Road Ode

by SallyExactly

Summary

After Rittenhouse is defeated, Lucy takes the scenic route home. She invites Flynn along.
North Carolina

It started with the car. No; Lucy’s sense of academic correctness rejected that. Really, it started with Agent Jimenez and her wife, a year or so earlier.

Lucy leaned against the door and watched Agent Jimenez pack up a box of evidence. “You heading home soon, then?” Agent Jimenez’s wife was due soon, Lucy knew, with their first child, back in the Bay Area.

But the other woman shook her head. “I’m driving the car back. It has to get back to our headquarters.”

“What?” Lucy glanced at the car. “Can’t someone else do that? It’s like a week of driving.”

“Two and a half days, if you really push it.” She flashed Lucy a smile, but it was weak and worried.

“But… your baby…”

“Half of our team is in the hospital,” Agent Jimenez pointed out.

Lucy winced, and nodded. Rittenhouse, Emma, had not managed to kill any of the team— the Time Team— or Agent Christopher’s team— before being captured, but that appeared to be by the grace of God. One agent had just graduated from critical to fair condition, and the other three were stable.

“I’m lucky just to be alive,” Agent Jimenez added. “And if I drive fast, I should get back in time. It’ll be fine.” She glanced around. “Unless one of you wants to take it,” she added jokingly.

Jiya glanced up from fiddling with the Mothership and shook her head apologetically. They had both time machines; they needed both their pilots. Rufus and Connor were arguing over the Lifeboat and didn’t even hear.

“Sure,” Lucy said. “I will.”

Agent Jimenez put down the box. “I wasn’t serious.”

Lucy wasn’t sure what exactly had made her say it. But the breeze through the open barn door was soft and tranquil, and whispered to her of places far away. Of new vistas, and things that weren’t war, and peace.

“I was,” Lucy said.

“… oh,” Agent Jimenez said. “Um. If… if you really want to, then… yes, absolutely.”

“Yeah,” Lucy said. “I do really want to.” The words felt strangely grounding.

Flynn wandered over, leaning against the tool bench, and glanced at her inquiringly.

“I’m going on a road trip,” Lucy explained. It was corny, but she already felt better for the prospect. “Wanna come?” she added, half-joking.

He hesitated, then nodded once.
She was startled. She hadn’t even told him—where, or why—

She hadn’t expected this to be an appealing prospect. But if she wanted to delay returning to San Francisco because she had so little left there, well… What did he have left anywhere?

He caught her hesitation, and his face changed. Before she could reassure him—

“Hey,” Wyatt said, coming up on her other side. “You ready to go?” He smiled, a little hesitant. “Agent Christopher says she can get the rest of us out of here tomorrow morning.” He glanced around wryly. “Don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to seeing California again.”

She felt the old pull of attraction. It would be so easy to lean into his personal space, tease him a little… Let him make the amends he so clearly wanted to make. Let bygones be bygones.

But… she couldn’t.

It was ironic that after everything that had happened, she wasn’t actually gun-shy about guns. Nope. She had to be love-shy.

“Actually,” she said with a friendly smile. “I’m driving back.”

“What?”

Agent Christopher came in on Wyatt’s heels, glancing at the two of them, so Lucy replied to both of them. “The Mothership detector needs to get back to San Francisco, and Agent Jimenez’s wife is due any day now, so I said I’d take it.”

Wyatt frowned. “Just load it on an airplane.”

“We can’t,” Jiya said. “The system interferes with aircraft navigation.”

“So turn it off.”

Jiya looked at Wyatt, as if to say, you think we didn’t think of that?

Wyatt looked exasperated. “It’s not safe. Rittenhouse could still be out there.”

“Uh, Flynn’s coming with me.” Lucy glanced sideways at Flynn, but his face was unreadable.

Agent Christopher raised her eyebrows. “Is Amina in labor?” she asked Agent Jimenez. Lucy could see her trying to balance her roles as compassionate person with competent Homeland Security agent.

The younger agent shook her head.

“Would you have wanted Michelle to be alone when she was about to have Olivia?” Lucy asked Agent Christopher.

Agent Christopher looked at her a little tiredly, but didn’t disagree.

“Look, I’ll come with you,” Wyatt said, with a look of dislike in Flynn’s direction.

“Wyatt, you have to get back to Pendleton.”

“I can… take a few days…”
"No. The whole point of a road trip is not rushing."

Wyatt looked so hurt that Lucy regretted saying it… but she needed a break. Hopping on I-40 and driving west as fast as they reasonably could, was not what she had in mind.

“Right,” Wyatt said. “And Flynn doesn’t have anywhere to be.”

He sounded so poisonous saying it that Lucy immediately took back her regret.

Agent Christopher looked between the three of them. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Having more of a transition than stepping into the Mothership, stepping out of the Mothership, and pretending to be a good little assistant professor again? Yes, I think it’s an excellent idea.”

Lucy paused. “With the Mothership in our hands, this equipment isn’t good for anything, right? It’s just going to sit in a warehouse somewhere anyway.”

“Yes,” Agent Christopher admitted. She looked at Flynn. “And you’re okay with this?”

Another single nod, but his face was closed off, now, in a way it hadn’t been before.

“You’re just going to release Homeland Security equipment into the custody of a known terrorist?” Wyatt demanded of Agent Christopher.

Agent Christopher looked at him rather coolly. “Actually, I was going to release it into Lucy’s custody.”

That took the wind out of Wyatt’s sails, but he was still obviously pissed off.

“Ex-terrorist,” Flynn added. “They formally dropped the remaining charges this morning. Right, Agent Christopher?”

Agent Christopher eyed him. “I was coming to tell you that. How did you already know?”

Flynn shrugged, and tried to look innocent, which succeeded about as well as Lucy doing a graceful pirouette. “What, you thought I was a bad spy?”

“I think you were a terrifyingly competent spy,” Agent Christopher said frankly.

Flynn looked smug.

“Lucy, look,” Wyatt said, stepping closer to her, taking the conversation away from Flynn and Agent Christopher. “I can see if I can get some time off, and I can go with you. Two weeks? Would that be long enough?”

“You know, I didn’t hear her invite you,” Agent Jimenez pointed out.

Wyatt looked at her, affronted and confused.

“But maybe I heard wrong,” Agent Jimenez added, ostentatiously busying herself with her work.

Lucy bit back a smile, relieved, on balance, for the interruption. Because she really didn’t know what she would’ve said in reply to Wyatt.

“Okay, fine,” Wyatt bit out. “Lucy, you know where to find me.” He walked away.

Lucy looked down at her hands. When she looked up again, Jiya had glanced after Wyatt and was
now exchanging speaking looks with Rufus.

“You can leave in the morning,” Agent Christopher told her, after a slightly awkward silence.

Lucy hesitated, then glanced at Flynn. “Is that okay with you?”

“I think I can manage all my copious packing by then.” But he still wouldn’t quite meet her eyes.

Great. Now she’d pissed off Flynn and Wyatt. And she’d just wanted some peace.

She sighed.

She’d hoped they could spend their last night together, well, together. But Flynn was in his room, Agent Christopher was busy with the logistics of clearing out this base and moving her people, Wyatt was helping her and apparently didn’t want any help himself, and Connor was up to his elbows in Mothership guts, happy to be reunited with his baby again. So it was just Lucy, Rufus and Jiya.

“So, uh,” Rufus said. “Road trip with Flynn?”

Lucy almost regretted joining them, and she felt horrible for feeling like that. “Yep.”

“Well,” Rufus said. “Some people juggle geese.”

Lucy looked blankly at him.

His expression softened. “Have a good time. Call us if you need anything.”

Jiya nodded.

“So, uh,” Rufus said. “Road trip with Flynn?”

Lucy almost regretted joining them, and she felt horrible for feeling like that. “Yep.”

“Well,” Rufus said. “Some people juggle geese.”

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Jiya nodded.

“Like emergency Star Wars facts for trivia night,” Rufus added.

Jiya looked at him. “And we’ll do dinner when you get back,” she said. “You are coming back to San Francisco, right?”

Lucy nodded. “That’s the plan.” It came out less enthusiastic than she’d intended. “To begin with, anyway.”

And after that… what?

Stanford probably thought she was dead. Anyway, they hadn’t wanted to give her tenure. She could start over anywhere, do anything…

but she was so tired.

Jiya gave her a soft, sympathetic look. Lucy probably didn’t have any right to complain, did she?

Lucy felt like she’d be blinking back tears in a minute. So she excused herself to the bathroom—she had to go anyway—splashed some cold water on her face, and on her way back, detoured to the kitchen for some snacks. Agent Christopher would just have to clear it out tomorrow anyway, right?

“Anybody want some—“

Her bright, determined voice petered out when she found Jiya kissing Rufus fiercely up against the Lifeboat. She recovered from her startled immobility and crept backwards—
“Oh—!” Rufus had seen her.

“Sorry. Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

The other two pulled apart. “We didn’t know you were back.” Jiya’s breathing was a little uneven, her mouth a little swollen. “Sorry.”

“I don’t, um…” Lucy tried again. “I don’t need to be a third wheel. I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Stay,” Rufus said. “Look, Jiya and I are going to the same place, we’ll be seeing each other all the time.”

Jiya nodded. “You’re the one who’s leaving.”

“Sh- she’ll probably get sick of me,” Rufus added—

“Never.” Jiya’s voice was unyielding.

Oh, Lucy’s heart ached for her friends. She’d seen how Jiya watched Rufus, relieved and hungry and tinged with disbelief all together. Rufus had been dead less than a week, but it would take years for Jiya, especially, to fully recover.

“Stay,” Jiya added, and Lucy didn’t want to make them feel like they’d done something wrong. So she did.

“Unless you’re tired and need to go to bed,” Jiya amended. “I know you have a lot of driving tomorrow.”

“What’s the plan?” Rufus asked.

“The plan is that there is no plan, and that’s the point of a road trip,” Lucy said.

“Fair enough.”

Lucy opened the chips and the pretzels, and they munched for a minute. “Are you going to miss anything about this?” she asked quietly.


Lucy smiled.


Her smile broadened. “I’d be happy to.”

“I’ll miss the team, too,” Jiya said after a minute. “And it’s weird, you know, because… I’m glad I can stop fighting a creepy time-traveling cult who wants to take over the world, but also? I don’t like thinking I’ve done my best work before I’m thirty.”

“Jiya, you’re going to do amazing things,” Lucy said. “Both of you. Even more amazing.”

“So are you,” Rufus told her quietly.
Lucy locked that contentment away in her heart for later.

“What about you?” Jiya asked. “Are you going to miss any of this?”

Lucy wasn’t drunk. But she was with friends, and she was too tired to lie to them. “Having a team,” she admitted softly. “Having a family. Having a place where I… belong.”

“You, uh, know that’s not going away, right?” Rufus sounded concerned. “I mean, we saved the world together. We escaped the Alamo and Nazis together. We’re not gonna just go our separate ways.”

“I want you to promise you’ll crash on our couch for as long as you need,” Jiya said.

“I don’t—”

“Pinky promise,” Jiya said. The sternness of her face, the resolute lines that three years in the past had only strengthened, was so at odds with what she actually said that Lucy burst out laughing.

“Pinky promise,” she agreed, linking her finger with Jiya’s.

They watched a little terrible television, and Lucy enjoyed Rufus and Jiya’s trenchant critiques of the science even if she didn’t understand all of them. Then she yawned. “Actually, I am going to bed,” she said. “I don’t know how far we’re going tomorrow, but it’ll be a while.”

Both Rufus and Jiya got up to give her hugs. “See you in the morning,” Rufus said.

“You’re not going to leave without saying goodbye, right?” Jiya added.

“Nope,” Lucy told her. “Pinky promise.”

She headed down the hall and yawned again—

“Lucy.”

Her heart sank. When had it started doing that around him? “Wyatt, I don’t want to fight again,” she said quietly.

“No,” he said firmly. “I just— I’m sorry.” The words seemed to stick in his throat, but he forced them out.

Her defensiveness eased. “Thanks… thank you.”

“Sometimes…” He hesitated. “Sometimes I forget how much you’ve been through.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You forget how much I’ve been through?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re… stoic.”

She lowered her eyebrows so she could raise one again. “Stoic? Like Marcus Aurelius?”

“Yeah. Him.” He tried a lopsided smirk. “Last of the Good Emperors, right?”

“Wait, how do you—”

“Hey, I read stuff.” He hesitated. “I don’t blame you for wanting a break. And I may not understand your, uh, choice of drivers…”
“Wyatt—”

“But I trust your judgement,” he finished.

“Thank you,” she said softly, and meant it. It occurred to her he was maybe being a little condescending, but it was easier to just be relieved that they weren’t going to fight.

She looked at him, standing close enough that she could smell his aftershave. The spark of attraction was still there, ready to roar up without much provocation… but she was just too tired. Like all of her feelings, it felt sealed away from her behind a transparent barrier of existential weariness.

And what she didn’t feel, right now, was trust. With her life, sure, but… not with her heart.

“Have a good time,” he added. “Send me lots of pictures.”

“Definitely.” She managed a smile, and it felt genuine. “Each one’ll have a history lesson in a hundred and sixty characters.”

“Of course it will,” he muttered.

Her smile brightened. “Good night, Wyatt.”

“Good night, Lucy.”

She reached her bedroom, opened the door—

“Doctor Preston?”

She turned. It was Agent Jimenez, with a duffel bag slung over her shoulder. “Hey.” Lucy greeted her with a smile. “Heading out?”

“Yeah. I’m taking a flight tonight, actually. I wanted— I wanted to say thank you. A lot. It means—” She swallowed. “This means so much to me.”

“Of course,” Lucy said quietly. Her weariness eased just a little, because this— this was why they’d saved the world, right? “Send me pictures of your little one, when she arrives.”

“Absolutely,” Agent Jimenez promised with a ghost of a laugh. Her face lit up, the grim strain of a Homeland Security agent who’d just helped to save the world replaced by the happiness of a new mom-to-be. “I hope you have a lot of memory.”

When Lucy finally got to sleep, after throwing her few things in a duffel of her own, she slept better than she had since Chinatown.

She woke early the next morning. She, selfishly, didn’t want to be the one watching the others leave. She hurried through a shower, stuffed everything else in her duffel, and filled a travel mug with coffee for the road.

It was early enough that she was surprised to find the others in the garage. But it thawed that thick barrier a little, to know they’d wanted to be sure of catching her.

The special Mothership-tracking equipment, the whole reason for the trip, took up the entire back seat, with no actual seats and only a narrow gap behind the front seats. Lucy threw her duffel in the trunk instead, beside Flynn’s, and closed the trunk.
“Pinky promise, huh?” Jiya said sternly.

“I was going to drop my stuff off and come find you,” Lucy said. She came over and gave Jiya another hug. “Safe jumping. I’ll see you in SF.”

“Yep.” Jiya reached down and linked their pinkies, and Lucy smiled.

Agent Christopher was next. “Did Agent Jimenez get home?” Lucy asked her.

“She should be touching down right about now.” Agent Christopher looked at her, her expression warm. “That was a good thing you did.”

“Oh, yeah,” Lucy said lightly. “Such a sacrifice to tour the country visiting amazing historical sites.”

Agent Christopher’s mouth twitched. “You know that’s not what I meant,” she said softly.

Lucy looked down. “The war, it’s taken so much from us,” she said finally, so that no one beyond the two of them could hear. “I wanted to give someone something.”

“Doctor Preston, I am proud of you, and I am honored to know you,” Agent Christopher said. Lucy was glad they hugged then, so no one could see how her eyes watered.

“Travel safely,” Agent Christopher added. “Call me if you have trouble.”

“I will,” Lucy promised.

Over Connor’s shoulder, she saw Wyatt hesitate, then hold out his hand to Flynn. Flynn eyed it, then eyed Wyatt. The two of them shook hands about as enthusiastically as if they were each grasping a snake, but hey, it was something.

Wyatt turned to her as Rufus and Flynn eyed each other. Wyatt pulled her into her arms, and Lucy didn’t resist. They stood there for a long moment; his scruff was rough against her cheek.

“Be safe.” His voice was rough, too, and low.

“I will,” she promised.

“Call me if—”

“Wyatt, what could possibly be out there that’s worse than Rittenhouse?”

He paused. “… rabid grizzlies?”

She snorted.

Last, as Jiya said “what the hell” and hugged a startled-looking Flynn, Lucy and Rufus said goodbye. “Safe travels,” he told her. “May the Force be with you.”

“Live long and prosper,” she told him.

He eyed her. “I can’t tell if you actually know enough about science fiction to be trolling me.”

Lucy laughed, and hugged him.

And then Agent Christopher was handing her the keys, and she got behind the wheel as Flynn
moved the front passenger seat back as far as it would go. After the noise of all the farewells, the car was quiet as they pulled onto the gravel driveway. She realized Flynn was the only one she hadn’t talked to that morning.

She finished the seventeen-point-turn to get them pointed in the right direction, glanced back as the others waved, and glanced at Flynn, too. “I figured we’d head north.” Her voice sounded uncertain to her own ears.

“Fine.” He closed his eyes.

If he opened them again for the next hour, she didn’t notice. It was very quiet. She fiddled with the radio, but nothing came in except static and staticky country. Of the two, she preferred the straight static.

“We’re taking the back roads,” she added, when they finally came up on where they would’ve turned for the interstate.

Flynn grunted.

She looked at him, again, and felt that old niggling sense of, you screwed up. “You didn’t have to come, you know,” she said quietly. Maybe she was wrong, but…

“If you’re having regrets about asking me,” he said after a minute, “the ideal time to tell me would’ve been before we left.”

“No.” She felt stung. “I just meant— Flynn, I didn’t invite you as a bodyguard.”

“Don’t worry, Lucy,” he said after another pause. “I’ll see you safely to San Francisco.”

“I know you will.” She didn’t have to think about that before she said it. “But that’s not why I asked you to come. I just…” She trailed off.

After a minute, he exhaled. “I’m sorry, Lucy,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean to be an ass. I wasn’t sure if you were…” He glanced sideways, and hesitated. “Wasn’t sure if you were serious about your invitation until Wyatt objected, and then I didn’t want to, uh, leave you in the lurch.”

“I— well, I was only not serious to the extent that I didn’t think you’d want to come.”

“Ah.” His expression turned a little warmer, a little tentative.

“You’re, um,” she said. “You’re… good company, and I thought maybe you could use a break. Like me.”

“Well. Ah. Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

One of the good things about the back roads was that, at least some of the time, you could take your eyes off the road for a little longer than the interstate permitted. When they weren’t going around a steep mountain curve, she glanced at him again and said, “Anything in particular you want to see along the way?”

He exhaled again. “Not really.” His face fell into familiar, tired lines, and she had a moment of thinking where she remembered them from.

Her mirror.
Oh.

Her feeling of isolation eased a bit. Of course he knew.

“Let me know when you want me to drive,” he said, sliding low in the passenger seat and swinging his legs to the dashboard in a way that should’ve been impossible.

One of the benefits of driving a fancy Homeland Security car was the enhanced navigational system. Lucy glanced at the big map; they were about an hour from the state line. “When we hit Virginia?”

“Fine with me.”

They headed north towards the border. The wind blew steadily through the open windows, tangling her hair, and the miles rolled quickly by under the tires.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After crossing the border, they got on the Blue Ridge Parkway. The car was quiet again as they followed the narrow two-lane highway flanked by long, uninterrupted stretches of trees, but the silence was much more comfortable than when they’d began their trip.

As they wound into the mountains— Lucy, a native of the western half of the country, wanted to call them hills and had to sternly remind herself of local custom— she was glad Flynn was navigating the curvy road. That left her free to watch the beautiful scenery and let her mind wander.

Her mind wanted to watch for Rittenhouse agents, still expecting them around every corner. Maybe they were. Maybe Lucy and Flynn were wandering right into a trap, and the peace of the late morning would be interrupted any minute now by shots. Flynn knew what it was like to have quiet tranquility erupt into violence—

Stop that.

It was done. After capturing Emma, Agent Christopher’s people had found her local base of operations and gotten a wealth of information. They knew how many people she’d brought east. They knew what she’d been planning. They knew, thanks to Jessica Logan, about the civil war in Rittenhouse after Mom and Nicholas’s death, which had left the loyalist faction disorganized enough for Homeland Security to be mopping them up back in the Bay Area right now.

Jessica Logan. She’d fled Rittenhouse and turned herself into Homeland Security when Emma had learned the location of the Time Team’s safe house and planned to slaughter them all in their sleep. Jessica had saved their lives and given them a wealth of useful information, but Lucy didn’t think it would be enough to spare her from prison. Which left Wyatt… what?

She thought of how tightly he’d held her that morning. She just… she wanted it to be real, so badly. She wanted him to be safe.

But she remembered the look on his face when Agent Christopher had told them Jessica had come in.

Something in her heart had cracked with a feeling of quiet finality, right then, and ever since, she’d been pretty sure she knew the truth, even if he didn’t yet.

Ever since. It had all happened so quickly. Less than a month ago she’d been sitting on the cold floor of the old bunker, in shock over Rufus’s death. Everything had happened so soon after that: evacuating the bunker, modifying the Lifeboat, finding Emma’s next targets, saving Rufus, doing three missions back-to-back-to-back, and then fighting for their lives back in 2018. She’d barely had any time to just sit and think. The thought of going straight back to San Francisco after that whirlwind, to try to reanimate the cold remains of her old life with the cut from Emma’s knife still fresh on her neck, was even less appealing than it had been last night.

As Flynn drove them slow mile after mile of winding mountain roads, where the average speed limit was about 40, raucous birdsong came in through the open windows; the breeze gloriously disarranged her hair. She, Doctor Lucy “Situations I Can Control” Preston, right at the moment
when she could have gone back to a semblance of control and familiarity, was on an impulsive road trip with no plans, no destination, no expectations.

If she spent the next two hours completely zoned out, just staring at the fresh green of the late spring leaves, literally no one on the planet would know except Flynn. And he wouldn’t care.

She felt her shoulders drop.

She opened her eyes when she felt them turn off onto a rough road. “Mmm?”

“I, uh, took the wrong turn back there,” Flynn said. “There’s no room to turn around, but I think this will take us back.”

Lucy winced as they bounced slowly down a gravel road with a steep drop-off to her right. “Oh, look,” she said, when they reached a crossroads. “There’s a historical marker.” More precisely, it was a sign pointing to a historical marker down the intersecting road. “It’s only four miles.”

“Four miles is a long time on a road like this.”

“We have time.”

So Flynn hauled the car around onto an even narrower, more rutted gravel road, and they crawled down the side of the mountain. The tires churned up dust. Lucy coughed, and rolled up the window. The map in the console was a complete blank.

She had time to regret her choice before they reached another paved road. She sighed with relief as the ride smoothed out. “Just another mile or two.”

The marker, when they reached it, was set off to the side of the road. Flynn pulled onto the grassy shoulder, which was possibly part of someone’s lawn, and Lucy scrambled out excitedly.

“It was… a school,” she said, when Flynn came up behind her. “A, um. Baptist school.”

She paused.

“Kinda thought it would be more exciting,” she admitted.

“Well, look on the bright side, Lucy, we only went four miles out of the way.”

She looked up at him. He was smirking.

“It’s about the journey, not the destination,” she said, attempting dignity.

He just looked at her, and she couldn’t stifle a burst of laughter. She tilted her face up to the sun, and took a deep breath in, then out, feeling like she was shrugging off another vestige of the old bunker.

They went the long way around back to the parkway, because it was paved. When they got there, the whole detour having taken about an hour, Flynn prudently filled the tank with gas. Lucy stopped in to the convenience store, which seemed to double as the local grocery store, thinking it might be the last time in a while she had a chance to buy food.

“Look,” she said as they left the little community and headed northeast. “What’s that point to?”

Flynn glanced at her, but nobly refrained from reminding her what had just happened on their last detour for a historical marker. But this time they only had to go a few hundred feet before they
came out at a distinctive rock church that Lucy vaguely remembered having seen in a picture once.

They kept going, through tiny communities and up and down steep, wooded climbs, interspersed with wide-reaching views of mist-shrouded ridges. They stopped at an overlook and Lucy took over the driving again. Flynn pushed the passenger seat back as far as it would go, put his feet on the dash, and appeared to go to sleep.

It was well into the afternoon when Lucy saw signs of Roanoke coming up ahead. She saw other signs, too— she glanced at Flynn, then stealthily turned down an even narrower, more winding country road.


He opened one eye, glanced at her, then closed his eyes again.

She only got lost once on the way there. Flynn trailed her silently to the visitor center, the living history sites, and down both the site’s walking paths. “My mom always liked Washington,” Lucy said, as they looked inside the slave cabin where he’d been born. “I used to think it was because of his focus on education, but now I wonder if it was because he, you know. Mollified the “good whites.”” She made her air quotes dramatic.

Flynn made an enquiring noise.

“He, uh, fought with other activists,” Lucy added. “Douglass was the only one who could hold that movement together, and when he died, no one could quite fill his shoes. Ida Wells-Barnett and her husband thought Washington was too accommodationist. It was a bitter rivalry— hey!”

Something had tugged sharply at her shirt. She tried to whirl, but her shirt was still in a tight grip. She tried to crane her neck— she hadn’t heard anyone come up— she caught the tail end of a look of alarm vanishing from Flynn’s face, and it finally occurred to her to look down —

A goat had the long end of her shirt in its mouth, and was regarding Lucy calmly.

She tried to shoo it away, back to the rest of the livestock, and discovered goats did not shoo. Flynn was laughing almost too hard to help, but finally got it to drop her clothes. Lucy quickly whisked her shirt out of its reach. It stared at her, maintained eye contact, and clamped down on her purse.

“Oh my God,” Lucy said, tugging hard. She had to tug very hard. Abruptly the goat let go, and Lucy fell on her butt.

Flynn offered her a hand up, still snickering, as the goat, having lost interest, wandered back out of the cabin. “Ready to go?” Flynn asked, mouth almost managing to be solemn.

She gave him a slanted sideways Look.

“Or were there, uh, other detours you wanted to make?” he added with a smirk.

They headed back towards Roanoke. In “‘Things I Would Not Have Predicted’ for $400, Alex,” being knocked on her butt by a goat had, somehow, loosened the tension. That tension hadn’t been between them, though. It had been… within her.

She’d once told him he was the easiest to talk to. Today she’d discovered he was also the easiest to


“I thought this would be a good transition,” she said as they headed towards the city. “But it was so peaceful out here… in some ways that was even stranger.”

He sipped at his water. “Past tense, huh?”

She gave him a dirty look, but couldn’t help smiling. He smiled back, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“It’s never…” he began after a few minutes, then trailed off, wincing a bit when she glanced over. “It’s never easy to come home from war, Lucy. Even when you still have a home.”

He paused, and that one sunk in.

“Be gentle with yourself,” he added. “You’ll get there.”

She snuck another look. “So, the journal told you I was Doctor ‘A Plan For Everything And Everything In Its Plan’ Preston, huh?”

“It did, but if it hadn’t, meeting you would have.” In her peripheral vision, she saw him look at her.

“Okay,” she finally said, softly, not entirely sure which part she was referring to.

They stopped at a diner for a very late lunch or early dinner. Lucy realized how hungry she was. Wyatt had called her stoic, and… well. But it was true she’d gotten out of the habit of paying attention to her body’s needs. She ate her way through a large plate of broiled chicken and roasted potatoes, and still had room for sweet potato pie.

Food… food could taste really good. She’d kind of forgotten that.

The scenery somehow got even prettier when they continued their slow crawl northeast. “It really doesn’t bother you?” Lucy asked, as they traveled along what felt like the roof of the world.

“Taking the scenic route?”

Flynn was quiet for a moment, navigating a sharp curve in the road. “It doesn’t bother me at all.”

She leaned back in her seat.

They realized they’d need to leave the parkway to find a place to stay to the night, and detoured to the highway. The sudden business of the traffic made Lucy’s shoulders creep up again, but they found a little motel on the edge of things.

“Two rooms, please,” she told the bored-looking teenaged clerk. “Next to each other.”

“Adjoining,” Flynn added.

The clerk looked at Lucy. Only when Lucy nodded did she say, “Sure.”

The clerk found them two rooms that not only adjoined but were on the back side of the motel, where the parking lot faced a huge stand of trees rather than opening directly onto the highway. Flynn asked to check hers first, and she let him. When he came out and nodded, Lucy carried her duffel bag inside, and… that was it. That was all the unloading she had to do. She looked around the room, decided not to bother unpacking, and wandered outside after a few minutes. She settled into the rickety swing hanging from the boughs of one big tree, and checked her phone.
Rufus had texted her a picture: he and Jiya grinning almost maniacally, giving the camera three collective thumbs up, with two foil-wrapped burritos on the table, a plate of chips and guac, and a busy street in the background. CIVILIZATION!!!!!!! the text read.

She smiled. Easy for you to say, she replied, as she saw Flynn wander out of his room. I got attacked by a goat.

oh my god, you want us to come get you in the lifeboat? he wrote back almost immediately.

Lucy shuddered, and painstakingly filled her screen with the word no before sending.

She decided to return their selfie. She smiled at the camera, but her olive shirt and brown cardigan wanted to blend into the swing and the trees—

“May I?” Flynn appeared—materialized, how the hell did such a big man move so quietly—in front of her. She handed him her phone. He poked her phone a few times, then handed it back for her to look.

Yeah, that was much better. She sent it to Rufus, with the caption, it has its moments, and then, after a moment’s thought, to Wyatt.

Kinda a leia in endor vibe, Rufus replied a moment later.

Lucy frowned at her phone. “What’s Endor?”

Flynn looked nonplussed. “As in the witch of Endor?”

Lucy shrugged, and replied to Rufus, I’m not a witch.

A moment later, she got a little frowny face with its hand to its forehead. Hurry back so we can stage an intervention.

A new message, this one from Jiya: I approve of your trolling.

What? Whatever. Lucy loved them, but she didn’t speak their obscure geek language.

pretty, Wyatt wrote back. After a minute, he added, nice trees, too.

Lucy snorted. Then she yawned. Her phone lit up; it was… Agent Christopher.

Lucy was too tired to resist the sharp pang of dread she felt. “Hello?”

“Is everything all right, Lucy?”

“Yeah, it’s… it’s fine. Why?”

“You’re heading north.”

“Oh.” Lucy hesitated. “I just— I— the car’s fine, we’re just taking a little detour, it’s just—nothing’s wrong— we’ll get it there—“

“Lucy.” Agent Christopher’s voice had turned gentle. “I didn’t call to scold you. If you want to take the scenic route, go right ahead. You’ve more than earned it. I just wanted to be sure you’re okay.”

“Oh.” That cold, empty place inside her that had come and gone at intervals ever since that
climactic pair of bullets, Wyatt’s into the Mothership’s controls, Flynn’s into Emma’s chest—eased a bit. “Really?”

“You were right when you guessed that the machine is just going to sit in a warehouse. And I know you’re safe with Flynn.”

Lucy glanced at him, which was a bad idea, because it was a dead giveaway they were talking about him. So she changed the subject: “Did you get home okay? See Michelle and Mark and Olivia?”

“Yes.” Agent Christopher’s smile was audible. “Yes, I did. We’ll have to have you over for dinner again when you get back. No business this time.”

Lucy added the knowledge that she was collecting dinner invitations to the store of reassurance she was keeping in her heart. “I’d like that.”

They didn’t talk long. When they hung up, she stood to go back to her room. Flynn was sitting on top of the equally rickety picnic table, courteously out of earshot. He looked like his mind was very far away, but he pulled his attention back to her as she came closer.

“I’ll, uh, see you in the morning,” she said. She hesitated. “Thanks for coming with me.”

He looked at her, his expression soft. “Good night, Lucy.”

#

There was no coffee maker in the room, which meant Lucy had to go through her whole morning routine and actually go out before she got coffee. The caffeine never seemed to be as effective when she drank it later, but the morning was chilly and she was grateful for the coffee’s warmth.

She snuck a sideways glance at him, and remembered the morning he’d brought her coffee. Because she’d woken up in his bed. Her face heated, and she was glad he was focusing on the road.

It was a nice memory. She just wasn’t sure what she wanted to do with it.

Everything had happened so quickly. There’d been so little time for dwelling on her feelings. In the days before they saved Rufus, that had been a mercy. Grieving, and supporting Jiya, and then celebrating Rufus’s return, and still supporting Jiya, had been a higher priority. And between that, and Wyatt telling her he loved her right after running after Jessica, and then Jessica turning herself in…

Lucy had just been emotionally exhausted. Thinking about… about anything else, about Wyatt, about Flynn, had seemed like it could keep. So she had let it.

And now, well… now maybe there was time to think. But she was still tired. So she drank her coffee, and watched the scenery.

She didn’t really wake up until he asked, “How far north do you wanna go?”

She looked sideways. “I… hadn’t thought that far ahead. Did you think of something you want to see?”

“No.”
It struck her how well she could read him by now. The lines on his face were deeper than usual. He glanced at her, but it was a moment before he spoke.

“I’d rather avoid the Lincoln sites,” he said finally. His mouth twisted. “Cowardice, I know.”

“No, that’s— fine,” she said automatically. “We have to turn west anyway, we can leave the parkway at Shenandoah. I know a route we can take.”

He didn’t say anything, and she knew that this, too, was more than simple silence.

“I’ve never been sure,” he finally said, haltingly, “whether you— wanted an apology, or whether I’d just be… indulging a selfish impulse, but Lucy, I am…” He swallowed. “I am sorry, for everything I put you through. I know that, uh… probably means nothing.”

He stared straight ahead, his knuckles white.

“No,” she said softly, surprised. “No, it does.” She hesitated. “Thank you.” He had to know that she’d stopped being afraid of him almost immediately, and had stopped resenting him not long after that. For him to think an apology was still warranted… she felt a little touched.

It did occur to her that maybe her self-esteem could use a bit of a supplement regime.

He nodded once. His grip relaxed.

She watched the road for a while, enjoying the sight of the mist-shrouded ridges as the breeze ruffled her hair.

“Flynn?” she began finally. “Can I… ask you something?”

He glanced sideways, and nodded.

“Did you believe Emma when she told you that— you’d gone back and saved, saved them, and it reset the timeline, and Rittenhouse—?”

Had told them, in fact, that Lucy— another Lucy— had told her.

Flynn didn’t respond. He didn’t even look her way. But the set of his jaw told her he’d heard.

“I’m— I’m sorry,” she offered after a minute. She’d overstepped, she shouldn’t have— “I didn’t mean—”

He shook his head. “It’s all right.” His voice was low and rough.

He pulled off at the next overlook, got out, and glanced back at her. She understood and followed. He leaned against the stone wall and looked out over the valley below.

“I don’t know if it really happened, in one timeline or another,” he said finally, very quietly. “But I think it could.”

She watched him as the wind swished through the new leaves above. Over the valley, some kind of hawk circled.

“I think it could, and— we won,” he said. He looked tired. No, he looked existentially weary. Lucy knew the difference very well by now. “How many timelines have we been through, Lucy? Was the Lucy who brought me the journal really from the original timeline? Or was there one before that, and one before that? And… one before that?”
His head dropped. “We won,” he repeated. His voice was guttural. “And as long as no one messes with the timeline, it’ll stay that way. For good.”

Tears rose in Lucy’s eyes. She swallowed.

“What they wanted, for the world? I can’t trade Lorena and Iris for that,” he whispered. “What’s that expression? Quit while you’re—” His voice broke. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out except a choked-off breath.

“Ahead,” he managed finally.

“Flynn, I’m so sorry,” Lucy whispered.

He shook his head once.

“I knew that they were lost to me,” he said after a while, his voice thick. “After what I’d done. I’d — made my peace with that, or I thought I had. If they had suddenly appeared in front of me, I don’t know…” He trailed off. “But I still thought I could bring them back.” He sounded bewildered, lost. “They— they both objectively made the world a better place.”

She hesitated, then took a step closer and put her hand on his shoulder. It was all she could offer, and that it was inadequate did not mean she shouldn’t try.

He looked startled, and looked down at her. His face was dry, but his eyes were red. She wanted to tell him that if he offered her any encouragement, she’d hug him, but cowardice made the words stick in her throat. After a moment, he looked out again, and she let her hand drop.

“That’s probably more of an answer than you wanted,” he said finally, tiredly.

“No,” Lucy said. “No, it… it’s not.”

They were quiet for a few more minutes. She watched him slowly draw himself back together. Finally, he looked at the car. “Shall we?”

“I’ll drive.” She held out her hand for the keys.

He hesitated, then nodded and gave them to her. But at the car, he stopped her. “I’m sorry about Amy,” he said quietly.

Her eyes prickled. She ducked her head, and nodded. When they’d captured the Mothership, they’d also captured the entire log of Emma’s jumps, and it hadn’t been too hard to work out what she’d done to erase Amy. She’d been telling the truth in 1918. It was very, very permanent.

“Want me to, uh, drive, after all?” he asked after a minute.

She shook her head, wiped her eyes roughly, and got behind the wheel.

They were about fifteen very quiet minutes up the road when her phone chimed. She pulled off at the next opportunity and grabbed for it, bracing herself for the worst even though she knew it was probably just a text from Rufus or something.

“… oh.”

“Everything all right?”

“Yeah, just… Amina is in labor.”
“Who’s Amina?”

“Agent Jimenez’s wife? The reason we’re taking the car, so she could get home?”

“Agent Jimenez? Oh, the, uh, trilingual one.”

“Trilingual? I only knew she spoke Spanish and English.” She’d heard Flynn and Agent Jimenez chatting in Spanish, in fact.

“And Quechua. She learned it to speak with her grandmother.”

… huh. Lucy had not known that. She reflected on his remarkable ability to connect with people, that he’d used to devastating effect first against them, and then while on their side.

Lucy reread the message again: *It’s started. Thank you for letting me be here.*

Grief’s biggest lie, and exhaustion’s, too, was telling you there was nothing outside of it. That little acts of resistance didn’t matter.

To *hell* with that.

They turned off the parkway at highway 250, and headed northwest. They stopped at a diner in Staunton for lunch. Lucy searched the menu in vain for something recognizable as a vegetable, that hadn’t been cooked and sugared within an inch of its life. But the coconut cream pie made up for it. If the whole trip was full of pie this good, she was going to put on weight.

Back on the road, she followed the signs through town to stay on the route. They swung north. On one side of the road was a pair of giant flower pots as tall as she was. On the other side—

“Flynn!”

His eyes snapped open, instantly alert.

“The Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library is here!” She was already changing lanes to make the turn.

She was disappointed that they were there on the wrong day for the “Wilson & Slavery Tour,” but she still eagerly went through the Manse and the museum. Flynn followed her gamely.

“Did you know he was the only president with a doctorate?” she told Flynn excitedly, as they stopped in front of a photo of Wilson in academic garb. “He once said he thought being a professor was the only profession he found appealing.”

“So how’d he become president?”

Lucy sighed. “Academic politics was the first step on the slippery slope.”

They visited exhibits exploring the contradictions between Wilson’s Progressive politics, and his support for segregation. Then there was an exhibit on the suffragists—

“Oh my God that’s Rufus,” Lucy said. “Oh my God, that’s you.” She pored over the photo— she, Wyatt and Grace were all out of sight— then snapped a picture and sent it to the group chat Rufus had made sometime this morning.

“Right,” Flynn said. “Commemorating the moment when he almost got the shit beat out of him for being an utter idiot.”
She missed the right turn at a strange, off-kilter intersection, and pulled into the parking lot of the public library to get pointed in the right direction again. Then she realized there was a sculpture of a giant book in the landscaping. She turned off the car and scrambled out. She had to take a picture.

“I am terrible at selfies,” she muttered a minute later. “How do people do this?”

She turned around. Flynn, who had followed her out of the car, held out his hand with an expression of long-suffering.

He got ample opportunity to practice that look over the next two hours after she discovered the self-guided walking tour of historic downtown Staunton. “Thanks for indulging me,” she said a little sheepishly as they headed back to the car.

His expression softened immediately. “It’s not exactly hard, Lucy.”

They followed the old turnpike out of town, climbing towards the backbone of the mountains on roads that made her glad she was claustrophobic and not agoraphobic. She glanced at the map, realized how lightly populated the area ahead of them was, and decided to stop for the night in the last town of any size before the border. The first B&B they checked— there were no chains this far up in the mountains— was full, but they managed to get two rooms at the second. The rooms were adjacent. Flynn still insisted on checking hers.

“You don’t think we’re safe here?” she asked him.

He shook his head once. “If I actually thought you were in danger, I’d sleep across your door, as the resident guard dog.”

She wasn’t sure what about that irritated her so much, but she gave him a hard stare.

“There’s just no point in taking chances,” he explained. “Good night, Lucy.”

“Night, Flynn.”

She got ready for bed and checked her phone. Wyatt had replied to her picture of the book: so it’ll take you about two hours to read something that size, right?

I’m SO glad me getting attacked by a cop is memorialized in history. Definitely how I want to be remembered, Rufus had replied to the other.

She smiled, and took a quick picture of the view from her window. She’d just sent it to the three of them when she got a slew of texts— oh, from Agent Jimenez.

Lucy blinked, then smiled again, tears rising in her eyes, as the blurry photos resolved into a wrinkly newborn, with dark curly hair and ochre skin, resting against what Lucy guessed was Amina’s warm brown chest.

esperanza fata dauda jimenez, the last text said. Lucy pressed her hand to her mouth.

This was what they’d fought for. This wrinkled little raisin of a baby would grow up in a world free from Rittenhouse. Rittenhouse would never do to another child what they’d done to Iris Maria Flynn.

Lucy went to bed not feeling quite as exhausted as before.
He watched the moon rise over the mountains, and thought about his girls.

He’d been willing to die for them. He’d tried, more than once. Now, he had to live without them.

He had to live with the knowledge of all the horrible things he’d done trying to bring them back—trying to stop Rittenhouse and save the world, too, of course, but also trying to bring them back. He’d ruthlessly smothered his conscience, considering that a sacrifice for the greater good, only to find out he hadn’t quite killed it off permanently. Now he had to live with what he’d done, and the knowledge that it hadn’t been enough.

He had to live with their ghosts. The memory of how Lorena would bite her lip and irritably brush her hair out of her face when bent over the computer with a difficult task. The memory of Iris falling asleep on his lap as he and Lorena watched television in the evenings. The knowledge that he’d never see any of those things again— and that the only record was in his fallible brain. How long would his memories last?

He had to live with knowing he’d given them up to save the world.

He knew, intellectually, he’d made the only reasonable choice. He knew even better than the others what Rittenhouse had planned for when they were in control. He couldn’t sacrifice three centuries of even irregular, inconsistent, insufficient progress for his wife and child. Lorena would have been fucking horrified for him to choose her over a world where women weren’t considered property.

He knew all that. It did help. But it didn’t do one thing to ease the ache of longing loneliness.

Worst of all was knowing that this feeling would pass, and he’d be able to go on.

He sighed, and rubbed his palm over his face. He thought about why he was thinking about this tonight in particular.

Lucy could get under his skin like no one else left alive. No… no, that implied an irritant, and she wasn’t that, not at all. But she could get through his armor and leave him exposed, helpless, before he’d even registered she’d turned her attention to him. She’d had that ability long before they’d fought on the same side.

It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it was a vulnerable thing. That question she’d asked him today, he wouldn’t have answered for anyone else. Did she realize that?

He thought about today, trailing her through the museum, through downtown Staunton. He thought about watching some of the bone-deep exhaustion, the unacknowledged grief, slowly leave the set of her shoulders, the lines of her face. About hearing a little of the leaden weariness vanish from her voice.

He’d grumbled out of reflex, but, trailing a brilliant scholar— who was also brave, badass, and, incidentally, very beautiful— to historic sites that were in her wheelhouse? Not exactly a hardship. He’d bet money that before this trip was out, they’d end up in a place related to someone on whom Dr. Preston was literally the world’s foremost authority.

He got up and silently checked downstairs, the front door, the back door, and the hallway their rooms were on. Then he stretched out in the creaky bed and went to sleep.
Blue Ridge Parkway: [https://www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm](https://www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm)


Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library: [https://www.woodrowwilson.org/](https://www.woodrowwilson.org/)

Credit for the idea that there have been several previous timelines goes to RedGold. Credit for the idea of Flynn avoiding Lincoln-related historical sites goes to deathmallow’s Make Amends With All My Shadows

*Esperanza* and *fata* are Spanish and Yoruba, respectively, words for hope.

Finally, in the interests of transparency: this fic may gain additional ships. The most likely, but not only, option is Lucy/Flynn. I'll just have to wait and see what the characters do... but I didn't want anyone reading under false pretenses.
Lucy woke early the next morning, thanks to the birds that started chirping raucously two hours before dawn… aka, Satan’s alarm clocks.

They hadn’t really gotten dinner, just snacked from the stash in the car, so Lucy devoured the ample breakfast the B&B put out for its guests. By seven thirty, they were packing up. By eight, they’d crossed into West Virginia.

“Plans for the day?” Flynn was once again slouched down with his feet on the dashboard. His still-wet hair fell in his eyes. It was a little endearing.

“I thought it might be fun to follow the old Staunton to Parkersburg turnpike,” she said. “The Union and the Confederacy fought over it during the Civil War. It should be a quiet, winding drive.”

“Sure.” He closed his eyes, and appeared to go to sleep.

That was fine with her: the sun hadn’t yet burned off the morning mist, and she needed to focus on navigating the sharp curves of the narrow highway. But after a while, when they were lower down the pass, he asked, “Were they just fighting over the route through the mountains?”

“Well, that, and, if the Confederacy was in control here, they could protect the salt.”

“Salt?”

“Yeah, it was a vital commodity. They had salt works south of here. But the Union controlled the turnpike for most of the war.”

“Huh.”

She decided to take the turnoff to Cheat Summit Fort, which had been critical for control of the turnpike. There wasn’t much left to see, but the earthworks were interesting.

She also discovered that clothes suitable for the North Carolina foothills definitely weren’t warm enough for a cold morning in the mountains of West Virginia.

“This battle was the first time in the Civil War that Lee led troops into combat,” she told Flynn, as she heard his footsteps behind her. She’d been in sight of the car the whole time, so he hadn’t felt the need to join her. “If he’d won, West Virginia might not exist.”

Flynn wrapped something around her shoulders. She automatically grabbed it to keep it from falling, then saw it was his bomber jacket. “Don’t you need this?”

“You’re the one wandering around out here.”

She gratefully zipped it up. “Thank you.”

The sleeves fell way past her hands, and Flynn’s residual body heat warmed her fingers nicely. The faint, elusive scent brought back a sudden memory of the night she’d, um, accidentally taken his bed.
She turned away, and focused studiously on the layout of the earthworks.

They pushed on to Beverly. The little museum there punched way above its weight class; Lucy was impressed. Then they detoured five miles west to Rich Mountain, the site of a pivotal battle for control of this region. She wandered, grateful for the warmth of Flynn’s jacket, and avoided the lingering pockets of snow that lurked in the shadows. She tried to imagine what it had been like here on July 11th, 1861. Was she disappointed that now she’d never have the chance to see for herself? Or grateful?

Both, she decided, as she looked out over the valley, hearing the whistle of artillery in her mind. She could feel both.

She saw how high the sun was in the sky, and looked around guiltily for Flynn. “I, uh, didn’t realize what time it was,” she said when she rejoined him. Then she felt doubly guilty, because she still had his jacket. Was that turtleneck warm enough? “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t think we had a schedule to keep,” he said. “It’s, ah, about the journey, not the destination, right? Besides,” he added with a smirk, “I saw what happened to the last guy who tried to get between you and history.”

“That was an accident,” she retorted, cheeks flushing, as she fumbled for the shreds of her dignity. “I didn’t know Justice Marshall’s law clerk was right there, or I never would have— yeah.”

Flynn’s smirk deepened as he held out his hand for the keys.

They drove on. She discovered that the radio now produced something besides static, and staticky country, and turned on a comfortingly bland pop station. The road felt like one long, narrow curve flanked by endless trees, and she was glad Flynn was driving. This way, she could just watch the scenery.

“But imagine coming through here on horseback two hundred and fifty years ago,” she said softly. The early European settlers, whatever their other qualities, had taken a path into what was to them the unknown, continuing ahead without much idea of what they might find. In comparison, surely she could manage to put her own life back together.

She saw Flynn turn his head to glance at her. A few minutes elapsed before he said, “I, uh, traveled terrain much like this on horseback, once.”

“Oh? When?”

“The war. Wars,” he amended.

“Croatia?”

“And Bosnia, and Kosovo.”

She eyed him for a little while, chewing on her lip. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Something personal?”

He nodded once.

She still hesitated before saying, “Why’d you enlist so young?”
He didn’t answer right away. “I’ve never been good at, uhhh, sitting around,” he said finally.

“I’ve noticed.”

He glanced sideways before continuing, “There was… a cause. It needed people. And, with the levels of overconfidence only a teenaged boy can achieve, I thought I could… help. I thought… I thought nothing else could be as important as helping.”

Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo. Those had all been close to home. But Chechnya? Nepal? Afghanistan? Darfur? Somalia? She wasn’t sure Flynn had ever grown out of thinking nothing else could be as important as helping.

“And, I didn’t want to be at home any more,” he added, with a sardonic twist to his mouth she couldn’t interpret. She wanted to ask why not, but she’d pried enough for the moment. If he wanted her to know, he’d tell her.

He didn’t.

They stopped outside Buckhannon for gas. Flynn filled the tank; Lucy went inside to use the bathroom. She looked around at the food in the convenience store, but turned her nose up at all of it. On her way out, she passed Flynn on his way in, and got the keys from him. She turned the car on and idly searched for some music.

“I’ve been on this lonely road so long,” Karen Carpenter crooned, “does anybody know where it goes?”

Lucy’s throat closed up, but she joined in: “I remember last time the signs pointed home, a month ago…”

Except it had been a lot longer than that for her. And she didn’t even—

Right now, “home” was six fragile, hurting people, no walls, no job, no life.

*Rented cars and empty motel rooms, lead you everywhere but home…*

She was almost glad when Flynn opened the car door. “Don’t, uh, stop on my account, Lucy,” he said rather awkwardly, as he climbed into the driver’s seat.

She shook her head, and they kept going.

*Come tomorrow, I’ll be gone again. Roads of sorrow, coming to an end for me…*

Lucy turned the radio off.

About ten miles down the road she began to regret passing up food at the gas station. They were traveling through the occasional populated area, now, and she could ask Flynn to stop next time she saw a place… but she was reluctant to break the rhythm of the drive. The car felt like a bubble, held away from the real world and all its complications.

She turned the radio on again. After a while, Carole King came on. Because of all the times Lucy had sung this song for Amy, *to* Amy, whether teasing or sincere, she found herself singing along despite herself: “You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I’ll come running to see you again…”

She sighed when the song was done, and was glad when something instrumental followed it.
Flynn didn’t seem to want to stop driving, either. They reached the outskirts of Parkersburg in late afternoon. “Hey?” Lucy said, yawning.

“Mmm.”

She checked the map. “This is probably the biggest city for a while.” She was hoping they could maybe head south, so pressing on to Columbus would be out of their way. “I know it’s kind of early, but how do you feel about stopping for the day?”

“Fine.”

So they continued into town, and found a hotel. “Two rooms, adjoining, please,” Flynn told the desk clerk.

“Sorry, we don’t have any adjoining rooms.”

“Adjacent, then.”

The clerk checked his screen. “Unfortunately, we don’t have any rooms left next to each other. The food festival is tonight,” he explained. “Lots of out of town guests. You folks here for that?”

Flynn shook his head once.

“I could put you on the same wing of the second floor,” the clerk offered.

She and Flynn looked at each other, and stepped away from the desk. “I’d rather, uh, stay close, Lucy,” he said quietly.

She hadn’t asked him to come with her for his protection, and she’d told him so. And yet she knew he considered it a matter of course to get her safely to San Francisco.

“Do you want to find another hotel?” he added.

*Rented cars and empty motel rooms…* “I don’t mind sharing if you don’t,” she said carefully. It wouldn’t be the first time, after all.

“Fine.” He stepped back to the desk. “One room, non-smoking, two beds.”

Flynn checked the room quickly and then gave Lucy her pick of beds. “Any, uh, sites you wanna see?”

“All of them,” she murmured absently, checking her phone to see what was in the area.

He snorted.

“Oh! Blennerhassett!”

“… uh, bless you, Lucy.”

“You know Aaron Burr?”

“Jefferson’s vice president and Hamilton’s killer? No, never crossed paths with him.”

“He wanted to carve out a bunch of land for himself, from the Louisiana Purchase land or maybe from Mexico or Texas. Harman Blennerhassett let Burr use his private island to keep all his supplies and train his men. Until Burr got busted and charged with treason. Anyway, the island is
west of here.”

Pause. “You wanna go?” He made it sound like more of an inevitability than a question.

“Mmm.” She checked the details. “The only access is by boat, I don’t think we’d have time… but there’s a museum.” She glanced up. “You don’t have to come.”

“I don’t mind.”

So they headed downtown to the museum. Lucy worried that, his assurances notwithstanding, Flynn was going to get bored following her around to historic sites, but there seemed to be plenty to hold his attention. There wasn’t anything earth-shattering here— but history wasn’t just big events, it was people’s lives. So Lucy had always enjoyed these “slice of life” kinds of exhibits, and time traveling had only increased her enjoyment.

When they came out, blinking into the sunshine, Lucy said, “I want to check out the big hill outside of town.” It had been named Mount Logan once, apparently, and she wanted to see if anything still had the old name so she could take a picture for Wyatt. And it wasn’t far.

Twenty-five minutes later, she had to admit she’d gotten them thoroughly lost, in an area so isolated even Homeland Security’s map didn’t have any data.

It wasn’t that there weren’t buildings, or that she didn’t know what general direction to go in to get back to town. But there had to be a shorter way than turning around and retracing their route, right?

Also, she was really, really hungry. There had to be some kind of restaurant or even grocery store around here.

Right?

She zoomed out on the map far enough to see the nearest town and headed in that direction. There’d be something there, even if it was just fast food, or…

When they reached it, it was basically a ghost town. Nothing brought home the hollowing out of rural America like walking past intact buildings and finding absolutely nothing open, or even looking like anyone had been there in days.

Her stomach growled. They turned back to the car.

“There are people who live here. Do they go into Parkersburg for all their food?” She briefly considered knocking on someone’s door and demanding to know where they ate, then decided that was the hunger talking and that might be a good way to get shot.

Then seemingly out of nowhere, they reached an intersection that had a gas station and a restaurant with a bustling parking lot. Nothing else. She pulled into a spot before she even looked at the sign.

The place was so busy they had to wait for a table, and then a while longer for their food. Lucy eyed the half-empty plate at the next table of a woman who’d clearly finished her supper, wondering if she could cause enough of a distraction to snag that totally untouched piece of pizza…

“Tell me about Burr,” Flynn said.
Lucy refocused on him. “What?”

“You said he wanted to take over part of the Louisiana Purchase or Mexico or Texas. Didn’t he know?”

“The issue is that we don’t know. The conspiracy was different things to different people, and historians have never agreed on its exact intentions. Maybe Burr wasn’t even sure. It’s one of those things where—” She snorted. “Where we’d really like to be able to talk to him.”

Flynn sipped from his water glass. “What do you think it was?”

She was halfway through explaining the enmity between Marshall and Jefferson when their food arrived. She immediately stopped talking.

“This is so much better than the food in the bunker,” she muttered after several minutes. “I don’t know if I stopped caring about food because there was so much going on, or because all the options were awful.” The food in the North Carolina house had been better, but by then eating had been the last thing on any of their minds.

Flynn made a noise of agreement.

He had the forethought to ask their waitress directions back to town. When she was gone, Lucy swallowed and said, “Sorry I got us so lost.”

Flynn smirked. “It’s about the, uh, journey, not the destination. Right?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, and seriously considering pulling a mushroom off her pizza and flicking it into his face.

Then she turned her attention to her salad, which she’d ordered with a guilty recollection of what her diet had been like the last few days. She didn’t actually think this would be an improvement in the vegetable department, though: pale lettuce, sad cucumber slices, some limp carrot shreds, and a giant container of dressing. At least the pizza had been good.

She got them back to the hotel without getting lost again, and only detoured briefly to take a picture of the sign for Logan Memorial United Methodist Church, in lieu of finding Mount Logan. She sent it to Wyatt when they were back in the room.

reports of my death are greatly exaggerated, he replied.

And what a damn miracle that was, for them all to have survived.

She shook her head, and put her phone away. How long would it take before it stopped hitting her anew that they’d not only won, but they’d all survived? Did she ever want to get used to it, and risk taking it for granted?

She didn’t come to any answers as she moisturized and brushed her teeth. “‘Night,” she murmured, turning back the coverlet and crawling under the sheets.

“Good night, Lucy.”

In the morning, she opened her eyes to find a cup of coffee waiting for her on the bedside table.

She blinked, and sat up far enough to take it. It was still warm. She sipped cautiously. It was good.
“Thanks,” she muttered after a minute, when she’d ingested enough to process this unexpected perk of sharing a room with Flynn.

He looked up from reading in the chair in the corner, his long legs stretched out in front of him, and nodded.

She took in what he was wearing: clothes. Street clothes. Wet hair. He’d clearly been in and out of the shower, and already stepped out somewhere for coffee. She glanced at the time.

“I didn’t mean to sleep so late,” she murmured. “You should’ve woken me.”

“Why?”

She blinked at him. “What?”

“Why should I have woken you? We’re not in a hurry.” His mouth curved into a familiar smirk. “It’s about—”

She pointed at him. “If the next words out of your mouth include ‘journey’ or ‘destination,’ I’m throwing this pillow at you.”

His smirk became that smile brimming with mischief that she’d first seen in San Antonio in 1936, and he laughed softly. She’d never heard him laugh before.

She straightened up against the headboard. “Thank you for the coffee,” she added, not sure she’d done more than grunt at him the first time.

He nodded again.

It tasted exactly how she took it. Actually, so had that other cup. “My coffee preferences were in the journal?” she asked resignedly, smiling over the top of the cup so he knew she wasn’t actually upset.

He shook his head. “I’ve, uh… learned not to assume that what she wrote necessarily reflects you, anyway.”

“Oh,” she said softly.

“I could tell you how most of the team takes their coffee,” he added.

“Oh, really? How about Jiya?”

“Trick question; she prefers chai.”

Lucy raised her eyebrows, impressed.

“Oh, come on, you can smell it from halfway across the room, it’s not hard.”

“Rufus?”

“Two sugars. Four or five if he’s staying up late working.”

“Wyatt.”

“One sugar, one cream, when he can get it.”
“Agent Christopher.”

“Black.”

“Connor.”

“When it’s not booze, it’s one sugar in his Earl Grey.”

… huh. She studied him. “You?” She felt a little strange that she didn’t know.

He shrugged, as if it didn’t matter. “One cream. Or anything to take the edge off, really.” He closed the book, and zipped up his duffel. “I tried chicory coffee when we were in 1863,” he added. “It was appalling.”

“Oh, God, yes,” she murmured, remembering.

“It’s not, uh, a bad addition when it’s done right,” he added. “Lorena and I… visited New Orleans once. She really liked the way they made coffee there. But I don’t think thorough roasting was exactly high on the priority list during the Civil War.”

“Definitely not.” She drained the last of the coffee, and stretched. “Okay. Give me half an hour to shower and pack, and we can go.”
After they crossed the broad, brown Ohio River, still swollen with the spring’s runoff, Flynn glanced at her inquiringly. “Where to?”

Yeah, that was probably important information. She looked at the map. “Where do you want to go in Ohio?”

He pulled off to the side of the road. “No preference.”

She eyed him, not used to a Flynn with so few opinions.

“What about you?” he added. “You’re our, uh, resident expert.”

“It would take us days to follow the Ohio River the whole way,” she said after a minute. “But I’d like to trace some of it.” She glanced up. “I mean, The Ohio River Valley played such an important role in American history,” she began.

“Lucy, you could tell me you wanted to see the American Earwax Museum and I probably wouldn’t care,” he said, correctly guessing that she felt an explanation was needed.

She blinked. “Does that exist?”

“No idea.”

“Oh.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “If it does, would you really wanna go?”

“No,” she said with dignity. “Even I draw the line somewhere.”

She continued studying the map, trying to remember all the obscure and interesting historical sites she’d heard about in the last decade. “I’d really like to see the mounds. Uh, burial mounds, effigy mounds, geometric earthworks… there were a couple of different indigenous groups that built them, for different reasons.” She hesitated. “Why don’t we more or less follow the river to Gallipolis, and take 35 up to Chillicothe?”

“Fine.”

Even after they got out of town, this drive didn’t have the obvious beauty of the Blue Ridge Parkway or the old turnpike. But the quiet, low road next to the river had its own subtle charm. The fact that she wasn’t chasing megalomaniacal murderers through time, risking dysentery, or trying to pee outside without getting poison ivy in some really bad places had a much more obvious charm. She sighed softly, and let the freedom of the road lull her. The wind coming in through the open window tangled her hair and chilled her, but she stubbornly refused to close the window. She texted Rufus, Jiya, and Wyatt to see how they were, but none of them got back to her right away.

“Do you, uh, have a historical sites bucket list?” he asked after a while.

“Is this for our route?”
“No, just, uh, making conversation. Not that we have to,” he added.

“Mmm,” she said. “Anywhere?”

“I think that’s the point of a bucket list, yes.”

She thought about it for a long time. “I’d kind of like to see the Harriet Tubman site,” she said finally. “The one in upstate New York, I mean. Though I’m sure the one in Maryland is nice too.” She considered longer. “Mesa Verde. The cliff dwellings. I’ve never been.” She turned to study his profile. “What about you?”

It was a while before he said, “This will sound strange.”

“Stranger than time travel?”

His lips twisted into a rueful smile, and he seemed to concede her point. “I’d, uh… like to see the Dickinson Homestead.”

“The— in Amherst?”

“Yes.”

Huh. “Can I ask why?” she asked after a minute. “You don’t have to tell me.”

He shook his head, apparently dismissing her hedging. “I was shot in the retreat from Grozny,” he said slowly. “A friend got me… out. I was safe outside Tbilisi as long as I… lay low.” He paused. “An old man sheltered me. I, uh… as I recovered, slowly, I turned to his library to occupy me. Most of it was in Russian, and I was in no condition to…” He touched his tongue to his top lip. “Anyway, his only English book was Dickinson’s poems. I… read them a lot.” He hesitated, and glanced sideways. “I was… after Grozny, I wasn’t in a good—” He broke off suddenly. “It was hard,” he finished simply. “The book… helped. I’ve never forgotten them.”

Lucy hesitated for a while, not sure what to say. “Well,” she said softly. “If you, if you ever want to consider a New England road trip, New York and Massachusetts do share a border.”

It was the right choice: his eyes crinkled. “I’ll keep that in mind, Lucy.”

They pulled into a rest area just outside of Gallipolis. The first thing she noticed was the historical marker. It turned out to be for a bridge disaster that had killed 46 people and catalyzed modern bridge safety standards.

She closed her eyes, feeling a little vertigo. Had it been like this in the first timeline? Intellectually, she didn’t see what Rittenhouse would have wanted with this. She just— sometimes she couldn’t stop herself from asking that. About bridge collapses, presidential elections, the outcomes of battles… anything and everything.

And then she felt awful for mourning history when 46 people had died.

Not all changes were bad. She’d never for a second regretted saving the women who’d once died at Salem. But she also couldn’t shake this feeling of loss.

“Lucy?”

She opened her eyes.

“Are you all right?” Flynn looked concerned.
She nodded, and then decided he’d earned her honesty. “I think so,” she admitted. “I will be.”

He looked unconvinced, but didn’t push the issue. She used the bathroom, got a selection of snacks from the vending machines, and headed for the covered picnic area overlooking the river.

Flynn, leaning back against one of the tables with his legs stretched out in front of him, looked up as she came in. She sat down beside him, tore open the bag of trail mix, shook some into her palm, and offered him the bag. His fingers brushed her hand as he reached inside.

Neither of them said anything. Lucy looked up at the old oak across the grass, its bright leaves susurrating in the wind. The Bay Area didn’t have much in the way of seasons, and she’d missed all of it, living in the bunker. Though, having lived in California all her life, all she’d really missed had been the sky, the fresh air, the open space.

She offered him the trail mix again, and he took the bag. They sat there for a few minutes, passing the bag back and forth, until it was gone.

“Want chips?” she asked.

He shook his head. Then he shrugged out of his jacket and offered it to her.

Lucy looked from it to him.

“You’ve been trying not to shiver since we left this morning and you’re clearly not getting used to it.”

He wasn’t wrong. But she said, “Don’t you need this?”

“Not really, no.”

“Oh, really. Then why are you wearing it?”

He smirked. “’Cause it looks cool.”

She looked at him in disbelief. But she couldn’t help smiling a little.

Then she hesitated. “Thanks for coming with me.” She wasn’t talking about the jacket. Without him, if it had been just her and way too much time on the road to think…

Well, he was helping to keep her grounded. He was helping to keep her from getting too lost in her own head.

He gave her a soft little smile. “Thanks for asking me.”

They reached Chillicothe at midday and stopped at a diner for lunch. Lucy got a salad to go with her cheeseburger. What came out was a sad heap of white lettuce browning at the edges, some pale pink, watery tomatoes, and a small mountain of rock hard croutons.

Lucy poked at it cautiously with her fork. “This is just sad.”

Flynn swallowed. “At least it’s not hardtack.”

She pointed her fork at him. “That’s an excellent point.”

After lunch, they went to Hopewell Culture National Historical Park. Lucy was grateful for the warmth of Flynn’s jacket as she wandered between the mounds that awed her with their age and
silent endurance.

“You know, when I was younger,” she said after a while. “Before I learned not to project my own values onto history…”

“Did you ever learn that, Lucy?” He looked amused.

She straightened. “I learned how to do my job.”

