

Spores of Attraction



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Spores of Attraction

A feel-good romantic comedy with roots, rain, and ridiculous mushroom facts.

When recently single, city-living Lucy Harper agrees to join a group of ramblers on a countryside hike, she expects sore calves, muddy boots, and a polite level of boredom. What she doesn't expect is Sam Rowan — a charming, soft-spoken mycologist with a passion for fungi and a grin that grows on her faster than any wild mushroom.

Drawn into Sam's world of bracket fungi, fairy rings, and the secret underground language of trees, Lucy discovers that life — and love — can bloom in the most unexpected places. As weekends turn into forest walks, foraged meals, and stolen kisses by the campfire, she finds herself falling for the quiet magic of the natural world... and for the fun guy who knows exactly how to read it.

But falling in love is never just a walk in the woods. With friends watching, family judging, and old fears trying to take root, Lucy must decide whether she can trust this slow, mossy, mushrooming love... or if it's all just a seasonal spell.

Spores of Attraction is a cozy, laugh-out-loud romantic escape full of wild mushrooms, warm tea, woodland kisses, and the kind of love that grows gently — until it's everywhere.

Spores of Attraction

A love story rooted in mud, moss, and mushroom magic

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Prologue: How I Fell for a Fun Guy

Lucy's Perspective

You don't expect your life to change because of a mushroom.

Or rather — a *man* who knows far too much about mushrooms. A man who says things like “*Mycelium is the language of the forest*,” and makes it sound romantic instead of mildly concerning.

Before Sam, I knew three kinds of mushrooms: button, chestnut, and the dodgy ones on pizza that look like they've seen things. That was the extent of my fungal expertise. I wasn't the kind of woman who went on nature walks, or camped, or even owned socks without holes.

I was a city girl. I liked clean lines, filtered water, and predictable weather apps.

I liked men who wore nice shoes, talked about investments, and smelled faintly of bergamot.

And then I went on a walk. A long, muddy, leaf-squishing walk with a group of overly cheerful ramblers, mostly because my best friend Clare threatened to stage a spiritual intervention if I didn't “get out of my head and into my legs.”

And there he was.

Leaning against a tree, talking about bracket fungi like it was Shakespeare. Hair tousled. Boots muddy. Binoculars swinging like a secret.

I rolled my eyes.

Then I listened.

Then I laughed.

Then — slowly, impossibly — I started to fall.

This isn't a story about love at first sight.

It's about spores.

And soup.

And slips in the mud.

And the soft, steady kind of love that grows underground — hidden, patient, waiting for the right moment to push through the surface and say, *Here I am.*

If you'd told me I'd fall in love with a mushroom man in the middle of a forest, I'd have asked if he was magic and if I needed a tetanus shot.

But now?

Now I know:

Some of the most beautiful things in life grow quietly.

In shadows.

In soil.

In unexpected hearts.

This is the story of how I bloomed.

Chapter 1: Fungus Among Us

I'm not entirely sure how I ended up here, wedged between a woman in tie-dye and a man who looks like he brought enough trail mix to feed an army. The morning air is crisp, the kind that bites your nose a little but promises sunshine later. We're in the car park at the foot of some nameless ridge in the Peak District, and I'm surrounded by what can only be described as *enthusiastic walkers*. Or *ramblers*, as they like to call themselves — a word that sounds like a cross between chatty and lost.

"New boots?" Clare grins at me, pointing at my shiny walking shoes with judgmental affection.

"Is it that obvious?" I lift one foot awkwardly, as if it might betray me and squeak out, *she's an imposter*.

"They're glowing. Like the North Star. Also, you're walking like a foal."

"I prefer the term 'fresh to the trail'," I say, trying to sound like someone who hikes recreationally. I don't. I jog sometimes, if there's a pastry shop involved.

Clare's already stretching with a grace that only people who do yoga unironically possess. She's wearing leggings with galaxies on them, a breathable pink top, and her hair in a perfect messy bun that somehow doesn't look like it survived a tornado, unlike mine.

We're part of a group ramble. Clare talked me into it as a "mind-body seasonal reset." After the whole breakup-with-Tom debacle, she decided I needed fresh air and fewer Deliveroo orders. She may have a point. Still, dragging me into the wilderness with twenty-odd strangers feels dramatic.

I scan the group. There's George, who I met last night at the pub and who told me — in one breath — about plaque buildup, waterproof socks, and his third divorce. There's Tasha, Clare's techy friend who looks ready to throw her phone into the forest if it doesn't find a signal soon. And of course, Ellie and Jamie — the nauseatingly sweet couple who make their own energy bars and hold hands while navigating mud.

That's when I see him.

He's leaning against a tree, squinting at something on the bark. He's not part of the regular crew — there's something... wild about him. Hair a little messy. Beard that looks like it's on purpose, but not *too* on purpose. Cargo trousers with actual cargo in them. Binoculars swinging at his chest. He taps the tree gently and mutters something that sounds like Latin.

Clare appears at my elbow like a fairy godmother of gossip. "That's Sam," she whispers. "He's a fungi expert."

I snort. "A fun guy?"

"Yes," she smirks. "But also fungi. Mushrooms. Lichen. That stuff."

"Oh good," I say. "I've always wanted to date someone whose interests include rot."

She ignores me and calls out, "Sam! Come meet Lucy!"

He looks over and smiles — a slow, earthy kind of smile, like moss growing between bricks. And then he walks toward us, and I forget how feet work for a second.

"Hey," he says, voice warm, low, and — annoyingly — a bit sexy. "You're new."

