

Chapter 4

People say if you hear something about yourself enough times, you begin to believe it. Lucy experienced more than her share of negative criticism and hostility throughout her life. Her mother Linda had gone from a sweet loving mom to a bitter, cruel woman. And, as many victims of abuse blame themselves, Lucy carried her anger, guilt, and sadness around like a bullet proof vest. It kept her safe from being hurt, yet made her stiff and impenetrable. She wondered if there was something more she could have done to help her mother. Maybe if she had been more supportive and less defensive. On the other hand, she wondered how her mother could have done that to her. How could she turn things upside down and then just leave? With no one else to turn to Lucy did her best to cope and handle the situations that came up. To her that meant protecting Katie, even if it also meant that Lucy would take the brunt of the backlashes from Linda.

Lucy could see now that a turning point came when she was in High School. When she was around sixteen, she was basically taking care of herself and Katie. There were times when Linda didn't even come home at night. She'd leave some cash on the table, tips from her waitressing job she was barely hanging on to. Often times they'd wake up in the morning to her passed out on the couch. On two occasions, child protective services received anonymous calls and a case worker was sent to the house. Both times Lucy was able to convince them everything was fine, even though Linda wasn't even home for one of the visits. Another ghastly example of the country's economic crisis; overworked social workers.

One particular night when Linda didn't come home until about two in the morning, Lucy awoke to the sound of Linda talking loudly to herself. Lucy realized that she had been looking at the bills that were on the counter. She was swearing about a bill from a hospital they had taken Katie to. Katie had been very sick and wasn't getting better on her own. When she took a turn for the worse, Lucy convinced Linda to take Katie to the hospital where they ran a few tests. The insurance company was not covering the entire balance and sent the remaining amount to Linda.

Lucy could hear the yelling getting closer, then farther as if Linda were pacing. "These damn kids! What the hell do they ever do but cost me money." Then there was shuffling around, noises in the kitchen, more yelling, glass breaking. Lucy became expert at knowing what each sound meant, especially when Linda was drinking. What worried her this time was that Linda sounded much more agitated than her normal sloppy drunk disposition. She prayed that Linda

hadn't been doing more than just drinking. Unfortunately, this wasn't the first time she had been concerned about that.

Lucy had been lying there for about an hour until she was sure Linda was done with her ranting, and fell asleep. The next day Lucy got Katie up early and the girls left for school without even having breakfast. Lucy also arranged for Katie to go home with her friend after school just in case things hadn't blown over at home by the time they got there.

When Linda woke up around one in the afternoon, she wondered where the girls were. She actually thought it was Saturday and not Thursday. She spent the next couple of hours fuming. By the time Lucy walked in around three-thirty, Linda reached her boiling point. She was sitting in a chair just staring at the front door.

"Where the hell have you been?" Linda held without moving a single muscle. Her dishwasher blond hair was no longer sprinkled with gray, it was drowning in it. Lack of proper health and nutrition exacerbated the cruel pilfering that age was already executing on Linda's facial features. Instead of looking sophisticated and beautiful as most would have expected from her, she was haggard and beat down.

"School." Lucy said as she passed Linda and headed for the kitchen.

"You liar!" Linda jumped up from the chair and followed Lucy into the kitchen. "What could you possibly be doing at school on Saturday... and where's Katie?"

Trying to sound calm, while feeling the complete opposite inside, Lucy said, "Today is Thursday, mom. You can check the calendar if you don't believe me."

"Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot! Where's Katie?" Her breathing was fast and heavy.

"She's at Kelsey's house." Lucy set her things down on the table and then moved back toward the living room. She struggled to keep her voice steady. "Her mom picked them up after school so they could work on a project."

Linda grabbed Lucy's arm as she was walking by her. "You call her and get her back here right now!" Their eyes met only for a second, but it was long enough for Lucy to see where this was going.

"No!" Lucy jerked her arm away and ran toward her bedroom. Her mother chased behind, but Lucy was able to shut and lock the door just before Linda grabbed the knob.

"You little bitch! You better open this door right now!" Linda banged on the door with a closed fist. "Don't you dare think you are in charge here. You're just a stupid little girl!"

