

LIBRIS BOOKS
Lucy Score is an instant #1 *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* bestselling author of contemporary romance. She grew up in a literary family, who insisted that the dinner table was for reading, and earned a degree in journalism. Her books have been translated into thirty languages and her international bestseller *Things We Never Got Over* has been optioned for television.

She writes full-time from the Pennsylvania home she and Mr. Lucy share with their opinionated cat, Cleo. When not spending hours crafting unforgettable characters, Lucy can be found reading books other people wrote, snacking and sometimes even working out.

Also by Lucy Score

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Things We Hide
From the Light
Things We Left Behind

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The Corpse in the Closet
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The Price of Scandal
Undercover Love
Heart of Hope
Maggie Moves On

Mistakes Were Made

LUCY SCORE



**HODDER &
STOUGHTON**



A snake to the face

Zoey

My cousin was lucky she was an entire state away and that murder was illegal.

“Inez,” I said with the last of my patience. “I need you to take the hysteria down about eight notches. I can’t help you when you’re incoherently wailing.”

“Why do you sound like you’re in a cave?” Inez demanded, temporarily forgetting whatever drama had caused her to call me in a panic. “Holy shit, Zoey! Are you trapped in an *actual* cave?”

I would have rolled my eyes, but seeing as how I was belly down exploring the nether region under my bed, the effort would have been wasted. “Yes, Inez,” I said dryly. “I’m trapped in a cave but I’m so selfless I didn’t want to bother you with my life-threatening situation when you called.”

“Oh my God!” My gullible cousin’s screech through the speaker made my ears want to bleed. “Okay, drop me a pin, and I’ll send the Mounties or whoever climbs into caves to rescue people.”

“For the love of God. I’m not spelunking. I’m under my bed

looking for a boot. Call off the Mounties, who are Canadian by the way. I'm in Pennsylvania." I continued to scan the dark abyss beneath the lodge's king-size bed with my phone's flashlight.

So that's where my fuzzy knee socks went.

"You're sure you're not trapped in a cave about to be eaten by bats?"

"Positive." *Aha!* I spotted the missing Stuart Weitzman boot wedged between the rustic nightstand and bed leg. It cost me a strained neck muscle and a bump on the head to wrestle it free.

"Good. So back to me then. Where am I going to *liiive*?"

We Moodys were a dramatic people.

"Here's a thought," I said as I inched my way out from under the bed. "Why don't you keep staying in my apartment? You know. The one-bedroom, third-floor walk-up that I generously sublet to you while I temporarily moved to Teeny Hallmarkville. Are you giving up on your modeling-slash-catering career already?"

Inez had moved to Manhattan with dreams of launching a topless catering company. But as she put it, *like an artsy topless catering company*. The last I'd heard, she was only serving cold passed appetizers after an unfortunate incident with hot tomato soup.

Out of breath and massaging my sore neck, I threw myself onto the mattress and surveyed the disaster masquerading as my hotel room. Piles of clean and dirty laundry vied for floor space. My "work stuff"—a.k.a. my laptop and several small paperwork explosions—spilled across the bed and occupied the tiny two-person table under the room's expansive lake-view window. The small closet had experienced a clothing apocalypse, and now the doors no longer closed.

Living and working in a hotel room for an extended period of time wasn't nearly as glamorous as I'd hoped. And even with the generous discount the lodge had given me, it was still expensive as hell. Something I was freshly and painfully aware of.

I'd been a few weeks late on my monthly peek at my finances only to realize I'd reached the bottom of my savings account.

Drastic measures were called for to survive until my agent percentage of my only client's advance came through on publication of her book...in seven weeks.

"That's just it, Zoey. You don't *have* an apartment anymore," Inez whined as I held my leg aloft and shoved my foot into the boot.

"You didn't accept any edibles from the baker on the seventh floor and gamble my apartment away in the building poker game, did you? I warned you. Madame Reneski is a card shark. She's been banned from four casinos in Las Vegas."

"What? No! I only lost your Chanel sweater to her."

"You better not mean my red Chanel sweater, or I will murder you at the family reunion."

"Zoey, will you please focus? I'm trying to tell you our apartment isn't an apartment anymore. It's a condo."

I sprang into a seated position like a curly-haired jack-in-the-box. "What did you say?"