His smile vanished instantly. “I didn’t, uh… I didn’t mean to question your competence,” he said, rather awkwardly. “You’re passionate about what you do, and that’s good … I, uhhhh… sorry.”

After a moment, she relaxed. “It’s true, you’ve seen a side of me my colleagues haven’t.” She stared off into the distance. “Nothing in my advanced grad seminars covered, you know… what to do when women’s suffrage is threatened right in front of your eyes. Time travel’s not exactly a situation my job prepared me for.”

“What were you going to say, before?”

“Oh. Uh, before I learned, you know, our professional norms, I would look at this place and think… imagine loving someone who died so much that you would build a huge mound over their remains.”

Flynn breathed out slowly.

“… oh God, I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

“It’s all right,” he said quietly. Paused.

Lucy stared at his profile, which seemed, just at that moment, etched from stone.

He cleared his throat. “So, they’re, uh, burial mounds?”

“A lot of them, yeah.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Do we know why?”

She shook her head. “Many of them have some kind of astronomical, astrological significance, which is incredible considering the people who built them tended to live in very small groups. And yet they had extensive trade networks, and made incredible art, too.” She scuffed her foot along the trail. “When I was in my junior year of college, I wanted to be an archaeologist. Focus on Native American sites. My mom, uh… she talked me out of it.”

Flynn walked quietly beside her, and didn’t say anything.

“Studying anthropology— cultural anthropology— was my way of holding on to that.” She shook her head again. “I fought so hard to be able to do that, you know? But now when I think back on it, on the areas of my life my mother didn’t dictate, it’s… oh, I studied anthropology.”

“Plus you helped destroy her time-traveling megalomaniacal cult bent on world domination,” Flynn pointed out rather dryly. “That’s not insignificant.”

Lucy couldn’t help laughing. “Thanks, Flynn.”

They drove to another mound site a few miles away. Lucy parked, turned off the engine, and looked at him. “You’re really not bored?”
She couldn’t put a name to his expression as he looked at her, but it was soft and a little rueful. “Lucy, if I get bored, I’ll tell you,” he promised.

“Ohay.” She opened the door. “I just never pegged you for much of a sightseer.”

“That was really the only tolerable thing about those damned trips.” He closed the door behind him. “Besides. Before this, we were both fighting Rittenhouse. Before that, I was in prison. Before that…”

They looked at each other, and he didn’t have to continue.

“Trust me, Lucy,” he added. “This is definitely an improvement.”

This set of mounds hadn’t been as thoroughly restored as the others, which had been leveled by the Army in World War I. It didn’t take Lucy long to feel like she’d seen enough. “Where to next?”

“I don’t care.”

She glanced sideways at him, because she wasn’t going to question his promise out loud… and yet.

He noticed. “I don’t have any idea what normal is any more, Lucy,” he said quietly. “If you tell me it’s a cross-country road trip of Native American sites and sad salads, I believe you.”

She was surprised into laughing, for at least the second time that day. “Well, I’m clearly not the subject matter expert on normal. I don’t think normal matters as much as wanted, anyway.”

“And I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

She snuck another sideways glance, but his tone had the ring of truth.

She got a slew of texts as they reached the car, so he drove to Serpent Mound. Agent Jimenez had sent Lucy more pictures of the sleeping Esperanza Fata, which made her smile. Jiya sent her a picture of her computer screen, with enough job applications open to make Lucy wince. She’d have to start on those as soon as they got back.

She was momentarily tempted to ask Flynn if he wanted to make a brief detour too, say, Nova Scotia.

Rufus had replied with a thumbs up, Wyatt with where are you?

Chillicothe, OH, she wrote back.

Pause. you’re only in ohio?

Scenic route, she reminded him.

i guess so.

She started to respond, deleted it, hesitated, tried again, deleted that too, hesitated, bit her lip, and just put her phone away.

They reached their third and final mound site of the day. “Was this one built by the same people?” Flynn asked, studying one of the interpretative signs.

“No, good eye.”
“Circular mound versus quarter mile long snake, there are a few subtle differences.”

“This one’s thought to have astronomical significance too, though,” she said. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

She pointed out where the various curves of the snake lined up with the annual variations in the paths of the sun and the moon. “They put so much effort into tracking the solar and lunar calendars,” she said. “I mean, as far as we can tell, that’s what it is. And I… I get it. Without artificial light…” She shook her head. “I don’t think it was until we were stuck in 1754 that I really understood the visceral power of darkness,” she said softly.

Flynn winced. “I’m, uh. Sorry about that. Too.”

She looked up at him for a minute, and felt a little smile tug at the corner of her mouth. “Yeah,” she said. “I know.”

They walked in silence a moment or two. Then she continued, “But also? I just wish I could ask them. This—to have the sun be so important to you, what’s that like for you?”

“Has time travel ruined you for regular history?” he asked after a moment, also smiling a little.

“I… don’t know. I don’t want to think about that right now.” Her brain immediately ignored that directive. “Oh, God, what am I gonna do?”

“Whatever it is, you’ll be great at it.”

“I always had a plan,” she said. “Or, I always thought I had a plan. How much of that was actually just Mom’s plan?” She ran her hand through her hair, feeling her nerves fraying. “What am I—that was my life, being good at it was how I kept everything else under control, I—”

“Lucy.” His tone was firm enough to get her attention as he stood in front of her. Carefully, he put his hands on her shoulders. “You’re a brilliant scholar. You’re a great teacher. You’ll be fine.”

She looked up at him. “You told me I was meant to be more than a teacher.” She knew it was childish, but her fear had made her irritable, and he was the nearest target.

“I was wrong,” he said bluntly. “I confused you and your alternate universe body double. It does happen. Okay?” He very gently squeezed her shoulders.

She closed her eyes. His hands were big, and warm, and comforting. She exhaled slowly. “Okay.”

They climbed the observation tower. Lucy sent the other three a picture from the top. Then Flynn took a picture of her on the walkway in front of part of the long, undulating mound, because there was no way she was getting that as a selfie.

Then they headed back to the car. She took the keys. “I guess the sensible thing would be to head to Cincinnati,” she muttered, looking at the map. “It’s only about sixty miles.”

“Forget sensible.” He’d already leaned the seat back as far as the Mothership detector would let it go, and had his eyes closed. “What do you wanna do?”

“Run away to Montana and herd goats.”

He cracked one eye open. “Really?”

“No,” she admitted. “Is there anywhere to stay around here?”
He took out his phone and began to help her look. “Not unless you want to stay at the nudist resort,” he said after a minute.

“The what?”

“About two miles away.”

“I definitely do not.”

“Me either.”

“Okay,” she decided. “Apparently we’re on the scenic route. Let’s take it back to the river.”

“Fine with me.”

She started the car, and had to laugh. “Well, this is the perfect road trip song,” she said, and joined in with Carole King on the radio. “‘Way over yonder, that’s where I’m bound…’”

It was late afternoon by the time they followed the small, gently winding road to the Ohio River. Lucy pulled off in Aberdeen. “I don’t really want to reach the city late at night and have to do a lot of driving to find a place.”

“I’ll drive if you want.”

“I know, I just…” After three nights on the back roads, she wasn’t quite ready for a big city. She looked for a place to stay between here and there. “Looks like there’s a B&B in the next town about eight miles up the road, and if they don’t have any space, there’s an AirBnb ten miles after that,” she said finally.

The B&B had empty rooms. “Would you like one room with a double bed—”

“Oh,” Lucy said. “Um.”

“— or the suite with a king-sized bed?” The cheerful, gray-haired proprietor smiled at them. “That would probably give the two of you more room, wouldn’t it?”

Um… both? “Do you have anything with two beds?” Lucy asked.

The older woman looked a little taken aback, but assured her, “The sofa in the sitting area of the suite is very comfortable for sleeping.”

Then she glanced down, and frowned. What? Lucy followed her line of sight to Flynn’s hand.

Right. Flynn’s left hand. Wedding band. No wedding band on Lucy.

“We’ll take the suite,” Flynn said. “If that’s all right with you?” He looked at Lucy.

She nodded. The proprietor was still frowning disapprovingly. “The suite it is,” she said stiffly.

Flynn cleared his throat. “That’s a, ah, nice grandfather clock,” he said, nodding across the room. “When my wife was alive, she, uh, loved… grandfather clocks.”

“Oh,” the proprietor said. “Oh! Thank you.”

Lucy waited until they were climbing the stairs with their bags to whisper, “Did Lorena actually love grandfather clocks?”
“Lorena would’ve liked you a lot,” Flynn said after a minute. “She wouldn’t mind me stretching the truth a bit on your behalf.”

“Well. Thank you. I’ve screwed up enough with married men as it is, I don’t need—” She realized what she’d said, and just… stopped talking.

Flynn checked the room, then dropped his duffel on the couch.

“I’ll take the couch.”

“I’m fine with it.”

“The bed is longer than the couch. You’re taller than I am. Take the bed.”

He shrugged, and transferred his bag.

Lucy plopped down on the couch, eased off her shoes, and leaned back. “I don’t understand how driving is so tiring,” she yawned. Well, driving, and walking the paths at three different historical sites, but after all the exercise she’d gotten in the past, that was nothing.

She maybe dozed a little, lost track of time, until Flynn said, “I can pick up some supper, if you want.”

The idea of not having to get in the car again sounded wonderful. “Is there anything around here?”

“I’ll get a recommendation from the owner.” He hesitated. “Be, uh, careful while I’m gone, yes?”

“Don’t worry,” she promised. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Instead she put her feet up and checked her phone. She had a message from Wyatt in response to her picture: where is that?

Serpent Mound, she told him.

Flynn came back with food, and they spread the containers out on the little coffee table and ate. Afterwards Lucy dozed off again. When she woke, Flynn was sitting out on the balcony, staring at the river.

She got unsteadily to her feet, stretched, and stepped out after him. The view was lovely. What had it been like here one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred years ago?

Flynn looked up at her inquiringly, then nudged the other chair closer to her.

She was tempted, but shook her head. “If you need the bathroom, do you think you could use it now?”

“What?”

“I want the tub.”

“Oh. Go ahead.”

So she filled the old clawfoot tub, and soaked in delightfully hot water until she was in danger of falling asleep. When she washed and got reluctantly out, feeling like all the day’s worries had melted away, Flynn was still on the balcony, silhouetted against the last of the late twilight. She considered joining him for about a second, then decided to stretch out on the couch under the very
She woke to broad daylight, a mug of fragrant coffee on the table by her head, and the incongruous sight of Garcia Flynn sitting up in bed reading *Pride and Prejudice*.

Lucy blinked at the book to make sure she wasn’t imagining it.

Priorities: she propped herself up on her elbow and reached for the coffee. “Where’d you get the book?” she asked after a few swallows.

“Bedside table.”

“What happened to the one you were reading before?”

“I left that one in the hotel lobby where I got it.”

She took another sip. “Thank you for the coffee.”

“Yes.”

She pushed herself slowly to a sitting position, then decided that was a plenty ambitious start to the day.

Flynn put his finger in the book to mark his place. “She said she’d start breakfast whenever we’re ready.”

Lucy blinked at him. “Breakfast?”

“Yes. The ‘breakfast’ in ‘bed and breakfast.’”

“… right.”

While they waited in the dining room, Lucy flipped through the local guidebook. Her eyes widened. “I was thinking we could head to Cincinnati.”

“Fine.”

“Do you want to do anything in particular along the way?”

“No, but it looks like you do.”

Lucy smiled.

They were the only guests, and the owner apparently loved to cook. Lucy filled up on the excellent fruit salad, because she was learning it would probably be her only chance that day to eat anything resembling fiber. But between that, eggs, biscuits, sausage, and homemade jam, even Flynn had trouble finishing the very generous servings.

Lucy spread homemade lemon curd on one last biscuit. One for the road, right?

For the moment, though, “hitting the road” meant walking two blocks to a brick house right on the river. “As a teenager, enslaved in Mobile, Mr. Parker worked at the foundry,” their tour guide explained. “This was how he earned the money to buy his freedom. But it was also where he got his start as an inventor. He was one of the first Black Americans to hold a patent before 1900.”
“Wow,” Lucy said softly, and this was a moment where she definitely regretted time travel was off-limits now, because it meant she would never meet this man.

“Of course, Mr. Parker’s ingenuity was only part of his story,” the docent continued. “It’s no accident that this house is right on the Ohio River, which was—”

“— the boundary between the free and slave states,” Lucy finished. “Sorry,” she added hurriedly. “I just… I get excited about history.”

“There’s no need to apologize at all, miss. I always enjoy meeting people who are enthusiastic about history.” The man smiled at her. “I guess it won’t be a surprise to you that Mr. Parker was a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Not only did he help slaves once they crossed the Ohio, he also made frequent trips to Kentucky to help them get to freedom. Slave owners put a thousand dollar bounty on his head, which was about thirty thousand dollars in today’s money…”

For the next fifteen minutes, Lucy listened raptly as the guide told them about Parker’s bravery, though she shuddered at the part where he and two fugitives hid from slavecatchers in new coffins. At the end, she promptly bought Parker’s autobiography for a little light reading along the way.

Then they drove up the high hill overlooking the river. Lucy thought they were missing out on not taking the stairs, but she wasn’t sure they were all still there, so many years later.

“Reverend Rankin began his ministry in Tennessee,” this tour guide, a woman with neatly styled iron-grey hair, told them. “But his anti-slavery sermons were not welcomed in a slave state, and he moved to Carlisle, Kentucky.”

“Uh, Kentucky was also…”

The woman nodded to Lucy. Like at the John Parker House, they were the only ones here today. “Exactly. Though Reverend Rankin stuck it out there for four years, and even started a school for slaves, eventually, the pro-slavery mob shut his efforts down. So, the Rankins journeyed here… to the town that slaveowners and their allies would call ‘that abolitionist hellhole.’”

“This house on the hill became an important stop on the Underground Railroad. There was a pole out front— archaeological exploration turned up a likely spot, and we’ve marked it— where the family would hang a lantern. That lantern could be seen all the way across the Ohio River, and would let escaped slaves know it was safe to cross at that time.”

“That’s where the stairs came from, right? To make it easier to get up the hill at night?”

The woman nodded. “I see you know something about the family already. Are either of you familiar with the Parker house?”

“We just came from there, actually,” Lucy said.

“Oh, wonderful. Well, then as you know, Mr. Parker was an extractor, someone who went into the South— in his case, risking his own freedom— to get slaves out. When he did get them out, often, he brought them here. Reverend Rankin, his wife Jean, and their thirteen children are estimated to have sheltered about two thousand fugitives during the years this house was a stop on the Underground Railroad.”

Flynn looked around. “Thirteen children?” The house had four rooms downstairs, and a modest second story.

“Yes.” The woman’s mouth twitched. “Plus sometimes up to twelve fugitives. People lived in
closer quarters back then."

She showed them into the next room. “With Reverend Rankin and his six sons guarding the place, this was a fortress on the Underground Railroad. And they did occasionally have to face down armed attackers. Mr. Parker saved the reverend’s life on at least one occasion.”

“Is it true that Eliza came through here?” Lucy asked.

“It is. In 1838, the Rankins sheltered a woman who crossed the Ohio River on ice floes with her child. Reverend Rankin later shared that story with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s husband, and the story became a part of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.*”

“Wow,” Lucy said softly, looking around.

Their guide finished the short tour, and Lucy put some money in the donation jar, wanting to contribute something besides their admission price. “Good luck with the renovations,” she said.

“Thank you,” their guide said. “I’m hoping that with more modern facilities, we’ll get more people who want to hear the story of this place. More folks that we can make history really… come alive for. That’s what it’s really all about, at least in my opinion.”

“Absolutely,” Lucy agreed, wondering if she would ever come to terms with the dual hardship and privilege of actually seeing history happen.

“May I ask if you’re a history teacher? You seemed to know a lot.”

“I… well, I was. I’m, um…” Lucy fumbled for an explanation that wouldn’t get her arrested for treason. “I’m… thinking through what’s next.”

“Midlife crisis?” The woman smiled sympathetically.

“Something… like that.”

“Well, best of luck.”

“Thank you.”

It was late morning when they left for Cincinnati. “Fifty two miles,” Lucy read from the highway marker. Should be just an hour or so of quiet back roads, until they reached the outskirts of the city.

She let a good ten miles go by before she asked, “Favorite historical sites you’ve *already* seen.”

He was quiet for a while. “I’m afraid my choice isn’t motivated by, uh, historical value.”

“There’s no wrong answers, Flynn.”


When he didn’t continue, she said, “I’m still listening.”

He glanced sideways. “The first time… my father pointed it out to me, when I was a boy, and told me how old it was, how many empires it had survived… it, uh, captured my imagination.” He cleared his throat. “I used to sneak out and play there, though I wasn’t supposed to.”

“I’m shocked,” she said drily.
That got her a warm smile. “What about you, Lucy?”

“Oh, gosh,” she said softly. Though she’d posed the question, she didn’t have a ready answer.
“Mmm. Well, after I defended my PhD, I spent ten days touring some of the big battlefields of the Civil War. Gettysburg, Manassas, Antietam, Chancellorsville. My mom split the cost with me. It was her early graduation present to me.” She thought back. “I was so proud,” she said softly. “She was, too. I guess… I guess for me it’s not necessarily motivated by historical value either, actually. I mean, obviously these places are important, but what I remember most is how I felt to be visiting them as Dr. Preston, you know?”

Flynn glanced sideways, but didn’t speak.

Lucy sighed. “Though as with many things my mom wanted, I have to ask myself, now, did I really want it or did I want what she wanted for me?” She thought some more. “No. You know what, that’s not true. I loved doing all the planning for that trip. It was the only thing that kept me sane as I finished my dissertation.”

After a minute, she continued softly, “Knowing what she wanted for me, knowing why she wanted me to be a historian… sometimes I second guess myself. It feels like she took something from me, in a way. She just—” She sighed again. “You were right. She groomed me.”

“She was your mom,” Flynn said after a while. “She had the perfect opportunity. It takes a lot for a kid to stand up to their parent.”

There was a weird tone to his voice for a moment, or maybe she’d imagined it. It passed.

Another pause, and he continued, hesitantly: “The things I said about her, about you, that day…” He winced. “I was wrong. I hope it wasn’t… too hurtful.”

She looked at him, staring fixedly at the road, her answer clearly important to him. She couldn’t help smiling a little. “Flynn, of all the things going on in my life at that point, that didn’t even make the top ten,” she told him honestly. “But I appreciate the apology.”

He relaxed, and gave her a rueful sideways look.

“It wasn’t one of my best days either,” she admitted. “I’m sorry I threw your family in your face.”

His weary exhale, the sudden lines on his face, tugged at her heart. He nodded once.

“She doesn’t get to take history from you, Lucy,” he said after another mile or so.

Lucy straightened up. “I know that. You think I’d let her?”

“I… think you’re indomitable and admirable, and that it couldn’t hurt you to hear it anyway.”

Indomitable and admirable? Was that really how Flynn thought of her, he who was such a formidable warrior himself?

She kind of liked the sound of it.

“I know,” she repeated.

She slid a little lower in the seat and watched the scenery go by. Ten miles later—

She straightened up. “Stop! Oh my God, stop, please. Oh my God.”
She, clearly, had not paid close enough attention to the map.

Flynn had pulled abruptly off the side of the road at her first word, and now brought the car to a jarring halt as he got his gun out of his jacket. “Stay down,” he ordered.

“— what?”

“What did you see?”

“What? No. Nothing’s wrong. Flynn.” She waited until he made eye contact. “Nothing’s wrong, I was just surprised.”

He looked at her rather doubtfully, and studied their surroundings very thoroughly anyway. Only when the set of his shoulders and the lines of his face eased did she undo her own seatbelt and open the door.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

Flynn had stopped them about a hundred feet from the entrance to the school. Lucy walked through the grass to the gate, and stared at the sign: Juliet Shakesman High School.

They absolutely, positively, lived weird lives.

She took a picture for the team. And maybe to hang on her wall, wherever she ended up. Because…

Because how did you go back to a normal life, after something like this?

Rufus, Jiya, Wyatt, they were all figuring it out. Maybe she was just being high maintenance, taking a leisurely road trip to get her head on straight. There were worse problems to have than having an indeterminate future, right?

But… still.

Flynn watched her from the edge of the road, expression unreadable. When she tried to fit herself in the picture with the sign, and didn’t have much success, he came forward and held out his hand.

“I didn’t actually invite you because I needed an official photographer,” Lucy said, to cover her embarrassment as she handed her phone over, “but thank you.”

Flynn took the picture, and gave her phone back.

“Juliet Shakesman was, um…” Lucy began to explain, as they walked back to the car.

“I know.”

Right. Of course he’d done his research.

They reached the car. “Lucy,” Flynn began, and turned to her, hesitating.

She waited for him to continue. He looked down and touched his tongue to his lip.

“You made amends a long time ago, Flynn,” she said quietly. “At least with me.”

He looked up quickly. She met his gaze calmly.
“… that was what the awkward silence was about, right?” she added.

He snorted, smiled ruefully, and nodded. She held out her hand. He looked confused, then dropped the keys in her palm.

Traffic on the road and on the river told them they were coming up on a big city. Flynn navigated, and directed her to a hotel on the outskirts of downtown that had its own parking garage. The car would be safer there, away from curious eyes wondering what that huge thing in the back seat was, and Homeland Security was covering their costs anyway.

Flynn knocked once on the doorframe before opening the door between the two rooms. Lucy looked up from sorting her dirty clothes, which were now most of her duffel. “Plans?” he asked.

“Underground Railroad Freedom Center, laundry, and food.”

He nodded once.

The Freedom Center seemed like a fitting ending to a day that had started with the John Parker House and the Rankin House. They stayed until closing, Flynn faithfully shadowing her from floor to floor, and Lucy easily could have spent several more hours there.

They stopped for dinner on the way back to the hotel. “Cincinnati chili is a thing, right?” she said, perusing the not particularly detailed menu as the waitress approached their table. “I’ll try that.”

Flynn ordered first, and got the same thing.

“Two-way, three-way, four-way, or five-way, darlin’?” the waitress asked.

“Four way,” Flynn said.

The waitress looked at Lucy.

“Uh, the same.” When the waitress had gone, Lucy whispered to Flynn, “What does that mean?”

“We’re about to find out.”

Lucy gave him a betrayed look.

The restaurant was the kind of small place that had a pass-through window to the kitchen at the back of the one main room. Lucy watched what was happening in the kitchen—

“They’re putting it on spaghetti?” she whispered in disbelief. “Flynn! They’re putting it on spaghetti!”

He twisted in his seat to look over his shoulder. “What do you want me to do, Lucy, shoot it?”

She rolled her eyes at him. After a minute, she asked, “What’s the strangest thing you’ve ever eaten while traveling?”

He wiped a bead of condensation from his water glass and was quiet for a minute. “I don’t know about strangest, but the grubs were probably the most memorable.”

“Grubs?”

“They’re a good source of protein, especially when there’s nothing else.” He looked up. “You?”
“Rocky Mountain oysters,” she said immediately, flashing back to a still-vivid memory from a conference she’d attended as a grad student.

“What?”

“Uh… deep-fried calf testicles.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, wait. Does time travel count?”

“It was your question, Lucy,” he reminded her, trying not to smile.

“Well, definitely scrapple. It’s, uh, kind of a… congealed pork loaf.”

“The word ‘congealed’ makes everything more appetizing.”

“I tried it in…” She blinked. “I don’t even remember what trip it was now. 1780, I think.”

“Is that what that unspeakable mush was that we got at the tavern?”

“ Might’ve been.”

When the waitress brought their food, Lucy looked at it with new appreciation, because at least it wasn’t pork scraps mixed with cornmeal, sliced and fried. Four-way Cincinnati chili was apparently some kind of meat sauce with beans and cheese, over spaghetti.

She took a cautious bite, then another. “Okay, this is actually good.” She dug in with more enthusiasm.

“Any, uh, plans for tomorrow?” he asked after a few minutes.

She shook her head. “Just keep going west, I guess. We could head for St. Louis.”

Back at the hotel, she finished sorting her dirty clothes, found a tote bag for a laundry basket, and walked into Flynn’s room. “Give me your dirty clothes.”

He looked up from his book. “… what?”

“I’m doing my laundry and I don’t have a full load.”

He hesitated, but unzipped his duffel and pulled out a bundle of mostly black clothes. He hesitated again. “You sure you don’t want me to do that?”

“Unless you have a thong or something in there, I think I can cope.”

He went adorably pink, and immediately dropped the clothes in the bag.

She bought laundry detergent from the vending machine, started the load, and sat down to wait.

The laundry room at the apartments where she’d lived in grad school had given her a pathological dislike of people who left their laundry in the machines unattended. Instead, she sent Rufus, Jiya and Wyatt the picture from Juliet Shakesman High School.

And yet, is there a Denzel Washington High School in Raleigh? No, Rufus replied.

I know. She sent him a little sad face.
Then she hesitated, and called Jiya. “Uh, hello?” Jiya said after two rings. “Is everything all right?”

“Oh… yeah, I… actually didn’t think you were going to pick up, I thought I’d just leave you a fun voicemail.” Something to make Jiya smile later, when she surfaced from job applications.

“… so, I just caught you in the act of vandalizing my voicemail?”

Lucy smiled. “I would never.”

“Where are you guys?” Jiya asked.

“Cincinnati.”

“How’s it, uh, going?”

“It’s…” Lucy thought for a bit. “It’s good,” she said. “I feel like… I feel like I finally have room to breathe, you know?”

“Yeah, you sound happier.”

So did Jiya. And when Lucy thought back to that week after Rufus’s death, when she’d moved in with Jiya to keep her from having to be alone in their room…

She didn’t know where she was going. But she was so grateful they’d gotten this far.

She heard Rufus’s voice in the background, and then: “Hey, Lucy!” he called.

She smiled. “Hey, Rufus. It’s good to hear you.”

“How are you? Where are you? Are you dragging Flynn to every minor historical site between here and Kalamazoo?”

“I’m not dragging him anywhere. He’s been great, actually. A great travel partner.”

A long pause. “And, uh, how’s the rest of the trip?” Rufus asked.

Lucy was surprised to hear Agent Christopher’s voice in the background, though she couldn’t make out the words. “Sounds like the gang’s almost all together.”

“Half of us,” Jiya said. “Agent Christopher came over to make sure we can all explain the gaps on our resumés without giving away state secrets. Wyatt’s, uh, not here, though.”

“Yeah, I figured he’d have orders…”

Another long pause.

Lucy got a funny feeling in her stomach. “No? Where is Wyatt?”

“He’s… visiting Jessica.”

“Oh,” Lucy said quickly. “Yeah, that, uh, that makes sense.” She cleared her throat. “Any luck with the, uh, how’s the job search.”

She swallowed, her throat suddenly tight and aching.

“Literally everything we do after this is going to be a letdown,” Jiya said. “And I’m not complaining, but—”
“You’re kind of complaining,” Rufus said in the background.

“I’m not complaining about not being shot at any more. I just— ugh, I don’t want to go work with a bunch of brogrammers optimizing clicks on dog food or something.”

“You’ll find something,” Lucy told her.

Jiya sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

Jiya had to go about the same time the washing machine was done. Lucy transferred all the wet clothes to the drier, not looking at any individual item too closely. She turned the dryer on—

She jumped. Flynn had materialized in the chair behind her. How did someone his size move so quietly?

“My turn,” Flynn said.

“What?”

He lifted his book. “You don’t need to babysit it the whole time. I’ll bring it back when it’s done.”

“Um,” Lucy said. Well, she wasn’t going to argue. “Okay.”

So… Wyatt was visiting Jessica. Well, he had the right, and it wasn’t surprising considering they had a history, and…

This wasn’t a surprise. So why did it still hurt?

She didn’t want to dwell on this right now. To distract herself, she sat on her bed and channel surfed. Oooh, a Real Housewives rerun was on, and it was one of Lucy’s favorite episodes…

She was already tired. She used the commercial breaks to get ready for bed. But this delicious trash television was the perfect distraction from everything, just like it had been ever since she’d first discovered it her last year as a grad—

Flynn knocked once on the doorframe between their rooms. Lucy jumped in surprise as he pushed the door fully open, and lunged for the remote. She landed with her knee on it, and the volume of Kelly’s histrionics went way, way up.

Finally she grabbed the damn thing the right way around and turned the channel. Then she just thought to turn it off.

“I guess I should’ve knocked louder.” Flynn was still standing in the doorway, not doing a very good job of not laughing.

She didn’t think he was even trying that hard.

She looked at the remote. Would the mute button work on him? “I guess you should’ve,” she said with dignity.

“Sorry, Lucy. I didn’t mean to, uh, interrupt your evening’s entertainment,” he added, smirking adora— aggravatingly.

She tried to stare him down. His smirk only intensified. At least he handed her the laundry bag and retreated to his own room without further comment.
She folded her clean, dry laundry while she watched the rest of the episode. Then she stacked everything neatly in her pajamas, stretched out in bed, and turned out the light.

Chapter End Notes

The characters have been communicative about where this is going, so I updated the ship tags accordingly.

Places in this fic:

**Marker for the Silver Bridge Disaster**

**Harriet Tubman National Historical Park** (NY) and **Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park** (MD)

The **cliff dwellings of the Ancestral Pueblo people** at Mesa Verde National Park

**Emily Dickinson Museum**

**Hopewell Culture National Historical Park**

**Serpent Mound**

**John Parker House** (His autobiography is called *His Promised Land*, and I recommend it. It's a short and engaging read.)

**John Rankin House**

**National Underground Railroad Freedom Center**

The nudist retreat center is also geographically accurate, FYI.
“I think I’ve had enough of following the Ohio River,” she admitted the next morning.

So they drove west across the gentle rolling hills of southern Indiana farm country. They could make it to St. Louis that evening if they didn’t stop too often. But if they found something too fascinating to pass up? They weren’t in a hurry.

Her phone buzzed: new pictures from Agent Jimenez. She smiled as she swiped through them all. There were a lot, and they all made Esperanza Fata look kind of like a potato. Lucy replied, I’m so happy for you!!!!!!

She might not be able to say with perfect honesty that Esperanza Fata was a beautiful baby, but every time Lucy looked at the pictures, she felt a warmth in her chest that helped ease what still lingered of that cold, empty feeling. It felt good to help. It felt very good to help.

She pulled up the map and looked at it. “We should probably talk about our plan,” she murmured. “Pick a route across the Rockies.”

“I don’t care,” he said.

She looked up at him. “Who are you, and what have you done with Garcia Flynn?”

“… what?”

“You always have opinions. Lots of them.”

Flynn’s confused expression eased into something more serious. But he didn’t reply.

A few minutes later he pulled off as they passed a county park, parked, and got out, looking back at her. She followed.

They stood under a gazebo, staring out at the little creek below. “Lucy, I…” He hesitated. “When, uh, all you have is an empty foundation, you can put anything on it.”

… oh.

“I never thought past… the end,” he continued. “I thought that, if I got them back, I would… say goodbye, and find a cause that needed my help.” He paused. “I honestly didn’t expect to live very long.”

She was almost certain that what he was really saying was, I wouldn’t fight very hard to survive.

“And now?” He sounded bewildered. “I’m here, and they’re not. And after what I’ve done? I couldn’t even bring them back, and yet I…” He shook his head. “Lucy, I sold my soul to stop
Rittenhouse. That’s why I can’t give a damn how we cross the Rockies.”

“Bullshit.”

He looked startled. “What?”

“I’m… not trying to make light of what you chose to do, or what you felt you had to do. But you saying you don’t have a soul any more? Flynn, no.”

He stared down at his arms resting on the railing. “It feels like I don’t… deserve to be here.”

“Says who?” she asked bluntly. “The government set you free. There’s no one to— tell you no.” She hesitated, studying him. “It might feel easier if there were, right?”

He looked up fast.

He, like her, had nothing except a future. She, at least, felt adrift, without guidance— and even opposition would be a kind of guidance.

“You, uh, have better things to do today than play therapist,” he said rather awkwardly.

“No,” she said again, firmly, to his self-deprecation. Speaking of therapists, was this, him refusing to believe anyone would care about what happened to him, a defense mechanism of some kind?

“We’ll figure it out together,” she said. “Okay? Our lives, our futures, aren’t going to be Rittenhouse’s last collateral damage. You don’t have to figure it out alone.”

He just looked at her, and she felt the old, familiar fear: I’ve overstepped. I’ve overestimated what I mean to him.

“I mean… if you want that,” she added, looking away.

He took a deep breath. “Thank you, Lucy.”

They were both quiet for a moment. He looked around. “You wanna, uh, walk?”

Walk? He knew she would gladly drive. If he didn’t even want to get back in the car yet, he had to be more shaken than he’d admit. “Okay.”

They followed a trail from the far end of the little parking lot, through the woods. Lucy looked at the verdant leaves shaking gently in the breeze, and remembered that there was life after war.

He exhaled slowly. “I do have one opinion.”

“What?”

“I’d rather not, uh, go the southern route. Through Texas.”

“Sure. Isn’t it excruciatingly hot down there anyway?”

He was quiet. “Lorena and I,” he said finally. “When my grandmother was still alive, I took Lorena to meet her. We, uh, drove west from there. Visited the Grand Canyon.”

“Must’ve been nice,” Lucy said softly.

He smiled, and she was glad that he could. “It was.”
Underneath the busy melodies of the birds, Lucy heard another sound. After a few minutes, the trail began to follow the top of a low bluff, with the gentle ripples of a shallow creek glittering in the sunlight about twenty feet below.

“Anything you want to see in St. Louis?” she asked after a while.

“Not really, but I know of a good restaurant if you’re interested in, uh, food from the Balkans.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

They kept wandering beside the creek. “This is nice,” she said softly. “I kind of forgot things like this existed.”

He made a noise of agreement.

“Just to get through, I…” She shook her head. “I let go of almost anything that wasn’t my survival or the team’s survival. And I didn’t like being that person.” She glanced sideways. He knew what that was like.

“There’s no… secret to it, Lucy,” he said quietly after a minute. “You just… go on. I know you’re good at that.”

“Well,” she said. “If I could get through the process of letting go, I can get through the process of getting it back.”

He smiled down at her, warm and soft, that look that had been so wholly unexpected the first time she’d seen it but… no longer was.

“Shall we, ah, head back to the car?” he asked after a few more minutes.

“Sure.” As they walked, she glanced down at the creek, at the shape of the bank. “I wonder if this was a settlement at some point,” she said. “It would make sense, with the water here, and right at the base of the hill.” She leaned forward. “See the shape of the—”

The ground gave way.

She was falling—

“LUCY!”

— she landed in a confused heap of dirt and water, hard enough to stun her. “Nnnn,” she managed.

“LUCY!”

Flynn’s roar jolted her back to coherence. She opened her eyes. The world was sideways. She was wet. She was in the creek. Luckily, it was less than a foot deep here.

“I’m all right,” she called, finding him at the top of the crumbled bluff, about to climb— or fall— after her. “I’m— stay there. I’m okay.” She struggled to her feet.

Ugh. She felt battered and scraped. Her hip throbbed where she’d landed hard on a rock, and her palms stung, but nothing was broken.

She waded upstream. Her pants were soaked, as was her entire left side, and the back of her shirt. Though the creek was shallow, it ran fast enough to make keeping her balance challenging. She didn’t want to think about what was in the water, though at least it was clear and not visibly
polluted.

She reached the spot where she’d gone down, and looked up, hands on her hips. Ugh, again.

“There’s some rope in the car,” Flynn called. “Will you be all right here for a minute?”

He sounded so worried, and his body language suggested only the likelihood of falling in himself was keeping him from pacing at the edge of the cliff. “Just… just wait,” she said. “I think I can—”

She took a tentative step up onto the collapsed bank, then another. She used a rock to help, then an exposed tree limb. She got halfway up, and the face turned vertical. Damn it.

Arms appeared over the top of the cliff. Flynn must have lay down on the ground, to keep it from crumbling further. She lunged and managed to grab onto his arm with one hand. Immediately his other hand grabbed her wrist. He pulled her up. Her whole body weight hung from his hands before she got purchase with her feet.

Between the two of them, they hauled her back up. Flynn helped her scramble over the edge, and pulled her backwards about ten feet to more stable ground. They sprawled there for a moment, panting. Then he got to his knees and gently helped her sit up, brushing her off and checking her for injury at the same time.

“I’m fine,” she told him. “I think. I mean, I’m soaking wet and I’m going to hurt tomorrow, but I think that’s the worst of it.” She looked up at him, and saw only the tail end of sharp fear.

“Help me up?” she added. It came out more plaintive than intended. He smiled a little ruefully, picked her up, and set her gently on her feet.

She tried futilely to brush herself off. “I think that’s enough walking, though.”

“You want me to carry you back to the car?”

“What?” She couldn’t tell if he was serious or not. “No, I just meant let’s go back.”

He politely gestured for her to go first. “I’ll get the first aid kit.”

Only her hands and forearms were scraped, and she’d landed with her right hip up, so the pocket holding her phone hadn’t gotten wet. She was really glad for that. Not only would it be a pain replacing her phone on a road trip, but she didn’t want to risk losing any of her conversations with the team. Those were so precious to her, now, that she had so little left.

She had clean, dry clothes, but she drew the line at changing in a public parking lot, and the only bathroom was a porta-potty. She’d just… air dry.

“You gonna be all right?” Flynn asked, opening the driver’s side door.

“I’ll be fine.” She hesitated. “You?”

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand. He looked so tired, suddenly, but managed one sharp nod. She found that she believed him, and she was glad.

She kept the window rolled down so she would dry faster. She turned the radio on, and searched until she found something halfway palatable. Sadly, the palatability lasted only as long as the song.

“This song is so misogynistic,” she muttered, and looked for something else. Finally she found a college-run public radio station that was playing something gentle and classical with only a little
“So, uh, Real Housewives,” Flynn said after a minute. “Explain the premise to me, Lucy. I’m not familiar with it.”

She looked at the suspicious depth at the corners of his mouth, and her eyes narrowed. “Garcia Flynn, if you think I don’t know when you’re full of bullshit, I have a bridge to sell you in the trunk.” She couldn’t help from smirking a little herself.

He laughed. “Fair enough.”

“You’re really telling me you never watched any guilty pleasure television?” she added.

He shook his head. “Never really had the time before…” He trailed off. “Never got in the habit.”

That made sense, given what she knew of his adult life.

“Although I, uh, I used to watch cartoons with Iris,” he added after a moment. “Saturday mornings, I’d fix breakfast, and we’d sit down, just the… just the two of us.” His voice grew rough.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The tires hummed against the road, and the wind rushed at the windows.

“I’m sorry that… my carelessness cost you your chance,” Lucy said quietly.

Flynn inhaled sharply. “In the end, it didn’t matter.” He bit the words out.

“I know,” she said. “I’m still sorry.”

“It’s all right,” he said softly. “It’s all right, Lucy.”

Another few moments. “Lorena liked gardening shows,” he said thoughtfully. “I offered to dig her out a bed, more than once, but she’d tell me it was much more satisfying to watch other people’s mistakes than make them herself.”

Lucy laughed. She was pretty sure she would’ve liked Lorena.

“And, uh, in the winter, it was British mysteries on the BBC,” he added. “After Iris was in bed, and we’d cleaned the kitchen, she’d curl up on the sofa with the fuzzy blanket. And a big mug of tea. I’d usually join her before too long. Not that I gave a damn about mysteries—at least, not at first, but you watch them long enough…”

Lucy swallowed, and blinked several times.

“The cartoons,” he said after a while. “It, uh…”

“When Iris was born,” he finally continued. “I thought, when Lorena went back to work, I could stay home with Iris for a while. I really wanted…” His voice husked into nothingness.

“But Lorena… wanted to stay home, and I… well, I never said anything to her.” He swallowed. “I wish…”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but he didn’t really have to.

“… but I don’t regret that Lorena got the time with her, before… they died.”
Lucy tried to sniffle discreetly, and failed.

“I didn’t mean…”

He sounded abashed, and Lucy was thoroughly irritated with herself, for bringing his attention to her feelings when he was remembering happiness with Lorena and Iris. “I know,” she said, her voice as steady as she could make it. “If you’d actually been trying to make me cry you would have said something like ‘here’s ten reasons why Amelia Earhart wasn’t really a hero.’”

He snorted. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“That’s true.” She abandoned subtlety, fished a napkin out of her bag, and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “If you— don’t stop just because of me. Please.”

“Another time,” he said. “It, uh… helps if I can see the road.”

She hesitated, reached out, and gently squeezed his shoulder. He looked startled, but undeniably pleased.

He cleared his throat and searched for something else on the radio, the classical station having gone out. After a minute or two he snorted, and glanced sideways at her with a smirk.

She straightened. “What?” Then she realized it was another Carole King song: *I feel the earth move under my feet*…

She looked pointedly sideways at him.

“Oh! Uh, stop here,” she said about fifteen minutes later. They’d reached a little town, and on the outskirts was a Wendy’s.

She changed in the bathroom, and reveled in the feeling of dry clothes against her butt. When she came out, she tossed her duffel in the trunk, and looked around.

“I’m going to run in there.” She pointed to a thrift store in the little strip mall behind the restaurant. She didn’t have anything warm enough for crossing the Rockies, and he’d need his jacket there.

He came with her, and parked himself in front of the books with the tilted head of a true connoisseur. She found a sturdy jacket that fit snugly down to her hips, that she secretly thought made her look a little badass. Then she picked out a few sundresses that she didn’t technically need to get her to California. But they were three dollars each, and besides… she just wanted something pretty and fun. The last few months had been really, really short on pretty and fun.

She went to pay, and…

“Flynn!” He was waiting by the door with an armful of books when she finished checking out. She held up her own find. “Look at this!”

He looked down at the blanket. “Is that…”

“The presidents? Yep.” She shook it out. “They only wanted five dollars for it, can you imagine?”

“Imagine that,” he said gravely, as he held the door for her.

“I wonder when it was made.”

“Sometime between 2008 and 2016, obviously.”
“Thank goodness for small mercies.” She smiled at Taft’s bewhiskered face, and refolded the heavy print. “Shall we?”

Feeling like she could take on the world with dry underwear, she took the wheel. The land grew hillier; the spaced-out farms and little towns followed the same general pattern, with the inevitable idiosyncrasies that gave rural life its flavor. Here, it was a row of houses dominated with at least twenty identical American flags on both sides of the road, flapping in the wind, and one Union Jack run defiantly up a flag pole.

She saw a historical marker on a cross-street and made a quick turn so she could pull off and read it. Flynn got out of the car and joined her. “Freeman Field?”

She nodded. “They conveniently left out the thing that site’s most famous for, though, which is the Freeman Field Mutiny. Black officers of the 477th Bombardment Group tried to use civil disobedience to integrate the officers’ club.”

“What happened?”

“Well, at first they were arrested and released, but when over a hundred of them refused to sign a statement saying they understood that the club was for white officers only, they were arrested again. It was April 1945, so since we were still at war in Europe, technically, they could have been executed.”

“Were they?”

She shook her head. “The colonel and the general in charge of the unit were staunch segregationists, and apparently wanted something like this to happen so they could court-martial as many officers as possible. But their superiors were not impressed. Only three officers were ever tried— Thurgood Marshall directed their defense, in fact— and only one officer was convicted, of allegedly pushing a white lieutenant.”

“So what happened to the club?”

“The unit was transferred to another facility where the white officers all went next door to another base, so technically, it was a moot point. But three years later, Truman’s Executive Order 9981 desegregated the armed forces.” She turned towards the car. “Sometimes you think you’ve lost the battle, and then you win the war.”

“Or vice versa,” he muttered.

They stopped for lunch at a restaurant that had the menu painted on a sign out front. “Vegetables,” she muttered, perusing the menu. “Besides potatoes. Is that too much to ask?”

“There’s salad.”

“No. That is not salad, that is a lie. That will turn out to be a bowl of sad, slightly browned iceberg lettuce, four underripe cherry tomatoes, mushy cucumbers, and tasteless matchstick carrots.”

Flynn shrugged. Lucy sighed, and ordered it anyway, along with a chicken sandwich.

“I was wrong,” she said, poking through the sad lettuce when it arrived. “Three cherry tomatoes.”

They’d been driving about forty-five minutes after lunch when traffic began to pick up, and she saw signs for the local fair. On impulse, she followed the line of cars to the county fairgrounds, and parked in the dirt. Inside the fence, kids were yelling and laughing, the announcer was talking
up a parade in the grandstand, and the Ferris wheel loomed over everything.

She looked from the fair to Flynn.

“I’ll wait in the car,” he said, and took out a thick book from the thrift store bag.

“Oh, come on. Fresh air. It’s good for you. Who wants to be cooped up in the car all day?”

His dark look would have deterred her, once upon a time. “What if Rittenhouse is there?” she added. “What if the sword swallower is a sleeper agent.”

He sighed dramatically, unfolded his long legs from the car, and followed her to the entrance.

A pie stall, running a small freezer off a generator, sat strategically near the entrance; she got a slice of peach generously topped with vanilla ice cream, he got apple, and they each let the other try a bite. Her slice tasted like summer. Flynn looked like he was enjoying himself, and she felt vindicated in her bossiness.

They skipped the animal exhibitions and wandered past craft exhibitions. They both browsed a large double stall of used books. Lucy took a few pictures of the classic car exhibition and sent them to Wyatt, then sent all three of the team the picture of the concrete replica of Stonehenge they’d passed that morning.

They reached the end of the fair and turned back. She glanced at Flynn—

He was staring into the middle distance, now, the lines on his face pronounced.

She wasn’t a mind reader. She didn’t have to be. She really should have thought this through better, insisting he come with her to a place where he’d be confronted with happy families.

She put her hand on his arm, drawing him back to the here and now. His gaze focused, and he looked down at her. “Do you want to go?” she asked quietly.

He hesitated. “Do you, uh, mind?”

“Not at all.”

Halfway to the exit, she stopped him. Ahead was a large family group, with a young girl dancing around her father’s legs, chanting “Daddy Daddy Daddy!” Just as well to let them get out first. Lucy tilted her head towards some nearby benches.

They sat quietly for a moment. “I didn’t mean,” she began, and then stopped. Would it make things worse to say it? She hadn’t meant to bring back painful memories. She hadn’t meant to remind him of what he’d lost.

He stretched out with the ease of a man powerful enough to make himself at home anywhere. He licked his top lip. “I know,” he assured her. “You just, uh, felt like you should take the guard dog for some exercise.”

She gave him a disgruntled look. “If you keep calling yourself that, I’m buying you a collar.”

She meant to provoke a melodramatic reaction, to distract him, but his face was inscrutable. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He glanced towards the exit. “It’s very, uh, thoughtful of you to try to guard me,” he said, “but… we can go. If that’s all right with you.”

He wanted to drive this time. Lucy found herself jotting down a list of all the places they’d been to
so far, and then adding notes. She wanted to remember this trip. Maybe she’d even put together some kind of memento book, with the pictures from her phone, the ticket stubs and pamphlets she was accumulating in her handbag, and some descriptions.

They rode in comfortable silence. The radio began to give a detailed rundown of local high school sport matches, lasting at least ten minutes. Lucy stuffed her new blanket between her shoulder and the door, and closed her eyes…

She woke when the car slowed.

Up ahead was a little shack by the side of the road. FRESH PRODUCE, read a hand-lettered sign propped against the side. Flynn pulled over, and raised his eyebrows.

Lucy got out and stretched. She was a little surprised to find no one inside. A heavy metal lockbox sat on the table, chained to a concrete post that ran down into the ground. Beside it was a scale and a list of prices. But what she really cared about were the vegetables, which were so fresh it was a mystery why restaurants forty miles away were serving salads that probably dated back to Watergate.

They were on a road trip. She took this into account, left seventy-five cents, and carried a plastic mesh basket of sugar snap peas back to the car.

Flynn was now leaning against the hood, watching her. She got her water bottle from the car and rinsed the peas right in the mesh. They got back in the car; as he drove, she snacked, enjoying the sweet crunch of a fresh vegetable. She carefully stripped the strings and stem from three pods and offered them to him. His fingertips were warm against her palm as he took them.

She closed her eyes again…

The squealing of stressed metal and the shattering of glass jolted her awake. Her eyes flew open as Flynn hit the brakes, sending her lurching against her seat belt.

As Flynn pulled off the side of the road and parked, her brain struggled with the picture in front of her, trying to resolve it into recognizable shapes. She finally realized a truck had hit a car at an angle from the right rear bumper, and…

A motorcycle on its side. Oh, God, was that crumpled pile several feet away the rider?

“Call the paramedics,” Flynn ordered as he popped the trunk. She was still fumbling for her phone when she saw him race past, first aid kit in hand.

She shook off her lingering confusion and pulled herself together. She got their exact location from the map and called 911, then stayed on the line as she ran after Flynn.

He wrenched open the rear door of the front car and crawled through. Lucy looked at the downed motorcycle rider, and hesitated. She didn’t see any blood. He— or she— might need CPR, but getting these other people away from the vehicles was the priority.

Flynn hauled a battered car seat out of the car. Lucy ran around to the front, and helped the driver out. “My daughter,” the woman said, tried to look over her shoulder, and hissed in pain. “My daughter, oh my God, she was right where—”

“We’ve got her. My friend’s got her, right over there. C’mon, it’s not safe.” Lucy reached back and grabbed the woman’s purse for her.
She led the woman to where Flynn was kneeling beside the motorcycle rider. “Check the truck,” he told Lucy. “They took less damage, but no one’s gotten out.”

Before Lucy could get there, the driver’s door of the pickup truck opened, and a boy who looked barely old enough to have a license lurched out. He glanced at the group of them, looked scared, and called someone.

Another car pulled up. A woman got out and raced toward them. Tears were running down her face. “Mom!” she shouted. “Mom, oh my God, oh my God—”

The motorcyclist groaned, and fumbled with her helmet. Flynn helped her get it off, revealing a woman with short-cropped grey hair. “Don’t move,” he told her gently. “Ambulance is coming.”

The older woman groaned. “I think I broke,” she began.

“What?” Flynn asked.

 “… my dignity,” she sighed.

Her daughter dropped to her knees beside her. “I told you it was too dangerous.” She could barely choke the words out.

“Yes, fine, you told me so.”

“You think I want to be right? I want to not have to scrape you off the pavement!”

“Well. Good thing I landed on the grass.”

Lucy gave the younger woman her handkerchief and tactfully retreated to check on the driver and her baby daughter.

It didn’t take long for the paramedics and the cops to arrive. The motorcyclist had broken more than her dignity; the paramedics moved her onto a backboard and loaded her into the ambulance. A tow truck arrived for the battered little car that had been hit, and someone came to pick up the driver and her child. The motorcyclist’s daughter stared at her mother’s motorcycle in bewilderment.

“Do you know anything about these things?” she asked Lucy, who was nearby.

Lucy shook her head.

“It’s my son’s, he needs it to get to work tomorrow, I don’t know how I’m going to… He’s going to lose his job. I told him not to let her take it out joyriding. I told her it was too dangerous—”

“Can you drive it home?” Lucy asked, suspecting that the woman was working herself into tears.

She shook her head.

“I can.”

The woman looked hopefully up at Flynn, who’d seemingly materialized beside them.

“If that thing, uh, runs, I can get it back for you,” he added. “Lucy, follow me in the car?”

“Sure.”
Which was how she ended up staring at Flynn straddling a motorcycle. From behind. For fifteen miles.

She wasn’t— no. It was ridiculous to react like this. She stared resolutely at his (very broad, very well-defined) shoulders, not letting her gaze…


She was being ridiculous. It wasn’t exactly news to her that Flynn was an attractive man, tall, very muscular, with an unfairly pretty face for someone who’d spent most of his adult life as a soldier. She didn’t need to act like a schoolgirl with a crush just because the, um, view had changed.

It wasn’t news to her, either, that her libido agreed with her assessment. She wasn’t ignorant of the fact that she sometimes got a little warm when he was particularly close, that the brush of his skin sometimes sent a pleasant thrill through her. She’d, you know, considered it. Considered him. More often than she’d want to admit to anyone, actually. But he was a bereaved widower, and she…

Well, she didn’t have a great track record lately.

Her attraction wasn’t news, but that didn’t make acting on it a good idea. She was done with rushing into bed and fucking up her love life.

They finally stopped at a long, low house set back from the highway. Flynn gracefully dismounted— oh, he should not be able to look that good after fifteen miles on a motorcycle. His hips did something, uh, eye-catching as he shook the stiffness of the road out of his legs, and—

Okay, she was just very done with this, and she was going to admire the… sunset.

The woman they’d followed got out of the car. “Thank you,” she said a little breathlessly. “I can’t thank you enough, I—”

“No need to thank us.” Flynn handed her the keys.

“Join us for supper,” the woman suggested. “We’re having pork chops, and—”

“Oh, thank you very much,” Lucy said, “but we’re actually traveling, and we, uh, we have a long way to go.”

“Well, can I— give you some food for the road? Pay you? Give you gas money, at least?” She looked more and more perplexed as Flynn and Lucy continued to shake their heads. “How about a puppy? Do you want a puppy?”

Lucy blinked. “What?”

“Our dog just had a litter! The cutest little things, you ought to see—”

“Mmm, no, thank you,” Lucy said, sudden visions of traveling with a puppy not appealing to her at all. “Thank you, but… no.”

The woman looked nonplussed, then said, “Oh! Wait here.”

Lucy and Flynn exchanged looks as the woman dashed inside the house. She returned a moment later, holding, thankfully not a puppy, but a plate of cookies covered in plastic wrap. “Just made them today,” she said. “Take them for the road.”
“Thank you,” Lucy said, deciding it was easier just to accept—oh, who was she kidding? They were homemade chocolate chip cookies.

“Thank you.”

“Our, uh, best wishes for your mom,” Lucy said, and waved a little awkwardly as she backed towards the car.

It was well into the evening, but they were only forty miles from the border. “Want to keep going, or should we stop?” she asked.

“I’m all right to keep going if you are.”

So they headed for Illinois. Flynn unwrapped the cookies and put them in the middle seat; Lucy sampled one. Then two. Then three.

They stopped for dinner at a sandwich shop in a little strip mall. Lucy yawned as they walked back to the car. Here and there, a firefly flashed in the long grass around the parking lot.

Flynn held out his hand for the keys, but she shook her head. “Can you find us a hotel over the border?”

They crossed into Illinois as the sunset turned the sky a beautiful pink-purple.

Chapter End Notes

Paulhenge: https://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/58611
Illinois

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lucy pointed off to the right. “Pretty sure that’s the commemoration of Lincoln leaving Indiana.”

Flynn frowned. She realized she’d brought up a Lincoln site. But what he said was, “Illinois put up a marker for where Lincoln left Indiana?”

“Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky don’t joke around with their competition over Lincoln. Kentucky gets his birthplace, Indiana gets his boyhood home, and Illinois gets pretty much everything else.” She considered. “Iowa gets two random parcels of land that he got for his service in the Black Hawk War, but never visited.”

Flynn snorted.

A few minutes on a dark country road, and they reached a town with the hotel Flynn had found. “I’m sorry, sir, we don’t have any adjacent rooms available,” the desk clerk told them. “I can put you on the same hallway.”

“Uh… we’ll just take the one room, thanks,” Lucy said.

“Certainly. Would you like one king-sized bed or two queens?”

“Two queens,” she and Flynn chorused.

“I’m sorry about the inconvenience. We’re the closest hotel for the drum and bugle corps competition, and we’re pretty full for the weekend.” The clerk handed them two keycards. “Here are your keys, and y’all have a nice night, now.”

Lucy trudged after Flynn, then stopped and looked at the mural on the wall next to the stairs. Three men, recognizable as Lincoln, Grant, and Reagan. The caption read “Late Presidents of Illinois”… with the first word squeezed in against the border, in perceptibly different lettering.

She snorted.

Their room was on the second floor. She stood in the doorway as Flynn checked the room, then dropped her bags on the far bed.

She looked out the window. Behind the hotel was a corn field, with an athletic field beyond. In the soft twilight, fireflies flashed brightly against the new-looking black track. She watched them for a moment, and tried to believe that it was over. That they’d won.

It got a little easier every day of slow trips down the back roads, every day where the most danger she faced was a creek bank collapsing under her feet. In the moments she lost herself in the trip, even easy. But then in the other moments, she had to remember.

She shook herself a little and found the bag from the thrift store. Flynn glanced up inquiringly. “I’m going down to the laundry room,” she told him.

“You’re gonna do all that tonight?”

She shook her head. “I’ll just wash everything. The dresses will air dry overnight, and I can throw
the blanket in in the morning."

So she found the hotel’s laundry, like she had… had it really just been last night? It felt so long ago. No wonder she was tired. This ‘scenic route’ road trip was a lot.

She threw the laundry in, and waited. She texted Agent Jimenez, to see how she and Amina and the baby were doing. Wyatt had replied to her picture of the cars— nice!— and Jiya had replied to the Stonehenge replica: aliens walk among us. Which Rufus had followed with, we already knew that.

Lucy smiled, and locked her screen. She missed them. She would be glad to see them again when she and Flynn finally got to California.

She leaned her head back against the wall. She hoped the woman who’d crashed was all right—they’d never even gotten her name. She hoped she’d be able to figure out what to do with her life when she got back to California. She hoped…

She hoped.

When the washer finished, she bundled everything into the blanket and went back to the room. She hung the dresses in the closet niche, and draped the blanket over the shower rod. Then she got ready for bed. Flynn, reading in the chair, reached for the light switch when she sprawled on the far bed.

She shook her head. “Won’t keep me awake,” she murmured, already closing her eyes. She wriggled, luxuriating in the feel of a decent mattress, even wide enough that she could stretch her arms out in both directions.

She heard him getting ready for bed anyway, as she drifted off. She burrowed more deeply into the bed. “I love pillows,” she sighed. Not her purse, not her arms, not a sack of cabbages, not the ground, but real pillows.

Something landed lightly on the bed. When she groped blindly, she felt two more pillows. She smiled, and stuck them behind her back and between her knees, completing her encapsulation.

#

She woke to what had become a familiar sight: a cup of coffee on the nightstand.

She smiled a little, shook off the thickest of the sleep, propped herself up on one elbow, and took a sip. The other bed was empty. She didn’t hear the water running, but maybe Flynn was in the bathroom.

A little more coffee, and she sat up and wrapped her dressing gown around her. She stood, stretched, and looked out the window.

The athletic field was occupied now. A marching band maneuvered on the far end; close to her, dancers were warming up. Instead of flashes from fireflies, patches of bright color filled the air, as the dancers twirled their flags with a grace Lucy could never hope to match.

She slowly finished her cup as she watched the show. God, just being able to stand here, drinking her coffee, and enjoy it, no crisis, no agenda…

Was this going to get old?

*How many chances does a girl get to save the world?* she’d asked, once. The answer was one, and
she’d done it. So… now what?

She realized at the same time that the bathroom was silent, and her phone was ringing. She scooped it off the nightstand: it was Agent Christopher. “Hello?”

“Lucy,” Agent Christopher greeted her. “Can you have Flynn pull over? I need to talk to him.”

Lucy blinked. “… what?”

“Isn’t he driving? He’s not picking up.”

“Uh, no, we… we haven’t left yet…”

“Then where is he?”

“I— don’t know, he was gone when I woke up…”

There was a long silence from the other end. Lucy was trying to understand why when the door opened and Flynn came in with— her blanket?

She held out the phone to him. “Agent Christopher needs you.”

He traded her phone for blanket, which was still warm from the dryer. “Hello?”

Lucy began folding the blanket.

Then: “I’m putting you on speaker.” He put the phone down on the bed between them.

A long pause. Then Agent Christopher said, “You’re in southeast Illinois?”

“Yes…” Lucy said.

“Don’t hurry home.”

Lucy’s heart raced unpleasantly. “What happened? Is everyone—”

Oh, God. If she lost them—

“Everyone’s fine,” Agent Christopher said. “They’re all under observation, and they’re not the ones I’m worried about. You are, Lucy.”


“We’re still trying to clean up factions of Rittenhouse. The others aren’t of any interest to them. But you—”

“Would make a great figurehead,” she murmured.

“Exactly.”

“How bad is it?” She steeled herself.

“Right now? I don’t think you’re in any danger at all. There’s no indication that they know where you are. As long as you’re not here, you’re safe. And if you’re with Flynn, you’re doubly safe. Have you seen any trouble?”

“Zilch,” Flynn said. “I’ve been watching. Nothing at all out of place.”
“Good,” Agent Christopher said. “I’d send you some agents, but frankly, I’d be afraid that would just lead Rittenhouse to you. So, keep a low profile… and take your time.”

“We’ll stay out of California and adjacent states until we get the all-clear,” Flynn said.

“Good.”

“What about our cell phones?” Lucy asked. “Credit cards, things like that?”

“They’re all locked down. I took care of it.”

“The NSA—” Flynn’s voice was dark.

“— cleaned house after a cult infiltrated their upper echelons. Plus I had Jiya help me with the encryption.”

Flynn’s shoulders eased down, and he nodded.

“I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come home. Meanwhile, you tell me the second you see anything out of the ordinary. I’m sorry, Lucy,” she added. “It shouldn’t be more than a week or two.”

Lucy shook her head, though she knew Agent Christopher couldn’t see. “All I have left in San Francisco is the team,” she said. “My old life…”

She trailed off.

“Well, we’ll clean these bastards up, and then you can figure out what comes next.” Agent Christopher sounded determined.

They hung up. Flynn looked at her. “Rittenhouse wants you as a figurehead because of your great-grandfather? And your dad’s family?”

Oh. Right. He didn’t know.

“Sit down, Flynn,” she said quietly.

Looking confused, he sat on the end of the bed.

She took a deep breath. “The Preston side of the family, my mother’s line… we’re the last descendants of David Rittenhouse.”

He stared at her, expression inscrutable. Her stomach churned. She swallowed.

“I’m sorry, Lucy.”

When more did not come, she felt confused. “Is… that all?”

“Uh, what were you expecting? ‘Begone, foul fiend?’”

“Um…”

His expression softened. “I know you, Lucy. Not better than you know yourself,” he added, with a wry smile. “But… who you are, what you stand for, even if I’d never read that journal, I would know. Where your DNA comes from doesn’t change that.”
She closed her eyes, which prickled with relief.

“The idea that blood is destiny, that’s *them,*” he added. “That’s not— I don’t buy into their creepy eugenics. Plus,” he added, “it’s bullshit.”

She smiled, and opened her eyes again. “You always know what to say to, uh… to help.”

He gave her that remarkably soft, startlingly pleased, slightly smug smile she’d first seen in a hotel room in San Antonio.

“So, I guess we have some time to kill,” she said after a minute. “What do you think about detouring to Memphis? It’s only— ‘only’— maybe four hundred miles.”

“That’s fine.” He stood, and studied her for a moment. “Are you gonna be okay?”

She sighed. “I just— I don’t know what I’m supposed to *feel.* One moment I’m trying to get used to the idea that the fight is over, and the next, it’s not?” She shook her head. “I wish the universe could make up its mind so I could know which crisis to have.”

He snorted.

“As for the actual danger?” She shrugged. Maybe she was just so jaded now that she wasn’t reacting like she ought.

“Don’t worry, Lucy,” he said. “I won’t fail you.”

That slight emphasis he put on the last word— there were so many things wrong with that sentiment, she didn’t know where to *start.*

She reached up and put her hand on the side of his face. That got his complete, startled attention. “Flynn. You didn’t fail *them.*” She stared up at him, daring him to disagree— verbally or otherwise.

He looked down at her, eyes wide and dark, serious and a little lost, intent and searching her face. The moment stretched out.

Finally he nodded once. He reached up, gently took her hand in his own large, warm one, and moved it away from his face. He gave her fingers a light squeeze before he let go. Their gestures had left the air between them charged with something Lucy couldn’t quite name, something far more dangerous than the simple attraction that was also present.

She cleared her throat. “I’m going to shower.”

A detour to Memphis. An indefinite number of days on the road. An infinity of sad salads, stretching out ahead of her. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing this right,” she announced when she was dressed.

He looked up from his book.

They stopped at the nearest big box store for a cooler, a pint of milk, a bag of salad mix, a colander, and two bags of ice. They could get the rest the next time they passed a thrift store. On impulse, she added a blank notebook.

After the morning’s excitement, they had a quiet ride. They headed south on a narrow, two-lane road, past wide, flat fields of young corn, and some fields of a shorter crop she recognized as
soybeans. “Knee high by the Fourth of July,” she murmured.

Flynn opened his eyes. “What?”

“It’s an old saying. The corn is supposed to be knee high by the fourth of July. Although I think that was before modern hybrids.”

She searched for a radio station, then turned the radio off when she found that their choices were static, country, or contemporary Christian. She glanced at him, and noted the dark bags under his eyes. “Did you stay up late reading?” she teased, in her best mom voice.

“Definitely…” The yawn that interrupted his reply somewhat lessened the dignity of his tone. “…not.”

A few more miles, and she saw a road sign that made her think. “Where the Mississippi joins the Missouri,” she said. “Have you ever seen it?”

He shook his head.

“I’d like to.”

“Now?” He looked at the map.

She hadn’t meant now, but she did consider it. It was only a few hundred miles. What else did she have to do? When would she be back here again?

“No,” she decided. St. Louis wasn’t exactly a remote destination. She’d have another chance, and the point of this trip was not to drive themselves into exhaustion. “Just someday.”

Lucy stopped at a gas station to use the bathroom, which was past a video poker room and a rack of bait. When she came out, Flynn had managed to find some music: Carole King’s “I Feel The Earth Move”… again. Lucy sang along happily anyway. She’d missed this, and most of Carole’s songs fit nicely in her own range.

Lucy glanced at the console in surprise when that song turned into “So Far Away.” What radio station…? But the display said CD. “Where’d you find this?”

“The, uh, thrift store.” He sounded a little sheepish. “It was a whim. You seemed to like her music.”

“Oh. Well. I do, thank you.”

