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**THINGS
WE
LEFT
BEHIND**

LUCY SCORE

H
HODDER

1

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

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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?"

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"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

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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