

Excerpt from
WHEN I FIND HER

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Chapter One

“Luke, if you could go back in time and correct three mistakes you made in your life, what would they be?”

Dr. Burgen, my psychiatrist – I know, it’s strange for a sixteen-year-old to have one – asks this somewhere from the vicinity of his desk. His voice, friendly and soothing, rumbles through the warm, September light.

Plush leather squeaks beneath my head as I sprawl out on the sofa. I gaze up at the ceiling and think about the weird question. *Mistakes*. At six-foot-two, I barely fit on the cushions and have to cross my sneakers over the edge. I toss my basketball into the air and catch it. It’s my emotional touch-piece, Burgen tells me.

Dr. Burgen’s odd, yet I like him.

At first, my dad argued against having a psychiatrist. I didn’t want him, either, but my mom insisted I need someone to talk to, someone neutral. So here I am, another Tuesday after school. It’s funny how we picked him out, as if we were searching for a new pet. I was hoping for a loyal bulldog. My mom was looking for a cute chinchilla. I think we both got what we wanted. She was hoping for a doctor with a sense of humor, to go along with her theory of laughter therapy and endorphins. His sense of humor was evident as soon as we stepped into his Toronto office. Every picture on the wall hangs a little crooked, on purpose.

The thing I like best about Burgen is that he treats me like I’m normal. He asks about my future, where I’d like to go to college, and what’s the car of my dreams. Lamborghini Huracan. Seven-speed dual-clutch automatic, six-hundred-and-ten horsepower.

“Three mistakes I’ve made in my life,” I repeat. “What do you mean by mistakes?”

“Whatever you say. It’s your definition.”

“Then what’re you going to do? Hypnotize me to believe I’ve gone back in time? That I’ve changed the scene?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Think of me as a genie. I’m granting you three wishes for a mistake do-over.”

Peculiar guy. I grin. “Events in my past I wish I could change...”

“Right.”

My mom would be open to the question. My dad would hate it. He’d say, “*What kind of person asks a kid about regrets?*” But I’m not a kid. I’m sixteen. No one’s ever asked me about regrets. Not that I don’t have any, just that my family doesn’t talk about stuff like that.

Personally, I find it ironic that the word leukemia contains all the letters of my name. Like it was sitting and waiting for me.

Luke.

Fortunately, my last name is not Mia, so most people don’t make the connection. My last name is Eric. Luke Eric. The stubble growing back on my head might connect me to leukemia, but shaved heads are in, nurses like to tell me, and strangers don’t notice my weight loss. Fine by me, because I don’t want to talk about it.

It’s in remission. It’s gone.

It’s not gonna do me in.

It does not define me.

My mom, however...she’s always on the internet researching my condition. That’s where she discovered that laughter can trigger the natural release of powerful neurotransmitters in the body, called endorphins, that can wipe out pain and sometimes trigger magical healing.

So my family has decided we’re going to laugh this off.

Mostly, I like hearing *them* laugh.

They bring me comedy movies. They play reruns of my favorite sitcoms. If something serious is on TV, my older sister and younger brother are pretty good at changing the channel. So’s my mom. My dad, not so good. But we could watch comedy twenty-four-seven and still no one would ever speak to anybody with any level of honesty.

Except me and Burgen. He’s a no-bullshit kind of guy. Yesterday, when I accidentally bumped into him at the hospital, I asked, “*How’s it goin’?*”

He said, “*Shitty.*”

“*Me, too,*” I said, amused. Then he bought me lunch in the cafeteria and things got brighter. At least for the next fifty minutes until I returned to the treatment room for more blood tests.

I think Burgen's somewhere in his early forties, give or take five years. I'm not good at guessing ages. I think women like him, but I'm not a good judge of that, either. They look at him nice. He's one of those guys who doesn't wear a wedding ring, but he's married and has a kid on the way, judging from the photos on his desk.

