

WHAT'S NEXT, LUCY?



WHAT'S NEXT, LUCY?

W YLM A BOOK 3

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New Degree Press

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**What's Next, Lucy?**

*Wylma Book 3*

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*To my husband, family, and friends for  
showing me what it means  
to truly be loved.*



(Look Inside)

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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*“I fell in love the way you fall  
asleep: slowly, and then all at  
once.”*

—John Green

Dear Readers,

Love found me again, and I am never letting go.

Over the course of writing three books, I learned so much about myself and what I want in life. Healing is a journey worth taking seriously. I used to try to make others happy and comfortable in my life. But I realized, a bit too late, I shouldn’t drown my own happiness for others to tolerate my presence.

Healing isn’t a set timeline. I needed peace after the storm, not my “friends.”

In turn, I found joy after my heart shattered into a million little pieces. No one could move on but me.

If I wanted to find love again, I would. If I wanted to fall in love again, I would.

Through writing about Lucy's journey, I healed my wounds, traumas, and reoccurring nightmares. Memories that used to put me into a tailspin now bring me the comfort and reassurance that I can overcome any obstacle. I explored the inner depths of my mind to bring awareness to the story I hold dear to my heart, which I never imagined branching out into a third installment. But here I am, living my daydream. After all the heartache, the sleepless nights are worth it.

I used to feel alone, broken, and empty. Then I found myself in the tiniest of moments, my ex-boyfriend no longer haunting my dreams and every waking hour. Time slowly erased his existence and rewrote my everyday life into something I could finally smile about instead of the endless crying. My nightmares turned to magical dreams. I stopped looking over my shoulder in the grocery store. I found every- thing

missing since my devastating breakup:  
myself, love, and laughter. Now that I  
have all three, I never want to waste a  
minute of my youth again. I'm almost  
thirty, and my life  
just began.

I'm surrounded by my favorite  
people, and I can't help but grin.  
Everything finally fell into place. A  
sweet, new, and exciting story begins  
now—my happiness. I chose to embrace  
the pain and find joy, despite the storm  
raging within.

*What's Next, Lucy?* resembles the  
rainbow after the storm, shedding light  
on the devastating and joyful times after  
an earth-shattering heartbreak. A way of  
revealing my healing journey.

It's okay to experience sudden  
unexplainable sad moments in the  
middle of moving on from the past. The  
past defines who you are and who you  
can become, and that's the beauty

of healing at your own pace. My hope is to at least help one person find the strength to keep going after enduring and embracing the pain of endings. Starting a new chapter means gaining a chance to experience what life offers after a world ending moment.

I wrote this book for anyone who loves stories about hope, happiness, and finding yourself after the hard times.

Your happiness waits for you.

With  
Love,  
Em



# CHAPTER 1

## TWO TICKETS, ONE ADVENTURE

---

January 4, 2023

Falling in love again had never been my intention. But heart-break entered my world like a tornado, destroying everything in sight. My once comfortable life ripped away in seconds by the one man I had trusted for a decade. A life once cozy as a blanket now hurt to the touch after I caught my high school sweetheart cheating two years after we'd been married. That was how this all began.

Mason's arms tighten around my waist, my safe place in the middle of Huntsville International Airport. He

nuzzles his chin between my neck and shoulder. The voices fade to white noise, yet I can't help but worry about our future together, my other assignments, and a second marriage.

He wanted nothing more than to come on this trip with me—our first of many writing assignments. This vacation seems different than our other trips. Now I wear a ring on



my finger, solidifying the fact I found my person—his flame matches my own.

How am I supposed to pull all this work and relationship balance off? Will we be able to find our rhythm early? Will he even understand I need to stay in more and write over going out?

What if he hates it here? My future lies with us; my writing and I are a package deal. But I also can't lose him... ever. I can't bear the ache of another breakup.

I enjoyed my alone time, but somehow he reminded me why I searched for my soulmate instead of a casual fling. A soulmate encourages dreams rather than crushing them with their bare hands. David never physically destroyed my dreams, but when we ended, a part of me crumbled. I lost my writing spark. On my Paris trip, I finally found myself again. I can't break my spirit again.

If things tank on this trip, everything with Mason could end in a blink. I worry constantly. Part of me tries to convince myself I'll never make a relationship

function properly again. All this overanalyzing comes too soon, though. Every- thing will be fine, if only for a little while.

I busy myself with going over my article topics again. Mason won't mind if I zone out on my phone for a few minutes. Pushing the bubbling guilt down, I open my most recent email from my editor.

*Hello Ms. Berry,*

*On January 4, you will leave for your next writing assignment and return on February 4. I wanted you*

*to have a typed copy of your three article topics and your current timeframes.*

*Top Five Things to Do at Hollywood Studios—Writing January 5-12 / Due January 13 / Posted January 17*

*Best Disney Dining Experiences—Writing January 13-20 / Due January 21 / Posted January 24*

*Disney Is for All Ages—Writing January 21-28 / Due January 29 / Posted February 2*

*Best,  
Judith Garcia  
Editor-in-Chief  
Getaway Travel Magazine*

We are minutes away from boarding our flight to Disney World, my favorite place on earth. His hot breath hits my cheek, and I smell his lime-scented shampoo. His presence calms my

bubbling nerves. We shuffle to the front of the line as his biceps press into my chest.

