

LIGHTS OUT LUCY -
CHAPTER 1

ELICIA HYDER

A NOTE FROM ELICIA

In 2008, my first husband was one of the first recorded deaths resulting from texting and driving in the state of Tennessee. He was 25 years old. At the time we had two children. Canaan was four. Will was two.

In the aftermath of that awful year, my good friend, Chuck, introduced me to the wild and wonderful sport of women's flat track roller derby. On a dare, I joined Fresh Meat (Roller Derby 101) with the Nashville Rollergirls, and "eL's Bells" (my derby name) was born.

Truth be told: I SUCKED AT ROLLER DERBY. I hung up my skates after my 2nd serious knee injury before I ever even skated in my first official bout...BUT new lifelong friendships were forged, my body became a formidable machine, and through the bruises, torn ligaments, and pulled muscles—my heart finally healed.

Fast forward to 2015 when I was diagnosed with cancer. My daughter—who was counting the days until she could play junior roller derby—was faced with the possibility of losing another

parent. Unlike her brother, who only remembered their dad in pictures, Canaan knew the pain that seemed to lurk in our future.

As I planned my funeral (yes, that's dramatic, but I think every cancer patient considers it), I wondered if Canaan, too, would find her healing on a pair of quad skates.

And thus, the idea for this novel, *Lights Out Lucy*, was sparked.

I published my first book with chemotherapy burning through my veins. And while the doctors and nurses (hi, Rena) saved my life, I can honestly say that writing saved my sanity.

Three years later, I'm cancer free and *Lights Out Lucy* is my 9th published novel. It's also my favorite. In these pages, I hope you'll experience the power of friendship and determination. I hope you'll laugh, fall in love, and see the very best in yourself through our unwitting heroine.

There are thousands of roller derby teams worldwide. Just go to your favorite search engine and type: *roller derby *insert your city here** to find a team near you. A lot of them are non-profits that support local charities, so bring the whole family to a bout and have fun for a good cause!

And if you ever toy with the idea of joining Fresh Meat to FIND OUT WHAT YOU'RE MADE OF...

I dare you.

For Canaan.

*You taught me what kind of woman I want to be.
I couldn't be more proud of you.*

Love, Mom.

P.S. Please skip over the sexy parts while reading.

LIGHTS OUT LUCY

"IT'S NOT a matter of *if* you get hurt, but of how bad and when."

I can't say they didn't warn me.

Right now, I realize: *I probably should have listened.*

Because if there's anyone who has no business playing a sport that requires a helmet, pads, and a liability waiver, it's this girl. The *same* girl who once knocked herself out during a game of backyard baseball. I stepped up to the plate, pulled the bat back a little too far to swing, and clocked myself in the back of the skull. Boom. Lights Out Lucy.

That's how I got my roller derby name.

So yeah. Maybe I should have known better.

But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? That's the whole reason I laced up a pair of skates to begin with. Well, *that* and this other little confession I need to make. Amidst all the estrogen and girl power that fuels the world of women's roller derby, this insanity may have started because of a guy.

Eyeroll, I know.

Sadly, today on the oval track, it's about to come to a very

bloody end. And all this slow-motion introspection might be part of my life flashing before my eyes.

I'm going down hard and fast, with a set of Atomic Turquoise wheels aimed right at my face.

Lights Out Lucy, indeed.

ONE

ONLY I COULD PULL off a car accident sitting still at a red light.

For a second after the impact, I forgot about the wasp in my car. Then it descended slowly in front of my eyes again, a sinister buzz rippling the small space between my nose and its stinger. I slammed the gearshift into park and forced open the driver-side door with a loud *creak!* As I tumbled to the asphalt, the door caught sharply on its hinges, bounced back, and slammed against my leg. I landed hard on my hip, and my elbow almost unearthed the center line dividing the two westbound lanes of Old Hickory Boulevard.

But I was safe from the buzzing bringer of death, even if I was sprawled across the highway during rush-hour traffic. A few feet away, the driver of the large black truck—under which my coupe was wedged—slid out of his cab.

"Are you crazy?" he shouted as he rushed toward me, closing my car door as he ran.

All around us, car horns crescendoed in an urban symphony. Wasn't it a known fact that people *don't* honk in the South?

Weren't we supposed to be the land of "bless your hearts"s and deep-fried hospitality? I guess not.

The man grabbed my arm and hoisted me to my feet, spinning me around and pushing my back against the side of my car. Traffic in the lane next to us started rolling again, right over the spot where my head had landed on the road between the front grill of a garbage truck and the backside of a school bus.