Burgen wears expensive shirts, but the backs are always wrinkled. He shaves a lot. Sometimes he takes out an electric razor when I'm in a session, turns to me and asks, "*Do you mind?*"

I never do, so he turns it on and shaves his face. Like he is now. I think it's like meditation for him. Maybe it's *his* emotional touch-piece. Usually he comes up with a good idea right after staring up at the ceiling and listening to me talk about my stuff while rolling that humming metal thing over his skin. He's got a private bathroom linked to his office, so it's not like he's gross. He cleans up in there. He even lets me use his bathroom – all I have to do is ask. It's nicer than anything I've ever seen. It's got black granite countertops, a black sink, and a shiny black toilet. I guess he's rich. If I was rich, I'd have a black toilet, too.

So I look at him now, his short blond hair, the cool square glasses, and say, "I can tell you mistake number one."

"Yes," he says in a quiet, personal tone. He stops the hum of his razor, tilts back on his chair and focuses his thoughtful gaze on me.

I rest the basketball on my chest and inhale deeply. I've never told anyone. No one. Not in a million years. It's too personal.

My hands get sweaty and my voice gets deep and crackly and stupid. "I never kissed Jennifer Marks."

There's a long pause. "Tell me about her, Luke."

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Jennifer is a girl I met last year. It was the first day of tenth grade for both of us. My school has two thousand kids and there aren't enough lockers to go around, so freshmen and sophomores have to share. It's supposed to be guys sharing with guys and girls with girls, but somehow Jennifer and I got mixed up on the roster and both showed up across from the science lab at locker 328. She was reaching to put her lock on it, but when I appeared, she stopped.

"Hey I'm three-twenty-eight, too," I say, like I'm some kind of NASA genius.

"You are?" She withdraws the lock. "But you're a guy."

"Must be an error," I say, as if I'm still interested in the locker. Like lockers are my

number one priority when I have this curvy girl with shiny brunette hair and sparkly brown eyes standing in front of me.

“I guess one of us has to switch.” She pushes the hair from her pretty face and turns to head to the office.

“Yeah.” I look after her as she saunters away, that crazy body in those clingy pants. Why didn’t I say anything cool? Do they give out awards in this school for biggest dumbass?

I groan and head to the science lab.

Later that day, I decide to leave two of my heaviest textbooks in my locker because I don’t feel like carrying the weights home. I withdraw my new lock from my backpack and go to unload my crap. Except when I open the locker, there’s already a little mirror glued to the inside a foot lower than my face, a girl’s pink sweater, and a geography textbook.

I thought Jennifer went to the office this morning to switch her locker, but I guess she thought I did. Huh. So why hasn’t she put her lock on the thing?

Maybe she’s testing me.

With a gulp, I shove my books inside, leave it unlocked, and wonder all the way home what will happen tomorrow.

The next day, we both pretend not to notice each other’s stuff. I bump into her at 328 between third and fourth period when I come to pick up my English text, and she’s reaching for her Math. She doesn’t say anything, just flicks her eyelashes at me in surprise, smiles, and runs down the hall at the sound of the bell.

I don’t trust myself to say anything to her for a whole week. Then one day after school, when she’s leaving an e-reader inside the locker, she turns and asks, “Want to know my number?”

She likes me! I knew it. What should I say to not embarrass myself? I keep it low-key. “Sure, I’ll put your number right in here.” I take out my cell phone to get it ready for her phone number.

She frowns and glances down at my screen.

What did I do wrong?

“I mean the combination for my lock,” she says. “We should lock this thing so my e-reader doesn’t disappear.” She giggles at my mistake and my face feels like I just inserted it into my backyard barbecue.

“Yeah, okay, give it to me.” I look down at my cell phone like I’m going to put her locker combination in there because I’m so embarrassed, I gotta keep up this charade.

“Five zero zero.”