Falling in love came easier than I ever imagined. I never want it to end.

The seatbelt lights flash and the pilot says, “Welcome to Flight 100 from Huntsville, Alabama, to Orlando, Florida. Thank you for choosing us for your flying needs. We’ll be taking off soon.”

I lean over to Mason and say, “So, how long do you want to be engaged? Long, short—what about a May wedding?”

He shakes his head at me. “Whatever you want, my dear. I’m glad I finally asked.” A few curls of his hair fall on his face, covering his emerald, green eyes. I want a ring the color of those magical irises.

“A May wedding gives us”—I count on my fingers—“four to five months to plan, depending on the date we choose. Closer to April or June, honey?” I tap my finger on my chin, remembering my old wedding date: June 5, 2018. Oh, the irony makes me laugh. New memories are needed more than ever after almost five years. The beginning of June brings dread and annoyance. I need to move on for real and make the end of May and the start of summer better.

“Planning a wedding from January to May, I’m down.” Mason catches my eyes, and we smile. “We also have your mom and Jenny to help.” He makes a great point.

I make a mental note and say aloud, “Well, we checked one thing off before takeoff.”

Everything about Mason screams safe, which made this the easiest yes ever. I let my diamond ring catch the sunlight from the slightly raised window shade. I squeeze his hand. “You and me forever and always, babe.”

“You and me forever and always and a *day*, babe.” He swings our hands between us, slightly hitting the armrest.

“You always have to top me, don’t you?” I smirk, unable to keep from teasing him.

He teases me without missing a beat. “Not always, but sometimes I enjoy it, if I’m honest.” I must have made a face because he adds, “Only because I love you so deeply.”

I lay my head on his shoulder, and he lays his head on my head. I take a deep breath. “I can see forever with you. I never want this to end.”

Before Mason, my comfort level around guys tremendously lacked. Of course, Michael Sparks and I are close best friends, but we terminated any romantic ideas long ago. I love him, but not as a life partner. His role will forever be... my best friend. Honestly, we made a marriage pact after my divorce. It stated *if we weren't married by our thirties, we'd marry each other*. Then, I met Mason on the edge of thirty, and we buried the marriage pact.

At first, sad and bummed, Michael said he'd end up alone. But Jenny and I reminded him no matter whom we married, he would always be our number one man. After all, he kept us sane for four weeks in Paris.

Yet, somehow, I can't believe I once swore off love to end up engaged within a year. Life moves fast when you love yourself first.

Mason kisses the top of my head. "I never want this to end, either."

I cuddle up to him and fall asleep, ready for my two-hour nap.

Hot air tickles my neck as Mason whispers, “Rise and shine, beautiful. We’re here.”

“Five more minutes.” I run my hands through my brunette waves, loosening the sleep knots.

He laughs and offers his hand. “We’re about to touch down in Orlando. You need to wake up. Let me see those beautiful hazel eyes.” He hits every word as if they are the most important ones.

Irritated and sleepy, I swat his hand away. “Touchdown? This isn’t football.” I groan and look around me. “I was sleeping so good too.” My eyes slowly adjust to the plane’s dim lighting.



“A little out of it, are we?” His smile widens as his nose bumps mine. “We’re landing. Are you excited or what, Miss Sleepyhead?”

I narrow my eyes at him. I want more sleep even though I napped after getting to the airport at seven. So how can I be excited about another airport?

The pilot interrupts my complaints after we land. “Welcome to the most magical place on earth, folks. Have a safe trip.”

“Believe me now?” He gently pokes my sides.

I roll my eyes at his irritatingly handsome smile while swatting his hand away. Then, I hear a double chime and see the seatbelt lights flash. The overhead compartments fly open, and suitcases clunk to the ground. Flight attendants help as fast as humanly possible as the aisles jam. I rub the grogginess out of my eyes.

Mason offers his hand again, and I take it this time. “Last chance for a clear opening. You ready?”

I smile back at him. “I’d go anywhere with you.”

He leads me down the aisle, and we finally step over the threshold into the hallway. The airport maze’s dense air encompasses me as the overhead signs blur together. I tighten my grip as we head for the luggage return.

He bumps my shoulder and says, “I won’t let the crowd carry you away.”

“You better not. I’m counting on you!”

We belt out Bruno Mars’s “Count on Me” lyrics in the middle of the airport. Of course, people stare, but we don’t mind.

“I love us!”

“I love us too!”

I plop on the bed and kick my legs in the air. “Ah! We’re minutes away from the Magic Kingdom.” I made the hotel’s location a top priority when discussing plans with my editor. Bay Lake Tower Resort sets within walking distance of my second favorite park. But seeing Cinderella’s Castle from the rooftop lounge is the cherry on top.

“Yes, we are.” Mason lays beside me and plays with my hair. “Now to tell everyone we made it.”