The neck of my savior/victim was inches from my face as he yelled to cars honking behind mine, "Go around!" He smelled like cedar and sunshine.

Stars twinkled in my vision as I stared at the perfect angle of his jaw.

Maybe I hit my head.

"Are you OK?" He took a half step back and studied my face.

God, he was handsome. Tall. Thick, broad shoulders. Dirty blond hair that couldn't pick a single direction to grow. The turquoise in my dress reflected in his chocolate-brown eyes. His lips were full—and kissable.

Yes. I definitely hit my head.

Gingerly touching my fingers to my hairline, where I was fairly certain my forehead had smacked the steering wheel, I blinked to try and reset my thoughts. There wasn't any blood. Miraculously. "I—I'm so sorry."

"Are you all right?" He bent at the knees so he was eye level with me. "What happened?"

"There was a bee."

His head snapped back. "A bee?"

Oh hell. Kill me now. Heat bloomed in my cheeks, compounding my mortification. I hid my face behind my hands. "A wasp, actually. I freaked out, and my foot slipped off the brake."

He was silent.

Peeking through my fingers, I saw him biting down on the

insides of his lips. Probably to keep from laughing. I dropped my hands. "It's not funny!"

"You're right. It's not funny." He chuckled anyway. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head despite the stars still twinkling in my vision. "I hit my head on the steering wheel, but I think I'm OK."

"Should we go to the hospital? Do I need to call an ambulance?"

"No, no. I'm all right." I hoped I was correct.

He examined my arm. "Your elbow is messed up."

"It hurts."

"Come on. I have a first-aid kit in the truck."

With his arm curled around my waist, he helped me to the sidewalk. Pain burned through my hip and down my leg as I stood by the back door of his truck. He pulled a small white box from the floorboard and balanced it on the rim of his truck bed.

"Let me see it," he said, gently taking hold of my wrist.

I winced as he pulled my arm up and across my body.

"There's a lot of gravel in the wound. I need to wash it out."

He stepped to the front door, opened it, and leaned inside. A second later, he returned with a bottle of water. I tensed just looking at it.

He grimaced. "It's gonna sting."

I took a deep breath and held it. "Just do it."

Cool water splashed over my elbow.

"Sweet mother!" I twisted and arched my spine as the water burned my shredded skin.

The man studied me carefully, perhaps afraid I might scream or pass out. "You OK?"

I nodded, squeezing my eyes shut.

"Breathe," he said.

I inhaled. "I'm OK."

He tore open a packet of antibiotic ointment and smeared it

over the bloody hole, instantly dulling the blinding pain. I fully exhaled for the first time since the crash. Then he opened a large bandage and covered the area.

"Thank you." I gave him a thorough once over, checking him for injuries, of course. "I didn't even ask. Are you all right?"

He smiled. "Honestly, the truck didn't even lurch enough to make my seat belt catch. You sort of slid right under it." He nodded toward his truck. Its size made my car look like it could be remote controlled. "I think you owe me a new bumper."

The front end of my car was wearing his chrome bumper like a tiara. My head fell forward in shame. "I just paid off the car loan."

"That's the way it usually goes." He closed the first-aid kit and put it back in his truck. "Can you manage to stay out of oncoming traffic long enough for me to dislodge your car from my rear end?"

My eyes doubled in size.

So did his. "That came out all wrong!"

I burst out laughing and clapped my hand over my mouth. "Yes, it did."

He shook his head and jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "I'm going to move my truck."

Still grinning behind my hand, I nodded. "OK."

The scraping metal against metal as he slowly pulled forward off my car made me cringe and plug my ears. My nose wrinkled as I stepped forward to inspect the damage. His bumper had settled at a slant below the tailgate, but other than that, his truck didn't have a scratch. I couldn't say as much for my car.

He pulled into the parking lot of the gas station next to the intersection, then parked and rejoined me in front of my car. "Well, unfortunately, I don't think it's drivable." He bent over my hood, which was stripped down to the base metal and crumpled like a sheet of discarded notebook paper. "Looks like my hitch tore a hole in the radiator."

Curse words drifted through my mind, but I would never say them out loud. Instead, I stepped toward the passenger's side. "I'll get my insurance information."

He grabbed my hand to stop me. "Is the bee still in there?"

I froze. "Oh! I don't know."

With a slight bow, he put his hand over his heart. "Let me."