It stung a little to sing I sure hope the road don’t come to own me, there’s so many dreams I’ve yet to find. The only home she had left was her friends, and, except for Flynn, she didn’t know when she’d see any of them again. She hoped she had dreams ahead of her, but right now, what were they?

She followed a gentle curve in the road as that song turned into the distinctive intro of “It’s Too Late.” She’d always liked the sultry opening of this one…

“‘And it’s too late, baby, now, it’s too late, though we really did try to— make it. Something inside has— died— and—’” Her voice cracked. Hurriedly, she pulled off onto the grassy shoulder. She pressed her hand to her mouth, and closed her eyes.

Flynn turned off the music.
She swallowed, her throat tight with unshed tears, and tried not to sniffle, feeling absolutely pathetic. She covered her face with her hands, but she knew she wasn’t fooling Flynn.

*Why? Why wasn’t she ever enough for anyone? She just…*

Wyatt had wanted her. He’d *valued* her. And she’d trusted him with that. And now?

She still loved him, as a friend, but if he wanted to get back together? If he told her that it was over with Jessica and she was all that mattered?

She still loved him. But he’d lost her trust.

Flynn’s hand rested very lightly on her shoulder, rubbing gentle, hesitant arcs with his thumb.

She steeled herself, and made herself stop sniffling. The past was the past. They were done changing it. All she could do was go on.

She lowered her hands, and tilted her chin up. Then she dug in her handbag until she found her tissues, wiped her eyes, and defiantly blew her nose.

“It’s over.” Her voice came out rough. “And I knew it was over before we left. Before we *won*. But that doesn’t…”

“But knowing it’s over doesn’t stop the pain,” he said, very softly, after a pause.

She nodded.

She took a deep breath, and squared her shoulders. “All right. Let’s go.”

“You want me to drive?”

She looked at him, and saw nothing but genuine concern. No embarrassment, no discomfort. It occurred to her, that if this moment *had* to be witnessed…

It wasn’t just that he matter-of-factly comforted her in her weakness. It was that he made her feel it wasn’t really weakness at all.

“No,” she said after a minute. “I’m— I’ll be okay.”

She pulled over at a grocery store to take a picture of the statue of an enormous man holding bags of groceries. She considered sending it to Agent Christopher as per her instructions to alert her about anything out of the ordinary, but decided she would probably *not* appreciate the joke.

She turned the music back on, and skipped the rest of “It’s Too Late.” The next song, too, was too melancholy and wandering for her right now. But the *next* one, she cranked.

“’You got to get up every morning,’” she sang gleefully, “’with a smile on your face and show the world all the love in your heart…’”

“Amy *hated* it when I woke her up with this song,” she explained to Flynn during the bridge.

He cracked one eye open. “So, you did it as often as possible?”

“Exactly. *You’re gonna find, yes you will, that you’re beautiful…’*”

She’d sung through the rest of the album by the time they passed another giant grocery man. She

Flynn took over driving, but she asked him to pull over almost immediately, when they came to a farmers’ market. She came out of with a basket of strawberries, which she put in the cooler, and a bag of pastries. Once she’d buckled again, she chose one, then offered Flynn the bag.

*When I’m back, we’re doing karaoke*, she texted the other three.

*Um*, Rufus wrote back almost immediately.

*no*, Wyatt said.

*yes! I do a mean you give love a bad name*, Jiya said.

Lucy smiled.

*also I have it on good authority that Rufus knows all the lyrics to she blinded me with science*, Jiya added.

*LIES*, Rufus replied immediately.

*really? ’cause your mom said you memorized it when you were ten and she still hears you singing it in the shower.*

Lucy remembered something she’d once overheard Jiya saying, and pictured them having this argument over text while in the same room. That made it twice as funny, and she laughed out loud.

*didn’t i once catch you singing into a hairbrush about pi or something*, Wyatt wrote.

Lucy saw Rufus start and stop typing several times. *Help me, Dr. Lucy Preston*, he replied finally. *You’re my only hope.*

*Um… okay? I’m right here, what do you want me to do?* she said.

Rufus replied with a video clip of a man hitting his head against the wall. Lucy snorted.

It eased her heart to watch them all, but especially Jiya and Rufus, bantering like this. She knew things weren’t suddenly perfect for them; she knew there was stuff she wasn’t seeing, just like they weren’t seeing all of her pain.

But when she compared this to Jiya’s heartbreak after Rufus’s death? Periods of grim, implacable fury with all of them, starting with herself and then Rufus, alternating with wild grief?

Yeah.

“Everyone, ah, surviving out there?” Flynn asked carefully.

“You know, the world won’t end if you admit you like them,” she said without looking up.

When she finally did look at him, Flynn was opening and closing his mouth in a startlingly good fish impression. “Are they doing well,” he finally asked grudgingly.

Lucy smiled. “Yes. We’re planning a karaoke night. Want to come?”

“I don’t sing.”
“Hmm,” Lucy said noncommittally.

Flynn gave her a deeply skeptical look.

“If you could go back to one more historical event,” she began after a while.

“I don’t ever wanna see the inside of a damn time machine again.”

“Okay. Let me rephrase. If you could be instantly whisked away to one historical event of your choosing, with a way to instantly return… what would you want to see?”

“Just to watch?” he said after a minute.

“Just to watch.”

He thought about it for quite a while.

“Mainz,” he said finally. “1450.”

It took her a second. “Gutenberg?”

He nodded. “Just the, uh, sheer power of possibility,” he said. “I fought in plenty of revolutions. Nothing to match that one, and no one fired a shot.” He glanced sideways. “What about you?”

She was quiet for a moment. “The Montgomery bus boycott,” she said after a while. “I mean, it’s an obvious one, but… it was just such a pivotal moment. For so many reasons.” She took a sip of water. “Or, well, a pivotal year and fifteen days.”

“A, uh, revolution in its own right,” he said after a minute.

She nodded.

It took them about an hour to reach Metropolis, the last town before the Ohio River. Lucy asked Flynn to detour into the town before they got on the interstate to cross the bridge. “We can stop for — does that say ‘Giant Superman Statue, straight ahead?’”

“Superman was from Metropolis.”

“What?” She couldn’t tell if he was teasing her or not.

“You never read superhero comic books?”

She shook her head. “Mom said they would rot our brains. We had educational comic books, like *Paul Revere and the Riders*.”

“Wasn’t that a band?”

“That’s Paul Revere and the Raiders.”

“Oh.”

“Paul Revere and the riders were the five who rode to warn colonists of the movements of the British army. Did you know that Revere was actually captured by the British, and it was Dr. Samuel Prescott who made it to Concord?”

“I did not.”
“Neither did my fifth-grade social studies teacher. I don’t think she liked me very much after that.”
Flynn was trying not to smile.

“That was the year I was Sybil Ludington for Halloween,” Lucy added. “My mount was a stick horse. People kept asking if I was Annie Oakley. I was indignant.”

Flynn was no longer even trying not to smile.

“I kept— oh! Historical marker.”
Flynn obediently turned down the narrow road. “Fort Massac,” Lucy read on the sign as he slowed. “That’s right, George Rogers Clark landed near here. He captured several British settlements during the Revolutionary War,” she explained. “He’s credited with helping the US end up with the Northwest Territory after the war.”

“You wanna keep going?”

“Why not?” It would be a long drive to Memphis.

Flynn followed the road, making turns at random, until Lucy saw something ahead. “There’s an actual fort?” she asked with delight. “They rebuilt the fort!”

They parked, and Lucy wandered happily around the reconstruction of the 19th-century fort, the last of several to occupy the area. She stopped in front of the statue of Clark.

“When I found out he was William Clark’s big brother—the Clark of Lewis and Clark—I was so excited,” she said. “I thought it must’ve been amazing to be part of a family that shaped history in so many ways.” She shook her head. “My mom must’ve been ecstatic.”

Why couldn’t her family have been normal overachievers, like the Clarks?

Lucy and Amy had spent at least a week playing Clarks. Lucy, though really more tempted by William Clark, had generously stuck to historical accuracy and been George Rogers. She and Amy would romp on the sofa, behind the desk, or under the kitchen table, with Dad occasionally pulled in to be the British or the local Native Americans, as necessary. Then, when they were worn out, Mom would sit down with them on the couch and read to them, telling them about the real Clarks and planting historical details in their fertile imaginations for the next day’s play.

Mom really had loved her. That almost made it worse. Love could be deep and genuine, and also twisted, controlling, and manipulative. What did you do with that? Could you honor the good parts and throw away the bad? Or was it irredeemable?

Flynn took a quiet step towards her, jolting her out of her reverie.

Whatever Mom had wanted for Lucy… it was Lucy’s choice now.

“Let’s, uh,” she said. “There’s a bench.”

They sat near the river and shared the last of the pastries, and the now-cold strawberries from the cooler. Clouds slowly accumulated in the sky, and a cool breeze began to blow. Her hand brushed Flynn’s as they both reached into the basket at the same time.

Lucy popped another berry in her mouth and bit the good part off, licking her lip to keep the juice from running down her face. To have come through everything, and to be sitting on a park bench in
Illinois, watching boats on the Ohio River, eating fresh strawberries…

It was better than she could have expected, in the darkest days of the fight. So maybe she should trust that there was something good still waiting for her ahead.

Flynn piled the strawberry hulls in the empty basket. “Shall we?”

They circled through the town center for a lunch more substantial than half a pint of strawberries and a danish each. As they left the restaurant parking lot, they came face to face with what was, indeed, an enormous statue of a man in spandex. There were signs all around the statue, and in fact, most of downtown: SUPERMAN CELEBRATION, JUNE 8TH -11TH. Lucy stopped and got out to take a picture.

“You want a picture with that one?” Flynn asked, smirking, when she climbed back in the car.

Lucy gave him a Look, and stole one of his last french fries. Then they headed for the bridge, and crossed into Kentucky.

Chapter End Notes

The mural Lucy encounters at the hotel is real, lest anyone think I am taking cheap shots at rural Illinois.

Things encountered or mentioned in this chapter:

Lincoln Trail State Memorial

Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park

Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial

Big John in Eldorado and Carmi

Fort Massac State Park

Metropolis Superman Statue

Metropolis’s Superman Celebration

Thomas Dolby’s She Blinded Me With Science

Kate Bush’s Pi
The sky was completely overcast, the morning’s bright sunshine gone. At a stoplight, Lucy found herself mesmerized by the newly green tops of the oaks, tossing in the rising wind.

The rain hit hard. The *swish* of the wipers made a pleasing percussion to the sound of the rain on the pavement and on the car. She flicked the lights on. The weather might slow them down a bit, but that was all right. It was only four hours or so to Memphis. They’d make it by night.

She followed signs for the Great River Road. A giant cross rising from a hill on the right reminded her that they were entering the Bible Belt.

They stopped for gas, having neglected to fill up at their earlier stop. Lucy stayed under cover of the awning as she pumped, but the wind blew the cold rain against her, and her sandals were no match for the depths of the puddles that had already accumulated.

Whatever. Still better than fighting Rittenhouse.

Flynn came out of the little convenience store and frowned at her, now much more soaked than she had been two minutes ago. “You want me to drive?”

So she dug her new blanket out of the trunk and wrapped it around herself. “Thanks for drying this this morning, by the way.”

“Sure.”

The only thing better than having a presidents blanket was having a presidents blanket that was amazingly soft and warm. “I don’t know how anyone ever gave this away,” she muttered, as she snuggled into the fabric, propping her feet up against the vents so her toes would warm.

The steady rain lulled her. It seemed to turn the car into a bubble, just the two of them shut out from the world. So it felt safe to say, after a while, “I’m not going back to Stanford.”

Flynn glanced sideways.

“I mean, for a year, to wrap up loose ends, if it’ll get me tenure, sure. But not to stay.” She shook her head. “I know it sounds crazy to leave a place like Stanford, if they offer me tenure.”

“It doesn’t,” Flynn said after a minute.

She gave him a grateful look. “But that department was Mom’s legacy. I want my own legacy.”

He smiled.

“What?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I admire you.”

… *oh*. She gave him a soft little smile in return.

If Stanford wouldn’t reconsider her tenure case— and she didn’t think the odds were good,
considering she’d completely disappeared for a year— it would be seven years somewhere else. She’d be in her forties by then. Did she want to fight that battle all over again? And— and what would that mean for the other aspects of her life?

“When we first met, you told me you… you knew what I was meant to be, and it wasn’t a teacher.” She looked at him. “What did you mean by that?”

He winced. “I’m not sure I was right, Lucy.”

“I still want to know what you meant.”

He sighed softly. “The Lucy who wrote the journal,” he said after a minute. “She— well, I told you, she’s impressive. Not that you’re not,” he added with an awkward but endearing smile.

“She, and a version of me, nearly managed to take out Rittenhouse. Lucy— you’re a good teacher, if that’s what you want.” He touched his tongue to his top lip. “But if you chose that path because you thought you had to follow in your mother’s footsteps… I think you’d succeed at anything else you wanted.”

“I didn’t— it wasn’t just my mother, Flynn.”

“I know.”

“… but it wasn’t entirely not that, either,” she said after a minute.

She thought. “I am good at history.” Though perhaps that wasn’t the most salient consideration. “And I like it.”

She thought more, and then spoke slowly. “In the original timeline, my mom was… dying of lung cancer. By the night you stole the Mothership, I wasn’t sure if she’d ever be alert enough to talk to me again.”

Flynn glanced sideways, but did not speak.

“So, I had to think about a future where she was… gone.” Lucy swallowed. “And whenever I thought about it, I thought, at least I’ll still have my work.”

And Amy, had been the other half of that thought.

She took a deep breath, and pushed the throttle of her train of thought forward. “And it was comforting to think that.”

Mom had influenced her love of history, of course. “Making Mom proud” and “doing good work” had been twin goals for as long as she could remember. But Lucy’s love for history was not irretrievably bound up with her feelings about Mom. It had survived the discovery that her first, and always best, professional role model had used the subject they both valued so highly to try to roll back all of the progress, the justice, achieved in the last three hundred years of American history.

“What about you?” she added. Maybe that was an unfair question, forcing him to face a future after all his losses. But it wasn’t a question he had to grapple with alone.

He licked his top lip. “Perhaps… find someone who needs fighters.” His voice was low and rough. “There’s never a shortage.”
That hurt her heart. “Flynn, you don’t owe it to anyone to go out and put your life on the line again,” she told him. “You did enough. You saved the world from an enemy no one else even knew existed. You did enough.”

He breathed in sharply.

He didn’t say anything more. She decided not to belabor the point, and instead readjusted the blanket and checked her phone. She sent the group the picture of the Superman statue: Superman’s a geek thing, right?

Yeah! Rufus wrote back.

Here’s another one from earlier in the day. She sent him the picture of the giant grocery store statue.

The “typing” ellipsis hovered a long time. I physically could not type I hate you but I want you to know I tried.

Lucy laughed.

Ahead, cars were backed up in front of a flagger with a stop sign. “My mom’s father was from Illinois,” Flynn said, as he braked. “He used to say there were two seasons in the north: winter, and construction season.”

“Sounds about right.” Lucy had heard similar sentiments the year she’d lived in Chicago.

They passed the construction crew, only to hit a detour that sent them onto even smaller country roads. But they weren’t in a hurry—and at least they weren’t the ones out working in this rain.

“Couldn’t you be an interpreter?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

“How many languages do you speak?”

“Fluently? Just, uh, English, Croatian, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic.”

She gave him a pointed look. “Just those? Wow, Flynn, you’re really falling down on the job.”

He smirked. “My French and German are pretty good, and my Gorkhali is passable. Uh, I can get by in Mandarin, and I know a little Farsi. Oh, and Portuguese.”

“Do you have any idea how rare that is? Half the companies in the world would be falling all over themselves to hire someone like you.”

“I’m not sure I want to spend the rest of my days translating transnational pet food contracts.”

“Or schools,” she said. “International NGOs. Refugee advocacy organizations.”

He looked a little thoughtful. She didn’t push this, either, just hoped she’d given him something to consider.

The sound of the rain against the windows and the road made her eyes drift close…

She felt the car slow, and cracked open her eyes. They were at a four-way stop in a little town, a gas station and convenience store on one corner, a currently-closed diner on another. Buildings
stretched back for another few blocks.

Someone rapped sharply on Flynn’s window. She jumped; Flynn tensed.

An older man wearing a bright red poncho was peering in. He held up a picture in a sheet protector — a grainy photo of a little boy at the top of a slide. “Have you seen this boy?” he asked, loud enough to be heard through the window.

Lucy frowned, and looked around. There was a woman in a green poncho on the opposite corner, flagging down the traffic going in that direction.

Flynn cracked the window. “No,” he said. “We’re from out of town.”

The man looked disappointed, but said, “Y’all travel safe, then.”

“Why are you asking about the boy?”

“He’s missing,” the man said. “Miz Johnson’s grandson. Little diabetic boy. She was watching him for his mom, he was playing in the family room, she heard him say, ‘I wanna play in the rain!’ and he opened the door and was gone. That was a few hours ago.”

“We got people searching the area for him, but no one knows which way he went, so we’re trying to see if any travelers have seen him.”

Flynn had gone still. “Type I or Type II?”

“What?”

“The boy. Is he dependent on insulin?”

“Afraid so.”

Flynn looked up at the man. “Who’s coordinating the search?”

The man directed them to the elementary school two blocks away. Flynn glanced sideways at Lucy, but didn’t say anything, his mouth tight.

“Wait a minute,” she said, when he parked under a big oak tree. “Let me get my sneakers on.”

He gave her a single nod, and she knew it wasn’t about her shoes.

They hurried through the rain past a line of beat-up trucks and cars. Inside, the building was dark; she’d lost track of time, but today was Saturday, wasn’t it. The smell of mildew hit her. She heard water dripping into water somewhere. “Kids go to school here?” she muttered.

They entered what had to be the cafeteria. A lean, greying, clean-shaven white man whose demeanor reminded her of Wyatt, and another white, florid man with a drooping handlebar mustache, were bent over a map; across the room, a few tired-looking people were eating. An older white woman was standing near some metal trays, the kind that kept food warm, making coffee. Wet, brightly-colored ponchos were draped over empty tables.

Lucy followed Flynn to the two men on the right. The lean man looked up. “Yes?”

“Your friend at the stop sign told us you needed searchers.”

Both men looked Flynn over, ignoring Lucy. “You have any experience?”
“I led a search and rescue team in the war.”

The mustachioed man eyed him. “Which war, sonny?”

“Afghanistan.”

He seemed satisfied.

“Where do you need people?” Flynn asked.

“You know the area?” the lean man asked.

“No, but I can read a map.”

“We have a bunch of searchers down by the river,” the lean man said. “Jason, uh, he’s fascinated with boats…” He trailed off into an ominous silence.

“So we need more people inland.” He tapped a spot with his finger. “There’s a park that opens into some woods and fields. The park was the first place Miz Johnson checked, but no one’s checked what’s behind it.”

“Fine,” Flynn said crisply.

“Your, uh, lady friend can wait here, if she wants,” the mustachioed man said.

“I don’t,” Lucy said firmly.

He looked pained. The lean man looked from Flynn to Lucy. Flynn stared them both down.

Lucy didn’t like living in a world where men questioned her. But if she had to live in this world, she very much appreciated having Flynn to back her up, no questions asked.

“We need your phone numbers,” the lean man said after a moment. “So we can let you know if there’s news about Jason. And vice versa. Oh, and grab some ponchos.”

“Have something to eat before you go,” the other man suggested. “Miz Turner runs that restaurant on the corner, she closed up so she could come here and keep people fed.”

They passed on food, and headed for the park. “Was Afghanistan the only time you did search and rescue?” she asked as they drove.

“No, but I didn’t think mentioning the others would help.”

They parked. The ponchos were huge on Lucy, swathing her in rustling plastic; Flynn’s barely reached his thighs. They looked at the back of the park, where patchy grass turned into big trees on one side and meadows on the other. The land sloped downhill, out of sight.

“At least it’s, uh, not a corn field,” Flynn pointed out.

“Are they really checking those row by row? Wouldn’t he hear them calling?”

“They’ve been searching for hours and they haven’t found him yet,” Flynn said. “There’s a good chance he… can’t respond.”

Right.
They started in the meadows, which were overgrown with tall weeds. Some of them were tall enough to hide a four-year-old boy, especially if he were laying down, so they searched thoroughly.

The poncho didn’t protect her legs. By the time she finished her section, the rain, and the wet plants, had soaked her jeans from the knees down. She looked around for Flynn, at the other end of the big field, hoping he’d had better luck. But he saw her looking and gave a double thumbs down in front of his body, so she could see.

Damn it.

They moved to the woods. “Normally we’d spread farther apart,” Flynn said, pointing her to a position, “but we’re looking for one person, small and possibly not moving. Walk as straight a line as you can. If you have to swerve, check thoroughly around what made you swerve.”

They started forward, trying to stay roughly the same distance apart. The trees were ancient and huge, and had choked off any scrub. It was easy to walk through them, and easy to see that there was no boy here. Which was good, because it was raining harder, now, and the wind was blowing the water under Lucy’s poncho.

Her feet began to ache. Swelling meant they chafed worse against her wet socks. Still. She’d gone through worse in the past.

It began to rain harder. The land sloped downwards, and the trees grew shorter and closer together, shrubs and vines running wild between them. This part must’ve been cleared within the last few decades.

She stumbled over a vine, grabbed for something to help keep her balance, and scraped her hand on the rough bark of an overhanging limb. Could be worse, she reminded herself. Could be so much worse.

At the bottom of the hill, the woods ended at a brown, swollen stream, with another meadow on the other side. She and Flynn met by the water and looked at each other.

“We need a smaller spacing with the density of the woods here. I suggest we search the slope first, then move back uphill. It’ll be easier then.”

She nodded as rain dripped down her forehead from her wet hair. This was miserable. It could’ve been worse, but it was still miserable.

But there was a kid, somewhere, lost in all this. So that was that.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine to keep going.”

So they turned and went uphill. Lucy slipped twice in the mud. The first time, she caught herself. The second time, she landed hard enough to knock the wind out of her.

“Lucy!”

“Stay there,” she managed to call. If he left his position to come over here, and they had to take even more time because of it…

“I’m all right,” she added, getting to her feet. The front of her jeans from the knees down were
coated in red-brown mud. She brushed the worst of it off, wiped her hand on her poncho, and straightened up.

They saw nothing by the time they reached the top of the hill. Lucy checked her phone: no missed texts or calls that Jason had been found. They moved down, and went again. And again. And again.

They met at the bottom of the hill after their fifth pass. Flynn wiped the water from his face, squeezed it out of his hair, and sank down on a rock by the stream. Lucy sat beside him. The rock wasn’t particularly flat on top, so she braced herself against the ground with one foot, and half-leaned against him. She dug a flattened protein bar out of her pocket, tore it open, broke it in half, and passed him a piece.

She looked down the water’s edge at all the woods they still had to cover before they reached the meadow again. Plus there was everything at the top of the hill.

Flynn stood, and offered her a hand. She was tired enough to let him help her to her feet. She stuck the protein bar wrapper deep in her pocket where it wouldn’t fall out; the hillside was already littered with empty bottles, bits of decaying Styrofoam, and the occasional old tire.

They kept going.

Three passes later, she was tired enough to be stumbling. She was cold, and wet, and hungry. She — she’d thought she was done with things like this.

Immediately, shame rushed in on resentment. A boy’s life was at stake. He was going to die horribly if someone didn’t find him. And here she was complaining about how her sodden socks chafed?

But the memory of all the other miseries seemed to weigh down on her. Hadn’t she earned being done with this?

The memory of all the other privations…

She’d done this before. A lot. And she could damn well do it again.

Fighting Rittenhouse had molded her, body and soul. This was who she was now. She was the woman who could get through this. She knew, because she’d done it before.

She tilted her chin up defiantly.

“Need to stop?” Flynn called from off to her right.

“No!”

He looked at her. She glared at him, but she wasn’t glaring at him.

She squared her shoulders, took the last few steps to the top of the hill, and moved past him to the next starting position.

Seriously, though. She’d be seeing these woods in her nightmares.

Was the rain letting up? Maybe that was a break in the clouds coming up ahead, a spot of lighter grey? Or maybe she was hallucinating out of desperation.

Instead of letting up, the rain started coming down even harder. She wasn’t sure the poncho was
even doing any good any more; it felt like all of her was soaked, the rain having run down the back of her neck and blown under the bottom. She could even feel it running down her jeans—

No. Wait.

She grabbed for her phone. Was that a text?

It was Jiya, updating their group chat with, *Interviewing tomorrow with Alphabet.*

Lucy felt a sharp stab of disappointment, and immediately felt terrible. That was great for Jiya, she should be happy for her friend—

She’d missed a second message.

“Flynn!”

He looked up.

“They found him! Conscious!” *Thank God...*

Even from here, she could see the way Flynn’s shoulders slumped in relief. He pointed to the top of the hill, and she nodded.

Back at the car, they spread the ponchos out to protect the seats from the worst of the mud. The school parking lot was still full of cars; they parked and trudged inside, hoping for food.

The food was gone, but Lucy accepted a cup of hot coffee, and led Flynn to the unoccupied end of a table. They’d been out there nearly three hours. Her feet ached, and she was cold.

They drank in a numb silence, surrounded by the energetic conversation of relieved people. Lucy let the coffee warm her and didn’t pay attention to much else. She only looked up when she realized the mustachioed man from before had stopped at the end of their table. “Bet you wish you’d stayed inside, huh,” he told her, chuckling.

She looked him dead in the eye. “Do I look like I’m in the mood to be patronized?”

His eyes widened. The smile slowly ran off his face. “Didn’t mean offense,” he muttered.

The lean man joined them, apparently having heard the exchange. He caught the other man’s eye and tilted his head slightly towards another table. The mustachioed man made himself scarce.

Lucy raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Thought y’all might wanna know, Jason’s mom’s at the hospital with him and says the docs say he’ll be just fine.”

“Oh,” Lucy said. “Yes, we— thanks. Where was he?”

“Got trapped in an old warehouse just a few blocks from here. Someone finally heard him yelling, and the police opened it up.”

Lucy shuddered.

Anyway, thanks for your help. Mighty kind of you when you were just passing through.”

“Is there a motel around here?” Flynn said. “We’re not going to make Memphis tonight.”
The man shook his head. “You gotta go down to Columbus for that. My cousin’s sister-in-law is a desk clerk down there. I’ll call her and ask her to hold a room for you folks.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said.

They headed for the car. “I can drive.”

“I’ll drive, you drove all morning.”

“You’re exhausted, Flynn.”

He gave her a disbelieving look. “And you’re not?”

Lucy gave in, climbed into the passenger seat, peeled off her wet shoes and socks, and cranked the heat up. The rain kept beating a monorhythmic tempo against the windows and the roof. They split the last protein bar, which was all the food they had left in the car except the milk and salad mix in the trunk.

Her clammy clothes clung to her skin. Why hadn’t she changed back at the school? She decided mud be damned, because it would wash out, and wrapped her blanket around her.

Thank God, it wasn’t that far, even with the steady rain and another detour. When they stumbled through the door, the clerk gave them a sympathetic look. “Y’all the folks from the manhunt?”

She checked them in blessedly quickly. When they got into the room, Lucy dropped her duffel on the bed, then made sure the blanket was wrapped tightly around her, to keep her from shedding dirt, and collapsed beside it.

“After you.” Flynn gestured towards the bathroom.

Lucy shook her head. “No. You’re even dirtier than I am, and it’s not like we’re going to run out of hot water.”

He didn’t argue. He was in and out very fast, and Lucy belatedly wondered if he’d wanted to be the one to go second so he could linger a bit. “All yours,” he told her, and she didn’t quibble.

She dumped all her filthy clothes in an unceremonious heap and started the water. She luxuriated in the feeling of washing the sweat out of her hair and the dirt off her skin. She scrubbed between her toes with something approaching ecstasy. When she finally felt clean, she got out, towled off…

… oooooooops.

“Uh, Flynn,” she called. “Could you bring me, um…”

“Outside the door.”

She got into her pajamas, only to come out and find food spread over the little table, with the second chair pulled out invitingly. He’d even waited.

She didn’t bother to ask how in hell he’d gotten supper for them. First things first.

“Oh my God, this tastes so good,” she muttered several bites in, when she’d taken enough of the edge off her hunger to talk.

“Hard work always makes everything appealing.” He took another bite and swallowed. “It’s best if you, uh, actually have food afterwards.”
She watched him for a minute. “Will you tell me about it?” she asked quietly. “The wars you fought in.”

He gave her an inscrutable look. “Are you asking as a historian?”

She shook her head.

“No,” he said after a long silence.

She nodded, trying not to feel like she’d overstepped.

“Not tonight,” he added. “Maybe some other time if you really want to know, but tonight all I wanna do is stuff myself, watch mindless, terrible television, and go to sleep.”

She couldn’t argue with that. “How in the world did you get dinner? Was I really in there that long?”

“I asked the clerk for someone I could pay to pick something up at a diner and drop it off here. She called a friend.”

They finished everything. Lucy went ahead and brushed her teeth and did her evening routine. The novelty of reliably having running water and an actual toothbrush to do so had not yet worn off.

When she was done, Flynn, sitting against the headboard of his bed, offered her the remote.

She narrowed her eyes. “Garcia Flynn, are you suggesting I’m the local authority on terrible television? I’m hurt.”

“Lucy, I am just being polite and letting you have first pick.” His face was serious, almost; his voice brimmed with laughter.

She sat down on the edge of his bed, because the television was deep in the recess of a cabinet too big for it and she couldn’t really see it from hers, and found a game show. Flynn shifted over and made room for her. She glanced at him, hesitated, and then slid over beside him.

Her eyelids drooped. She leaned against Flynn’s convenient, warm, solid shoulder. He smelt very good.

“Okay?” she muttered. She shouldn’t… maybe she shouldn’t… I just want— this is just me wanting comfort. That’s all…

“I think my shoulder can, uh, bear the weight of your head.” He sounded amused.

She felt obscurely irritated that he didn’t answer the question she really cared about. Then realized she didn’t know what exactly that was.

“Lucy,” he murmured just a moment or two later.

“Mmm,” she sighed.

“Mmm,” she sighed.

“Lucy.” He gently brushed her hair away from her face, and she found herself drowsily wishing she’d opened her eyes to see the look on his own face as he did. “It’s late. I need to sleep.”

“Just a…” She’d move in just a second. Just one more second…

He pulled away, but she didn’t realize immediately because he cupped her neck in one hand. Then
he simply picked her up.

“I was moving,” she protested groggily, as he very gently deposited her on the other bed.

“On a, uh, geological timescale, maybe.”

She felt him conscientiously tug the blanket up where she could reach it, felt the addition of more pillows…

#

She drifted off feeling so relaxed and safe, it was unfair to wake up like this.

But the despair of the dark hours hit hard, leaving her feeling suddenly empty and lost. The surety and bravery of daylight drained away at three am. What was she doing? She was on an impetuous road trip, and it was nice, but the end loomed large in her imagination.

What was she going to do? How was she going to go back to normal life after this?

*Running water*, she reminded herself. *I like running water*.

It was such a feeble justification.

Tears welled up, and she was too tired to fight them. She slipped silently out of bed and went into the bathroom so she wouldn’t disturb Flynn.

She closed the door behind her, leaving only the light of the nightlight, and sank down on the edge of the bathtub, face in her hands. What was wrong with her? They’d won. She’d lived, they’d all lived. She shouldn’t feel so lost, it was ungrateful, she was weak—

She slid down to the floor, and buried her face in her knees.

They’d won, but… now she had to reckon with all they’d lost. As long as they’d been fighting, it had been easier to put off dealing with the fact that her entire life might have been a lie. In her old timeline, Mom hadn’t recruited her to Rittenhouse, but she’d still gotten pregnant by Benjamin Cahill. So, whatever choices Mom had made later, had Lucy still been conceived as… as an heir?

Maybe Lucy had been the duty child. Maybe Amy had been the wanted one, conceived in love and valued as herself, all along.

Amy. Amy was gone. Lucy had given up on her.

*I didn’t give up. I exhausted all the options. I would have gone to the ends of the earth*—

But she couldn’t. Because—

*I never should have gone to say goodbye to Mom. I never should have*—

Her heart rebelled at that. She hadn’t known then that Mom was *Rittenhouse*. Amy had disappeared without warning; that might have been the last conversation she could ever have had with Mom.

And, if she hadn’t, she… what? Might’ve been blown up at Mason Industries with the rest? Might’ve been outside the Lifeboat, still changing, and been killed?

Maybe she’d really had no options all along.
Mom never would have let her be killed at Mason Industries if she’d known about it. So had she
given the signal, somehow, when Lucy had arrived home? Had Rittenhouse had Lucy followed?
Or had it been some other shadowy branch of the monster, and Mom really hadn’t known?

Yeah, what were the odds of that?

A quiet knock on the door. How much time had passed? “Lucy?”

She raised her head. She should’ve known that even in sleep, he wouldn’t have missed her leaving
and not coming back.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Her voice came out thick.

Pause. “Are you decent?”

“Mm-hmm,” she sighed.

The door eased open. She stared up at him defiantly, aware of the tears and the snot on her face.

He just looked at her for a moment, soft and wry and sad. Then he flipped on the dim overhead
light, and sat on the closed toilet. He rested his elbows on his knees, and watched her quietly. He
looked tired.

“Anything you want to, uh, talk about?” he asked softly.

“What is there to say, Flynn?” She barely choked it out. “What. Is there. To say?”

She almost asked him to leave to save her pride, but she didn’t actually want him to go. So they sat
there in silence.

“Can you pass me the toilet paper?” she finally muttered.

He popped the roll off the wall with one hand and handed her the whole thing. She wiped her eyes
and blew her nose.

After a minute, he held out his hand, palm up. She stared at it blankly until she realized what he
wanted, and gave him her own hand.

He wrapped his large fingers around hers gently, almost diffidently. “The, uh, demons of the dog
watch are tenacious,” he said quietly.

She closed her eyes in painful acknowledgement.

“But so are you.”

Her eyes snapped open. She looked up at him. He watched her patiently.

His warm, callused hand on hers reminded her she wasn’t alone. His faith in her reminded she
could get through this. It might not be pleasant, but she would endure.

He’d seen her sobbing in that alley in Chinatown. Rufus had been dead; Emma, who’d taken so
many people from her, had been alive. Lucy hadn’t been able to save Amy in the end. But they’d
saved Rufus, and Emma would never again wipe out another person’s sister.
Before that, when she’d been Mom’s prisoner, she’d been convinced everyone else was dead; she’d thought she was utterly alone, in all senses of the word. But that hadn’t been true.

She didn’t know how to start over. But she didn’t have to do it alone.

She gently reclaimed her hand, and looked down. The wiry black hair on his bare feet— which were large, just like the rest of him— was strangely endearing. The jagged scar on the top of his right foot was less so.

“What happened?” She pointed at it.

“Knife wound. Someone was, uh, trying to keep me in place.”

She stared up at him, horrified. Her dinner rebelled in her stomach at the thought of—

“It’s not deep,” he added hurriedly. “He didn’t, uh, know what he was doing. Whether something scars doesn’t just depend on how bad it is, but also how you tend the wound, and… I couldn’t take good care of that.”

“Well?”

“Just someone I was fighting. I never knew his name.”

“… oh.”

He glanced down at her inquiringly, and raised his eyebrows.

She felt like she should explain. “From the way you said it, I thought…” She was glad it hadn’t been this bad. “Maybe someone you… knew.”

“You thought my father?” His lips curled, and his tone turned dry. Nothing in Flynn’s file had indicated what kind of a man Asher Flynn had been, and looking at the contradictions on his son’s face, Lucy still didn’t know.

“Or a, um, partner.”

“Oh— I,” he said, looking off-balance. “Actually, it’s, uh. It’s always been women for me.”

“Oh.” He didn’t— look offended, or angry, like so many men did when you made that assumption. Lucy had learned long ago to keep it to herself.

“Just how the, uh…” He cleared his throat. “How the dice fell. In, uh, this timeline, anyway.”

Lucy thought about that, and felt a slow smile spread across her face.

“What?” he asked her, with a bit of a laugh.

“I know what I’m asking you in the car tomorrow.” She winced. “… this floor is unforgiving.”

He offered her his hand. She let him help her to her feet, and followed him out of the bathroom.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” she told him.

He shook his head. “It’s all right. Good night, Lucy.”
She woke to the sun coming in around the blinds. In June that didn’t mean anything, but she felt like she’d slept a long time. A glance at the clock confirmed it was nearly eight.

She felt tired, and a little embarrassed about last night. But her heart felt lighter. And in the daylight, the knowledge that she wasn’t alone felt like bedrock. Not just Flynn, but Rufus and Wyatt, Jiya, Agent Christopher, even Connor.

Speaking of Flynn…

He was still asleep, stretched out on his side, hair in his eyes. One well-muscled arm stretched over the pillow, and his shirt had ridden up, showing the lines of his waist and the dark hair that…

Wow. Perv ing on her travel partner in his sleep. Great going, Lucy. She looked away quickly.

She eased silently out of bed, grabbed her clothes, and dressed in the bathroom. She came back out for her shoes—

“Lucy?” Flynn’s voice was low and soft and rough, and it did things to her.

“I’m going to get us some food and coffee,” she told him. “I’ll be back soon.”

He looked like he wanted to protest.

“Go back to sleep, Flynn.”

He made a noise that could have been agreement or half-hearted argument, then sank back into the pillow.

When she got back, he was sitting up, but gave the distinct impression of having just woken up when he’d heard the key in the lock. His hair was all rumpled on one side, his eyelids heavy. It was unfairly adorable.

They sat at the rickety little table, and shared muffins and eggs and pancakes. “Memphis, take two?” Flynn asked after a minute.

She nodded. “But I want to look around the town first. There was a Confederate fort here, and Grant’s first Civil War battle was right across the river.” She glanced at him. “You, uh, don’t have to come with me. If you don’t want to, I mean.”

“Unless there’s a bronzed statue of the time I tried to kill him, I think I’ll be all right.”

She looked at him for a moment. “Why?” she asked quietly.

“Why kill Grant?”

She nodded.

He winced. She didn’t mean to hurt him, certainly didn’t want to hurt him, especially not after he’d been so gentle with her last night. But she didn’t retract her question, either. It was their history. It did no good to ignore it.

“I mean, Rittenhouse wanted the South to win. So why help?” she added.

“Southern conspirators kill Lincoln and three of his Cabinet, what happens?”

She saw it immediately. “Backlash.”
He nodded.

“Post Civil War history would have looked completely different. Reconstruction might have gone on for decades… But it was a risky plan. It might have made the South bolder, if they smelled blood in the water.”

A risky plan. That suited him. But…

“Did you come up with that one, Flynn?” she asked quietly.

His hesitation gave her all the answer she needed.

Oh, God. “What did I become?” she whispered. Then she shook her head, realizing what a stupid thing that was to say to him.

“Oh, God. “What did I become?” she whispered. Then she shook her head, realizing what a stupid thing that was to say to him.

“Someone who could save the world.” His voice was gravelly. When she looked at him, his gaze was steady. “Just like in this timeline.”

She just—

This was too much. Especially now. Especially after last night.

She cleared her throat. “The, uh, Fourth Heavy Artillery, a Black regiment, was headquartered here, too. Maybe there’s—”

A loud sound made her jump. It took her a second to identify it: music on the other side of the wall.


She sighed.

“Welcome to the heartland, Lucy,” Flynn said, his mouth twitching.

She just shook her head. Then she smothered a yawn. “About… about last night, I’m sorry. And… thanks.”

It occurred to her that this was the second time she’d said something like that to him. And that people usually said that kind of thing in very different circumstances.

Well—

No. She was being ridiculous this morning. She just— she didn’t—

She was just… ovulating. That was all.

She didn’t even know if he wanted… if he saw her that way. She knew he cared about her— she’d have to be blind not to know that— but, sometimes, the way he looked at her… she couldn’t characterize it. It certainly wasn’t simple lust, and if the thought that it might be something so much bigger terrified her…

And she’d messed up one friendship already by rushing into bed. She wasn’t going to do that again. Slowly, Flynn had come to mean so much to her that the thought of losing his friendship—

She felt a strange, fierce ache in her chest.

“It’s all right,” he told her, pulling her out of her reverie. He was looking down at his coffee, his
gaze a little distant. “Even, uh…” He licked his lip. “Even when there’s no time travel, it’s hard. At the. End.”

“But neither of us has to do it alone,” she told him softly.

When he looked up, the warmth and the fondness in his gaze made her hands a little unsteady.

She cleared her throat. “I’m going to, uh… get more ice.” She bundled her napkins into the empty takeout box.

He drained his coffee. “I’ll be ready in a minute.”

She shook her head. “Take your time.” She rested her hand on his shoulder as she passed. “We have time.”

Chapter End Notes

The historical marker for the "Fourth United States Colored Heavy Artillery."

Hearing a loud country version of "Amazing Grace" coming through hotel walls on a Sunday morning is also an experience I have had.
An hour into the drive, and they’d already detoured to their second historical marker. The day was starting well. Plus, it wasn’t even raining any more.

“So, the marker is out here in the middle of nowhere because the island disappeared?”

She nodded. “The Mississippi washed it away. You could say it’s the most inaccessible battlefield of the Civil War.”

Flynn snorted. “And how many people died, trying to take this piece of land that doesn’t even exist any more?”

“Not many.” It occurred to her that as a lifelong soldier, he might have a different opinion of what ‘many’ was. “About a hundred casualties. Less than fifty deaths.” Direct ones, anyway.

“The Union didn’t want to hold Island Number Ten,” she added. “They just wanted to deny it to the Confederacy so they could get down the Mississippi.”

“Ah.”

“Plus, it was the beginning of the end for fixed forts. With steam power, ships could get out of range of a fort’s guns faster, giving them a chance to run a blockade. It happened here and at Vicksburg.”

“Mmm.”

“One of my favorite papers in college was on how innovations naval technology shaped the outcome of the Civil War.” She glanced at him. “… am I boring you?”

“Never.” His quick reply, tossed off with the air of instinct, made her feel…

Made her feel good.

They headed back to the car. Lucy got behind the wheel and checked the route again. “It would save us some time if we went straight to Shiloh, then back to Memphis,” she admitted. “It’s two hours each way from the city. Except… my feet hurt.” After searching the woods for three hours in shoes that chafed, the idea of wandering the battlefield was less appealing than it should have been.

“We’re not in a hurry,” he reminded her.

“Good point.” So they pressed on to Memphis.

“What was it you wanted to ask me?” he prompted, as they left Ridgely behind.

It took her a moment to remember their conversation from last night. “If you could… date any historical figure,” she said. “Anyone in history. Who would it be?”

He thought about this for a while, but he didn’t look upset. She’d been a little afraid it would be salt in the wound. “Anyone known to history?” he asked finally.
“Mm-hmm.”

“So, as long as she’s in a textbook somewhere, she counts?”

“That’s… a weird hair for you to split, but sure.”

“I’ll, uh… have to think about that,” he said, with a little smile.

Lucy eyed him.

“What about you?” he added.

“Well…” She hesitated. “With a lot of people, I have to wonder, how would they really have treated me, you know? I mean, Robert Todd Lincoln was lovely, but look how he treated the Pullman workers.” She hesitated again. “It’s— it means a lot to me, to have a partner’s respect, and… respect definitely took very different forms in different time periods.”

It was crucial to her. Chemistry was fine, but it wasn’t enough. She needed respect. She needed to be able to trust someone with all of her.

She smiled at a memory. “Harry Houdini,” she admitted. “Of course he married Bess, but dating can just be… getting burgers and ice cream and seeing a movie and maybe… making out a little in the back row.”

“I didn’t know you were into bondage, Lucy.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“He handcuffed me to a safe.” He glanced at her, corners of his mouth dimpling. “I just felt like I should warn you.”

“Oh, really? Couldn’t have happened to a more deserving person.”

He snorted. “… no,” he admitted.

Another mile. “Houdini… anyone else?” he asked.

“Mmm… well, when we were in Paris, Josephine Baker flirted with me.” She was afraid it came out a little pathetic—

Flynn laughed. “Good for you.”

“Maybe… Amelia Earhart,” she said after a few minutes. “Yeah. Definitely. Oooh! Or Katharine Hepburn.”

“So, uh, bold, brave, indefatigable women with nice cheekbones, that’s your, ah, type?”

She smiled, pleased by his description. “I guess so.” She glanced at him. “What’s so funny?”

He shook his head.

She looked at the time and pulled off so she could text Jiya, wishing her good luck in her interview and suggesting they maybe talk afterwards. South of Dyersburg, she stopped by the side of the road when she saw a historical marker. “‘Mrs. Rosa McCauley Parks,’” Lucy read. “‘Mother of the modern civil rights movement.’”
“I didn’t know she had a connection here.”

“… neither did I, actually.” She kept reading. “The citizens of Dyersburg, Tennessee gratefully acknowledge how far we’ve come and how much better we can be if we step beyond the shackles of the past.’ Huh.” She paused. “I don’t think this is commemorating a local link.”

“They just put up a marker for her?”

“Apparently.”

After Dyersburg, the Great River Road ran along the Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway. After the third sign they passed, she began, “One of the first big fights I ever had with my mom was in high school, when I had to do a report on the Confederacy. She always…”

She hesitated, then decided she didn’t owe it to Mom to sugar coat things any more. “She always got overly involved in my school reports. But I was used to that, I was used to…”

She hesitated again, glancing sideways. “I was used to giving in to her,” she said bluntly. “But this time… I wouldn’t go in the direction she wanted. I said the Confederacy was evil. She told me that I wasn’t maintaining the proper objectivity for a historian. And I said, they were objectively fighting for the right to own people.”

Flynn watched her quietly.

She shook her head. “Most kids my age were fighting about normal things, like curfews and piercings and sex. I fought with my mom over whether the Confederacy was evil or ‘just misguided.’”

“When I wouldn’t give in,” she continued after a few minutes, “Mom told me that maybe I wasn’t cut out to be a historian. It was the most painful thing she could’ve said. I was crushed.” She glanced sideways at Flynn, self-conscious of what he was saying, remembering that day in prison when he’d accused her of letting Mom groom her.

He’d apologized, later. And the sting had faded from him saying it, but not the shame of it being true.

“I remember complaining to Dad about all of it. God, I spent so much time complaining to him about Mom. I was a self-absorbed teenager, you know? I wish…” After a minute, she shook her head again.

“I remember because at the end I made him promise to go get his cough checked out. And… and he did, and, uh…” She swallowed. “Fourteen months later he was gone.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy,” Flynn said softly.

“Thanks,” she sighed, after a minute.

They followed the gently undulating highway, flanked by fields and long stands of trees, down to Hennings. Lucy pulled off to read another marker. “Fort Pillow… oh.” She looked over at Flynn. “The remains of the fort are about twenty miles west of here. Do you mind if we go?”

He shook his head. “That name is familiar.”

“It was the site of an infamous massacre of Black Union troops, trying to surrender, by Nathan Forrest’s troops.” She paused. “Somehow, that part didn’t make it onto this sign.”
“Imagine that,” Flynn muttered.

The narrow two-lane road took them farther into the country, with little to see besides farm buildings and fields. They saw few other cars. If there were signs, Lucy missed them; she glanced at the map to make sure they were still going in the right direction.

Finally they reached the entrance sign and followed the winding road back through the park to the museum. The remains of the fort were, disappointingly, down several miles of hiking trails, and Lucy’s feet hurt just at the thought.

“There is a video,” the helpful volunteer said. “I could start it for you.”

Lucy glanced at Flynn. He shrugged.

“Sure,” she said. “Let’s watch the video.”

Lucy paid careful attention. By the time the eighteen minute long video was done, she’d taken two pages of notes.

“Um, excuse me,” she said when they came out. “I couldn’t help but notice your video is thinly disguised Confederate propaganda.”

The young woman staffing the desk, as well as an older white man in a ranger’s uniform, looked up. “Is there a problem, miss?” the man said, rather stiffly.

“‘No one can truly know what happened that day?’ ‘Confederate soldiers were confused by the flag flying over the fort?’”

“The flag didn’t come down, miss, it’s documented fact. The confusion—”

“There was confusion in a lot of battles, and yet the only one that turned out like this was when troops under the command of the man who would become the Klan’s first Grand Wizard killed surrendering Black soldiers! What a coincidence!”

“Professional historians have determined—“

“I am a professional historian!” Lucy snapped.

The ranger looked dubious.

“One of Forrest’s sergeants called it ‘butchery’ and clearly described Confederate soldiers killing Black soldiers ‘like dogs.’ His own words!”

“Doctor Preston,” Flynn said, speaking for the first time, gently emphasizing his words. “Weren’t you saying something on the road about Forrest’s, uh, letter?”

“Letter? … right, yes. He wrote that he hoped it would teach the North a lesson about using Black soldiers!”

“Words,” the ranger said dismissively. “The general wasn’t even there.”

“Words—”

“Ma’am, I have better things to do with my time than listen to an overwrought Yankee, and so does this young lady, so I’m going…” He glanced at Flynn rather apprehensively. “Going to have to ask you to leave.”
Lucy gave him a scorching look, thought biting things about fleeing from a battle, and decided she didn’t want to get them arrested. So she stalked off.

They reached the car in silence. The wind was picking up again; she hoped it didn’t rain, or if it did, they didn’t have to do another search and rescue mission. She opened the car door, and the damned wind blew it into her face, which just added… injury to damned insult.

She slammed the car door harder than necessary. “I can’t believe them,” she muttered. “Black troops were killed at twice the rate as white ones, and they think they can call it an accident?” She took a curve a little too fast, and realized she needed to calm down.

She reached the park’s exit and headed back towards the Memphis highway. She forced her hands to unclench on the wheel. They drove in silence for a while.

Abruptly, she pulled off on the side of the road. “It’s not just that they’re wrong,” she said. “It’s that they’re wrong there.” She looked at him. “You know what I mean?”

“No,” he admitted, “but I am listening.”

She made an impatient gesture, and looked out the window. “I’ve always thought, that when something like that happens — a massacre, genocide—“ She shook her head. “We can only do two things for the victims— at least the ones that died— and we have an obligation to do them.”

“We can make sure it doesn’t happen again… and we can remember,” she continued. “Which is part of making sure it doesn’t happen again. And that—” She pointed back the way they came. “Is the only marker of the massacre, the only memorial, and they still won’t tell the truth about how those men died.” Her voice cracked.

After a minute, Flynn said, “Too bad there’s not a, uh, historian around who has the know-how and the professional credibility to push for changes.”

“Don’t patronize me, Flynn,” she snapped.

“Lucy, I’m completely serious.”

She looked at him.

“You… maybe feel powerless, but you’re not. If it matters to you, and I think it does… then it’s worth the fight, isn’t it?”

She considered this. Then she considered it some more.

When they’d first started traveling through time, trying to stop Flynn, she’d thought that saving history meant making sure it happened the same way in every timeline. But now?

She no longer placed the same value on something happening the same way in every timeline as in hers, which she now knew was… more arbitrary than she’d thought. But there was more than one way to erase history. Flynn and Rittenhouse had done it with a time machine. But people all around the world did it every day with words.

“I bet there’s a local group around here who wants the same thing,” she said finally. “I should see if I can get in touch with them. Support their efforts.”

Flynn’s mouth quirked upwards.
“You’ve done all the driving today,” he said finally. “Want me to take over?”

“Sure.” They switched seats. “How did you know about Forrest’s letter?”

“I remembered reading about it, once I knew what this place was.”

“Please tell me I never tangled with Nathan Bedford Forrest,” she muttered.

He shook his head. “It was for a lead I never followed.”

She tried to find any local groups involved in the history of Fort Pillow, but she had no service out here. The radio didn’t come in, either. After a few minutes, she curled up in the seat and tucked her feet up beside her. She folded her blanket so all the dirt was on the inside— they needed to do laundry tonight— and wedged it against the door for comfort. She was still really tired from last night. She’d close her eyes for just a minute…

She woke a good forty-five minutes later, and blinked groggily.

The highway had four lanes now, but the landscape was still rural. How close were they to Memphis? She pulled up the map.

“I want to stop here,” she told Flynn a moment later, pointing.

He looked, and smirked.

About fifteen minutes later they pulled off the highway. Lucy, Tennessee, was more a collection of houses and churches than a town. Still, childish though it might have been, it made her smile to see “Lucy Baptist Church” and “Lucy Road” and “Lucy Tiny Free Library.”

“Oh! There.” She pointed. Flynn pulled off the road and parked on the grass. She looked at the sign. “There’s no way I can get that all in a selfie. Could you… take a picture of me? Please?”

“Whatever you want, Lucy.”

So he took her phone and snapped a few pictures of her in front of the ‘Welcome to Lucy’ sign. She looked at them, and smiled, and just shook her head. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

She had cell service again, so she texted it to the team. She put her phone away just as mixed scents of fresh pine, and something that smelled vaguely like a lemon Creamsicle, wafted into the car on the warm breeze. “Oh, that smells wonderful.” She took a deep breath. “I wonder what it is?”

He thought for a second. Then his face changed, and he looked around. “It’s, uh…” He pointed to a stand of tall blue flowers across the narrow road. He swallowed. “Irises,” he finished, quite roughly.

Her own smile disappeared. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Only when they were out of range of the fragrance did she say, “Pull off.”

He did.

“Unbuckle.” She suited her own actions to words.

He did that, too, but looked at her, puzzled.
“Come here.” She slid to the middle seat, leaned forward, and hugged him.

His breath left him in a soft, startled rush that was nearly a sob. He held on tightly. Hesitantly, she stroked her hand up and down his broad back.

She did not let go until he murmured “Thank you, Lucy,” and his own grip loosened. She pulled back and searched his expression.

“Flynn—” she began, and struggled for words. But she couldn’t find the right ones.

“Do you want me to drive?” she finally asked.

He shook his head.

So they kept going. Occasionally, she eyed him stealthily, wondering if— well.

“I’m all right, Lucy,” he said, without looking up.

So much for stealthy. Probably NSA agents defined that word totally differently.

Her phone buzzed: Wyatt replying to her picture. where?

North of Memphis, she told them.

After a moment, she got another text: it took you a week to go one state west?

She pressed her lips together, and rejected the first few replies that came to mind. I AM having a lovely time, she finally wrote back a little tartly. Thanks for asking.

my interview went really well!!! Jiya said, and Lucy felt grateful as she texted back her unsurprised congratulations.

Also, I got kicked out of a state park this morning, Lucy offered, after the messages about Jiya’s interview went back and forth.

Again, Wyatt replied first: fort pillow, huh?

She frowned. How’d you know?

cause i’ve been there and i can absolutely see how you’d get thrown out.

She snorted, then looked up as the car slowed. Flynn had pulled off the highway, into the parking lot of a flea market.

She looked at him, a little surprised. She wouldn’t have figured him for the flea market type—though he’d liked the thrift store, hadn’t he. Well, he’d certainly stopped enough for her, without complaint. And if he needed a break, after earlier—

He glanced at her. “Do you mind? I just thought it might be, uh.” He licked his lips. “Fun.”

“Not at all.”

It was a well-attended flea market. She hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast, and her water bottle was empty, so she got a giant pretzel and lemonade and wandered the three aisles. Clothes, music, knickknacks, kitchen stuff, furniture. Looking at a stand of plates and silverware reminded her of setting up her first college apartment, which reminded her that she was probably going to have to
set up housekeeping all over again.

She had no idea what had happened to Mom’s house, and even if it hadn’t been… repossessed for taxes, or something— how long did that take?— did she really want to keep using Mom’s old dishes after, well, everything?

She shook her head, and finished her pretzel.

She picked up a few CDs for the car, and eyed a big floppy hat before deciding it was spectacularly impractical. She got two stalls down, went back for the hat, and went to look for Flynn.

She found him, not surprisingly, at a book stall, with a bag in one hand and a stack of books on the table next to him. But it was the stark lines on his face that got her attention; he was staring at… she got close enough to see it: a children’s book.

He abruptly noticed she was there. She couldn’t remember another time she’d taken him by surprise like that. His face softened, and he handed his stack to the vendor to total up.

“Seen everything you wanted to?” she asked, when he’d paid. Three dollars was a steal for that many books.

He glanced at his watch. “Yes, but…”

“But what?”

“If we stay another fifteen minutes, the Elvis impersonator starts at the top of the hour.”

She stared at him. “I will take the keys and leave you to your fate.”

His face broke into a wide, smug grin, chasing away the last traces of solemnity.

They reached Memphis before rush hour. The weekend over, they were able to find a hotel where they could get adjoining rooms for two nights. “Shiloh tomorrow?” Lucy asked, when Flynn had deposited his duffel in his room and was leaning against the doorframe of the connecting room. “Give me your laundry.” She bundled the dirty clothes she’d worn yesterday, still covered in flaking dried mud, into the blanket.

“I’ll do the damned laundry.”

She looked up at him, surprised by his tone.

“Sorry,” he sighed. “Just, uh, tired. Here, give me that.” He held out his hand. “And Shiloh is fine. Maybe on the way we can stop at the National Bird Dog Museum.”

“The what?”

“The National Bird Dog Museum.”

“You’re making that up.”

He showed her his phone, his smugness not quite ruining his look of innocence as he took the laundry from her.

She shrugged. “As long as they don’t have Elvis impersonators.”

“I’m sure that could be arranged, Lucy. This is Memphis—”
She pointed to the door. “Out.”

They were too late for the Cotton Museum, so they got an early dinner and then wandered, neither of them speaking much. She wasn’t sure if Flynn had something on his mind, or was just tired.

They headed back to the hotel. Flynn pleaded tiredness and went to bed early. Lucy did some research, and discovered a local group that coordinated a yearly memorial to the fallen Union soldiers at Fort Pillow, in the Memphis cemetery in which they’d eventually been re-buried. But she couldn’t immediately find anything about the interpretation at the fort itself.

Bekah, a friend from grad school, had worked at UT for a few years before leaving for another school. Maybe when they got back to San Francisco, Lucy would find her contact information and ask if she was familiar with the local historians…

She put her phone down, turned the lights off, and closed her eyes.

#

They reached Shiloh by mid-morning the next day. At the visitor center, Lucy glanced over the map, and reordered the stops on the auto tour to be chronological rather than geographical.

It was a quiet day. It was Monday, which helped, but Shiloh had a reputation for rarely being crowded and busy. Actually being there, Lucy could see why; the park was huge.

“‘A place of peace,’” she murmured, reciting the oft-repeated translation of ‘Shiloh’ as she looked at the Hornet’s Nest. Federal soldiers had held here for seven hours, until completely surrounded and pounded at close range by more than fifty artillery pieces, buying time for the rest of Grant’s army to retreat towards the river.

“‘A place of peace,’” she whispered. Sometimes she was convinced whatever higher power was out there had a nasty sense of humor. Or maybe… God, if she wanted to use that term… had the same perception of irony as humankind, and had watched with the same sad sorrow that she now felt.

It was peaceful enough… now.

She couldn’t help sighing at the monument erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which was of course a terrible and non-objective reaction for a historian to have, and of course the existence of the monument itself provided important insights into how later generations had viewed the war, and… having faced actual Confederate troops, Lucy so could not bring herself to care.

Time travel had upended all her attitudes. Having lived it, history was now even more personal to her, but by the end, she’d cared less about protecting it than about stopping Rittenhouse. It was disquieting to think that her previous timeline self had felt the same way.

*If we hadn’t won when we did, what might I have become desperate enough to do?*

They stopped in early afternoon to eat the sandwiches they’d brought from Memphis. As the day continued, and they drove across the battlefield and back, Lucy realized it was also quiet because Flynn was quiet. Outwardly, he was the same thoughtful and considerate travel partner he’d been for the last eight days; he replied readily when she spoke to him, as engaging and even snarky as ever. But when she didn’t speak to him, he didn’t say anything. His mind seemed to be far off.

Maybe bringing him to one of the Civil War’s bloodiest battlefields had been a bad idea. “Are you —” she began, then hesitated. Were either of them okay? Really?
“Are you going to be okay?”

He looked up, coming back from wherever he’d been, and nodded once.

“Do you need to leave?”

He shook his head.

“Do you want to leave.”

“This is fine.”

She eyed him, but he didn’t say anything else.

Shiloh’s name haunted her again when they stopped at Bloody Pond. Flynn stayed by the car; Lucy walked down to the water, and pictured what it would have looked like…

Maybe a bad idea.

She knew, intellectually, that this may or may not even have been the site of the original Bloody Pond, but the thought of so many men dying here, men with the desperate thirst of the wounded crawling here to take their last drink out of what amounted to a giant bloodied mud puddle…

She pressed her hand to her mouth as she teared up.

_We never learn_, she thought. _We just never learn_. As a species, they just kept killing and dying, collectively bent on getting power. People who survived, like— like Flynn, still got chewed up and spat out, ground down into something different by merciless forces that considered the pain they caused acceptable collateral damage.

People like the whole team. None of them were the same as before they’d heard the name Rittenhouse. She and Flynn had lost… everything except for what they’d found along the way. Jiya might never be free of her seizures and visions. Rufus— she and Jiya, too— had learned what it was like to take a life. Wyatt was a strong man, but getting Jessica back, only to lose her again, and then have her turn herself in… Lucy didn’t know how much more of that he could take.

She looked at the tranquil, shallow pond. The men— and the occasional woman— who’d survived here had… gone on. It gave her a strange, and maybe macabre, feeling of peace to know they hadn’t had any choice.

There were no guidebooks for what she’d gone through. She’d take what comfort she could get.

She headed back to the car, not sure if she was comforted or unnerved by how a vicious and bloody battlefield could become a quiet, peaceful park a hundred and fifty years later. Was it reassuring, or obscene?

If she tried to read too much into it, she’d put herself in a bad place.

On the way out, they stopped at the mounds, which were, thanks to their proximity to the battlefield, one of the best preserved mounds sites east of the Mississippi. They were a fascinating example of the Mississippian culture, and Lucy enjoyed the hike, but by the end, she was ready to be done with this park and its uncomfortable ironies.

“You mentioned Corinth,” Flynn reminded her as she pulled out of the parking lot.

She winced. She was exhausted, and… but… “You seem… tired.”
“I’m all right as long as you drive.”

This tacit acknowledgement that he was tired reassured her. “All right,” she said after a minute. “I do want to see the contraband camp. But let’s skip the railroad.” The intersection of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad, and the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, was in some ways the single most blood-drenched square foot of territory in the entire country.

“Fine.”

Flynn seemed more like himself as they dipped briefly into Mississippi, visiting the refugee camp-cooperative farm hybrid where thousands of people who’d escaped slavery had gotten their first taste of freedom. Lucy was a little disappointed by the small scope of the site. There were so many stories here…

She scribbled some notes in her notebook, and decided it was high time to head back to Memphis.

By the time they got dinner and returned to the hotel, it was late. Lucy heard the water running in Flynn’s room, and decided that was a good idea. She showered, got into her pajamas, and sent the group a picture from Shiloh.

You’re still in Memphis? Wyatt wrote back almost immediately.

She grabbed her phone and typed out, how’s Jessica, Wyatt? But she deleted it before she could be stupid enough to send it. She also resisted the urge to throw her phone across the room. Why did he have to be so—

She counted to ten, and sent a message just to him. Why are you so annoyed about my itinerary?

She was pretty sure she knew why, and she couldn’t believe him. Plus she was feeling just— petty, and vindictive, and she wanted to force him to say it.

A moment later, he called her.

“Hello?” she said, cautiously enough to make her sad.

“Hey, Lucy.”

His quiet voice made her shoulders drop, and eased her out of her defensiveness. Doing this on the phone instead of over text was definitely a good idea. “Hey, Wyatt. How are you?”

“I’m… you know.” He hesitated. “I didn’t, uh, mean to upset you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“I just… I think you belong with the team.”

She loved him. She really did, even if not in the way they’d both thought and hoped that she did, for a little while. But he had the most amazing talent for bungling an apology that she’d ever seen. “You don’t think I can be trusted to know where I belong, Wyatt?”

“Oh course I do.” He said it without hesitation. “Just… you don’t ask for help when you’re not okay.”

She opened her mouth to deny that instinctively.

“And now you’re wandering the country, after everything we went through, with Flynn for moral
support—” He made a noise as if the thought of Flynn providing moral support was hilarious.

Her lips tightened. She was almost provoked into telling him what Agent Christopher had told them, about it being safer to stay away. But she didn’t. She didn’t want to worry him or anyone else.

“I am having a lovely time,” she said evenly. “I am having a lovely time with no one shooting at me.”

“Lucy—”

“And do you know what I’m particularly enjoying?”

He sighed. “What?”

“Going through each day without having to remember, oh, this is where my mom took me for my ninth birthday, before it turned out she was part of a megalomaniacal cult. Oh, this is where my sister and I used to go swimming, before she vanished from existence. Oh, this is where my dad would take me for ice cream, before it turned out my biological father was actually a low-key sociopath!”

She realized she was shouting. She cut herself off.

Silence from the other end.

“There’s a lot of memories in the Bay Area, Wyatt,” she said quietly. “I’m not—I’d rather not face them quite yet.”

An exhale. “I get it,” he said quietly.

She relaxed, relieved. “You do?”

“I mean, I’m sure I… don’t totally get it. But… after Jess died…” He cut himself off, and took a deep breath.

“How is Jess?” she asked evenly.

“She’s… fine.”

A long silence.

“I guess it was… my job to look after you for so long, that I can’t help worrying about you,” he said after a minute.

“I know,” she said softly. “Old habits die hard, right? But I’m fine, Wyatt, really I am.”

“Maybe I’m just jealous that I’m not with you seeing everything.”

“I told you. Say the word and you’ll get history lessons by text.”

He snorted. “Flynn behaving himself?” he said after a minute, a little stiffly.

“Yes,” she said simply, and let him make of that what he wanted.

“So, uh, Shiloh,” he said, after a long pause.
“Have you ever been?”

“Once, a long time ago.” She heard pots and pans in the background. “Will you, uh, give me the rundown, professor?”