"Brand new," I reply, gesturing to my boots like they're the star of a product launch. "Still got that showroom shine."

He chuckles. "Don't worry. We'll scuff you up."

My brain short-circuits slightly. *Steady on, Harper.* “Looking forward to it,” I manage, a bit too brightly.

He glances over his shoulder. “You’re in luck — fungi are everywhere right now. It’s the perfect time of year. Moist soil, decaying leaves, mushrooms popping up like secrets.”

“Secrets?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” he says. “Fungi don’t show themselves unless conditions are just right. Like they’re waiting for the perfect moment.”

He says this while looking directly at me, and I swear, Clare nudges me with her elbow like we’re in Year 9 and someone’s passed a note that says *Do you like her? Tick yes or no.*

“All right, rambles!” shouts someone at the front — possibly the designated leader, or maybe just a very confident hiker. “Let’s move out!”

Sam gives me a quick nod and falls into step beside the group, already pointing at something growing on a tree stump.

I glance at Clare. She wiggles her eyebrows.

I sigh, shoulders rising with a mix of anticipation and resignation. The boots are tight. The air smells of moss and damp bark. And I may or may not be falling for a man who collects spores for fun.

Here goes nothing.

Chapter 2: Meet the Fun Guy

We're about fifteen minutes into the walk and I've already managed to trip over a tree root, catch my sleeve on a bramble, and step directly into what I *hope* was just an overly hydrated patch of mud. I am nature's newest victim.

Sam, on the other hand, moves like he was born under a mushroom. He's a few paces ahead, crouched next to a decaying log, pointing something out to Tasha — who looks like she's trying not to breathe too deeply in case she catches moss.

"This is turkey tail," Sam says, running a finger over a cluster of wavy, layered fungi. "*Trametes versicolor*. Beautiful, right?"

Tasha peers at it like it might explode. "Looks like a psychedelic potato chip."

Sam grins. "That's actually not far off. It's been used in traditional medicine for centuries — especially in Asia. Boosts the immune system. Full of polysaccharopeptides."

Tasha blinks. "Polly-what now?"

He looks at her, patient. "It's a compound in the mushroom. Helps fight off illness. There's actual research. Not just mushroom mumbo-jumbo."

"Hmm," Tasha says. "Well, it's prettier than I expected fungus to be."

"It's not just pretty," he says, lighting up. "Fungi are incredible. They break down dead things. They connect trees. Some glow in the dark. Others are older than dinosaurs. And some —"

“— will kill you instantly,” I chime in, stepping up beside him, trying not to pant too hard from the gentle incline we just climbed.

He looks at me, amused. “True. But that’s part of the magic. Fungi don’t care what you think of them. They’re not here to please. They’re just... *doing their thing*. Cleaning up the world. Quietly. In the dark.”

“Oh great,” I say. “Just what I needed — an existential mushroom.”

He laughs, warm and unbothered. “That would make a great band name.”

“What, *Existential Mushroom*?”

“Yeah. Bit indie-folk, maybe with a banjo.”

I smile before I can stop myself. He has that way of talking that makes you feel like you’ve known him longer than ten minutes. Like your thoughts just fall into step with his.

“Here,” he says, pointing to another log. “You see that one? With the yellowy cap and the gills underneath?”

I crouch down next to him, pretending I know what I’m looking at. “Sure. That’s... a mushroom.”

“Very accurate. That’s a *Chlorophyllum molybdites* — the green-spored parasol. It looks edible, but it’s not. Actually causes some pretty aggressive regret.”

“Is that a technical term?” I ask.

“It is now,” he says. “One of the most commonly mistaken species. People confuse it with shaggy parasols, which are delicious. These ones, however, send you on a very unpleasant digestive adventure.”

“Good to know,” I say. “So the moral is: don’t eat wild mushrooms unless you’re absolutely sure, or have someone like you on speed dial.”

“Exactly. Mushroom roulette is not the kind of thrill you want.”

We both stand up, brushing our hands on our trousers. My knees crack like bubble wrap.

Behind us, Clare calls out, "We're heading toward the old oak grove! Sam, bring the nerd stuff!"

He raises an eyebrow at me. "Apparently I'm the nerd stuff."

"I can think of worse things to be," I say, shrugging. "I mean, some people collect stamps."

He leans in, slightly conspiratorial. "I actually have a stamp with a mushroom on it."

I burst out laughing. "Of course you do."

We fall into step with the rest of the group, and for a while, there's only the sound of boots crunching leaves and birds announcing their existence. I feel oddly calm. My legs are tired, my hair's probably a mess, and my new boots are officially christened with mud... but I feel good.

Sam walks beside me. Not talking much now, just glancing down at the ground occasionally like he's scanning for something secret. I glance over at him, wondering if he's always this peaceful. Or if it's the woods. Or if it's... me?

Probably the woods.

Still, I catch Clare's eyes up ahead and she gives me a look that says *I see what's going on here*.

I shake my head at her. But my cheeks are warm.

Because maybe something *is* going on.

And maybe I don't mind one bit.

Chapter 3: Spores and Smiles

We've officially left the well-trodden path.

The "old oak grove," as Clare called it, feels like something out of a fairytale. Moss blankets every surface like nature's plush carpet. The air is thick with the scent of damp earth and something faintly sweet. I'm half expecting to stumble across a fairy circle and be whisked off to another realm. Which, frankly, sounds more relaxing than my inbox.

Sam crouches near a patch of mushrooms so round and perfectly spaced, it looks like a tiny fungal Stonehenge.

"Fairy ring," he says, motioning us all in with a wave. "*Marasmius oreades*. Neat little circle, right? Caused by the outward growth of the mycelium underground."

