I blend her bronzer while I'm at it.

"Thank you," she says, examining her face in the mirror.

"Anytime. Now, freshen up your lipstick, take a few breaths, and go out with your head up. Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Mallory walks out beside me, nudging her shoulder against mine. "You're going to be great with them next year, Captain Hansson."

"Thanks. I wish you didn't have to graduate for me to be captain, though." Mallory is one of the girls who's on both the school team and the Hammerheads club team with me, so we've been teammates for years. She's a true shark in the pool, and she keeps me on my game.

"Well, you'll visit me at the U next year, yeah? Let me sell you on trying out for the team?"

"Sure," I say, although it's strange to think of visiting Mal. Would I stay with her? She's a friend, sure, and we have a lot of fun during our shared activities, but we don't really talk about personal stuff. "Have a great night! See you Monday."

It's not just one thing that makes me feel a little separate from the swim team girls; it's everything. I didn't start at White Hills High till freshman year. And I stay up at the lake all summer, helping my parents run our church camp, which means I miss all the bonding moments of summer club team. Then there's the fact that I have family movie night every Friday, and I won't ditch it, even for social events.

Kids my age usually have a *carpe diem* attitude about high school—hyperaware that these days don't last forever. And I know that too. But when your mom gets cancer on your third

day as a freshman in a new school, you realize time with your parents is precious too.

I find Lukas where I left him, near the refreshment table. He ducks out of his conversation with the track team guys, frowning a little. "Everything okay? You were gone awhile."

"Yep. Swim team stuff."

He leans down to peck my cheek, an elegant motion that makes me feel like we're at a gala or a fund-raiser. Lukas wants to be a doctor, but tonight, I can see him as a young senator. He's thoughtful and engaged in every conversation, and, especially in his traditional black tux, he cuts a regal figure. Blond hair just long enough to comb, a healthy tan, and a strong nose.

"Is my tie okay?" he asks. "I've got to announce king and queen soon."

"Your first official act as Senior Class President Pratt!" I grin, teasing him a little as I straighten his bowtie. "Fancy!"

He smiles a bit sheepishly, though I know he's proud to have been reelected. It's a nice addition to his already impressive CV. Mine's not bad either, though I can't bear to think about it. Unlike Lukas, I have absolutely no idea where I want to go to college, or for what.

The lights dim lower around us as the DJ transitions to a slow song, and I nod toward the dance floor. "Shall we?"

"All right," Lukas says, taking my hand. He's much more comfortable chatting with people than dancing. He confessed this before our first homecoming together, to make

sure I wouldn't have a disappointing evening. But at least he'll entertain a few slow dances. Even though we're only swaying, he wears his *working on calculus homework* expression.

"What?" he asks.

"Nothing." I smile, my pressed lips trapping the laughter.

This dress would be a little hard to truly dance in anyway. I thought I'd go for a pale pink or blue gown—something simple and floaty. But I surprised myself with this one: the color of milky tea, with crystals like a dusting of sugar. I tend to think of my coloring as plain: pale, freckled skin; unremarkably blue eyes; and ash-brown hair that falls nearly to my waist. But the neutral-tone dress works somehow, makes me look brighter by comparison. I think the mermaid silhouette and Hollywood glamour look surprised Lukas too. On the way here, he glanced at my neckline and tugged at his collar. "Are you sure it's not . . . a little . . . showy?"

I laughed and said that if my pastor dad was okay with the dress, it was fine. He still looked a little disquieted, which I hoped was a compliment. Lukas is fast to share his well-thought-out opinions in class, but he can be hard to read in other ways.

In fact, it took me all of freshman year to realize that he liked me. We were both the new kids—me transferring from Sotherby Christian so I could join the swim team, him from North Carolina. He brought his faint Southern drawl with him, along with a collection of brightly colored polo shirts and his impeccable manners.