This man. I wasn't aware guys like him existed in my generation. I stayed behind as he walked around the car. "Be careful. It's mean."

It took a few yanks, but he finally managed to wrench the door open with a labored creak from the mangled metal. "Whoa!" He ducked out of the wasp's way as it zinged past his head. "That sucker was huge!"

I tossed my hands up, then winced from the pain in my arm. "I know!"

He motioned me over. "Come on. The coast is clear."

In my glove box, all pertinent roadside necessities were neatly arranged. The paperwork was filed away in a black case behind a first-aid kit, a tire-pressure gauge, an ice scraper, and a flashlight. As I sat in the seat, carefully removing the items, he looked over my shoulder. "You're so well prepared, I'm surprised there's no bee spray in there."

I might have laughed had I not been trying so hard to fight back tears. I quickly found my insurance card and handed it to him. "Here. Take a picture of it with your phone."

"Good thinking. Have you done this a lot?" he asked.

I sighed as I got out of the car. "Don't ask."

With the camera on his smartphone, he snapped a picture of my insurance information. "Lucille Cooper?" He grinned and began humming the hit by Kenny Rogers, "You Picked a Fine Time to Leave Me, Lucille."

Rolling my eyes, I tucked the card back into the case and

stepped out beside him. "Boy, I've never heard that before. It's Lucy, actually."

He offered his hand. "I'm West Adler."

My brow crinkled. "West? As in north, south, east"—I pointed at him—"and you?"

He folded his arms over his chest, straining his short sleeves against his biceps. "That's a funny joke coming from a girl named Lucille."

I playfully shoved him in the shoulder, then noticed the embroidered logo on his chest. "Adler Construction. Family business?"

"You could say that."

The shrill wail of a police siren echoed through the jammed intersection. My heart sank.

"Uh-oh," West said with a grin. "Looks like someone called the fuzz."

My day kept getting better and better.

A white-and-blue Nashville Metro police cruiser, with red-and-blue lights flashing, inched its way across the busy road until it pulled to a stop behind my car. The officer, an older man with white hair and a matching mustache, angled out from behind the wheel and tugged his belt up over his belly as he sauntered toward us.

"It's your lucky day," West said quietly at my side.

"Right," I muttered.

The cop pulled off his mirrored aviator sunglasses. "West Adler, is that you?"

West met the cop halfway. I trailed behind him.

"How's it going, Danny?" West asked, stretching out his hand.

Officer Danny accepted West's hand with a hearty shake. "I'm having a better day than someone is having." He pointed to my mangled car. "What happened?"

"A killer wasp, I'm afraid." West grinned down at me. "Fortunately, there were no casualties other than the car."

God, his smile made my knees wobble.

"What'd it hit?" Danny asked.

West pointed toward his truck. "Tapped my bumper."

"Will it start?"

West sighed. "Haven't tried, but there's radiator fluid all over the pavement."

The cop grunted in response, then surveyed our surroundings. "Think we could push it into that parking lot?"

West looked at me. "Lucy, can you steer while we push?"

My mouth was gaping. I'd rear-ended him, and West Adler was saving the day. Who was this guy?

"Lucy?"

I snapped out of my daze. "Yeah. Of course. Sorry."

When my little blue car was safely off the highway and parked at the side of the gas station's lot, I got out and rejoined the men at my back bumper. West was dusting off his hands. I should've washed my car.

"I'll be right back," Danny said, wiping his hands on his pants as he walked back to his police cruiser.

I narrowed my eyes at West. "Are you famous?" It was a fair question in the music capital of the world.

He laughed. "No. Danny knows my father."

"Oh."

"He won't give you a ticket," he added, lowering his voice.

My shoulders relaxed, and I blew out a deep sigh. "Thank God."

The cop pulled into the lot beside us and rolled down his window. "Need me to call a tow truck for you, ma'am?"

West held up his hand. "I'll take care of it."

My head snapped up. "You will?"

"Of course, I will. I can't leave a beautiful young woman stranded on the side of the road."

I tapped my chest. "You know I ran into you, right?"

West ignored me. "I've got this under control, Danny."

Danny tipped an imaginary hat toward us. "Call me if you need anything, West. And give my regards to your family."

West waved. "Will do."

"Thank you!" I called out as the officer drove away.

True to his word, West Adler—knight in shining polo shirt—called a friend who owned a body shop. After a few moments on the phone, he covered the speaker with his hand. "My buddy says it's gonna be about an hour before he can get here. You can leave it, and he'll pick it up and call you about the damage, or we can call another company. It's up to you."