So she told him about the day. And about the pond. “Didn’t it bother you?” she burst out. “How many people have died, in—”

“How many soldiers?” he asked, when she didn’t go on. “Died at Shiloh, and everywhere else?”

“… yeah.”

“Yeah, of course,” he said. “But walking away from a fight won’t help anyone. That’s… why I fight. So someone else doesn’t have to.”

She took a deep breath. Sometimes he drove her crazy, but sometimes he reminded her why she loved him. “I was kind of hoping we’d all earned a break from fighting,” she admitted. “Do you have orders yet?”

“No, not yet. There’s a lot of after-action with Rittenhouse. Agent Christopher still has teams in the field, actually.”

It occurred to her to wonder why Wyatt wasn’t leading, or at least with, the teams. Wouldn’t his knowledge of Rittenhouse be an asset for Agent Christopher?

“Where are you heading next?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “West. Probably northwest. I haven’t decided where we’re going to cross the Rockies yet.”

“Well. It’d be nice to see you by, say… Christmas.”

“I miss you, too,” Lucy said quietly. “All of you.”

They hung up soon after that. Lucy took a deep breath. She was tired, but she wasn’t quite ready to sleep. Not after that conversation. She didn’t want to bother Flynn, but maybe if he was still up…

She knocked on the adjoining door before pushing it open. His room was empty.

What?

The bathroom was empty. His duffel was still on the bed. She darted back to her own room for her phone: *where are you? are you okay?*

He replied almost instantly: *I’ll be in later. Don’t wait up.*

She stared at her phone. This fight with Rittenhouse had honed her instincts. And right now, they were telling her something was wrong.

She got dressed again and headed for the lobby. She had the car keys, but that didn’t mean anything; wherever he’d been going, he could’ve taken a cab.

She asked at the front desk: “Excuse me, did my friend come through here? Very tall, dark haired—”

“Headed that way about forty-five minutes ago.” The clerk pointed left.
Well, it was a good thing Flynn was distinctive.

Lucy thanked her, tipped her, and headed in the direction she’d indicated. She walked a few blocks, but didn’t see any neon signs saying GARCIA FLYNN CAME THIS WAY. Damn it, she needed—a strategy, or something—

She texted him again: *are you sure you’re okay?*

**ff**ine

Her eyes narrowed.

Two blocks away, she walked into a dive and found him slouched at the bar.

She walked right up to him, appalled by—how close she got before he noticed her, for one thing, but also, the level in that *bottle*, that the bartender had apparently just *left* with him, and—and the look in his eyes indicating that he was, in fact, drunk, and the fact that he hadn’t been gone that long, which meant he’d been drinking with purpose, and—

He noticed her, and looked—alarmed. “What are you doing here?” He was intelligible, but she could definitely hear the alcohol in his diction. “S’posed to be in bed. Thought you’d be too tired to…”

“What am—what am I doing here? Flynn, what are you *doing*?”

He closed his eyes, and knocked his glass back in one swallow. “Nine.”

“Nine—shots? Oh my *God*.”

“She woulda been nine.”

… oh.

*Oh.*

… oh, no.

“I’m so sorry, Garcia.” His first name slipped out without thought.

He looked up, eyes hazy. “You don’ call me that.” Order, or observation?

She just looked at him, this man who—sitting in a dingy bar, getting systematically drunk…

And something in her heart cracked.

She was sad. And angry. She looked at the bartender. “Give me his tab.”

The bartender looked at her in disbelief. “How stupid do you think I am, lady? Someone walks in that *determined* to drown their sorrows, I make ’em pay up front.”

“Please tell me he didn’t start with a full bottle.”

The bartender shook her head. “About two-thirds.”

Right. Okay. Not as bad as it could be. Still bad enough.

“C’mon,” she whispered gently. “Let’s get you home.”
He looked up at her, bleary eyes hopeful. “Home?”

She managed to get him up. Thank God he was cooperative, because she never would have been able to haul two hundred forty pounds of dead weight. Still, he was drunk enough to not really notice how much weight he was putting on her shoulders, and she staggered under the burden.

It was a long four blocks back to the hotel. A woman sitting in the lobby smirked at them, until Lucy’s death glare that wiped the amusement off her face. They wobbled to the elevator—thank God, too, that they were staying somewhere modern enough to have one, or he would’ve been sleeping it off at the foot of the stairs.

She stopped in front of her door. She could barely keep her balance, let alone search his pockets for his key.

She fought to get him down on the damn bed as he blinked at her stupidly. “If you kick me while I’m getting your shoes off, you’re driving through the next two states,” she warned him.

He looked horrified. “No,” he assured her.

She stood up, and decided everything else could wait. If he wanted his belt off—

“Nine,” he whispered.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Wouldn’t know ‘er any more.” His eyes closed. He slumped, defeated, and started to topple sideways.

If he fell onto the floor, she would never get him back up again. She shoved at his shoulder with all her strength. He leaned in the other direction, and fell face first onto the bed. The mattress muffled an animal wail of grief that tore at her heart. His sturdy body shook convulsively. He sobbed.

She stood frozen for a second, stunned, horrified, heartbroken. Then she sat on his other side and shoved hard at his shoulder until he rolled onto his back. “You survived Rittenhouse, I’m not letting you suffocate in your snot,” she whispered, because she couldn’t say it any louder past the knot in her throat.

She wasn’t sure what to do for him. Finally she climbed onto the bed and pulled his head into her lap, cradling it between her palms and stroking his hair. It felt like they sat like that forever, but when his agonized noises began tapering off, the clock told her it had been only a few minutes.

His body was heavy against her legs. Was he asleep? With his legs hanging off the edge and everything? “You have to move,” she told him, getting out of the way so he could shift up the bed.

He made a guttural noise.

She felt a very real terror of him somehow choking in the night. “I need you to move,” she repeated, and to her surprise, he did. She helped roll him into the rescue position, just in case, then propped him up with pillows.

God, she felt so tired, and numb, and it wasn’t really because of how far she’d walked at Shiloh. She wasn’t— She would process all this in the morning. Tonight had been enough.

She changed back into her pajamas, and checked on him one more time. He’d begun to snore softly. She turned out the lights, and collapsed into bed.
A guttural, barely audible groan was her first indication he was stirring. She sat on the other bed.

After a minute or so, his eyelids cracked open. He groaned again.

“There’s painkillers and water on the nightstand,” she said softly.

He opened one eye completely and looked at her. Then he closed his eyes again.

Another minute or so and he braced himself on his arms, levering himself up. He ended up barely propped up against the headboard, and inched his way up to sitting. He shuddered, eyes still closed, and looked nauseated.

“Need the wastebasket?”

He shook his head once. He reached for the nightstand, and nearly overturned both water and coffee by fumbling blindly. She caught his hand, big and warm in hers, and put the tablets in it. When he’d put those in his mouth, she wrapped his fingers around the cup. He lifted it to his mouth and managed one, two, three swallows, slowly. Then he put the cup down. “Thank you, Lucy,” he whispered, and winced.

She nodded, then realized his eyes were still closed. “Yes.”

They stayed where they were for another minute or two. When he opened his eyes, he looked—a pained, exhausted, grieved version of himself. But a version of himself.

“I’m so sorry,” he managed, voice gravelly.

She looked at him. That was his priority? Really?

He leaned his head back against the headboard, and almost looked like he’d gone to sleep again. He opened his eyes a minute later and reached for the coffee. He muttered something. She thought it was Croatian. She didn’t have to know the words to understand what it meant.

“I’ll turn off the light if you want to sleep again,” she offered.

He shook his head slowly, then winced.

“Food, then?” she suggested after a minute. When he didn’t look nauseated at the thought, she added, “Do you have a… favorite hangover food?”

“I saw a diner up the street,” he managed. “Usual… American breakfast. Please.” He sniffed his sleeve, and made a face.

He was moving slowly enough that by the time he had showered and dressed, she was back from the diner with two boxes. He looked a little more normal, and held his head like the painkillers had kicked in.

“What time is checkout?” he said after a few careful bites.

She swallowed. “I got us one more night.”

He looked both relieved and chagrined. “Lucy—”

“I’m tired. I was tired after Shiloh. And you don’t look ready to go anywhere. This way we— or I
— can have a quiet day at the Civil Rights Museum, and then we can leave early tomorrow.” The thought of driving a few hundred miles this afternoon was utterly unappealing, and they hadn’t even talked about where they were going next.

“Lucy, I’m sorry,” he said tiredly.

“It’s all right.”

“Thanks for, uh. Dragging me back here. And looking after me. And… I’m sorry you had to.”

“Gar—“ she began, then stopped. “Fl—“ Pause. “What do you want me to call you?”

He stared at her. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. “Whatever you want,” he said finally.

It felt very important to get this right. “Garcia,” she said after a second. “You’ve been looking after me this whole trip. Did you think I hadn’t noticed?”

He looked at her, and something in his tired expression eased, just a little.

“That wasn’t… my plan,” he admitted after a minute. “I hadn’t seen anyone— haven’t seen trouble since we left, and I thought you’d be safely in bed. I thought… I’d just have one or two.” He was speaking very slowly. “But after the first, the things I… I try not to think…” He trailed off, and shook his head.

“It’s the first birthday when I know for sure she’s not— coming back,” he said abruptly, and closed his eyes. “And I didn’t— expect it…”

His voice broke, and he stopped.

“To be so bad,” she finished softly.

He nodded once.

After a moment, she said, “Was it yesterday or today?”

“Yesterday.”

She hesitated. “I wish you’d told me,” she said quietly.

He opened his eyes. “I guess, uh, bottling it up until I couldn’t take it any more and getting plastered in a dive bar just seemed more sensible,” he said, with a touch of that familiar self-deprecating dryness.

She snorted, and tried not to wonder why he hadn’t. Maybe he just… didn’t think it was any of her business.

He was watching her, and seemed to guess what she was thinking. “Because it hurt too much,” he told her quietly, all levity gone.

“She was five, Lucy. And they shot her. In the head. And I couldn’t stop it.” His words were blunt and bleak, and his eyes were wet when he closed them.

She moved her chair in front of his. She leaned forward and pulled him into an awkward hug, and let him hold on to her tightly as he cried. This morning, his grief was quiet, gentle, totally different from last night’s violent storm.
Though maybe the rain imagery was only occurring to her because of his tears on her shoulder.

Finally he pulled away, and wiped roughly at his eyes. She got up, rested her hand on his shoulder in passing, and got the tissue box for them both.

“I’m sorry—”

“New house rule,” she told him. “No more apologies.”

He looked at her. “What?”

“You’ve hit your limit for apologizing about last night. Or this morning.”

“How about thanks?” he said after a minute, with a hint of a smile that was so good to see, after everything. “Can I thank you?”

“No,” she said firmly.

They finished eating. He made motions of getting ready to go. “Are you sure you want to go?” she asked. The museum was at the site of Dr. King’s assassination, and while it covered the broad history of the civil rights movement, Lucy knew part of it also presented extensive details of his murder.

“I don’t want to sit alone in a hotel room.” His voice had turned guttural. “I don’t know if I’ll be good company, but—”

She shook her head, dismissing that self-deprecation. “I don’t care if you’re good company. I’m not always good company, either. That’s… we’re allowed. I just… I just want you to be… as okay as you can.”

He looked up from tying his shoes and gave her a soft look, almost a smile.

She hesitated. “If… if something like that happens again… tell me.”

He looked down. “You have… your own problems, Lucy. And some of those are— my doing, and—”

Her anger stunned her into silence until she found her voice: “Wow,” she said. “I’ve heard nonsense from you before, but what you just said takes the prize for grade-A bullshit.”

“… what?”

She crossed the room to stand directly in front of him. “Listen to me, Garcia Flynn.” She bit the words out, and took his chin in her hand. Startled, he looked up; she didn’t even have to tilt his head up. But she didn’t let go.

“We didn’t stop being a team when the war ended. I do have my own— problems, and you’ve helped! You have to know damn well you’ve helped.”

“So for you to go off and drink yourself into a stupor because you don’t want to burden me? Unacceptable.” She searched his face. “Do you understand?”

“Lucy,” he breathed.

“Yes. Or no.”
“… yes.”

“Good.” She let go, but he continued to stare at her for a long moment. Almost like she’d hung the moon, or possibly, like she’d grown a second head.

The second one. It had to be the second one. Self conscious, she backed away and looked around for her purse.

The National Civil Rights Museum was awe-inspiring, and humbling. And somber, and depressing. Between it and Shiloh, Lucy didn’t know what to think or feel. Why was the cost of progress so damn high?

She recognized that she probably wasn’t in the right head space to appreciate it right now, and tried not to be too hard on herself. Maybe she could come back one day, when she wasn’t licking her metaphorical wounds.

Flynn—Garcia—it felt strange to think of him as that, when the name Flynn had come to feel like—

Like what?

… her travel companion was very quiet, but she wasn’t sure if that was the museum, the day, or both. When they reached the car, he didn’t head back to the hotel right away. Instead, he detoured to a park.

They ended up sitting on a bench near a pond. The scent of irises floated through the air again, and Lucy looked around until she saw them, blue-purple against an oak tree. She looked back to Garcia— to Flynn—but he didn’t seem affected.

“Lorena was in labor for twenty-three hours,” he said slowly. “She wanted to kill me by the end of it. I couldn’t blame her.”

“The nurse put her in Lorena’s arms. And when Lorena handed her to me, this scrawny, wrinkly thing just a few minutes old…” He shook his head. “My world rocked on its axis.”

Lucy reached down and gently squeezed his hand, then let go.

“Lorena was in labor for twenty-three hours,” he said after a minute. “She loved to draw, anything. I mean, anything. Once Lorena was visiting her family for a few days, and—” He shook his head. “Family troubles. I suggested she leave Iris at home. I’ll admit, I was selfish.” His lips quirked. “Anyway, there I am, veteran of ten wars by that point, and I don’t even wake up until Iris has gotten into the Sharpies and is drawing on my face.”

Lucy was startled into laughing so hard she nearly fell off the bench. He put out a hand to steady her.

“We picked Lorena up at the airport that night,” he added. “I’ll never forget the look on her face when she saw me.” His voice cracked, this time with laughter. “I didn’t live that one down for a long time.”

Lucy pictured that, just—that whole thing—and tears gathered in her eyes. It was a relief to have them be from mirth.

“Drawing, and math,” he continued after a minute. “Those were her two big things. Some kids would read everything—Iris was slow to read, but she counted everything. She wouldn’t go to
sleep until she’d counted all her stuffed animals three times.”

“Sometimes,” he added after a minute. He licked his lip. “Sometimes, it annoyed me. I’d be trying to work and she’d come in, every other minute. ‘Daddy, I saw another car, Daddy, that’s thirteen so far.’ And—” He shook his head. “I was an ignorant ass.”

“I’m pretty sure everyone who has ever lost someone has felt like that,” she said softly. “Like they took the time for granted.”

He gave her a tired, grateful look. “It, uh, made it easy to get her to eat her vegetables, though,” he said after a minute. “Anything that could be counted, she’d happily eat.” He cleared his throat.

“This probably disqualifies me from ever winning the ‘Parent of the Year’ award, but once or twice, if a family gathering got, uh… tense— Lorena had a… complicated family,” he explained. “And I could always count on Iris to break up a, a conversation if I just asked her ‘how many dishes are on the table, Iris? how many pieces of silverware?’”

Lucy, fully understanding ‘complicated family,’ snorted.

“She looked so angelic, and she could cause so much trouble in thirty seconds flat if you took your eyes off her.”

“Can’t imagine where she got that from,” Lucy couldn’t help saying.

He smirked at her sidelong, but then his amusement vanished. “And she was so young,” he finished softly.

What could she say to that? She watched him quietly.

He shook his head. “I think I understand my father better now,” he said after a minute.

“What do you mean?” she asked, when he didn’t continue.

He ran his hand through his hair. “My father… adored my mother,” he began. “After she died, when I was six, he… fell apart.”

He looked across the pond. “She was always… sad, and he was always trying to make her happy,” he explained. “I don’t know if he felt second best, but I think he hoped, in time, he could lift the shadow for her. Of her first husband’s death. Of Gabriel’s.”

“And for her to die with that cloud still over her… I think it must have felt like failure.” He spoke the words as if tasting them for the first time.

“He sent me to live with his mother.” The words tumbled out of him after a pause. “Because he would come home from work— before he lost his job— and drink at the table until midnight. He was never mean. He was just… not there. Not really.”

“And with all the selfish cruelty of a child, I despised him for it,” Garcia continued after a moment. “I’d just lost my mother. My world had fallen apart. I thought he should be looking after me, but he couldn’t. I’d see him, on the weekends, and…” He sucked in a breath. “I’m afraid I made my contempt very clear.”

“My world had fallen apart,” he echoed softly. “I didn’t realize until much later how much his had, too.”

“Garcia, I’m sorry,” she said quietly. It hurt to think of his father loving a woman who’d lost
“It, uh, does have a happy ending,” he said after a minute, a touch of that self-deprecating dryness creeping in. “He woke up one morning, realized he hadn’t managed to drink himself to death, remembered that somewhere out there was the son of the woman he’d loved, and decided to stop trying suicide by alcohol. He got his life together and brought… and I lived with him again. But it took me years to forgive him. I ran away and became a soldier first.”

He cleared his throat. “Thanks for, uh… listening to all this.”

“… of course.”

“It was better than… well, Getting drunk and becoming someone she wouldn’t recognize was a poor way to honor her.” He hesitated. “I wish… I could find a better one.”

“I mean, you did help save the world.”

His mouth quirked into an almost-smile. He toyed with the edge of his sleeve for a moment. He wasn’t normally a fidgety man, and the motion caught Lucy’s attention.

“Do you, uh, have plans for tonight, Lucy?”

“Plans? No, why?”

He cleared his throat again. “Last night, ah, definitely wasn’t one of my better moments…”

“I mean, nothing exploded, and…” She almost said nobody died before realizing how monumentally insensitive that would be. “There was no property damage.”

He choked. “Lucy, maybe you’ve been spending too much time with me.”

She looked him dead in the eyes. “I disagree.”

They stared at each other. The moment stretched out.

He looked down. “I wanted to make it up to you,” he said quietly.

He warmed her heart and made it ache at the same time. “You don’t have to, Garcia.” For him to force himself to— well, she didn’t know what he had in mind, but for him to force himself to do something when he was in the midst of his grief, just because he thought he owed it to her…

“I know. But I’d like to. If… you’d like that.” He hesitated, and seemed to hear what she was really saying. “I’ve spent the last two and a half days mostly in my own head,” he said slowly, “and… it’s time for something… else. They wouldn’t…” He swallowed. “They wouldn’t begrudge me that.”

She watched him for a moment, this man who was so patiently trying to pick up the pieces after Rittenhouse. “Okay,” she said softly. “Sure.”

Then she immediately thought of a qualifier: “… you better not be thinking of anything involving Elvis impersonators.”

He smirked at her.
They detoured first to the General Washburn Escape Alley, which, according to Lucy, marked where a Union general had fled in only his nightgown from a surprise raid by Forrest’s troops. There was nothing to see but a street sign and a plaque, but Lucy smiled anyway. It was worth it for that.

He had, of course, done his research, and this was supposedly the juke joint with the best live music on a weeknight. They settled in at a back table where they could watch the band; after a few minutes, he decided that reputation was warranted.

The restaurant wasn’t busy, and their waiter was attentive. They did attract some attention… but not a kind he worried about.

“That man just glared at you.” Lucy sounded taken aback as the waiter refilled Garcia’s water, having already brought her another beer. He definitely wasn’t drinking tonight. Possibly for the next year. God, hangovers were even more unforgiving when you weren’t in your twenties any more.

He looked at the man in question when the waiter was gone. “Mmm?” he said neutrally.

She eyed him suspiciously. “Did you say something to him?”

“Not a word,” he said, with perfect honesty.

“Did you… look at him?”

He just smiled. If Lucy honestly didn’t know why multiple men here were looking at him like they wouldn’t mind at all if he dropped dead on the spot, he certainly wasn’t gonna tell her.

He was pretty sure that was one of the sundresses she’d bought in Indiana— he remembered the deep red flowers on white hanging in their hotel room in Lawrenceville— and she’d put a cardigan over the strappy shoulders. She was particularly breathtaking in it, though he wasn’t exactly an unbiased judge.

He realized she’d caught him looking— not ogling , mind you, he wasn’t a boy, but still looking—and felt himself flush. “You look, ah, particularly nice tonight, Lucy,” he said.

She gave him a pleased little smile. “Why, thank you.” She cleared her throat. “You don’t, uh, clean up too badly yourself.”

Maybe she was a little tipsy already? That was all right. He was driving.

He settled back in his seat as the band started another set. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten his grief of the morning. It sure as hell wasn’t that the pain had gone away entirely.

But— he had to let it heal. What other choice did he have? His father had made the unappealing alternative very clear. As he’d told Lucy a few days ago, in that dim motel bathroom, how badly something scarred didn’t just depend on the wound; it depended on how you cared for it afterwards.

He’d mourned Iris last night, and the night before, and today… and he would mourn her again, over and over, because accepting that she and Lorena would never be part of his life again wasn’t the same as accepting that they had to stay dead.

But they’d stopped her killers, and spared only God knew how many people the same fate. And if he mourned her, he had to celebrate that. He had to celebrate that they’d survived, that somewhere
in the future would come a life free of Rittenhouse— for everyone.

So he let himself enjoy the music, and the food, and Lucy enjoying the music. He let himself enjoy Lucy’s company, and her laughter, and her dark threats about what she would do to him if an Elvis impersonator appeared. To see her happy and smiling— and frankly radiant, tonight, even more so than usual— after everything, did him good.

There’d be dark nights ahead for both of them. But tonight—

Tonight, they’d be all right.

Chapter End Notes

… I said this was just a soft fluffy fic, and then we all forgot who was writing it.

Historical Marker for the Capture of Island No. Ten

Mrs. Rosa M. Parks marker

With regards to how I have presented Fort Pillow, a couple of notes:

My ‘out’ for any liberties and inaccuracies is that the timeline in which this story is set is not the same as our own. Our pair has stayed at places where there’s no lodging, and visited places that should have been closed. It’s possible that the real-life equivalents of the fictional Fort Pillow staff in this chapter may be perfectly sensitive to the historical realities of the massacre.

However, I did not invent the storyline out of thin air. A resource I’ve been using, Michael Weeks’s excellent The Complete Civil War Road Trip Guide, notes that the site seems not to address the tragedy in reasonable depth; a handful of online reviews seem to concur; an article from 2017 details efforts to honor the Black soldiers killed their and suggests that the site’s treatment of the massacre is lacking; and, most tellingly, as of this writing, the official brochure for the park does not mention the massacre at all, but says “The 1,642 acre Fort Pillow is known for its well-preserved breastworks and reconstructed inner fort.” Make of all that what you will.

For the Fort Pillow massacre itself, I mostly used the Wikipedia article, which is, currently, very good, as well as Court Cartney’s article. The latter is particularly valuable for explaining that “To many black soldiers, after Forrest’s actions at Fort Pillow, surrender equaled execution.” Will Hickox also has a good blog entry on the subject.

For the National Civil Rights Museum and Shiloh National Military Park, I used the official websites, Wikipedia… and a map of the auto tour which is currently not linked on the official website, but still exists here. The website on the Corinth Contraband Camp is also worth a look.
Arkansas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Wanna go to Vicksburg?”

“I’ve actually been. I visited after a conference in grad school. Do you want to see it?”

“Not particularly.” He slammed the trunk, climbed into the driver’s seat, and put his sunglasses on.

“So, where to?”

She considered the map. They were at roughly the latitude of LA, and had to head north at some point. With Garcia preferring to avoid the Grand Canyon, they should do it relatively sooner than later. She wasn’t sure what route he and Lorena had taken, but mentally crossed Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona off the list completely.

She considered the other options. Maybe the smartest thing to do would be to head back up the Mississippi to St. Louis and head west from there. But she felt restless. She didn’t want another trip through the Mississippi River Valley lowlands.

“Head west, young man,” she decided.

He snorted as he started the car. “I have eight years on you, if I recall.”

She made a dismissive noise. “That’s not that much.”

He glanced at her over the top of his sunglasses, and pulled out of the parking lot.

“I’m guessing you don’t want to stay on 40,” he said after a few minutes.

“Uh, not longer than we can help it.” She studied the map again. Southwest was the wrong direction. Straight west and north were the interstates. “I guess let’s take sixty-four and see where it goes?”

Arkansas had never been high on her list of must-see states, but they’d find something interesting along the way. “There is a lot of interesting Civil War history in Missouri,” she added. “But after Shiloh…”

“I know,” he said. “Me, too.”

He took her literally and got off the interstate as soon as they’d crossed the river. They headed north through Marion, and she asked him to pull off near a cluster of historical markers.

“Oh, the Sultana,” she said, as they got out in front of one. “Most people don’t know that the worst maritime tragedy in recorded history was on the Mississippi.” A steamboat, overloaded with Union officers just released from Confederate POW camps, had sank, killing eighty percent of its passengers, when its boilers exploded.

“A lot of people thought it was sabotage,” she added. “Some people even confessed. But none of their stories ever held up. None of the supposed methods fit what actually happened. Still, the fact that people were so willing to believe that says a lot about that period of history.”

They looked at each other, each seeming to have suddenly had a similar thought, both waiting for
the other to say it first.

“You think it was… Rittenhouse?” he said finally.

She thought for a minute. “I can’t see what good it would’ve done them. Maybe it was part of a plot to destabilize the Union after the war? Maybe… they were just Confederate sympathizing psychopaths.”

“I think I’m… sorry I asked.”

“I think I’m going to spend the rest of my professional life jumping at shadows,” she admitted, as they walked back to the car. “Was this Rittenhouse? How about this? The problem with conspiracy theories is that you see them everywhere.”

“And when it’s something like Rittenhouse…”

“Exactly.”

They took sixty-four northwest through long stretches of broad, flat rice fields. She snuck occasional surreptitious looks at him, but he seemed… he seemed okay, this morning.

Not like everything was better, because it didn’t work like that. But like he was more at peace with it.

They stopped briefly at another Mississippian mound site and wandered the trail before getting back on the highway. “To answer your question,” he said after a while.

She fumbled mentally to remember her question.

“Grace Murray Hopper.”

It took her a minute. “To date?”

He nodded. “The, uh, programmer. She was one of my mother’s heroes. She— my mother— used to quote two sayings of hers. The first was, ‘Tommy rot and nonsense.’”

Lucy smiled. “And the second?”

“Go ahead and do it, you can always apologize later.”

Lucy shook her head. “Sorry, but I just don’t see you two having anything in common.”

He laughed. God, he had a nice laugh. It had taken her so long to hear it for the first time.

She watched the scenery for a while. “I did think of another name.”

“Mmm?”

“Don’t laugh.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m not… saying I would want to, you know, marry him…”

“You said hamburgers and ice cream and sit in the back of the theater and maybe make out a little.”

“Or, well, in this case…” She hesitated. “It might be nice to have dinner with a young Ronald
Tolkien. Have a Scotch, go punting. I mean, you can tell from his books that even though he wasn’t a trained historian, he had a deep reverence for the past, and— you said you wouldn’t laugh!”

“No,” he protested, smiling. “I’m not, I’m just thinking… Lucy, if you ever had dinner with Tolkien, you’d come back to find that *Lord of the Rings* ended in one book with Arwen and Éowyn making an alliance, slaying all their enemies, and ruling Middle-earth together.”

She raised her eyebrows, secretly pleased. “Would that be a bad thing?”

“No at all.”

After a while she pulled her blanket out from the narrow gap behind the passenger seat, where it now lived. “Wake me up when you want me to drive?” she murmured, folding it against the door. They’d been out late last night, neither of them wanting to leave the music and…

Well, it had just been a good night.

She waited until she actually got his assent; she’d learned something in the last few days about assuming he’d ask for what he needed. Then she slipped her sandals off, tucked her feet up on the seat beside her and closed her eyes.

She didn’t really fall asleep, but she did doze, until she felt the car slow. “Mmm?” she murmured.

“Historical marker.”

Her eyes snapped open, and she sat up. Flynn— Garcia— was trying not to smile. She looked around as she unbuckled. Oh, there it was.

“Another salt works,” she murmured. Without salt coming in from the north or from Europe, and with the Union cutting off more and more supply lines between parts of the Confederacy, salt works had sprung up in many places. In fact, salt had probably been Florida’s most valuable contribution to the Civil War; with all that coastline, it was perfect for boiling down salt water.

“The other reason I stopped,” he said after a minute, “is we’re at a crossroads. If you wanna turn north, this is the place. Going west gets more circuitous after this. Unless you want the interstate.”

She got back in the car, looked at the map, and saw his point. Why not head north into Missouri? The Fort Davidson site was up there, and then they could cut north or west as they wanted.

But something about the deserted westward route called to her. She tapped the map. “If we cut cross-country to sixty-five, that’ll take us north and west.”

“Something up there you wanna see?”

She shook her head. “Not particularly. But it’s quiet and it’s going in roughly the right direction.” She looked up at him. “Is that okay?”

“That’s fine.”

The road climbed slowly but surely out of the Mississippi River bottom and into the highlands. They’d come so far already. From the old Appalachians, down the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers, back to mountains, the even older Ozarks.

A song from childhood came into her mind: “This land is your land,” she sang slowly, “this land is
my land, from California to New York island…”  

Garcia was listening quietly.  

“… from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, this land was made for you and me…”  

“As I was walking that ribbon of highway, I saw above me the endless skyway. I saw below me the golden valley… This land was made for you and me.” She realized she was singing it at about the pace of a dirge, and tried not to read too much into that.  

She sang through the middle verses as they followed the winding road, then finished up with the vaguely communist verses.  

“When I was little, I wanted that to be our national anthem,” she said finally. “Mom told me it didn’t have the right tone. I was too naive then to understand what she meant.”  

He glanced at her, but didn’t speak.  

“I—” She sighed. “You weren’t wrong, about her and me.”  

He made a disagreeing noise. “I didn’t have to be an ass about it. I’m sorry.”  

She shook her head. “Some of the proudest moments of my career were getting her to change her mind,” she continued slowly. “I really… I loved that about her, that even though she was a preeminent scholar and she’d been in the field for decades longer than I had, she was willing to listen to the evidence. To adopt—a more progressive interpretation, usually—if I convinced her.”  

“And so I thought I could change her mind about Rittenhouse,” she said bleakly. “I thought—maybe she would listen, just like she had before.”  

She stared ahead, not really seeing the farms and meadows and woods they were passing.  

“It’s not your fault that you didn’t, Lucy,” Garcia said quietly. “That she didn’t.”  

“In my head, I know that,” she sighed. “But—what was that you said about your dad? It still feels like failure.”  

“That your mother betrayed your trust, that’s not on you. That’s on her.”  

“I know. You think I don’t?”  

He took a deep breath. “I think it couldn’t hurt you to hear it again.”  

She remembered their conversation from the day before, and thought that maybe they weren’t only talking about her, and didn’t argue.  

Her phone chimed. “Oh, good,” she murmured as she looked at the message.  

“Everything all right?”  

“Yeah, it’s Isobel. Agent Jimenez. I hadn’t heard from her since last Friday, and I wasn’t sure if they were doing okay. I meant to text her over the weekend, but with everything, I forgot.”  

“They have a new baby,” he pointed out. “They’re lucky if they have time to breathe.”  

Isobel had had time to take some new pictures, anyway. Lucy admired all the new shots of Potato
Baby, and wrote back, thanks for the update! I hope you’re doing well.

A moment later, she got a reply: so tired i want to cry, but she’s doing enough of that for all three of us.

While Lucy was trying to figure out how to respond to that, she got another message: and i’ve never been happier.

Lucy smiled even as she teared up a little bit.

When she glanced at the map and realized how lightly populated the country ahead was, they stopped for lunch at a little diner. If she’d been inclined to romanticize diner food before this, this trip would have cured her. Nothing had really been as good as those first days in Virginia… though maybe that was because her standards before that had been so low.

She ordered a chicken sandwich, and, having finished the salad mix in Memphis, a side salad. “What?” she asked Garcia after the waitress has gone.

“I was just surprised you ordered a salad.”

“Hope springs eternal,” she said firmly.

“But elderly lettuce doesn’t.”

“You just want to be able to say ‘I told you so.’”

“Lucy, I would never,” he said, with something approximating a straight face.

“Now that’s revisionist history if I ever heard it.”

“… fair enough.”

Her salad arrived five minutes later. He took one look at it and very eloquently said nothing.

She poked it with her fork, and sighed. “Let’s find a grocery store soon.”

As they ate, he glanced behind her more than once. Her back was to the door, so she asked quietly, “Trouble?”

He shook his head.

Lucy waited until she heard the door open, and used that as an excuse to look over her shoulder. Everyone behind her looked fairly ordinary…

She took a second look at the woman and boy sitting near the front window. The boy was happily going through a burger and a plate of fries. The woman was slowly nursing a cup of coffee, and taking very small bites of toast.

The waitress brought their check. “Just so y’all know, there’s no hurry,” she said, with the perfunctory air of someone who says it dozens of times a day.

“The woman and the child at the front,” Garcia said very quietly. He put two bills down on the table. “To cover their meal, and anything else they want to get. Particularly if she wants an actual meal. Whatever’s left is for you for your trouble. All right?”

The waitress looked very taken aback, and glanced from him to Lucy. Lucy gave her what she
hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Absolutely,” the waitress said after a minute. “Thank you, sir, that’s very generous of you.”

Garcia made a disgruntled face and noise, and she tucked the bills in her apron and hurried off.

“All right, let’s go,” he said, when they’d counted out the money for their own meal and tip. They’d discovered it was easier just to pay with cash at places this small and out of the way. Nearly everyone took credit cards, but the card readers could be ancient and slow.

“Don’t you want to make sure she’s not going to just pocket the money herself?”

“She’s not.” Even as Garcia spoke, the waitress approached the table in question with a menu. Garcia looked like he really wanted to get out of there, so Lucy grabbed her bag and they hurried out.

Lucy took over the driving for the afternoon. As she waited for a line of traffic to pass so she could pull out on the highway, she glanced at him. She wasn’t sure, but he was generally a very attentive travel partner, so she thought he was deliberately not making eye contact.

She let it go, and just smiled to herself.

He stretched his legs out and closed his eyes. As the mostly empty road wound north, ominous signs like “brake check ahead” and “runaway truck ramp one mile” warned that they were coming to hillier territory. Sure enough, the gentle curves and little hills soon gave way to more sweeping turns, the kind designed to skirt an entire mountain. Rocky bluffs began to appear on one side of the road; the other looked out over the valley.

Their second mountain range of the trip—geologically, anyway, if not in any topographically convincing fashion to someone who’d grown up in the shadow of the Sierras. Or the shadow of the Dinarides, for that matter. But though the landscape might not have been dramatic, the rocky ridges and the long stretches of open meadow in between were nonetheless beautiful. She was glad they’d come this way.

They began to pass hay meadows, dotted with dozens of cylindrical bales. Other vehicles became even scarcer, and the road curved more sharply and more often. Nothing came in on the radio, and she suspected she didn’t have cell service, either.

He closed his eyes and seemed to sleep. She felt bolder continuing to sneak the occasional look at him. After the last few days, after she hadn’t known what was wrong until too late, she just wanted to be sure he was okay. And he seemed a little tired, but not… distant, like in Memphis.

He was on her mind for other reasons, too.

It was just… it was just comfort, that was all. That was the reason she felt better when he was near. And the atmosphere, that too: road trips were adventurous. They were romantic. It was easy to persuade yourself you had feelings you really didn’t. But she was done letting the romance of a situation get her into trouble. Been there, done that, learned.

Besides, he still was grieving his family. The last two days had proved that. The last thing either of them needed was to be some kind of a post-trauma rebound.

Besides. Surely whatever might seem like a good idea on a spontaneous road trip across the country, couldn’t possibly stand up to the stress of real life.
… right?

Kentucky: the two of them together, searching methodically for that lost boy. It had been one of the least romantic things she could think of. They’d already weathered tough times, not as a couple, but as a team.

No, it was a crazy idea. And thinking of damaging her friendship with him physically ached. It was safer to just… let this stay a fairy tale. A dream that belonged to the road trip. Safer for both of them.

That must be why she felt so… sad.

She shook herself, and focused on the road.

Driving through an infamous sundown town that had driven away nearly all its Black residents in the early twentieth century, and then tried to hush up the historical record, cooled her enthusiasm for the region’s beauty somewhat. A sudden summer thunderstorm blew up as she was navigating the winding road across the next ridge, and she slowed down and put her lights on.

“Want me to drive?” Garcia’s voice was rough with sleep.

“… how would you feel about stopping for the day?” It was late afternoon. The map showed them coming up on a town, but she wasn’t sure how big it was. “I don’t know if there’s any lodging here.”

He took out his phone. “Eureka Springs is a, uh, tourist destination, apparently,” he said after a minute. “We could probably find something.”

“What’s after that?”

He checked the map while she focused on the road. “Bentonville’s about an hour. More, in this weather. So, tourist town or Walmartville?”

“Definitely here.”

Eureka Springs was indeed a tourist destination, full of gift shops, little cafés, and B&Bs. It also had the topography of a miniature version of San Francisco. The highway ran through the flattest part of the valley; the town definitely did not have that constraint.

It was also surprisingly busy for a Wednesday, but they managed to find lodging at the third place they tried, a set of somewhat rundown cabins. The proprietor, an old white man, gave them elaborate and totally impractical instructions of how to flee across the street to the nearest basement if their “smart-ass telephones” showed a tornado warning.

By the time they went back into town for an early dinner, the rain had stopped. They ate in a park under the benign gaze of a large blue goddess statue that definitely did not fit Lucy’s preconceived notions of Arkansans. Afterward, they explored the park, and a little of the town, and her calf muscles understood why it was described as the Switzerland of Arkansas. They found a used bookstore; while he lost himself in the shelves for a few moments, she found a nearly-new road atlas of the country.

“Hey?” she said quietly, as they climbed down from a ridge, heading back to the car.

He offered his hand to help her down. “Hmm?”
“I’m, um…” She hesitated. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

It took her a little courage, because she’d said it before, but… after the last few days, this felt a little different.

His hand tightened on hers— automatically, she thought. He didn’t speak, or move, just looked up at her for a moment with a startlingly soft expression. She stayed where she was, at the edge of the ledge, looking down at him. For a moment, they felt suspended in time, sheltered from the world around them.

Once, she would have thought it strange, if not impossible, that the grim, intense man she’d first met could be so… different. But his family might have been equally incredulous that the man they knew, who’d laughed and looked after them and cared for them so faithfully, could act so violent and dark.

And yet, here he was, watching her with a look that was undeniably soft, maybe even… tender.

It occurred to her that she was possibly the only person to see all these sides of him.

“The feeling is, ah…” he said, rather awkwardly, and licked his top lip. “Very mutual.”

He gently helped her down. It was a long moment before either of them let go of the other’s hand.

When they returned to the cabin, she wandered out back, stretched out in the swing, and video chatted Jiya. “Hey, traveler,” Jiya greeted her.

Lucy smiled. “Hey.”

“Where are you?”

“Arkansas.” Lucy stood and made a slow circle to show Jiya the scenery. In the background, Garcia came out to the cabin’s deck with a book. From Jiya’s expression, this area definitely wasn’t at the top of her bucket list.

“Tell me how things are with you,” Lucy added.

“Well, I make it to the second round of interviews with Alphabet.”

“Congratulations!” Lucy tried to remember what Jiya had told her about this job, and felt a little guilty that she might have missed something while traveling. “What’s the job for, exactly?”

Jiya hesitated. “Okay, you know Google, right?”

Lucy gave her a look. “Just because I study the pre-industrial age doesn’t mean I live in it.”

“Well, this is their parent company…” Jiya gave an explanation of the job, of which Lucy understood exactly none. Maybe she was closer to the pre-industrial age than she thought.

“I… have no idea what you’re talking about,” Lucy said honestly, when Jiya had finished. “But if you’re happy, then I’m happy for you.”

Jiya laughed. “Thanks. Yeah, um… I have a few other leads. So does Rufus. He’s out with Kevin tonight.”

Lucy nodded.
“Tell me, um, about the road trip. How much longer are you going to be gone?”

Lucy hesitated. She wasn’t sure how much Agent Christopher had told the rest of them, but she decided not to mention Rittenhouse still being after her. She didn’t want to worry anyone. “We’ll be home by your birthday.”

That was still three, three and a half weeks away; they’d be able to go back by then, right?

Jiya looked disappointed.

“What is it?” Lucy asked. “Is everything okay there?”

“Yeah, no, it’s fine, I just thought…” Jiya’s turn to hesitate for a long moment. Lucy was almost worried by the time she finally continued, “I thought Rufus might want you around, after…”

Lucy sat up fast. “After what? Jiya?”

“… after I propose.”

Lucy squealed. Garcia was on his feet instantly—

She gave him an apologetic wave, and he relaxed.

Jiya was wincing. “I can fix the Lifeboat a lot more easily than I can replace my ears!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Lucy said, not at all sorry. “Oh my God! Jiya! I— oh my God! That’s— I’m so happy for you!”

“I haven’t even asked yet,” Jiya pointed out, looking pained. “What if… what if he says no?”

Through the miracle of modern technology, the Look Lucy gave her traveled two-thirds of the continent instantly. “And what if the sky falls? That’s more likely.”

“I just… I mean, I don’t know how he feels, but… he’s the one for me.” Jiya shrugged. “I want him around. For the rest of my life.”

“I so wish I could hug you right now,” Lucy told her.

She remembered those days after Rufus’s death, when Jiya had told her he was the first man she’d ever imagined marrying and even having children with. “I used to think that was something I never wanted, you know?” she’d whispered, tired and spent after all the sobs. “But I looked at him, and it’s not like I thought, propose to me now, impregnate me now —”

Lucy had snorted despite herself, and been relieved to get an answering amused huff from Jiya.

“— but I— I wondered—” Jiya had squeezed these next words out through a tight throat. “What it might be to wake up beside him fifty years from now. What our kids might be like. Lucy, I never thought that way about— anyone— else—“

“We’ll get him back,” Lucy had sworn to her. “We’ll get him back, and if the two of you want that, you can find out.”

And they had, and now Jiya and Rufus were going to get married, and Lucy—

Honestly, she was about thirty seconds from delighted tears.
“So, do you know when and where?” she asked instead.

“Uhhh, I’m… working on that part? I mean, our first date kind of… sucked, so I don’t want to do it there. And where we had our first kiss is…”

“… rubble?”

Jiya nodded. “Comic-Con is the obvious choice, but that’s not for, like, six weeks.”

“What’s Comic-Con?”

“Like an academic conference for nerds.”

“Ah.” Lucy nodded.

As the sun set and the fireflies came out, she tried to help Jiya brainstorm ideas for proposals, though she wasn’t sure how much real help she was. After a while, she found herself yawning.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s not you. I’m just tired.” She glanced up at the sky; dark clouds were slowly covering the twilight stars. “I think it’s about to rain. I should probably…”

Jiya nodded. Then her expression turned pensive. “Hey, Lucy.”

“Yeah?”

Jiya took a long moment to answer. “Have you talked to Wyatt lately?”

“A few days ago, why? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Jiya said. She looked pained. “Look, he’s… spending a lot of time at the prison with Jessica. A lot of time.”

Lucy took a slow breath.

“I didn’t… want to tell you, but… I didn’t think he had, so…”

Lucy looked away from the camera. “I know,” she said finally, and she wasn’t just talking about Jiya’s reluctance.

“I’m sorry,” Jiya said softly. And she wasn’t just talking about delivering the news.

“It’s all right,” Lucy said finally. “We had what we had.” She didn’t know how to tell Jiya that what hurt most wasn’t the ending, it was the way Wyatt had treated— was still treating— her.

Jiya hesitated again. “I know you’re not supposed to say bad things about your friends’ exes, but… I was happy for you. Because he made you happy. But, lately? He mostly seems to make you… tired.”

Lucy snorted. “You’re not wrong.” She felt a raindrop on her head. “I have to go, but speaking of being happy, I am incredibly happy for you and Rufus. Keep me up to date.”

Jiya didn’t bother protesting that she hadn’t proposed yet. She just gave Lucy a warm, brilliant smile that was the antithesis of her anger and grief after Rufus’s death. “I will.”

As the rain fell harder, Lucy hurried to the back deck of the little cabin. Garcia put his book down. “Rufus proposed?”
“No. But Jiya’s going to.”

He raised his eyebrows, and looked impressed.

By the time she was ready for bed, it was raining in earnest. She took the loveseat, as the one of them who could actually fit on it without her legs hanging off. She nestled happily back against the cushions, still basking in the glow of Jiya’s news, and let the steady rain on the roof lull her to sleep.

#

She woke when she heard the door open.

Was someone breaking in? Her eyes snapped open. But it was only Garcia, stepping out onto the deck.

When he didn’t reappear, she sat up and pulled her robe over her pajamas. From the top of the deck steps, she could see that he’d made his way down to the swing and was looking at the stars. She watched him for a moment. If he wanted to be alone, she didn’t want to get in his way. But if he was fighting his own demons of the dog watch…

The grass was cold and wet with rain and dew under her feet. She hesitated behind him, not exactly sure what to say. Before she could figure it out, he slid to one side, making room for her if she wanted to join him.

So she did.

“You all right?” she asked quietly.

He nodded slowly. “Just, uh, couldn’t sleep.” He pushed the swing gently back, then let it glide forward.

“Anything you want to talk about?” she asked after a minute.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“It’s all right.”

It was nice out here. The rain had cleared, and now the stars were brilliant, abundant, and beautiful. The fireflies winked on and off, a closer, warmer light, and the chirping of the crickets accompanied the gentle breeze through the trees. An owl hooted, mournful and beguiling. Somewhere nearby was the quiet sound of running water.

She’d always been a city girl, but this… she could use more of this in her life.

“Every day on this trip, I feel like I can breathe a little easier,” she murmured after a while.

He exhaled slowly, and nodded.

The distinctive shrill whine of a mosquito, right by her ear, startled her. She swatted at it, but it was determined. Or, no, there were two of them.

“How are they not going for you?” she demanded.

“Because you’re sweet, and I’m not,” he said, with a hint of that dimpled, smug smirk she’d first seen in that San Antonio hotel room.
She rolled her eyes at him. “Are you really going to be okay if I go back to bed—” She felt something against her neck, and slapped hard. “— or are you going to sit out here and—” Slap! “—brood?”

“I might stay out here a while longer,” he told her. “I don’t think I’m gonna brood. Go inside before I have to take you for a transfusion in the morning.”

She went, and stood not upon the order of her going.

#

She woke to a cup of coffee on the nightstand. She struggled out of the blankets, blinked blearily, and reached for it gratefully. She remembered Jiya’s news, and smiled all over again.

She looked around. Garcia was at the little kitchenette table, hair still mussed, nursing his own cup rather sleepily.

“You didn’t stay up all night, did you?” Her voice came out a little groggy.

He looked up and saw her awake, and an unguarded, warm smile spread across his face. Something in her stomach felt very, very strange…

“Ah, no.” His own voice was low and rough with sleep like it got. It struck her that she didn’t find it remarkable that she knew that.

…it also struck her how sexy it was.

She decided… just not to dwell on that, and joined him at the table.

“Anywhere in particular you wanna go?” he asked.

She pulled out the road atlas. He moved their cups so she could spread it across the table. If they simply went west, they’d hit the Grand Canyon, and then have to turn north anyway at 395. She looked north. They could cross the Rockies in Colorado, cross Utah, take 50 west across Nevada, and come out at the right latitude, east of San Francisco. Or…

She focused closer to their current destination, and flipped to Arkansas. “Not really. Although, unless we turn north here into Missouri, we’ll go right past Pea Ridge.”

“I’m not familiar with that one.”

“It was an important battle for control of Arkansas and Missouri,” she said, “but honestly I mostly remember it as a battle of blunders. On both sides. You know. ‘Who’s in charge? Where are our supplies? Wait, is that the enemy? Right over there?’”

He gave a pained snort very similar to the one that sometimes escaped Lucy when someone asked her about grad school: the sound of ah. Yes. That. She eyed him.

“It is supposed to be incredibly well-preserved,” she said after a minute. “Want to head there after breakfast?”

Pea Ridge was as impressively preserved as Lucy had heard. They drove the loop, and she lingered a particularly long time at the Trail of Tears marker. The northern route, passing through Pea Ridge, had only been taken by the Cherokee; they’d come from eastern Georgia and Tennessee, along with western North and South Carolina.
So, basically, the trip she and Garcia had made by car, they’d had to make by foot and wagon.

When they left, she let him drive, and was quiet for a while. Rittenhouse, the journal had told her, had been partly responsible for the Trail of Tears. If the team had managed to wipe them out earlier — in the past as well as the present— maybe it never would have happened.

But they’d won, and now they had to live with the terms of winning: the damage they hadn’t been able to undo as well as the people they hadn’t been able to save. Survivor’s guilt, in a weird way.

“You gonna be all right?” he asked after a while.

She nodded. “Eventually.”

They exchanged looks, both knowing that sometimes that was the best you got.

“Where are we going?” he asked. “Do I just keep heading west?”

She opened the atlas, and studied it for a while. “West to Tulsa?” she finally suggested. They could figure out the rest along the way. Just like they’d been doing so far.

She looked up, and managed a tentative smile.

His answering smile warmed her. “Fine with me.”

Chapter End Notes

- Historical marker for the Sultana
- The Mississippian garden
- Confederate Salt Works
- Statue of Aza
- Harrison race riots
- An interesting article on Harrison today (ignore the headline…)
- Some information on the Trail of Tears at Pea Ridge National Park
About ten miles into Oklahoma, construction sent them on a detour, and they decided to follow the road all the way to Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. That was the point of a road trip, right? To wander?

When they were back on the road after Tahlequah, Lucy texted the team a picture of a stop sign in both Cherokee and English. *nice*, Wyatt replied.

She added: *Supposedly, Mr. Ed is buried somewhere around here.*

…*what?* Rufus said.

*talking horse*, Wyatt said.

*Is this your way of asking for an intervention?* Rufus said after a minute. *Just say the word, Lucy, and we’ll come get you.*

She snorted.

But she decided to skip Honey Springs. It was famous as a battle where white soldiers were in the minority—Black soldiers fought for the Union, and Native American forces fought on both sides—but she wasn’t sure the actual battlefield was worth an additional detour.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they approached Tulsa. “There’s not much,” Garcia said, searching for lodging. “Strange for a Thursday.”

“Maybe there’s a festival this weekend and people came a day early? Take my phone and check AirBnb.”

So they ended up taking a “suite” in what turned out to be a large house on a quiet, leafy street. The listing promised off-street parking, which was preferable for keeping the machine in the back seat of the car away from prying eyes, and the host, an older white woman with generous streaks of grey in her dark hair, showed them where to park behind the house.

The “suite” was a large bedroom whose sunny corner held a little sitting area of two armchairs, a mini-fridge, and a microwave on a shelf. It was clean, quiet, and cheerfully decorated.

But…

“The listing showed two beds?” Lucy said.

Their host surreptitiously glanced down to Garcia’s left hand, and, apparently, drew her own conclusions. “Oh, does it still? I’m sorry. We had a leak in the roof from a bad storm a few weeks ago, and the one bed got all wet, so we moved them out to be cleaned and swapped this one in. It’s
very comfortable, you’ll like it. Well, I’ll let y’all get settled in, now. Holler downstairs if you need
something.”

Lucy and Garcia, still holding their bags, exchanged looks.

“Do you want to leave?” he asked.

“Depends,” she said, going for a light tone. “Do you kick?”

He snorted. “No.”

“Then this is fine.” It was a big bed—a queen or a king, she couldn’t tell. Lucy preferred to sleep
cocooned in pillows anyway, and there were plenty here. It was fine. It was all just… fine.

… her libido was not invited to weigh in.

They decided to head to the Gilcrease Museum. Lucy immediately regretted that they only had a
couple of hours there; she could easily have spent a whole day.

“We heard about this place in one of my anthropology classes,” she said, as they descended to the
basement and the huge collection of Native American artifacts on display. “I always wanted to
come here, but I never got the chance.”

She spent two very happy hours wandering the exhibits until the docent very politely informed
them that the museum was closing, immediately, and they had to leave.

“Usually they have announcements like ‘the museum will be closing in ten minutes,’” she
muttered, hurrying to the entrance.

“They did,” Garcia said, easily keeping up with her.

“… oh.”

“I thought you’d heard,” he added, trying not to smile, “or I would have said something.”

“You were just scared to get between me and history again.”

He snorted, but didn’t deny it.

After the museum, they drove through downtown, Garcia patiently indulging her search for Art
Deco sites. She found a number of them, and also an adorable giant penguin statue, with which she
took a selfie. She sent it to the team. Rufus replied with a screenshot of his earlier message, asking
if she needed an intervention.

She wondered if Jiya had decided when and where to propose yet.

They stopped for dinner at a pizza place. It was with some trepidation that Lucy ordered yet
another salad, but when it arrived, it was fresh and delicious.

“Shall we?” Garcia asked when they’d eaten, picking up her empty dishes as well as his own.

“In a minute. I’m getting another salad to go.”

They got turned around on the way back, and ended up detouring past a pair of Mvskoke sites, the
Creek Stickball Park and the Creek Council Oak Tree. She wanted to see if there were other
historical markers in the area of Tulsa’s origin as a Native American capital, but dark clouds
sprung up, and it started to sprinkle. By the time they reached the house, it was raining hard.

Lucy had just dropped into one of the armchairs by the kitchenette when her phone buzzed: THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE IN TULSA HAS ISSUED A TORNADO WARNING FOR TULSA, OSAGE, AND WASHINGTON COUNTIES. UNTIL 7:57 PM CDT. AT 7:17 CDT…

She skipped the rest and looked at Garcia, who was reading the same thing. She tried to remember the “how survive as a Californian in the Midwest” seminar she’d gotten in Chicago back in grad school, but that had been a decade ago and, anyway, Chicago wasn’t very tornado-prone and she didn’t think they’d even talked about that. “What are we supposed to do?”

“For starters? Get off the second floor.” He gestured for her to precede him.

They found their host, Mrs. Cusack, chopping vegetables at the sink and peering with interest out the kitchen window. “There’s a tornado warning,” Lucy said. “Do you have a, uh…?” She looked at Garcia.

“Basement,” he supplied.

She looked back to Mrs. Cusack.

“It’s through that door,” she wiped her hands on the dishtowel and pointed, “if it makes you feel any better, but there’s really no need to worry. Actually, I’m about to go outside and watch the storm for—”

Garcia just opened the door in question.

Lucy nearly balked when she saw the dark, narrow hole in the ground, but a sudden gust buffeted the house, and the wind took on an eerie, whistling quality. It helped when Garcia flipped the light on at the bottom of the stairs. The “basement” was a small, unfinished space, lined with shelves and old furniture, but at least it was clean and dry, and only faintly musty.

The basement in Chicago had smelled like—

No, she told herself firmly. I’m not doing that again. Fear isn’t real.

She lowered herself gingerly into an old desk chair as Garcia perched on the desk. “I should have grabbed a deck of cards or something,” she said wryly, trying to downplay how little she liked being in an enclosed space underground. “How did you know what to do in a tornado?”

“My, uh, mother’s mother was from north Texas. Tornado Alley. She used to tell me stories of being caught far from home when she was a child.”

“My, uh, mother’s mother was from north Texas. Tornado Alley. She used to tell me stories of being caught far from home when she was a child.”

“Oh.” Not as distracting as she’d hoped. She fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve.

“The house is creaking,” she said a moment later. “The wind must be really picking up.”

“Or it could be the pressure dropping as the storm approaches.”

“… oh.”

This wasn’t so bad. It wasn’t. The lights were on, she had room to move around, and best of all, there wasn’t a sadistic psychopath down here with her. She focused on her breathing and on those definite pluses to the situation.

“Where were you during the 1989 earthquake, Lucy?” Garcia asked after a minute.
She didn’t have to think about this one. “I was at home with Mom. She always picked me up from kindergarten, and… Dad always took me to school.”

Lucy still remembered her confusion and terror as the ground moved in ways it wasn’t supposed to. “I was in the kitchen eating the snack she’d fixed me, and she was at the other end of the house, in the bathroom,” she added. “One of the kitchen cabinets collapsed. She heard the crash and she thought… she panicked. I’d never heard her scream like that before.”

“She found me under the kitchen table. I wasn’t hurt, but I was terrified. She… grabbed me, and ran outside. The earthquake was long gone before she was willing to put me down.”

“Was there a lot of damage?”

Lucy shook her head. “But my father didn’t make it home for hours. Mom was convinced he’d been on the Cypress Street Viaduct. She was frantic.” She snorted. “Come to think of it, that might have been the night Amy was conceived.”

Mom had really, truly loved Dad. Lucy was sure of it. So…

So how, exactly, had Lucy come to exist? Born two and a half years after her parents’ wedding?

… She might actually prefer to think about the basement.

Which really wasn’t so bad. With the lights on, she could remind her mind that while it was small, it wasn’t that small. She could think of it as… just like being in a smaller version of her room in the Bunker. And, fully underground, instead of buried in the side of a hill.

Maybe it was best just not to think about it.

“So, uh,” Garcia said, licking his top lip. “You have any thoughts about our route?”

She gave him a grateful look just as the door at the top of the stairs banged open, making her jump. Mrs. Cusack barreled down the stairs, looking grim.

Lucy straightened up. “Is everything all right?”

“I think I heard it,” the other woman said.

“You heard—”

“Scuse me, sweetheart, let me just grab…”

She was trying to reach something on the shelf behind Lucy, so Lucy vacated the chair. Mrs. Cusack pulled a weather radio from the shelf, flicked it on, and set it on the desk.

“There,” she said. “Now we’ll know what’s going on.”

The whole house shook again. Lucy slid to the ground next to Garcia and pulled her knees up near her chest. “How long, uh, does this usually last?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“Oh, it can be from a few minutes to an hour, but it’s always safe to go out again before they lift the actual warning. They’re always so cautious about these things.”

The lights flickered and died.

Lucy breathed in sharply as the narrow darkness fell instantly, and pressed her lips together so she
didn’t let out any noise.

“Don’t worry, we have flashlights. We know the drill,” Mrs. Cusack said. Lucy heard her moving around, and then the sound of a switch, and then “… drat.”

Lucy focused on breathing. The room wasn’t any smaller now that she couldn’t see it. It wasn’t.

“… Lucy?” Garcia murmured, his hand brushing hers.

Someone was breathing fast and harsh. Oh, that was her.

“Is she claustrophobic?” Mrs. Cusack asked, worriedly.

“I’m,” Lucy said from behind clenched teeth, “fine.”

Garcia gently took her hand. “Breathe with me, Lucy.”

“I’m—” She squeezed his hand hard. She couldn’t even choke out fine, because it felt like a relentless engine was driving her lungs and refused to slow down. Her heart pounded, too. She felt herself start to sweat.

“Lucy.” His hand tightened on hers, and his tone was firm, and she found herself paying attention. He matched his breathing to hers, which sounded really unhealthy, but she didn’t have the attention to spare to tell him so. His breaths began to slow, little by little, and hers followed.

“Deep breaths,” he told her quietly, when she wasn’t quite gasping any more. “Deep breaths. That’s it, there you go.”

He turned her hand so it rested palm-up in his own. He ran his other thumb from the base of her palm to the base of her fingers, and then did it again. The gentle, unhurried stroking caught Lucy’s attention, and slowly, the team of runaway horses that was her mind right now began to slow down.

“That’s it,” he murmured. Slowly, muscles she hadn’t even realized were tense, unclenched.

The gloom lightened. “Ha!” Mrs. Cusack said triumphantly, and held a battery-powered lantern over Lucy’s shoulder. The encroaching darkness was replaced by a very dark basement, the weak light casting long shadows of the furniture.

“Thanks,” Lucy managed weakly, taking it in her free hand.

Behind her, Mrs. Cusack snapped another flashlight on. “Just had to find the fresh batteries. I knew I restocked them at the beginning of the season.”

Garcia let go of Lucy’s hand with his right one. Instead of pulling away, she turned her hand over and wrapped her fingers around his.

She heard his breathing stutter a little, and his expression turned soft and— wondering, almost. His hand tightened on hers like it held something precious.

Her heart still beat faster than usual, but her breathing was back to normal. She squeezed his hand gratefully. The sound of the wind howling seemed to be dying down, replaced by steady rain, and she didn’t hear the house creaking as much.

Mrs. Cusack seemed to be thinking the same: “I think it’s passed,” she said. “I’ll go see if—”
“I’ll go.” Lucy bolted to her feet and up the stairs, nearly colliding with the door at the top in her haste to get out.

The house was standing, and that was about all she cared about. She stumbled out onto the porch, did a perfunctory check for nearby funnel clouds, and then just stood there, breathing deep. In. Out. She was safe.

She settled down in one of the chairs to watch the storm. A few minutes later, the door opened; it was Garcia, offering her a glass of water. She took it gratefully. Her sweaty panic had made her thirsty.

She thought about apologizing for earlier. She decided not to. “Thank you,” she said instead.

“Of course.”

They headed inside when the wind shifted, blowing the rain in on them. The power came back on right as they reached the top of the stairs. Garcia let Lucy have the bathroom first, so that by the time he came out, she was safely arranged on one side of the bed, snuggled up to several pillows between her and the middle. Still, when the bed rocked and dipped from his substantial weight on the other side…

Geez. She was a grown woman, not a horny teenager. Just the awareness of a man’s body a few feet from hers shouldn’t be enough to make her melt down.

She closed her eyes, and let the day catch up with her. Even this, um, energy, from having Garcia so… close, couldn’t compete with the aftermath of that horrifying claustrophobic attack in the basement. Though it was a near thing.

“I love the rain on the roof,” she whispered, knowing from his breathing that he wasn’t asleep yet. She took a deep breath, and sank deeper into the mattress, letting the rain wash the tension out of her…

#

She woke to bright sunlight and a feeling of ease. She’d slept well.

Remembering that she was sharing a bed with Garcia, she got out of bed as quietly as she could, though she didn’t expect him to sleep through it. She tugged on her robe, started the coffee— there was one of those pod machines near the microwave— and, sure enough, he rolled over and his eyes opened to slits.

Had he slept this lightly before Rittenhouse had come in the night and murdered everyone he loved?

He apparently didn’t intend to get up yet, though, so she put a cup of coffee on the nightstand on his side, as quietly as she could. Not so quietly he couldn’t tell she was there; that corner of his mouth deepened for a moment. Then she retreated to the sitting area with her own coffee, the— delightfully fresh and varied— salad she’d brought home for breakfast, and the road atlas.

She tried to resist the temptation to sneak looks at him every so often. He was waking up. It would be embarrassing if he caught her. But sprawled across the bed as he was, clearly relaxed and at ease… it was hard not to look.

Route. She was focusing on their route. Which did not lead to her crawling back into bed.
He got up about ten minutes later, and came over to the other chair, all sleep-rumpled hair and heavy eyelids and soft, sleepy smile and tight shirt stretched over his—

She dragged her gaze ostentatiously back to the atlas.

“Finding anything?” he asked, his voice low and rough.

She smiled, and turned the atlas around so he could see it. “I know it’s not the most topographically exciting of routes,” she began, tracing a line with her finger. “But I really wanted to do this when I was a kid…”

He looked at it thoughtfully. “Pretty sure the emigrants who crossed it by wagon wouldn’t call it unexciting.”

“I know the sensible thing to do would be to cross the Front Range and cut across Utah to San Francisco,” she admitted. “This way, we’ll have to head south again once we cross the Rockies. But I don’t know when I’ll get another chance to follow the Oregon Trail.”

He turned the atlas back around. “Fine with me.”

“Really?”

He gave her a blank look. “Yes.”

A short discussion of whether either of them really felt like moving on to Kansas that day— no—led them to book another night in the room. Having chosen their route for most of the rest of the trip, Lucy asked Garcia to choose something for them to do today, and went off to shower.

She didn’t actually ask him what he’d picked, just let him drive. They headed northeast of the city on—

“Is this route 66?” she asked, when they passed a vaguely familiar giant blue whale statue. She glanced at the map.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Nice.”

It wasn’t actually a particularly exciting drive right here, rather flat and lined with billboards, but it was full of cultural history, and she appreciated that.

“Are we just joy-riding?” she asked after a few minutes.

“Uh, no, not unless you want to.”

She shook her head. “Whatever you want is fine with me.” She paused. “Unless it’s—”

“They don’t have Elvis impersonators in Tulsa, Lucy.” His cheeks dimpled.

“That would be more reassuring if it didn’t imply that you’d checked.”

His smirk deepened. God, his dimples, she just—

“Everything all right?” he asked, not looking away from the road.

Her face flushed. *Yep, everything’s fine, I’m just staring at you because you’re really, really*

They stopped at a diner in Claremont for breakfast, because he hadn’t eaten yet. Then they walked a few blocks to a Route 66 sign she’d noticed on the way in.

“Want me to take a picture?” he asked.

She kind of half-shrugged. “I was thinking maybe… you could be in this one. If you… wanted to be.”

She glanced sideways. His expression was uninterpretable. “All right,” he said finally.

She took a selfie of the two of them in front of the sign, Garcia standing rather awkwardly at her shoulder. Then he took her phone and took a picture of just her. She sent that one to the team, just because… it was easier. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of traveling with him. Far from it. It was just… She didn’t want to spend the energy to deal with the questions.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Here, actually,” he said. “There’s the, ah, Will Rogers Museum, and one of the world’s largest collections of historical guns.”

“Which— did you want to do both? We have time before the game. If you wanted to go to that.”

Mrs. Cusack had offered them a pair of tickets to a baseball game that night, that her daughter had gotten for a date night with her husband, who now had the stomach flu. Lucy wasn’t a baseball fan, but, they were on an all-American road trip, they should take the chance to see a game, right?