George peers over his glasses. "Did you say fairy ring? Should I be worried about goblins?"

"Only if you're rude to the mushrooms," Sam replies, deadpan.

I stifle a snort. George chuckles, clearly delighted.

"Folklore says if you step into one, you'll be cursed to dance forever," Sam continues, grinning. "But realistically, they're just fungal colonies expanding outward. Still, I wouldn't risk it if you've got dodgy knees."

Clare walks the long way around. "I'm not taking chances. My aura's been off all week."

Tasha, of course, steps *right into* the ring. "If this gives me abs from eternal dancing, I'm in."

I'm next. I pause, one boot hovering midair. "So is this where you lure people to their doom? A bit of Latin, some creepy mushrooms, then poof — another sacrifice to the woodland gods?"

Sam laughs. "Only if you misidentify a *Death Cap*. That's when things get serious."

I step carefully around the ring, half for superstition, half to match his vibe. When I glance back, he's watching me with a smirk.

"You're cautious," he says.

"Selective," I correct him. "With my portals to other realms."

We start walking again, the group loosely scattered along a narrow trail that winds through the trees. Birds chirp in stereo. A squirrel scolds us from a branch overhead. Somewhere ahead, Ellie and Jamie are debating the health benefits of mushroom tea.

Sam walks beside me, close enough that our arms occasionally brush.

"You really know your stuff," I say after a while. "Have you always been into... decomposition?"

He laughs. "Pretty much. I used to poke at moldy bread as a kid. Everyone thought I was weird. Turns out I was just ahead of the curve."

"You know how to win a girl's heart," I tease. "Moldy bread anecdotes."

"It gets better," he says. "You know there are fungi that can survive in space?"

"No way."

"Yup. *Cryomyces antarcticus*. They took samples to the ISS, exposed them to cosmic radiation, and they *lived*. Fungi are indestructible. Like the cockroaches of the forest, but smarter."

"You're making me feel very fragile right now."

He grins. “Just saying — mushrooms might inherit the Earth. You should get to know your future overlords.”

We laugh, and it feels so easy. There’s no posturing, no weird dating script. Just dirt, boots, and a man who talks about mold like it’s poetry.

“You’d be a great nature documentary voice,” I tell him. “Soothing, slightly nerdy, with hidden passion.”

He fakes a deep voice. “*And here, in the moist underbelly of the forest... the fungus makes its move.*”

I burst out laughing. A real laugh. The kind I haven’t had in weeks. Maybe months.

And he looks at me like he’s pleased with himself. Not in a smug way — just quietly proud. I realize I’m staring a beat too long, so I look away and pretend to be very interested in a slug.

Clare falls back to join us, sipping from a thermos that smells like herbal regret. “So, Lucy,” she says, too casually, “what’s your favourite mushroom so far?”

I glance at Sam, then back to Clare. “The talking kind.”

Sam chuckles. “Flattered.”

We keep walking, the path narrowing again, and he gently places a hand on my back to guide me through a gap between two trees. Just a touch, but it lingers in the air like static.

My boots are muddy. My cheeks are pink. And I’m thinking — very seriously — about how I might join a fungi foraging group without it seeming *too* obvious.

Something’s starting here.

And I’m not just talking about spores.

Chapter 4: Mycorrhizal Connections

We break for lunch near a wide clearing that opens like a secret kept by the trees.

It's quieter here, the kind of quiet that has weight to it — not silence, exactly, but a low hum of wind through leaves, distant birds, and the occasional crunch of someone unwrapping a flapjack. The ground is soft, springy with moss and pine needles. Sam calls it “duff,” which makes me think of beer and cartoon dads.

Clare lays out a waxed cloth like we're about to host a woodland picnic for woodland royalty. George pulls out a thermos of soup and offers it around like it's a sacred ritual. Tasha is inspecting a mushroom near a stump with her phone torch and asking Sam if it's edible or demonic.

I wander a little way off, just enough to pretend I'm doing something introspective. But the truth is — I'm hoping Sam will follow. I'm not proud of the tactic, but it works.

“Solitude or sabotage?” he asks, appearing beside me.

“Strategic retreat,” I say, plopping down on a log. “Needed a break from George's soup sermon.”

Sam sits beside me, arms resting loosely on his knees. “He means well. But he did just try to convince me that dental plaque is a metaphor for spiritual decay.”

I grin. “That actually sounds like something Clare would say.”

We sit in easy silence for a minute. Sunlight filters through the branches, scattering gold across the undergrowth. There's something sacred about it — not in a religious way, more like... a whisper from the world, if you're quiet enough to hear it.

Sam points to a nearby tree — a tall oak with thick roots burrowed deep into the earth. "You know that tree is probably talking to others right now?"

I raise an eyebrow. "You lost me."

He smiles, that warm, knowing smile. "Through the mycorrhizal network. It's a symbiotic relationship between trees and fungi. The roots of the tree connect with fungal threads underground — like cables. The fungi help the tree absorb nutrients and water, and in return, the tree gives the fungi sugars."

"Wait. Trees have fungal Wi-Fi?"

"Basically. It's called the 'wood wide web.'" He nudges me gently with his shoulder. "Look at you — absorbing my nerd talk."

I laugh. "I'm just impressed. I thought mushrooms were either pizza toppings or poisoning hazards. Turns out they're forest diplomats."

He leans back on his hands, eyes on the canopy. "The network even allows trees to warn each other about drought or pests. They'll send nutrients to a sick tree. It's... beautiful, really. The idea that everything's connected, beneath the surface."

