





# the NIGHT of the BROKEN MOON

Lucy is doing that thing with her lips again. I call it a twibble, a twitch too subtle to be a quiver or a tremble. She's trying not to let this get to her. She's failing to hide that she's trying not to let this get to her. I just haven't figured out what *this* is yet.

"So . . ." I lean against the doorway to her bedroom as Lucy finishes getting ready for school, pulling up sections of her hair to pin them back. If we talk, eventually the reason for her twibble will come out. "Did you get your prom dress yet?"

"Prom is *tomorrow night*, JJ," she says without looking away from the mirror above her dresser. She plucks another pin from the tray next to a bottle of lotion. "If I didn't have my dress yet, I wouldn't be going."

She also wouldn't be Lucy if she didn't plan every little thing ten steps ahead. But for this, I'm in agreement. This is senior prom. Our last big hurrah before high school graduation. Before our entwined lives go their separate ways. I picked up my tux last week, but she never told me when she got her dress. She hasn't told me *anything* about it, actually, not even the color.

“Can I see it?” I take one step toward her closet—

In a blink, she’s across the room and blocking me. “No!”

“All right, all right,” I say through a laugh. “I won’t look.” I keep smiling—it’s not a big deal. But still . . . “What’s the big deal?”

Prom is supposed to be a night of fun, nothing more. Nothing serious. We made a promise to each other at the beginning of senior year, that if neither of us had dates for prom, we’d go with each other. At the time I hadn’t thought that would actually happen. It was likely I’d still be single, but before this past school year, Lucy never went long between partners. But now it’s the day before prom, and we’re both still dateless. The chances of that changing in the next thirty-six hours are close to nil.

“It’s *not* a big deal,” she insists.

“Then why can’t I see it? I’m just curious.”

“Your curiosity can hold out one more day.” Her lips twibble again.

Okay . . . Is this about the dress? “Does it fit okay?” I ask.

She goes back to the mirror to finish her hair, her green-purple-blue-swirled tunic top swishing back and forth. “I didn’t get too fat for it since picking it up, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s *not* what I mean. You’re not ‘too fat’ for anything, now or ever. I mean I know it’s hard for you to find clothes that complement your shape, and I want you to be comfortable.”

Her dark-brown gaze catches mine through the mirror, and then another twibble. “Sorry, my brother is just . . . getting to

me lately. He's on some new fitness plan, and according to his chart, I'm morbidly obese and one cupcake away from heart failure." She rolls her eyes, then mutters, "I've got a chart of my own I'd like to show him."

This again. God, I hate that guy. "You could out-yoga him with both hands tied behind your back. Don't listen to him."

"Trying not to." Her shoulders drop with a sigh. "Anyway, I've got everything sorted out. Shoes, accessories, hair, makeup. And the dress fits perfectly."

"Good."

"It is good." She smiles unconvincingly, the corners of her mouth barely lifting. Even in the weak lighting of her bedroom, I notice her skin is already getting darker with the longer, sunnier days. She drinks in sunlight as if it's water and she completely dehydrated over the cold months. In midwinter Lucy appears almost as white as I am, but by midsummer she turns a radiant golden brown, while I become a very attractive shade of burnt and peeling. She stabs the nest of dark-auburn curls on her head with another pin. "And we've got enough to worry about today," she continues, then sucks in a breath, the rest of her freezing in place. "Did you remember to bring Marty—"

"He's in my car," I assure her. "Everything's ready to go. Except you."

Most school days I find Lucy and a to-go cup of coffee waiting for me in the kitchen downstairs. It's only on the twibble days that I have to venture up to her room because she needs more time. Is she nervous about our presentation with

Marty today? Is that what this is all about? Yesterday she was fine. Today she's on the brink of not-fine. But we've been practicing. It's flawless, everything set, down to the pauses for breath. Because Lucy is flawless, perfect as always, and so is all she does. I'm the one who's likely going to flub something up.

Oh. Maybe that's it—me. I have a tendency to stress her out sometimes. Okay, more than sometimes, but never on purpose. She's a perfectionist, and I'm whatever is the opposite of that. A disorganizationist? A go-with-the-flow-ist? A hot-mess . . . ist? So we clash. We have spats. And then we get over it. That's just us. Complicated, but it works. We are a well-oiled machine made of broken parts.

Without Lucy to keep me in order, I'd probably fall apart. Spontaneously self-destruct. I don't remember how I kept it together before I met her almost four years ago.

"I'm ready now," she declares, and grabs her messenger bag, then slings it over her head to crisscross over her chest. I turn to walk out and she falls into step behind me as we head downstairs. "There's a spot on your glasses," she says casually. "Left lens. Upper right corner."

I remove them, use the bottom of my shirt to wipe away the offending spot, and slip them back on. "Anything else?"

We reach the bottom of the stairs and she looks me up and down. Her assessment pauses at my "distance-raptor over time-raptor equals veloci-raptor" T-shirt.

*Twibble.* "Good choice. That's one of my favorites."