My head snaps up. “You sure? That’s a crazy number.” What’s wrong with me? What do I care what the stupid number is? Do I think she made a mistake, that she’s so dumb she couldn’t read it properly from the package? Am I some mystic fortune-teller who has to read meaning into dumb numbers? Maybe I should pick a fight with her, too.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Then she props her open lock on the latch for me to close, and leaves me standing there alone, like the loser I am.

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“Sounds like you didn’t have much confidence,” says Dr. Burgen, his electric motor revving across his face. “I used to be like that with girls, too.”

“Really? You?” I can’t picture him a loser.

“I never knew what to say to them. Still don’t sometimes. Especially the cute ones.”

That makes me feel better. I twirl my basketball.

“Go on,” he says gently. “How’d it get to the missed opportunity?”

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We weren’t in any classes together, unfortunately. I would’ve liked to sit next to her, or be in a group together so I could maybe work on a project with her after school. But she keeps going her way and I keep going mine.

We start talking, though. About all kinds of things. Movies. Foods we both hate. Which teachers we hear are hard for next semester. She uses her hair ribbon and shows me how to tie a slipknot – turns out her father is a boat salesman and she knows a lot about water stuff. They move frequently due to his job. I discover they’re American and just moved here from Chicago. I think it’s cool that she lived in Chicago. She doesn’t have an accent, except occasionally when she says words like “dog”, she drags it out extra long so it sounds like “dowg.” She kids me how short and snappy some of my words sound.

One day, early morning, her eyes are all bloodshot and moist, like she’s been crying. Every day for the next week she comes to school upset. I ask if something’s wrong, but she keeps shaking her head. Doesn’t want to talk about it. I want to give her something to cheer her up, so I take a piece of paper and sketch her a slice of chocolate cake. She told me once that she loves cookies and ice cream and anything with sugar, and I’m a pretty decent sketcher and thought it would give her a laugh. I leave it in the locker for her. She

never mentions it, but I see her taking it home that night. She opens her sweater and tucks it next to her body.

That weekend, I see her at the Harvest Parade. I wish now that I would've talked to her. That I would've hung out with her at the dance. The music wasn't anything special, just a band in an outdoor band shell. It wasn't even dark yet when they started playing. She was lingering with her friends, like she wanted me to talk to her, maybe ask her to dance, but my friends were heading off in another direction. They were leaving to shoot hoops. I wish I would've stayed with her. I wish I would've asked her about music and talked to her more.

That was my missed opportunity.

The next Monday, she was gone.

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“What do you mean, gone?” says Dr. Burgen.

“Her side of the locker was cleaned out. She moved. No one knew where. None of the other kids knew her very well. I heard later that she moved to Alaska. Or maybe Hawaii.”

“You didn't try to contact her? Social media? Texting?”

I recall the chaos of the time, and shake my head. “It was a bad day. My mom pulled me out of classes that same afternoon to get a bone marrow biopsy.”

“Oh,” Burgen says with a thud. “You got the news about leukemia the same week she left?”

I shrug.

“So what's the day you'd like to go back to and change?”

“That Saturday in October,” I say with a hopeful smile, imagining how great it would be if it was really possible. “At the Harvest Parade. I'd like to go back and kiss her.”

Dr. Burgen looks at me in amusement, like he would look at any sixteen-year-old guy, any normal one, who has hopes of making out with a girl. I forget all about my health problems. It's about me and Jennifer again.

I twirl my basketball on my finger. “Is this where you use that electric razor and wave it back and forth in front of my face? Tell me I'm getting very sleepy? Then make me believe I kissed her?”

“Nope. No hypnosis.”

“Maybe you give me a dream suggestion? Tell me to go home and think carefully about that day as my head hits the pillow? I’ll dream about her and me at the Harvest Parade. Then the next time you see me you’ll try to convince me that it was real?”

“Nah. You’re going to try to make it actually happen. All by yourself.”

I lower the ball to my chest and scratch my hand. “How’s that?”

“If you trust me, if you believe what I’m going to tell you – and I think you will – then leave your basketball here and follow me.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you when we get there.”
