

Ian's grip on my left hand was tight, and was causing my palm to become clammy. The hallways of the school were crowded with overwhelmed adults looking for their children's classrooms. Ian walked with strange confidence and strength for a child as he dragged me down the hall to his classroom. Parents stood off to the side, and students quickly took a seat in their assigned spots. Several boys beckoned Ian over, causing me to awkwardly approach the other parents. They nodded their heads, but gave me curious looks. I brushed my hair behind my ear and tugged on my jacket uncomfortably. Ian looked younger than most of the other children in the room, as I too looked younger than the other parents that surrounded me. Ian was in second grade at the age of six because of his ability to read and write at a level higher than other students his age and I was only twenty-three, which raised eyebrows on its own.

Ian's teacher silenced the classroom with a simple clap. The toned skin and sharp jaw line of the man in front kept all eyes on him.

"Welcome to room four. I am your son or daughter's teacher. My name is Mr. Crawford." The single mothers standing among me took note. I could see them comparing how Crawford would sound with their own names. I silently laughed at the thought.

"I hope this year is a great year for all. I will be allowing for one-on-one questions with each parent after my summary of how my classroom will be run and what I expect from your students while in it," He concluded with an attempt to make eye contact with each parent. I avoided his eyes all together. He cleared his throat and mentioned the fire exits as if we were on a plane or in a theater rather than an overcrowded classroom.

"Now, I thought I would quickly introduce myself in a more detailed manner so you feel more comfortable with me," he said. Once again trying to make eye contact with each parent. I, once again, looked down at my dirty keds. He cleared his throat, and continued to talk.

"My name is Lucas Crawford. I have a masters in..." His words got cut off, as my brain was hard at work trying to place where I had heard his name before. Lucas Crawford. His name was on repeat in my mind. Lucas Crawford. Lucas Crawford...

“Did you want that iced or hot? Sorry. I am a little frazzled, ” the boy behind the counter said apologetically.. He began to reach for the stack of cups in hopes of multitasking but ended up knocking the stack over onto the ground. I held back a giggle as he groaned in frustration.

“Sorry, do you need some help?” I asked as he wiped sweat from his brow. A smile formed on his face and he shook his head.

“It’s my first day and my boss literally left me all alone. I only got this job to pay back my student loans!” I slipped out my right headphone to show him that was I was actually listening to what he had to say.

“I’m stuck working here when I have to study for an exam that is tomorrow and I just don’t feel like it, ” he burst out, but became quiet as he realized where he was, and who was looking. I smirked.

“Seems like someone needs a nap, ” I said simply. He smiled.

“If you only knew. How did you want your coffee again?” He asked as he wiped his hands on his apron.

“I’ll take my coffee black, with only one sugar, ” I said while I looked down at the counter that was overflowing with the latest graphic novels and band flyers.

“Coming right up.” He smiled. His smile was crooked in all the right places and his brow furrowed in a cute manner. He brushed his black hair away from his eyes as he handed me my freshly brewed cup and gestured for me to sit at the booth off to the side. The table was sticky from spilt coffee and smelled somewhat of lemon, coffee, and bleach. I wrinkled my nose. He slipped off his apron before he slid into the seat opposite me. He extended his hand.

“My name is Lucas, ” he said as I gripped his hand in mine.

“Annabel, ” I said while I sipped on my coffee. Before each sip I blew air into the cup in an attempt to cool it down. . The coffee burned my mouth with each sip but I continued to drink. Lucas smiled as if he didn’t seem to notice. His smile complimented his eyes. His eyes were so blue, hidden slightly behind his overgrown black hair.

“Annabel- beautiful name. What brings a beautiful girl like you out to this hole in the wall?” He teased while he gestured to the walls that surrounded us. Books and records spilled out of every nook of the small shop and it smelled deeply of coffee and mildew.

“I like things that are a little out of the way, ” I said with a smile as I looked down to avoid his piercing eyes. They made me nervous.

“You’re different. I like that,” he said while he leaned back further into his chair. The silence engulfed us but was broken by the words that slipped off my tongue.

“...Why do you have this job, if you don’t care for it?” I asked while I drummed my fingers on the edge of the table. He snorted before taking a long swig of his coffee and wiped the foamy froth from the scruff of his upper lip.

“It’s all I have time for. I would quit right now if I could... But it’s not an option. What I really hope to do is to get into teaching after college.” I bit my cracked lips and noticed that his eyes were locked on the headphone placed in my left ear.

“Whatcha listening to?” He queried, gesturing towards the bud.

“Soul to Squeeze by Red Hot Chilli Peppers,” I said without hesitation. Having seen them in concert three times, their sound was familiar and easily recognizable to me.. He smiled and slowly stood from the table.

“Follow me,” he said as he turned to walk towards the corner of the shop. Gig posters and wanted ads were scattered on the wall, stapled one on top of each other. “Singer needed, drummer needed, live show,” the words shouted at me. He ran his fingers gently across the bindings of the records that were stored tightly in the bookshelf off to my right. *Pink Floyd, Stones, Soundgarden, Foo Fighters*. Their names were passed until his fingers slowed at a single record tucked in the corner.