“On it!”

I roll over on my stomach and pull out my phone to start typing in the Mommas’ Group Chat. When we planned this trip, I always kept a text thread on hand with our two mommas. We may be in our late twenties, but we’ll always be their babies. Truer for me than for Mason because I’m an only child. Emma and Joshua—the twins—are Mason’s older siblings. His mom worries, but she carries more of a significant load than mine. I’m guessing her load takes a lot of energy.

Nevertheless, she continuously checked in, and I wanted to do the same.

Me: *We made it safe and sound to Orlando.*

Three dots on the screen disappear and reappear as our mommas type. I roll onto my back and look over at Mason. The sun through the open curtain casts a glow across the bridge of his nose. His eyes are slightly open, and his breathing seems calm and relaxed.

“We need to make sure we send them pictures,” I quietly remind him as he snoozes. “Their happy we’re safe and sound.” In a few months, I’ll officially gain Momma Lori, Mason’s mom, as my mother-in-law. I can’t believe it. I watch their messages roll in, one after the other. “They’re so sweet. I love them.”

Mason sleepily says, “Yeah, me too. They’re the best.”

I poke his shoulder and whisper, “Hey, babe, do you want to FaceTime Aaron and Jenny with me?”

He stirs and opens one eye. “Yeah. Sounds good. Then, can we nap?”

I fire off a text to Michael as I say, “Yes, after we Facetime Jenny and Aaron, you can nap.”

Me: *Hey, boi, Mason and I made it to Orlando. I hope you're doing well.*

I nearly fall off the bed when Mason's loud snore scares me. I mentally punch him and continue waiting for Michael to quit typing. The dots constantly go in and out.

Michael: *Glad y'all made it. I can't wait to read your articles. I'm doing well.*

Me: *Aw, thanks. We'll hang out when we get back. Miss you already.*

Michael: *When do y'all get back?*

Me: *In a month. Got to go. My fiancé keeps dozing off. Talk to you later.*

Michael: *Talk soon, girl!*

I gently nudge Mason's shoulder again. “One more call, then you can sleep. I promise.” I dramatically

punctuate each sentence.

My phone takes a minute to connect. Jenny and Aaron fill my screen. “I’m so happy to see y’all,” I say as Mason squishes his face into mine.

Jenny says, “Same.” Her brunette hair falls over her eyes. “Good or bad flight?”

“I fell asleep.” I wave my hands around my face. “Shocker!” She shakes her head as her green eyes shift to Mason.

“So,  
Mason, tell us about the flight.”

He bumps my shoulder and says, “A great experience, in my opinion. But, unlike Lucy, I stayed awake the whole time.”

“If he yawns, you know why.” I lightly tease him and shift my eyes from each face.

“Hey, I’m allowed to be tired.” He crosses his arms. “You woke me up early.”

Aaron, my brother-like best friend, says, “Oh no, did Lucy wake up at five in the morning again?”

“Well, we arrived at the airport at seven on the dot. But, yes, little missy woke me up at four-something with a phone call.” Mason chuckles. “After we hung up, I screamed into my pillow unsure of what I got myself into.”

“I remember.” Aaron runs his hand through his shaggy, brown locks and chuckles. “Jen’s phone vibrated so early when they left for their Paris trip in 2021. Her text came around five in the morning too. So, I understand, bro.”

Jenny laughs. “Now you see why she sleeps so well on the plane.”

“She can sleep anywhere.” Aaron’s blue eyes catch mine. “Hey, hey, hey!” I put my hand up. “I love my sleep. But,

in my defense, Jenny, Michael, and I also needed to arrive at the airport early too.”

“We know you do,” Aaron assures me. “We love picking on you.”

Being the voice of reason, Jenny cuts into the fun and says, “Let your man sleep. Then call us when you get to one of the parks.” She looks at Aaron, then adds, “Forgot to tell you, baby girl measured good today.”

“Sneaky, best friend. Keep us updated.” I twirl my hair then say, “We’re going to Hollywood Studios tomorrow morning. Not sure about the plan for tonight, though. Luckily for us we can walk to Magic Kingdom, but sleepy Mason wants to rest tonight. He wins,” I half joke.



With promises to update them as much as possible, we say our goodbyes and end the call.

Mason reaches out for me. I crawl over to him and lay my head on his chest—our favorite cuddling position. His snoring catches me off-guard.

I peek my eyes open and tilt my head, smiling. I constantly fall in and out of sleep. My body wants to rest, but my mind needs to plan. I stare at Mason a bit. He peacefully sleeps as his chest rises and falls in rhythm, with his back muscles tensing every few seconds. He snores with his mouth slightly open and blows hot air on my face.

I constantly poke and shake him harder each time. He stirs, half-opening one eye.

*Uh, oh, I'm in trouble.*

I sit cross-legged on the bed with barely any space between us.

His thick and sleepy, husky voice fills the silence. “Okay, okay, I’m awake.”

“I could have yelled in your ear,” I admit with an innocent grin.