Lucy slid down the back of the door with her hands over her ears. She knew the cycle, and she knew this outrage would eventually turn from anger to sorrow and then eventually, sometimes, pity. It was a standoff and with her will, she knew she would win. She thought of prisoners in solitary. How long would they sit, staring at that door waiting for it to open? She'd wait forever if she had to. She wouldn't crack under pressure.

"I'm your mother... and you have to... listen to me." Linda banged a few more times but her head couldn't handle the noise or the force. Her arm fell to her side. "You're not in charge of Katie, she's my... baby!" Her body slumped to the ground and propped against the door. "I'm in charge," she cried. "I'm the mom around here."

They both cried, Lucy silently, on either side of the door for twenty minutes before Linda made the first move. She went to the kitchen and began cleaning the mess from last night. Then she reached in her pocket, pulled out a wad of cash and plunked it on the table. Lucy stayed in her position against the door. Her face and eyes were still wet, but she was passed the emotional storm. Now she had to figure out what to do next. She could hear the rustling around going on in the other room but found herself still glued to the floor. After a few more minutes, there was a door slam, and then silence.

Still hesitant, she waited in her room until she felt safe, and then opened the door a crack to peek out. She knew her mother was gone because that was the only thing Linda could do when she felt guilty. Lucy went to the living room and then into the kitchen and noticed the money on the table along with a small white piece of paper. She walked over and picked up the paper which had only two words on it, *Forgive Me*.

Lucy began to cry again as she crumpled up the paper and threw it in the trash. She couldn't take a chance that Katie would see it. As bad as things were, both Linda and Lucy tried hard to make things seem normal when Katie was there. Walking sullenly back to the living room, Lucy collapsed on the couch. She grabbed a pillow and pulled it tight against her as she closed her eyes in complete exhaustion.

Lucy never felt more alone than she did at that moment. Not only did she believe there wasn't a soul out there that could help her, she was also very confused about her life and where it was going. Was that how things were supposed to be? How much longer could she go on like that? She couldn't have known that it would be six more years of being on that emotional rollercoaster.

Now the ride was over, but the aftermath was still very unstable. How could Lucy figure out who she was, or who she could become, if she didn't even know who she used to be? She couldn't find a place in her own family let alone the world. At times Lucy was a daughter, a sister, and a mother, but now she was nobody.

Chapter 5

“I’ll drive,” Anne offered as the two stood in the hallway about to leave. Anne was taller than Lucy, 5’7 to be exact. She had blonde hair that was long and straight. She was sweet and a bit naïve, and more on the cute side rather than pretty. It surprised Lucy how Anne was drawn to her even though Lucy was not very inviting. Anne was very laid back and friendly, and never took the things Lucy said personally. It didn’t seem to faze her when Lucy was closed off or negative.

The club was about ninety percent full when they arrived, and the girls sat at a table more towards the front. Benny’s friend Zach was on stage and about to finish up. They had missed the first guy and there would be a short break before Benny, who was third out of five.

The girls chatted a bit, but it was mostly Anne talking and Lucy listening. She wanted to tell Lucy all about a guy she was interested in at the hospital. She spoke as if they were in High School, saying things like, “totally hot,” and “awesome.” Lucy was just about to excuse herself to the restroom when Benny came on stage.

To start the night, Lucy had a couple of beers at home before she met Anne outside Mrs. Allen’s apartment. She added to that the two drinks that came with the cover charge. Before Benny was through with his bit, she was feeling pretty out of it. Not being able to sit there any longer, she told Anne she was going to leave.

“I just gotta get outta here,” Lucy said swaying in her chair just a bit. “It’s too hot in here.”

“Okay, let’s both go then,” Anne said. “I’ll drive us back. I’m fine.”

Laughter bellowed through the room as Benny delivered his quips and stories in a conversational voice. That was part of his style. He wanted the audience to feel as though they were just hanging out talking with him. The bright lights on stage made it difficult to make out any intricacies in the audience, so he didn’t notice that the girls were talking and not paying attention.

“No, Benny will be so bummed. You stay here and I’ll take the bus.” Lucy started to get up and tried to look totally in control.

“Are you sure, Lucy?” Anne sound worried.

“Really, I want to take my time going home anyway. I’ll see you later.”