And then maybe afterwards they could go for some apple pie while they were at it.

So they started at the Will Rogers Museum. Lucy wasn’t sure what to expect, but she was amused by how clearly Garcia enjoyed all the evidence of Rogers’s skill as a horseman. He seemed particularly enthralled by the video of Rogers’s roping skills. Once a cowboy, always a cowboy.

“Wait,” she said. “How did I not know he was Cherokee?”

Garcia glanced over at the exhibit. “Most people don’t. He was, uh, quite open about it, though. Identified as Cherokee all his life.”

“And he was at the 1893 Columbian Exposition? Too bad you didn’t get to see him.”

Garcia didn’t say anything.

“… oh my God. When?”

“I, uh, had to run out for a few things, and I happened to pass by…”

“Of course,” Lucy sighed.

“I wasn’t in, ah, much of a mood to appreciate it at the time, though.”

After they’d seen several exhibits, the cold air conditioning started to get to her. Neither of them had brought jackets, so they explored the spacious grounds for a little while, soaking up the determined heat of the early Oklahoma summer. They barely saw anyone else out there, and it was pleasant just to wander silently with Garcia beside her.
Then they moved on to the gun museum. She’d prepared herself for a boring hour or so, tolerated cheerfully for Garcia’s sake just as he’d been doing for her the whole trip, but…

“Wow,” she breathed, as they stepped into the first room. She had to appreciate the weight of the history here. Once, the sheer number of devices intended for maiming and killing assembled here would have made her uneasy, but… but after all she’d seen, it barely even registered.

Could she go back to being as soft as that early Lucy? Did she want to?

They wandered in separate directions for a little while, because she particularly wanted to see the Native American artifacts. She finally found him planted in front of a glass case in a back corner. She joined him, and read what he was looking at:

**ROCKET LAUNCHER USED TO BRING DOWN CHARLES LINDBERGH**

… oh.

“It, ah, could be worse.” He licked his top lip. “It could’ve been, uh, the gun that killed Lincoln.”

“Considering that was a modern gun? Yeah, that would be a lot worse.”

Or the gun that was used to kill Lieutenant Colonel Travis. Or the one used by the unknown intruder who shot his way out of the White House in 1972. Or…

“I’ve come across part of what the historical literature says about us,” she added after a minute. “But I… I never had the time to sit down and check systematically. Read the analyses.”

And that would be a good way to see what had changed, too. She’d need to know that if she ever wanted to work as a historian again. Even her own work—she’d come back from 1865 to find that her book was now partially about John Wilkes Booth, and partially about the mysterious tall, dark assassin who’d murdered President Lincoln and then disappeared without a trace.

He continued to stare at the case. After another minute, she gently put her hand on his arm. She wasn’t trying to get him to move along, just wanted him to know that, wherever his mind was right now, he wasn’t alone.

He took a deep breath in and out. “Shall we?” he said, gesturing to the next room.

They stopped for lunch and made it back in time for the game. Lucy looked at the map as they headed into the city, realized the neighborhood name looked familiar, and then realized why it looked familiar.

“Greenwood used to be the most prosperous Black community in the country,” she murmured. “There were so many Black-owned businesses here, and affluent Black residents, that it was called Black Wall Street.”

“So, uh, what happened?” he asked.

She sighed. “Oh God.”

“It happened in 1921. It started—because of course it did—with a nineteen-year-old Black man falsely accused of sexually assaulting a seventeen-year-old white woman in an elevator. This man, Dick Rowland, was arrested. Some newspapers openly called for him to be lynched, and… a white mob gathered at the courthouse to do it.”
“The sheriff tried to keep Rowland safe, but he was vastly outnumbered,” Lucy continued. “Um… so a group of armed Black men, many of them World War One veterans, went to the courthouse to help protect him.”

“So, of course, the white mob considered this a threat. Um… someone told one Black man to disarm, and a shot went off, and immediately, the crowd returned fire. Twelve people were shot dead in less than a minute, and then the fighting moved towards Greenwood.”

She shook her head. “Gun battles raged through the night. Very early the next morning, the white mob began setting fires. Then around dawn, they stormed Greenwood. They… they systematically looted, they shot people indiscriminately, they set more fires. The district was even firebombed from private airplanes dropping balls of burning turpentine. And the authorities—some of them helped. I mean, it was local guardsmen who used a machine gun to destroy the Mount Zion church.”

They pulled into a paid parking lot near the stadium, and discovered it was a zoo. “The entire commercial district was wiped out,” she explained, as he searched for a spot. “Thirty-five city blocks leveled. When it was over, fifteen hundred homes had been burned or looted or both. Ten thousand people were homeless.” She shook her head again. “The official death toll was thirty-eight, but it could have been ten times that number. They’re still trying to find the graves. The mass graves.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised I never heard of this,” he said after a minute, as he headed for the exit. “I knew of it, but I didn’t know how bad it was.”

“Most people don’t. It was hushed up for a long time. And even when we started talking about it, I mean… ‘race riot’ doesn’t even begin to cover it. Some sources say there were five thousand white men with guns in the streets that night.”

“… out of how many in the city at the time?”

“Seventy or eighty thousand.”

Garcia swore softly.

“One witness described Black Tulsans as ‘hunted game,’” Lucy added. “They were… they chased into crowded movie theaters and killed in full view of everyone. They were shot trying to escape their burning houses. They were shot with their hands up to show they were unarmed.”

“The mob threatened to kill the firemen when they tried to put the fires out. There was one crew—in the middle of the fighting, they managed to save the hospital when it was set on fire two different times. But the mob just set it on fire again.”

“The sheer magnitude of the animal rage, it just…” She trailed off, at a loss for words.

“What about Rowland?” Garcia asked after a minute.

“He survived. When the mob tried to storm the courthouse, the sheriff and his officers pushed them back. Later, the case was dismissed; even at the time, the police knew it wasn’t a real allegation.”

“Of course,” she added after another moment, “while he went free, so did everyone else. No one was ever convicted for the killings or the fires.”

“… and now it’s used as a baseball stadium?” Garcia asked after a minute, in disbelief, as he finally found them a spot on the street.
“Yep. Well. Greenwood rebuilt, actually.” In fact, they’d parked not far from the rebuilt Mount Zion Baptist Church. “Which was no small thing considering white civic leaders tried to stop it. But, among other things, running the interstate through the middle didn’t help.”

“Is anybody talking about it now?” he asked, as they got out and headed for the stadium.

“Um. Well… More than they were.”

“Ah.” He gave her a sidelong look, but didn’t say anything else.

Which she appreciated. This was Tulsa’s fight, not hers. They didn’t need a California stranger barging in and telling them how to remember their own history. But it reminded her that there were plenty of other fights, plenty of critical and untold stories, out there. Closer to home. Wherever home was.

The baseball game was sparsely attended and relaxingly nondescript. Probably the most memorable part was the short white woman in a team jersey sitting a few rows ahead of them yelling, “Catch it! Catch it! CATCH! IT!” whenever any opportunity presented itself. They left five innings in, when the home team seemed hopelessly behind, because Lucy wanted to stop across the street at the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park, which memorialized not only the 1921 massacre, but also the Trail of Tears. Then they stopped for dinner, and went back to the house.

She woke when she smelled coffee, and opened her eyes to find a cup on her nightstand.

“Have I ever thanked you for making me so much coffee?” she murmured groggily, fumbling her way to sitting.

Garcia looked up from the armchair where he was reading in the sun, long legs stretched out in front of him, and gave her a soft little smile. “Yes.”

She wasn’t sure she believed him, but she couldn’t remember right now.

She joined him in the little kitchenette nook, curling up in the other armchair with her legs tucked up beside her. The sun soaked into her skin, and as she slowly sipped her coffee and tried not to slurp, she just didn’t want to move. Or be anywhere else, for that matter.

Contentment. Was that what this was? She thought about the word, and let it sink into her bones. She had not expected to find it—if at all—in a place like this, and not that long ago, she never would have expected to find it in the company of this man. But she would cherish it all the same.

On the recommendation of their host, when they left, they detoured to the Standing Bear Museum in Ponca City. “He was one of the Ponca chiefs,” Lucy explained, as they crossed the long bridge across the Arkansas River. “The US government forced them to relocate from northern Nebraska to Oklahoma, and then didn’t give them the supplies to see them through the winter until they could plot their own crops.”

“Of course,” Garcia muttered.

“A third of the tribe died, including his son, whom Standing Bear had promised to bury in their homeland, near the Niobrara. But when they arrived there, they were arrested for leaving the reservation in Oklahoma.”

“So, Standing Bear sued the US government for unlawfully detaining them. And the resulting court
decision was the first time a Native American was recognized in a court of law as, you know... a person.” It was one of those stories that was inspirational, but also a little horrifying.

“I—“ He looked at her, and then didn’t say anything else.

“What?”

Garcia hesitated. “Sometimes I wondered, why you fought so hard to protect history as it was.”

Once, she would have snapped at him. Now she just took a moment to think. “I’m not sure that I still would,” she admitted finally.

Now, the people they hadn’t been able to help haunted her just as much as the knowledge of what the timeline had once been like.

“Remember the Ferris wheel at the Columbian Exposition?” she added after a minute.

“I’m not likely to forget it,” he said drily.

“Apparently Chief Standing Bear rode it, in full ceremonial headdress.”

The museum was fairly small, but she enjoyed it. “‘The same God made us both,’” she murmured, reading part of Standing Bear’s famous speech that had swayed the judge. She wandered the displays of the six tribes of the area: Kaw, Osage, Otoe-Missouria, Pawnee, Ponca, and Tonkawa. She’d heard of all six, but she wasn’t nearly as familiar with them as she’d like to be. When she got home, she would start to fix that. And the next time she created, or refreshed, a syllabus…

She poked at that thought experimentally. Yes. It felt right. She did want to teach. She wanted to share all the stories that had been ignored for too long. Not somewhere status- and legacy-hungry like Stanford, but…

But somewhere. She’d find somewhere.

Garcia was waiting patiently for her on a bench near the car, elbows on his knees. When had she started noticing how well his shoulders filled out his—

Oh my God, what is wrong with me? “I didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” she told him.

His lips quirked, and she couldn’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but she could imagine their expression. “I didn’t mind, Lucy.”

He stood, and she was suddenly very aware of his height, and nearness, and his general… presence. It was a very, very nice presence.

“Shall we?” he asked, gesturing politely for her to precede him.

She snapped out of it. “Right,” she said. “Yes.” She dug out the keys. “Next stop, Kansas.”

Chapter End Notes

First, many, many thanks to RedGold for her patient, extensive, and invaluable advice on Oklahoma attractions; her quip about Flynn seeing Will Rogers at the Columbian
Exposition; and for making a cameo appearance. ;-)  

Mr. Ed’s grave (NB, on private property)  

The Battle of Honey Springs, which is holding a reenactment in November of this year (2019)  

The Gilcrease Museum  

The Tulsa Penguins  

Creek Stickball Park  

Creek Council Oak Tree  

They do in fact have Elvis impersonators in Tulsa. So Lucy can feel better knowing Flynn didn’t actually check. On the other hand, I had to check, and it didn’t make me feel at all better.  

The Blue Whale of Catoosa was built as a surprise anniversary gift from a man to his wife who liked whale figurines.  

The Will Rogers Memorial Museum  

J.M. Davis Arms & Historical Museum  

As always, I’ve tried to describe the Tulsa Race “Riot” as accurately as possible. Among the sources I used were Brophy’s Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921 and Hirsch’s Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy. I strongly encourage you to learn more about it, and here are some links:  

Meet The Last Surviving Witness To The Tulsa Race Riot Of 1921; (Dr. Hooker has passed away since the publication of that article.)  

The Oklahoma Historical Society wrote about it.  

So did the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum, and I encourage you to look at the pictures there, too. Black Tulsans were marched through the streets of their own city at gunpoint after having their community destroyed by a white mob; this is our history as a country, and we have to acknowledge that.  

It’s controversial to claim that Tulsa was “airbombed”; however, multiple
eyewitnesses attested to this throughout their lives.

And it’s very important to know, as Lucy says, that Greenwood’s story doesn’t end with the massacre; **the community rebuilt**.

Finally, **Standing Bear Park**
Garcia maintained that the only thing more boring than the interstate was the interstate in the Great Plains, so they took the back roads across the border.

“There is, uh, one place I’d like to visit,” he said, shortly after they crossed from flat, wide-open northern Oklahoma to flat, wide-open southern Kansas.

“Where?” she prompted, when he didn’t continue.

“The Cosmosphere. It’s in Hutchinson. It’s the largest collection of US spaceflight artifacts outside of the Smithsonian Air and Space.”

“… in Kansas?”

“Yes.” He seemed amused by her surprise.

“Um… yes, definitely. That sounds amazing. Hutchinson…”

“I’ll navigate. We want 77 until 15.”

She could easily see how Kansas had gotten a reputation for being boring. But what she hadn’t expected was just how big the sky felt, like it went on forever. It was completely different from having mountains looming on the horizon. She kind of liked it.

About five miles down the road, she reached for the radio dial, and surfed through the meager offerings.

“I wouldn’t have expected oldies to be so popular out here;” he said.

“Rural areas are significantly older than urban ones. It’s actually beginning to be a serious demographic issue.”

“Ah.”

Halfway to Wichita, a dull ache in her uterus warned her that she’d better get her menstrual cup out of her duffel at their next stop. They skirted Wichita on the beltway, and stopped for lunch at a sandwich shop on the outskirts. She swallowed what she discovered was nearly her last naproxen, and then they headed northwest.

“How did all these artifacts end up in rural Kansas?” she asked, as they came to the edge of Hutchinson. “Houston, I might have expected, or Cocoa…”

“It started as a planetarium at the state fair during the height of the space race.”

“… huh.”

The Cosmosphere, it turned out, had not only one of the biggest collections of American artifacts, but an extensive collection of Soviet artifacts. “… is that Sputnik?” she said in disbelief, as they started in the lower level. She looked closer. “Oh, it’s just— ‘just’— the backup.”
Then they saw collections from the manned spaceflight era. Looking at the *Liberty Bell 7*, recovered from the ocean floor after nearly forty years, and picturing Gus Grissom inside that little space… oh God. It almost made her grateful for the dimensions of the Lifeboat.

Then they came around a corner, and saw the exhibit on the moon landing.

Garcia stood there for several long moments, his face like it had been carved from stone. Lucy waited beside him quietly.

“I thought there was no other way,” he finally whispered, sounding defeated. “Lucy, you have to understand—”

He looked down, and stopped.

“If I have the right to make you try to understand anything,” he said quietly.

“Of course you do.”

He breathed out slowly. “The journal,” he began. “Lucy, it was a document— from the losing side. Everything they did, it wasn’t *enough*.” His voice sank low and became gravelly: “And, trust me, Lucy, they did a lot.”

He licked his top lip. “And so I knew— I knew what Rittenhouse was, and I knew the only chance I had to stop them was to be… ruthless.”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever said it before,” he said finally. “But… Lucy, I’m—” Another slow breath. “You found another way. And I’m… grateful.”

She reached for his hand, callused and warm. He looked up quickly. She rubbed her thumb across his rough knuckles. “I know,” she said softly.

He seemed to hear everything she wasn’t saying; his shoulders dropped a little, and some of the tension eased out of his face, though he didn’t try to take his hand back. “I suppose I should, uh, say that to Rufus and Wyatt at some point,” he said, with all the dead-voiced enthusiasm of a man discussing a root canal.

Then he brightened. “Or, considering they might think I’d been, uh, body-snatched, it’s probably safer not to.”

“Excuse me,” said an annoyed voice to Lucy’s left.

Lucy jumped, and realized… they were standing right in front of the lunar lander, and they had a bit of an audience.

They got out of everyone’s way. “You were in an impossible situation,” she said quietly, when they had a bit more privacy. “My past self *put you* in an impossible situation, because… that time, I guess she *couldn’t* find another way.”

Hesitantly, she reached for his hand again. “We won,” she reminded him. “And now, we… go on.”

He stared down at her, eyes dark and unreadable. His fingers tightened on hers. Slowly, he nodded.

“Excuse me—”

Lucy gave the speaker an irritated look. Garcia gave him a hard stare. Under their united front, the man— the same one as before— looked startled and backed away.
Lucy looked at what they were blocking this time: an exhibit of space underwear. She snorted, and didn’t feel guilty.

She took some pictures of the Star Trek gear for Jiya, and sent them to her with the message, *how’s everything going?* They saw most of the rest of the exhibits, and decided to pass on the planetarium, heading toward the exit. Then Garcia stopped suddenly.

Lucy followed his gaze to the small picture in front of them. It showed a slender, dark-haired white woman and a tall, balding white man inspecting a large piece of equipment. The caption read, *Bruce Gerhold and Maria Tompkins, engineers for Lockman, inspect a prototype.*

She looked at him. “Did you know this was here?”

He shook his head. He looked a little choked up.

“They might be willing to give you a copy of the original if you tell them you’re her son,” she pointed out.

“I can’t prove it, though,” he said, a little absently.

He probably had a point.

He studied the picture for several very long moments, then finally turned away and smiled down at her. “Shall we?”

Lucy’s phone buzzed as Garcia pulled out of the parking lot. It was a reply from Jiya: *great. The second round interview with Alphabet is Monday, but I also have an interview with CalTech. They’re looking for a scientific programmer. The pay’s way worse, but kinda sounds like more fun and I can work remote.*

When no other messages were forthcoming, Lucy’s eyes narrowed. She replied, *yeah, that’s DEFINITELY the only part of your life I was asking about………*

Jiya responded with a little icon of a woman shrugging. Lucy snorted.

She put her phone away and leaned back in the seat, then swung her feet to the dashboard, thinking about the day so far. Maybe she sometimes fell into the same trap as other West Coasters and assumed the middle of the country was boring, but so far, it was anything but. Standing Bear, the Cosmosphere, Garcia’s own connection there…

“Garcia?” she asked after a few minutes.

He made a quiet noise to show he was listening.

She hesitated. “Did you ever…”

When she didn’t continue, he glanced sideways, eyebrows raised, before looking back at the road.

“After Houston, did you ever get in touch with your brother?”

He didn’t respond immediately. “He doesn’t know me, Lucy,” he said finally. “He knew a different man. Probably… a better man.”

“Well, whoever he knew, he’s probably wondering what happened to him,” she pointed out.

Garcia winced, but didn’t argue.
She swallowed. “Siblings are precious, Garcia,” she added softly. “I think you should hang on to yours.”

He looked at her long enough that she was a little concerned for their safety. Then he nodded once.

Their hotel options would be better in Wichita than anywhere in the country. She found them a pair of rooms on the east side of the city, near the road they’d take for Topeka in the morning. They reached Wichita, and Garcia tackled the interstate with… enthusiasm.

“You know, these ramps have speed limits for a reason,” she said, watching a hapless van fail to get over fast enough and end up on the exit to the road it had just left.

“Don’t worry, Lucy, I’ve driven tanks.”

“On an interstate entrance ramp?”

He made a face of long-suffering, but slowed down.

They stopped at a little restaurant for dinner. Remembering the really great salads she’d had in Tulsa, Lucy ordered one here. That proved to be… unjustified overconfidence.

“Um, excuse me?” she said, as the waitress passed by. “This is… lettuce and croutons.”

“Oh!” The waitress looked down. “Well, that’s not right. Let me take that for you and have the chef dress it.”

“Thank you.”

“I almost wish I’d been taking pictures of all these,” Garcia said, trying not to smile, when the waitress was gone.

She pointed her fork at him warningly. When he just smirked, well, that wasn’t exactly a bad outcome.

“Do you want to see Dodge City?” she asked. “You know, cowboy central?”

He considered. “How far is it?”

“About three hours. West.”

“And you wanted to go to Topeka?”

“We can do both,” she reminded him. “We’re not in a hurry.”

“It’s a long way, though.” He took a bite. “What do you think?” he said finally. “You know more about the historical value of Dodge City than I do.”

“I think it’s probably a bit of a tourist trap,” she said reluctantly.

“Then let’s skip it.” He didn’t sound upset about this. “Let my, uh, childhood dreams remain untarnished.”

Lucy snorted, but didn’t argue.

She swiped at her phone, just looking at the general area— “Hey,” she said after a minute. “We could do this instead, tomorrow.” She pushed the phone across the table.
He looked through what she’d found. His eyebrows went up, and then he started to smile. She smiled in response.

“A living history museum? Haven’t we, uh, seen the equivalent of two or three dozen of those?” he said, perhaps trying to salvage some dignity.

She looked at him. “You do realize I can see your face.”

He laughed. “All right, let’s go.”

“Here you go, miss,” the waitress said, putting Lucy’s plate down in front of her. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“Thanks—”

Lucy looked closer. Her salad was now topped with a huge pile of shredded carrots. On the side was extra little bowl of dressing.

Oh, wait. About half of that pile was cheddar cheese, not carrots.

Garcia was about killing himself trying not to laugh. She put her head in her hands. “I give up,” she sighed.

Back at the hotel, the sight of her nearly empty pill bottle reminded her of her errand. She walked into his room. “Could I have the keys? I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He handed them over. “Everything all right?”

“Yeah, I just need some more painkillers.”

“Want me to go out?”

“I’m fine, but thanks.” She glanced down at the book in his hand. “That’s a good one. It was assigned in my first history survey class and I stayed up until two am reading it. My roommate told me I was an incurable nerd.”

“Nice of her to compliment you so highly.”

Lucy was startled into laughing, and got an answering grin in return.

#

Wandering the dusty streets of Cowtown, Wichita’s famously accurate living history museum, was a little strange. As Garcia had said, they’d spent time in the 1880s, the period it was recreating. It was jarring to see what were now familiar sights of the 19th century, combined with things that were unmistakably from the 21st, like women in short skirts holding smartphones.

It even, if she wanted to admit this… made her a little sad that she’d never see the real thing again.

But all those trips to the past hadn’t been for fun. Lives had always been on the line, including their own. It was very nice to be able to wander without anyone shooting at them. It was nice to have the time to watch the blacksmith work, or to chat with the women working the authentic 19th century sewing machines about their technique, or take in all the details of the printing press and its operation.
After peppering the man running the press with questions, she realized there was a family with kids waiting patiently, so she stepped back. Garcia was no longer by her side. Where had he…?

It wasn’t hard to pick him out of a crowd; she found him up the street, talking with a group of men with horses. No one’s body language suggested anything was wrong, so she stayed where she was. As she watched, one of the men nodded, and Garcia stepped forward, letting the nearest horse smell him. After a moment, he reached up and rubbed the horse’s neck.

“What other kinds of things would the newspaper have used the printing press for?” the mom with the kids asked, drawing Lucy’s attention back. When she looked up the street again, Garcia was now on horseback, trotting away.

He reined in, circled, and came back. Lucy had no idea what was going on, but she wasn’t at all surprised that he’d managed to find a horse to ride. He came around for a second pass, and—

“Cowboy, Mommy! Cowboy! Look!” The toddler with the group at the printing press pointed enthusiastically. Lucy could tell from Garcia’s face that he’d heard. He tipped an imaginary hat at the kid, who squealed, and went down to the end of the block and turned back again. He dismounted, and handed the reins back to the original rider.

“What was that about?” Lucy asked, when he rejoined her, clearly pleased.

“Just a, uh, discussion about riding techniques for that kind of saddle.” The pleased smile still lingered on his face. “Something I had to learn in a hurry, or get my ass worn off.”

*That* would be a pity— *stop that.*

“Cowboy, Mommy!”

“What was that?” Lucy asked, when he rejoined her, clearly pleased.

“Just a, uh, discussion about riding techniques for that kind of saddle.” The pleased smile still lingered on his face. “Something I had to learn in a hurry, or get my ass worn off.”

*That* would be a pity— *stop that.*

“It’s a hard job, but somebody’s got to do it,” he said gravely.

She snorted.

They kept going in the direction in which they’d been wandering. And, speaking of cowboys—

“Good,” Lucy murmured appreciatively, reading the plaque. “I’m glad they have this here. We imagine the cowboy tradition as something unique to the American West— the white American West— but in reality, it goes back to Mexico and Spain.”

He, unsurprisingly, was not surprised. “I’ve, uh, read that white guys might have been a minority among American cowboys. Do you think that’s true?”

“Depends on the decade, depends on the place. In the southwest, or Texas? After the Civil War? Easily.”

They continued on. “Did you know that ‘buckaroo’ is from the Spanish word *vaquero*?” she added.

“I did.”

She smiled up at him, and got an answering smile in return.

They left the dentist’s office, and shots erupted.

Garcia shoved Lucy behind him. They could make it around the corner— she grabbed for Garcia —

They both realized at about the same time that the wooden sidewalk was lined with unalarmed
spectators, and that the man sprawled in the dusty road wasn’t bleeding. Part of the reenactment, then.

They exchanged a long look. Lucy was all for historical accuracy, but… they’d lived this already. She was pretty sure they were good, thanks.

For a moment, they watched the proceedings with a critical eye. “I bet the, ah, saloon’s nearly empty right now,” he said finally. “May I, uh, buy you a sarsaparilla, Dr. Preston?” He very politely offered her his arm.

She tucked her hand through it. “Mr. Flynn, you may.”

So they sat in the saloon and drank their “soda pop,” as the bartender called it, and shared some chips. When the shots had stopped, and all the “dead” men and women had gotten up and brushed themselves off, they headed back out to see the rest of the buildings in the little town, and then walked up to the recreated farm. Which had—

“You fought Rittenhouse, but you’re afraid of goats?”

“I’m not scared of them,” she said. “I’m justifiably cautious after I was viciously attacked in Virginia.”

Garcia snorted, and looked way too amused.

Her feet were beginning to ache by the time they reached the visitor center again. But she cleared her throat. “Garcia?” She pointed to the quartet of cowboy statues, sculpted in mid-charge. “I think you should let me take a picture of you in front of that.”

He looked where she was pointing. “I suppose I can, ah, let you do that.” He was smirking.

He posed in front of the statue, looking—

God, this road trip was like playing whack-a-mole with her hormones.

She took the picture, and—

“How about I do that and you can be in the picture with him?”

She looked up. It was one of Garcia’s cowboy friends from earlier. “Oh,” she said. “Um. Okay.” She went to stand next to Garcia.

He raised her phone. Then he lowered it. “Wait,” he said. He came forward and put his cowboy hat on Garcia’s head. “There.”

He raised her phone— “You know, it’s not actually 1870,” he said a little drily. “You’re allowed to put your arm around your girlfriend in public.”

Garcia made an interesting choking noise. Lucy felt her face flame. He gingerly put his arm around her shoulders, and she wrapped hers around his waist, acutely aware of everywhere they were touching.

“I hope that wasn’t too, uh, awkward,” she said, when she had her phone back and their helpful photographer was out of earshot.

“It’s an understandable, uh, assumption.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I hope you weren’t, um, uncomfortable, I—” He’d flushed a little pink, though maybe that was just the sun.
“Nope,” she said brightly, and headed determinedly for the car before she could say— anything else.

As they headed for Topeka, she thought, would it be so bad if she said, have you ever thought about… or what if… what if that were real?

Mmm, or, maybe she could just go stick her head in the nearest horse trough. It would probably have a better outcome.

Before the disaster in 1888, she’d maybe thought… but what if she were wrong? What if she had mistaken what she thought she’d seen? What if she trespassed, and she messed things up between them?

She was, after all, so good at that.

But… was that really true? Was it the whole truth?

Examine the evidence, dear, said a voice that sounded like Mom.

Bullshit, said a voice that sounded like Amy.

You’re Lucy Preston, and you’re damn good, added a voice that sounded like Wyatt at his best.

She opened her mouth. Then she closed it again.

It took her another mile to get up the courage to try again, just past the sign for the town of Cassoday. “Garcia?” she said quietly.

“Mmm.”

She took a deep breath. Swallowed.

“What that guy—”

Something beeped in the back seat.

She looked at Garcia. Then she looked at the Mothership detector. It beeped again, and something was flashing on the screen.

Adrenaline rushed through her. No. God, no, please.

I actually believed it was over.

Where? She didn’t see—

Garcia was searching, too. He handed her his gun as she grabbed her phone.

Agent Christopher picked up on the second ring. “Lucy?”

“The Mothership detector is going off.” She put the phone on speaker. “Someone’s stolen it.”

Another beep.

A long silence. “The Mothership is under lockdown. I have a twenty-four hour video feed. It’s definitely still here.”

“Someone could have tampered with the video,” Garcia said grimly.
“Do you see the Mothership?”

“No, but the damn thing in the back seat is going off!”

Pause. “I have Jiya looped in on speaker,” Agent Christopher said after a minute.

It was a relief to hear Jiya’s voice: “Lucy? Flynn?”

Lucy explained briefly while Garcia kept driving, looking around for the Mothership. Jiya asked her to read off something from the detector screen, so she unbuckled and twisted awkwardly to see into the back seat, trying not to elbow Garcia as he drove.

“I’ve dispatched a team to check on the Mothership,” Agent Christopher told them after Lucy had given Jiya the string of numbers and letters she asked for. “For now, just keep driving.”

“… I think maybe it’s stopped,” Lucy said after a few minutes. Which would suggest that the Mothership, if it really were there, was somewhere behind them. She half-expected to hear gunfire against the windows…

The trees at the side of the road swayed. She jumped before she saw the gust of wind move steadily, not like the outflow of a returning time machine.

She forced her panic down. Now wasn’t the time for this deep sense of betrayal, either. I thought it was over. I really thought it was over.

… how stupid could I be?

Rufus arrived wherever Jiya was, and joined the call, and Connor joined from the road. They kept telling Garcia where to turn. “What is this doing?” Lucy finally burst out, frustrated. “Is the Mothership here or not?”

“The signal is consistent with the Mothership,” Jiya said. “But that doesn’t make any sense. We’re trying to figure out what else it could be.”

“If the signal is consistent with the Mothership, isn’t the logical explanation the Mothership?” Garcia said.

“Have you seen it?” Jiya demanded.

“No.”

“We have driven ten miles,” Lucy pointed out. “If it were around here somewhere, wouldn’t the signal have, you know, stopped?”

Right?

Please?

“No, it’s meant to pick up the signature from at least fifty miles,” Rufus said.

She closed her eyes for a second. Then she opened them again, to keep watch for the Mothership. Any second, Rittenhouse might appear, guns blazing—

Another ten minutes. The beeps began to slow down. “I mean, this thing is a detector, right?” Lucy said. “Shouldn’t you be able to tell us where the Mothership supposedly is? Then we could…”
“Run like hell,” Rufus supplied.

“The signal’s moving around. We can’t get a lock on it,” Jiya said.

Garcia swore quietly under his breath.

Another ten miles. “The Mothership is safe. My team just reported in,” Agent Christopher said.

“I’m on my way to check for any signs of tampering,” Connor added.

“Mason, what’s your ETA?” Agent Christopher asked.

“Well, it depends on this delightful San Francisco traffic.”

Lucy realized that Rufus and Jiya were having them spiral out from where they’d heard the first beep, as much as the back roads of Kansas would allow. The beeps kept slowing down, and each time she thought, *maybe that was the last one*, and then each time— oh, God.

They turned again, leaving pavement for gravel. They were *way* out in the middle of nowhere, now. If Rittenhouse found them… what a perfect place to make sure there were no witnesses.

She readjusted her grip on Garcia’s gun. She’d really been hoping not to have to hold one of these ever again.

The time passing by the clock seemed to lose all meaning; everything narrowed to the interval between beeps. Sometimes Lucy couldn’t believe how fast time was moving, as they bounced down dusty back roads; sometimes the minutes ticked by impossibly slowly.

Connor reached the site where the Mothership was kept— the two time machines were kept separately, so anyone stealing one would not have the chance to destroy the other at the same time. “There’s no indication that anyone’s—” He sneezed. “Excuse me. No one’s taken a trip since Rufus jumped this from North Carolina. It’s even a little dusty.”

“So what if… they haven’t taken it yet?” Lucy asked, hating herself for saying it. “What if this is the Mothership from the future?”

And if someone stole the Mothership to come back to kill her, or Garcia, or both, then that suggested that they had done something— that they were going to do something— that they still had a part to play. And Rittenhouse wanted to make sure they didn’t play it.

It meant it wasn’t over.

She and Garcia exchanged agonized looks. He squeezed her hand, his expression fierce.

“How would they know where to find you?” Agent Christopher asked.

“You know where to find us,” Garcia pointed out. “Maybe they found your records.”

“Or maybe…” Lucy trailed off.

“Maybe what?” Jiya said.

“I’ve, um… been keeping some notes about our trip.” Just yesterday she’d picked up scissors and some paper clips from the drugstore, along with the painkillers, and she’d spent part of the morning, before they left, sorting ticket stubs and programs and other mementoes she’d saved. Her plan was— had been— to transfer everything to archival-quality materials once she got back to San
But right now, leaving any more reminders of her presence felt like the last thing she wanted to do. “Maybe… someone found them. Will find them.”

Oh, God.

“This machine tracks the Mothership. Is there any way for them to reverse engineer that and track us?” Garcia asked.

“Not right now,” Rufus said.

Not right now. Would they always be haunted not only by the past but also by the future?

The day wore on. Lucy knew she should have been hungry by now, but the adrenaline and the worry had taken away her hunger. Slowly, though, she became aware of another need: “Okay, we’re detouring to the nearest gas station,” she said finally.

“How low is the tank?” Agent Christopher said.

“We don’t need gas. I need the bathroom.”

“I… hate to say this, but you’d be safer by the side of the road.”

“Maybe you could trust Lucy to manage her own bodily issues?” Garcia sounded disbelieving.

Lucy shot him an appreciative look. “Look, if we don’t stop soon, Homeland Security is going to have blood on their nice clean seats.”

“… ah.”

“Wait, you’re bleeding?” Rufus said. “Are you all right? … uh, why are you both looking at me like that?”

The nearest gas station was a ramshackle building in a tiny, dusty town. Garcia took his gun back and stood guard outside while Lucy used the bathroom. It was damp and dusty, full of spiders and smelling of urine, but it had toilet paper and soap and that was all she cared about.

Once they’d both used the bathroom, he filled the tank as Lucy held the phone, still on speaker. She leaned against a vacant pump and tried to look in every direction at once. Brakes squealed—

She jumped—

But it was just a beat-up old pickup truck, two tanned boys in the cab, racing away from the stop sign and laughing.

They took the chance to buy what snacks the tiny convenience store offered. Lucy’s hands shook, making the change jingle, as she paid. She kept expecting gunshots outside.

“Anything?” she asked, when they were back on the road.

“We have some leads,” Rufus said. “It might be airplanes.”

“Airplanes?”

“Yeah, the detector interferes with navigation systems.”
She’d forgotten about that, but it was the whole reason for the trip. “I didn’t know it worked the other way around.” Could that… was the explanation that simple?

“Neither did we.”

“And we can’t… at least head for Topeka or something while you’re figuring it out?” she said a while later.

“No,” Jiya said. “Sorry. I know this really, really sucks. Hang in there, guys.”

Lucy heard the concern in Jiya’s voice. It couldn’t be any easier to know her teammates were in danger so far away than it was to actually be here.

“There’s just one problem with that, Rufus.” Garcia’s voice was sharp. “We’re in the middle of Nowhere, Kansas, and we haven’t seen any planes.”

He was right. Lucy’s heart sank again.

“Yeah, well, we’re… working on it, okay?”

“Sure,” Garcia said. “Great. Let us know when you have something.”

Agent Christopher disappeared from the line for a while. Lucy had taken over driving by the time she returned, but they were still wandering aimlessly, or so it seemed.

“All right,” Agent Christopher said. “I have news. Rufus is right: it may be airplanes.”

“We haven’t seen any airplanes,” Garcia snapped.

“Flynn, if you were testing a super-secret government prototype, where would you do it?”

“… right,” he said, in a less strained voice. “In a lightly populated area near a major military base.”

“So, that’s it?” Lucy tried not to let herself sag with relief, because after the last three hours, she didn’t want to get her hopes up.

“This is the US government we’re talking about, we don’t do things the easy way,” Agent Christopher said drily. “This prototype is so secret that the most anyone would do was confirm its existence. They won’t give me any details on its flight pattern or its energy signature. And, of course, they’re not cleared to know about the Mothership or its detector.”

“Our tax dollars at work,” Garcia muttered.

“Have you… actually paid taxes, in the last four years?” Rufus asked. “Is there sales tax on C4 on the black market?”

“Can’t you do something?” Lucy said. “I mean, isn’t there someone who can make them tell you?”

“There is, if you two want to be sitting there for two days while I pull rank and call in favors.”

“So what’s plan B?” Garcia demanded.

“We send them a highly sanitized version of our readings, and they confirm whether or not it matches the flight path.”

So they pulled off to the side of the road and waited while Rufus and Jiya worked on the “highly
sanitized” part.

And waited. And waited.

“I can’t stand this,” Lucy whispered, after muting the phone. “I know no one’s even shooting at us, but…”

“You don’t have to constantly minimize your feelings, Lucy.” His voice was harsh. “No matter what the hell your mother taught you.”

She looked up at him in surprise—and protest. “I’m a grown woman, Fl—Garcia. I can look after my own feelings.”

He exhaled. The deep lines on his face eased. “I know,” he said quietly. “I… know.” He took a breath. “We’ve, ah…we’ve both been through so much that ‘it could be worse’ has lost all descriptive power.”

She snorted, and had to give him that one.

“I just think ‘at least I’m not still held captive by megalomaniacs’ is a bad standard to apply to the rest of your life, Lucy,” he added.

“You’re saying I should complain more?” she said drily.

“If that’s how you feel.”

“Fine. We’re stuck out in the middle of nowhere, we may or may not be being hunted by ruthless time traveling psychopaths, this is a terrible time to have my damn period, and I just want to go home.” Her voice nearly broke. “When we first started this trip I didn’t know how to go back to normal life, but now that things are more normal and it looks like I might lose that, I don’t want to!”

“… huh. I actually do feel a little better,” she added after a minute.

“Glad to help,” he said, a little drily himself.

She looked sideways at him. “You’re allowed to complain too,” she pointed out.

He considered. “I am, uh, hungry,” he admitted. “I’d like to get the all clear and get the hell out of here. I’d like to know that everything we did isn’t for nothing, that those Rittenbastards don’t just pop up in the future again.” He glanced sideways a little shyly. “On the other hand, the, ah, the company is excellent, so…” He trailed off awkwardly.

She snorted again. “There is that,” she admitted. And the silence that followed was just a little happier, just a little less tense, then before.

“Okay, the good news is we got something,” Jiya said, after Lucy’s second bathroom detour.

“And the bad news?” Lucy and Garcia chorused.

“Uh…you have to wait outside the car.”


“To speed things up we wrote a program that automatically pulls any anomaly, but that would include fluctuations in your own electromagnetic fields. The detector compensates for these, but…
for us to use the processed data would take another few hours.”

“At least,” Rufus added.

Whatever. Lucy just wanted this to be over.

They had to wait for this mysterious prototype to make another pass, and Agent Christopher’s contact refused to tell them when it might be happening. Lucy and Garcia found a shade tree a few yards down the deserted, narrow road, and sat side by side under it, the phone resting on his leg. They were still on the call with Jiya, Rufus, and Agent Christopher, but Garcia muted their own microphone. Every ten minutes, he would unmute to let the others know they were still fine.

Both of them had grabbed a book from the car. Neither of them felt like reading. Instead, they simply stared at the sky through the leaves. Garcia had offered to keep watch if she wanted to sleep, but she definitely couldn’t.

“We’re sending the first hour of data,” Rufus said. He sounded as tired as they felt.

The first hour. The first hour. “Oh God,” Lucy muttered.

What really got to her was knowing this was the good outcome: it could’ve actually been Rittenhouse.

Garcia reached out and gently took her hand. She squeezed his fingers. She didn’t want to be here… but if she did, there was no one she wanted with her more than him.

“Back there,” he said hesitantly, after their latest ten minute check-in.

“Mmm?”

“Were you, ah…” He touched his tongue to his top lip. “Saying something? About, ah, the museum?”

It took her a moment to remember what he was talking about. Oh. Oh. But this was the last moment to say something like, have you ever thought about us being a real couple? Because, God, what if he said no? What if he looked horrified?

“It… it doesn’t matter,” she said.

The sun went down, and the air began to cool quickly. She tried not to shiver. After a while, she gave up and unmuted their microphone. “Can I get something out of the back seat?” she asked. Her blanket was back there.

“No, sorry.” Jiya sounded apologetic and exhausted.

“What about the trunk?” Garcia asked.

“The trunk… should be fine, if you’re quick and you don’t, you know, crawl in there.”

Garcia returned a moment later with one of his bags of books. “I, uh, was saving this for your birthday,” he said, “but…”

Lucy’s first reaction was warm pleasure at the affirmation that he intended to stick around in her life. Then she looked at the stack of cloth he’d just handed her. It looked… familiar, but it wasn’t
her presidents’ blanket.

“Is this…” She saw Ida B. Wells, Lucretia Mott, Sally Ride, Dolores Huerta, Emily Dickinson, Marsha P. Johnson, Sojourner Truth… It would take her better light than this a dark road to identify all these women. “Oh my God, this is amazing. Thank you!” She hugged him tightly.

He leaned his head against her hair, and wrapped his arms around her very gently, like… like she was precious. The hug stretched out a bit longer than she’d expected, but she didn’t mind at all, and not only because he was so warm.

“Lucy,” he began hesitantly. “Do…”

She pulled back and looked at him. In the dim light, he looked so serious.

“What is it? Is everything okay?”

“Ah…” He licked his lip, and ducked his head. “Yes. Never mind.”

She wrapped herself in her new blanket, and waited a little more happily.

“Guys?” It was Jiya.

Lucy straightened up. Garcia unmuted them. “Yes,” he said.

“We sent the Army people three sets of anomalies. They said all three matched 100%.”

Lucy sagged in relief. “So that’s it? There’s no future Mothership?”

“That’s it.”

Oh, thank God.

“Thank you,” she told Rufus and Jiya. “Go… get, um, dinner, or something. Something that’s not this.”

“I have it on good authority that I have a hot date.” Jiya’s amusement traveled across the miles, and then Lucy heard the sound of a kiss.

“And I have an appointment with a bathtub, a glass of wine, and an excellent dinner with my wife,” Agent Christopher said rather drily. “The two of you be careful. If the detector goes off again and you’re more than a hundred miles away—”

“You’ll hear from us,” Garcia said.

They climbed back in the car, worn out and silent. There was no way they were making Topeka tonight. They found the nearest hotel, drove through a burgers and fries place on the way there, and just collapsed into bed.

#

Awareness began to trickle into his tired brain. He felt so warm and contented.

Then a little more awareness leaked in, and he began to question every decision that had led to waking up with Lucy in his arms.

Not that he objected, mind you, but… how the hell …?
It started to come back to him. “This mattress smells like cat pee,” she’d muttered, exhausted. “Can I share with you?”

“Well.” He’d shifted over to the side of the double bed, thinking that after Oklahoma it didn’t matter at all, and they’d both fallen asleep.

But this bed was a lot smaller than the one in Tulsa. And so sometime in the night, she’d apparently ended up lying back against him, her head resting on his arm, her arm wrapped around his other arm, which was kind of across her side and her waist.

It was delightful and maddening, in a way that had nothing to do with his dick— though he was also grateful that she wasn’t right back against his hips, and that he’d thought to take care of himself in the privacy of the shower, yesterday morning. And, ooooh, best not to dwell on either of those thoughts, situated like this.

But the scent of her hair was in his nose, and she slept so peacefully, and…

When exactly had he fallen so hard for her?

Had it been watching her belt out Carole King on a two-lane highway? Seeing her determined stoicism as they searched for that boy? The defiance in her expression when she’d looked up at him, huddled on the bathroom floor in her quiet three am misery? Or even farther back? Watching her delight as Robert Johnson recorded? Seeing her fight for those women in Salem? Having her tell him off and spare no words on one of their collisions in the past?

*I was in the middle before I knew that I’d begun*, he thought drowsily.

He’d always had a thing for her, of course, and after they’d joined forces… Well. But after Chinatown, she’d been grieving, and— as per usual Lucy— also shoving her own feelings aside to help Jiya. He hadn’t wanted to push. And if what she wanted was Wyatt, undeserving as he was, or someone else who’d never— threatened her— then Garcia would just quietly starve from a distance.

And then she’d invited him on this road trip, and…

It seemed like she had to know how he felt about her. He felt like he’d been obvious, maybe laughably so. But that was her effect on him: she stripped him of his defenses, threw him off balance, made him want to bare his heart.

But…

But he didn’t know how she felt. She liked him, certainly, but… She was so— she was so Lucy, and all their trips to the past had shown how charismatic she was, how well she could connect with people. Just because she chose to open up to him, didn’t necessarily make this much more than that.

But there were times when he thought he wasn’t amiss to wonder if she really cared for him. If he wasn’t just fooling himself.

He wrenched his brain off of that track and focused on how he was going to extricate both of them from this with a minimum of embarrassment to her. Archaeological analysis of their limbs suggested she’d reached out first, and, well— they were squarely on his side of the bed, which showed fairly clearly what had happened. But that didn’t mean she wanted to wake up like this.

He should’ve known from the way she cocooned herself in pillows that she’d seek the warmth of
She stirred. “Garcia?” she murmured.

That half-awake pleased sound went straight to his heart. Her arm tightened around his. He nearly died on the spot.

“Yes,” he whispered, not wanting to disturb her. She’d known— she’d remembered— maybe this was about more than a warm body to her, after all.

She sighed contentedly.

Then she gave a little yelp and sat bolt upright, scooting away from him just about as fast as humanly possible. “Oh God oh God oh God —”

Oh, he’d been wrong. That morning she’d woken up in his bed, that hadn’t been a look of abject horror.

This —

This was abject horror.

“It’s all right,” he said hurriedly. “Lucy, it’s okay—”

Did she— she wasn’t wondering, was she— well, he’d wondered, maybe he’d better— “We didn’t — we weren’t, uh, intimate,” he said hurriedly, because we didn’t have sex left room for them to have fooled around, and he didn’t think that prospect would horrify her any less.

“It was just sleep,” he added.

She turned tomato red, muttered something incoherent, and fled to the bathroom, grabbing her duffel along the way.

He sat back. Well.

Well, the way she’d practically shrieked and precipitously exited his bed, answered his questions about her feelings quite thoroughly, didn’t it?

Or… did it? Was he just a foolish, over-optimistic idiot with a laughably inflated sense of his own ability to attract a woman as incredible as Lucy Preston?

Or were they both simply lamentably bad at this?

He had plenty of time to think about it, because Lucy seemed determined to take refuge in the bathroom forever. Finally, the door opened. “I’m sorry,” she blurted. “I’m so sorry, oh my God, I wasn’t— I’m sorry…”

She was far too upset for him to even consider teasing her. “It’s all right, Lucy,” he told her gently. “It’s— it’s fine.”

“I never meant to…”

She sounded so horrified. “I know,” he told her. “I, uh… don’t think any more about it.”

Easier said than done, clearly. It was a very awkward morning, practically silent, as they got ready to go. And as they drove in to Topeka, to the Brown v. Board of Education Historic Site. And as they walked its grounds, touring the former Monroe Elementary school. And as they left.
They stopped late morning for gas, not far from the border. “Lucy,” he said gently, when she came back to the car from the bathroom. He’d had plenty of very quiet time to think, and after the first visceral sting of her reaction, he’d begun to realize that it had to be at least as much mortification as horror.

So, maybe this was a bad idea, but he didn’t know what else to do. And it would be a long trip to San Francisco if she couldn’t even manage eye contact.

“Could I,” he continued, “ah… have a hug?”

She looked startled. Okay, that was it, this really was a terrible idea—

— and stepped forward and put her arms around his torso. Hesitantly, she leaned into him.

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and swallowed. He wanted her to feel how he relaxed at the contact, and he didn’t have to fake that. She, thank God, was not stiff or— or shrinking away, or he would have let go immediately. And probably emigrated to, say, Mars.

“It was a long war, Lucy,” he murmured. “I know what that’s— like. You lost so much. And if cuddling up to me in the middle of the night— no, don’t combust—”

She snorted.

“Helps that hurt a little less… you didn’t hurt anything.”

She stepped back, and he got the first eye contact he’d had from her all morning. “Promise?” she asked quietly.

“Promise.”

Her face was quite pink, but she looked a little more relaxed.

“I didn’t mean… Garcia, I really didn’t mean…”

“I know.” It was on the edge of his tongue to say, it would be all right if you did, Lucy. But he couldn’t bear her reaction if he were wrong. Not when she was stuck with him all the way back to California. He wouldn’t selfishly risk her comfort like that.

She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry I gave you the silent treatment this morning,” she said. “I was just— so embarrassed at treating you like a. Uh.” She hesitated. “Stuffed animal.”

Like a what?

Was that really how she—

“It’s all right,” he told her again. He felt like he had to say something to lighten the moment. “They don’t even, uh, make heated body pillows, so I don’t blame you for wanting to indulge—”

“Oh my God.” Back to pink.

He hesitated. “Lucy,” he said quietly. “Do you…”

“Yes?” When he didn’t continue, she looked at him almost as if she were searching his face for something. It reminded him of that long moment in 1888 that Wyatt, damn him, had interrupted.

Searching for further reassurance, no doubt. He wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize the— the
pleasure, the rest, she’d found on this road trip. He couldn’t.

He cleared his throat. “Shall we, ah, continue to Nebraska?”

Chapter End Notes

Lucy and Flynn both use “talk about your feelings!” It’s comically ineffective!

Kansas gets the distinction of having the saddest salad yet because it’s the state where I was told, “We don’t really do vegetables here.”

I don’t know if the Cowtown Museum actually has a plaque about the Spanish origins of the cowboy tradition, and how many cowboys were Hispanic or Black, but they do mention it on their website.

And thanks to prairiepirate for telling me about the Cosmosphere! I’d never heard of it before she mentioned it, and it sounds really cool.
She probably would have been less embarrassed if he’d caught her masturbating.

To have luxuriated in the heat of his body as if he were a damn sauna, relaxing happily against him like… like…

Like they were a couple.

And they weren’t. So it just felt like… trespassing. Like trespassing in the Garden of Eden, because she’d enjoyed it very much, in that half-awake moment or two before consciousness had set in.

Oh God.

She felt like she’d taken advantage of him. Of their friendship. And it almost made it worse that he acted like he didn’t mind…

It dawned on her quite suddenly that he hadn’t minded waking up… like that.

She went hot all over. Could it be that simple? She wasn’t overestimating what she meant to someone, for what felt like the thousandth time?

If she could trust anyone on that subject… surely, it was him.

“Can you check the map? I’m starting to think I missed the turn.”

His voice broke into her contemplation of the Nebraska countryside… and her own feelings. It took her a second to drag her mind back to here and now. Garcia had an uncanny ability to remember directions if she read them to him once, but she was surprised he hadn’t asked her to check before this. “Uh… no, it’s another mile.”

“Thanks.”

“Historical marker!” she said, just a minute later.

Following historical markers was like rolling the dice. This time, it was just a large stone barn. But Homestead National Monument, their first planned Nebraska stop of the day, had much more to see. She stood in the original settler cabin, about the size of her first studio apartment, and imagined living here, no neighbors in sight, just the endless sky and wind, and it felt freeing and frightening at the same time.

No— wait. According to the interpretive sign, a family of twelve had lived here. She updated her mental image, picturing that, and winced. She pictured going through labor ten times—or, probably, more—and her vagina winced.

She didn’t even want to know what Rittenhouse had had planned to destroy birth control. But, now, they never had to find out.

After the settler cabin, the walk across the prairie was beautiful and peaceful—therapeutic, after yesterday’s panic. Then they made one last stop, at the one-room schoolhouse.
She looked around the little schoolroom. “The first time I taught, in undergrad, I felt so young and so unprepared. But these teachers were even younger,” she murmured. “Laura Ingalls was fifteen and still in school herself when she taught in a place like this.”

Garcia took a picture of her. Maybe she would put it on her desk— the next time she had a desk—to put her problems as a teacher into perspective. Not that they weren’t real and important. Just that they weren’t, you know, a life-threatening blizzard.

“Hungry?” he asked as they headed for the car.

“Oh,” she said. “Um. Yes, but… I’m a little sick of middle American diner food.” Which was a problem, considering how much of the country lay between them and the coast.

“I can work with that.”

“I know this is just cornfields,” she said, looking at the map as they backtracked to Beatrice. The Oregon Trail had followed rivers, a necessity out here in the dry west, while modern roads tended to be laid out in a grid. So they’d done some zigzagging across the back roads.

“But it’s… really peaceful,” she finished. She was glad they had so much to traverse. The scenery was similar to yesterday, but today’s calm was the restorative she needed after yesterday’s long, long fright.

And this morning’s emotional turmoil.

They found a grocery store in the center of town. Her phone buzzed as she got out of the car. “It’s… Wyatt,” she said. “Can you— just—”

“I’ll get something.”

“Thanks.” She accepted the call. “Wyatt?”

“Hey. Rufus… told me what happened, I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Yeah, it was a false alarm. Secret Army prototype, apparently.”

Wyatt snorted. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to watch out for you.”

“I was fine, Wyatt. Really. Thanks for calling to check.”

“Well… good.”

“How are you?” she asked.

“Why were you in Kansas?”

“… it’s between Oklahoma and Nebraska?”

“No— I mean—” He hesitated. “On the road two weeks and you’ve only made it to Nebraska?”

“Wyatt, we’ve had this conversation—”

“Are you sure Flynn’s not taking advantage of you?”

“… what?” Lucy’s fury choked out any further words.
“Drawing things out so he gets to spend more time with you? I mean, I want to think better of the guy, but you gotta admit, it’s the kind of twisted thing you wouldn’t notice—”

“Wow. I don’t know what part of that to correct first.” Her voice nearly cracked with rage. “The insult to my friend? Or to my intelligence?”

“Lucy, I didn’t mean—”

“You did, Wyatt. You’ve been meaning it ever since we left North Carolina.”

“I just— worry—”

“You don’t own me, Wyatt!”

Her vehemence finally stunned him into silence.

“I make my own choices, and I do not have to defend them to you. I shouldn’t have to tell you this again. I shouldn’t have had to tell you once.” Her voice did crack this time.

“We are not a couple, and even if we were, that wouldn’t give you the right to tell me what to do.”

“I know—”

“And I know you know.” She knew it was bad fighting to interrupt the other person, let alone change the subject, but she was so angry it was hard to stop. “Because you chose to rebuild your life with Jessica.”

A long, long silence. “Who told you that?” he asked finally.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t you.”

He hadn’t owed her the news, just like she didn’t owe him an explanation of what was happening between her and Garcia. But for him to be calling, acting all protective, suggesting that Garcia was bad for her, while at the same time choosing a life with another woman—

It was frankly hypocritical, and she was out of patience.

“I don’t want to fight, Wyatt,” she added. “I’m tired and we had a scare with Rittenhouse yesterday. So if that’s all you called to say, I’m saying goodbye.”

It was the closest she had ever come to hanging up on him.

She… did she want to cry?

Yes, she decided after a few minutes of feeling stunned. Because she was terrified she was losing him as a friend, and the thought of that was unbearable.

But she also decided that she wasn’t going to. Because she had borne many unbearable things already, and right now—

She’d cried a lot already. Instead, she tilted her chin up.

She heard a quiet footstep behind her. “Are you all right?” Garcia asked softly.

“How much of that did you hear?”
“I waited out of earshot until you hung up.”

She turned around and looked at him, a little surprised. He was holding a paper bag and looking down at her, frowning a little, searching her face.

“I will be,” she said. Decided, again. “Um… Rock Creek?”

“That’s fine with me.”

At the state park formed around a former Pony Express station and toll bridge on the Oregon Trail, they headed for the picnic area, only to discover that most of the tables were liberally daubed with bird poop. The day and the grass were dry, so instead they just sat on the ground.

“What did you get?” she asked, eyeing the bag.

“They, ah, had some nice premade salads, so—”

She sat bolt upright. “No.”

He smirked at her, and handed her a deli sandwich.

She checked her phone. Was Wyatt—

No. She wasn’t going to dwell on it. She hated to fight with him, but things couldn’t go on like this. She hadn’t done anything wrong. It was up to him now.

She put her phone away, and tried not to think about their phone call.

Lulled by the heat, by the peaceful rush of the creek and the tossing of the leaves in the gentle breeze, Lucy ate slowly. She felt the tension from the fight slowly drain out of her shoulders. When the sandwiches were gone, Garcia took out a smaller paper bag, which held cookies.

Lucy finished hers and licked the melted chocolate off her fingers contentedly. It was hard to believe that just yesterday…

“It’s… weird, but until yesterday, I don’t think I realized how far I’d come,” she said quietly.

“You know, mentally, I mean,” she added. “From… from the fighting.”

Garcia was watching her with a gentle little smile.

And yesterday had been awful, but… it had been a false alarm. It was still… it was still over for them. For now. They were still free to sit here, in the shade, watch the creek, and just breathe.

And they did.

… some people did this kind of thing on… dates, didn’t they.

Then it hit her that she couldn’t immediately think of an actual date that she’d prefer more.

The answer was obvious; she could no longer deny how she felt. She should say something. Do something. They would reach San Francisco sooner rather than later, and… and she didn’t want him to think this was just her amusing herself for a few weeks on the road.

But she was enjoying this, with him, so much, and she was so afraid to jeopardize it.
What would it… look like? If they were a couple? She tried to picture that. Waking up with him every morning, talking with him over dinner every night, sharing adventures and struggles and a bed—

A particularly loud shriek made Lucy look up, but it was just a new family claiming one of the picnic benches. The shrieking came from a redheaded toddler bolting with gleeful determination for the creek, her mother in hot pursuit as her harried-looking father unpacked a cooler. Two older kids, covered in freckles, were walking with all the solemnity of an honor guard beside a grey-muzzled, rather frail brown dog.

The mom recaptured the fugitive, carried her back to the picnic table, grabbed a blanket her husband held without looking, shook it out, and gently plonked the toddler down on the blanket on the grass. It was impressive parenting coordination. Well, if you had three kids, you needed it, right?

Garcia was watching, too, with a gentle little smile. One of the older kids pulled a neon frisbee out of a backpack. Just the sight of it seemed to transform the dog, and it barked happily, prancing like it was shedding years. The kid sent the frisbee skimming over the grass, and the dog was off, running stiffly, tail a blur of happy motion. One kid ran after it.

She felt more than heard Garcia’s sigh, in the shifting of his body, and caught the tail end of a wistful, haunted expression on his face. “Should we go?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head.

“It— hurts,” he said, tentatively, after a minute, “and…” He licked his top lip, and sounded bewildered when he spoke again: “and I don’t want it to stop.”

Then his lip curled. “That’s just, uh, normal grief, I know.”

How much of a chance had he ever gotten, to experience normal grief? Between the prospect of saving Lorena and Iris, and the war…

After a minute, she said, “You know, a wise man once told me not to minimize my feelings.”

“A, uh, venerable mentor, clearly,” he said drily.

She recognized his sarcasm for deflection, and didn’t bridle at it. “No. Just an exceptionally good friend.”

The sarcasm slid right off his face. He looked startled. She smiled inwardly. He’d had that coming.

“If I were as harsh with myself in my grief as you’re being right now, wouldn’t you have something to say about it?” she added. “Be gentle with yourself, Garcia.”

She felt a sudden impulse to kiss his cheek, but this moment was about his grief, and she didn’t ever want to intrude on that. But she gently stroked the side of his face.

“Lucy.” He breathed her name like a prayer, and she gave in to the urge to smooth his hair—getting long, now—back from his forehead, as well. He closed his eyes, and there was no mistaking the way he leaned into her hand, the ache clear on his face.

When he opened his eyes again, he took her hand, smoothing the pad of his thumb over her knuckles. “Those kids—“ He nodded to the dog and the kid running together. “Rittenhouse is never gonna touch them. Two hundred and fifty years, those dicks were operating, and we shut
them down.” He exhaled. “It feels good,” he admitted.

Yeah. It did.

And for her… Rittenhouse was her family’s legacy. It haunted her that they’d done so much damage. But to have helped stop them… that helped her sleep a little better at night.

“Ah…” Garcia said, and she followed his gaze to where the sky was growing dark in the west.

As the towering clouds built, they had just enough time to visit the wagon ruts, still visible where the Oregon Trail had crossed the creek. By the time they left the park, the breeze ruffling the nearby cornfields had turned to a steady wind. The rain hit about five minutes down the road, lashing the windshield hard. She just slowed down and drove carefully. They had time. They’d get there.

There was something eerily beautiful about the prairie thunderstorm. The wind whipped the few trees, and lightning seared purple across the inky clouds. She was a little sad when it began to taper off, but the sun breaking through the grey was beautiful, too.

Her phone buzzed. She pulled into the overgrown yard of a deserted building to make sure it wasn’t Agent Christopher.

“… oh,” she said softly.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, I—” She swallowed. She tried again. “Isobel and Amina want me at Esperanza Fata’s christening.”

She pressed her hand to her mouth, and sniffl ed a little, and smiled.

“It was a, uh, good thing you did for them,” he said softly.

“Says the man who came with me,” she pointed out drily.

“You would’ve gone with or without me.”

“Mmm.” He was right, and she didn’t need to deflect his praise.

They passed miles of farmland, and saw maybe one other vehicle a minute. “You know, people say that Nebraska is boring—” she began.

And never stopped to think about why. Interstates tended to follow the easiest terrain, and Nebraska was no exception. Much of I-80 followed the same basic route as the Oregon Trail, in fact, down the Platte River valley.

“— but they never mention how big the sky is,” she said. “It’s weird, but it’s nice, too.”

“Mmm.”

“If you could live anywhere in the world,” she asked after a few minutes. “Where would you choose?”

He thought. “And make a living there?”

“Yeah.”
“I thought…” he began after a minute, and glanced sideways.

“When I… dared to think that we might beat Rittenhouse,” he continued finally, licking his top lip. “And that I might survive. I thought I might, uh, go back to Croatia. Šibenik. But… now?” He shook his head. “What about you?”

When she tried to imagine her future, most of it was still a blank. “I wouldn’t mind leaving California for a while,” she said finally. “Not necessarily for good, but…” But long enough to make some memories elsewhere.

“Amy and I,” she said. “We… used to talk about me getting a job at some small Oregon college, and her moving up there with me.”

She smiled, remembering their plans. “We’d get a house near the coast, because professors can totally afford that. The summers would be gorgeous, and in the grey winters, we’d, oh, hunker down in our big library, and wear cozy sweaters, and drink lots of tea, and watch the stormy ocean.”

“She’d find work at some cute little tourist café in the nearest town, and in the off-season, she’d run a save-the-whales operation,” Lucy added. “Since we’d, you know, have that improbable house near the coast.”

She sighed.

“After I turned down the job at Kenyon, she… stopped bringing it up. I… think she thought I’d never leave Stanford, even after Mom was…” Lucy swallowed. “Was gone.”

“God, I miss her,” Lucy breathed after another minute. “Some of her dreams were just— so improbable, so outrageous, and she dreamed them so hard anyway she made you believe in them.” She shook her head. “The world needs more people like that.”

A few more miles went by. “I’ve, uh, been all over the world, and… the people are what matter to a place,” he said finally. “To me.”

“… ‘And thou beside me singing in the wilderness, and wilderness is Paradise enough?’”

“Exactly.”

Lucy glanced at the map. She wanted to make one more detour, but they needed to find a place to stay that night, too. “Do you have enough signal to look for a hotel?”

From his muttering over the next few minutes, the answer was “no.” They could head up to Kearney if they had to. But it had been a long day, and if they could stop before then, she wouldn’t argue.

“AirBnb outside of Minden?” he said finally.

“Fine.”

It was late afternoon when they reached the Willa Cather House, nearly back in Kansas. Lucy doubted the wisdom of having taken them this far out of the way, as they toured the modest house… but what were they rushing for? They had time.

“I once got into a fierce fight with my history of the American novel professor about whether or not she was a lesbian,” Lucy said. “At the time, her letters were still embargoed, so you could read
them, but you couldn’t quote them. And he kept telling me ‘I’ve seen the letters, Lucy, you haven’t, I’m afraid you’re creating drama where there is none.’ And then he said ‘As historians, we have to take the high road and analyze the facts, not what we wish the facts were.’”

“He sounds like a smug dick,” Garcia said. “Did you take him apart?”

“No. I was just an undergrad, I didn’t… I didn’t have the evidence, and I couldn’t articulate what was so wrong about how he was talking to me.” A few more steps. “But I was absolutely right.”

Garcia’s smile was fond, almost… proud. He—

Sometimes his regard was so honest, open, and warm that she didn’t know what to do with it. And when had that happened, anyway?

Their AirBnb host was a cheerful, freckled redheaded woman, Sonja, who lived out in the country with her son, his girlfriend, their two-year-old, and some livestock. Her warmth helped lift Lucy’s spirits as she showed them around the clean, rambling old house accessorized with cats sprawled across most of the furniture. Lucy hadn’t been sure what to do for dinner, and had hoped they could find something still open in Minden, but Sonja invited them to share supper with the four of them as if it were a matter of course.

So Lucy and Garcia found themselves rather unexpectedly sitting down to a family dinner. Mike and Dora were occupied with Sami, their little girl; Sonja tried to make conversation. Which was kind of fraught.

“I’m a… history professor,” Lucy said. “I was, um, working in North Carolina for a while, and now I’m heading home. We decided to make a road trip out of it.”

“Oh! I have cousins in North Carolina, where were you working?”

“Uh… kind of outside of Boone.”

“At Caldwell? I didn’t know they had much of a history department.”

Lucy decided to come as clean as she could. “I was working for the government, actually. As a contractor.”

“Oh…”

Lucy found Dora watching her, looking intensely curious and also a little worried. But Sami chose that moment to vigorously wave her sauce-coated little fists in the air, and Dora had to grab her to keep her from speckling everything with red.