We met in second-period freshman biology, two days before my mom's cancer diagnosis. Sometimes, when memories of that time come back like tremors, I think about what a good friend Lukas was to me. He handled the havoc with such grace—looking up statistics to comfort me, earnestly sharing scripture for whatever I was feeling. I'm a pastor's kid; I know Bible verses. But sometimes it's nice to have people present them to you. Like they thought so deeply about your situation that they sought outside help. He did all that without ever even holding my hand.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

"When we met."

He smiles, his gaze passing over my face. "It's so different to see you with all this makeup on."

"Good different?" My deep lipstick needed bold wings of eyeliner to balance it. Even though I have an online channel where I share makeup tutorials, I don't use many products day to day. My parents don't exactly love when I wear lots of makeup. And my parents don't exactly know about the video channel.

"Sure," Lukas decides. "Just different. You look like a slightly alternate-universe Lucy."

"Hollywood Luce," I suggest.

"Your parents didn't think anything of all the makeup?"

I lift one shoulder. He's unduly reverent toward my parents, so he considers my video channel a lie by omission. Whereas I think I'm keeping them from unnecessary worry.

But in this moment, with my best makeup artistry and my hair swept to one side, it feels like the culmination of what I hoped high school would be, all at once. I compose a quick prayer of gratitude—that I have both my parents still; that I have Lukas, who is steady and good; that I have swim team and a chance to be a good leader. Tonight, everything feels like it's supposed to.

The second crisis cracks my world into pieces.

Lukas and I stay after the lights go up, exposing a sticky dance floor. He and the rest of the student council take down the balloon arches, and I pick up a few corsage petals that have been trampled underfoot. Most of the chaperones are seeing students out, making sure no one is drunk or being particularly stupid as the limos take them to afterprom.

I'm waiting for Lukas outside the ballroom when Principal Cortez comes back up the stairs. "Lucy, sweetie, what are you still doing here?"

"Oh, Lukas is helping tear down, so I figured—"

"Well, he can go too." She touches my arm. "You've got enough going on."

"Okay . . . ," I reply. I guess I do have a lot going on, with swimming and my AP classes.

Her smile is an attempt to encourage me, I think, but she only looks sad. "Give your mom our love, okay? We're all thinking about her."

Because I don't know what else to say, I reply, "Will do."

She heads inside, flagging down a nearby hotel employee with a question I can't make out.

Give my mom their love? They're thinking about her? These are the sounds of freshman year, after everyone heard she had breast cancer. And *everyone* heard; when you're a school nurse and a pastor's wife, half the community knows you.

But she's fine now—has been for a long time. If she weren't, my parents would obviously have told me.

My dress itches at the neckline, and the straps bite into my shoulders. Moments ago, the ceiling outside the ballroom seemed lofty. Now, I feel trapped inside a too-small box with not enough air.

Maybe my parents have been a little preoccupied the past few days, but my dad is just struggling with this week's sermon. I can always tell by the sound of his pencil on the legal pad, the sharp scratch as he crosses out ideas. And I did notice my mom twisting the ends of her hair, as she does when she's worried. But the flu is getting passed around school, so work has been busy for her.

Still, a shudder slips down my spine, something deeply off in the world. My hands tremble as I pull my cell phone from my purse. I scroll to my dad's number, since he's the world's clumsiest liar. Even his reactions to unflattering haircuts are badly acted.

"Luce? What's wrong?" my dad demands. Of course he's alarmed—his only daughter is calling home on prom night.

"Nothing! I hope." Now I feel dramatic. Principal Cortez probably misheard some teachers' lounge gossip. "Is everything . . . I mean, Mom's okay, right?"

The silence. That's what gives him away. It stretches out, a chasm carved into the conversation, and blood rushes to the center of my body. Flashes of heat in my arms and thighs. The feeling that comes after you slam your brakes, hard, to avoid an accident. No. *No.* It can't be bad health news; she had a lumpectomy. *Please, Lord, I will do anything if it's not that.*

Finally, my dad manages to say, "You know what, honey? Everything's gonna be fine. The three of us will talk when you get home."