"The building is going condo. They said you have thirty days to buy your place or get our stuff out."

"Who said, *Inez*?" I demanded.

"I *don't know*, Zoey. The people who sent all the notices and spoke at the building meeting a couple weeks ago."

I slapped a hand to my forehead. "Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?"

"I thought I did. Didn't I?"

As someone who had endured being labeled as "flighty" for most of my life, I'd always found the romance novel industry's label "too stupid to live" a little harsh. Until this moment.

"No," I countered. "You told me when that hairy guy you met at Pilates clogged my shower drain and when you thought you saw the winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race* buying hot dogs at Quick Stop."

"Oh. Yeah no. This was *way* before that. Maybe I told a different cousin?"

"You know what, Inez? I'm going to call you back." I disconnected before I could give in to the raging impulse to insult her.

LRDIS | *Walden*
The alarm on my phone jangled irritably with my two-minute warning of my appointment with Hazel.

"Damn it," I muttered, snatching a reasonably clean blazer off one of the chairs by the window and dialing another number.

"Zoey! So nice to hear from you. What did your dumbass cousin do now?" Mrs. Newville was an eighty-something-year-old retired Broadway star turned amateur food critic who lived across the hall from me in Manhattan.

"She didn't tell me the building was going condo."

There was a weighty pause. "Well, shit."

"How can this happen?" I demanded, shoving my arm through the sleeve of the blazer.

"Building owner got his hand caught in some pyramid-real-estate-scheme cookie jar and went to prison. The new owner decided she didn't want to deal with rentals and went the condo route. You know you've only got thirty days, right?"

"Thirty days to decide whether I'm going to buy my place?" I asked hopefully as I slicked on a coat of my second favorite lip gloss. I'd misplaced my first favorite a week ago and hadn't remembered to order a new tube. Which I wouldn't be doing now due to the aforementioned financial shit fest.

"Thirty days to close or get the hell out," Mrs. Newville corrected.

"Well, shit," I muttered. There was a cheery knock at my door. I vaulted over last night's dinner tray and flung it open.

Hazel, my best friend and only client, stood there looking all smug, glowy, and in love. Her long chestnut hair was pulled back in a swingy ponytail, her thick fringe of bangs accenting her glasses. The scruffy dog at her feet gave me what I considered to be a judgmental look. Meetcute was a medium-size black-and-white ball of wiry floof that had been part of last summer's grand gesture apology-proposal from Campbell Bishop, Hazel's soon-to-be-husband.

The dog pawed at my boots like they were a rawhide chew. I waved them in and tried to keep some distance between my prized boots and Meetcute's mouth full of tiny razor-sharp teeth.

It wasn't that I didn't *like* animals. I just preferred to appreciate them from a respectful distance. Away from their teeth, claws, fur, and slobber.

"I'm texting you the link," Mrs. Newville said. "Be warned, the asking price ain't for the faint of heart."

"Thanks for the heads-up. Are you staying?" I couldn't imagine the building or New York without her.

She snorted. "At that price? Fuck no. I'm moving to Portugal with my new boyfriend. Listen, I gotta go. I'm meeting a VP of finance and two nuns for karaoke. Ta-ta, kid!"

I could live to be two hundred and still wouldn't have a life as interesting as hers.

"Bye, Mrs. Newville," I said morosely.

This couldn't be happening. This wasn't part of the triumphant comeback I'd been working toward since my unceremonious firing last year. This was a monumental setback.

"How is our favorite broad of Broadway?" Hazel asked, letting Meetcute off the leash when I disconnected the call.

The adorable terror immediately nosedived into my dirty laundry with an ecstatic groan.

"Moving to Portugal. Which might be my next destination depending on the cost of living." I clicked on the text link from Mrs. Newville, violently scrolled, then fervently wished I could reverse the clock to a happier, less homeless time in my life. Even at my previous Literary Agent with a Stable of High-Earning Clients Zoey peak, I couldn't have afforded to buy my own apartment. Down to One Client and Living on Dwindling Savings Zoey was fucked...and not in the good way. "Damn it!"

"What's wrong?" Hazel asked, clearing the stack of mail off one of the dining chairs and sitting.

"My cousin—"

"Topless caterer, hippie innkeeper, or biochemist that raises alpacas?" she cut in.