Sonja turned to Garcia. “And what do you do?”

Garcia swallowed. “I’m between jobs right now,” he said. “I, uh, used to work in private security.”

Sonja seemed to be trying to connect dots between “historian government contractor” and “private security.” Lucy was afraid of what shape she’d come up with. “And, um, what about all of you?” she blurted, to change the subject.

Mike and Dora looked at each other. “I’m a mechanic,” Mike said. “Working on my auto cert at Central.”

“I waitress,” Dora said.
Sonja owned a couple of properties in town and also worked part time at the living history museum. “You might like it,” she told the two of them. “I have a couple of passes—”

A little calico trotted into the kitchen. Sami giggled with glee, leaned forward, and toppled out of her chair, shrieking— Her parents both grabbed for her—

Garcia caught her, somehow out of his own chair and on his knees. “Whoa, there,” he said, bouncing Sami gently as she cried. “Don’t do that, okay? Wait until your wings have grown.”

Dora was pale. Mike looked like he’d had a quiet heart attack. He reached out for his daughter as Garcia got her to calm down. “That was an amazing catch, man.” His voice was a little shaky. “Thanks. You got kids?”

Lucy winced inwardly.

Garcia took his time getting off the floor. “No.”

Mike gave him, then Dora, an uncertain look.

“Not… any more.”

The room was very quiet.

“I’m so sorry,” Dora managed.

Garcia nodded once, his face carved into harsh lines.

“Well, uh,” Mike said, his voice a little shaky. “Making the drive to the hospital with a screaming, bleeding baby is no fun, I know from experience, so… thanks.”

“Agreed.” Garcia’s own voice started to sound a little more normal.

“Does, uh, anyone want ice cream?” Sonja asked, a little too brightly.

Lucy and Garcia helped clear the table; Sonja declined help with the dishes: “That’s why I have a dishwasher.”

“You use to say that’s why you had kids, Mom,” Mike pointed out.

“And then I got this, which does a better job with less whining.” She smiled cheerily.

Mike snorted, and looked at Dora. “You all right with Munchkin for a while?”

“Yep, I got her.”

“Do you two, uh, want to see the property at all?” he asked. “The barn and all? No pressure, I know you’re tired.”

Lucy declined, but Garcia, surprising her, accepted. She decided to take the chance to check in with Jiya, and make sure she and Rufus were okay after yesterday’s panic.

“… Lucy? Sorry…” Dora intercepted her before she could head for the bedroom. “I was just wondering if I could ask you something?”

“Sure, of course.”
“You’re a professor, right?”

“I… yes.”

“When the Munchkin’s a bit older—“ She shifted Sami on her hip. “I want to take some IT classes at Kearney.”

“That’s great!”

“But— I’ve looked at the application, and… like, what the hell is a personal statement? I don’t know what some of the stuff is that they’re asking, and, like… my parents never did this, and Sonja did this twenty years ago, and… I was just wondering if you…”

“Sure. Absolutely.” So they sat side-by-side on the couch, and went through the application. The cats slowly closed in until Lucy had two sprawled across her lap, purring happily.

“Aw,” Dora said, “they like you.”

“It seems like they like anyone who sits still long enough.”

Dora laughed. “Are they bothering you?”

“Not as long as they don’t mind being moved in a few minutes.”

When they were done, Lucy went back to the bedroom she and Garcia were sharing, and called Jiya. She wasn’t sure if the Internet out here was good enough for a video call, but it was worth a try, right?

“Hey!” she said, when her friend picked up. “How are you?”

“Hey.” Jiya smiled. “Better than when we talked yesterday.”

“Well, that’s a low bar, but I’m glad you cleared it.”

Jiya snorted.

“How was your date?” Lucy added. “Did you… you know.” She didn’t know if Rufus was within earshot.

Jiya’s eyebrows went up. “Did you call just to ask if I proposed?”

“No,” Lucy said with dignity. “I just happen to be very interested in that question as well.”

“Well… I’m not actually going to be proposing.”

“What!” Had something… “Is everything— Jiya…”

“Because he proposed first.” Jiya covered her ears.

Which was smart, because Lucy squealed at a pitch only audible to dogs.

“And I said yes,” Jiya added, with the biggest smile Lucy had ever seen on her face.

Not until now had she regretted anything about this road trip, but all she wanted right now was to be able to hug Jiya. And Rufus. “Congratulations,” Lucy said, feeling good tears well up. “Oh my God, Jiya. I’m so happy for you.”
“Thanks.” Jiya looked incandescently happy. “I… I’m honestly having a hard time believing this is real, you know?”

Lucy wiped her eyes. “It’s real, and I can’t think of anyone who deserves this more. Oh my God. Is — is Rufus there?”

“No, he’s with his mom and Kevin. I’ll tell him you said hi.”

“Do you have a date yet?”

“No, we, um, planning was not our top priority last night.” Jiya looked smug.

Lucy laughed.

“So, how’s the trip?” Jiya added.

Lucy just looked at her. “There’s absolutely nothing I could tell you about our road trip to rival your news.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not interested.”

So Lucy told her about the Brown v. Board of Education site, which seemed so long ago, though it had just been this morning. Then she described the pioneer sites.

“It sounds like you’re having a good time.” Jiya looked satisfied.

“I’m having a very good time.” When she thought back to leaving the North Carolina safe house, barely able to believe it was really over…

“So,” Jiya said after a minute. “Wyatt called…”

Lucy felt her good mood deflate. Seeing from Jiya’s sympathetic expression that she understood exactly what was going on just made things worse. “I don’t want to lose him as a friend,” she said softly. “But— it’s like he doesn’t get boundaries.”

She didn’t want to air their dirty laundry in public, even with someone as close as Jiya. But— Wyatt had already called her.

“When I got why he was calling, I read him a few subsections of the Riot Act,” Jiya said. “But, to be fair, I think he already knew he’d screwed up.”

“You had other things to think about, you didn’t have to do that.” It was just wrong for this sad, ridiculous business between her and Wyatt to distract Jiya from celebrating her engagement.

Jiya just looked at her. “When I cried so hard over Rufus I threw up, you held my hair back, and brought me water, and in the morning you told everyone you’d eaten something that disagreed with you, so they didn’t fuss over me.”

Well, yeah, that was what friends…

… oh.

“We’ll work it out,” Lucy said, with more optimism than she felt. “I’m sorry you got dragged into it. So, um… tell me… geek wedding things.”

“I’m writing my vows in Klingon.”
“… why did I ask.”

She heard thunder in the distance, and the connection started to break up, so they hung up. Lucy texted Rufus: *OMG CONGRATULATIONS!* and filled the rest of the screen with exclamation points.

She looked out the window for Garcia as the sky clouded over, and saw him and Mike talking in the barn. Satisfied, she settled in to watch another spectacular prairie thunderstorm.

After the storm blew through, she got another video call. The connection had improved. “So, I’m guessing Jiya told you our news,” Rufus said. It looked like he was in his car.

“Yes, and I’ll save you the excited screeching she got.”

Rufus snorted. “Appreciated.”

“But, oh my God, I’m so happy for you,” Lucy added.

Rufus’s expression softened into adorability. “Thank you. Hey, when are you coming home?”

“Soon. We’re in Nebraska.”

“… voluntarily?”

“Rufus!”

He shrugged, unrepentant. “And Flynn’s behaving himself?”

Lucy raised an eyebrow. “Garcia is an excellent traveling companion.”

Rufus eyed her. “Lucy…”

She suddenly felt very tired. “Please don’t,” she said quietly. “I already went through this with Wyatt this morning, and…”

“Fair enough,” Rufus said. “You know what you need.”

*See, Wyatt, is that so hard?* That was uncharitable. She shouldn’t think like that.

“… so, um, I know I shouldn’t ask this, but if Jiya’s writing her vows in Klingon, what are you…?”

“With this ring, wed you, I do,” Rufus said, in a weird, garbled—

*Oh my God.*

Lucy winced. “I should not have asked. I really, really should not have asked.”

Garcia chose that moment to walk in. “… you all right?” Then he saw the phone. “Ah.”

“Yes, Rufus is just… explaining to me the influence of, um, that green guy from Star Wars on his wedding vows, and I’m just wondering why I ever asked.”

Garcia’s eyebrows went up. “Congratulations, Rufus.”

“Thanks, man.”

They didn’t talk long after that. Lucy got ready for bed, perched on her twin bed, and eyed Garcia.
“Hey,” she said softly.


“I just… are you okay? After earlier?” Surely there were no sadder phrases in the English language than *I used to have kids.*

He looked tired, and she was almost sorry she’d asked. “It hurt,” he admitted, voice guttural. “But it’s not gonna fester. I don’t think.”

She hesitated. “Can I give you a hug anyway?”

He almost smiled. “A prophylactic hug?”

“Exactly.”

“Of course.”

So she moved over to his bed and gently gathered him into her arms. It was amazing, the way he relaxed as she rubbed little circles on his back.

Finally, he took a deep breath. “Thank you, Lucy,” he whispered.

She smiled at him. “Any time.”

Then she moved back to her own bed, nestled herself in pillows, and tried not to think about how she’d woken up that morning.

#

She woke early, and decided to do laundry.

“I can do that,” Garcia said rather drowsily.

Lucy looked at him, unimpressed. “I’m vertical, you’re not. Go back to sleep.”

She’d just finished loading the washer when her phone buzzed: it was Wyatt. *can i call?*

She hesitated. It was even earlier there. He’d never before texted to ask if it was a good time.

*Sure,* she replied, and picked up when he called.

“When you said goodbye, I didn’t know if you meant the phone call or… for good,” he said.

Lucy felt guilty. “Wyatt, I would never cut you off like that. I want us to be friends. But you have to respect my boundaries.”

“I know.”

She waited for the ‘but’ to come and slap her in the face, just like it had before.

“I... know,” he repeated. “Look. Lucy, I... called to say I’m sorry. About a lot of things, if you’ll... let me.”

A month ago, she would have said, *you don’t have to apologize.* But now she just said, “Yes.”

“I should’ve treated you… better. Should’ve listened to your choices. They’re...” He hesitated.
“You’re smart. They’re good ones.”

It meant more to her than she wanted to admit, to have him say it out loud. “Thank you.”

A long pause.

“I… figured I owed it to you to tell you about me and Jess in person,” he continued. “I didn’t know…”

He trailed off. Her mind filled in something like, how you’d take it.

“Wyatt, I wasn’t upset that you didn’t tell me,” she said. “I was upset that you didn’t tell me, and then kept calling to scold me about hanging out with Garcia.”

“You’re calling him—” Wyatt cut himself off.

Lucy raised an eyebrow, though this was a voice call and he couldn’t see.

“Right.” He sounded a little more measured, even if it was forced. “Not my best moments.”

“It’s all right.” As long as he was sincere this time, about changing, it was all right.

“Lucy, I… I fucked up, and I hurt you, and I wish I could fix it. But… all I can do now is better, and I hope you’ll consider forgiving me at some point.”

“Wyatt, it’s… I do. I have. Already.”

A long pause. “There’s something else you should…” Pause. “She’s really pregnant, Lucy. I saw the ultrasound.”

Lucy poked at that cautiously, like a healing wound. “Congratulations, Wyatt.”

“Thanks.”

“I can see why you… why you’re building a life together.”

“That…” He hesitated. “I didn’t know. She didn’t tell me, until… I told her I’d wait for her.”

Lucy breathed out slowly. This was, finally, confirmation from his own mouth that Wyatt had chosen Jessica over her, with no strings attached. It had been a long time coming, and she wasn’t sure it even really hurt any more. Not when she’d already moved on.

But she was tired.

They’d… if all this had wounded their relationship, they’d hopefully gotten the gunk and the infection cleared out. Now they just had to wait for it to heal, which took time and energy… and residual pain. And leaving it alone.

“So, Master Sergeant Logan,” she said after a minute. “Expert tactician that you are… what should we get Jiya and Rufus for a wedding present?”

He laughed, and it was good to hear.

They hung up when the washer was done. She sighed, and leaned against the wall. She felt like the conversation had taken a load off her shoulders, but she still felt tired from carrying that load for so long.
She found Sonja in the kitchen. “Breakfast?” she offered.

“… oh.” Lucy was fairly certain this wasn’t a usual feature of AirBnbs. “That would be lovely, thank you.”

Sonja’s face brightened. “Finally I have someone to cook for! I started doing this last year, and it’s been slow through the winter, and most of the folks who’ve stayed so far had special diets.”

Garcia came out just then, showered and dressed but still looking sleepy. It hit her hard, how badly she wanted more lazy mornings with him.

They had toast, and scrambled eggs that tasted oddly sweet from the almond milk— Sonja, Mike, and Sami were all lactose intolerant, apparently— and Sonja’s strong coffee, and just talked for a while. Lucy was a little surprised to learn Sonja had been a high school English teacher.

“I liked it for a while, and then I stopped,” Sonja said. “And I knew I needed to get out before I started taking it out on the kids.” She shrugged. “It was right for that phase of my life, and then I moved on.”

Lucy had never thought of a career path that way. In the Preston household, you chose your goals when you were young and clung to them tenaciously, constantly pushing yourself harder and harder, because anything else was failure. Sonja’s attitude was… incredibly refreshing.

After breakfast she showered, got her laundry out of the dryer, and decided to just stick it straight in the car. She’d fold it later. She carried it around the corner of the house—

“Eeeek!”

The goat that had startled her jumped, then keeled over, stiff as a board.

What the hell— she stared, horrified, her heart pounding. She dropped the bag of laundry and started to run.

“Lucy!” She passed Garcia as he came out of the house. “What is it?”

“The goat. It— it’s sick, it just fell over, I think it’s dead—”

“Lucy.” He caught her wrist. “It’s supposed to do that, it’s a fainting goat.”

She stared at him. “What the hell is a fainting goat?” And why would anyone want one?

“It’s something about their nervous system. Mike showed me last night. They lock up when they’re startled. Did you startle it?”

“We startled each other,” she said defensively.

“Then that’s why. Look, resurrection.”

She looked where he was pointing. The goat picked itself up and trotted away, a little wobbly.

She was really starting to hate goats.

“Don’t laugh,” she told him.

His lips twitched. “You all right?”
“Fine.”

… goats.

Once they said goodbye to Sonja, their route paralleled I-80 for a while, but they both stubbornly refused to take the actual interstate. Which just meant they passed cornfields at a slightly slower pace. But off to the north, on the other side of the Platte River, low hills began to appear. At the National Monument the day before, one of the rangers had shown Lucy the map for the officially-designated Historical Trail; now, she swiped through that, deciding what she wanted to see and what they could skip.

They passed multiple markers for skirmishes between white settlers and Native Americans who’d feared encroachment on their land. Justifiably. But, in the end, the fighting had only helped convince the settlers and the American government that the “Indians” were savages who needed to be controlled.

In college, Lucy had once made the three am mistake of forgetting to fix the working title of her paper draft. Her TA had not been impressed with “Why Manifest Destiny Was A Crock Of Shit.”

They’d just passed Cozad when her phone buzzed: Rufus. “Hello?”

She heard Rufus—

Singing?

“‘You’re my nerd girl,’” Rufus sang, kind of off-key but with a surprisingly nice voice, and then dropped back into his speaking voice. “Although you’re actually really stylish.”

Lucy heard the sound of a kiss. “Well, I actually think your walk is very sexy,” Jiya said, her voice low and warm. “And you haven’t stutter-talked at me since—”

Lucy came to her senses and hung up.

“Butt dial,” she explained. “Or arm dial. Or whatever.” Possibly a post-coital one, but Garcia didn’t need to know that.

She laughed. Then she sighed.

Garcia glanced at her inquiringly.

“… I want what they have,” she admitted, very softly. The disaster with Wyatt had been the most complicated and recent, but far from her first romantic misstep. The thought of having a partnership like Rufus and Jiya made her wistful.

He was quiet for a long time. “You’ll find it one day, Lucy.”

She snuck a sideways look at him. What if I want it… with you?

It was an audacious thought. It was one thing to ask if he maybe wanted to start something romantic— and she hadn’t even managed that yet— and another to ask if he wanted to spend his life with her. But… more and more, she was convinced that was what she wanted. That he was who she wanted.

Whenever they had that conversation, she was pretty sure she didn’t want it to be in the car. So she turned her attention back to the road.
Her phone buzzed again, this time a text from Wyatt. He’d sent her a link to something called Carhenge, which was apparently a Stonehenge replica made out of… cars? The message just said, *looks cool.*

She checked the map. Alliance was a bit out of their way. But she smiled at the suggestion anyway.

“So do we follow the interstate all the way?” Garcia didn’t sound enthused.

“We could. The Oregon Trail wasn’t actually one set trail. Some emigrants did follow the South Platte into Colorado and cross north later. A lot of gold miners on the California Trail went that way, too. I guess…” She checked the map. “That would be shorter.”

“Which do you want to follow?”

“Well, the North Platte is best known. The famous landmarks are there.”

“So, where’s that?”

“We turn off at Ogallala.”

First they stopped for lunch. Lucy noticed something strange in the distance, and they detoured south until…

“… okay,” she said. “I’m not imagining things, right? That really is a water tower painted as a UFO?”

He smiled, and his dimples showed. “Aren’t these the sights for which one, uh, goes on road trips?”

She snorted, and took a picture for their group chat.

Almost as soon as they turned north, the terrain began to grow hillier. The corn fields gave way in places to long expanses of low, empty scrub. She understood why early white explorers had called this area a “desert.” Even now, cars and houses were few and far between. They’d left the solid mountains of the Appalachians, and the forested river valleys east of the Mississippi, far behind.

They stopped off at Windlass Hill and hiked up to see the ruts of heavy wagons sliding down the precipitous slope. Even after all the running she’d done in the past, Lucy was short of breath by the time they reached the top. She tried to imagine getting a heavy wooden wagon and a team of oxen up that climb. But the sweeping view of the rumpled hills was worth it.

Then they stopped at the reconstructed sod house. On one hand, seeing it up close, the ingenuity of the early settlers impressed her. On the other hand, even thinking about living in the dark, cramped hut made her flee back to the expansive Nebraska sunshine.

They passed a marker for a pioneer cemetery, but didn’t stop. “There’s so many unmarked graves out here,” she murmured. By some estimates, up to ten per mile. “We usually don’t think of the death toll. People started out with whole families, and ended the trip as single—” She glanced sideways. “Sorry.”

“I’m not fragile around the subject of death, Lucy.” His voice was dry. “I have killed a person or two myself, since Rittenhouse murdered my family.”

“I just… you’re allowed to be. You know.” She glanced sideways again, and saw his expression soften. What did it say about them, that each guarded the other’s emotional vulnerabilities more
watchfully than they did their own?

They drove a few more miles, the silence comfortable. Then Lucy snorted. “I just realized why I always had a good grasp of the death toll. There was… an Oregon Trail computer game that was popular when I was in school. You know, basic nineties graphics. But you had to make all these choices about what supplies to choose and what to do when bad things happened… and bad things happened all the time. The members of your party would drop like flies. And you’d get this text that popped up— ‘you have died of dysentery’ or ‘you have died of cholera.’”

“At first, Mom didn’t want me playing it. She didn’t think it was historically accurate enough. So I played at school, in the computer lab. But Dad got me a copy for Christmas, and one day over break Mom and I sat down at the family computer and played through. Even she had to admit it was pretty good.” Lucy smiled at the memory.

Mile after lonely, desolately beautiful mile stretched out ahead of them. She wasn’t sure what to make of the shoes on the fence posts, but that was another road trip sight, right?

They didn’t talk much. It was late afternoon by the time Chimney Rock came into view, a welcome landmark for them just like it had been for the emigrants. Then they pushed on to Scottsbluff, the largest town until central Wyoming. They found a hotel, then went downtown for some dinner. The town was small enough that they parked on the edge of downtown, and just walked.

“You know,” she said. “The problem with the Oregon Trail is that it’s going to take us to… Oregon.” She glanced sideways at him.

“I’d gathered that, Lucy. Despite the incredible cunning of the name.”

She snorted. “So we’re going to end up in the Willamette Valley. We’ll have to drive south.”

“I don’t see how that’s a problem.” His turn to look sideways at her, his expression guarded. He licked his top lip. “Unless you’d rather get home sooner, of course.”

“I’m ready to be home,” she admitted.

“Ah.”

“But… I’m not in any hurry to cut this trip short, either.” Although if Agent Christopher didn’t give them the all-clear to return to California soon, they’d have to stop in Idaho. Maybe take a detour to Colorado and Utah.

“That is quite the dilemma,” he said, mouth serious, eyes not.

Her own mouth twitched. After everything they’d been through, she could understand why he didn’t take any of this too seriously.

That he seemed happy to wander wherever she wanted as long as they were together…

It made her happy, and giddy— and frightened, too, in case she was misinterpreting him. God, she’d been through so much, it was almost easier not to hope.

But she was a historian. She was trained in interpreting the evidence and coming to a conclusion. And her conclusion increasingly was, Garcia Flynn was delighted simply to be in her company.

And as for her, well, the thought of getting to San Francisco and no longer seeing him every day…
Her attraction to him hadn’t been news for a long time—she wrenched her thoughts away from how solid and warm he’d felt behind her when she’d woke up yesterday morning. Nor was it news that, after a totally improbable beginning, he was one of her best friends, if not her best friend.

But it was increasingly clear that this was more than lust or friendship.

… and yet she still couldn’t work up the courage to reach out and take his hand as they walked. *Words, Lucy. Actual words.*

They heard music up ahead. The syncopated ragtime beat tried to seduce her into dancing as they followed it to its source, which turned out to be a band in a small plaza with a large audience spread out across the grass. “Look, food trucks.”

So they got some supper and looked around for a place to sit. They didn’t have chairs, and the grass was fairly well covered. Garcia pointed to a wall around the edge of the plaza; kids were sitting on the lower level, but the higher level was unoccupied.

He held the food and gave her a boost, passed both their dinners up to her when she was safely seated, and then swung himself up with ease. And, you know, very attractive muscles.

They ate, and then enjoyed the music. Lucy watched a family settle in below them: an older man with a cane, a woman of the right age to be his daughter, two young kids, and a pudgy bulldog. The older man unpacked food from a bag while the woman shook out a picnic blanket. One of the kids started playing with a beach ball; the man handed a bag of popcorn to the other kid, the one with the adorable ‘fro. The bulldog begged shamelessly. The child gave it some, which it mouthed at and dropped on the ground before looking up expectantly for more.

The band started another song. Lucy swung her feet in time with the music, and smiled. She took a rather lopsided selfie of the two of them on the wall and sent it to the others.

A gentle breeze began to blow through the few trees and ruffle her hair. Birds were singing somewhere behind them. “This is nice,” she murmured.

She laughed at the older man’s flabbergasted face when he saw the steadily growing pile of soggy popcorn in front of the dog. In the ensuing family altercation, presumably about wasting food, the dog continued to look innocent and beg.

Garcia glanced at his phone, and snorted. “Subtle.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Yeah.” He shoved it back in his pocket, and gave her a reassuring smile.

The band took a break between sets. This was…this was a logical time, right? They had time to talk. They were in the middle of something that could be two friends enjoying each other’s company…or could be a date, if you squinted. They didn’t have anywhere else to be. If she screwed this up, they could just go to bed and not have to see each other for eight whole hours…

It took her several tries to start. “Garcia?” she said quietly.

“Yes.”

She swallowed. “This trip, I’ve…it’s been great, all the time we’ve, um, spent together. Everything we’ve done. I’ve really enjoyed it.”
He gave her a little smile, though his face looked flushed.

When had her mouth gotten so dry? “I was, um… hoping we could keep doing that when we get back to San Francisco.”

“Oh,” he breathed, his smile disappearing.

“… Garcia?” He looked so serious—

“I’m afraid I was, ah, already taking that for granted.”

“Oh,” she said. “… oh.” She felt warm all over. “I mean— yes! Good. Yes. You should. Good.”

“Good,” he echoed, staring at her. He licked his top lip.

She realized she was staring at him. And he’d probably noticed.

She’d leaned towards him without even thinking about it. What if she followed this crazy, relief-driven impulse and… just…

Something moved in her peripheral vision. She flinched and threw a hand up out of reflex— and found herself with a hand full of beach ball.

Her heart raced with a very different kind of relief… and maybe with something else.

“Sorry!” the kid yelled up to her. Lucy gently tossed the ball back.

She glanced self-consciously at Garcia, who was looking down, expression unreadable. Oh. Okay. Maybe— yeah. Definitely best not to get carried away and rush things.

Definitely.

Then he looked up, and she thought she’d been imagining things. “Nice, ah, reflexes, Lucy,” he said with a slightly lopsided smirk.

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that a nice way of saying I’m not as clumsy as I was?”

He snorted. “It wasn’t intended that way, no.”

She glanced around at the food trucks. “I’m going to go get some more food. Maybe some dessert. You want anything?”

“I’ll go if you tell me what you want.”

“You don’t need to.”

“I know. But, of the two of us, I can climb back up myself.” He smirked again.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Surprise me. Pleasantly.”

He brought her another small burrito and some kind of coffee ice cream sundae. She had to eat that first, of course, or it would melt. It turned out to be intensely sweet, layered with… sweetened condensed milk?

“There are, um, two spoons,” she pointed out. After traveling with him this long, she knew he didn’t always turn down dessert. “If you’re… interested.”
He gave her that little, unreadable smile, and reached for the other spoon.

The band came back just as she was thinking about suggesting leaving, so they stayed for the next set. By the end of that she was yawning, and it was full dark. “Mind if we go?” she asked him.

“Not at all.” He jumped down, took care of their trash, and then held up his arms to swing her gently to the ground.

They didn’t talk much as they walked back to the car. He had to know she’d nearly kissed him. Right? He couldn’t be in doubt about how she felt any longer. If he wanted— what she wanted, nothing was stopping him from making that clear.

… right?

And even if she’d chickened out about that kiss, they’d made it clear they were going to keep seeing each other. So. All was well, and… maybe she’d be braver tomorrow. Or maybe he would be.

They reached the hotel and said good night. She’d just gotten into bed when she realized he might well have interpreted what she’d said as her wanting them to spend time together as friends. In the ambiguous way they’d been doing essentially this whole trip.

She buried her face in her pillow and wriggled her legs in abject aaaaaaugh. God, how was she so bad at this?

The door between their rooms was unlocked. She could let herself in, even join him in bed, and make clear exactly what she’d meant.

So… why didn’t she?

This was too important to her to screw up. She didn’t want a quick road trip fling. She wanted them to build something that would last. And her track record…

Well.

She flopped on her back, and stared at the slow flash of the smoke detector. Dammit, she was allowed to chicken out after one declaration per day— even an unsuccessful one.

He was smart, and perceptive. He had to know how she felt. If he didn’t… do anything, what did that mean? Was that its own answer?

She wouldn’t figure this out tonight. Either she went next door and told him how she felt… and she wasn’t prepared for that. Or she stopped dwelling.

She tried not to think about how empty and quiet the room felt, or how much happier she’d be with him in the other bed. Or… well… this one.

She tried not to think about how, as messy as this was trying to make things clear between them… it was a lot straightforward than her future.

Scottsbluff: for settlers, reaching this landmark had been a milestone on a journey into what was, for them, totally unknown. She felt that way, too.

Whatever was ahead, she would handle it. She was, frankly, a little frightened. Right after they’d won, she’d thought that nothing besides Rittenhouse could ever worry her again. But this trip had
let her decompress and get a healthy perspective again. She worried more, yeah, but that thick shell of detachment was gone. She was interested in things again.

What she had learned from the fighting was that, whatever was to come, she was strong enough to take it. With Garcia by her side, preferably, but alone if she had to.

She made an impatient noise, wrapped herself in her new blanket—her amazing new blanket—grabbed a pillow or four off the bed, and gently pulled the door open.

Garcia sat up. “What is it?”

He sounded sleepy, and she felt bad for waking him. “I just, um—sorry. It’s—it’s really quiet in there. Can I—have your spare bed?”

She determinedly didn’t think about the last time she’d asked to share his space. Although, come on. She wasn’t going to change beds in her sleep.

Although, plausible deniability…

Nope.

“’course.” He lay back down and tossed her his spare pillows. Which gave her…okay, ten was probably excessive, even for her.

She nestled down in her cocoon. “Good night, Garcia,” she whispered.

“Good night, Lucy.” His voice was low and warm.

Chapter End Notes

First, thanks to NancyDfan for the Oregon Trail idea!

The Filley Stone Barn
Homestead National Monument
Rock Creek Station Historical Park

'And thou beside me singing in the wilderness' is a quote from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

The Willa Cather House

"Nerd Girl" is a duet between Chester French and Janelle Monae

Carhenge
Ogallala's UFO water tower
Windlass Hill
Chimney Rock
Wyoming

Chapter Notes

content notes: blood; description of historical massacres; references to violent racism

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were about five minutes past the border when Agent Christopher called.

“We cleaned up a Rittenhouse cell four days ago,” she said without preamble. “We think it was the last one.”

“And you didn’t think to mention this to us until now?” Garcia asked.

“I had leads to follow, Flynn. I wasn’t going to say anything until I could be sure it was the last one.” She paused. “Anyway. It’s safe to come home, Lucy.”

Home. There was that elusive word again. “Right,” she said.

“And you should hurry up. With the last Rittenhouse agents accounted for, I’m going to have to start accounting for all the assets. Including that car you’re driving.”

“Right,” Lucy said again, with less enthusiasm.

“We had to stay out of California, Oregon, and Nevada until today, and now you want us there yesterday?” Garcia sounded unimpressed.

“Flynn, have you ever once in your life not been difficult?”

Garcia opened his mouth.

“Don’t answer that. I’m just telling you to make good time.”

“We will.” Lucy forestalled any hostilities, quelling Garcia with a sideways glance. “I don’t think we were going to stop long in Wyoming, anyway.” Then, before Agent Christopher could hang up: “Can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

Lucy hesitated. “Why wasn’t Wyatt part of the clean up operation?”

Agent Christopher hesitated for even longer. “Operational security,” she said finally.

Operational—

Jessica.

It had been Lucy’s sneaking suspicion, but she wasn’t pleased to have it confirmed.

After hanging up with Agent Christopher, they followed a sign to a historical marker. They got lucky: this one was just a few miles down the road. It recorded the long-gone town of Empire,
settled by Black Exodusters looking for freedom, but eventually vanquished by racism and
drought. There was nothing left of it.

Their next stop was Fort Laramie. The same stretch of trail from Scottsbluff, that would have taken
early emigrants four days, had taken them... an hour.

They didn’t stay there long; Lucy felt an undefinable urge to keep moving, and the reconstructed
buildings were, while important for this particular site, not particularly remarkable in themselves.
She did look at a sign near the building that had held the post school: “Oh my God.”

“What?” Garcia asked.

“When they couldn’t get civilian teachers to stay, they made enlisted men do it, and even deserters
in chains. Excellent pedagogical practice, guys. A plus.”

Garcia snorted. She took a picture of the sign for those days when she wasn’t convinced she could
make a difference as a teacher.

“This area used to be littered with discarded stuff that people realized they couldn’t haul with
them,” she said, as they drove away from Fort Laramie. “Extra food. Tools. Things of emotional
value that they’d brought from their old homes.” She shook her head, “Sometimes we like to
sentimentalize the Old West, the earlier centuries, as being ‘natural,’ but we started littering in a
hurry.”

“Reminds me of Mount Everest,” he said, after a minute. “We think of it as this remote area, but—
when I was there in the nineties, parts of it were a dump.”

“Yeah. Same— wait.” She eyed him. “Tell me you haven’t climbed Mount Everest, Garcia.”

He smirked. “No.” He paused. “I, ah, was there during the war. I fought for the rebels for about
eighteen months, and I was at the base camp to make contact with a sympathizer who’d snuck in
pretending to be a climber.”

Near Guernsey, they stopped at Register Cliff. In some places, the original names were obscured
by more recent ones, but she still marveled at all the emigrants who’d expended precious energy on
an exhausting trip to carve these enduring markers. Had they imagined that two centuries later,
their names would still be there? What had they been thinking of, as they chiseled into the soft
rock? What had they been hoping for?

Then they stretched their legs a bit on the walk to the famous wagon ruts. “It’s just wagon ruts,”
she told him, not wanting him to be disappointed with the result of their effort.

“There are worse places to be on a Wednesday morning than walking in the sun with no one trying
to kill us.”

He had a point.

After Guernsey, they came over a low ridge, and there were the mountains, low and grey-brown on
the horizon. They got on the interstate, simply because they weren’t sure any of the other options
were even paved. The entire state of Wyoming had barely a tenth of the population of the Bay
Area, and the low number of routes through the state reflected that.

It was a quiet drive. Garcia was behind the wheel, and Lucy was content to watch the scenery grow
more dramatic, and enjoy the sunshine.
They detoured into Douglas for the hell of it, and quickly ran into a street festival. They parked on the outskirts and wandered for a bit. “What the hell is that?” Garcia sounded bemused.

Lucy looked. “It looks like a rabbit with antlers.”

They exchanged looks.

“These are the sights for which one goes on road trips, right?” she added, smirking.

Lucy took a picture of the creature, which apparently was called a “jackalope.” Here in town, her phone actually had a signal, so she sent the picture to the team. Rufus replied almost instantly: *I’ll alert the Men in Black.*

The mountains she’d seen a few hours ago weren’t the main body of the Rockies; before she lost signal again, she discovered that these were the Laramies. They stretched off to the left as she and Garcia headed west, and the horizon once again opened up ahead. Though she’d spent most of her life in and near the Coast Ranges, with frequent trips to the Sierras, she was still excited at the prospect of seeing the Rockies.

They got off the interstate for a state highway that followed the Oregon Trail a little more closely. This road was even emptier. The cornfields were long gone, by now; it was too dry out here for them. Instead, long stretches of green-brown scrubby grass were dotted by silvery green sagebrush.

“I like the city,” she murmured. “But this is nice, too.”

It was so nice, it lulled her to sleep…

She resurfaced into wakefulness with the sense that not much time had passed. A gravelly, slightly off-key voice was—

*singing?*

He must’ve noticed her stirring, somehow. He abruptly cut off.

“Was that Neil Diamond?” Her voice came out groggy.

“No, it was, uhhhh… the radio.”

“The radio was singing along with Neil Diamond on the radio?”

He cleared his throat. “Tell me about, uh, the history of this, uh, county, Lucy.”

She smirked.

The presence of a radio station besides country told her they were coming up on Casper. They stopped there for lunch. After Casper, the Trail cut cross-country west across dangerously dry, inhospitable terrain, but the road continued to follow the North Platte southwest. Well, the paved road; there was another that paralleled the old trail more closely, but Lucy drew the line at bouncing down twenty miles of gravel and dirt.

The road they chose quickly emptied of much of its vehicle traffic. A sign warning them to turn their headlights on told her what the road was like ahead.

They came to a sign— Lucy turned to look at it again and make sure she hadn’t read it wrong. “What’s that doing way up here?”
“What?”

“It’s a sign for the Sand Creek Massacre Trail.”

“I’m not familiar with that one, but it doesn’t sound good.”

Lucy sighed.

“November 29th, 1864,” she began finally. “A group of Cheyenne and Arapaho had followed orders to come to Fort Lyon for the winter, or be considered ‘hostile’ and risk being killed. At the fort, they were sent about forty miles away, and it was mostly women, children, and the elderly in the village.”

Garcia winced.

“At dawn, a unit of Colorado cavalry attacked them. They… slaughtered them without mercy. Mutilated them. The soldiers cut fetuses out of pregnant women, and… dismembered bodies for trophies.”

“They killed maybe a hundred and fifty people, most of them women and children. The colonel in charge reported it as a glorious victory over five to six hundred warriors—”

Garcia made a guttural disgusted noise.

“But two men, Silas Soule and Joseph Cramer, each refused the attack order. Their companies held their fire. And those two men helped get the truth out afterwards. There were a number of investigations.”

“Did anything, uh, happen?” he asked after a minute.

“What do you think?” she asked tiredly.

He looked at her, then back to the road.

“Captain Soule even testified against his commanding officer. And he was murdered a few weeks later.” Her historian’s precision prompted her to add, “Though that may not have been related.”

“Soule was a militant abolitionist,” she said after a minute. “He went with John Brown on some of his raids. But you know who else was an abolitionist? And a preacher? The colonel who ordered the slaughter.”

The air had gotten noticeably cooler as they climbed into the mountains, but that wasn’t the only reason she reached back for her blanket and wrapped it around her.

“What was the Colorado cavalry doing in Wyoming?” he asked after a few more minutes.

“They weren’t. It happened in Colorado. That’s why I was surprised to see the sign.”

“You said they were Arapaho?”

“Arapaho and Cheyenne, yes.”

“There’s an Arapaho reservation northwest of here. Might be related.”

“Oh, that’s right. Could be.”
They rode in silence for a long time.

They met fewer and fewer cars. Would they have seen anyone at all, on the unpaved county road that more closely followed the route of the Trail?

Finally, a sight familiar from many pictures told her they’d rejoined the Trail. She pointed. “Look.”

Garcia looked. “I see a rock. How is that different from any of the other dozen rocks?”

“Independence Rock. Emigrants tried to make it here by the Fourth of July to give them a better chance of reaching the end of the trail by the fall snows.”

“Ah.”

“It was kind of a Rorschach test for tired, stressed settlers,” she added. “Some people saw a turtle, some people saw an apple, some people saw a loaf of bread…”

“I’m, uh, sensing a theme here.”

“And that tells you what the Oregon Trail was like.”

They pulled off at the state rest area by the rock. Together, they climbed carefully to the top. It was windy, and cold, and Lucy wished for one or both of her blankets, but the view was amazing. He took a picture of her, on top of the rock, and then allowed her to take a picture of the two of them together. They climbed down, and he gave her his hand to help her over the rough spots.

They passed Devil’s Gate and continued southwest, then west, through more dry and desolately beautiful terrain. “We’re gonna want to find a place for the night,” he said.

It was only afternoon, but with so few towns, they’d want to plan ahead. She looked at the map. “Either we find something in Lander or Atlantic City, or we have to go on to Rock Springs,” she said finally. There wasn’t much in between. She tried to scout options on her phone, but had no signal.

They took the precaution of stopping for gas, not knowing when the next opportunity would be. She took a turn driving.

The afternoon seemed to merge into a dreamy haze, mile after mile of grass, up hills and around ridges. She might’ve been tempted to think they weren’t really moving, except for the mountains slowly growing in the distance.

When Garcia spoke, he startled her. “Imagine what it was like taking days to cross this on foot.” He sounded drowsy.

Lucy shivered. “I know,” she said. Out here, the land was still wild enough to give a sense of just how unforgiving it had been, a hundred and fifty years ago. The past had had that same warning feeling: *mess up and there’s no help coming.*

“I know,” she repeated.

The land changed again as they got closer to the white-capped mountains; the road wound around red outcroppings, bare except for little shrubs. She was surprised to see scattered buildings again. It almost felt like they’d just journeyed into the past, again, to the time before European conquest.

They reached the sign for Lander. She looked at him. “What do you want to do?”
“I can keep going.”

So they turned south to Atlantic City. They saw a highway gate and a sign saying ‘highway closed when lights flashing’; that, and the conifers lining the road, showed how high they’d climbed. Focusing on the road and not the map, she was startled to see the sign, “South Pass Overlook.”

“Garcia!”

His eyes snapped open and he scanned for danger as she pulled off.

“No,” she said. “It’s— this is the Continental Divide.”

They got out and looked around. She had to laugh.

He looked at her inquiringly.

“We just crossed the spine of the continent and we wouldn’t have known it if not for the sign,” she said. “The wagon trains often had the same experience. Sometimes they were surprised to get to the first creek and see it flowing west.”

“Ah.”

That also meant they’d passed Atlantic City without even seeing it. Back in the car, they looked at each other. “We could backtrack,” she said.

He glanced at the sky. “We’ve got daylight left,” he said. “No need to turn back unless we want to.”

She wasn’t sure that she did want to. The empty high plains, so hauntingly beautiful this morning, were starting to… get to her. She felt like moving on.

She looked at the map, but it was blank. She had to zoom out and eyeball their route without knowing exactly where the road was. One hour to Rock Springs? Two? They could make it.

The trees disappeared. “This was the Fort Bridger route,” she told him, after they passed the historic Parting of the Ways. “It was longer, but at least there was water.”

He looked around. “There was?”

“There’s a river out there, not far. But it took a week longer to go this way. So some people cut due west across the desert. Forty-five miles without water. It was brutal.”

They reached a little town, just a few buildings, really, but the first they’d seen since Lander. Highway 28 stretched out to the southwest, following the old settler trace down the Big Sandy River, but Lucy turned onto 191, the quicker route. This close to the solstice, the sun would set late, but the mountains west of them would block its rays much earlier.

The town stretched down the highway, which was obscurely comforting. The road was merely deserted now, not eerily lonely as it had been for parts of the last few hours. They passed more buildings, and even some irrigated fields, improbably green amidst the high desert. It had grown quite cold, but she didn’t want to stop to get her jacket.

They were north of Rock Springs when she saw the sign: DETOUR AHEAD. “Oh, God,” she sighed. She really wanted to be off the road before dark.

The detour pointed them onto an even more deserted side road. “Is this the right road?” she asked.
“I don’t think it’s even paved all the way.”

“With so few roads, they might not have much choice about where to reroute traffic.”

“Then why didn’t they just take it down to one lane?”

He didn’t have an answer.

She was right: the paved surface quickly turned to gravel. Lucy looked at the map, deeply frustrated, as she had to slow way down. Even at low speed, the jouncing was enough to rattle her to her bones. She bit back a complaint and hoped they came to the end of the detour soon.

The miles dragged by. Focusing on the road, she didn’t glance at the map for a while. When she did—

“Garcia, I’m pretty sure this isn’t the right road.” They’d gone more than five miles with no signs of buildings or any other roads.

“I think you’re right. But it might still be the fastest.”

“You think so?”

“If we turn around, we have to go all the way back, then find the real detour, which might be worse than this. This looks like it parallels the highway all the way down. And we might find a side road that cuts back to the highway.”

“Yeah, but we can’t go more than fifteen miles an hour.”

“I’ll drive. The car can handle more than that. It’s all-wheel-drive.”

“Really?”

“It was meant to be able to follow the Mothership wherever it went.”

“Well… then be my guest, Mr. I’ve-Driven-A-Tank.”

When they switched seats, she grabbed her jacket from the trunk. The cold air bit at her exposed hands in just those few moments outside the car.

The ride didn’t get any smoother, but at least she didn’t have the stress of trying to steer the best route. They bounced resignedly down the road, the only noises those of the car and the gravel.

“Look on the bright side,” she said after a while. “We’ll have an amazing view of the sunset.”

He snorted.

She was tired, and she’d had quite enough of the “romance” of the trip for today, and she just wanted dinner and a bed. But if she had to be out here like this, she didn’t want to be with anyone but him.

Ten uneventful miles, and they went over a crest and the car bottomed out and stuck.

Garcia swore, and tried to reverse out of it. But that obviously wasn’t going to work. He growled. “Well, I guess you get to drive after all.” He opened the door.

“What are you doing?”
“I’m going to push while you press the gas.”

“I—” She didn’t like this arrangement, but he was much stronger than she was.

“Be careful,” she said.

“Don’t worry, Lucy. I’m just getting the car unstuck.”

She slid into the driver’s seat. God, what if the car rolled backwards and squished him? Maybe they could get a tow? But when she checked her phone, she didn’t have any service.

"Ready?" he called. “One, two—”

The car rocked forward as she hit the gas. She heard him grunt. But then they didn’t go any further.

He tried that several times, until Lucy had had enough. “This is ridiculous,” she said firmly, putting the car in neutral and joining him at the back bumper. “We’re in the middle of a flat plain and the car’s not going to fall over a cliff. Clearly the gas pedal won’t help until we get out of this rut, and you don’t need my weight in the car when you’re trying to push.”

He looked sardonic, but didn’t object, possibly from the exertion of trying to move the car. “On three, then.”

The car rocked forward—

And stuck.

They tried again. And again. And again.

Finally, Garcia slumped against the back bunker. “So much for all wheel drive,” he muttered. “I’m sorry, Lucy. This was… a bad idea.”

She shook her head. “It’s all right.”

After a moment, he straightened up. “Do you have service, or do we start walking?”

“We’re not done here.”

The evening light illuminated his face, but it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. He licked his lip. “You wanna give it another try?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “We took down Rittenhouse, we can get this car out of the rut. I’m not giving up now.”

“It was the whole team that took down Rittenhouse,” he pointed out, turning back to the bumper.

She looked at him reproachfully. “Though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven,’ and defeated evil megalomaniacs, ‘that which we are, we are. Strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.’”

He just looked at her.

She folded her arms over her chest.

“Tennyson, Lucy? Really?” He was trying not to laugh.
“Would you prefer Lewis Carroll?”

He closed his eyes, smiling. When he opened them again, the smile was gone, but his expression was warm. “Lucy, whatever… you choose, whatever happens in your future, I think you’re gonna be all right.”

She tilted her chin up. “I think so, too.” And standing there, stranded in the middle of the Wyoming desert, cold and sweating both, so close to the end of her rope that she was spouting poetry, she felt, for the first time, like she could claim those words.

“And I think we should take a running start,” she added.

He very loudly said nothing, but backed up with her some distance from the car. They darted forward and collided with the back of the car—

It shifted—

She yelled loudly in hope and anger and frustration and being 100% done—

The back of the car popped over the dip in the road.

Lucy yelled again, this time in victory. The car rocked to a stop, on level ground once more. She straightened up, and gave Garcia a triumphant look. He looked very impressed.

“See?” she told him. “Quite the team.”

They both needed a breather after that. So they parked by the side of the road— not that anyone was coming by any time soon— and leaned against the hood, watching the sunset. She’d been right. It was magnificent.

It was also cold. She wrapped her presidents blanket around her while they ate the last yogurt cups in the cooler, and then some protein bars. Even with her jacket and her blanket, she was still chilled.

Garcia glanced down at her, and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Better?”

She certainly wasn’t going to object to that. “Yes, thank you.”

She finished her bar and tucked the wrapper in her pocket. She sighed, and leaned against him. Then, after a minute, she reluctantly straightened up. “Shall we?”

He turned the key in the ignition, and nothing happened.

He swore, short and sharp, and tried again. Still nothing. Not even a sputter.

“What?! It was just running, the battery couldn’t have died that quickly! We’ve been driving all day!”

He sat back. Even in the twilight, his expression was harsh. “It may have something to do with the detector. It has to get its power from somewhere.”

“Oh, God,” she sighed.

After a moment, he said, “If you wanna wait with the car while I walk out for help…”

“Absolutely not.”
“I’m not gonna think any less of you, Lucy.”

“No,” she said firmly. “We do this together, Garcia. It’s only, what, four miles? Five?” Six?

He gave her a soft little smile.

She got out of the car, and hesitated. “Even when we get to town, we won’t find a tow truck tonight, will we?”

“Good point.” So they shouldered their duffels and set off down the road.

It was slow going. The ruts that had rocked the car were more forbidding on foot, and they veered back and forth across the road, trying to avoid the worst of them. The ground dropped off on one side of the road, giving them a magnificent view of... dark nothingness. The moon was just a sliver, but luckily, Garcia had a flashlight.

At least it was too cold for mosquitoes.

“This is still better than fighting Rittenhouse,” she muttered, after they’d trudged for a while.

He made a wry noise of agreement. They stepped into the grass to avoid another rut. The ground crumbled away beneath them.

Lucy screamed as she fell. She clawed frantically at the side of the hill— she managed to slow herself— Garcia cried out— then she hit hard.

Impact stunned her and knocked the breath out of her. She stared stupidly at the stars for a moment. Garcia swore.

Ooooh.

Right. Ow. Moving. From the sound of Garcia’s oaths, he’d come to rest not far away. She lifted her head and looked around.

“You okay?” she managed. Luckily, they hadn’t fallen far, just slid down to another to more grass. There were definitely more dangerous drops along this road.

“Fuck.”

She’d never heard him sound like that before. Not in prison, not in Chinatown. She sat up at once, and looked around. There he was— lying prone on the ground. Not moving.

“Garcia!” She darted to his side. The flashlight had landed nearby, lighting up the scene. “What is it?” She reached down to help him up—

He shoved her hands away. “Don’t,” he warned, teeth gritted.

She felt cold, and it wasn’t the night. “Garcia.” She looked him up and down. He was lying awkwardly, his left leg at a bad angle. “Is it— your back?”

_Dear God, no. Please. No._

“No,” he said. “I landed— on something.” He grimaced. “Maybe an old fence post. It’s stuck in the ground.” His voice was rough.

“Do you need help up?”
“It’s in my leg, Lucy,” he said quietly.

“I’ll get the first aid kit from the car—”

“Lucy.” He winced. “It’s in my leg,” he repeated. “Take it out, and… uh. There’s nothing in the kit to handle that much bleeding.” He looked up at her. “I’m sorry, Lucy. You’re gonna have to go for help.”

“I can’t leave you here!”

“You have to. I won’t make it to town. It’s too far. I’m sorry, Lucy.”

“But— you’re gonna—” No. She wouldn’t let this happen. She would not.

“No,” he told her firmly. “I know my limits, Lucy. I’m not at them yet. I’ll be all right. But you have to go. Can you get back up the hill?”

“You’ll be all right?” she echoed in disbelief. “Don’t lie to me, Garcia, don’t you dare lie to me!”

“I won’t be comfortable, I’ve got a damned piece of metal in my leg. But it’s keeping the bleeding down.” He winced. “I’m not dying.”

“I—"

“Here.” He felt around in his jacket. “Take my gun.”

“I’m not taking your damn gun, Garcia. I can at least outrun— threats.” She looked around. “Do you want— where’d the bags go?”

She’d dropped hers at the top of the hill. His was about a third of the way up the slope. She heard an alarming groan behind her as she went and grabbed it; when she turned around, he’d managed to sit up. Even in the weak light, he didn’t look good.

“Take the flashlight,” he told her, when she deposited his bag within reach.

“And leave you in the dark?”

“I’ll be fine. Trust me, I’ve faced much worse.” He winced. “Lucy, listen, this is important. If something— happens, if you can’t make it back— it’s all right.”

She stared at him, in horrified, furious disbelief. “No, it’s not all right! All right is the last thing that is!” She squatted to look him in the eye. “The next time I see you, we’re talking about this bullshit idea you have that you’re disposable.”

He tugged her forward and kissed her lightly on the mouth. “For luck,” he explained. “Now go.”

She stared at him, and sank back on her heels. “Garcia—”

He pressed the flashlight into her palm and curled her fingers around it.

“Garcia, I—”

But her throat closed, and she couldn’t force the words out. And every second she delayed—

She had to turn away from him, and leave him in the dark. Because it was that or watch him die slowly.
She scrambled up the hill. Her hands ached; she’d skinned them on the way down. Her ankle throbbed, and her face stung as well. But worst of all was the tightness in her throat.

She pulled herself over the rim of the road, and she ran.

The night closed in around her. In the weak light, she stumbled and fell almost at once, hitting the gravel hard. She picked herself up, and kept going.

How far did she have to go? She tried to remember the map. They’d come at least fifteen miles, maybe twenty. Was it ten more? Even with the rough road, she could cover that in two hours. Right? She’d find help and get the paramedics. It would be fine.

It would be fine. She wasn’t losing him now, damn it.

Despite everything, what her mind insisted on dwelling on was the feel of Garcia’s lips against hers. God, she should have told him. If— if he—

But what he needed right now was her speed, not her feelings. If he— died— before she could tell him how she felt about him—

If he died at all, she would have to find a way to go on.

She tripped and fell again. Her face ached worse. She wiped it, winced at the pain, and didn’t bother to look at her hand. She knew what that warm liquid was.

Her ankle throbbed. If she’d sprained it—

She would crawl out of here if she had to, damn it.

The wind nipped harshly at all her exposed skin. Her legs burned. She had a stitch in her side. She needed more air than she was getting. The starlight felt cold and hostile.

Finally she staggered to a stop and bent over, panting, because she couldn’t run any more. She took the chance to glance at her phone, but she still didn’t have any signal.

She gave herself five deep breaths, and then forced herself into motion again.

Her face and hands were freezing. She almost thought her phone had lost track of time, through not connecting to the network for so long, because what she saw when she checked the clock bore no resemblance to how much time it felt like was passing.

She had to stop again, and again, and again, at frighteningly shorter intervals each time. God, she couldn’t be weak like this, she had to keep going.

The road ahead seemed to come out of nowhere. She stopped, and considered it.

A sign warned, “Primitive road ahead: 4 wheel drive vehicles only.” But she could see lights over the ridge; there were people over there. And this road went in the right direction.

She didn’t know how long it was to highway on this current road. If she chose wrong— if she couldn’t make it to civilization— Garcia—

The thought of him alone in the dark, in the cold, slowly bleeding—

She ruthlessly shoved it away, and turned onto the new road.
Something big moved in the dark. Adrenaline and fear rushed through her. She swung her flashlight in that direction—

—and saw glowing eyes.

Then she heard a soft, annoyed whinny, and saw several dark shapes unfold themselves from the ground. The horses trotted away for a resting place with fewer disruptions, and were silhouetted for a moment against the horizon, illuminated from below by the lights of the town. Lucy’s heart rate eased down to roughly twice its usual.

The road wasn’t as bad as she expected, because it was nearly all downhill. She still fell several times as she veered around the sharp switchbacks, trying to go as fast as she could. At this point the new pain and the old pain all blended together. Everything hurt, everywhere.

Her ass also hurt from such a steep descent by the time she reached level ground. But the lights of the town had disappeared beyond another rise. She looked at it, and felt helpless. What if she’d badly underestimated the distance?

She straightened up, checked her phone—no signal—and stumbled forward.

She crested the rise and promptly fell on her face again. She rested her forehead against the cool dirt, despairing. She couldn’t—she couldn’t—

After a long moment, she looked up. Through blurred vision, she saw lights. When she blinked and cleared her eyes, they were still there. She staggered to her feet and shot forward.

She stumbled down the last slope into a neighborhood of trailers and manufactured homes. She found the first home with lights on and banged frantically on the front door.

And waited.

Nothing happened.

She tried again—

“They’re not home,” said a disapproving voice behind her.

Lucy spun to find an older white woman in an overcoat and a nightgown frowning at her from across the street.

“What the hell are you making all this fuss for?” the woman added. “Are you—” she looked Lucy up and down, and her expression seemed to sharpen. “Drunk isn’t the problem here, is it.”

Lucy nearly laughed and sobbed at the same time. “No,” she said. “My friend and I—we got our car stuck on the ridge and he fell and hurt himself and he can’t move and my phone hasn’t had any signal since Casper.” The words tumbled out. “Please. Help, please.”

“You’d better come in and use our landline.” The woman tossed her long, steel grey hair over her shoulder and led the way into the house.

Inside was another woman of about the same age. She looked between the two of them, eyebrows raised.

“Accident,” the first woman said briefly. “Where’s the phone?”

Lucy was maneuvered to the couch and handed a cordless phone. Her cold, bloodied fingers shook,
but she managed to dial 911.

“And you can’t tell us where he is?” the dispatcher repeated.

“No.” Lucy stopped herself from snapping back that there weren’t exactly mile markers up there. “But I can show you.”

A pause as the other woman relayed this. Then she came back: “What’s your present location?”

Lucy got the address from the woman who had led her inside. “It’s right by the road,” she added. “It goes right up—”

“And are you safe now?”

“Wh— yes. Yes.”

“The officers will be there in twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes—!

When they hung up, she thought she might throw up from the anxiety of waiting. She hurt everywhere, she was cold, and Garcia was out there somewhere feeling a thousand times worse.

The woman who had let her in sent her to wash her hands, then pulled gloves on and cracked open a startlingly extensive first aid kit. “Pretty foolish of you all to be joyriding up there at this time of the night,” the woman commented.

“We weren’t joyriding,” Lucy said tiredly, and winced as the woman started to get the grit out of her hands. She would have protested being handled like this, except she was pretty sure that if handed the supplies herself, she would have just stared at them blankly.

“We got lost following the detour,” she added.

“I told you they put the sign at a confusing place,” the second woman said. “We had a tanker crash just yesterday,” she explained, offering Lucy a steaming paper cup. “Melted the asphalt on both sides.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said gratefully, and let it warm her other hand, relieved she didn’t have to worry about getting blood on their china.

“I’m Mary, and this is Jane,” the second woman added.


Jane switched to her other hand. The tea cooled to the point where Lucy could take a sip. She was startled to taste—

“Is this… chamomile?” she asked, trying not to sound rude.

“Yes,” Mary said. “Don’t worry; worked up as you are, it’ll just take the edge off.”

“Thank… you.” I think. But it was hot, and Lucy was cold, and she didn’t argue.

“Are you hungry?” Mary added.
“...yes?” The yogurt felt like a long time ago. “Yes,” she realized.

The run across the desert had felt interminable. To now be sitting on the chintz-covered sofa of two complete strangers, in the middle of Wyoming, eating cheesy potatoes at eleven o’clock at night, was surreal—God, what was taking the police so long?

“Thank you,” she said again, when Jane finished with her other hand. “For— for everything, for letting me in, for not thinking I was a crazy robber…”

“Oh, we could deal with a robber,” Jane assured her, and glanced casually at the shotgun leaning in the corner.

It occurred to Lucy that, maybe not here, but maybe at another house, this all might have gone very differently had she not been a young-looking white woman.

She started at every noise from outside. Had it been twenty minutes yet? It felt closer to thirty. The old-fashioned clock on the wall told her it had only been ten.

She nearly vibrated with impatience as Jane and Mary settled down in front of the TV. It wasn’t their fault. They’d been incredibly generous, incredibly gracious. She—she just—

She threw her plate and cup away and declined a refill. She used the bathroom. She finally resorted to pacing in their entryway.

“I’m sorry,” she said, as both women looked up at her. “It’s just—my friend—”

“Did I hear right that you ran all the way down White Mountain?” Mary asked.

“Whatever that ridge is.”

“Then if your friend has half as much grit as you, he’ll be all right.”

Lucy nodded numbly. It was true, Garcia was a survivor.

Finally blue and red lights reflected in from outside. She yanked the door open. “Thank you so much,” she told the two women one last time, no less sincerely for being so rushed.

“Good luck with your friend,” Jane told her, and came to close the door behind her.

Coming up the driveway were an older white man and a young Latina cop, and behind the two squad cars was an SUV and a big off-road vehicle of some kind. “Miss Preston?” the man asked.

She and the two cops all piled into the off-road vehicle, which had the BLM logo on the side; she rode shotgun, and another white man was behind the wheel. The EMTs would follow them in the SUV.

The vehicles made quick work of the ridge Lucy had stumbled down. “Left or right?” the driver asked at the top.

“Right. Three or four miles, I’m not sure. If we reach our car, we’ve gone too far. And I left a duffel bag where—where we fell over.”

They bounced along the road she’d so painfully traversed, headlights illuminating the ruts and holes with which she’d become infinitely familiar. Lucy looked at the clock, and at the speedometer, and clutched at the door handle like she could make them move faster by doing so.
Finally she saw the gleam of metal up ahead. “Stop. It’s— it’s around here somewhere…”

She tumbled out of the off-roader and switched on Garcia’s flashlight. Every little rock and hillock looked like the duffel bag in the dark. How far from the car had they come before going over the side? The whole bank had crumbled away, that should be visible…

“There!” she said finally. That was unmistakably her duffel bag with her blanket on top. “He’s down there.” She plunged down the hill side. She was afraid to yell in case she… didn’t get a response, but he was right—

He was not right there.

What the hell.

She looked around, panicked. Her bag was at the top. He should be right here. His bag wasn’t far off. He had been here, she wasn’t—

As the policewoman came to stand behind her, Lucy saw a hole in the ground that could have plausibly held an old fence post, and— she looked closer. The light soil was stained with blood.

“Garcia!” she yelled. It echoed back. “GARCIA!”

“…Lucy!”

His voice, strong and close, sent an overwhelming jolt of relief and adrenaline through her. She wiped her eyes as she took off running, the cop right behind her.

They found him crumpled on the other side of a low rise, face in the dirt. She saw the thing sticking out of his leg and felt sick. From the look of it, he’d pulled it out of the ground and somehow dragged himself, on his stomach, all the way over here.

She dropped to her knees beside him. “Garcia,” she panted. “I’m—are—”

He managed to raise his head. “I see you brought the cavalry,” he panted.

“What the hell were you thinking?” she demanded. “You didn’t think I’d come back?” She couldn’t take any more tonight. Thinking about him thinking that— her heart was going to break.

“I knew you’d have to be dead or incapacitated not to come back.” The rock-steady assurance with which he said it calmed her. “I was— cold, and… kept picturing you…”

He didn’t finish, but she imagined the end of it was something like dead or incapacitated.

Lucy backed off and gave the EMTs space to work. She tried to interpret his condition from their expressions, but it was dark and they just looked grim and professional. Soon, they had him loaded on a stretcher. Lucy grabbed all their scattered gear, and the EMTs let her squeeze in the back of the SUV, which had been modified to fit patients and medical equipment.

She took hold of Garcia’s hand. “Let’s talk about this bullshit idea you have that you’re disposable,” she said, as one of the EMTs got behind the wheel and the other climbed into the back.

As the engine started, Garcia squeezed her hand, hard. She realized just how much pain he had to be in, and let it go.

For now.
She held his hand all the way, watching him worriedly. The ride was terrible, and it had to be even worse for him, with his leg jolted every time they went over a bump. At least the pained noises he couldn’t bite back let her know he was conscious.

“You’ll get the car out tomorrow?” he murmured.

“Yeah. Don’t worry.”

He also managed to hand his gun off to her when the EMT wasn’t looking. She stuffed it in her bag. It was reassuring that he was alert enough to think about things like this.

An ambulance was waiting when they reached actual pavement. The police and one of the paramedics peeled off; the other paramedic, Garcia, and Lucy transferred to the ambulance. The paramedic put an IV in him. In the bright light, Lucy looked more closely at him, at his leg, and felt sick.

“How far to the hospital?” she asked. Was there even one closer than Utah?

“About ten minutes.”

They reached the hospital; Lucy stayed out of the way as they got Garcia out, then tried to follow him back. The double doors swung shut in her face, leaving her standing there holding two duffel bags and a dirty blanket.

She sank down in a chair in the nearly empty waiting room, and… waited. And waited. She started to shake, and couldn’t stop, even when she wrapped the blanket around her. She got some terrible hot coffee from the machine, which helped. She took out her phone—she needed to talk to someone, so badly—but she still didn’t have a damn signal.

She approached the desk for at least the third time that night. “Excuse me?” she asked. “I was just wondering if you had an update?”

“Ma’am, when I have an update, I will call you over.” The young Latino nurse was visibly trying to be patient.

She sat. She stood, and paced. Her swollen feet ached, badly, her toes jammed up against her sneakers. She went through his bag for a book to distract her. She stared at the pages for about a minute before she realized it was upside down. She got more coffee.

“Ma’am?”

She nearly jumped out of her seat, and hurried over to the front desk. “Yes!”

“Do you have Mr. Flynn’s insurance information?”

“… oh.” She deflated. She dug her handbag out of her duffel, found the cards Denise had sent them off with, and handed it over.

She went back to waiting.

“Ma’am?”

She jolted back to wakefulness. “Yes. Hi. Yes.”

“Mr. Flynn has been stabilized, and he’s in fair condition.”
She breathed out slowly. “Can I see him?”

The nurse looked up at her. “No, ma’am. It’s two am, and he’s sleeping.”

“But—”

“You can see him tomorrow, during visiting hours.”

“But— I have his, his things—”

“Give it to me and I’ll make sure it gets back to him.”

Reluctantly, she handed over the duffel. She suddenly felt— so alone. The harsh fluorescent lights seemed to smite her.

“You said he’s in fair condition?” She hated how small her voice sounded.

“That’s what his nurse said, yes.”

Lucy sniffled. She put her hand up to hide her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she choked out. “I’m— sorry—”

“It’s all right.” The long-suffering nurse, who might’ve gotten desk duty just by virtue of his patient, soothing voice, put a tissue box on top of the counter.

She wiped her eyes. “Is there— is there a motel in walking distance?”

She shouldered her bag again and trudged out of the emergency room. He’d said it was just a mile, but one more mile felt so, so far.

A police car pulled up alongside. Lucy stepped onto the grass, wearily, and waited for whatever the hell it was now. She didn’t think she could take anything more.

The window rolled down. “Hospital security, ma’am,” said the Black woman behind the wheel. “Can I offer you a ride?”

Lucy nearly cried all over again.

She checked in at the motel, walked into the room, dropped her bag on the bed… she’d nap for just a few hours, and then go back and see…

#

She woke to daylight streaming through the curtains.

Her first thought was, why the hell do I feel so bad?

Her second: where’s Garcia?

She remembered everything, and sat bolt upright. Oh my God, oh my God—

She gulped down a protein bar and hurried through a shower. Her poor feet were so swollen, she couldn’t get her sneakers on. She had to put her sandals on instead, though it was cold. Her hands ached as she dragged the brush through her hair.

She walked into the hospital. “Hello,” she said brightly, feeling much less wraithlike after eight hours of sleep. “I’m here to see Garcia Flynn. Could you please give me his room number?”
“Morning visiting hours just ended,” the receptionist said, not looking up. “Come back at six.”

Lucy stared at the top of his head, and wondered if she could make his bald spot catch fire through sheer disgruntlement.

… she should probably eat something.

“Can you give me an update on his condition?” she asked, much more politely than she felt, because she knew, intellectually, that it was not this man’s fault at all. “Or, privacy laws—”

He tapped at his keyboard. “What’s your name?”

“Lucy Preston.”

More typing. “It looks like he did sign a release form authorizing you to receive privileged medical information, Dr. Preston. He’s in good condition—” The man read off a bunch of medical jargon that Lucy didn’t understand at all.