Anne looked concerned but said, “Okay, be careful.” She knew not to argue with Lucy. When she wanted to be alone, that was it, end of conversation.

Lucy walked to the back of the bar, out of sight, and stood for a few minutes. She couldn't quite leave yet because she actually wanted to hear some more of Benny's act. He was talking about his family being poor when he was growing up and how he and his brothers used to eat breakfast. He explained how they used to eat their cereal with a fork, then they'd pass the bowl with the milk to the next person to use. She laughed and on impulse looked around at the other people laughing. She noticed a man at the bar staring at her. He looked vaguely familiar and mouthed a "hey" that seemed to say he recognized her.

While she was still looking at him, he got up from the bar and walked toward her. Lucy's first instinct was to take off. Caught off guard and with a pretty good buzz, she turned too slow and the man was suddenly in front of her. He was clean shaven, wore a business suit and had short sandy-colored hair.

"Lucy...Lang." He snapped his fingers. "I thought that was you."

"Hi...uh," Lucy replied. She did think he looked familiar but still couldn't place him. She looked straight ahead as if she were engrossed in what was going on up on the stage.

"Kyle," he said as if everyone should remember him. "Kyle Benson, Westen High School, we had Mr. Beamer's Science class together." He put his hand out even though she wasn't looking at him.

"Oh, yeah, right, Mr. Beamer." She nodded and smiled but wasn't a hundred percent sure she remembered him. Then she took his hand and shook it.

"It's good to see you, Lucy," he said as if they had been long lost friends.

"Yeah, you too." Sure, she took that class, but that was a dozen years ago. And, she didn't really date too many guys in her class. She had to give him credit though. He remembered her, and he still approached her. Maybe he didn't remember *everything* about her.

Kyle crossed in front of her and stood on the other side as if to cause a distraction. Their eyes met for a moment and she noticed his deep blue eyes focusing tightly on hers, as if to get a read on what she was thinking. "How've you been, Lucy? You look great."

This was actually one of her better looking nights. Typically, due to her budget and motivation Lucy's wardrobe consisted of mostly jeans and t-shirts. Tonight, she had her hair down and wore just enough make-up to show up on her light olive complexion. She had on black and silver croppy pants and a short sleeve black shirt that fit snugly against her thin body. She

would have normally felt uncomfortable talking as if they were old friends, but was in the mood to play along. “Good, and you?”

“Great. I’m working for a marketing company now. Some of us go out together after work...but everyone pretty much left.” He gestured toward the door. “Were you leaving?”

“Actually..., yeah. But, good seeing you.” She turned to walk away half hoping he would stop her. It had been months since she had dated anyone and almost two years since she’d had a boyfriend. It would be nice to talk to someone new since she rarely had the opportunity to meet new people.

Reaching out and grabbing her arm he said, “You need a ride?”

Lucy stopped and smiled, trying not to let on that she was happy, or that she had been drinking. That was a skill she had mastered over the years. “I was going to take the bus...but sure, thanks.”

Chapter 6

Kyle had a black Toyota Four Runner and was parked just outside the club. As he opened her door in the full gentleman role, she felt a hint of hesitation. These were the situations that parents warned you were dangerous. Lucy knew that, but was in the mood to take chances. She got in and while Kyle walked around to the driver's side, she took a quick look in the mirror. She felt a twinge of excitement as he rounded the back end of the car and opened his door.

In the car, there was a brief moment of awkward silence until he began to search for music. He pressed number three on the CD player. "You like Green Day?" he said looking straight ahead.

"Sure."

"I remember now...you never did talk that much in school." He chuckled.

That was an unsettling statement to respond to. She didn't want to just start rambling like an idiot to prove him wrong, or keep sitting there like some wallflower. The pressure of the silent seconds ticking in her head caused a sudden, yet casual, "Sor-freakin-ry."

Taken by total surprise he burst out laughing. "Well I didn't expect that." He put a hand on her knee. "I'm the one who's sorry," he said. "Listen, I'm supposed to meet some friends for a get together. Do you want to go? It's just a few people for drinks and it's not too far from here."

"Sure, why not," she replied surprising herself.

"I just need to stop by the store. I always hate walking in empty handed."