I go quiet. Not because I don't have a smartass comment lined up — I always do — but because something in me stirs at that. The image of invisible threads connecting everything. Helping. Healing.

"What if people were more like trees?" I say, mostly to myself.

Sam turns his head, eyes meeting mine. "Maybe we are. We just forget sometimes."

There's something in his gaze — a stillness, a steadiness — like he's not afraid of quiet. Like he listens not just to words, but to the spaces between them. I wonder what it would be like to be held by that kind of presence.

Just then, a bee lands on my knee. I squeak and Sam gently waves it away with the back of his hand, like a spell.

"Your knight in shining corduroy," I say.

He grins. "You'd be amazed how many heroic rescues happen around insects and sandwiches."

Ellie calls from the picnic spot that there's banana bread and we'd better come before George hoovers it. We both stand, but neither of us moves.

"Want to come to a mushroom foray next weekend?" he asks, like it's no big deal.

I blink. "A what?"

"A guided walk. Deeper woods. Rarer species. Fewer George anecdotes."

"Are you inviting me on a fungal date?"

"Only if you promise not to eat anything unless I say it's safe."

I grin. "Deal."

As we walk back toward the group, I feel it — something subtle, rooting beneath the surface.

Not love. Not yet. But something delicate and real.

Like mycorrhizae.

Like connection.

Chapter 5: Fungirl Feelings

I do not have a crush.

I *do not* have a crush.

I'm simply very interested in the ecological role of fungal networks and the structural integrity of hiking boots.

That's all.

Still, I find myself lagging behind the group the next morning, adjusting my rucksack straps so I just *happen* to fall in step next to Sam. Again.

Clare clocks it. She gives me that smug little side-smile — the one that says *you're not fooling anyone, mycelium maiden*.

"You okay back there?" Sam asks, glancing over.

"Totally," I say, feigning casual. "Just pacing myself. You know. Conserving energy. For... spores."

He chuckles. "Smart. Most people overexert before the mushrooms even show up."

"Rookie mistake," I nod, solemn. "I keep my stamina for serious fungus appreciation."

Sam laughs — the real kind, eyes crinkling at the corners. He doesn't laugh like a man performing for someone. He laughs like he's just genuinely... pleased. It's infuriatingly attractive.

We follow the winding trail through a denser part of the forest, where everything feels more mysterious — shadowy, ancient, full of secrets you can only see if you *don't* look directly at them.

Sam crouches suddenly and waves me over.

“Come here. Check this out.”

I kneel beside him and see a cluster of tiny mushrooms poking out from a rotting birch branch. They're ghostly white, delicate, almost translucent.

“*Mycena chlorophos*,” he says. “They glow in the dark.”

“No way.”

“Yup. Bioluminescent. Like tiny woodland lanterns. You can only see the glow at night, though.”

I look closer. They don't look like much now — fragile, like they'd fall apart if you breathed too hard. But the idea of them lighting up after dark is somehow... magic.

“I think you've officially made me a mushroom girl,” I murmur.

Sam raises an eyebrow. “A fungirl?”

“Oh God, I walked into that one.”

He smirks. “You did. But you wore it well.”

I try to hide my grin by standing up too quickly and immediately trip over a root.

“Whoop—!” My arms flail, gravity does its thing—

—and then his hands catch me.

Not dramatically. Not some sweeping, cinematic lift. Just warm, steady hands on my waist, holding me in place like it's the most natural thing in the world.

“You alright?” he asks, concerned but clearly trying not to laugh.

“I meant to do that,” I say, heart pounding.

“Sure you did.”

He doesn’t let go right away. And when he does, my skin tingles where his hands had been, like a spark’s been left behind.

Tasha, who has *flawless* timing, appears from nowhere and says, “Ooooh, did I just witness a spore-mantic moment?”

I groan. “Tasha. No.”

“I’m just saying,” she sings, already walking away, “if you two end up doing mushroom cosplay I *need* pictures.”

“She’s impossible,” I say.

“She’s great,” Sam says, grinning. “But yeah. Also impossible.”

We keep walking, side by side, as the others chatter and snack and occasionally mistake poison ivy for mint.

“Do you do this often?” I ask him. “Lead fungal expeditions for curious women with no upper body strength?”

“Only on weekends,” he replies. “During the week, I do fieldwork. Sampling, classification, research. But I like this part — getting people excited about fungi.”

“Has anyone ever gotten *too* excited?”

“There was one guy who tried to snort powdered reishi because he thought it would give him psychic powers.”

“Did it work?”

“He got a nosebleed and started quoting Nietzsche, so... maybe.”

I laugh again — too easily, too often — but I can't help it. There's something about him. Something grounding and unpredictable all at once. He's like the forest — calm on the surface, but full of hidden wildness.

I glance at him. He's looking up at the trees. There's a speck of moss in his hair. He doesn't notice.

And I think: I'm screwed.

Because I definitely have a crush.

And possibly a moss fetish.

Chapter 6: Mush Love

It's amazing how much better food tastes when you're slightly cold, slightly tired, and sitting on a log in the middle of nowhere with someone quietly spectacular.

The fire crackles in front of us, throwing sparks into the dusk like tiny fire fairies. The group's spread out in a loose circle, everyone cocooned in scarves, coats, or oversized fleeces they swore they'd never wear. Someone's playing gentle music from a Bluetooth speaker — probably Ellie and Jamie, who are currently sharing a thermal flask and each other's breath. Gross. Sweet. But still gross.

Sam is tending a small pot over the flames. It smells earthy, rich, oddly comforting — like something your grandmother might serve you in a forest cottage with a wink and a warning.