He thought she was that kind of doctor, didn’t he.

“Right,” she said. “Thank you.” She just held on to good condition.

“… is there a tow truck company within walking distance?” she added.

The man pointed her to the phone book.

It was an hour before the tow truck arrived. The driver was a man old enough to be her father who insisted on calling her ‘sweetheart,’ and who chattered the whole way down the interstate— his truck couldn’t handle the back road up to the ridge, apparently— and down the terrible gravel road.

“I should probably tell you,” Lucy said finally, staring out the window at the horses below.

“There’s something in the back of the car that if you ask too many questions about, federal agents are going to ask questions of their own.”

He was quieter, after that.

He got the car jumped and then insisted on following her all the way back to town, which she appreciated. The car sounded gratifyingly normal, but it had yesterday, too.

She still had hours before she could see Garcia. She still had no signal. But—

A trip to the grocery store, a chat with a helpful cashier, and a detour to a local restaurant, and she had what she needed. She spent about ten minutes writing the card out, and then made her way back to the subdivision where Jane and Mary lived. She parked across the street and opened the mailbox—

“What are you doing?”

Lucy jumped, and turned to see Jane come out from behind a pickup truck. “I— I know I can’t repay you and Mary for what you did, but— I wanted to say thank you, so… here.” She held out the card. “It’s just— a gift card. To a restaurant.”

Jane looked at her, and seemed like she was trying not to smile. “That was sweet. You find your friend?”

Lucy nodded.
“He doing okay?”

“He— I haven’t seen him yet, but they said he’s… okay.”

“You waiting for visiting hours?”

Lucy nodded.

“Hey, Mary!” Jane called, back towards the house. “You hungry?”

Lucy nearly protested the lunch invitation until she realized the last meal she’d had had been cheesy potatoes at this house about twelve hours ago. And that she was about ten minutes from either fainting, or turning into Lucyzilla and razing the entire town out of sheer, low-blood-sugar-induced crankiness.

So the three of them headed to the restaurant Lucy had picked. Over lunch, Lucy learned that Mary and Jane were both veterans of the Geological Service; that they’d lived together in Denver in the eighties before both of them had gotten married; and that they’d reconnected about ten years ago, after Mary’s divorce and the death of Jane’s husband, and had decided to move together out here, because they loved the scenery and because Mary had a son and granddaughter in Evanston.

“What about you?” Mary asked.

“I’m… a history professor, I’ve been working out in, um, North Carolina…” Lucy gave them the brief rundown.

They were quiet when Lucy was done. “Wow,” Jane said, swallowing a bite of her burger. “Last time I heard a story with that many holes in it, it was actually a piece of Swiss cheese.”

Lucy choked on her water. Mary gave Jane a reproachful look, but didn’t look like she… disagreed.

“There’s a lot I can’t tell you,” Lucy agreed. “And I don’t want to lie.”

“That’s very fair,” Mary said firmly.

Lucy managed to snag the bill before the two women could get it. “Goodbye,” she told them, at the front of the restaurant. “And thank you, again, so much. Look me up if you’re ever in San Francisco. I’ll take you to lunch.”

They exchanged phone numbers. Lucy hugged Mary and shook hands with Jane, and drove back to the hotel.

She washed and dried the dirty blanket, set both her phone alarm and the bedside clock alarm, and took a nap. She woke up starving, and stopped at a little Mexican restaurant before she went back to the hospital.

She was ready to storm through an entire phalanx of nurses to see Garcia, but nobody tried to stop her this time. She walked into Garcia’s room, eager and anxious, and found him asleep.

She smiled ruefully, took the chair by the side of the bed, and took out a book.

Maybe half an hour later, he stirred. “Lucy?” His voice was rough, his eyelids were heavy, and he looked a little feverish, but he was undeniably pleased to see her.

She gently took his hand, the one without an IV. He felt feverish, too. “Hey,” she said softly. “How are you feeling?”
He made a noise that sounded like it tried to be ‘fine’ and never quite got there. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “Yeah, I’m good.”

“Good.” He fell asleep again.

This was anticlimactic. But it was still so good just to sit here, with him, even if they couldn’t actually talk.

He woke again about forty-five minutes later and smiled drowsily at her.

She smiled back.

“Don’t have a death wish,” he said. “Risky… for you. Didn’t want you to blame yourself if… something happened.” He closed his eyes again.

That made intellectual sense, and it was so like him, but her heart still hurt. “You’re not disposable to me, Garcia,” she said softly. “You’re indispensable.”

He cleared his throat. His eyes shone. “We made it through,” he managed. “Thank—”

“Garcia Flynn, don’t you dare.”

He snorted, and sank back against the pillows.

There was so much more she wanted to tell him right now, so much she’d been waiting so long to say, but… but she wanted him alert and coherent, when they had that conversation. Otherwise it was just a recipe for disaster.

“What did the doctors say?” Lucy asked quietly.

“Exposure… blood loss… possible infection… nothing serious.”

Nothing serious— nothing— serious—

“Gave me a lotta blood,” he added. “Wanna keep me overnight for… observation.”

She swallowed. “You said you wouldn’t lie to me, Garcia.” She didn’t want to trouble him when he was so weak— but she had to know.

“’m not,” he assured her. “Chart’s—” He nodded to the foot of the bed.

Then he fell asleep again, which told her more about the toll last night had taken on his body than he had.

She stayed until they came to kick her out. She tucked the clean blanket around him, careful to avoid his leg. He stirred, and looked at her.

She very gently kissed his hair. “I’ll be back in the morning,” she promised.

She went back to the motel, took a long, hot bath, and slept again.

#

She walked into his hospital room the next morning, and found him sitting up, alert and dressed.

Something tight eased in her chest. “Hey,” she said softly.
He smiled at her. “You look, uh, better today.”

“. . . I think I’m supposed to say that.”

He snorted.

She sank down in the chair. “Garcia,” she began, and hesitated. “What day is today?”

“Friday.”

She cleared her throat. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Your hands are in your lap, Lucy.”

“. . . right.”

“Lucy, what—”

“Garcia,” she said again. She moved to perch on the side of the bed. “This is important.”

The room suddenly felt small. And warm. And it was hard to breathe.

“Garcia.”

“That’s the third time you’ve said my name,” he pointed out, trying not to smile.

She reached down and took his hand. “I’ve— I’ve been trying to say for a while—”

What a bad start. She tried again: “When we get back to San Francisco—”

He looked at her.

And what was she trying to say? Please stay forever?

She went with something less emotionally weighted. “Do— do you want to go on a date? A whole series of dates? Lasting— a while?”

There. It was out, it was completely unambiguous, and . . .

And he was frowning.

No. No, she had not been wrong through all of this—

“Do we have to wait until San Francisco?” He sounded confused.

A noise between a sob of relief, and a laugh, escaped her, and she leaned forward and kissed him.

He made a guttural noise; the fervor with which he kissed her back told her that he’d been holding back his feelings just like she had. His hands came up to her shoulders, to her neck. He touched her like she was the last water before the desert, infinitely precious and to be savored. The tenderness of his fingers in her hair was a revelation.

After a long, wonderful moment, she pulled back and touched her forehead to his. “I didn’t— I haven’t known what to say,” she panted.

“That worked fine,” he assured her, voice rough.
She kissed the corner of his mouth, but he broke away. “I— I wanted,” he said. “To tell you— to ask you— but I was afraid if something went wrong, the rest of the trip would be awkward for you. I was gonna ask you to dinner in San Francisco—”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “And also do you— do you want to move in together, because I know that’s usually a later conversation but the thought of not seeing you every day is just— no.” She cupped his face. “I want you around. Through— thick and thin.” She almost said better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health, but that was a whole other conversation.

He looked stunned. “Yes,” he managed. He kissed her hard.

God, this felt so good. They’d been waiting so long, almost speaking, close but not quite, that it felt like water after the desert—and now the slide of his mouth against hers, impatient and gentle in turn—the rasp of his stubble against her lips—

She leaned even further into him. One kiss blended into the next, and the only sounds in the room were the sounds of their lips, of his soft noise when their tongues touched, of their rough breathing.

If they did this for the rest of visiting hours, it might possibly be enough to tide her over—

“Oh my God.”

At the familiar voice behind her, Lucy nearly fell into Garcia. She turned ungracefully to see Agent Christopher standing in the doorway. Lucy blinked at her stupidly. “Agent Christopher!” What? “We weren’t, um.”

“Expecting you,” Garcia supplied.

Agent Christopher raised an eyebrow. “Yes,” she said. “I could see that.”

“What— why—” Lucy tried to formulate a complete sentence.

Agent Christopher raised the other eyebrow. “First you tell me you won’t be stopping long in Wyoming,” she said. “Then the car stops dead in the middle of nowhere for more than twelve hours, and when it does move, it ends up right down the street from the hospital. And then I can’t get either of you on the phone, for a whole day, and none of the team has heard from you, either.”

“Oh,” Lucy said stupidly. “I haven’t— had signal since Casper. I’ve been trying—”

“And you couldn’t use a landline?”

“I didn’t know you were worried. You haven’t been checking in with us every day or anything.”

Agent Christopher sighed. “And you’re both…” She looked Garcia up and down. “All right? Tell me what happened.”

Lucy sat back down on the edge of the bed to let Agent Christopher have the chair as they talked. That it let her hold Garcia’s hand was totally unrelated.

“I’ll get a tech out here to look at the car,” Agent Christopher said, when they’d told her the whole story. “It sounds like the connection to the auxiliary battery might’ve been loosened by a bump, but they’ll be able to tell for sure. I’ll send the car back with an agent, and the two of you can fly back with me.”

“Oh—” Lucy’s hand tightened on Garcia’s. She looked down at him. She hadn’t even thought
about this part.

Garcia glanced up at her. “I think we, uh, might want to finish the road trip.”

Agent Christopher looked unimpressed. “Can you even walk?”

“I don’t need to walk to drive.”

“I can drive,” Lucy said. “You’re supposed to keep your leg up.”

“I don’t like this,” Agent Christopher said. “You still have to cross some of the most deserted country in the… country, and, no offense, Flynn, you’re not at full strength.”

“It’s not that far,” Lucy said. “It’s, what, a thousand miles? We could do that in two days if we had to.”

“You’d have to pay an agent,” Garcia pointed out. “Not us.”

“It’s, you know. Good stewardship of taxpayer resources,” Lucy added.

Agent Christopher looked at her sternly. “Dr. Preston, I have children. That big-eyed, soulful stare is not going to work on me.” But even as she said it, her expression softened.

“Agent Christopher,” Garcia said, quiet, but firm. “The trip has meant a lot to Lucy.”

Agent Christopher looked between the two of them for a long moment. “You’d better hurry,” she said finally. “No more moseying slowly across the country on romantic side trips. And yes, I know I was the one who said to take your time.”

“Oh,” Lucy said, feeling her face heat. “Actually— we just—”

Agent Christopher’s eyebrow made her sputter into silence.

Garcia cleared his throat. “The doctor said she would probably discharge me later today. We can —”

“Rest at the motel and hit the road tomorrow,” Lucy said firmly.

“Right. That.”

Agent Christopher looked between the two of them. “Lucy, could I have a private word with Flynn? And then you and I should talk.”

Garcia gave Lucy a soft smile. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Choosing not to care that they had an audience, Lucy leaned down and kissed him. Then she stepped out of the room.

But she wasn’t out of earshot when Agent Christopher spoke. Her voice was glacial — arctic. “Be careful with her.”

Lucy froze. She listened for Garcia’s retort. Should she go back and intervene?

“Always,” Garcia said softly.

Footsteps, and Agent Christopher came alongside her. “I thought you needed to talk to Garcia?”
Lucy asked innocently.

“It was a very short conversation,” Agent Christopher said drily. “Is there anywhere around here we can get lunch?”

“I’m sorry you came all the way out here for nothing,” Lucy said, when they were seated at a diner. “I really am.”

“Well. Better safe than sorry, I suppose. And having you on the road has meant I don’t have to worry about Rittenhouse grabbing you, so it’s worth it just for that.”

“You really think they’re gone?” Lucy said quietly.

“Yes. All the evidence points to that.”

Lucy breathed out slowly.

Then her bag started vibrating and wouldn’t stop. Lucy grabbed for it, discovered she suddenly had a signal, and found twelve missed calls and fifteen text messages. “Do you mind if I…”

“Go ahead.”

She scanned everything quickly and wrote one message to the whole group: *sorry for disappearing! we had a little trouble with the car but we’re fine. no signal in wyoming though.*

“Thank you,” she said, when they were waiting for the check. “For letting us finish the trip.”

Agent Christopher took her time responding. “You look a lot better than the last time I saw you,” she said finally.

“I do?”

“Less… brittle. More resilient.” She wiped her mouth. “I like to take care of my people. And if this is what you needed— you’ve earned a chance to… recover.” Then she gave Lucy a stern look. “I meant what I said about finishing the trip quickly, however. Keep the romantic lollygagging to a minimum.”

“Would you please define romantic lollygagging?” Lucy asked innocently.

“I *beg* your pardon?”

They paid and said goodbye. Agent Christopher promised that the tech was on his way from Salt Lake City, and made Lucy promise to be very careful.

Garcia called her room in late afternoon to tell her he was being discharged. She hurried over to the hospital. They’d brought him down in a wheelchair, and she could feel his disgust just by looking at him. He did take the crutches. It clearly pained him to move his leg, but not as bad as she’d feared.

They got him in the front seat. “That— that definitely, um,” she began. “That *did* happen this morning. Right?”

His lips twitched. “Do we need to call Agent Christopher back as a witness?”

“Oh God.”
“C’mere, Lucy.”

She leaned over, and he very thoroughly refreshed her memory of what had happened that morning. “Lucy,” he murmured against her mouth, his fingers sliding gently through her hair.

Finally, she pulled back, reluctantly, his fingers trailing softly down her cheek. This was spectacular, but it wasn’t comfortable. She should get him somewhere where he could keep his leg up.

The Homeland Security tech arrived shortly after they got back to the room, so Lucy went to meet him. She left him poking carefully over the car, found Garcia asleep, threw her blanket in the laundry to wash off all the hospital germs, and went out on foot to get some dinner.

The tech intercepted her on her way back to the room, and confirmed Agent Christopher’s guess. The rough road had loosened the connection to the auxiliary battery, which took up a good chunk of the detector, and the machine had drained the car’s main battery quickly. Later bumps must have reseated the connection. “I’ve reinforced it. It shouldn’t come out again,” he explained. “But maybe stick to pavement from now on.”

He left; Lucy went back to their room. “Everything all right?” Garcia asked.

“Yeah, the car is cleared.” She sat down beside him on the bed, and kissed him gently, taking her time.

Sometimes at the beginning of a new relationship she felt a little shy. But this? She wasn’t shy about this. This just felt one hundred percent right.

Over dinner, Lucy shared the day’s other news: “Agent Christopher pulled some strings to get my mother declared dead and her estate is… on its way to settled.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’ll have money,” Lucy said bluntly. “And the house. Not much of the former, the medical bills—”

She paused. Rethought that.

“I guess I never got totally used to this new timeline,” she said quietly. “Anyway. I’ll have money to get by until I can find a job.” It was one less thing to worry about.

They got ready for bed. Lucy came out of the bathroom, and hesitated. Garcia had taken the other bed, the one she obviously hadn’t been occupying.

“You’re, uh, welcome to join me,” he said, carefully and a little awkwardly. “If you’d like.”

“I would like very much. I just don’t want to hurt you.”

“Ah. That, I think we can manage.”

She helped him prop his injured leg up on pillows, and stack a few more pillows up as a protective barrier. Then she slid carefully into bed beside him, and nestled against him.

“Mmm,” she sighed, contented. He was solid and warm, and he smelled good.

She felt more than heard the ghost of a chuckle from him, and felt him kiss her hair. She slid even closer, fitting her body into the contours of his, and quickly fell asleep.
This time, when she woke snuggled up to him, she felt absolutely no desire to flee. Or, really, to move at all.

It wasn’t long before he woke. When he saw her there beside him, he looked overwhelmed. She leaned up and kissed him, not giving a damn about their morning breath. “Good morning,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he breathed. “Very.” He rolled onto his side— and winced.

She reached for the painkillers and the water on the nightstand, and helped him sit up far enough to swallow. He swallowed a pained noise. “This is not how I imagined our first night together going,” he muttered.

“I wouldn’t change it.”

He looked at her.

“… I mean, besides the hole in your leg. Obviously. It’s just—”

She hesitated. He watched her patiently.

“Earlier in the trip, I thought… I didn’t trust my own feelings about you. I was afraid it was just the trip. That because I was happy and relaxed for the first time in… since this began, I was mistaking that for… for another feeling.”

“But… when we looked for that boy. When the car broke down. That wasn’t happy. Or relaxing. Or romantic. And it’ll keep happening like that. Not because of Rittenhouse, but because of life. And—” she looked at him. “And there’s no one I’d rather be with through it.” She swallowed. “For… for better or for worse.”

He looked stunned.

Inwardly, she cringed. “Did I say too much?”

“No,” he breathed, staring at her. “I— I don’t— think you did.” He reached for her, and cradled her against him.

She could’ve stayed in bed with him all morning, but life intruded. He assured her he was all right to stand in the shower, so she showered first and went out to get them some breakfast while he took his slower turn.

She wanted to make him breakfast, she decided. When they got home. She wasn’t a good cook— sometimes she was a downright bad cook— but even she could handle scrambled eggs, toast, and fresh fruit. She wanted to cook with him, she wanted to sleep beside him, she wanted to spend quiet nights reading with him… hell, she wanted to go grocery shopping with him. She just… she just wanted him.

She walked into the room just as he limped out of the bathroom, still glistening from his shower except where the towel was slung around his hips.

She stopped in her tracks. This was a rather different kind of wanting him…

She looked him slowly up, and down…
... and then got to the wound in his leg, that he hadn’t rebandaged yet, and felt a very different, much less pleasant, kind of lightheadedness.

She put breakfast down on the bed, and moved his duffel bag and the first aid kit where he could easily reach them. “Need help?” she asked, carefully not looking.

“Ah, don’t take this the wrong way, Lucy, but what would be most helpful is not having to bring you out of a faint.”

“I’m not going to faint,” she muttered. But she didn’t turn around.

When he told her it was safe to look, he’d already, disappointingly, put his pants on. She still watched as he tugged his shirt on, and didn’t try to hide it. His mouth twitched, and she knew he saw her.

They sat side-by-side on the bed, and ate scrambled eggs and sausage and pancakes out of Styrofoam containers. When they were done, she threw everything away; he bent forward, and breathed in sharply.

“Here. Let me.” She sat on the floor, and reached for his socks.

“Lucy, you really don’t have to—”

“If our positions were reversed, would you do anything different?”

She looked up. His expression was rueful, but he, wisely, didn’t try to deny it.

She carefully maneuvered his socks on, trying to jar his injured leg as little as possible. Then she did the same with his shoes, conscientiously double-knotting the laces.

When she was done, he offered her a hand up, bracing his good leg for leverage. She stood, and looked down at him.

“Are you really up to this?” she asked quietly. “It’s not too late for you to get on a plane. I have no idea how you’re going to keep your leg elevated in the car.”

“Well, I definitely couldn’t keep it elevated on a plane, Lucy.”

She just looked at him. “You were born difficult, weren’t you.”

“My mother was in labor for an unconscionably long time, yes.” Then he became serious. “I’m all right, Lucy. I’ve had much worse, and…” He hesitated. “I’d like to finish our trip.”

Our trip. She liked the sound of that.

“I’ll try not to be too much of a, uh, burden,” he added.

She definitely did not like the sound of that. She looked at him in disgruntled disbelief. Did she have to buy a squirt bottle and use negative association to train him out of believing things like that?

She sat beside him, on his good side. “You’re not a burden, Garcia.” She leaned in close. He slid his arm around her and tried to kiss her, but she pulled out of reach. “You’re not disposable. You are not any of the other self-deprecating things you think you are. Do you understand?”

“Lucy, you just called me difficult.”
“That’s different and you know it.” Again, he tried to kiss her; again, she pulled away, then leaned in again. “Do you understand, Garcia?”

“You’re just gonna sit here like this until I…” he said in disbelief, eyes straying to her lips.

“Yep. Unless you want me to leave…”

His hand tightened on her hip. “Lucy, this is blackmail.”

“No, it’s extortion. I’m surprised you don’t know the difference.”

He snorted.

“You scared the hell out of me the other night,” she added. “I’m willing to play dirty if that’s what it takes to get you to see how much you mean to me.”

“All right, Lucy,” he breathed. “I— yes.”

She gently kissed the corner of his mouth. He groaned, barely audible, and brought his other hand up to cradle the back of her neck as he tilted his head towards hers.

“Shall we?” he asked, several minutes later.

She cupped his face in her hand, feeling his lovely scruff against her palm. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes.”

She stood, and offered her hands to help him up.

Chapter End Notes

**Empire, Wyoming**

**Fort Laramie National Historic Site**

**Register Cliff**

Douglas, Wyoming's **Jackalope Days**

The Sand Creek Massacre is, tragically, totally historically accurate. To write about it, I used [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org) and this article from Smithsonian Magazine. The **Sand Creek Massacre Trail** exists to mark the movements of the Southern Cheyenne and the Northern Arapaho peoples in the years after the massacre. TW for all three links: references to brutal murder and dismemberment.

**Independence Rock**

**Ulysses** by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The **Pilot Butte Wild Horse Scenic Loop** (the site also has a good PDF brochure with more information)
“I know the Oregon Trail was my idea,” she said, “but I hope you don’t mind giving up.” They’d passed the turnoff where the trail left Fort Bridger, but that would have taken them north through Wyoming, along the winding Snake River Valley in Idaho, and then down the Columbia. Then they’d still have to drive south through the Willamette valley or along the Pacific Coast. Dramatic and historic, but also long.

He shook his head. He’d wedged himself improbably sideways into the passenger seat, so that with his foot propped carefully up on the dash, the puncture wound on his leg was almost higher than his heart. She was impressed, but also determined to make good time towards California.

“I hope you’re not too disappointed,” he said after a minute.

She shook her head. ‘I’ve had enough of the desert for a while. I know we still have to cross a lot of it, but I don’t mind taking the shorter route.”

She wanted to see Preston, Idaho. She and Dad had joked about going there, once or twice. But it would keep.

“Besides,” she added. “We’re really just leaving the Oregon Trail for the Mormon Trail.”

“Ah.”

He shifted in his seat, then reached back and pulled one of her blankets out from behind the passenger seat. He refolded it, then wedged it under his leg.

“Better?” she asked.

He nodded.

Then he said, “Yesterday morning, I woke up, and I, uh…” He glanced sideways. “I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined you being there, the night before. But I saw your blanket, and I knew I hadn’t.”

She smiled.

A steep grade sign ahead gave her a feeling of… not PTSD. She didn’t want to trivialize that, not even in her head. But it was enough to make her feel foreboding informed by experience, anyway.

The upside to taking the interstate was that there’d be people around if they broke down.

The terrain became rougher, and red rock began to show through the surprisingly abundant grass. Sharing the road with so many other vehicles was a little annoying… but after the last few days, it was reassuring, too.

She glanced at the map. “Garcia?”

“Mmm.”

“How would you feel about a very small detour?”

“Is it paved?”
“I think so. Otherwise I’d turn around.”

He yawned. “Yes.”

She felt a little guilty. “Are you sure?”

As often happened, he seemed to know what she was thinking. “It’s like you said, Lucy,” he replied after a minute, rather sleepily. “And thou beside me in the wilderness, and wilderness is Paradise enough.”

It did not exactly surprise her to hear him talk like that. Not any more. Yet the way he said such earth-shaking things, so casually, nonetheless took her breath away.

She was so rarely enough for anyone. For Amy and for Dad, she had been, but… they were both gone. She hadn’t been enough for Mom. Hadn’t been enough for many of her colleagues, who expected a Carol clone and weren’t satisfied with an independent, accomplished scholar in her own right trying to step out of her mother’s shadows. Hadn’t been enough for Wyatt, either.

But Garcia?

His regard for her—open, honest, asking nothing in return—sometimes overwhelmed her. She was enough for him. What was more, he’d made sure she knew it. Lucy had enough self-awareness to know how rare that was.

She was so wrapped up in marveling at the rightness of what had finally happened that she nearly missed the exit she wanted. “Uh, so this is Echo Canyon,” she said. “It was a critical route on the way to Salt Lake City. It’s famous for its weird rock formations.”

She turned onto the old road, which ran along the base of the cliffs, close enough for her to be astonished by the details of the formations. There was something wild and beautiful about the red rocks in the bright sunshine. She understood why this area featured so prominently in emigrant diaries.

“The road’s not hurting you, is it?” she asked after a few minutes. It was paved, but rougher than the interstate.

“No.” He glanced at her. “I’ll tell you if, uh, that changes.”

“Good,” she said. “Interpret that broadly. Don’t be stoic.”

He snorted.

The canyon narrowed, squeezing the road, the railroad, the creek, the power lines, and the interstate into a very small space. It was easy to see why Mormon settlers had chosen this spot to fortify against federal troops. As she drove, she felt some of the excitement of the trip return, no longer overwhelmed by panic and exhaustion. The thought of crossing the worst of the desert, still ahead, still made her feel uneasy, but she could enjoy the journey, too.

She missed the turn for the interstate, and ended up on a different surface road. “Shit,” she muttered.

Garcia looked at the map. “This road follows the interstate a while, if you wanna keep going.”

She did, but… “Just… tell me if you see anything out of place, okay?”
He looked at her.

“I’m just a little jumpy after the other night,” she defended herself.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just, you’re talking to the man who fell off a cliff.”

She snorted. “We both fell off the cliff when it collapsed under us.”

“Do you have a feeling that anything’s wrong?” he asked after a minute.

She’d spent enough time around soldiers to understand. “My gut instinct isn’t warning me about trouble, if that’s what you mean. I’m just… yeah.”

“We’ll get home, Lucy,” he told her quietly.

She glanced sideways at him, and nodded.

So they followed a quiet road that hugged a startlingly blue reservoir. Snow still shrouded the very tops of the peaks and ridges across the water, reminding them how slowly summer came in the mountains.

The road took them through a neat, quiet little town, and then past scattered ranches. She pulled off at a historical marker. “It’s for an old stagecoach station,” she reported.

“Ah.” He stopped the slow process of getting out of the car. “Could you, uh, come over here?”

She stood at the open door. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he assured her, taking her wrist and gently urging her towards the edge of the seat. “I just, uh, need a little help with something….”

She perched on the edge of the seat, and he cupped her face in both hands and slowly, carefully, kissed her.

“Mmm—” She sighed, and leaned into him, bringing one hand up to his hair and resting the other on his very solid shoulder for balance. The kiss went on for a while.

When she finally pulled back, just so she could breathe, he looked dazed. His smile was small, and almost shy, and thoroughly sweet, and the only reason she didn’t kiss it off of him was so she could appreciate it.

God, he did things to her. And she wanted to do things to him. But not by the side of a country road in Utah.

“Was that enough help?” she asked.

He smirked at her. “For now.”

They followed the little country road back to the interstate; she glanced at the map, then shook her head.

“Wanna take the back road?” he asked.

“Not through the Wasatches.”

“That bad?”
“Let’s put it this way,” she said. “If the Donner-Reed party hadn’t punched their own route through
the Wasatch Range, we probably wouldn’t know their names.”

“Ah.”

“One time, when I was eight,” she said slowly, after a few minutes. “Mom came home from a
dinner party and found me hiding in her closet with one of her books. It was on the Donner-Reed
party. I was hiding because…” She shook her head. “I didn’t want Dad, or especially Amy, to
to know what I’d just found out. I was horrified.”

“Mom must have stayed up with me half the night until I could go to sleep. When I woke up the
next morning, she’d fallen asleep in my bed. And I felt…”

Lucy swallowed.

“I felt safe,” she admitted quietly. “Knowing she wouldn’t let the monsters get me.”

Garcia made a soft, uninterpretable noise.

“And, you know, even then, what they had to eat to live—to me, that was more sad than scary,”
Lucy said. “But… they made some incredibly cruel choices, too. To survive. And I didn’t
understand that, then, I didn’t understand how people could do that.” She shook her head again. “I
didn’t believe in leaving people behind.”

“Do you now?” Though he sounded doubtful, it was a genuine question, not mocking her self-
awareness.

She thought about it. “… no,” she admitted.

Then she glanced at him. “Garcia— don’t—”

Look at me like that. Put me on a pedestal like that. She wasn’t sure she could take the mingled
admiration and sorrow in his expression.

“Lucy, you found a way to win a war that ruined me.” His voice was gravelly.

“You’re not ruined—”

“No. But I was.” His quiet assurance silenced her. “You found a better way. I’m not supposed to
admire that?”

She couldn’t argue with that part, but— “It wasn’t just me. It was all of us. Together.”

“I know,” he said. “But, Lucy, you held us together. Held us up.”

“Not always,” she reminded him quietly. “Sometimes you were the one holding me up.” Literally,
as well as metaphorically.

In a way… they’d saved each other.

He cleared his throat. “It, uh, was my pleasure.” His voice was soft, and rough, and when she
risked a quick glance at him, his eyes were a little wet. She gave him a little smile.

It was the last glance she snuck at him for a while. As the interstate snaked its way through the
mountains, it carried more traffic than she’d seen in a while. The combination of steep curves and
grades, and a crowded road, demanded her attention. A sign reading truck escape left lane showed
that the terrain meant business. But then the first glimpse of the valley stretched out beyond the pass made her catch her breath, just as it had done for the first emigrants.

Salt Lake City was fairly narrow east to west, squeezed between the Great Salt Lake and the Wasatch Front, so they pulled off the interstate before they’d gone very far. The traffic of the surface roads was a shock after days of small towns. But they found a good restaurant for lunch, and Lucy happily ordered a large side salad to go with her soup and sandwich.

“What in Salt Lake City you wanna see?” he asked, as they split a generous slice of peach pie.

“Not really,” she admitted. She knew there were many historical sites in the area, but she felt like she had emigrant-related site fatigue. Plus she was just tired. She didn’t want to traipse around the city simply because she felt obligated to see as much history as possible.

“West, then?”

… oh.

Lucy had, for some reason, envisioned stopping for the night before they crossed the desert. But there wasn’t much on the west side of the city. “Do we want to risk it this late in the day?” It was mid-afternoon, but after their last experience trying to push through…

“It’s two hours. We should get there well before dark.”

Should. She felt uneasy. But they had to cross it sometime, and if they didn’t want to play tourist, it made no sense to stop so early in the day.

“Let’s take care of a few things first,” she said.

They stopped at a gas station on the west edge of town. Lucy filled up the gas tank, checked the tire pressure, and bought ten one-liter bottles of water. She knew that was overkill, but if they broke down on the interstate, it would last them until help arrived. While she did all that and used the bathroom, Garcia searched for a place to stay on the other side of the desert. Then he walked her through checking the various fluids in the car, just in case Homeland Security’s fancy diagnostics weren’t working. Then she helped him out of the car so he could take his turn in the bathroom. When he settled in again, he was wincing.

“I’ll be all right,” he said, in response to her look.

She decided to take him at his word. She trusted him with her life; she hoped she could trust him with his own well-being. Trust that, even if he, after years of fighting, drew the line farther out than she would, he’d at least draw a line.

She had one last thing to do before they left. She texted Agent Christopher, We’re leaving Salt Lake City for Wendover. It shouldn’t take us more than three hours. I’ll text you when we get there or call from a landline if there’s no service.

She glanced at her new messages. She had one from Agent Jimenez—Isobel—showing her and Amina and Esperanza Fata. The two women leaned against each other and looked exhausted, but were beaming; Esperanza Fata was a little brown face in a bundle of green cloth. Lucy smiled, and replied, love the family photo!

Then Lucy glanced at Garcia, smiled, and said, I owe you coffee when we get back. If you want.

Isobel must have been right by her phone, because she replied immediately: YOU don’t owe ME
Coffee… and a story, Lucy replied. In response, she got a perplexed smiley face.

She also had texts from the team. From Wyatt: okay? And from Rufus: hey, just checking in.

She smiled at their both reaching out. Had they talked to Agent Christopher, perhaps, and gotten more of the story about Wyoming than Lucy had given them?

We’re crossing the Salt Lake Desert now, she said. I probably won’t have service for a while.

Wyatt, too, must have been right by his phone: thought you were following the oregon trail

We’re taking a shorter route home, Lucy replied.

As the buildings receded in the rearview mirror, she tried not to feel uneasy. Garcia, as often happened, guessed what she was thinking. “If anything does happen, we’re on the only east-west road for miles. Someone will find us.”

She nodded, and tried to relax. She hadn’t expected so much water, but at times the interstate was an island between vast, salty expanses. Even the ditch between the east and westbound sides filled up.

And then the water was gone, and it was simply brown, stretching as far as the eye could see, broken up by some sagebrush or… other low, scrubby plants; that was as far as Lucy’s botany knowledge went. The terrain felt ancient. For the first time, she truly understood the saying, ‘as old as the hills.’

“You all right?” Garcia’s voice interrupted her reverie.

“Mmm. Yeah. The driving’s not hard.”

“Not quite what I meant.”

She didn’t play dumb. Desert and deserted were, after all, basically the same word. “It helps that we’re together,” she said finally.

He reached over. The interstate was flat and straight, and there was so little traffic that she could take his hand.

“So, uh,” she said after a while.

When she didn’t continue, he made an enquiring noise.

“I guess this might be… a little premature, but…” But they were in the middle of nowhere, they had nowhere else to go, and they were due an awkward conversation.

“You’re not going to go down on one knee, Lucy? I feel a little cheated.”

She choked, glanced over, and saw his smirk.

“I, uh,” she said, and hesitated. “I don’t know how much you know.” Of course he knew about her and Wyatt, but she’d never specified whether it had involved sex.

“Wyatt and I slept together once, in the past, and… after, after everything that happened…” Lucy took a deep breath. “When we moved to North Carolina, and Agent Christopher made me see that
doctor, I got her to give me the standard STI panel.”

The worst part hadn’t been the shame of asking, which Lucy knew was unwarranted. Getting tested for STIs was just part of being an adult who had sex with different people. No, the worst part had been knowing that, if she just asked Wyatt if he was clean… she wasn’t sure she would trust him to be honest.

“Which came back all negative,” she added. “And, uh, I have an implant.” Or she never would have had unprotected sex with Wyatt in the first place.

“I did know you and Wyatt had been together,” he said, speaking with care.

“From the journal?”

“From context clues, Lucy.” He glanced at her, then continued: “Lorena and I were clean when we started sleeping together, and… there hasn’t been anyone for me, since her. I can, uh, get checked again, though.”

Lucy shook her head. She trusted that Garcia had been faithful, and she trusted his assessment of Lorena’s fidelity. “I mean, it’s not a bad idea if you want to do it, but that’s good enough for me.”

“And thanks to all my recent injuries,” he added, with mock cheerfulness, “I know for sure I don’t have anything blood borne.”

“Mmm, yeah, what an… awesome perk.” She couldn’t help laughing.

Even just the thought of making love with him… she wished they were somewhere private. She wished this conversation had been all that was standing in their way.

But if they got carried away, and his still-healing leg wound started to bleed…

*Ugh.* Her incipient arousal died a quiet death.

But they had time. They had time to do things properly, at their own speed, and not in a rush to check off relationship markers.

The salt flats seemed like a bizarre lunar landscape, with the occasional billboard looking stranger than anything else. The glare of the reflected light was strong enough that she reached for her sunglasses, only to realize they were already over her eyes.

The tire tracks through the salt were more frequent than she would have expected. “Lots of people running off the road.” She knew the flats reformed after every year’s winter rains, so these had to be fairly recent.

“Could be on purpose,” Garcia said. “The flats are used for racing.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Land speed records are regularly broken out here.”

“Huh.”

The only reason she knew for sure they were moving was that the line of brown mountains in the distance came steadily closer; one distinctive peak in particular slowly crept off to their right. When she finally saw what might have been buildings ahead, she wasn’t sure if they were a mirage.
But a few minutes brought them between a pair of cliffs to Wendover, and another few minutes got them off the interstate, into the parking lot of the hotel Garcia had found. “Wow.” She tried to get used to the sight of human habitation again. “That wasn’t just me, right? That was weird.”

“Yes.” He undid his seatbelt. “Did you, uh, promise to let Agent Christopher know we were here?”

“Oh! Thanks for reminding me.”

“I’d rather not be interrupted this time,” he explained with a smirk.

“Oh?” She looked up at him from under her eyelashes as she hit send. “Why? What did you have in mind?”

“Come about six inches closer, and find out.”

She slid over, leaned carefully over his bad leg, and guided his head to hers. As she took her time kissing him, his hand started on her waist, slowly slid up her back, and rested between her shoulder blades, solid and warm and very, very nice.

“Garcia,” she murmured against his mouth, not at all inclined to stop, but wanting to affirm for herself that this was real, this was happening.

“Lucy,” he breathed, with sacramental reverence.

When she pulled back just far enough to look at him, he started to lean in— instinctively, she thought, as if he couldn’t bear to let her go. Then he caught himself, and straightened up, and winced. She remembered that he had a hole in his leg and they should both probably get out of the car.

They were both tired. She got them some dinner, and they ate quietly. The light lingered late, at this time of year, but his body was still repairing itself and she’d done all the driving that day. So they pulled the curtains and crawled into bed early.

The warmth of his body quickly lulled her to sleep. But she woke to darkness, and checked the clock groggily: it was about three am. Was there trouble? She listened. No. Garcia was a little restless; maybe that had woke her.

The curtains had fallen open, and the panoply of stars visible even through the lights of this little town took her breath away. She wrapped her president’s blanket around her, and slipped out of bed to sit in the little chair by the window, watching the sky. It was beautiful.

She wasn’t sure how long she sat there, just enjoying the simple, peaceful pleasure of the night sky. She looked up and was startled to see Garcia watching her drowsily. “Did I wake you? I’m sorry.”

He made a vague gesture of denial she wasn’t sure she believed, and propped himself up on one elbow to see what she was seeing. “It’s beautiful.” His voice was rough with sleep.

She yawned in the middle of agreeing. She should probably go back to bed— “What are you doing?”

He rearranged the pillows and blankets and stretched out kind of diagonally across the mattress, propping up his bad leg. He patted the bed in front of him. When she climbed in with him, she discovered that from this new position, she could see the stars.
She nestled contentedly against him. He kissed her hair. She fell asleep again with his comforting solidity behind her and the beauty of the stars far above her.

#

Garcia woke rather slowly and groggily, and it took him a moment to remember why they were diagonal across the bed. Lucy, though she was no longer curled into him, had a hand on his hip, as if she hadn’t wanted to let him go.

He wanted to kiss her hair, but he let her sleep. She’d done a lot of driving yesterday, and would have more today. Could he take over some of it yet? No, probably not, damn it. Tomorrow, though, he’d try.

He managed to gently move her hand and sit up without waking her, though the way she sighed in her sleep and shifted closer to him tempted him very strongly to just stay in bed with her. But limping to the shower gave him a chance to gauge how his leg was doing— painful, but he’d had worse— and, frankly, he wasn’t looking forward to standing for the two minutes necessary, so he might as well get that out of the way.

The hole in his leg seemed to be healing acceptably. He took care of the dressing in the bathroom, not wanting the wound to be the first thing Lucy saw as she woke. But— though he wasn’t a vain man— he didn’t think she’d mind too much if he took advantage of the bedroom’s greater space to struggle into his pants there.

When he returned to the bedroom, she was sitting up on the edge of the bed, blinking at him sleepily over a cup of coffee. She held out a second cup with an unguarded smile that made him weak in the knees.

He sank gratefully down beside her and took the coffee. “Good morning, Lucy.”

She smiled at him again. “Hi.” She waited for him to lower his cup, then cupped his face and kissed him. Then she frowned, and pressed her palm to his forehead.

“You’re a little warm,” she murmured. She reached down and gently felt the skin next to the bandage. “Warm here too.”

He reassessed. The healing puncture wound had been a little pink. It was possible that this fatigue was more than just the road trip. But he’d had much worse. “I’ll be all right, Lucy.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I think we should stay over an extra day. We have four hundred miles of sparse country ahead of us; I don’t want you getting sick out in the middle of nowhere.”

She took a sip. “I mean, I don’t want you getting sick at all, but especially not out in the middle of nowhere,” she added.

In her voice, he thought he heard echoes of her night run down the mountain in Wyoming. He knew it had been tough physically and mentally— and she was tough too, but he wished he could have spared her that.

“I’ll check with the hotel about an extra night and call Agent Christopher,” Lucy added. “We’re not fighting any more, Garcia. You don’t have to push so hard.” She touched his forehead, part brushing his hair back from his face, part checking his temperature again. “Let me look after you.”

He was tired. She was tired. There were worse things than spending the day here. “All right, Lucy,” he said softly.
“Go back to bed, I’ll get us some breakfast.”

He caught her hand before he could stand, turned it over, and pressed his lips against her palm, near her wrist. He felt her shiver, and she looked more deeply moved than such a simple gesture… well.

Lucy’s idea of looking after him, he discovered, was to arrange them on the bed with his head in her lap and his leg propped up on pillows, and read to him as she gently ran her nails across his scalp. Her voice, and the soft touch of her hand in his hair, lulled him into closing his eyes. Maybe he was more tired than he…

#

Garcia’s deep sleep made Lucy feel vindicated in her decision to take a rest day. He didn’t even stir when she gently tucked her women in history blanket around him. His forehead felt about the same, and she might mother hen him with her worry if she stayed around all day. So she went out to get some fresh air.

The salt flats didn’t interest her; driving out into the desert alone definitely didn’t interest her. She ended up at the old airfield, part of which was decaying, part of which had been restored to a startlingly authentic museum of how the base would have looked during World War Two. She avoided the active parts of the airfield and wandered through everything else, including the meticulously reconstructed service club, where she took pictures for Wyatt. He replied, nice, wheres that?

Before she could reply, she found herself staring at a hole in the ground.

She hesitated for a long moment. Then she called him, because the worst thing that could happen was he was too busy to talk.

“Lucy?” His surprise hurt her heart, a little. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m not— I’m not in any trouble.” She paused. “I know this might be a bad time—”

“It’s not. Where are you? What are those pictures you just sent?”

“Wendover Air Base. Um…” She hesitated again. “Right now I’m looking at the Enola Gay’s old bomb loading bay.” She paused. “Did you ever… see anything related to the bombings? Of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?”

He was quiet for a moment. “When I was stationed in Okinawa, I went to Nagasaki,” he said finally.

“I don’t think I knew you were stationed in Okinawa.”

“Not for long, but there’s a Special Forces unit there.” He sighed. “I just… figured I owed it,” he continued after a minute. “To someone, I didn’t know who. But that if I was gonna fight… I needed to know about the cost.”

Lucy swallowed. After everything, the cost of ending a war felt… close to home.

“I went to that museum they have there, and, I’ll be honest… I was spoiling for a fight. Ready to be angry about how they told the story. About making the military look like the bad guys— look, I was twenty and I was… well.” He paused. “Every bad side of me you think you’ve seen, I used to be worse.”
“But the things they have there— you probably know, I don’t have to tell you. God, the remains—who’s there?—” His voice dropped, in volume and in pitch.

“I walked out of there thinking… a lot harder than I ever had before,” he said finally. “And I remembered how my grandpa, he once said that… when the truth, you know, started to come out about the bombings, that they might’ve saved a lot of lives of soldiers, but he rather would’ve died invading the islands than seen those kids killed like that.”

“… which is probably more answer than you wanted,” he added.

She shook her head, then remembered he couldn’t see her. “No. That was… that was what I asked.”

She had, of course, plenty of informed and even expert opinions on the bombings and their impacts on the course of World War Two as well as the Cold War. But expert opinions weren’t what she was looking for now.

“Thanks, Wyatt,” she added softly.

“Flynn there?”

“No, he’s back at the hotel. His leg’s giving him trouble.”

“Agent Christopher said he fell off a cliff and impaled himself? … if it had been anyone but her talking about anyone but him, I wouldn’t’ve believed it.”

Lucy snorted. “… basically.”

“She… said he was gonna be all right?”

“Yeah, I just didn’t want him to push too hard and… have something happen while we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“Hey, Lucy?” Wyatt said after a minute. “Do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Go back to the hotel.”

“What?”

“You’re wandering around an old atomic era bomb bay by yourself, and…”

“Wyatt, it’s safe. I’m safe. Even I can’t get into trouble out here.”

“Not what I was worried about.” He paused. “Just… promise me you won’t stand there staring at a hole in the ground, thinking about history, okay?”

Her lips twitched into a little smile. She was glad they were friends without asterisks again. “I’m walking back to the car,” she promised him.

“Hey, uh, tell me about those pictures. Was that a USO club?”

She told him all about the service club on her way to the car, and kept talking as she just sat behind the wheel. “… I can recommend a couple of books if you want,” she finished.
“… mmm!” He made a noise that managed to sound enthusiastic while being completely non-committal.

She laughed outright. “Fair enough.”

“Hey, uh…” he said. “It was good to hear your voice.”

“Yeah. You, too, Wyatt. Hey, tell Rufus and Jiya hi for me if you see them… they’re probably at work right now.”

“Yeah, I will. See you soon, Lucy.”

“See you soon.” And she would, she thought, as she started the car. Jiya’s birthday was just over ten days away, and Esperanza Fata’s christening would be soon, too.

This trip had been more than she could possibly have dreamed when they left the safe house in North Carolina. But now it was time to go home. And as a down payment, she would go check on Garcia.

#

He woke to bright afternoon sunlight streaming into the room. It took him a moment to reorient himself.

Lucy was sitting in the chair, and gave him a soft smile when she saw he was awake. “How do you feel?”

“I, uh, better.” His voice came out as a rasp.

“Good.” She closed her book—the one she’d been reading to him earlier. “I brought us some lunch. Then maybe you could sleep again?”

He started to tell her that he would be fine, he’d had far worse, and he didn’t need to sleep all day. Then the true weight of his fatigue hit him. They weren’t leaving that day anyway. He could use the extra rest.

She reached forward and checked his temperature again, then caressed his forehead. He realized—Lucy liked taking care of him. It wasn’t just that she didn’t mind; she was enjoying this. Caring for him… pleased her.

He felt as if he were trying to grapple with the revelation of a once-familiar idea made strange through pain. He was, he realized dimly, staring at her.

“I, uh,” he managed, and tried to remember the question. “Yes.”

While they ate, she told him about the Wendover base. “I left a donation, of course, but I wonder…” Her expression was thoughtful. “If there’s funding that could help them.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I took their contact information.”

He smiled a little to himself.

“What?” She looked self-conscious.

He swallowed. “I enjoy watching you be an indomitable force for good.”
She gave him a Look. “I’m just thinking out loud about grants. That’s definitely not… whatever you just said.”

“You meet someone, and you immediately start thinking, how could I help them?” He knew better, now, about assuming he knew Lucy better than she knew herself. But he also knew that part of Carol Preston’s legacy was how Lucy constantly, casually underrated herself, her achievements, and her potential.

Maybe it wasn’t entirely Carol’s legacy. When helping others came as naturally to you as did breathing, perhaps you noticed it just that much.

“It’s remarkable, Lucy,” he added. “As are you.”

Her eyes went wide and soft. She looked like she didn’t hear what he’d just said nearly often enough. He wanted to take her in his arms and put an entirely different look on her face, but he knew he couldn’t kiss her habitual undervaluing of herself better.

“Well, now you definitely sound feverish.” She tried to play the moment off with wry self-deprecation.

“I don’t.” He licked his top lip. “If I’m not, uh, disposable—”

“You’re not,” she said firmly.

“You’re no less than who you are, Lucy.”

She stared at him, startled, overwhelmed. “Garcia,” she breathed.

She put her arms around him, holding him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her back as she rested her head against his. For a moment, the only sound was their deep, slow breathing.

Finally, she pulled back just far enough to press her lips to his temple. “Garcia,” she whispered again, and touched her forehead to his for just a moment. When she finally sat up, her eyes were shiny.

He reached down and took her hand. “Together, Lucy,” he murmured, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles, and hoping she understood both the clumsy words and the clumsy gesture.

Her hand tightened on his. “Always.” Her voice came out a little choked.

They finished eating. He limped back to bed, grateful to stretch out again, as she curled up in the chair with a book and a little smile. God, he loved to watch her being competent in her craft. He loved to watch her be happy. He loved to watch her.

He dozed lightly, and woke to see her put the book down and sigh. “Lucy?”

She looked up. “Yeah?”

“The bed’s a little…”

“Cold?” she asked, coming to perch on the edge. “Hot?”

“Empty.” He gave her his best innocent, persuasive look.

She laughed, startled. “Well. We can’t have that.”
She slid in behind him. “Oh—”

He leaned over and tucked a pillow behind his thigh, shielding the hole in his leg from uncomfortable proximity to her knees.

So she curled up against his back, her arm around his waist. “Rest, Garcia,” she whispered, stroking his hair with her free hand. And it wasn’t a hardship to relax against her warmth…

#

Lucy woke to the smell of coffee, and smiled.

She opened her eyes to early morning desert sunlight, and stretched, warm and sleepy. Garcia was sitting up in bed beside her, reading, drinking from a paper cup. When he saw her, he gave her a gentle little smile.

“How’re you…” She yawned. “How’re you feeling?” She wriggled her way to a half-sitting position, and felt his forehead. It was cool.

“Better.”

“Good.”

Another paper cup sat on her nightstand. She leaned against his shoulder and drank her coffee slowly. Out of instinct—there was a book in front of her—she tried reading over his shoulder for a moment. Then she gave up and just took her time waking up.

When her coffee was almost gone, she said, “Are you all right to travel today?”

“Yes.”

She turned and studied him, trying to gauge the truth of that.

“Don’t worry, Lucy.” He licked his top lip. “I—”

He hesitated, and looked down.

“I, uh.” He huffed softly, and made a self-deprecating face. “I know you’re, ah, fond of me, and—”

“Garcia,” she said quietly. “I think you know I’m more than just fond of you.”

She wouldn’t spell it out, not right now. She didn’t want him to feel badly if he felt differently, and…

And Lucy didn’t know what it was like to have loved Lorena and lost her, and now feel—something—for another woman, but it was all right if it were complicated.

Her subtlety might have been wasted, because Garcia was staring at her.

“I,” he breathed. “… oh.”

She took her last sip of coffee, not displeased with this result.

“I.” He cleared his throat, looking as if he thought he were saying very sensible things and not conversationally flailing. “I, uh… wouldn’t, uh… be… stupid.”
Lucy tried to hide her smile and failed miserably. “Good,” she said.

He seemed to have recovered by the time she’d showered and dressed. “Want me to get breakfast?” she asked.

“We can stop on the way out of town,” he suggested, and reached for his shoes.

“I can do that.”

“I want to see if I can.”

He managed it, but it clearly pained him. “Better than before, anyway,” he grunted when he was done.

He already knew it wasn’t a race— and she understood wanting to be whole again as soon as he could. Rather than remind him, she just put her hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her, expression soft and open.

She didn’t know what words, exactly, he would use to describe how he felt about her. But he didn’t have to say anything for her to know that he, too, was more than just fond of her.

“Ready to hit the road again?” she asked.

“With you?” he asked. “Always, Lucy.”

Chapter End Notes

[Echo Canyon](#)

[Wanship Station](#)

[Bonneville Salt Flats](#)

[Historic Wendover Airfield](#)

[Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum](#)
By the time they reached the California Trail Interpretative Center in Elko, two hours from Wendover, Lucy remembered why they’d been avoiding the interstate: it was a road designed to be as straight and flat as possible, and carry as much traffic as possible.

She parked close to the building and paced Garcia as they walked slowly inside. It clearly hurt him, but she knew he wanted to stretch his legs, and start trying to regain his mobility.

They moved slowly between the exhibits. “Is that… an elephant?” Garcia asked. “Or did I take the wrong painkillers?”

She looked. “No, that’s an elephant.” The bronze statue towered over another of a man.

He licked his top lip. “Would it be, uh, too obvious to ask why?”

She looked at the interpretative plaque, and nodded when it confirmed her guess. “Emigrants on the trail would talk about it as ‘seeing the elephant.’ Because back then almost nobody in the US had seen an elephant. ‘Seeing the elephant’ meant… well, it was the excitement, but it was also the overwhelming hardship of the trip.”

“… huh.”

They passed a life-sized diorama showing a man watering a fallen oxen, desperately trying to get it up, against a background of carcasses and skeletons. Lucy remembered an emigrant diary that talked about the Forty Mile Desert, between the Humboldt Sink and the mountains, being carpeted with carcasses.

She was profoundly thankful to be making this trip in the 21st century instead of the 19th. She was also grateful they were traveling by car and not time machine.

Speaking of the desert, she got their empty water bottles from the car and refilled them. She started back towards the car, then saw Garcia, still and stiff, staring at…

She came up beside him. The diorama showed… a pile of rocks, and a makeshift tombstone: Aged 8 years. Rest in peace. Sweet boy. Troubles are over. A piece of wood bore the words, please tend my boy’s grave. Worst of all was the coyote digging around the rocks.

The lines on Garcia’s face were deep. She tuck her hand into the crook of his elbow, and took his hand in her other. His fingers tightened on hers.

Finally, he took a deep breath, and turned away, blinking. “All right,” he murmured.

“Should we go?”

He shook his head. “Not if there’s more you wanna see here. We have a long ride ahead, I don’t mind the break.”

She eyed him, then decided to take him at his word. “All right.”
She wandered the exhibits both outside and in for a few minutes. She lingered longest over the displays about some of the Paiute and Shoshone bands that had survived the harsh conditions of the Great Basin for centuries, and then survived the settler invasion, too. Now they were fighting to keep their sacred lands at Yucca Mountain from being used as a nuclear waste dump site.

Different century, same battle. God.

When they left, she asked at the desk for advice about roads that weren’t the interstate. “It’s not too much longer to drive down to fifty,” she told Garcia as they got back in the car. “Would you be okay with that? If we have a safe route?”

“Well, the interstate in California’s gonna suck. I say we take the scenic route while we can.”

“Okay. One of the rangers showed me a route we could take, and as of this morning, it didn’t have any detours.”

They stopped for some groceries, just to be safe. Then they took the interstate to the next town… which was called Carlin, so Lucy promptly stopped to take a number of pictures. She sent them to Rufus with the caption, is this something you did in the past? and a winking smiley.

It’s named for some white dude, he wrote back after a minute. Cool pictures, though. My brother’ll get a kick out of them. Then: Though, admittedly, I’d say the same thing if I HAD changed history to name a town after myself and you asked.

Lucy snorted. Then she texted Agent Christopher an update on their travel plans, just in case.

She felt her shoulders drop and her hands relax on the steering wheel almost as soon as they pulled off the interstate onto the two-lane state road that would take them south. It felt good to be enjoying the back roads again.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured, as the interstate receded in the rearview mirror.

After a few minutes, she glanced sideways at him. He rode more normally today than on the way across Utah, which was a good sign. He still had his feet up on the dash, but that might be to keep pressure off the wound, because he was otherwise sitting up straight.

He saw her looking, glanced up, realized she wasn’t trying to get his attention, and let her look. The car filled with comfortable quiet.

They had… they had this, ahead of them. Stretching out the rest of their lives, if they wanted that. And Lucy knew that she did. Greedily, she dreamed of decades together.

… except.

She swallowed.

“Garcia?”

“Hmm.” His voice was soft.

“You said that—” Her throat closed painfully, but she forced herself to talk normally past it. “You said that the Lucy who gave you the journal was just a few years older than me.”

“Yes.” He looked up. “But no less lovely,” he added, with a crooked smile.

He looked more closely at her, then stopped smiling.
“What if—” She broke off. “What if she replaces me in five years?” she blurted. “Maybe—” Her words came out chokily. “Maybe we shouldn’t do… this.”

“What do… what?”

She gestured miserably between them.

Total, terrible silence. When she finally looked at him…

He licked his top lip. “Lucy, pull off,” he said quietly.

Her eyes stung and her vision blurred as she did. He unbuckled. She swallowed hard, and wiped her eyes. Garcia rummaged around in her bag, and handed her a tissue. She wiped her eyes again and blew her nose, trying to stop crying.

“We don’t know that it works like that,” he said quietly. “If it’s the same as for, uh… ‘normal’ time travel.”

She sniffled. “That’s how it’s always worked before.”

“We’ve had visits from… two different future Lucys,” he said. “I… I don’t know what that means.”

“But we know what it could mean, and—” Her voice broke as she tried to explain the crux of her sudden objection. “You deserve— better than another loss in five years.” He’d already grieved so much. So many.

He looked at her.

“I want whatever time I can get with you, Lucy.” His voice was gravelly.

She stared at him, astonished.

Not by what he said. But by the force of his bravery.

“You think losing Iris and Lorena should have made me cautious,” he continued. “But it didn’t. It made me… bolder.”

She snorted through her tears at associating him with the word ‘cautious.’

“So— Lucy, we don’t have any guarantees of five years. We could crash into a truck ten minutes from now. But whatever— whatever we get… I want it, Lucy.” He reached for her face, then stopped himself. “What do you want, Lucy?”

She responded without needing thought: “I want you.”

His face softened and shifted, as if she had astonished him in turn. “It’s all right, then,” he murmured. “C’mer.”

She cried herself out against his t-shirt as he held her. She cried for her brokenness and for his losses, and vice versa, too. She cried to think of her possible impending— erasure? Death? She cried for their still-healing war wounds, physical and mental and all the rest. She cried from the relief of no longer having to bottle everything up, and of no longer being alone.

Finally, she raised her head, and wiped her eyes. She managed not to apologize, and felt good about that.
“We’ll talk to Rufus and Jiya,” he said. “Even if the woman who gave me the journal is gonna come back to this timeline, you don’t… you can survive.”

“What do you mean? That’s how time travel works.”

“Not if you’re not here when she returns, Lucy.” He watched her intently, searching her expression. “I’ve… given it some thought, actually. If you’re safely in the past, then you would overwrite her when you return.”

“But I don’t know when she left from, I don’t— I can’t live the next five years in the past!”

“I know when her last entry was dated,” he said. “That’s the earliest she could have left. And maybe Jiya and Rufus can help us narrow it down somehow.”

She thought about that. “Living in the past is a lot different than visiting.”

“I’d, ah, come with you. If you wanted that,” he added hurriedly. “We can build a life in any decade, really.”

She stared at him. She took his hand and gently kissed his knuckles, and his breath stuttered. Then she leaned in, slid her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

When they came up for air, he brushed her hair back from her face. “We’ll figure it out together, Lucy,” he promised her softly. “Don’t— don’t do anything… rash.”

She thought about pointing out the irony of him asking that. Instead, she said, “I promise.”

He cleared his throat. “She might not…”

“Have made it back,” Lucy finished, so he didn’t have to say it. “I know. But—”

But life was beginning to be sweet again, after the numbness of everything. Life with him was very sweet. She wasn’t going to risk it.

“I, uh, messed up your shirt. Sorry.” That was an acceptable apology.

“It’s all right. I have another.”

She turned the engine off and followed him to the trunk, partly because he didn’t grab his crutches, partly to enjoy the sun’s warmth after the upheaval of the last few minutes. Then he nonchalantly pulled his shirt off, and she… stared.

He looked up, and saw her, and her face flushed, but she didn’t look away. Him, standing so casually by the side of the road, naked from the waist up, showing off… there was a lot to show off.

“Like what you see, Lucy?” He smirked as he tugged the dry shirt over his head.

“You are playing with fire, Garcia Flynn,” she murmured.

His merriment vanished as his head reemerged. They exchanged a long look, in which they both decided that, yes, they were too old and sensible— not to mention battered— to have sex by the side of the highway, even one as deserted as this one.

Unfortunately.
He gave her a rueful smile. The heat of her arousal softened into a much more comprehensive warmth. He limped forward, and slid his arms around her. She leaned her head against his chest, and listened to the slow thudding of his heartbeat.

“Together,” she whispered. His arms tightened around her.

They reluctantly let go of each other. “Want me to, uh, drive?” he asked.

“I can drive. Just keep your leg up.”

It was a quiet drive down an empty road, flanked on both sides by short, scrubby plants and long stretches of low mountains. Though they didn’t see anyone else, Lucy wasn’t afraid any more like she had been crossing the Utah desert. The way the road stretched on, seemingly forever, under the vast sky, felt dreamy and peaceful.

“I could use more of this in my life,” she murmured.

Garcia shifted in his seat. “When we’re… settled,” he said. “If you like, Lucy, I’d like to take you on a vacation up the coast. Just, uh, a few days’ quiet driving by the ocean. Perhaps… at the end of summer, or early fall.” He sounded a little hesitant.

She had to clear her throat. “I’d like that very much,” she replied softly. She reached out her hand, and he took it in his.

They rode like that a while before they came across something surprising—a real live truck, sharing the road with them—and she put both hands on the wheel to pass it. Not long after, they reached US-50, and Lucy turned west.

They passed a sign reading, “The Loneliest Highway.” She snorted. “If that was the loneliest highway, then what did we just turn off of?”

About half an hour down the road they saw a sign for petroglyphs. Garcia seemed to read her mind: “I’m game if you are.”

The two cars they saw in the campground were the first vehicles they’d seen since the truck on the state highway, so maybe “The Loneliest Highway” was aptly named after all.

“… oh.” Lucy looked at the sign: SELF-GUIDED INTERPRETATIVE TRAIL: 0.5 MI.

“I thought it would be closer,” she murmured.

“You gonna park?” Garcia asked.

“The trail’s not paved.”

“Does that matter?”

“Garcia, you have a hole in your leg.”

“It’s closed up.”

She looked at him.

“You want to see the pictographs, and I want to stretch my legs. I can handle a little walking.”

She trusted that he knew his own limits, and parked. She couldn’t help watching anxiously as he...
maneuvered—using his crutches, this time—down the trail. Twice, she almost asked him if he really wanted to do this, and stopped herself both times.

They reached a cliff with visible carvings just a hundred feet or so down the trail. Garcia sank down on the bench, and Lucy joined him.

“Any idea of the, uh, significance of these?” he asked. “This, uh, loop shape is everywhere.”

“I remember reading about this site, now that I think about it. The first popular theory was hoof prints.”

“Lucy, I don’t think those are hoof prints,” he said drily.

“Another theory is that the carvings represent female genitalia, and this was the site of a rite of passage.”

“That seems more likely, yes.”

She studied the carvings, going closer to see better. For a moment, she imagined herself hundreds of years in the past again, watching the artists who had painstakingly cut these lines into the cliff. Then the past seemed to merge dizzyingly down onto the present, with the carvings stretching through the centuries to bind the two together. She shook her head to clear it.

She’d been standing there for a while; she sat beside Garcia again. “You all right?”

He nodded once. “The subject’s just, ah, out of my purview. … the, uh, carvings, I mean, not—”

He’d flushed a little pink, and it wasn’t just the sun. “I think I’ll stop talking.”

Lucy laughed out loud, and took his hand.

A few more minutes in the hot sun, and they moved slowly back to the car. Garcia seemed glad to sit down again.

The highway took them down sharp curves through a pine forest, between mountains that still had snow clinging to their peaks. Then they reached an actual town, the first since Carlin, that straddled the hairpin turns. They’d stopped for gas that morning, but Lucy took the chance to fill the tank anyway.

She glanced at her phone, and saw that not only did she have signal, she’d missed calls from Jiya and Wyatt. Had something happened?

Trying not to panic, she called Wyatt.

The phone rang and rang, reminding her of all the times she’d called him the day he fled the bunker to find Jessica. But there were plenty of reasons he might not pick up. She wasn’t sure where he stood in terms of getting new orders, but—

“Lucy?”

Her shoulders slumped in relief. “Wyatt! Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“I saw you and Jiya had both called and I… worried.”

“Oh. No. Nothing’s wrong. I mean, not with me. Are you okay?”
“Yeah, we’re fine.”

“Good. I just…” He hesitated. “Look, that isn’t me saying Flynn can’t take care of you. ’s not why I called. This is me having, you know, protected you for so long, and still… worrying.” He made a self-deprecating noise. “Old habits and all.”

She smiled at his mother henning. “I understand.”

“Where are you?”

“Nevada. We should be back sometime tomorrow.”

“Oh, uh… it’ll be good to see you again.”

She smiled again. “I’ll be glad to see all of you.”

He paused. “You glad you went?”

“Very.” She hesitated. “I should probably call Jiya, just to make sure…”

“Right.”

She wasn’t sure if she should tell him. But she’d been angry with him for keeping things from her. They were friends, and they had a complicated history; it was fair to be up front with him. “Hey, Wyatt?”

“Yeah.”

She hesitated again, and hoped she was doing the right thing. “Garcia and I are a couple now. I just… didn’t want that to take you by surprise.”

A long silence. She refused to check her phone to see if the call was still active.

“I’ll, uh…” he said finally. “Be totally cool with that by the time you get back.” He sounded resigned. But not particularly surprised.

If she was tempted to roll her eyes, she at least appreciated his honesty. “Good,” she said brightly.

“I’m gonna ask you one question, though.”

“Wyatt…”

“You’re happy, right?”


“Then that’s…” He cleared his throat. “What matters.”

They hung up, and Lucy called Jiya.

“Hey, were you returning my call? I was just checking in.”

Lucy smiled. “I feel very missed.”

“You _are_ missed.”

Jiya was not a demonstrative person, and her willingness to come out and say that made Lucy feel
“We’re fine,” Lucy added. “Driving through Nevada.”

“Seen any aliens yet?”

“No, of course n— yet?”

Jiya snickered.

“Aliens aren’t real, Jiya.”

“Excuse me, which of us has the science degree?”

“Which of us helped create one of the first UFO sightings in North America?”

“Uh-huh.”

Lucy smiled again.

“Hey, when are you getting back? Rufus and I want you to come over for dinner.”

“Tomorrow, probably late.” Lucy tried to think. “What day is it? I’ve totally lost track on this road trip.”