“Please don’t ever yell in my ear,” he begs.

“Unless you just won’t wake up.” I hold up my pinky and link it with his. “I promise never to yell in your ear.” We put our thumbs together and kiss, sealing our promise to each other.

“You’re a blessing, babe.”

“I try to be.”

“Trust me, you are.”

Early in our relationship, Mason thanked me for minor things. Gestures I would consider the bare minimum, such as saying “I love you” when we left each other’s houses or

checking on the other person unannounced. Slowly, I understood he never received the healthy romantic love in the past—acceptance and love—from his exes. Mason struggled to receive the love he gave. Meanwhile, I experienced all kinds of love. A few of his exes aren't terrible, but some were worse than David, which sounds scary.

When he opened up about his romantic past, I wondered how he treats me so good. It breaks my heart how he can be so gentle after so many toxic relationships. I only suffered through one, so I can't imagine what he endured. I wish I had found him sooner and reminded him of the love he offered. He looks up at me and squeezes my hand. "Where'd you go, baby?"

I whisper, "I remembered how lucky I am to call you mine." He pulls me into his arms, and his muscles tense as he tightens his grip. "I'm not going anywhere. I promise." In a single grip, I sense every ounce of his struggle. "Never change

anything about yourself.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anyone else.”

“Good.” He whispers, “Do you want to plan now?”

“Ah!” I instantly perk up. “You’re speaking my language.” My stomach growls. “We should plan while we eat. Does room service sound good?”

He nods, as if saying *Don’t you know me and my stomach by now?*

Checking and rechecking my phone, time moves slowly. Mason sleeps beside me, unbothered by my worrying mind. Scaring him away remains my biggest fear. How can I juggle my work, relationship, and wedding? I’m overwhelmed.

After knowing him for over a year, I’m confident he’ll always support me. Yet, my worry keeps eating at my happy thoughts. One second, I’m bubbly. The next, I’m in a tailspin.

Why can't I be optimistic instead of wishy-washy? I'm a ticking emotional bomb.

I lay my phone down, tap Mason's shoulder, and say, "Have you talked to your siblings lately?"

He shrugs, eyes still closed. "I texted our group chat before I came over to your house this morning. Emma said to enjoy our trip. Joshua said, 'Cool, man.' They seemed half asleep."

I scrunch up my face. "I like getting an early start." "They'll forgive their little brother for interrupting their sleep one day, I suppose." He opens one eye and looks at me. Then, sticking his tongue out, he adds, "Don't worry, babe. They love me."

I cross my arms. "You're the silliest man ever."

He loudly yawns while stretching all his limbs. Then, rising, he rolls on top of me and pins my arms above my head on the mattress. "Oh, I'm silly, am I?" His breath tickles the inside of my neck, and I squirm underneath his weight.

“Yes, you, sir. I’m the adorable one. Remember?” I laugh and toss my head from side to side. Then, pushing my hands against him, I try to lift, but he pushes me into the bed.

“I may be tired, but I’m still strong.” His laugh comes out husky.

“Room service!”

The loud knocking scares both of us. Mason rolls off me and almost plunges to the floor. Catching his arm, he lays down, out of breath. I flick my eyes to the door and then to him. Nodding, he scrambles to his feet and skips to open it. We sit on the bed a few minutes later with burgers and fries between us, a simple go-to meal for the unofficial first day of my work vacation. A taste of home. My notebook and pen are to the side.

I swallow a huge bite then get to business flipping through my notes. Clearing my throat, I say, “I need to figure out what I want to write about in each article, which will help us plan where to go. Hollywood Studios marks my first article location.” I scratch my head. “Tomorrow morning?”

“Rock ’N’ Roller Coaster or Tower of Terror?”

“Are those your favorites too?” My eyes light up. “I prefer one over the other.”

I grew up going to Disney every so often, and those two rides are my absolute favorites. I would hit them first. Now, I’m the one planning the trip. I finally get to share my favorite vacation from my childhood with the love of my life.

He looks away for a moment then says, “Yes to Rock ’N’ Roller Coaster, not so much Tower of Terror. I’m more of a coaster person than dropping several stories at a time.”

“Me too. Ugh, more reasons to love

you.” My stomach flutters. “You’re definitely the right person for this writing adventure. You’re in your element, aren’t you?”

“If we can visit the *Star Wars* stuff, I will be!” He cheers. “Even better with you by my side.”

“Oh, you and your *Star Wars*.” I shake my head, smiling. “Finally, sharing this amazing place with someone I truly love and who truly loves me.”

“You’re my princess, so it fits.” Then, with his Yoda voice, he says, “My true love, only you can be.”

“You’re my prince, or should I say, Scoundrel?”

“You’re learning, and one day the student will become the master, my warrior princess.” The mattress creaks as he moves closer. “Seems you’re excited with how fast you’re writing.” He smiles. “Might need to take it easy with four weeks of writing ahead of you.”



I shake my hand out as I look over my notes. “Sometimes I don’t even realize I’m writing fast until my hand starts to hurt.” “Lucky for you, your man gives the best massages.” He half gloats.