"What's in it?" I ask, hugging my knees.

"Foraged morels, dried and rehydrated. Bit of barley. Garlic. Wild thyme. Touch of butter," he says, giving it a stir. "Forest risotto, basically."

"Risotto?" George perks up. "Are we classing this as fine dining?"

"I mean," Sam shrugs, "I did find the mushrooms behind a decomposing log, so — Michelin might say no."

I take the tin bowl he hands me and try not to drool. The first bite is glorious. Warm, umami, and just slightly chewy in that satisfying mushroom way.

"This is incredible," I say. "I can taste the... forestiness."

“Ah yes,” Sam nods. “That would be the terroir of leaf litter and worm farts.”

I snort mid-chew.

“Sorry,” he laughs. “I’m bad at compliments.”

“Yeah well, I’m bad at hiding that I like someone,” I blurt, *then immediately panic*.

He looks up, slow and steady. “Good,” he says simply.

I blink. “Wait, that wasn’t me fishing—”

“I know,” he says, smiling. “But if you were, I’d have bitten. I like you too, Lucy.”

Oh.

Oh, this is happening.

Somewhere behind us, Clare sighs dramatically and mutters, “Finally,” to no one in particular.

I bury my face in my bowl for a second just to cool my cheeks and possibly regroup my entire personality.

Sam shifts a little closer. Not in a *big move* kind of way. Just enough to make my shoulder buzz where it brushes his arm.

“You know,” he says, low and quiet so only I hear, “mushrooms reproduce by releasing spores into the air... like invisible messages. A cloud of intent.”

“That’s disgustingly romantic,” I whisper.

He chuckles. “I thought you’d appreciate it.”

We sit for a while in companionable silence, sipping soup and listening to the wood pop. Tasha starts roasting marshmallows with a suspiciously toxic-looking stick. Clare’s teaching Ellie how to do deep breathing through one nostril. Jamie’s filming it, obviously.

And I'm just... here.

With him.

With the firelight, the taste of earth and thyme on my tongue, and a surprising lightness in my chest. I don't remember the last time I felt this... present. Not scrolling, not calculating, not rehashing old conversations in my head.

Just here.

Just us.

At one point, Sam leans in close and says, "By the way, you've got something—" and brushes his thumb gently over the corner of my mouth. His touch is feather-light. But I feel it in my spine.

I look up at him.

He looks at me.

And we kiss.

It's not dramatic. Not fireworks. It's just... real. Warm. A meeting in the middle of the moment. The kind that tastes slightly of mushroom stew and forest air and the relief of yes.

When we pull apart, there's that rare, golden kind of silence. The kind that doesn't ask for anything more. Just lets you sit in it and smile.

And that's exactly what we do.

Chapter 7: The After-spore

The next morning, everything smells of dew and campfire.

I unzip my tent to a world soaked in silver mist, like the forest hasn't fully woken up yet. The air is crisp enough to make my nose feel like it's going on strike, but I kind of love it. It smells like moss and possibility.

Clare is already up, doing yoga next to a tree. She's in a pose that looks like she's worshipping a particularly flexible squirrel.

"Morning," she sings. "Did you sleep well, or were you too busy dreaming of your fun guy?"

I groan. "You've been saving that one all weekend, haven't you?"

"I have," she beams. "And I have *zero* regrets."

Sam appears a few minutes later, coffee in one hand, two enamel mugs dangling from the other. He hands me one without saying anything, just smiling like it's the most natural thing in the world — and suddenly, it is.

We sit side by side on a fallen log, watching the sunlight begin to melt through the trees.

"I like mornings like this," he says, stretching his legs out. "When the forest still feels like it's deciding whether to share its secrets."

I sip the coffee. It's too hot, but it tastes amazing. Like adventure and burnt beans.

"Do you always talk like a forest poet?" I ask. "Because I think you've officially ruined normal small talk for me."

He chuckles. “I just like paying attention to things. Especially things most people overlook.”

“You must be amazing at dating,” I say. “You probably notice when someone changes their shampoo *and* when their basil plant is dying.”

“I’m a good observer,” he admits, nudging my shoulder gently. “And you... are better in the woods than you give yourself credit for.”

“I tripped over three roots, got bit by something aggressive with wings, and accidentally insulted a patch of lichen yesterday.”

“You also made everyone laugh, asked real questions, and made an effort to see what’s actually here. That’s rarer than you think.”

My cheeks flush, and it’s not from the coffee.

Eventually, we pack up camp, rolling sleeping bags into shapes that defy physics and trying to squeeze everything back into bags that seem smaller than they were two days ago. George is giving unsolicited advice about foot posture. Ellie and Jamie are feeding each other granola with synchronized spoons. Tasha’s on her phone again — signal must’ve returned, poor thing.

As we start walking back toward the trailhead, the forest opens up behind us like a story closing. I walk beside Sam, not needing to talk this time. Just feeling the rhythm of footsteps, the brush of his hand when it occasionally finds mine, the hum of something very new but very alive between us.

When we reach the car park, there’s that awkward in-between moment — where you’re not ready to leave, but the real world starts tapping its watch.

“So,” Sam says, scratching behind his ear. “The mushroom foray next weekend... still on?”

“Absolutely,” I nod. “Unless you’ve changed your mind about taking a beginner who thinks puffballs sound like Pokémon.”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

We linger near my car. The others are loading up, saying goodbye, already drifting back into their other lives. Clare winks at me and shouts, “See you Monday, Mushroom Queen!”

I roll my eyes, but Sam leans in.