Between being rattled by the accident and feeling woozy from West Adler's cologne, I didn't know what to do. "If you trust him, I guess it would be OK to leave it."

He nodded, then pulled the phone back up to his ear. "Hey, man. We'll leave it here at the gas station. It's a dark blue GKS Sport with a front end currently shaped like an accordion. You can't miss it."

My mouth twisted into a frown.

West winked at me.

"I'll text you her phone number," he said before disconnecting the call.

I withered. "Thanks, West."

He tucked the phone into his pocket. "Don't mention it. My friend could use the business."

I knew he might be saying that to make me feel better. It worked.

He looked down at the shiny silver watch encircling his wrist. "I can give you a ride depending on where you're headed."

I crossed my arms. "Are you doing penance for some horrible past sin?"

"What?"

"Or maybe you're in the 'make amends' step of a recovery program and this is some part of a paying-your-grievances-forward plan?"

West scratched his head. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Nobody's this nice to someone who hit them at a traffic light. I know because I've done this before."

The corner of his perfect mouth tipped up. "Maybe you just haven't bumped into the right person." He pointed to his truck. "Do you want a lift or not? It's a pretty simple question."

"Umm..."

"Where are you going, Lucy?"

"Downtown," I answered.

Without giving me a chance to object, he walked to his truck and opened the passenger-side door. "Me too. Hop in."

Giddiness bubbled inside me. I felt a little dizzy. Maybe it was the concussion. "Are you sure?"

His eyes widened, and his sparkling smile was teasing. "Get in the damn truck, Lucille."

I laughed and got in the damn truck.

On the off chance he was a serial killer (such would be my luck), I texted my roommate Olivia Barker. *In case I go missing or wind up dead, a guy named West Adler is driving me to work. I wrecked my car, but I'm OK. Just wanted someone to know.*

She didn't respond.

West got in the driver's side and started the engine. It was so loud I wondered if I'd screwed up his muffler, but West didn't seem to notice. He put it into gear and rolled to the lot's exit. "So where were you headed this morning before all hell broke loose

inside your car?" As he pulled onto the busy street, he waved his thanks to the driver who let him cut into the line of traffic.

"Work," I answered.

"What do you do?"

I tried to cross my legs, but the pain stopped me. "Marketing. I work for an artist-management company downtown."

"What kind of artists?"

"Country music mostly."

"Anyone I've heard of?"

I nodded. "Probably. Melvin Brooks, Jake Barrett, Lawson Young—"

"I love his new song," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Most guys do."

Country crooner Lawson Young had recently released an entire album spawned by one of the worst, and most public, breakups in history. At least Nashville's history, anyway. And that was saying something in the home of country music. The first single—eloquently titled "Bitch, Please"—immediately blew up the charts, and the tabloids. The object of the breakup? My boss, his soon-to-be-former manager. Things at work were tense, to say the least.

"Do you like it?" West asked.

"The song?"

He chuckled. "Your job."

I nodded. "Most days." And it was true. Besides all the drama as of late, it was fun and exciting. And fortunately, it paid well enough to cover an increased car insurance premium and my hefty deductible.

My phone buzzed in my hand with a text message. *Are you dead?* It was Olivia.

Not dead. Call you later, I texted back.

"Where's your office?" he asked as we neared the on-ramp to I-65 North.

"Inside the Summit Tower. Do you know where it is? It's pretty new."

He checked his blind spot and merged with traffic. "I think I've seen it before."

"Probably. It's the biggest building downtown."

He shook his head. "The Batman Building is bigger."

"The *what*?"

"You're not from here, are you?"

"I've only lived here about six weeks," I said.

"Really? Where did you move from?"

"A teeny, tiny little town called Riverbend. Have you ever heard of it?"

He thought for a moment. "It doesn't ring any bells."

"It's between here and Memphis with a sixty-mile detour south off I-40. You're not alone. Most people haven't heard of the armpit of Tennessee."

"Armpit, huh?"

"It's a pretty place to visit, or maybe hide in the witness-protection program, but I don't recommend staying there."

He cut his eyes over at me with a grin that made my stomach tingle. "Are you in witness protection?"

I winked at him. "Not anymore."

"What brought you here?"

"The job brought me to Nashville, specifically, but I was considering any city with a population greater than three thousand." I looked out the window. "Lately, I really needed a change of scenery."

"How's that working out for you?" he asked.