“Thank you for being my forever travel partner.” He makes everything more exciting.

He squeezes me and says, “Nowhere else I would rather be.” “Even fighting fires?” I raise my eyebrows and cross my fingers hoping he says no.

“The guys can handle the city while I’m away.” He slaps his hand to his chest. “I trust my life with those fellows.”

Captain Charles, Mason’s Firehouse Captain, resembles more of a dad figure than a boss. He checks on them and keeps them in check with their mental health. He considers his crew his second family. Even still, Mason and his crew spent two weeks convincing Cap to say yes to his time off. Two of Mason’s

firefighter brothers stepped up to the plate. They'll cover Mason's shifts—Cap signed off, but not without making Mason promise to work overtime. One heck of a deal.

“Best squad for miles, huh?”

“I don't want to brag, but we're a well-oiled machine at Decatur Fire House 103.” His face softens as he talks about his people. “A band of brothers saving lives daily.”

“Oh, I found my reason why you're so attractive.” I try to muffle my raising giggle. “You're part of a band.”

“I swear you'd be content with laughing at your own jokes any day.” He runs his fingers through my hair and kisses my neck.

“I love laughing, so I'm okay with your little jokes, silly boy,” I admit and elbow his side.

He changes the subject. “Mr. and Mrs. Edwards in four months. Wow.”

“You stole my heart.” Goosebumps spread across my neck and arms. “Are you ready to share last names and everything in between?” I lean in real close, listening for his answer.

“Share everything with my favorite woman in the entire world? I would love nothing more, babe.”

“You and me against the world.” I throw my signature eighties fist in the air as if we’re in the *Breakfast Club*.

Am I capable of fulfilling all my deadlines? Am I ready for another trip, especially while planning my future with Mason? Maybe I jumped the gun too soon. Too many decisions. But we’re here now. Nothing can go wrong. If anything, we’re solid. Can I do all this while maintaining our connection, or will one get in the way of the other?



## CHAPTER 2

### ROCKING OR SCREAMING, MY DEAR?

---

January 5, 2023

My deadlines swirl around my head, capturing me in a spinning vortex. This trip marks the beginning of our Disney World adventures together, and my mind races despite my happiness. I need to find time to write, plan, edit, and everything else while still trying to enjoy our time together. How am I supposed to juggle everything all at once?

This assignment creates a once-in-a-lifetime experience to write about my favorite place. Nothing can bring me

down. But what if I worry too much about not writing enough? What if I'm too hard on myself, or worse, if I want to give up? As we approach our favorite park, Hollywood Studios, I wiggle in my seat. The sun blinds me as cars zoom by on the crowded Florida highway. I want to keep my eyes closed, but I also want to take everything in. Mason squeezes my hand

as a prerecorded voiceover announces our arrival and the pick-up and drop-off times.

The blue color palette hits me as we walk through the entrance—deep, sky, and baby blues. A whole Hollywood experience lives within these gates.

We scan our magic bands and push through the turnstile as teenagers trade pins and compliment each other's Mickey Ears. I come to a sudden halt inside the entrance, and Mason loses his grip on my hand. I pull him back to my side and look up at him.

“I want to take it all in.” Anything to keep shrugging off my looming deadline dreads. “We’re finally in the magic.” I paste on a cheery smile.

He nudges my shoulder and says, “Whatever you want, babe.” He rocks on his heels while I stare at the magic around us.

We weave in and out of the heavy crowds along Sunset Boulevard. Cast members

with balloons are everywhere. The Hollywood Tower Hotel looms over the guests. Screams from the elevators' victims echo in my ears.

We walk under the blue stretch limo, identical to the Rock 'N' Roller Coaster limo. The limo never stops for anyone or anything. At the staff's commands, passengers race through the city at top speed while hit songs blast in their ears. A roller coaster unlike any other. A one-way ticket to an Aero-smith concert with a need for speed awaits us.

I say, "Wow, only a thirty-minute wait." The early risers get first dibs.

Mason knows the way to my heart. He understands and appreciates the tiny details. I honestly got lucky when he entered



my life. No one else I would rather share this experience with than him. This trip marks my first time at Disney without my parents, which happens to be both weird and freeing.

We round the corner to the colorful marble door, and my eyes light up. The smooth surface cools my skin as I roll the heel of my palms over a row of little green marbles. “Oddly satisfying.”

He shakes his head at me and steps away from the door. “Best kind of satisfying!” Without another word, he scoops up my hand and swoops me off to catch up to the end of the line.

A cast member directs us to Studio A. I go directly to the front of Aerosmith’s recording studio setup on the screen. The famous rock ‘n’ roll band finishes their recording time as their manager storms in to tell them they’re late for their concert.

I lean over to Mason and whisper, “They’re about to say my favorite part.”

Steven Tyler’s voice booms through the makeshift studio as the whole band

begs their manager to give us, their super fans, backstage passes. They all want us at the concert as fast as possible. My blood starts pumping as their manager orders a super-super stretch limo to drive us to the highly anticipated show.