“You *do* have queen energy,” he murmurs. “Forest royalty.”

“Oh God, you’re going to be unbearable now, aren’t you?”

“Only when I’m right.”

We kiss again — soft, familiar now. Like the end of a sentence that doesn’t quite finish because there’s more to say next time.

He pulls away slowly and says, “Text me when you get home. So I know you didn’t get lost to the fairy ring.”

“Or eaten by puffballs,” I add.

He grins. “Exactly.”

As I drive away, forest dust still clinging to my boots, I glance at the rearview mirror and see him waving once, then turning back toward the trail like he belongs there.

And maybe — just maybe — I’m starting to belong there too.

Because sometimes, love doesn’t fall from the sky. Sometimes it grows quietly underground, patiently waiting for the right conditions.

And when it blooms — it’s magic.

Bonus Scene: The Log and the Look (Sam's Perspective)

She doesn't know she's funny.

That's the first thing I like about her. Not in the trying-too-hard, rehearsed-wit way. Her humour just... leaks out naturally. Like a spring bubbling up from somewhere inside her — sharp, dry, with just enough warmth underneath it to make you lean in.

The first time I saw her, she was trying to pretend her brand-new boots weren't giving her grief. Tugging at the laces like she was in a hostage negotiation. And she laughed at my *turkey tail* joke — not a polite chuckle, but a genuine, startled laugh. That did it.

I like people who laugh like they didn't expect to.

Most people join these rambles because they're chasing something: mindfulness, fresh air, a bit of exercise before the pub. But Lucy? I couldn't read her at first. She had this restlessness that didn't match the setting. Like her mind was running laps even when her legs weren't.

But she stayed curious.

She crouched when I pointed things out. She asked questions, not to impress anyone, but because she actually wanted to know. That's rarer than people think.

When we talked about the wood wide web — she went quiet. Not bored, not distracted. Just... processing. Letting it soak in. Most people hear that trees talk underground and think it's a fun fact. Lucy looked like it meant something.

We sat on that log and shared soup, and I swear, I forgot what time it was. And not in the usual forest way. I forgot I had anything else to do, anywhere else to be.

When she tripped near the fairy ring and I caught her — it was reflex, sure, but I didn't let go right away. I could've. Should've. But her eyes widened just slightly, and she looked at me like she was seeing something new. And I couldn't let go. Not for a second.

Later that night, by the fire, she told a story about thinking puffballs were tennis balls. She had the whole group in stitches. And I sat there thinking, *you don't even realise you're lighting this whole place up.*

And then, that kiss.

It wasn't planned. Wasn't smooth. But it felt real. Like a soft, mossy corner of the forest you accidentally stumble into — and then never want to leave.

When she said yes to the mushroom foray next weekend, I didn't just feel relieved. I felt rooted.

She thinks I'm grounded — that I know what I'm doing, that I move through the woods like I belong there.

But the truth is, I've spent a lot of time alone in these places. Teaching others about mushrooms, yes, but also hiding in the comfort of lichen and rot. It's easy to feel useful when you're the only one who knows the Latin names.

With Lucy, though... I don't feel useful.

I feel seen.

And that? That's rarer than any mushroom I've ever found.

Bonus Scene: The Foray (Sam's Perspective)

One Week Later

She shows up in a raincoat two sizes too big and boots that are still trying to remember they were once white.

"I overpacked," she says, holding a canvas tote with what looks like a thermos, two Tupperware containers, and something suspiciously shaped like a wine bottle.

"Planning to bribe the fungi with Pinot Noir?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Can't hurt."

I'm already smiling. It's embarrassing how much I've looked forward to today. Most of my forays are solo or academic — quiet hours spent in a trance of spores and Latin names. But this? This is different. I packed two flasks instead of one. Brought the good thermos. Reread the species list. Practised a joke about slime moulds. Just in case.

She falls into step beside me as we head into the woods. We're in a quieter area this time — a mature beech forest with undisturbed ground cover and a thick carpet of leaf litter that dampens sound. The kind of place where mushrooms appear in secret and birds sing like they're narrating your life.

"Do you name them?" she asks suddenly.

"Who?"

"The mushrooms."

I glance over. She's dead serious.

“Sometimes,” I admit. “Mostly when I’m collecting samples. Or if they’ve got... personality.”

“Like this one?” She points to a stubby, brownish lump growing near a log.

“That’s a *Scleroderma citrinum*. Earthball. Poisonous. Kind of rude-looking.”

“I’m calling him Kevin.”

“Kevin’s a menace,” I nod solemnly.

She laughs, bright and clear, and I feel it like sunlight breaking through the canopy.

We spend the next hour meandering, stopping whenever something interesting catches our eye. She spots a jelly fungus clinging to a branch and names it “Blobby.” I tell her its real name is *Tremella mesenterica*, and she immediately renames it “Blobby Tremella III, heir to the wobbly throne.”

At one point she slips — again — but this time I catch her before she goes all the way down. Her hands grip my arms for balance, and I swear the forest tilts.

“You have a habit of falling near me,” I say.

“Maybe I’m just testing your reflexes,” she grins.

“You’re definitely testing something.”

She blushes, and I want to kiss her. But I wait.

Instead, I pull out the lunch I packed — wild mushroom tartlets, some dark chocolate, and two mugs of hot elderflower tea.

“Are you trying to seduce me with fungus?” she asks.

“Would it work?”

“Tragically, yes.”

We eat cross-legged on a mossy patch by a tree, sharing bites and stories. She tells me about her job as a graphic designer, the ridiculous client who wanted a logo shaped like a “sexy octopus,” and how she sometimes daydreams about being a forest witch.