“It’s Monday,” Jiya said drily.

“How’s the, um, job search?” Lucy asked brightly.

Jiya’s sigh answered eloquently. “I’ll tell you about it when you’re here.”

“At least we’re all in the same boat, right?” Lucy offered.

“Yeah. Except Wyatt.”

But Wyatt would have a baby in, what, six months? So it was probably just as well he wasn’t job-hunting.

“Hey,” Lucy added. “Thanks for… calling to check in. I really, um, appreciate it.”

“We… told you, Lucy,” Jiya said after a short, awkward silence. “The team’s not gone just because the war is over.”

“I know.” It was so much easier to believe that now than it had been, that night before they’d all gone their separate ways. So many things were so much easier now. Lucy just felt more… human. More whole.

And she and Jiya were both, in their own ways, prone to sweeping their feelings under the rug, so Lucy really appreciated her friend making the effort to reach out to her.

“I know,” she echoed. “Thank you. And, um… wedding plans. I want to hear all about those, when we get there. Okay?” Did Jiya want a bridal shower? If so, Lucy would make that happen. She would pour all her neurotic Preston skills into making it happen.

They settled on supper for Wednesday, and hung up. Lucy turned back to the car.

Past the gas station, a crumbling three-story brick building that would have looked more
appropriate in a Saxon castle than in the middle of the Nevada desert stood alone on a hill. And then the little town was behind them, and they were alone on the road again.

“How far is it to Vegas, anyway?” she wondered. Her last and only trip to that city hadn’t been by car, and she’d had other things on her mind.

“From here? Five or six hours.”

“Oh.”

“Did you want to, uh, go?”

“No. God, no.”

“Ah.” He glanced sideways at her. “Probably just as well.”

“Because it’s a long drive?”

“Because, if…” He paused. “If you and I, ah…”

He hesitated for a long moment.

“If we ever choose to… marry,” he continued, voice uneven, “it shouldn’t be an Elvis impersonator.”

His courage stunned her. To say that, after… after what had happened in his last marriage…

He was eyeing her, as if deeply afraid he’d said the wrong thing. Which, he had, but not like that.

“If we ever choose to marry, there will be zero Elvis involvement,” she said firmly. “There will be negative Elvis involvement. I will hire a team of undergrads to clear the area in a five mile radius of all Elvis-related… whatever.”

He chuckled, low and warm.

She hadn’t forgotten what she’d said that morning. Her fears of being erased hadn’t disappeared. But if he could be brave enough to try this, then she could, too.

A few more miles, and he was glancing at his phone. “Do you like, uh, hot springs?”

“… in theory?” she ventured, after considering the question for a minute. “Why?”

“There’s a lot out here. Mostly down one detour or another.”

She shook her head. “No bathing suit, no towel, no sunblock, and I doubt you could go in. Another time.”

Not that she was at all opposed to skinny-dipping with him, out in the middle of nowhere. But then the no sunblock became a bigger concern. And the getting to the out in the middle of nowhere.

“There’s a nice place I know a few hours north of the Bay Area,” she said. “Definitely off the beaten path. If we ever decide we’re, you know, bored of modern conveniences and we want to do some camping…” That was a big if. “I’ll take you there.”

She glanced sideways at him. “Clothes optional,” she added.
“My modesty and my innocence were the first two things to go when I joined the army,” he assured her. Which didn’t entirely explain that flush of color along his cheekbones.

It was a quiet fifty miles to the next town— well, the next set of buildings along the highway, anyway. Hungry and acutely aware of their lack of other options, they parked at the edge of the gravel parking lot of the only restaurant. Which had a big neon sign on top saying BAR.

The scrub encroached on the parking lot from two sides. They stopped at the historical marker for the old stagecoach station and Pony Express stop. Water ran somewhere nearby, which made sense; of course an old station would be located near a source of water. Garcia’s phone buzzed quietly—

Lucy was abruptly yanked off her feet. Garcia took several large steps backwards, wobbling when he put weight on his bad leg—

He lowered her to the ground much more gently than he’d picked her up, keeping his body between her and where she’d just been standing. Only when she looked where he was looking, and saw the long, mottled grey-brown body undulate across the edge of the gravel, did she understand. She glanced down at her flimsy, open-toed sandals, and felt incredibly grateful she was traveling with him.

“You all right?” he asked, easing his right hand out of his jacket, but not taking his eyes off the snake as it disappeared into the scrub beyond.

“Yeah.” Her heart slowed to its usual rate. “Thanks. Are you okay?” He had most of his weight on his right leg. “Do you want the crutches?”

He shook his head. “I’ll be fine.”

She slipped her hand into the crook of his arm as they walked slowly across the parking lot. It wasn’t his job to keep her safe, but nonetheless, when they were together, she felt that all of her was safe with him: not only her life, but her wellbeing, too. Her happiness. He’d quietly looked after her from almost the first moment they’d been on the same side.

The menu was more modern than the building: the latter looked like it dated to the 1880s, while the menu would have felt at home in the 1980s. Some of the pictures were reminiscent of those horrifying Jello salads Lucy had thought a prank when she first encountered them, and there was a separate “LO-CAL” section. The baked potato with veggies was the ‘California baked potato.’ Salad and cottage cheese was the ‘California plate.’ The steamed vegetables without a side of potato were the ‘California steamed vegetables.’

Lucy decided on yet another burger, and promised herself that when they got back to actual California—

“… excuse me,” she said to the waitress, when she came back their way. “Excuse me, that thing you just put on their table, what was that?”

The waitress looked at her strangely. “Our house salad.”

“I’ll have that, please. Actually, can you make it meal sized?”

Ordering an entrée-sized house salad with chicken on top definitely got her another strange look, but Lucy didn’t care. “Oh my God, this is so good.” Even the lettuce was crisp and fresh and sweet. “How did they get all this out here? In the desert?”
“Irrigation?” Garcia’s mouth twitched. “I’m glad you finally, uh, found what you were looking for, Lucy.”

“Yeah, and we only had to cross the country first.”

After they paid, she used the ladies’ room. She lingered in front of the mirror after she’d dried her hands, and reached up hesitantly to her own neck. She knew where it was by touch, but the place where Emma had cut her was barely visible; all that remained was the pink of healthy new skin.

They both watched carefully for snakes as they crossed the parking lot. Garcia went to the driver’s side, and held out his hand. “Keys?”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded once. “I’ll try it for a few hours.”

So she curled up in the passenger seat and watched the scenery, restraining the impulse to sneak peeks at him every few minutes to make sure he was okay. Or just because he was beautiful.

He pulled off at a historical marker, which turned out to be for the incongruous-looking sand dune stretching off to their right. “Have you ever heard sand dunes sing?” Garcia frowned at the sign, looking skeptical.

Lucy shook her head. “But it says there’s the remains of an old Pony Express station up there.” It was amazing, really, what an outsized space the Pony Express occupied in the American historical conscious considering it had run for only eighteen months.

He glanced down at her feet. “You have, uh, actual shoes, right?”

She changed her sandals for her sneakers as he followed the sign. When they saw how far the old station was from the parking, he visibly steeled himself. “Garcia, stay here,” Lucy said firmly. “I will be careful, and I will be fine.”

He hesitated.

“That was the first snake we’ve seen in… how many days in the desert?” she added. “I promise, I’ll be right back.” She leaned over, cupped his face, and kissed him softly. The gentle desperation of his mouth told her everything he was so carefully holding back.

She pulled back. “I promise,” she repeated.

She stuck to the middle of the trail and watched where she stepped. The remains of the station were low walls of dark rock mortared together, near some sulfurous, turbid springs from which she was very glad she didn’t have to drink.

She was not altogether surprised to turn around a few minutes later and find Garcia leaning against one of the walls behind her. He looked like he’d used a good deal of strength to get up here, and she didn’t point out that the walls were historical artifacts.

“I know you can take care of yourself, Lucy,” he assured her, with a self-deprecating grimace. “I’m just, uh, bad at keeping still.”

Her lips twitched as she stood in front of him. “You don’t say.”

He reached down, took her hand, and brought it to his mouth in silent apology.
They lingered so he could rest, then started back. The wind picked up from the north, scouring them with grit and sand. “Living here must’ve been wonderful,” he observed drily.

A low, unearthly moan filled the air, making Lucy’s body tense in primeval fear. She grabbed Garcia’s hand. He grabbed for his gun as the sound continued, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

After a second, his grip on her hand relaxed. “I think it’s the dune.”

“The— wh—” How was that even possible? But the alternative was it was an ancient monster awakening from a thousand-year sleep, or something like that, so… yeah, the dune. Definitely, it was the dune.

When the single-note hum droned on without any sign of a threat, she made herself relax, too. Well. “Definitely a delight,” she said. “Imagine trying to sleep with that in the background.”

They made it back to the car. When Garcia dug out the keys, she gave him a Look and held out her hand for them.

“I can drive, Lucy,” he protested, trying not to lean visibly against the car.

She ended the conversation with a lift of her eyebrow, and got behind the wheel.

They passed through an actual town, the largest they’d seen since Carlin, and the highway grew from two lanes to four. Lucy had somehow expected more in the way of weird roadside sights from Nevada than from, say, Utah or Wyoming, and once they finally reached populated areas again, she was not disappointed. They passed a large dachshund head statue, with no body, and then—

“That was either a shed poorly disguised as a cactus, or one of the aliens Jiya warned me about,” she muttered.

“We could always go back and take a closer look.” Garcia was smirking. “Or we could detour five miles north, and see Mark Twain’s toilet.”

“Oh, that’s right, he worked in Virginia City, didn’t he? … but no.”

She did make an abrupt turn into the parking lot of a storage facility to make sure she hadn’t been seeing things. No, that was definitely a VW Beetle turned into a thirty-foot spider.

Welcome to Nevada.

She sent a picture to Jiya: you were right, I found the aliens. also what makes a sand dune make an unearthly wailing noise? Then she thought an explanation might be needed: noise is waves is science, right?

And then they were on the outskirts of Carson City. “Pull off,” Garcia said sharply.

She found the nearest parking lot, just past a street vendor’s open van. “What is it?”

He climbed out and limped towards the van. “I saw something.”

They turned the corner, and she saw it too: a velvet canvas. A velvet canvas with Elvis painted on it.

She turned on him, indignant. But he was looking at another… thing. He lifted it, and Lucy stared, trying to make sense of it. The painting showed the green guy from Star Wars, and someone who
looked human but had pointy ears. And they were… looking at each others’ ears?

“I think it’s Yoda and Spock discussing their similarities.”

“I know six of the eight words you just used, but I have no idea what you just said.”

“Yoda from Star Wars. Spock from Star Trek.”

“Since when are you into science fiction?”

“Since I was a kid… but I was actually thinking of Jiya and Rufus. You know, your friends who are getting married?”

She looked at it rather blankly. “You think they’d like it?”

“I think they’d think it was hilarious.”

So Lucy paid for the painting. The van’s proprietor wrapped it up in newspaper and tape, and they put it behind the driver’s seat. “I’m getting them an actual wedding present, too.”

Garcia made an open-handed gesture, as if to say, suit yourself.

“… but thanks.”

They found the motel where Garcia had found them a room for the night, and unloaded. Isabel had sent Lucy a picture of Esperanza Fata in an adorable dinosaur onesie, and Jiya had replied with a link to an explanation about dry sand and avalanches.

Hey are you going to Vegas? Jiya added. There’s a Victorian-era octopus time machine down there.

…I don’t know what that is, I don’t want to know, we are actively getting farther from Vegas as we speak.

Where’s your sense of adventure? Jiya replied, with a smiley face with devil horns.

“Hey, Garcia?”

“Yes.”

“That painting was an excellent call.”

He gave her a cheeky grin. “I know.”

They cleaned up, and Garcia gave her directions to a place for dinner. She didn’t know where they were going until she pulled into the driveway of a drive-in movie theater.

She looked at Garcia inquiringly.

“A date can just be, ah, getting burgers and ice cream and seeing a movie and making out in the back row,” he explained. “Or, in our case, the front seat.”

She smiled. There was nothing just about what she wanted with him… and she didn’t think that was news to him. But this was nice. That she knew she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him didn’t diminish her pleasure at going on a fun date with him.
After they paid and parked, Garcia insisted on being the one to limp to the concession stand for food. They had to eat the ice cream first, of course, or it would melt in the Nevada summer heat. Lucy watched him absent-mindedly lick an errant drop off the corner of his mouth, and flushed hot when he looked up and caught her.

She finished her burger and put the wrapper in that day’s trash bag, which still dangled from the dashboard. When she straightened up again, Garcia gently cupped her cheek, and leaned in, eyes wide and dark.

Their kiss started out hesitant and gentle, and quickly turned fierce and hungry. Lucy’s own soft, raw moan startled her. She slid her hands down to Garcia’s waist, and found the hot skin underneath. He twitched—

She pulled back. “Are my hands cold, I’m s—”

“Don’t care.” He guided her mouth back to his and kissed her hard again.

She rested one hand at the small of his back as she slowly explored his stomach with her other. His muscles flexed under her touch as she slid her hand from those hard, flat muscles, to the little cushion of fat, to the soft hair that trailed down to his waistband. He made a choked groaning noise, impatiently shoved her jacket off her shoulders, and kissed down her neck.

She gasped at the fierce heat of his mouth. “Garcia,” she panted. He lifted his head, which was the opposite of what she’d wanted.

“Do you— wanna go back to the room,” he managed, voice uneven.

Oh, God, yes. “Yes.”

She hated to let go of him, but she had to, to dig out the keys and start the car. The ride back to the motel felt five times longer than the ride here. She caught Garcia’s eye at a stoplight, and when he licked his lips, as he did, she flushed hot again and had to look away.

She didn’t dare look at him as she fumbled with the room key, but she was acutely aware of his presence right behind her. As soon as the door slammed shut behind them, they grabbed for each other.

She strained up on her toes to kiss him. He reached for her ass like he wanted to pick her up, and then wobbled and made an impatient noise. They could save that for another day. She nudged him towards the bed. He walked backwards, managing to step out of his shoes in between fast, hungry kisses, and not fall on his ass at any point in the process, which she couldn’t have done.

She undid his jacket and yanked it off his arms, then reached for his pants. The way his hips moved as he shimmied out of his jeans— that was just unfair.

He stepped out of his underwear as they reached the bed. She looked him up and down… slowly.

God, he was gorgeous. She was going to appreciate him very thoroughly, in a variety of ways.

“Lucy.” His voice was rough with arousal and amusement. “Lucy, were you planning on taking off your own clothes at any point?”

She pushed gently at his chest, and he sat willingly. Heat rushed through her at the realization that he would let her take charge, if she wanted to. She’d never explored that side of herself with anyone, but…
But she wanted to, with him.

She unceremoniously shed her clothes, and it was his turn to look. He touched his tongue to his top lip, and…

*No one* had ever looked at her like that before. Appreciation, and hunger, and wonder, all open and ample. She would have expected it to overwhelm her… but she just wanted *more*.

Whatever the next years would bring… she wanted this, tonight, with him. She wanted him for as long as they could possibly have together. Decades would be too short.

Mindful of his leg, she stretched out on the sheets and tugged him down beside her. He kissed her mouth, then where her head met her neck, then the hollow of her throat, then just at the top of her breasts. He tried to roll her under him, but winced and made a pained nose. “Lucy, ah…”

She sat up. “What is it? Do you— do you need to stop?”

“No. But I’m afraid you might, uh, have to, ahhhh…” He looked down, and did that thing with his tongue again.

She smiled, slowly, as she filled in the blanks. She straddled him carefully, and propped herself up on her elbows above him. His warm skin against hers, with nothing in between any more, felt wonderful. “Have my wicked, wicked way with you?”

During their final mission, Rittenhouse had managed to damage the Lifeboat. When Rufus had tried to jump them home, something in the computer had fizzled out. As the rest of them watched nervously, he’d restarted it over and over, only for it to sputter into standby mode each time.

Lucy felt a little smug as Garcia’s very impressive brain appeared to do the same thing.

“Uh,” he finally managed. “Something like… yes.”

She smirked, and leaned down and kissed him very, very gently, slowly sliding her tongue along his. “That,” she whispered, when she pulled back, “I think I can handle.”

#

Awareness began to trickle into his tired brain. He felt so warm and contented.

Then a little more awareness leaked in, and he began to marvel at the whole string of decisions—some of them, frankly, terrible— that had led to waking up with Lucy in his arms.

*God.* It was part imprecation, part prayer, part acknowledgement of the miracle. He gently, reverently kissed her hair, lightly enough that he didn’t disturb her— she was sleeping so peacefully.

The room was chilly. He tugged Lucy’s blanket a bit more tightly around her. Now Susan B. Anthony looked at him with disapproval from Lucy’s right hip. *Too bad, Miss Anthony,* he thought drowsily. *We’re not all called to celibacy."

Thank God for that.

Lucy sighed in her sleep. “Garcia?” she murmured.

“Mm-hmm.”
She nestled back against him. He obligingly held her tighter as the scent of her hair filled his nose again. He’d thought of it with embarrassing frequency ever since that morning in Kansas.

Then she stirred, and rolled over in his arms. She opened her eyes and blinked up at him, and smiled, and— his heart nearly stopped. She looked like the cat who had gotten into the cream, and it was no less than she deserved.

“Good morning,” she purred.

He leaned down and kissed her. “Good morning, Lucy.”

She looked up at him. “Were those all Croatian oaths, last night?”

His face heated. “Most of them, probably, yes.” He didn’t remember exactly what he’d said, but he remembered a lot of nonsense.

She smirked up at him. “I think I’ve learned something.”

“I’m so glad it was educational for you, Doctor Preston,” he said drily.

She nudged his shoulder, and he obligingly rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. She glanced towards his bad leg—

“It’s fine,” he assured her.

She stretched out carefully on top of him, and kissed him, one kiss leading to another and to another. “I still want to have my wicked way with you,” she murmured against his mouth after a few minutes.

He couldn’t help it: “You can ride me into the sunset any time you like, Lucy.”

Her Look suggested he was pushing it. But she kissed him again. “What about the sunrise?”

“That, too.”

God, that pleased little smile of hers did so many things to him.

After they made love again, they cleaned up, and curled up together again, dozing. Every so often one of them would make a halfhearted movement to get back up, and the other would tug them gently back down. All he wanted right now was to stay here like this, with her, all day… but they couldn’t.

But they could take a few more minutes.

Lucy sighed, and nuzzled sleeplily against his chest. “Your leg okay?”

“It’s fine, Lucy.” He probably could have taken a more, ah, active role in what had just transpired, but he knew the idea of him being in pain would disturb her more than the actual pain would have bothered him.

She reluctantly pulled away, and got as far as propping herself up on her elbow. She yawned. “I guess… we should get up.”

“Mmm.”

She looked down at him. “Ready to go home?”
“I think I already am,” he murmured drowsily.

She blinked at him. “Carson City?”

He kissed her shoulder, and watched her expression change, and he knew she understood.

She reached down and threaded her fingers through his, her eyes suspiciously wet. “Garcia Flynn.” Her voice was shaky. She stroked her thumb over his worn hand, then brought his hand to her mouth. He squeezed her hand.

“Are you ready to finish our trip?” she asked after a minute. Her expression, as she looked down at him, was open and warm.

How far they’d already come. San Francisco would be the end of one journey, but just the very earliest days of another.

He looked up at her, and nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s some more information on "seeing the elephant" (second link is a PDF)

Carlin, Nevada

The Hickison Summit petroglyphs

Stokes Castle

Middlegate Station

Singing sand dunes! Here are a few videos about this phenomenon. Here’s a link about Sand Mountain in particular, and the Sand Mountain Pony Express station.

The dachshund head and the cactus building.

Mark Twain's toilet and the Victorian octopus time machine.
“We missed a historical site,” Garcia said.

“… I’m sure we missed a lot,” Lucy said after a minute of trying to figure out which one he meant. “Contrary to popular belief, I don’t actually have to stop at every historical site we pass.”

She glanced sideways. “… I just, you know, want to.”

He was reading on his phone, looking unwarrantedly solemn.

“What did we miss?” she asked.

“The, ah… outside Carson City was the birthplace of the creator of the first Ferris wheel.” He hesitated. “I’m sorry, Lucy,” he said. “For how I treated you then. You didn’t… I’m sorry.”

She took a moment to respond. He’d apologized before. She’d forgiven him a long time ago, and he knew that. Yet he still preferred to address their difficult and occasionally violent past head-on rather than shy away from what he’d done. He still thought she deserved the apology. Not because it would gain him anything, or its omission would cost him anything, but… because he owed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said finally. After a moment, she added, “I think… I think I knew you weren’t going to hurt me.” Which did not, of course, obviate his apology.

He looked relieved, and a little abashed. He paused. “Karl, ah, called me out on that,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“After you and Houdini knocked him out and left him handcuffed in an alley, he told me to stop threatening you, because we both knew I could never go through with it.” His abashed look intensified. “I think his exact words were, ah, ‘boss, stop letting your mouth write checks your ass can’t cash.’”

Lucy snorted. “What happened to him, anyway? He was there in Paris and then he was gone by DC.”

“Emma said he walked out. Either she scared him off, or she killed him.” His face was hard.

Lucy knew why he’d made the decisions he had, and why the team had made the decisions they had. All of them had been operating from partial or wrong information at some point, and they’d had a lot to work through before either side could trust the other. Honestly? It was a miracle they’d started working together in time.

She glanced at him. They’d gotten several miracles.

“Why did you trust her?” she asked quietly.

“To the extent that I did?” He hesitated. “Because she was in y— in the journal.”

She nearly swerved. “She what?”
“Your alternate timeline self had apparently not… found out the truth.”

“Oh God.” So Lucy— some other Lucy— had…?

“It’s not your fault,” Garcia added firmly.

“I know,” she sighed. “Just thinking about what a mess we all made.”

But in other timelines, it had been even worse. It must have been, for their future selves to make two different trips back. And in this timeline… they had won. They would never have to experience whatever had happened in those other timelines.

Winding through the mountains as they were, she wasn’t comfortable taking his hand, but she promised herself a good five minutes of nice, slow kisses the next time they stopped.

Navigating a tight hairpin curve reminded her of coming to this area before. “My father— Henry,” Lucy began. “He was an avid skier when he was younger.” She glanced sideways. She never knew how much Garcia knew about a given part of her past.

“My mom never got into it, but… I was game. So as soon as I was old enough, he took me up to Lake Tahoe for spring break. Mom stayed behind; she had a conference to get ready for.”

“That first day, I had a beginner lesson from an instructor and my dad, and then we headed for the bunny trails, and… I was a disaster.” She laughed. “But I kept trying. I was determined to make Dad proud of me. And… I kept being a disaster.”

“… I notice you don’t look surprised,” she added.

“Lucy, this is entrapment.”

She snorted. “I finally… fell on my face, skidded like twenty feet on my face and hands, and came to a stop only to hit myself in the head with my own ski and get my legs tangled up with my pole. Dad had to untangle me. I was bleeding, and I was crying…”

“He just picked me up and carried me back to the lodge, and we spent the rest of the trip, oh, having snowball fights, and making snowmen, and drinking hot chocolate by the fire as we made up stories about the other guests.” She smiled at the memories. “He must have been disappointed that skiing wasn’t going to be our thing, something we could do together, but all he ever said to me was he was proud of me for trying it.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“He was,” she said softly. “He was.”

Three successive historical markers related to the Pony Express, mining, or both, reminded her how few routes there were through these mountains; in other places, the modern highways had long since been realigned away from the pioneer routes, but not here. But the scenery more than made up for the lack of variety in the historical markers.

For their last lunch on the road, they stopped at a little grocery store, then drove until they found a convenient picnic table not too far for Garcia to limp. The picnic table overlooked a creek that rushed fast and foamy down the mountain, and the burble of the water drowned out the noise of the nearby highway.

They didn’t talk much. Neither of them were inclined to hurry; maybe Garcia was thinking of the
traffic ahead, too. When she’d finished eating, she slipped over to his side of the picnic table, and leaned against him. He slipped his arm around her waist, and she nestled her head against his shoulder.

“I know I’m clingy sometimes,” she admitted. “I hope you don’t… mind.”

She looked up when she felt him turn to look at her, and caught the tail end of an incredulous look before he got his face under control.

“The word I would use is cuddly,” he said after a minute, “and I, uh, like it.”

She smiled up at him. “You do, huh?”

He kissed her hair. “Yes, Lucy, I do.”

She loved how he made her feel that all of her was all right. That she didn’t have any parts she needed to feel ashamed of, even the parts that weren’t— that weren’t smart and clever and steel-strong.

She leaned against him happily for another moment, then sat up and pressed a gentle kiss against his neck. He made a deeply gratifying contented noise, turned, and kissed her thoroughly.

Once they got back on the road, they didn’t stop much, by mutual agreement. They both wanted to get through the Bay Area traffic. Their one stop of any length was at the State Indian Museum in Sacramento.

When they came out, Lucy glanced next door.

“A fort?” Garcia asked.

She nodded. “Sutter’s Fort.”

“Is that the same Sutter…”

“Yes. The settlement here was basically overrun and abandoned when gold was discovered out at his mill. He spent the rest of his life trying to get compensation for that.” Lucy might have felt sorry for him, if he hadn’t spent years enslaving and abusing the Native Americans who’d been there when he arrived.

Lucy was afraid the Sacramento traffic was only the beginning, but things cleared up a bit on the other side of the city. “I can drive,” Garcia offered.

“I know.” She was holding that in reserve for if and when she reached her limit. She’d lived here most of her life; she had a high tolerance. But after weeks of taking the back roads, the Bay Area interstate was a different beast altogether.

“I’ll let you know,” she added.

“If we’d detoured to the coast, we could have driven from the Atlantic to the Pacific,” Garcia said after a while.

“Well,” she said, after thinking about it. “There’s always next year.”

He snorted, and she risked glancing away from the road for a moment. The warmth in his eyes… She wasn’t really serious about wanting to drive coast-to-coast next year. But she was serious
about being willing to go anywhere with him. And now… they would have that chance.

“Garcia?”

“Yes.”

She took a moment to think. For nearly four weeks, their normal had been hours of driving and nights in motels. No real obligations. And now…?

“What is our life going to look like now?”

“Whatever we want it to, Lucy,” he said after a minute.

She sneaked a quick glance at him. He wasn’t usually one for platitudes, and she’d expected something a little more… concrete.

“You’re strong enough to make that happen, Lucy. And… you’ve earned it. You’ve earned a fresh start.”

She waited, and hoped she wouldn’t have to say it. She waited longer, as a mile slid by under their wheels. Finally, she opened her mouth—

“I suppose… maybe we both have,” he added, very quietly.

She gave him a soft little smile.

“So, uh,” he continued, “what do you want your life to look like, Lucy?”

“I want to help people,” she said after a minute. “I want to stand up for history when people— bastards— try to twist it in the service of oppression. And I want to be happy.” She considered. “And I want you. And our friends.”

“That sounds like enough to start with.”

She smiled. “What about you?”

He was quiet for a while. “I envy you your certainty,” he admitted. “I want… something that’s not fighting, any more. And I want you.”

“We have time for you to decide,” she said. “For you to find what’s right for you, now. Not just something that would work.” She glanced over long enough to make sure he heard her— really heard her.

He nodded once. “I’ll, uh, take my time having my midlife crisis,” he said gravely, and Lucy snorted.

They were traveling against the rush hour flow, so it only took them a few hours to get back to San Francisco. Still, she was so tired from fighting traffic in the few chokepoints that relief at being done with that was her strongest emotion. It felt anti-climactic.

Still, she couldn’t face her mother’s house that night. So they found a comparatively cheap motel, which still cost more than twice what some of their nights on the road had. They’d get some dinner —

“The car,” she realized.
“What?”

“We have to return the car. To Homeland Security. The whole reason we drove.”

It seemed to take him effort to remember that. “Right.”

They checked the car twice, making sure they hadn’t left any trash, or socks, or spare Yoda-Spock paintings. Garcia elected to ride with her to Agent Christopher’s office, despite his pointed dislike of Homeland Security.

Agent Christopher and another agent were waiting outside the secured area. Lucy handed the younger woman the keys, and watched a little wistfully as the car that they’d spent so much time in the last three and a half weeks disappeared out of sight.

“Do you have a place to stay?” Agent Christopher asked.

“We have a motel room.”

She looked at Garcia. “How’s your leg?”

“Attached.” Their surroundings weren’t doing Garcia’s mood any favors, apparently.

Agent Christopher raised an eyebrow.

“It’s healing fine,” he conceded.

“Good.” She turned back to Lucy, and picked up a bag at her feet. “I sent our office newbie out for something for you. I thought you’d probably be tired.”

Lucy peeked inside the bag: a bag with the logo of a popular local Italian place. “Oh, wow. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She tilted her head. “I thought I owed you that much after that scare in Kansas, anyway.”

“Oh God,” Lucy muttered, at the memory.

“Come for supper next week.” Agent Christopher’s gaze flicked sideways. “Both of you,” she added after a minute. “I’ll ask Michelle to make her mustard chicken.”

Lucy did not need to be told twice, though she glanced sideways at Garcia to gauge his reaction. His expression was interesting, but he didn’t outwardly object.

“Thank you for driving the car back,” Agent Christopher added. “I… owe you one, for that.”

Lucy and Garcia exchanged looks. “It wasn’t too much of a hardship,” Lucy added, smirking.

Agent Christopher raised an eyebrow, but there was a suspicious softness at the corner of her mouth. She held out her arms, and Lucy gladly accepted the offered hug.

Garcia and Agent Christopher shook hands, and Lucy called a Lyft to get them back to the motel. It felt so strange, riding in the back seat after all those weeks in the car.

Rufus called while they were walking in the door of their motel room. “Hey. Are you back?”

“Yeah, we just got in.”
“I’m glad you survived all the… outside.”

“I didn’t have to wipe my butt with leaves once.”

“Always good. Hey, we talked about dinner. Do you want to come over tomorrow night? Or we could do lunch if, uh, you have plans. Or another day if you’re still tired from the trip.”

Lucy smiled at his thorough covering of the options. “Let’s do dinner. We’re tackling my mom’s house tomorrow.”

They made plans and hung up; Lucy and Garcia opened the food. It was good and ample… and Agent Christopher’s office newbie had thoughtfully included a large salad, which made Lucy smile. They put the rest in the mini-fridge for morning, and got ready for bed, rather quietly.

And then it hit.

“I guess this is the post-trip letdown,” Lucy said, attempting another smile, as she finished moisturizing. Garcia looked up, and searched her expression as if to determine her exact mental state. Lucy almost told him she was fine. But…

With him, it was okay if she wasn’t.

He opened his mouth, hesitated, and closed it again. Instead of speaking, he pushed the covers down invitingly. She smiled, finished what she was doing, and crawled in beside him.

Curling up next to him like this was a far cry from last night’s impatient passion. But she didn’t have to choose. Together, they could have both.

It was a rare thing, a man—or a woman—she could trust with all of her.

“Can I help?” he asked quietly.

She gently touched his face, his stubble rough under her fingertips. “You already are.”

She hadn’t minded nearly a month of motel rooms on the road. To be here, though, in this templated room, just another bed and dresser and old TV cabinet, in her own hometown, felt so… bleak.

But she wasn’t alone.

Garcia turned and gently pulled her against his chest. As he slowly stroked her hair, over and over, she felt herself relax against him. She let out a deep sigh.

“What do you want in an apartment?” he asked after a while, his voice rumbling against her back.

“In an apartment?”

“We… have to find a place to live. I’m just curious what matters to you.”

“You being there,” she murmured.

“I, uh, have good news, then…”

She snorted. “A dishwasher,” she said after a while.

“Mmm. Yes. What else?”
“Light,” she said dreamily. She still wasn’t over that dark bunker. “And a sunny corner, where you and I can sit and read.”

He made a low noise of contentment.

“Room for my books,” she continued. “I— I inherited Mom’s library.” She’d had time to get used to that idea, in her original timeline, or it would have been a shock. “Mmm. A kitchen where we can cook together.” She nestled a little closer to him. “What about you?”

He was still gently stroking her hair. “A chair where we can both fit,” he said after a while.

“We’ll get one of those big peanut-shaped bowl chairs.” Snuggling down in one of those beside him, with a book and a cup of tea…

At her urging, he rolled over so they could change places. “Is this all right?” she murmured, wrapping herself around him.

“Lucy, I don’t mind being your little spoon.” His voice rumbled against her chest, pressed against his back. He sounded amused.

“Not what I asked.”

He took her hand in his. “Yes,” he assured her.

She pressed her lips to the back of his neck, at the bump of his spine. His hand tightened on hers, and she slid her arm more firmly around his waist. Sleep came, after all, quite quickly.

#

Lucy slammed the door behind her. The Lyft driver pulled away from the curb, and then it was just the two of them in front of the house.

Except it wasn’t.

Jiya, Wyatt, and Rufus were waiting on the doorstep. Jiya had a tote bag, Wyatt had a stack of flattened cardboard boxes, and Rufus had what looked like a box of donuts and a carafe of coffee.

“Oh my God,” Lucy said softly, and smiled, blinking back tears.

“You guys didn’t have to come!” she said, as soon as they were within hearing range.

Rufus groaned, dug into his wallet, and handed Wyatt a bill. “We had a bet,” he explained, when Lucy looked puzzled. “On what you’d say when you saw us. You just won it for Wyatt, so, uh, thanks for that.”

Lucy snorted, then laughed, then hugged him tightly. Then Wyatt, then Jiya.

“It’s really good to see you,” she murmured.

“You, too, Lucy.”

Lucy gently picked up Jiya’s hand, and looked at her engagement ring. “Oooh, nice.”

“Rufus apparently made it himself,” Jiya said. “In the lab.”

Lucy had no idea how that worked, or how it had been possible for Rufus to do that quickly, but
she could tell that Jiya was deeply geekily enthusiastic about it. So she made encouraging noises.

“Good to see you’re not, uh, dead,” Rufus offered behind her, and Lucy turned to see Rufus and Wyatt, and Garcia, eyeing each other awkwardly. Well, this was still progress.

“Thanks, Rufus,” Garcia said drily.

“Lucy, you, uh, wanna…?” Wyatt gestured at the front door.

“Hmm? Oh!”

She stepped past Wyatt to the front door and dug the keys out of her pocket. Fitting the key into the lock, as she’d done countless times, brought up a whole range of emotions she hadn’t expected… and wasn’t prepared for. The last time she’d seen this house had been the night Mom kidnapped her.

Then Garcia stepped up beside her before she could open the door. “Wyatt?”

Wyatt nodded, and drew his gun — what?

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Checking the house,” Wyatt said. “Stay here.”

“Agent Christopher’s people have already checked. Several times!”

“Humor us,” Garcia said.

Wyatt motioned for the rest of them to step back. Reluctantly, Lucy did. Garcia cracked the door open, waited, then slipped through. Wyatt took up what Lucy now recognized as a covering position, then followed Garcia in.

“They’re just being melodramatic, right?” Rufus said. “Like, a soldier thing?”

Lucy really, really hoped so.

“Clear,” Garcia called after several long moments. Lucy picked up the coffee, and followed them inside.

Lucy looked around, seeing Mom’s ghost everywhere. And there in the kitchen—

That was where Mom had—

Mom had—

“Lucy?”

At Jiya’s voice, Lucy shook herself back to the present. She’d stopped in the hall, right before the kitchen.

Rufus put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. Jiya reached down and took her hand. With her friends supporting her, Lucy took the last two steps across the threshold.

Garcia’s eyes were wide and dark and understanding; Wyatt winced, and looked sympathetic. Lucy was grateful she didn’t have to explain it to any of them.
But the room was too quiet. “I’m fine,” she told them automatically. “Or… I will be.”

Garcia’s expression softened. Even to her, it was that second one that had the ring of truth.

“All right,” she said, a little too brightly. “Work, then coffee?”

“Coffee, then work, then we order pizza,” Wyatt said.

“It’s important to pace ourselves,” Rufus explained.

Lucy laughed, and if her eyes were a little wet, it was because she loved them. “Where do we start?”

“I would start downstairs,” Jiya said quietly. “It helps to have one room you can… one room that’s not so painful.”

Lucy looked at the solemnity of Jiya’s expression, and silently gave her a hug. She wasn’t the only one who’d been here.

She started clearing the shelves of the living room bookcase. She didn’t try to overthink any of these decisions, just went through and sorted everything there into hers, which could stay; Mom’s to be put away for later; or Mom’s to be given away.

Rufus knelt beside her, carefully wrapping each fragile thing with hands made gentle by long practice with fiddly electronics. Jiya had disappeared upstairs, saying something about clean sheets; Wyatt had gone outside for something; Garcia was in the front room.

“So, what was your favorite thing you saw?” Rufus asked, as he set up a second box.

“Superman,” she said, with a sly sideways look.

Rufus made a grumbling noise.

She laughed. “Honestly, I don’t think I could pick. I loved things like the Cosmosphere, and— and Serpent Mound, and the Gilcrease Museum, but I also loved, oh… the open spaces. The prairie thunderstorms. The big skies.”

“To each her own,” Rufus said after a minute.

She laughed again.

“You seem, uh, better,” he told her, as he wrapped up a picture of Lucy and Mom. “Than when you left.” He shrugged. “You laugh more.”

It felt good to hear someone else confirm it. “I feel better,” she agreed quietly. “I feel like…” She hesitated. “This war took— so much,” she began, with a self-deprecatingly look, aware that she was talking to a man who’d literally died. “And I feel like… I found some of those things again. On the road.”

Rufus looked at her for a moment, and then just hugged her. It felt good.

“Tell me your news!” She wiped her eyes when they finally pulled apart. “How’s the wedding planning going? … and the job search, if you want to talk about that.”

His face softened into a smile. “The wedding’s going to be at Comic-Con,” he said.
Lucy immediately pictured the two of them exchanging vows in front of hordes of people wearing cardboard box robot costumes.

“Just a small ceremony,” he added. “A couple of guys— and girls— owe me favors, so, we’ll just be in one of the conference rooms.”

Her vision dissipated. “That’s… soon, right?”

“Yeah, about a month from now.” He tilted his head. “We both thought, why wait?”

Lucy smiled. “I like that,” she said softly.

“As for the job search,” he said after a minute, “I actually wanted to talk to you about that.”

“You did?”

“So… Berkeley wants to hire me. They called me the other day.”

“Oh?” she said. “Oh! That’s… great!”

“Don’t know how they found out about me.” He looked a little bashful, which was kind of adorable.

“Yeah, it’s a complete mystery how a total genius got on their radar.”

He snorted. “But, the thing is, I… don’t think I actually want to take it?”

“… oh?”

“I just…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I learned how to fit in at MIT. But I had to learn.”

She watched him quietly.

“So, I got in touch with the physics department at SF State, told them who I was, told them Berkeley wanted me, and asked if they were hiring.”

Lucy nearly swallowed her own tongue at his casual treatment of the academic job market. She managed to just blink at him dumbly.

“I have an interview in two weeks,” he added.

Lucy swallowed several startled phrases about hiring cycles and open lines. “And how do you feel about that?” she asked finally. Rufus would make an excellent teacher, but she wasn’t sure how well he would cope with the politics and the departmental bullshit.

He took a moment to respond. “It’s an option.” He put another item in the box. “I just… think of all the kids out there, growing up like I did, who don’t have a Connor,” he said softly. “Maybe I could… I don’t know. Help them.”

He looked up. “So, maybe we could sit down some time and you could tell me about being a professor,” he added.

“I’d… love to.” She considered. “Maybe not over dinner tonight, though. Jiya might prefer slightly more scintillating conversation.”

“And, uh, Flynn.” Rufus glanced at her. “He coming? I didn’t ask last night, but… that wasn’t on
“Would you be okay with that?” Lucy understood why Garcia had done what he’d done to Rufus, but only Rufus could forgive him for it. And to invite Garcia into the home he and Jiya shared was different than sharing a safe house with him.

She watched Rufus carefully, but he didn’t look alarmed as he seemed to consider the question honestly. After a moment he shrugged. “Yeah.”

Lucy nodded. “All right.”

They finished the shelves, and Rufus said something about checking on Wyatt. Before Lucy could call after him to ask what Wyatt was doing, Jiya was there. “Hey.” Jiya gave her a friendly smile. “Wanna start on the kitchen? I didn’t want to touch the bedrooms without asking you first.”

“Um… sure.”

Jiya drew herself up. “Whatever’s in that refrigerator can’t be worse than Rittenhouse or the 1880s,” she muttered to herself.

Lucy blinked at her. Then glanced at the refrigerator, and did the math.

Oh. Yeah. Ew.

They cleaned it out by virtue of chucking a bunch of fuzzy, unidentifiable stuff straight into the double-lined trash can. “Is it okay if we squeal like girls?” Lucy asked, glancing at Jiya to be sure.

Jiya wrinkled her nose. “Absolutely.”

“Oh good,” Lucy said with relief.

“I bet if we were biologists, we could discover a bunch of new antibiotics from that pickle jar alone.”

“… I don’t know what that means, and I’m happy with that.”

As soon as they were done, Jiya knotted the trash bag and carried it out to the can. Lucy washed her hands thoroughly under the hottest water she could stand, dried them, and nearly ran into Garcia.

“Hey.” She smiled up at him. “How’s the leg?”

“Fine.” He studied her inscrutably. “How’s the, uh…”

“Heart?” she supplied, feeling her eyes water a bit, when he didn’t continue.

He winced, and nodded.

“I’m… I’m all right,” she said softly, and it was the truth.

“This would be a lot harder alone,” she added after a minute.

Garcia gave her a soft little smile.

“What have you been doing?”
“Going through the front room. The papers. Ah…”

“… looking for anything about Rittenhouse,” Lucy realized.

He nodded once.

“You don’t think Agent Christopher’s people would have done that?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t deliberately keep any secrets, but there may still be connections they would miss that I would not.”

She nodded. Whatever it was, it was taking him a while, because she hadn’t seen him since…

She thought of how he’d appeared just as Jiya had stepped outside, and realized her friends were keeping her from being alone in the house.

She leaned into him, and he wrapped his arms around her and held her.

“Mmm,” she finally sighed softly, and pulled away.

Jiya came back and washed her hands, and Garcia went back to the front room. Jiya helped Lucy clear out the cupboards, and also put all of the things that especially reminded her of Mom, out of sight in boxes.

The back door opened. Wyatt came in, hands covered in something black. “You don’t have any Fast Orange, right?”

“… any what.”

“Any, uh, Dawn?”

“Why didn’t you just call it that in the first place?”

Wyatt sighed.

Jiya found a bottle of oil and poured it over Wyatt’s hands over the kitchen sink; he rubbed and rubbed, his hands turning from black to grey. “Your, uh, car’s working,” he said.

Lucy blinked at him. “What?”

“Your car? In the garage? Little blue sedan? It’s working again.”

“Was it… not before?” She hadn’t thought of her car in ages.

Wyatt gave her a Look. “After sitting for over six months? No.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“What do you, uh, need in here?”

By the time the pizza arrived, the downstairs looked very different. And sitting with her friends, laughing, somehow felt… cleansing. It felt weird to think of it that way, but…

But love was powerful medicine, right?

“Hey,” Wyatt said, as they carried the pizza boxes to the outside can. “You doing okay?”
“With… the house? Or in general?”

“You said it would be hard to come back to the city,” he said after a minute. “And now you’re at your mom’s house.”

“Oh.” She held the lid up so he could stuff everything inside. “I guess I hadn’t stopped moving long enough to think about that part,” she admitted.

“Mmm.”

She let the lid slam down. “But… it is better. In general. I mean…” She hesitated. “Before… I feel like I was looking back. And now I’m looking forward.” She glanced at him, self-deprecatingly. “Does that make any sense?”

He winced. “Yeah, it does.” He looked up. “And I’m, uh. Glad to hear it.”

She reached out and hugged him, and it felt good.

Wyatt, Jiya, and Rufus left after lunch, after Lucy thanked them profusely. That left her and Garcia looking at each other in the living room.

“What do you want to do now?” Garcia asked. “Should we, uh, head back to the motel, or did you want to work more?”

She looked around. “What would you think about staying here? The couch turns into a bed,” she added, because he probably couldn’t negotiate stairs without pain yet.

He scrutinized her. “You really gonna be okay with that?

She nodded slowly. “I have to face this place sometime,” she said. “I have to deal with— what my mom was. And this wasn’t just her home. It was mine.”

After a minute, he nodded once. “If that’s what you want, it’s fine with me.”

Dinner with Rufus and Jiya was great. They swapped road trip stories for stories of job hunting and wedding planning. Garcia was driving, so Lucy relaxed with a glass of wine and enjoyed Rufus’s amazing cooking.

“You didn’t let us know you could cook this well in the bunker because you didn’t want to get stuck doing it,” she accused.

Rufus scratched the back of his neck. “It’s really just the fresher ingredients…”

He trailed off, sounding like even he didn’t believe himself, and Lucy laughed.

They said good night and headed— back to Mom’s house. The house. Lucy couldn’t call it their house, not even in her head. They weren’t going to stay. But for right now, it made a good home base.

They came in the front door, and Lucy scooped up the mail from the floor. To be getting the same old junk mail after everything that had happened felt…

Wait, this wasn’t junk mail.

“Garcia,” she called. He’d gone ahead into the living room. “Something came for you.”
“No one knows I’m—” His voice, sharp with worry, trailed into confusion when he saw that she had already opened the envelope.

“No,” she said. “It was addressed to me.” She handed him the black-and-white photograph.

He took it, looked up fast, almost in disbelief, and his eyes filled. She smiled.

“Thank you, Lucy,” he managed, after a long moment of staring at the photo of his mother. His voice was rough. He blinked hard a few times.

“How did you even get this?” he asked, when his voice was under control again.

“I wrote to the Cosmosphere.”

He pulled her into a crushing hug, and buried his face against her hair. “Thank you,” he breathed.

She held him tightly.

He finally, reluctantly, let go of her again. “I think this, uh,” he began. He touched his tongue to his top lip. “When I—” He hesitated. “I looked up my— my brother’s contact information,” he said finally. “I don’t know if he’ll want anything to do with me, but I know he’ll want to see this.”

She smiled at him, and reached up and cupped his cheek. He closed his eyes, leaning into her touch.

While he took a quick shower, she checked her email. Bekah, her friend from grad school, had responded to her query of that morning, giving her some leads on groups that might be pushing for more accuracy at the Fort Pillow site.

She’d follow up on that tomorrow. It felt strange, to be slipping back into the familiar patterns of academia… but comforting, to be reminded that history wasn’t only what Mom and the rest of Rittenhouse had wanted to make it. She could use her skills for good. Would use her skills for good.

Together, she and Garcia wrestled the bed out of the couch, and got sheets on it. “Shall I, ah, ransack the upstairs bedrooms for their pillows?” he asked, trying not to smirk.

“Can you even climb the stairs?”

“For your pillow habit, Lucy, I would make the sacrifice.” That damned smirk had blossomed now, into full-blown dimples.

She smoothed the top sheet. This would be the first time in nearly a month they were sleeping somewhere they could call their own, even if just technically. That felt… strange. But good.

And maybe, she realized, watching him putting around the kitchen making tea, as if he belonged there already… maybe she wanted them to be able to call this place their own. Maybe it was time to stop shrinking away from her mother’s legacy. Maybe it was time to make things her own.

She changed into pajamas and did her evening routine. When she came back to the living room, she caught the tail end of a deeply appreciative look from Garcia. “I think that’s the one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen you wear.”

She looked down at herself, a little confused. She wasn’t wearing lingerie. Just loose sweatpants and a t-shirt that had a stack of books with the caption *my weekend is all booked* — oh.
She really appreciated having a partner who didn’t hide how attractive he found her brains. She really, really appreciated it.

She climbed into bed and watched him rather sleepily. Before long, he joined her. They silently negotiated whose limbs were going where, which ended very satisfactorily with her snuggled against him. When everyone got everything they wanted, it was a great negotiation.

“What are you going to do tomorrow?” Garcia murmured, tucking his arm a bit more tightly around her.

“Mmm.” She thought. “I have to get a christening gift.” Esperanza Fata’s christening was Saturday, and she had no idea how hard it would be to find something appropriate.

“Do you want help with that?”

She looked up at him.

“I can, ah… tell you everything a newborn or her parents might need. Or want.”

His face was shadowed. She stroked his cheek, then stretched up and kissed his forehead. “Not if it would be painful for you.”

He shook his head. “It’s worth the pain,” he said quietly. “To remember.” He closed his eyes. “It’s all right.”

“Okay,” she said after a minute, and cupped his cheek again.

He opened his eyes. “Anything else?”

“I… should probably get in touch with Stanford,” she admitted. “Let them know I’m, you know, alive. See where things stand with them.” She didn’t want to stay there, but she’d need references for any job search. And until searches began to open in the fall, it wouldn’t hurt to pick up a class or two, if she could, to bookend the giant gaping hole on her CV.

“What about you?” she added.

She felt more than heard his sigh. “I’m going to… try to contact Gabriel.”

“How about we spend the morning getting our difficult phone calls out of the way, then go out to lunch and pick up a christening gift?”

“It’s a date.”

She kissed the corner of his mouth. His hand spread across her back as she shifted to kiss him full-on, slow and lingering.

One kiss became several. Slow and lingering became open-mouthed and heated. When Lucy sat up long enough to get rid of her shirt, the sight of the living room was jarring, and she almost—

But this was her house now. Her choices.

Besides, if she were trying to cleanse the house of its bad memories…

She wondered if Garcia was thinking along those same lines when she realized he was deliberately encouraging her to be loud, but by then she had more important things on her mind. And by the time they cleaned up, their movements slow and languid, she was far too content to ask.
Tomorrow would be the first time in twenty-four days she’d wake up somewhere besides a rented room. The adjustment no longer scared her. Four thousand miles of surprises and spur-of-the-moment decisions had strengthened her confidence in her ability to navigate, in more ways than one.

And it wasn’t as if she were going to lose the chance to ask what was over the horizon. It would just happen a little differently, that was all.

They’d had an adventure, and along the way, gone from road trip partners to, she hoped, life partners. Now they were going to figure the rest out together.

She smiled, tugged the blankets over them both, and closed her eyes.

#

“I still can’t believe you talked me into this,” Garcia muttered, not for the first time.

“They’ll really appreciate it,” she pointed out, also not for the first time.

“Mmm.”

“Besides.” She looked him up and down. “I think you know that’s not a bad look on you.”

He smirked.

They followed Rufus’s instructions to get inside and navigate the enormous crowds, and then found the others in a small conference room with the table pushed against the wall. She and Garcia were almost the last to arrive.

“Hey!” Jiya, looking radiant, caught her in a bone-crushing hug. Rufus’s hug was no less enthusiastic.

“Nice costume, man,” Rufus said, and she’d never heard him speak to Garcia so enthusiastically.

Lucy looked at Wyatt, and snorted. He, and Rufus, and Garcia, were all wearing the same thing: blue pants with a red stripe, open-collared white shirt, black vest. Garcia, she thought, wore it especially well; the scruff was a nice touch.

“What?” Wyatt asked, a little self-deprecating. “It’s an easy look.” His vest looked like it had been scrounged from military surplus.

“Uh-huh,” she said, hugging him. “That’s the only reason all three of you dressed up as Han Solo.”

His self-deprecating look deepened. “I, uh, kinda expected Leia,” he said when they let go. He gestured at her own costume.

“That was the obvious choice, but I figured you’d all come as Star Wars, and I wanted Jiya to have someone for the bride’s side.” She smiled at Jiya, and Jiya gave her another radiant look.

Introductions didn’t take long: the amused woman in the elegant, flowing robes was Rufus’s mom, Angela. His brother, Kevin, was wearing rough-looking tan robes and carrying a fake lightsaber. The bemused woman watching from the laptop, obviously Jiya’s mom, was wearing a headband with sparkly antennae. Connor was dressed as Lando Calrissian, with a long cape Lucy half-suspected might quietly migrate into his regular wardrobe.

The door opened, and two more… figures was definitely the right word… appeared: one, a human-
sized Yoda, and the other, a man with pointed ears. Lucy choked back laughter.

“Is this everyone?” the Vulcan asked.

Jiya looked around, and looked a little disappointed. “I think so, yeah.”

“Very well.”

“Gathered, have we,” Yoda intoned, “to celebrate a union of this lifeform, to this one.” She? gestured to Jiya and Rufus.

“Pair bonding is a logical arrangement found in many species,” the Vulcan continued, reading from the script.

“Promotes emotional well being, it does,” Yoda said.

Were these— friends of Jiya and Rufus’s? Were alien wedding ceremonies a… service this fan thing did? Lucy was very much not going to ask.

“Do you, Jiya Marri, take Rufus Carlin to be your lawfully wedded spouse?” the Vulcan continued.

Jiya turned to Rufus and took both his hands. “For as long as we both shall live,” she said, and added quietly, “Or, actually, longer.”

Rufus’s expression turned impossibly soft and warm.

The door opened—

Garcia had already relaxed by the time Lucy saw that it was Agent Christopher. “You made it!”

“Finally, yes. Sorry I’m late.”

“We’re just glad you’re here,” Jiya said.

“Hey, where’s your costume?” Rufus asked.

Agent Christopher gave him a stern look. “I’m the space police.”

Rufus gave her a slightly disappointed look. “Well. We really are glad you’re here.” Then he turned back to Jiya, leaving Lucy as the only witness when Agent Christopher slipped a tiny Starfleet pin onto her lapel.

“Take Jiya Marri to be your lawfully wedded spouse, do you?” Yoda asked Rufus.

“Oh hell yes,” Rufus said softly, and kissed Jiya.

“You may now exchange a sign of—” the Vulcan said, still reading from the script.

“Redundant, that is,” Yoda pointed out helpfully.

Their kiss went on, and on. When the two of them finally broke apart, they stared at each other like they’d forgotten the presence of everyone else in the room. Maybe in the world.

Lucy unashamedly wiped her eyes. Garcia, without looking, handed her a handkerchief.

“I now pronounce you legally wedded spouses,” the Vulcan said. “Your marriage is legally binding anywhere within the Federation.”
“Within the what,” Wyatt whispered.

“Nerd things,” Lucy whispered back.

“Oh. Great.” But he couldn’t not smile when he looked back to Rufus and Jiya.

“Aren’t we forgetting something?” Jiya asked, and held up a little cloth bag.

Yoda and the Vulcan looked abashed.

Rufus took Jiya’s left hand and gently slid the ring onto her finger before bringing her hand to his mouth. She put a matching ring onto his hand, and then threw her arms around him, holding him too tight even to kiss. Whatever she whispered in his ear brought tears to both their eyes. And Lucy was grateful for Garcia’s handkerchief.

“So, uh,” Rufus said, when he and Jiya finally remembered there were other people in the room. “Thank you for coming to our wedding—” He reached down and took Jiya’s hand, and they both beamed. “And, there’s food next door. For those of you who are, uh…” He seemed to realize that commenting on his mother-in-law’s physical absence might be a bad idea, and trailed off.

“Hungry!” Jiya supplied.

“Right. We have space dots,” Rufus said.

“… space dots,” Wyatt echoed, looking like he should have seen this coming. “Of course.”

“And other food,” Jiya reassured him.

So they settled in around a conference table, eating takeout and space dots— well, mostly it was Rufus and Kevin eating space dots— and laughing. Connor opened a couple of bottles of champagne. “Sorry,” he said, passing the plastic cups around. “Short notice.”

Mrs. Marri procured her own glass from somewhere and joined the toasts before signing off for the evening. Then the newlyweds opened their gifts; Rufus shouted with laughter at the painting, and both of them appreciated Lucy’s less exciting present, a sheet set with a luxuriously high thread count. After Rufus and Jiya had unwrapped the last gift, some kind of exotic five-in-one kitchen device from Connor, Lucy looked around at all of them, gathered around the table despite the odds, and smiled.

They drank more champagne, and they celebrated more. “How’s Jessica?” Lucy asked Wyatt. Rufus, Jiya, Connor and Kevin had been exchanging nerd jokes for the last five minutes, and they might as well have been speaking another language.

Wyatt winced. Maybe she shouldn’t have asked. But… it didn’t do any good to pretend, did it?

“She’s… all right,” he said finally. “She’s, um. Lonely a lot.” He glanced sideways. “They’re keeping her— not in solitary, exactly, not for the punishment aspect, but to protect her.”

Ah: to protect her from Rittenhouse, if there was anything left of it.

“She has a lot of time to think, and a lot to think about,” he said after a minute. “It’s… not easy, when your world turns over.”

“She turned it over,” Lucy pointed out.

“I know.”
“She chose to walk out on everything she knew, everything she’d been taught was right. Because she loves you, Wyatt. And she wanted better for your baby.”

Wyatt’s tiny little smile made Lucy think he and Jessica were going to be all right, in the end, despite everything ahead of them. “I know,” he repeated.

Lucy hesitated. “Do you think she could use company?”

Wyatt’s expression was hard to read. “You wanna go visit her?”

“I mean, you said she had a lot to think about, and I know what it’s like to have your world turn over.” She studied him. “Unless you think she’d rather not see me.”

It took him a moment to respond. “No. I… think she would.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to Agent Christopher.”

“Talk to me about what?” Denise appeared with the uncanny awareness of her surroundings that typified her profession.

“Picture time!” Jiya proclaimed, as Agent Christopher and Lucy finished sorting out the logistics of visiting Jessica. Yoda came back and served as the photographer, getting all of them in a surprisingly professional exhaustive barrage of shots and combinations. “Smile, you will,” Yoda ordered sternly.

By the time they finished all that, Angela and Connor were packing up the food. Lucy started to help by picking up all the plastic cups.


They exchanged looks. Lucy certainly wasn’t going to say no on his wedding day, and neither did any of the others. So the seven of them crowded in, one last time… for tonight, anyway.

They maneuvered awkwardly to get everyone in view, elbows bumping, trying not to step on each others feet. Then Rufus realized he couldn’t hold the camera if he had one arm around Jiya’s waist and the other around Lucy’s shoulders, so Wyatt took it, and they had to reshuffle.

Finally they got into position. Lucy looked at all of them, huddled into sight on the screen— all of them together. And she laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking with this story from one end of the country to the other! Stay tuned for a brief epilogue.
Lucy curled around Garcia, obliging heating pad that he was, and watched the whitecaps dotting the stormy grey ocean.

It had been a long, late summer, and she’d looked forward to an idyllic four days of October sunshine and warmth on the coast. But a storm blew through as they were leaving Mendocino, and bringing cold and rain in its wake.

Which just meant that she had an excellent excuse (not that she needed one) for lazing in bed with Garcia’s back pressed against her chest as the gas fire danced in the fireplace. A rolled pillow propped her head up so she could see out the balcony door, and the slow crash and hiss of the waves lulled her out of thinking.

After a while, she shifted just far enough to press a gentle kiss to the curve of his neck. He made a noise so soft it threatened to break her.

They had no rush. Nowhere to be until much later. No war to win, no problem to solve, no desperate odds to outrun. Just the two of them in a snug little motel room in Oregon, nothing demanding their attention but the flicker of firelight and the rhythm of the breakers.

Eventually, her hunger pangs also demanded her attention, and she reluctantly pushed back the covers and shrugged into her robe. She found the pastries they’d bought the day before, and brewed some coffee, and eventually they took everything to the little loveseat that looked out over the ocean. She tucked her feet up under her robe and leaned against his side, snuggling happily into his warmth as they ate.

“I was thinking,” she began.

“… mmm?”

“If I get that job at Oberlin, we could… road trip out there.” She looked up at him to see his expression. “Next summer.”

God, the way he looked at her with such tenderness… sometimes it threatened to undo her.

“I’d like that, Lucy.” His words came out as a soft rumble.

She hesitated. “But… I don’t know if I want to go so far from— everyone else,” she admitted. “They, and you… you’re the only family I have left.”

Garcia wrapped his free arm around her and kissed her hair.

“So I… decided to apply for that job at Berkeley.” She hesitated again. “And the one at San Francisco State.” She instinctively braced herself for a reaction she knew, intellectually, wouldn’t come.

And apparently her unease was visible: Garcia sounded a little confused. “All right…”

She half-smiled, though it wasn’t funny. “Mom would’ve flipped out. Oh, she was all for
expanding education, but… her expectations for me were clear.”

A teaching institution, Lucy? Are you really sure you’re working up to your full potential, dear?

“That’s on her, not on you.”

“I know.” And she knew he knew. And he knew she knew he knew. But every time she had to say it out loud… it helped, a little.

“Berkeley would be a good job,” she said. “But I just… every time I think about it, I hear Mom. In my head. Well done, Lucy. But I can’t decide my life by what she wouldn’t want, either.”

Garcia’s thumb stroked gentle arcs on her shoulder. “Would you be happy at Oberlin?”

“Yes. Assuming the department’s not fully of petty asses.”

“Would you be happy at Berkeley?”

“I think so.”

“Would you be happy at SF State?”

“It would be a lot more teaching. But I love teaching, and…”

And learning history shouldn’t just be for the elite… which basically defined most of Stanford’s students, one way or another. It should be for everyone.

“I love teaching,” she finished.

“Then you have options, and that’s good.”

She tucked her head against his shoulder.

“Wherever… wherever you want to be, Lucy. It’s up to you.”

“You don’t have opinions?” she asked. “Ohio versus San Francisco?”

“I’ll, ah, come with you, wherever,” he said. “You… know that, I think. I hope.”

She did. They’d had this conversation before. She’d asked because she wanted to hear him say it, again. He’d come with her wherever—or whenever. Jiya and Rufus were working on tracking down other Lucy’s trip to 2014.

She lifted her head, and turned her head to gently kiss his wrist.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing snow again,” he added. “Although I’m sure the novelty would wear off after shoveling it for a few months.”

Lucy snorted.

“And Ohio is not, uh, the most interesting of places, but… it’s near a lot of things.”

As they’d discovered on their road trip. She nodded.

“But if you want to stay in the California sunshine, with Rufus and Wyatt and Jiya and the rest, that’s fine, too.” He paused. “And if you do want to stay in California, that doesn’t stop us from road tripping east anyway, if we want.”
“Good point,” she murmured. “You’re smart.”

“I know.” The smile was audible in his voice. “We’ve been over this.”

She looked up at him just to enjoy his smirk.

She leaned against his shoulder again, drinking her coffee in slow, contented slips. “What time is the tour?” He’d made all the plans and all the arrangements for this trip, including finding a restored lighthouse that was open to the public two weekends a month.

“Eleven. We should probably leave around ten thirty.”

Plenty of time. They could lounge all morning.

“After that, the plan is to find a restaurant or a grocery store, pick up a little lunch, and drive out to the headland. If it’s raining, there’s a shelter, and if it’s too cold, we can eat in the car.”

“Or I can just sit on your lap and steal all your body heat.”

He snorted. “Your alternative is, uh, acceptable.”

“This trip has been really lovely,” she murmured after a while. “All those logistical skills you used on our awful trips to the past are definitely put to better use planning vacations.”

He flushed a little pink at that, pleased. “Good.” He kissed her hair again.

She wasn’t dreading going back to San Francisco nearly as much as she would have expected, once upon a time. Their house…

The laughter and happiness they’d shared with friends had slowly leached away the bitterness of the bad memories with Mom and the painful memories of Amy. She still remembered everything, but it was just… it was different now.

Laughter and happiness shared with friends, and with family. She hadn’t known what to expect when Garcia made that first, hesitant phone call to his brother, and neither had he. It certainly hadn’t been Gabriel showing up on their doorstep four days later. Those two days after had been… wonderful. Lucy had delighted in the touched, overwhelmed look on Garcia’s face, in how stunned and happy he was. She was really looking forward to spending Christmas in Paris with Gabriel and his partner. Equally as much, she was looking forward to coming back home and celebrating a late Christmas with all their family here.

And she was doing what she wanted. She wasn’t where she wanted, not yet, but she was helping people, and she was standing up for history. She was working with a group associated with Fort Pillow to craft all the research they’d done into arguments that would hopefully be persuasive to the Tennessee State Parks administration, and also helping them plan a publicity campaign in the likely event that that didn’t work. She’d also thrown the house open to a weekly grad student working group that was pushing for radical revisions to the curriculum— ideas like the ones that had jeopardized Lucy’s tenure, once upon a time. As long as she was there, they’d have her backing, and she was quietly recruiting support for them among her colleagues. It didn’t hurt at all that the things they were discussing would make Rittenhouse roll over in their collective grave.

She yawned. Somehow, the message about getting off the loveseat wasn’t getting to her feet. And wasn’t that remarkable, that after everything, she, they, had found such contentment.

“I’m going to shower,” she finally murmured, hoping that saying it would make her do it. “Unless
you want the shower first?”

“We could shower together.” His dimples peeked out.

“Then it would take three times as long.”

“We have the time,” he pointed out, “and we won’t run out of hot water.”

She tilted her head and looked up at him. “Your alternative is… acceptable.”

After all… they weren’t in any hurry.

His smirk intensified. He kissed the tip of her nose. “Shall I carry you?” His voice vibrated with laughter.

*Three times as long* turned out to be a generous estimate, but eventually they were clean and clothed. The sun was fighting to break through the clouds in a few places as they walked to the car, though Lucy was glad for the warmth of her coat.

Lucy buckled, and took a moment to appreciate the curvy, pine-flanked highway when she didn’t have to concentrate on staying on it. Garcia had driven them to dinner last night in darkness; this was as far as they’d come in daylight. She could only see as far as the next rise, and while she knew that what was out of sight probably looked just like what she could see, she felt the old excitement at the prospect of unexplored vistas.

She looked over at him, and saw a quiet echo of the same feeling in his expression. She started the car.

“Well,” she said, maneuvering carefully around a crookedly parked truck, and signaling for the highway. “Let’s see what’s ahead.”

Chapter End Notes

I chose Oberlin for Lucy because it's a "small college in Ohio" that has a reputation for being very progressive.

Thanks for reading!

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