"*Dad.*" The hotel is a too-fast carousel, blurs of color and light around me. *Please, God. Let me be wrong.*

"Luce?" Lukas's voice is somewhere nearby, but the word floats over me, drifting past. I don't know where it came from or where it lands.

"I'll leave now," I tell my dad. "I'm leaving now. Just please tell me. I can't . . . I can't drive home wondering, okay?"

Wait, I didn't drive. Lukas did. He appears behind me, hand on my lower back and guiding me to the exit.

My mom's soft alto enters the background, calm as she confers with my dad.

"It's back, isn't it?" I whisper.

More silence. Space enough for a gulp or a pained sigh or a pang to ache through your chest. "That's what the doctors are saying. Yes."

I don't cry. But water springs to my eyes, the reaction to a slap.

I whisper, "I'm on my way," as my phone slips from my hand, dropping to the floor.

This is what I'll remember later: Lukas gathering up the pieces—of my cracked cell phone case, of me. Ushering me to the passenger seat. Getting my inhaler out of my purse and pressing it into my hand. It will occur to me later how unhesitating he was.

The first time, the diagnosis shook my world like an earthquake. I clutched the door frames; I fell to my knees. And when it was over, we straightened the photos on the walls. We swept broken vases into the dustbin. I let myself feel relieved, even if I never forgot the fear.

"This isn't possible," I whisper, somewhere between downtown and my house.

I can hear everything: the low blast of the air-conditioning, the hum of the engine. The cringing silence from Lukas.

"She had a lumpectomy." I say this as if it refutes a new diagnosis. I say this as if he hasn't been there with me through everything. "They said it worked. She didn't even need a mastectomy or chemo."

Lukas scratches the back of his neck. "We just don't have all the information yet. It could be really, really minor. I'm sure everything will be fine."

The first time, we repeated that refrain over and over. It was our credo, our hymn. I prayed while scrubbing dishes after dinner. I prayed with every stroke, back and forth, back and forth, down my swim lane. I prayed while walking between classes.

I didn't even beg God—I said I trusted that His will would be done.

I should have begged.

"But . . . you're *not* sure," I realize out loud, turning to Lukas. "No one can be sure."

"Well, it doesn't help to think like that. We have to trust God on this one."

He turns onto my street—how did we get here so quickly and so slowly? We've lived in the parsonage for ten years, and it's felt cozy and worn in since the first day. It's ancient—silver-sheened radiators, narrow hallways, and floral wallpaper in the bathroom that we never bothered to take down. Instead, my mom decided to embrace antiquity. She hung lace curtains, bought a beautiful brass bed for my room, and put out her collection of old quilts. Why am I thinking about this? My present reality has detached, and it is floating away like a child's lost balloon.

"Wait." I reach across the console to grip Lukas's arm. "Pull over."

Lukas obeys, drifting the car to the side of my tree-lined street. The church looms ahead of us. It's so close to our house that in the daylight, the steeple casts a shadow across our roof.

Leaning forward, I try to slow my breathing. "I just . . . I need to get it together before I walk in there."

He nods. Of anyone in the world, Lukas would understand my need for composure. It's like a tacit agreement in his family: straight-back shoulders, soft expressions, always in control. Their whole house is full of tall windows and cream linen upholstery. The possibility of smudges or stains will simply not be indulged.

"It's my mom, Lukas. My mom." These are only two words, but they glint with a hundred facets. She's my closest friend, my cheering section, my nurse, my teacher, my confidant. The least I can do is collect myself and *try* to handle this with grace.

"I know," Lukas says quietly.

When my mom was originally diagnosed, I tried to memorize her. Even in small moments—ducking her head into my room to say good night, singing along to the radio in the kitchen—I mentally freeze-framed every detail. Curly hair to her shoulders, always pulled back to reveal her trademark dangly earrings. The soft, pale skin that she rarely covers with makeup. The wide-set hips, so like mine, that she has never once complained about.

Deep breaths, air expanding my lungs until they ache.

"Hey. You've got this." Lukas reaches over to clasp my hand.