I admired him from across the cab. *The scenery looks pretty great from here.* I didn't dare say that, however. I blushed and looked away. "I'll let you know, but so far so good."

"Look." He pointed toward the skyline in the distance ahead of us.

The tallest structure in the sky was a giant building with what looked to be two pointy ears. I laughed. "I get it. The Batman Building."

We arrived at my office way too soon. I wasn't ready for our meeting to end. He pulled up to the curb in front of the entrance and parked. "Here you are, m'lady."

I unbuckled my seatbelt. "Thanks again, West. You really didn't have to do all this for me."

He shifted sideways and pulled his phone from his pocket. "Let me get your number. I still need to send it to Randy at the shop." When he finished typing with his thumbs, he leaned toward me, tilting the phone enough for me to see the screen. He'd started a new contact file under the name *Hot Chick Who Wrecked My Truck*.

I almost melted into a puddle.

After exchanging numbers, I opened the door and groaned in pain as I slid out onto the sidewalk.

"Are you sure you shouldn't get checked out at the hospital?" he asked, his gorgeous eyes crinkled with concern. "I'm afraid you might be really hurt and not know it."

My heart, I knew, would surely never be the same. "I'm fine, I promise. And I'm really sorry about your bumper, West."

He shrugged. "It could happen to anybody." Quickly, he tapped his chest. "Not me, of course. But anybody else."

Laughing again, I closed the door.

He rolled down the window. "Let me know if you have any problems with the shop."

"I will. Thank you." I waved as I turned toward the building and started up the front steps.

"Hey!" I heard him call.

I looked back.

He pointed at me with a grin. "You owe me, Lucille. Don't you forget it."

Then he winked, and I slipped off the step.

THANKFULLY, West missed my blunder on the stairs as he drove away, leaving me and the butterflies in my stomach to duck, embarrassed, into my building. I limped to the elevator lobby and pressed the up button.

The Summit Tower was a spectacle in the center of the city, encased in glass from top to bottom. The elevator provided a spectacular view of downtown Nashville on my ride up to the sixteenth floor, but that morning I wasn't looking at the skyline. I was scanning the streets for a black pickup.

Maybe he got off the street. Maybe he parked and came inside. Maybe he sprinted up the stairs to be waiting when I step off the elevator. He'll take me into his strong arms and...

DING!

The doors slid open, and the building's geriatric gardener looked up from the fern he was pruning. He waved a handful of brown leaves at me in greeting. My shoulders drooped as I stepped into the hallway. *It's going to be a long day, Lucille.*

Claire Huggins looked up from the receptionist desk when I walked through the smoky glass double doors of Record Road Nashville. It was strange seeing her there. Normally, I arrived before everyone else and quietly slipped into my office to hide unnoticed all day. Claire glanced at the clock on the wall.

I held up my hand as I crossed the room, favoring my injured leg. "I know. I'm late."

She looked worried. "Is everything all right?"

I nodded. "I wrecked my car on the way in, but I'm OK. Anything I should be aware of?"

She shook her head, then her hand shot forward. "No, wait!

Audrey is in the conference room doing a lot of yelling, so you might want to steer clear of there."

My eyes widened, even though our boss yelling at someone wasn't exactly a newflash. "Thanks for the warning. Have a good day, Claire."

"You too, Lucy."

As quickly as my battered legs would carry me, I crept down the hallway lined with gold and platinum records toward my office. Audrey's muffled bark filtered through the walls, stirring my sympathy for whoever was on the receiving end of it. I assumed she was probably yelling at Ava, her sister and vice president of the company. The pair of them made me glad I only had a brother.

I relaxed when I reached my office undetected, but my relief was short lived. I heard the latch of the conference-room door tumble, followed by the familiar staccato click-clack of Audrey's heels against the tile. My spine went rigid, and I fumbled my keys before I could get the right one in the lock.

"Lily!"

I groaned and rolled my eyes up toward the ceiling, mouthing the question "Why?" to God or whoever might be watching. Before turning around to face her, I plastered a bright smile across my face. "Good morning, Audrey."

It was rumored in the break room that in another lifetime Audrey Scott had been a beauty queen. It was believable given her perfectly symmetrical face and long, silky dark hair. But that was before the pressure of running a powerful company in show business had etched a few extra years across her brow. I'd heard she was thirty-four, but she could easily pass as forty, or fifty, depending on how deep her stress lines went at any particular moment. Watching her stalk down the hallway toward my office, I could have been convinced she qualified for AARP.