"The bucket-of-hair-for-brains caterer subletting my apartment just informed me that the building is going condo and I have thirty days to buy or get out."

Hazel did her best not to look gleeful. It wasn't fooling me one bit.

I pointed an accusing finger at her. "Stop it."

"Stop what?" she asked, brown eyes going wide with feigned innocence.

"Stop gloating."

"I'm not gloating. Meetcute, am I gloating?"

The dog looked up from the sock he was mauling and cocked his head thoughtfully.

"I have options," I insisted.

"Of course you do."

"I could buy the place." If I robbed several banks or discovered a wealthy deceased relative I didn't know existed who had left me everything in their will. But that would probably take more than thirty days. "Or I could find a new place in the city. Maybe move to the Village. Or New Jersey. Or maybe I'll find a place with...roommates." I congratulated myself on not choking on the words.

"Sure," she said as she organized my untidy paperwork into piles.

"Don't get comfortable. I'm ready to go," I warned.

"You sure about that?" Hazel asked innocently as she paged through my research on the table and held up a printout. The craggy, irritated face of author Earl Wiggins, my white whale, stared back at me. He was more of a dick than Moby Dick, but if I could land him as a client, my financial woes would turn into whees.

I snatched the paper out of her hand and stuffed it into my oversize tote. "Positive. Do I need a coat?"

Early spring in eastern Pennsylvania was mercurial at best, and it was impossible to gauge the early April temperature and wind speed through my room's window.

Hazel remained seated and looked pointedly at my tote bag. "Earl Wiggins is an old-school misogynist asshole. He once told me at a cocktail party that romance novels are 'unrealistic drivel' because women can't have multiple orgasms. He's never had

a female agent because he believes they're genetically inferior. You'll need a coat. And you could move here."

I shot her a dirty look.

The second Hazel had officially gotten engaged to broody contractor Cam, she'd become hell-bent on convincing me that Story Lake was the perfect place to rebuild my literary agent empire.

"Haze, I'm glad you've embraced small-town, 'everybody knows your name' life. Love that for you, blah blah blah. But I can't poach *New York Times* bestselling shitheads from narcissistic buffoons like your ex-husband and the rest of my former colleagues if I'm living hours away in a tiny town that voted for the slogan *Towny McLake Face*. Agents have to live places where book things happen."

She scoffed. "Please. Ninety-five percent of your job can be done from home these days. Most agents don't even commute to an office anymore. Think of how much money you'd save moving here for just a year." She rose and placed her hands on my shoulders. "Think of the closet space you could have here."

This was the problem with best friends. They knew exactly which buttons to push. As a proud and devoted clothes whore, most of my fantasies involved spacious closets. One of the only things New York could not provide in my price range.

"I'll weigh my options," I promised.

Yes, an extended stay in Story Lake was an option. But it felt like accepting failure. I wasn't made for small-town life. I was a busy, successful Manhattanite...or at least I had been. And I would claw my way back if necessary. I just needed to survive the next few months, launch Hazel's book into the stratosphere, and land the moderately gross Earl Wiggins as a client. Easy-peasy.

"Now can we please leave?" I asked. "You have paperback orders to sign, and we need to strategize preorder details."

"Sure. But you do know you're not wearing pants, don't you?"

"Shit!"

After I remedied the pants situation with a pair of cute tailored shorts over patterned tights and wrestled my favorite bra out of Meetcute's jaws, we headed downstairs. Story Lake Lodge sat on the quiet tree-lined eastern shore of the lake. It was a rustic three-story building outfitted with black board and batten siding and green metal roofs. Two wings angled out on each side toward the rocky shoreline.

When I'd first set up camp here, there had been entire weeks when I was the lodge's only tenant. But thanks in large part to the public's interest in Hazel's real-life happily ever after, both the lodge and town were seeing a boost in book-loving tourists. There were even a handful of readers who had inexplicably decided to make Story Lake their new permanent home.

We exited the elevator into the chaos of the sunny lobby.

"Whoa," I said, dodging the end of a roll of shimmering tulle that innkeeper and head chef Hana carried over her tattooed shoulder.

"Sorry, Zo. Wedding prep," she called as her long legs carried her past us.