He says this when I'm nervous before a swim meet. But these types of inner strength pull from different reservoirs. Competition jitters call for adrenaline, for confidence. Your mother's mortality? I have no idea what that requires. Faith? Because I tried that before.

Lukas means well, though, with his clammy hand on mine.

I give myself one last slow exhale, then a puff of my inhaler.

"Good?" Lukas asks. He's seen a few stress-induced asthma attacks, and each time, he calmly talks me through it.

"You've got this," he repeats, with one last hand squeeze.

This is what I'll never, ever forget: My parents waiting for me on the couch. The stiffness of my beaded dress as I sink into the armchair. *It's in my breasts again.* My mom's soft hands holding mine. *Gonna fight it.* The teakettle shrilling. *Double mastectomy.* Sipping for the comfort of the heat, not even able to taste the mint. *Trusting in God like we always have.* How quickly I fastened a mask of bravery onto my face.

"We don't want you to worry," my mom says. "Surgery is scheduled for Monday morning. That's the first and hopefully only step."

"*This* Monday morning?" I gesture down at my ridiculous, jewel-encrusted dress. "You let me get all dressed up and go to prom when . . . when *this* is happening?"

"Oh, honey." She looks so genuinely sad, like telling me is the worst part of all this. Pressure builds behind my eyes, but I refuse to succumb to tears. "We wanted you to have your night. You deserved that much."

But don't they see? Prom night—my perfect prom night—doesn't matter at all compared to this. Why do they think I've stayed home every Friday of high school for our family movie night? Because I swore—to myself and to God—I'd never take this for granted, and I meant it.

"How long have you known?"

My parents exchange guilty glances, and for the first time in my life, I wonder if they've lied to me before. If protecting your child trumps the ninth commandment. It's my dad who speaks this time. "They found a lump at a checkup two weeks ago, and the biopsy came back pretty quickly."

Maybe it would be different if I had a sibling, but it's the three of us. I'm the only one who's been going on her merry way while the rest of this family worried, suffered, planned ahead without her.

"And when were you going to tell me?"

My dad answers more steadily this time. "Tomorrow morning. Before I tell the congregation. We didn't want you to worry for any longer than you had to."

I understand their good intentions—I do. But understanding doesn't make me feel any less lied to.

"Oh, Luce," my mom says. "I'm sorry it happened like this."

"I'm sorry it's happening at all." Yes, I feel burned by their secrecy. We're supposed to be a team, and I'm old enough to handle this. But mostly, I wish there was no awful diagnosis to keep secret in the first place.

"You should head up to bed," my mom suggests gently. "Change out of that pretty gown. It's been a long night. We can talk about it more tomorrow, okay?"

I acquiesce, but mostly so I can react in private. Clutching the stair rails with both hands, I feel the air thin; I feel my vision tunnel. And behind the bedroom door, my dress closes around me, squeezing like a fist. The crystals feel too hard, rock fragments trapping me in this too-tight casing. I contort my arms to reach the zipper, bending in a way that should hurt. But I feel nothing.

The dress drops from my body as I reach for my inhaler. The last time I glanced in the vanity mirror, I was zipped-up and sparkling—the very picture of prom night. Now, I am freckled skin squeezed into nude spandex, hands on my knees as I gasp for breath. My perfect hair coming loose, gown pooled on the floor. Behind me, a bookcase full of stories my mother read to me, full of swimming trophies and jewel-toned ribbons, full of certificates from childhood piano recitals. What is any of it worth? What is any of it without my mom?

Without her, who would call me Bird because of the way I squawked as a baby? Who would listen to every detail of my dates with Lukas? Who would have movie nights in and

girls' nights out with me? Who would make faces at me from the choir loft when no one was looking?

Don't cry, I command as I peel the spandex off my body. *Do not.*

In the bathroom, I scrub the makeup from my face. I scrub until it hurts, until my skin is pink and clean. And when the warm water hits my hands, I think up at God: *We had a deal. How could you?*

How could *you?*