She tugged up the sleeve of her tailored gray suit—which I

was sure cost more than my rent—to look at her sparkly watch. “Lily, I need your help.”

I took a step to my right, out of the way of the name placard on the wall. “Of course. What do you need?”

She didn’t notice my name. “I have a meeting with Lawson’s lawyer and his business manager at nine. Can you get me the financial reports from all of last year’s online advertising?”

Ahh...no wonder heads are rolling already this morning.

Lawson Young had been one of the agency’s biggest clients until the younger of the Scott sisters, Ava, dumped him the night before their big Texas wedding. Now, four months later, Record Road was still working out the details of being forced to let Lawson out of his contract with the agency. Hence all the yelling in the conference room.

“You asked me for it yesterday, so I put it in your door pocket last night before I left the office. Did you see it?” I asked.

She blinked with surprise. “Oh! No, I didn’t. I dumped all that paperwork on my desk this morning before my phone began ringing.” She cocked her head, pressing her painted lips into a thin smile packed with fake endearment. “What did we ever do without you, Lily?”

She turned on her heel before I could say anything else. When she rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, I stamped my feet in frustration and jabbed my finger over and over at my name engraved in the gaudy brass plate on my door. *My name is Lucy!*

My head throbbed, only partly from the car accident.

It had been exactly forty-three days since I’d accepted the position of online marketing manager for the Scott sisters, and I was beginning to wonder if my senior boss had some kind of brain defect. Two weeks in, I’d given up on correcting her about my name. I was Lily. And there was no convincing her otherwise.

I walked into my office and flipped on the overhead light,

though the room hardly needed it. Before sitting down at my oak desk, I paused at the wall of windows to admire the view, and I inhaled a deep calming breath fragrant with citrus polish and glass cleaner.

As crazy as Audrey's tyrannical behavior threatened to make me, I truly loved my job. Which, in its simplest form, was to get whatever or *whoever* I was selling on as many computer and mobile screens as possible.

I spent my days creating email newsletters, building and tweaking social-media ads, and writing website and blog content. The writing was my favorite. Drafting articles that could make fans swoon *and* land a website on the front page of Google was truly a magical art form. My last job had been whoring out software for a no-name foreign company from a makeshift office in the basement of my parents' house. For the lighting upgrade alone at Record Road, I'd be willing to change the name on my birth certificate to Lily.

Thirteen new emails were waiting in my inbox, four of which were from Audrey. Two were from her assistant, Peter Jansen, following up on Audrey's four emails, and one was from my dad. The rest was junk. I clicked open the message from Dad first.

Hey, Lulabean. Just wanted you to know that Katherine and I are having a great time in Costa Rica. The internet is shoddy here, so I'm not sure if I'll be in touch again before we get home. Attached is a picture of a monkey. Hope you have a good weekend.

Love you, Dad

Wrinkling up my nose, I wondered if the picture was of Katherine, Dad's new bride. It wasn't. It was a picture of him with

a capuchin monkey sitting on his shoulder. His face was tanned from the Caribbean sunshine, and he was laughing behind his salt-and-pepper goatee. I paused to remind myself for the millionth time that his happiness was what was important despite my feelings about the situation.

And he did look happy. I wasn't sure if that fact vexed me or not. It's not like I wanted him to be sad, but did he have to be *so* happy? So happy so soon?

I couldn't help but compare his smile to the one in our family photo that was framed on my desk. *Our* family. Before Katherine. Before cancer. Before everything had fallen so spectacularly apart.

Then I lightly smacked my own cheeks. "Stop it, Lucy."

Those kinds of thoughts would zap all my productivity for the next few hours, so I typed out a quick reply, saved Dad's picture to the appropriate folder designated for personal photos, then deleted his message. I returned to the inbox and promptly erased all the junk mail before tackling Audrey's requests. All of them had already been addressed and were sitting on her desk, except for one. I moved that email to my "To Do" folder, because it wasn't urgent, and deleted the rest.

Under the desk, my cell phone beeped inside my purse. My joints burned as I bent to retrieve it.

Just checking to make sure you made it inside OK...and without killing anyone. - West

Be still my heart.

I leaned back in my cushy office chair with a grin so wide it triggered a cramp in my jaw. I hit reply, bringing up a new chat window.

Me: *Safe and sound. I only allow myself one accident per trip.*

A second later, my phone beeped again.