Two burly men jogged after her, pushing carts stacked with trays of jingling glassware.

Billie, Hana's wife and business partner, waved to us with her elbow from the front desk, where she had two phones to her ears and was using aggressive head nodding to point a delivery guy toward the lobby bar.

I waved back and nearly fell on my ass when a woman with flushed cheeks and manic happiness in her eyes cut in front of me. She was wearing an oversize sweatshirt that said *BRIDE #2*.

"Ohmygod," she said in a starry-eyed rush. "It's really you. I mean, I knew you *lived* here. That's why we—me and my almost wife, yay!—decided to get married here. We came up from Maryland for Winter Fest and the Ultimate Bingo Championship to basically stalk you and ended up falling in love with the town, so we booked the lodge for our wedding, which is this weekend. You should totally come! We love you!"

Bride #2 said all this in one breath over my head to my significantly taller, more famous best friend.

I took an agent-y beat to make sure the bubbly bride posed no physical threat to Hazel before reluctantly taking the dog's leash and stepping out of the way.

"You're getting married here? Me too! Congratulations," Hazel squealed.

"OMG I'm getting married in the *same venue as Hazel Freaking Hart!*"

The octave change had Meetcute whimpering pathetically. I took pity on him and headed out the front doors into the sunny but chilly spring day.

The dog sniffled and snuffled his way down the sidewalk as if he had important business to attend to. "Oh God. Please don't poop. Please don't poop," I chanted to the gods of animal defecation until Hazel joined us a minute later. "That's one excited bride," I said, gratefully hurling the leash at her.

"Adorable, right? Fair warning. I'm going to be totally insufferable for my wedding," she said dreamily.

Meetcute executed a tight circle on the grass and squatted.

Ha. Thank you, poop gods! At least one thing went my way today. "I have no doubt. I'd be disappointed if you weren't. How is Cam handling the wedding planning?"

She unfurled a doggy poop bag out of the fancy dispenser clipped to the leash. "He's surprisingly opinionated on the food, the flowers, and the invitations."

"What's he say about the dress?"

Hazel's smile was sly despite the fact that she was cleaning up crap. Love did strange things to people. "He said it has to be easy to remove."

I sighed. "If I didn't love you so much, I'd probably hate you."

"I get that," she said smugly.

"How's writing going?"

She winced. "I'm still feeling out the characters."

That was code for doing more online shopping than actual writing.

"You know the only thing better for a comeback than a bestselling book is —"

"I know. I know. *Two* bestselling books."

"What are you hung up on?"

"I don't know. I guess I just don't know who they are yet. Which means I don't know why they can't be together."

"Tell Cam you need him to step up the inspiration," I suggested.

"Oh, he did. This morning. In the kitchen," Hazel said with the creepy self-satisfied smile of a woman who had orgasmed on her kitchen countertop.

"Love is so unhygienic."

We decided to walk to the bookstore. It gave Meetcute a chance to pee on every tree we passed. And it gave *me* the chance not to break all my fingernails gripping the door handle while Hazel navigated the half-mile trip in the used Suburban Cam had bought her. Her driving was improving. Slowly. The sheer size of the SUV ensured her safety behind the wheel, but the same couldn't be said for the town's curbs and the neighbors' recycling bins.

The sun was bright in the cloudless blue sky and sparkled off the last vestiges of snow lining Lake Drive. Green spears of daffodils and crocus plants poked their heads up, promising beauty and warmth soon. New beginnings. Fresh starts.

Yep. Everyone was enjoying a new chapter. Mine was just a bit less triumphant than everyone else's. Losing my apartment was the latest metaphorical squirt of lemon juice in the eyeballs of a downward spiral of failures.

"So guess who was sitting on the breakfast table this morning eating cat food when Cam and I got up?" Hazel said, adjusting the leash she had clipped to her belt because she was the type of person who had dog leashes that clipped to her belt now.

"I'm going to guess DeWalt." DeWalt was Hazel's pudgy orange cat that kept her company on her desk while she wrote. And by *kept her company*, I meant spread his girthy body

across her keyboard, inserting meaningless characters into her manuscript.

"DeWalt and *Bertha*," she announced as Meetcute trotted into the woods in search of the perfect stick to carry to town.