I listen. I listen hard.

After tea, she leans her head on my shoulder for a while. Doesn’t say anything. Just breathes.

And I think: I could spend my life like this. Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just... beside her, in the quiet places. Watching things grow.

As we head back, she pauses one last time to crouch near a patch of shaggy inkcaps. They’re tall and elegant, like dripping candles.

“These look like they’re melting,” she says.

“They are,” I reply. “They autodigest. Break themselves down to spread spores more efficiently. It’s called deliquescence.”

She stares at them for a moment. Then looks at me.

“You’re full of weird, beautiful facts.”

“You’re full of weird, beautiful everything,” I say, before I can stop myself.

She smiles. “You’re getting better at compliments.”

“Learning from the best.”

We kiss again, soft and slow. The kind of kiss that doesn’t need witnesses. Just spores, trees, and time.

And I know — without a doubt — that this isn’t just a weekend thing.

This is a new season beginning.

Bonus Scene: Rainlight (Sam's Perspective)

One Month Later

Rain rattles gently against the window like a lazy percussionist.

The forest is too wet for foraging, and neither of us minds. She's curled on my sofa, legs tucked beneath her, wrapped in a blanket that smells faintly of smoke and thyme — probably from our last campfire. Her hair's damp, little fronds clinging to her neck like ivy vines, and she's holding one of my field notebooks.

"You have the neatest handwriting for someone who crawls through undergrowth for a living," she says.

I glance over from the kitchen, where I'm making tea and pretending not to stare at her every ten seconds.

"You'd be surprised how much mushroom work involves labelling jars," I reply. "There's a whole science to specimen jars."

She raises an eyebrow. "So you seduced me with Latin names and superior penmanship?"

"I seduced you with spores and soup, actually."

She smiles — the kind of slow, spreading smile that moves in stages: first her lips, then her cheeks, then her eyes. I feel something tug in my chest when she looks at me like that. Like she sees everything and still stays.

The kettle whistles. I pour. Bring her the mug she always picks — the one with the faded fox on it. She wraps her hands around it like she's siphoning the warmth straight into her bones.

I sit beside her, close enough that our knees touch under the blanket.

Outside, the trees are blurred in a curtain of grey. Inside, it's golden — the soft kind of light that happens when everything is wet and still. Her presence fills the room like warmth, like the smell of forest soil after rain.

"You okay?" I ask.

She nods, but softer than usual. "Yeah. Just... one of those days where everything feels a bit floaty, you know?"

I do.

So I don't say much. I just shift closer, lift her legs into my lap, and start tracing slow circles along her calf with my thumb.

She doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just lets herself lean into the quiet.

I've touched a thousand mushrooms. Pressed fingers to velvet caps, jelly textures, crusted brackets and brittle gills. I know how to feel without disturbing. To sense life without intrusion.

That's how I touch her now.

My hand moves from her knee to her thigh, slow and grounding. Not reaching. Just resting. Her skin is warm beneath the softness of her joggers. She shifts slightly, her breath catching for a moment — not with tension, but surrender.

I kiss her shoulder, where her T-shirt hangs a little loose, and she sighs — like an exhale she didn't know she'd been holding finally slipped out.

She turns to me, sets her mug on the table, and curls into my side. Her lips meet mine with a kind of deliberate slowness that steals time. She kisses like she forages — curious, tender, hungry in a way that isn't desperate but deeply *present*.

My hand cups her jaw, her cheek fitting perfectly into the space where my palm has always wanted to rest.

“I like you like this,” she murmurs between kisses.

“Like what?” I whisper.

“Soft. Still. Serious.”

She brushes her nose against mine. “Like the mossy side of you.”

I smile. “There’s only moss.”

We kiss again. And again. It deepens like a forest path — winding, hidden, full of unexpected clearings.

Later, we don’t say much. We lie tangled under the blanket, the sound of rain settling into the roof like an old friend. She traces the shape of a button on my shirt absently, and I stroke slow patterns into the hollow of her back.

I never imagined love would feel like this.

Not lightning. Not wildfire.

But something older. Something like roots growing unseen beneath the surface.

Steady. Unspoken. Irreversible.

Bonus Scene: Meet the Parents (Sam's Perspective)

Three Months In

Lucy says, "They're normal," in the same voice someone might use to reassure you before a root canal.

I nod like I believe her. But we both know this is the social equivalent of stepping into an unfamiliar forest and hoping it's not filled with booby-trapped puffballs.

We're standing outside her parents' house, her hand gripping mine tightly enough to leave indentations. I don't mind. Her anxiety is kind of adorable. The way she's brushing imaginary lint off my jumper and trying to explain her family in rapid-fire summaries.

"Mum's the boss. Dad will ask about your tax bracket. My brother will definitely try to mess with you. Don't let him. And absolutely *no mushroom puns* unless you want to lose respect instantly."

I raise an eyebrow. "Even tasteful ones?"

She looks at me. "Sam. I love you. But if you say 'I'm a fun guy' at the dinner table, I will walk into traffic."

"Understood."

She exhales, squares her shoulders like she's going into battle, and rings the doorbell.

Two Hours Later

Honestly?

It's going better than expected.

Her mum, Elaine, is sharp and efficient, the kind of woman who serves homemade quiche while also asking questions like, "So are you planning to make a *real* career out of the mushroom thing?" But it's not unkind. Just... direct. I can work with that.

Her dad, Roger, is an accountant with the social ease of a golden retriever. He keeps calling me "Champ" and showing me his tomato plants. I like him.