I know. That's why I wore it. "Glad you approve."

"You *appear* ready," she says, "but if you're not feeling ready,

tell me now. We have only one shot at this. One chance to nail this thing that counts for half our final physics grade. *One chance.*”

“You don’t have to remind me there are no second chances.” With this project, or anything. “Everything’s going to be fine. We got this, okay?”

“What do you got?” her dad shouts from the kitchen. “Unless it’s a cold, you better share!” He laughs, throaty and robust, at his own joke. The sound of it tugs a grin out of me, even though I’ve heard that joke from him a million times. Yeah, I hate her brother, but I love her dad.

Lucy sighs, heading across her living room. “Nothing, Papà, just school stuff. *A dopo!*” She waves goodbye to him as she passes the kitchen on her way to the front door.

“*Ciao, Lucilla!*” he calls back to her. “JJ, don’t forget your coffee!”

“*Va bene.*” My Italian is borderline embarrassing with my blah Ohio accent. But every word I know of it, I learned from Lucy and her family. When I’m around them, it just comes out.

She glances over her shoulder at me. “Grab your coffee, let’s go. We’re running late.”

“We’re running right on time.”

“I meant we *will* be running late if we don’t leave now.” She snatches her rainbow-striped umbrella from the front closet and then she’s out the door, into the grim haze of a steady spring drizzle.

“My mistake.” I grab the to-go cup of coffee she left for me on the kitchen counter, say hello and goodbye to Signore

Bellini—conveniently the same word in Italian for both—and meet Lucy in my car. Same as I always do, every school day of the year.

But today feels different, even with the routine. Because today is the day before the day I've been looking forward to since the start of freshman year. Tomorrow is our senior prom. So today, nothing can go wrong.

“Something's wrong,” Lucy says, staring down at Marty like he's suddenly grown a fungus. Marty is the time-travel device we made for our science project and about the size of a football, an amalgamation of plastic, metal, and wires.

I know he's on because the steady hum of his motor buzzes in the silence of our physics classroom. Lucy flips the switch again, the one that should send our test subject—a bright purple Sharpie—back to ten seconds ago, before she pulled it out of her bag.

Nothing happens. Again. And I have no idea why. What's different now?

Marty is a crude device and can't send anything further than ten seconds, but it worked in our trials. It's a starting point. And it *worked*. After weeks of exploding markers and melting crayons, we finally got it to work without “killing” the subject, just a few days ago. We'd move the test subject from a specific location, to Marty, and then watch it disappear—only to reappear ten seconds later, as if it had gone backward by ten seconds and then took those ten seconds to catch up with itself

in the present. Or at least that's what we concluded was happening, because that's what we'd wanted to happen.

The fact we were slightly delirious from too much sugar and too little sleep that day—night?—didn't make it into our official data log. But we couldn't have both had the same hallucination at the exact same time, multiple times in a row . . . I don't think?

Someone cracks their knuckles. Another person lets out a bored yawn. Mrs. Ruano checks her watch, then makes a note on our score sheet. We're running out of time.

Lucy laughs nervously, a forced grin plastered on her face. Through her teeth she whispers to me, "What did you do to it?"

"Nothing," I whisper back, analyzing what I can without taking Marty apart. I really want to take him apart right now. Let him think about what he's done while I dissect him, slowly and methodically, piece by piece. Everything looks good on the outside, though. I don't get it. "Why do you assume this is my fault?"

Never mind. I was the last person to have Marty in my possession, and I'm usually the one who screws things up. Usually meaning always. The last time she saw this, it worked. We celebrated. We fantasized about getting rich and famous from this thing. This thing that can't even *tell* time now, let alone manipulate it.

"Don't start an argument, JJ, just help me." Her tone is on the verge of panic.

Okay. We got this. *Deep breath.* Time to improvise. I lift the



Sharpie and twirl it like a mini baton. We have to move it every ten seconds or our model proves nothing. But also, I'm distracting the class so Lucy can troubleshoot without twenty pairs of eyes on her. I start spouting off whatever scientific anything I can think of, as if it's a step-by-step of what we're doing. Like this was all planned.

"In our quest to understand how the universe works, we study the basic building blocks of our existence—matter, energy, space, and time . . ."

Lucy catches on fast, and in my side vision I watch her frantically flipping switches and discreetly popping panels open. She pulls a hairpin from her head and uses it to tug on a wire, muttering something under her breath in Italian. Probably cuss words.

Even if she can fix this, we're going to need consolation ice cream later.

Lucy releases a mouse-like squeak, and I flick a glance at her. She's wide-eyed, pulling another pin out of her hair, which loosens a curl. *The bobby fell inside*, she mouths, and tucks the loose hair behind her ear. A blue spark flies, and she yanks back her hand. Then, when it's clear we didn't accidentally create a bomb, she tries again.

Make that triple scoops. Chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry.

In a last-ditch effort to give Lucy a few more seconds, I pull the basic definition of *science* out of my butt and hope Mrs. Ruano doesn't call me out on it. ". . . the use of evidence to construct testable explanations and predictions of natural

phenomena, as well as the knowledge generated through this process—”

“Time’s up,” Mrs. Ruano says.