West: *My lucky day. :) Of all the pickups in all the towns in all the world, she ran into mine.*

A gleeful squeal slipped out before I could stop it, and I spun around in my office chair, disregarding the pain that swirled in my head.

There was a knock at the door, and my feet slammed onto the floor so fast I almost toppled over. *Ow*. I brushed the hair that had whipped across my face out of my eyes and saw Ava, my other boss, smiling in the doorway.

She walked in and sat down on the edge of the seat across from my desk. "I *must* know what that was all about." She crossed her legs, resting her hands and the papers she was holding on her knee.

Ava was the carbon copy of Audrey, minus five years and all the wrinkles. She was softer and far less demanding, approachable but still firm. She was classy, but considering all the drama swirling around the office, she was also a bit of a rebel. I liked that.

However, she was still my boss, so I straightened in my seat and tried to look professional. It was no use. I couldn't stop smiling. "I'm sorry," I said, hiding my red cheeks behind my hand.

She waved her papers at me. "Don't be sorry. Just spill the beans. You're dying to tell somebody. I can see it all over your face. What's his name?"

I laughed and dropped my hands into my lap. "West Adler."

"Adler?" She turned her ear toward me like she wasn't sure she'd heard me correctly. "As in Adler Construction?"

I rested my elbows on my desk, then immediately jerked back upright, sucking a sharp, pained breath in through my clenched teeth.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

I looked down at the bandage on my arm. "I fell and scraped the skin off my elbow this morning, but yeah, I'm OK. You've heard of Adler Construction?"

She chuckled, then motioned around the room. "They built your office, honey."

I was confused.

She bent toward me. "The Summit Tower. They built it."

My mouth fell open. "Shut up."

"The Adlers are sort of like royalty in this town." She held up her hand, rubbing her fingers together. "Lots of money in that family."

Withering in my seat, I gripped my head in my hands. "Are you serious?"

"Girl, I never joke about men or money." She leaned on the armrest of her chair. "How did you meet him?"

I slid my hands down the sides of my face, pulling my lips into a distorted frown. "I ran into him at a stop light on my way into work this morning."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean you 'ran into him'?"

I made two fists, then crashed them together with sound effects.

"Like *boom*?" she asked.

"Like *boom*. I literally slammed into the back of his truck."

She laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. "Uh-oh." She nodded toward my phone laying on the desk. "Well, he must not have been too mad about it if you're in here spinning around in your chair."

I bit down on the tip of my index fingernail. "He drove me to work, and now he's quoting *Casablanca*."

Obviously impressed, she slowly clapped her hands. "Congratulations. You must have left quite the impression."

I nodded. "Yeah, on his bumper."

We both burst out laughing.

Finally, she pointed at me. "Oh, Lucy. You and I are going to be great friends."

My heart swelled. *She knows my name.*

"Did you need something from me, Ava?"

She turned in her chair and craned her neck to look down the hall. "No. I was looking for a place to hide when I heard you squeal." She jerked her thumb toward the door. "Almost everyone else is in the conference room, and I'm afraid my ex is going to show up with his lawyer."

I grimaced. "You can hide in here as long as you need to."

"Thanks." She laughed. "I promise, things are normally more professional around here than they have been since you came on board."

I leaned back in my chair. "I believe that. You don't get where you are in this business by pure luck."

"Do you like it so far? The music business," she asked.

Tilting my head from side to side, I gave a noncommittal shrug. "I'm still getting used to it. It's a little surreal doing promos for people you hear on the radio all the time."

She cut her eyes over at me with a cheeky smile. "Try sleeping with them."

We laughed again.

My phone buzzed on the desk. I picked it up.

West: *Have a great day, Lucy. Maybe we'll "run into each other" again soon. :-)*

THE SCOTT SISTERS were so lucky to have me. My productivity level was astounding. By lunchtime, I'd found West Adler's Facebook page, his Instagram account, and every newspaper article written about him or his family since the birth of the internet. What else was a single girl to do in the digital age besides use the company Wi-Fi to cyberstalk the fourth-ranked most eligible bachelor in all of Music City according to *The Nashville Scene*?

West Adler was thirty-three.

Never married.

A graduate of Belmont with a master's degree in business.

He was a philanthropist. A benefactor of not one, but two children's hospitals, the performing arts, a rehab center for girls, the local women's roller derby team...

A roller derby team?

When I read the words again, a black-and-white movie reel flickered on in my brain. Women in short shorts and knee-high socks skated around a wooden bowl the size of my apartment, shoving and knocking each other out of the way. They all had tattoos. They all had Bettie Paige bangs adorned with Rosie the Riveter bandanas.