Hazel had purchased her pink monstrosity of a house in a moment of panic from a less-than-accurate online auction only to discover that it was in a serious state of disrepair...and home to a large kinda-sorta-domesticated raccoon. I liked to think of *Bertha* as a combination of Liam Neeson and reverse Houdini. She had a special set of skills that allowed her to get back inside the house no matter how many raccoon-proofing measures Cam took.

"This is going to send Cam back down the rabbit hole again, isn't it?" I teased.

"I believe you mean the raccoon hole. And he was already on the phone with his brothers, discussing some surveillance tactics."

"That sounds like inspiration for book two."

"Ugh. We'll see. Writing's hard, but I really don't want to get a real job."

"You wrote a whole book inspired by you and Cam. Maybe you just need to find a new couple to inspire you?" I suggested.

"That's not a terrible idea. No wonder I keep you around."

Meetcute bounced out of the woods with a medium-size tree limb clamped in his teeth. He proudly smacked me in the shins with it.

"Aww! Cutie! What a good job," Hazel crooned.

"Ouch. Yes, very athletic of you. This won't impede our walk *at all*," I said, giving him a grudging pat on the head. He dissolved in joyful full-body wriggles without dropping the stick.

We continued on in the direction of town. As we approached, Hazel gestured toward the nondescript mailbox with a wooden placard that read BISHOP. "Levi's making progress on his manuscript. He's taking it pretty seriously. He's only let me read a few chapters, but they're good. If you're interested, I could get you a copy once his first draft is done."

LRBIS | We know books

"If I haven't worn down Earl Wiggins by the time Levi's ready, I'll take a look," I promised.

Hazel wrinkled her nose. "Seriously, what do you want with that old-school, 'back in my day men were men and women made dinner' geezer?"

"That *bestselling* geezer hasn't missed the *New York Times* hardback list in his last fifteen releases," I pointed out. "Besides, once we launch your book to the top of the charts *and* I poach another bestseller from my old firm, I'll have officially won at life."

"Thirsty for Vengeance Zoey is one of my favorite Zoey's. But you know what I'd say if you were my heroine."

"I'm nobody's heroine," I insisted.

Hazel brought her hand to her heart. "I'd be the gorgeous and talented best friend who would point out to the gorgeous and talented heroine that vengeance isn't the most rewarding quest in life."

"Oh really? What is?"

"Love," she said dramatically.

"Well then, it's a good thing this is real life and not one of your books so I don't have to listen to you."

Just then, a shadow fell over us. Meetcute's googly eyes went even wider, and he dropped the stick to bark ferociously at what lurked above us.

"Damn it, Goose," Hazel said, glaring up at the bald eagle that had landed on a bare tree branch over our heads. I still wasn't used to the fact that this town just happened to have its own bald eagle. In New York, all we had were pigeons. This bird was huge and maybe just the slightest bit majestic. He was also an absolute menace. If one could have an animal nemesis, Goose was mine. He'd greeted us on our arrival to Story Lake by hitting Hazel in the head and dumping a giant dead fish in my lap. I was still emotionally scarred.

"Do *not* shit on us," I ordered in my best authoritative voice.

"Do *not* eat my dog," Hazel said.

"Yeah, don't do that either," I added quickly.

"Is that something in his talons?" Hazel asked, cocking her head.

Meetcute paused his barking for a beat and mimicked her head tilt.

I squinted up. There was definitely *something* moving against the knobby gray bark of the oak tree. Something long and thin.

I swear to God, the bird looked me dead in the eye as he spread his massive wings.

"Is that a...?" Hazel's voice trailed off in horror.

"Don't you do it, Goose," I warned in a hoarse whisper.

But it was too late. The bird opened his talons and sent his prey plummeting toward me.

The snake—an actual goddamn live snake—hit me in the forehead and slithered off my shoulder.

"What. The. Fuuuuuuuck? You feathery jackass!" I screamed. Survival instinct kicked in, and I sprinted down the road, brushing vigorously at my hair and shoulders. "Get it off! Get it off!"

I ran a panicked zigzag pattern across the asphalt as I tried to put as much distance as possible between me and that damn eagle and his damn snake. But the fear and adrenaline had narrowed my field of vision. By the time Hazel yelled my name, I was already blinded by the glint of sunlight on glass and metal.