Mason wraps his arms around me and whispers, “Almost go-time.” His face acts as an extra hug, bringing my body warmth and peace.

I squeeze his arms, then instantly relax my muscles. “No one else I would rather be with than you.” I untangle his arms from me and lace my fingers through his rough hands. I pull him through the alley door.

The limo coaster pulls up to the ride’s speedway entrance. Passengers hold GoPros and phones as the recording counts

down to take off, telling passengers to keep their heads back. Then, the coaster stops, and over the intercom a cast member tells the passengers to put their devices away.

I put my hand over half of my mouth and casually say, “It isn’t y’all’s fault if they lose their devices,” which makes one of the cast members laugh while the other shushes them. The same coaster remains on the track. I tap my foot, giving the people in the waiting limo the stink eye. I’m ready to ride, and they’re holding up the line. “How in the world do they believe they’ll hold onto those phones and cameras with the corkscrew turns and loop de loops?”

Before Mason can remind me it’ll be okay, I blurt out something to the current passengers. “Put your phones away, or you’ll lose them. Don’t be stupid!”

A cast member announces the ride will start in two minutes. My shoulders ease as the last device finally goes down. Mason says, “Deep breaths.” Then, he

points to the tracks. “Look! And their off.”

I quickly check my notifications: one email and a few Instagram reactions so far. Nothing major, either. I read over the email in my drop-down bar, then click on it and start to answer.

*Hello Ms. Berry,*

*I hope this email finds you well and you're having a blast at Disney World. I wanted to check in to see how your first park day was going.*

*You only have three articles for this assignment and around a week to complete each. Setting a weekly due*

*date allows you to have free time during your final week in Orlando. So, buckle down now, and the last week will be fun!*

*As always, don't hesitate to reach out*

*with any questions. Best,  
Judith Garcia  
Editor-in-Chief  
Getaway Travel Magazine*

*[Draft]*

*Hello Mrs. Garcia,*

*Our morning couldn't be any better. As we stand in line, I'm even more excited to write later today.*

The roaring of the crowd catches my attention, and I lock my phone to see the chaos. The next blue super stretch limo shoots through the black hole into the many twists and loop tracks. "What's your favorite: front, middle, or back?" I say, my phone tasks forgotten.

He presses his lips to my earlobe and says, “I’m hoping for the second or fourth row.” He points ahead of us, and bounces on his toes. “I’m not quite ready for the front,” he admits.

“You always give me more reasons to love you.” I follow the crowd to the loading area, my nerves kicking in as if I’m eight again.

“My super adventurous ways?” His smirk drips humor. “Oh yeah, my attractive qualities.”

“So attractive,” I bashfully gush. “Add in being a firefighter, and I’m one happy woman.” Distracting myself from the seriousness of his job helps me cope. Unhealthy coping mechanisms in all the best ways.

“Soon-to-be firefighter *wife*.” He nudges me as a cast member points us to the second row.

“Oh, what a nice ring to it.” I flash my diamond as the passengers in front of us lock their restraints.

“I thought so.” He nuzzles his chin into my shoulder. “Future Mrs. Edwards.” The coaster proceeds to the entrance, and my nerves bubble in my stomach.

I say, “The best kind of ring. No longer Plain Jane, but Fancy Nancy.”

Our limo comes to a halt, and the small iron gate swings open. I step into the seat first and wait for Mason to sit down. We reach over our heads and pull down the restraints. Another cast member pushes down on our restraints and gives us the all-clear.

A few long minutes later, our limo pulls back into takeoff position. I push my head against the seat. “Are you ready to rock ’n’ roll, baby?”

I drum my hands against the metal bars, the anticipation killing me. Steven Tyler’s voice barely pierces my heavy thoughts. I continue to push my head into the seat until it throbs. I’m ready but also terrified. I love this ride with every fiber in my body.

Aerosmith, take me away. Please take me to the freeway and sing to me. I shut my eyes and prepare for the acceleration as I say to myself, “I will not be afraid. I am mighty. I love thrills and stomach drops.” The song comes in loud and clear. “Wait, did I email my editor back?” I yell into the void as we shoot straight to fifty-seven miles per hour.



*Four... three... two... screams erupt...*

I grip the metal handles and at the last minute decide to throw up peace signs. “Dude Looks Like a Lady,” knocks out my eardrums. I sing at the top of my lungs to keep from screaming.

I barely hear Mason singing as we flip upside down. I stop turning my head during the ride to look at him and face forward. Then, after the last curve, we halt in the tunnel, and my head bounces off the seat. I scream, “The best way to start the morning *and* trip.”

Mason squeezes my hand, reminding me I’m not alone. “Aerosmith’s top-notch ride has been waking sleepy park-go-ers since 1999.”

“Do I smell a researcher?” I arch my eyebrows even though he can’t see my face.

“Ha! You aren’t the only Disney-obsessed person in this relationship, little lady.” Color me impressed. I rubbed off on him.

I squirm in my seat. “Glad to know my obsession won’t even be a problem.” *I need to check my phone.*

“If you liked a guy, then maybe,” he honestly admits. “But Disney and research are harmless to me. Other than always having your nose stuck in a book or web browser.”