Now at JPs Market, Lucy waited in the car while Kyle ran in to grab some wine for the party. Sitting there, Lucy suddenly began to feel that this was a big mistake. Her *fight or flight* was kicking in and she thought the latter would be a much better option. She wondered why she had agreed to go with him. But, she knew why. Did she really think she could make it through a party being nice and polite to total strangers; enough for Kyle to like her and want to spend the night with her? Was she even sure that was what she wanted? The anxiety was rising in her and she was starting to lose the buzz she earned earlier in the evening.

Nervously, Lucy looked at her phone, then out into the store window. She glanced around all the angles of the car to see who was around. For a second she almost opened the door to get out and leave. In the back seat she noticed a small bag that looked like it was for toiletries. She grabbed it and began to rummage through it. It seemed to hold the usual stuff: mini toothpaste,

floss, shampoo. Then she saw a prescription bottle. She yanked out the bottle and turned until she saw what it was; Vicoden.

Looking up she noticed that Kyle was not at the cash register yet. What was she considering here? What would he think of her if he found out? At this point she didn't really care. Besides, he wouldn't miss a few and it's always good to have a few pain killers around for emergency. Not to mention the fact that she needed to ease her current tensions. Popping open the bottle, she poured four pills into her hand. Holding them tightly in her hand, she replaced the cap and put the bottle back in the bag. She opened her purse and pulled out her wallet. On the side there was a zipper which she opened and tried to pour the pills in. To her dismay, only one pill fell in and the other three dropped between her legs. She looked up in a panic to see where Kyle was and found him paying at the counter. Now she really felt idiotic. She dug down and pulled one out and dropped it in the wallet. *Two more* she thought. Kyle grabbed his change and headed back to the car as Lucy dropped her wallet in her purse and set it on the floor.

"Hey," he said as he slid in the car. He reached in the bag, pulled out a candy bar and handed it to her. "Here, I got you a treat," he said smiling.

Lucy took the chocolate and replied, "Oh...thanks." She couldn't decide if that was strange or sweet, but she was leaning more towards sweet.

Kyle set the bag on the back seat next to the little black bag.

Lucy smiled, trying to act casual, and put her hands between her thighs as if she was cold, which actually she did feel a little chill. In the dark he wouldn't notice her looking for the pills so she began feeling around.

"Oh, I'll turn the heater on for you," he said.

"Thanks," she said still running her fingers around. Then, she felt them in the crease of the seat. "Mind if I have a sip of your water?" She gestured to a bottle with her head.

"Sure, but it's been there a few hours."

"That's okay. My throat is really dry." She turned her head to look out her window, popped the two of them in her mouth and took a long drink from the bottle. "Thanks."

"No problem." He smiled but kept his eyes on the road.

Ten minutes later they arrived at a two-story home in a family-style neighborhood. Kyle grabbed the bag, got out of the car and started to walk around to her side intending to open her door. Before he got there she was already opening the door to get out. The cool breeze felt

exhilarating on her skin and flying through her hair. She froze for a brief moment to enjoy it and then her expression faded.

“Don’t worry,” he said as stood next to her. “Everyone here is really nice.”

“Did I say I was worried?” She walked up the driveway towards the house as Kyle followed closely behind. He thought about the women he’d been dating lately compared to Lucy. There was something intriguing about her, but he couldn’t put his finger on why he already felt an attraction to her. Hopefully tonight he could make her feel comfortable enough to reveal more about herself.

Walking through the door without knocking, they were greeted with “Kyle!” shouted in unison from half a dozen people. Lucy noted his obvious popularity. Like magic, a woman appeared from a doorway and handed them each a margarita. That will work. For the few cars that were outside, there were more people than she expected. The house was dimly lit and there were several candles lit throughout the main living area. Most of the guests were standing in and about the living and kitchen area and a couple was sitting outside, talking as if they were having a very serious discussion.

Kyle introduced Lucy as a friend to most of the guests but she barely remembered anyone’s name. They’d only been there for about thirty minutes, but the alcohol-pills-alcohol schedule she was executing caused her head to spin, fast! She spied a seat at the end of the sofa and went straight for it without letting Kyle know. She didn’t want to interrupt his conversation with a beautifully dressed woman who appeared to be the hostess. From the sofa, she watched as Kyle smiled and touched the woman’s arm during their conversation. Instinctively it made her smile for a moment. All around her she listened to bits of broken chit chat on various topics, until Kyle finally turned and noticed her on the couch.