I searched the internet for the Nashville roller derby.

Employee of the Year, right here.

Founded in 2008, the Music City Rollers is an all-female, non-profit, skater-governed roller derby league in Nashville, Tennessee. We are dedicated to training up strong, independent female athletes who value character over appearance and integrity over winning. We are an inclusive league comprised of women with diverse backgrounds and skill sets who are committed to excellence on and off the roller derby track. The final home game of the season is Saturday, August 22 at the Municipal Auditorium...

I looked at the calendar beside my phone. The twenty-second was tomorrow. When I turned back to the screen again, my eyes fell on the logo for Adler Construction. They were the first listed sponsor. Maybe it was a sign.

I nibbled on my fingernail, then picked up my phone and texted Olivia again.

Do you have plans tomorrow?

When she didn't answer right away, I turned back to my screen and clicked the link for Adler Construction. The company website popped open in a new browser window, and vivid photos

of high-rise buildings filled my screen. They were set against a stark white background, and the "heart and mission" of the company was described in a crisp sans font. God knows this love affair might have ended before it began had I stumbled onto animated GIFs and Comic Sans.

But there were zero pictures of West on the entire site. I checked. Every page.

My phone buzzed.

Olivia: *I'm having a threesome with a bag of Cheetos, a carton of rocky road, and the final season of Sons of Anarchy.*

Me: *Did you know Nashville has a women's roller derby team?*

Olivia: *Yeah. A girl I went to college with plays.*

Me: *I want to go.*

Olivia: *Have fun.*

Me: *Go with me!*

Olivia: *I'm busy.*

Me: *You just said you're staying home to watch TV.*

Olivia: *That's important business.*

Me: :-)

Olivia: *Don't sad-emoji me. It's my only Saturday off this month.*

Me: *Please go with me.*

Olivia: *Fine. But you're buying.*

Me: *Deal.*

Olivia: *Why the sudden interest?*

Me: *It might be about a guy...*

Olivia: *Ugh. I changed my mind. I'm staying home.*

Me: :-)

Olivia: *You know it's an all-girl sport, right? If you're trying to get a date there, it'll have to be with a woman.*

Me: *That's your department...hey, maybe we can find YOU a date.*

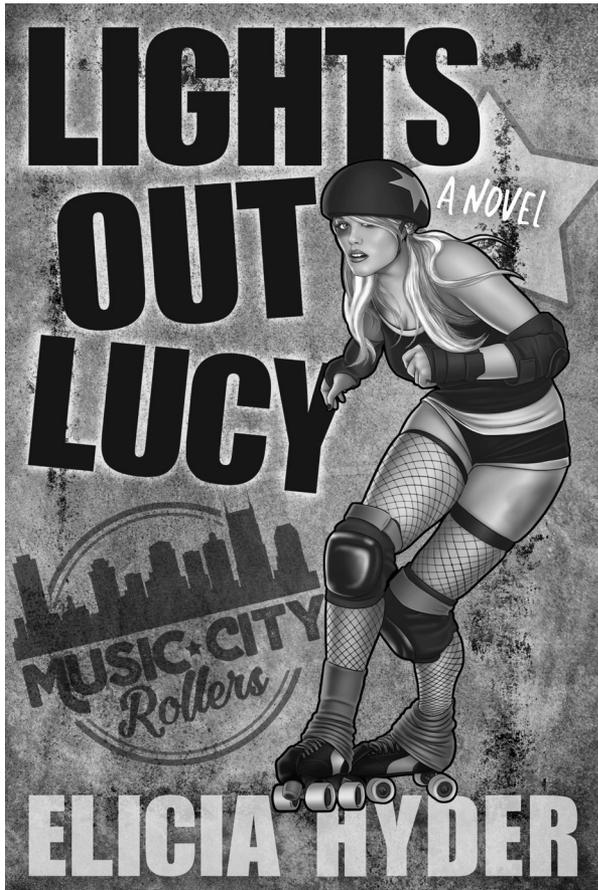
Olivia: *Good point. I'm back in.*

Me: *I'll see you tonight.*

Olivia: *I'm closing. I'll see you in the morning.*

I put my phone down and turned back toward the computer. It was time to put cute bachelors out of my mind and get back to work. But the Music City Rollers still lit up my screen. And they were almost as distracting as West Adler.

GET LIGHTS OUT LUCY



GET LIGHTS OUT LUCY

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