“You’re only sharing me with imaginary people and my editor. No big deal.” The coaster jolts forward, rocking me back in my seat as we approach the unloading dock.

“My ego can handle anything. No problem, babe.” We stop at the red-carpet entrance to the gift shop. We push up on the restraints and hop out of the super stretch limo.

We walk through the gift shop and up the ramp to the exit while swinging our arms. The sun blinds us while people zoom around. I look up at the gigantic red guitar. I shield my eyes with my hand and point to the incredibly complex

instrument. “Do you think your ego could survive playing a massive guitar?”

“My ego would be far too overwhelmed.” He rubs his neck. “Stardom never suits all.”

“We may be in the wrong park.” I laugh without a second thought about my nagging thoughts.

“No, no, no, we aren’t, my little movie buff,” he assures me as we walk under the model coaster and toward Sunset Boulevard. “Movie marathons over stardom any day.” He winks. “Oh, and music too.”

I roll my eyes and tug him through a family of twelve. “Okay, pretty boy.”

“But I could be a movie star for a day.” He glances up at the spooky Hollywood Tower Hotel.

The fake windows gleam in the morning light. The famous elevator shaft door opens as if on cue, and screams fill the empty void. The doors slam shut, capturing its victims one elevator at a time. On the outside, the hotel

resembles an average run-of-the-mill decades-old hotel. But, beyond the charming light pink exterior, something terrifying reaches out to guests. The hotel sign flickers every few seconds.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach. This ride scares the living daylights out of me. I can flip upside down all day long, but put me in a constantly dropping elevator, and I'm instantly nauseous. Little by little, we climb to the entrance. My calves sting. Finally, we're moments away from walking into the dusty lobby.

Mason stops inches short of the entrance, his face blank. "Come on." I cross my arms. "Don't be a baby about it."

He makes a twisted face and takes a deep breath. "I can't let you go alone. You could disappear forever and ever."

I punch his arm. "Now who's trying to scare who?"

“I had to perk myself up somehow.” A grin plays across his face as the fear tries to melt away. “I couldn’t come up with anything else.” The line thickens around us. We need to decide, and fast.

“Ah, I bet. People are cutting in front of us. Are you in or out?” I tug the living daylight out of his hand with no luck. His sneakers must be plastered to the concrete.

He scratches his neck. “I—I don’t know. I’m not so sure about this, babe.” Fear strangles his words, leaving him breathless.

“It’ll be so much fun.” I gesture to the entrance. “You can’t let me go all alone into a haunted hotel.”

He pulls me out of line. People hurry past us. Mason leans in real close and puts his forehead to mine. Then, looking deep into my eyes, my soul, he whispers, “I’m scared of fall- ing. This ride terrified me as a little boy. Little me almost fell out of the elevator.”

I shiver at his final revelation. Yet, my heart melts for him. I’m so deeply in

love. I can't let my love go to waste. I need to encourage him. I squeeze his sweaty hands in mine and look into his eyes again. "Do you want to conquer fear or let fear eat you alive?"

He takes deep, heavy breaths. "I can't."

"You can, Mason Scott Edwards." I push onward as if I'm the most confident person in the world, even though I'm far from it. "You're not the same little boy anymore. You're a firefighter, for goodness' sake. You, my love, are a hero."

He squirms against my forehead as he considers my argument. Finally, he pushes away and, with all seriousness, says, "I am Mason Scott Edwards, and I am fearless."

My stress melts away as his confidence encourages me to be a little braver.

Without another word, we cross the threshold.

As we walk through the double doors, I run my hand over the steel line divider. Dust coats the furniture, decor, carpet, and ceiling. My nerves kick in as we wait at the clerk's desk. I stare at the elevator on the back wall. Then, finally, I say, "Are you so sure about playing the disappearing game?"

"As long as I'm disappearing with you." One of the hotel clerks points a handful of the line to the haunted library. The automatic fake wood doors open. Mason squeezes my hand as we step across the yellow caution line.

"Remember, we got this."

We shuffle into an old-timey circle room lined with dusty bookshelves and antiques. A small vintage television sits on a shelf as the hotel employee's spooky voice booms through the room.

Before Mason can entirely part his lips to speak, the lights cut off, and the television set turns on. The screen illuminates with a starry night sky and a

door slamming shut with back-ground vocals from *The Twilight Zone* legend Rod Serling.

As Serling tells the 1939 disappearing story, I grip Mason's arm. A shiver runs down my spine. The tale of five random guests and the hotel's bellhop disappearing unsettles me. Yet, here we are, waiting to board the same mysterious service elevator. No matter what I do, this monologue always scares me. *The Twilight Zone* never advertises to the faint of heart. His voice cuts off, and dim lights turn on down a long hallway to the service elevator in the boiler room. I lean into Mason's shoulder and whisper, "You got your stardom wish." We walk around the boiler equipment. "A hallway to stardom," he says. "I'll take it." A few seconds later, we arrive at the gate.