“I’ll be right back,” he said softly in her ear after walking over to her. “Do you need to go?” He gestured toward the hallway and she assumed that meant the restroom.

“I’m fine,” Lucy replied taking note of the gentle way about him. It was like he was speaking to a timid child. She assumed he was that way with everyone based on her earlier observation; otherwise she may have been offended. Or maybe he was treating her with kid gloves. She wasn’t sure of anything at that point except that her head was starting to feel inflated.

Lucy watched Kyle as he walked off and disappeared down a hallway. *How the hell did I get myself into this on?* she thought. She figured that her best bet was to apologize and ask him to

take her home. On the other hand, she absolutely hated asking people for help or being an imposition. Before she knew it, she was off the couch and headed for the door. Walking past a sea of blurry faces, the door seemed to be getting further and further away. An arm that didn't appear to be attached to anyone reached out to her.

“Are you okay?” a voice murmured in slow motion.

Lucy picked up the pace and started running. She finally reached the door and bolted outside. There was no way she could make it home like this. She wanted to puke it out of her, but she was well aware it was too late for that. Her head was blowing up, spinning, but if she could get to a bus stop she was home free. About a year ago, Lucy was without her own transportation and completely mastered the bus system. She slowed from her run to a speed walk until she got to a main road, and miraculously tracked down a bus stop. After a few minutes of standing under the dimly lit bus sign, next to a thin Hispanic man, the bus finally arrived. She thought about jumping in front of it instead of getting on. How she made it back from there to the Sunset Vista apartments is a complete blackout.

When Benny's set was over, Anne was there waiting for him with a giant grin. “You were so great,” she cheered while doing little mini claps with her hands. She had explained that Lucy left, but saw most of his time. She also told him that Lucy apologized and said that Benny did a great job. He knew better. That didn't sound like Lucy, and Anne was always trying to smooth things over.

“Thanks, Anne,” he said modestly. “But I blew that bit about bosses.”

Benny had insisted on them following each other home to be safe. He enjoyed taking on that big brother role since he didn't have any sisters of his own, just brothers. Normally he would be going out to continue the laughs with his buddies, but he had to admit he was tired from all the apprehension of the night.

Returning from the parking lot, Benny and Anne walked back to the apartment. They talked and laughed about the show and hadn't even noticed that they were about to step right on top of Lucy. There she was lying on the ground a few feet away from the stairs.

“Oh my God, Lucy!” Anne screeched as she ran and kneeled down next to Lucy.

Benny was right behind her and took a swift glance around to survey the situation. “Lucy!” He grasped her shoulders and shook them slightly to see if she would jar awake. The night air was cool and thick and the full moon seemed to be providing the spotlight they needed.

“Do you think she was attacked or mugged or something?” Anne looked desperately at Benny. She was not used to this type of situation. “Should we call 911?”

“Hold on a second.” Benny checked her pulse and breathing. He was composed and acted as if he had experienced this many times before. “She’s breathing. Let’s see if we can get her conscious first.” He shook her again only a bit harder this time. “Lucy, can you hear me? C’mon Lucita, wake up!”

“Benny! We’re wasting time.” Anne grabbed her purse and began searching hysterically for her cell phone. “I’m calling 911.”

“Don’t make me kick your ass,” a slurred and quiet voice came from below. Lucy stirred slightly and groaned.

Benny and Anne shook their heads and smiled at each other.

“Lucy, you scared us,” Anne said. Thank God you’re okay. I mean, are you okay?”

“God...kill me now,” she moaned and rolled over to her side.

“C’mon girl, let’s get you inside.” Benny picked Lucy up like a new bride and carried her up the stairs to her apartment. “Anne, grab her purse.”

“Got it,” she said trying to sound helpful. She gathered up both purses and followed them up the stairs. Before reaching the top, Anne was able to find Lucy’s apartments keys to open the door.

In Benny’s arms Lucy’s eyes were closed but she spoke quietly. “I don’t need you Benny. I don’t need anyone.” A tear rolled down her cheek and landed on Benny’s arm.

“I know,” he whispered.