“Huh, that’s weird,” he said “I guess, it’s not here anymore.” He scratched his head.

“Oh, who was it?” I said, but was cut off.

“Actually, I just remembered.. I took it home the other night.” He paused to think, “The shop is about to close up, if you want you could come over and listen to it with me.” He said innocently. I thought for a moment, and then I felt my cheeks turn bright red. *It’s getting late, and a boy is inviting you over. You know what he wants.* My mind raced, and I knew the word virgin was now planted on my forehead. I had to come up with a response, I didn’t want to look unresponsive or worse, he would repeat what he had said.

“Sure.” I spat out. He smiled eagerly. He grabbed my hand lightly as he led me towards the door.

“Hey, Lucas.. What’s your full name?” I said laughing slightly, to ease the tension I felt I was creating.

“Lucas Crawford,” he said with a smirk.

“... Student education, and musical theory.” He once again scanned the room for eye contact and, this time, I didn’t avoid it. His eyes were still crystal blue and his hair was still jet-black as I remembered it. I couldn’t believe that I didn’t recognize him as I walked into the room. I swore under my breath. The lady standing beside me shifted her weight, as if she had heard me. Memories from the night I met him flooded me: the laughter, the lust, the fear of getting caught, and then of course, when reality struck. I cleared my throat and felt myself begin to sweat. I looked over towards Ian who was listening to what Lucas was saying and my stomach turned. Ian resembled Lucas in a way that was obvious to the eye. The same blue eyes, the same bone structure. The only visible difference was the blonde hair he had gotten from me. *I wonder if they act the same, or have the same mannerisms?* I thought silently to myself.

“Does anyone have any questions? Or shall we get into the one-on-one interviews?” he asked with confidence. He glanced over towards the parents that stood beside me and I felt as if his face showed a sign of recognition, finally. Could it be possible that he might have recognized me in that moment, when we made eye contact across the room? I doubted it. The parents seemed to be hypnotized by his words. They all simply nodded. It had been years since I had seen him, let alone talked to him.

No clouds were in the sky and the temperature was almost at one hundred degrees. Ian balanced on my hip as we walked over to the newly opened exhibit. He clapped his hands excitedly as we approached the tiger that was perched on a rock in the center. Amy laughed beside me and clapped alongside Ian. I simply smiled, and placed a pair of Ray Ban sunglasses on my face. They reflected, and Amy made a goofy expression in her reflection. The zoo was packed shoulder-to-shoulder with people and even though I was wearing cutoffs and a tank top, I was sweating profusely. I set Ian on the ground beside my leg but he held on tightly. Some children were laughing at the tiger, while others screamed in fear as the tiger let out a ferocious roar, but Ian stayed content.

“You’ve got a little trooper, ” a voice said from behind me. I turned to see a man standing hand in hand with a girl I assumed was his girlfriend.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I said with a smile while I picked up Ian once again. The man continued to look at me with curiosity.

“You look familiar. Do we know each other?” he asked. I eyed him with interest and was about to shake my head no when I remembered something. His eyes stood out to me. The blue was as vivid as the day I had met him. His hair was shorter, now a buzz cut. His crooked smile confirmed my thoughts. It was Lucas. I bit my lip. I thanked for my glasses that were covering my face. I looked down at Ian and began to think about how the father he had never known was standing within a few feet of him and I had the chance to tell him. But the timing wasn’t right. Not yet.

“No, I don’t think so, ” I said with a nervous smile. I turned back towards the tiger that hadn’t moved from its perch above the crowd.

Ian ran over towards some of the boys in his class as I approached the coffee supply that stood on the counter in front of the windows. The sun was setting and I felt myself begin to shake. My brain raced as I waited for Lucas to come talk to me. What could I say? *Lucas never knew that I got pregnant, let alone that he was the father.* I bit my nail as I considered my options. *Had Lucas already created a family of his own with that girl from the park? Did Lucas want another child to care for? Another child to love?* A tap on my left shoulder interrupted my racing thoughts. I turned to see him standing behind me. Lucas.

“Hello, you’re Ian’s mother? Correct?” He began to pump himself a cup of coffee.

“Yes, that is correct, ” I said with ease. “My name is Annabel.” I watched closely to see how he reacted to my name but right as the words were released from my mouth, he turned and looked towards the classroom, avoiding eye contact.

“Ah.. Yes. Would you like some coffee?” He turned and met my gaze, finally.

“Yes, that would be great. Thanks, ” I said, unsure how to proceed. Did he recognize me? Did he remember? My thoughts were interrupted by his words.

“Black with one sugar, ” he said quietly but surely as he began to stir the sugar into the cup. My words were gone, but his quickly filled the silence.

“I remember, Annabel, ” he said, as he handed me my coffee.