“Wait, I almost—” Lucy protests, but Mrs. Ruano raises her palm toward us.

“Back to your seats, please.”

With a grimace, I grab the infernal thing off the counter and shove it into my backpack, then follow Lucy’s swishing tunic top to our table in the back of the class. Her lips are far beyond twibble territory. They’re trembling, likely from holding in whatever she wants to vent about what just happened.

Mrs. Ruano studies her notes for a moment before lifting her head and saying, “It was a good idea and very well researched. You lost some points for presentation, but to be honest, I wasn’t expecting it to work. Time travel just isn’t possible. Neither is speeding up time, slowing it down, or stopping it altogether. Scientists have been trying to do it for centuries—you aren’t the first to fail at it and you won’t be the last.” And on that inspirational concluding note, she calls up another pair of students to the front of the class.

Triple scoops, whipped cream, and a cherry on top. I don’t even like cherries, but after this, I need one or five.

Lucy’s leg bounces, her frustration seeking any physical outlet it can find. She’s upset and has every reason to be. That one section of hair that came undone has to be bothering her, too. I know she’ll fix it as soon as we’re out of class and she can get to a mirror, but part of me wishes she’d just let herself be undone

for a day, not worry about the little things. Part of me wants to tell her it's okay to be a mess sometimes, but the rest of me, the logical me, keeps my mouth shut. Because when Lucy has it in her head to do something—or not do something—there's no changing her mind. It's a done deal. *Finale.*

I hand her the bright purple Sharpie, and she uses it to write on her spiral notebook, then slides the message over to my side of the table.

*We failed.*

I write back: *We didn't fail the project. The project failed us. It was perfect until the very end. I bet we still get an A.*

Slide.

Sigh.

Scribble.

Slide.

*Until we know for sure,* she wrote, *what's the plan?*

She's asking *me* for a plan? Has she met me? All I know how to do is improvise. I mean, I'm the guy who chose what college to attend by putting all my acceptances on a dartboard, blindfolding myself, and taking my best shot. With Lucy already approved—a long time ago—for a geosciences program in Italy, nothing I chose in the States would keep us any closer. They were all the same to me, so. University of Texas, here I come.

If she wants to know my “plan,” I guess it's that we'll figure out what went wrong later, but for right now, for this project, for this grade, for this class, for this school year, that was our

only chance. We're done. There are no repeats and no do-overs. So tonight?

I write: *Ice cream.*

On Fridays I tutor math-challenged students after school and Lucy gets a ride home from her cousin Chaz. We'll meet at my place for ice cream later and watch the stars come out. The rain is gone now, and the sky is clear. There's a meteor shower tomorrow night—actually it's been going on for days already, but it'll be most visible tomorrow—so we might catch some falling this evening.

Jenna, the girl I've been tutoring for the past six weeks, bites her lip and furrows her brow in concentration as she tries to solve an algebraic equation. This is stuff I learned freshman year. It comes easy to me. But I don't hold it against her that the only reason she's going to pass algebra her senior year is because I helped her out at the last minute. Jenna could write an article for the school newspaper, drafted, revised, edited, and polished, in six minutes flat. She helped me with an essay a couple of months ago, so I've been returning the favor.

I've known her from a distance for a few years. Now, the more time I've spent with her in closer proximity, the more she's wormed her way into my thoughts when we're *not* together. Meaning, I like her, what I know of her so far, and I'd like to know more. As her boyfriend? Maybe? I honestly don't know if what I feel for her is romantic attraction or just that we get along really well. But the only way to find out is to try. Go on

a date. Take a chance. It takes me a while to get to this point with someone, where I even want to give it a try to see if there is a difference. And I think maybe I could be at that point with Jenna now, if only she were free for me to even ask her.

She has a reputation for being the life of all the parties—the ones I never get invited to but always hear about, the ones that are reserved for Beaver Creek High elite. She's got this vintage-movie-star look going on, with platinum-blond hair, a practically porcelain-white complexion, winged eyeliner, fire-engine-red lipstick, and I don't recall her ever wearing clothes that are considered "modern fashion." It works for her. Very well. Jenna is one of the most popular girls in the whole school, let alone the senior class, but she's also one of the nicest.

There is only one thing that kept me from asking her to prom. One six-foot-three thing with a chiseled physique, a British accent—which may or may not be as fake as Jenna's hair color—and a smile that gets him virtually anything he wants. Blair is sure to be voted prom king, and since Jenna is his girlfriend, she'll likely wear a crown tomorrow night, too. He probably rigged the ballot with just one wink at the right person.

Jenna's concentration breaks when her phone buzzes next to her paper, rattling the tabletop. The teacher supervising our session tells her to put it away so we don't disturb the other tutoring groups around us—even though they're "whispering" louder than any phone would buzz—and then she goes back to reading her paperback with the kilt-wearing Highlander on the cover.