“I need to reappear to keep a writing career,” I scream above the noise. “And to check with my editor, you know?” *Do I need to email her back?* We round the corner as we inch closer to the elevators. *No, I emailed her before our last ride.* I push the worries down and focus on the task at hand, getting Mason and myself through this ride.

“We won’t be long. The ghosts will throw us right back.” He jokes when his nerves get bad.

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’ll talk their heads off and annoy them.” He shrugs and grins. “Serves them right for scaring Little Mason.”

A bellhop ushers us to the circles in front of the elevator doors, reminds us to hold on to all belongings, and tells each row to sit down. We buckle our seatbelts across our laps, and I mush my backpack against the backrest. I press my shoulder to Mason’s and grip his hand and the handlebar. The doors slide shut, and the elevator spins around. Showtime.

The opening sequence makes me shiver.

Mason presses his lips to my ear and whispers, “I got you, darling.” He sits further back in his seat and looks straight ahead. “If I can face my fears, so can you. I’ll see you on the other side.” His voice trembles as he tries to put on a front.

Moments later, our elevator stops, and a spooky voice booms from the speakers with an eerie message. My heart starts pumping as Mason’s hand tightens around mine. I mentally prepare for the drop of my life.

The black hole of doom spins. We fall fast and hard. All I hear are screams. The air brushes against my face. My butt lifts off the seat as we drop at least four more stories. We pause for a minute, then fly straight up. My butt slams into my seat. I grip Mason’s hand even tighter. He stares straight ahead with his mouth wide open. The elevator doors reveal

a bird's-eye view of Hollywood Studios. A camera flashes, and we drop two more times.

We abruptly stop in the hotel's dingy basement, and the ride finally stops. Scattered along the dusty walls are abandoned suitcases and belongings. My heart races, and Mason's sweat mixes with mine. *Gross*. I catch my breath. He takes deep, calming breaths but tries to smile for me. He gives a shaky thumbs up.

Rob Serling's parting words crackle out of the speakers. Mason whispers in my ear, "*The Twilight Zone!*"

I ought to smack him for pulling a Mr. Berry on me. Growing up, my dad always scared me during the library part, so I never expected it today—no parents, no dad to scare the bejesus out of me. Until now, when Mason would fill those shoes.

I kiss his cheek as the doors reveal a bellhop reminding us to reconsider our choice to check into a haunted hotel. Then, with a daunting grin, she waves us

out of the service elevator and into a dingy area connected to the ride's gift shop.

I lace my fingers through Mason's and swing our arms. We push open the gift shop's heavy doors, and the sun blinds me for the billionth time this morning. "Did you enjoy your rise and fall to fame, baby?" I ask him.

"Best ride of my life." He bounces on his toes. "I'm energized."

I shake my head and smile. "Want another go? Need a snack?" We walk down the endless pink concrete slope.

"You know I can't pass up food." He pats his stomach. "But I say we ride both rides a couple more times before we call it a day in this part of Hollywood."

"We can kill a couple more hours before lunch anyway." I sit down on the nearest bench and pat the empty space. "So

let me quickly check my notifications, and then we'll hit the rides again.”

“You're the boss,” he says and bumps my hip.

I open my email, and my entire world comes crashing down in a split second. “Wait, I finished our conversation earlier this morning.” I read her opening sentence over and over, trying to process her words. “I wrapped everything up and sent back an update and everything.”

*Ms. Berry,*

*I never received a response to my previous email. Although, I hope you're having a blast at Disney World.*

*This second email stands as a friendly reminder. Your articles are on a deadline to publish on a set schedule. If you cannot meet your January 13 deadline, we may need to change course or run someone else's*

*piece in your time slot. Let me know your update as soon as possible.*

*Best,  
Judith Garcia  
Editor-in-Chief  
Getaway Travel Magazine*

Mason pats my shoulder, trying to calm me down.

“Babe, I messed up.” I cry. “Maybe I only replied in my head.” “Check your outbox. Maybe you forgot to hit send, or it failed to go through on Mrs. Garcia’s end.” He rubs small circles on my back. “It’ll be okay. Deep breaths.”

I frantically switch from tab to tab, not finding the email I supposedly sent back. Tears blur my vision as I try to type a new email. “I need to explain. I need to fix this.”

“It’ll be okay. Mrs. Garcia will understand.”

“She’ll have to. Maybe it slipped my mind. Maybe I re- member wrong.” I hit the keyboard faster and faster until I’m happy with the final product and hit send.

*Hello Mrs. Garcia,*

*I apologize for my long delay in replying to you. I thought I had sent a reply to your first email. Something must have happened. We’re having a great day. We got an early start at Hollywood Studios.*

*I have written the article deadline dates on my calendar, and I already have an outline drafted in my head. This first article is going to be a*

*blast. I can make the deadline—no  
need to fret.*

*Thanks  
, Lucy  
Berry*

I refresh my sent box constantly, making sure my email remains real. Patting the bench seat, I tap my foot hard against the sidewalk. I might be sick on Sunset Boulevard.