Her brother, Ben, is exactly as she warned — smug, younger, and clearly sizing me up for weak spots. He casually asks, "So, fungi — that's like... glorified compost, right?"

I smile politely. "You mean compost — that's like nutrient-rich gold made possible by fungal symbiosis?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Touché."

Lucy watches us like she's monitoring a gas leak.

Over dinner, the mushroom talk comes up — inevitably. Elaine asks what exactly I *do*, and Lucy visibly tenses.

I take a breath.

"I study fungi," I say. "Not just mushrooms, but the entire kingdom. Mycorrhizal networks, medicinal applications, fungal remediation — using mycelium to clean up environmental damage. Most people don't realise that fungi are at the heart of nearly every ecosystem on Earth."

Roger nods, impressed. Ben sips his wine with exaggerated suspicion.

Elaine folds her hands. "So, you believe in what you do."

I meet her eyes. “Yes. I believe in looking closely at what others overlook. Fungi live quietly, hidden, but they keep everything going. There’s something beautiful in that.”

For a second, there’s silence.

Then Lucy’s mum says, “That’s... quite lovely, actually.”

Lucy lets out a breath so deeply I think I hear her soul unclench.

Later, in the car

She’s practically buzzing as she turns to me.

“I can’t believe you won them over. My mum *smiled* at you. Ben didn’t make you cry. My dad tried to give you jam.”

I grin. “What can I say? Fungi teach patience. And how to survive in hostile environments.”

She snorts. “Stop.”

“And if all else failed,” I continue, “I brought a peace offering.”

She gasps. “You didn’t.”

I pull it from my bag — a tiny box of *chanterelle truffle salt* I made myself. “Just a little something for Elaine’s quiches.”

Lucy covers her face, laughing. “I love you. You ridiculous man.”

I lean in. “I know.”

And just like that, it’s not just me and her anymore.

It’s me, with roots starting to tangle into her life — like mycelium spreading quietly through the soil.

A new network.

A new kind of love.

Bonus Scene: Cabin Season (Sam's Perspective)

Four Months In

There's something magical about cabins in the rain. The way the roof crackles under water's fingertips. The way the trees lean closer, as if eavesdropping. The way time stretches like moss over everything.

Lucy's standing barefoot on the wooden porch, wrapped in my flannel shirt — which, frankly, looks better on her than it ever did on me. Her hair's damp from the mist, her face turned up toward the rain like it's speaking to her in a language only she understands.

We've been here two days.

No signal. No schedule. Just a tiny cabin, the smell of cedar, a fireplace that behaves when you sweet-talk it, and a woman who's turning this whole trip into a fever dream I never want to wake from.

I lean against the doorway, sipping coffee, watching her.

"You're doing that look again," she says without turning. "The one where you go all moody and poetic."

"I'm just admiring the fungi."

She smirks over her shoulder. "Excuse me?"

"You. You're the fungi. Beautiful, misunderstood, slightly wild, good for the planet, and thriving in damp conditions."

She laughs — that full-body kind of laugh that makes her eyes crease and her chest rise in rhythm with joy. Then she crosses the porch and takes my mug from me.

“Tastes like cinnamon,” she says, surprised.

“Secret blend.”

She sips again, then steps forward, pushing me gently back into the cabin with her body.

“You brought me to a forest and gave me mushroom facts and secret cinnamon coffee,” she murmurs. “You know what that means?”

I pretend to think. “You’re going to marry me in the presence of spores?”

“No,” she grins, “but you *are* going to lie down while I warm my feet on you.”

Later

We’re tangled in the throw blanket on the couch, fireplace low, her legs draped over mine, a novel face-down on the floor. Neither of us is reading. Just fingers tracing skin, slow and reverent.

She looks at me the way people look at forest mushrooms when they realise they’re rare.

I touch her like I’m documenting her — gentle pressure, curious fingertips, a scholar of skin and heartbeat.

“Do you ever wish you were someone else?” she asks softly.

I shake my head. “No. But I’ve wished someone would see me the way you do.”

Her breath catches.

And just like that, she's in my lap, kissing me in that way that says: *I know. I know. I see you too.*

There's no rush. No script. Just the rhythm of rain, the whisper of flannel sliding off a shoulder, the truth of hands learning one another like sacred ground.

We move together like roots intertwining beneath the soil — slow, deep, quiet, inevitable.

And when she finally rests her head against my chest, both of us warm and breathless, I whisper:

"You know, certain fungi glow in the dark when they're in love."

She hums. "Are we glowing?"

I press my lips to her temple.

"Absolutely."

Bonus Scene: Spores and Stillness (Lucy's Perspective)

Six Months In

I find a mushroom growing in the windowsill this morning.

Not even kidding. Just there, between the terracotta pots of parsley and thyme, nestled in the corner like it's been gently waiting for someone to notice. A soft, pale dome, slightly fuzzy, slightly smug.

I hold it up to Sam like a detective with a damning clue.

He blinks at it, then shrugs. "Looks like a *Coprinellus micaceus*."

"Of course it does."

"You leave damp soil in indirect sunlight," he says, brushing a crumb off his beard, "the spores just... do their thing."

I narrow my eyes. "Are you secretly seeding mushrooms around the flat? Is this a slow, fungal takeover?"

He leans over, kisses my cheek. "Would you even mind?"

I pretend to scoff, but I wouldn't.

I really wouldn't.

Sometimes I still can't believe this is my life.

I used to live by phone alarms, bad takeout, and the vague ache of wanting something I couldn't name. I spent years dating men who were perfectly fine but never *quiet*. Never *slow*. Never the type to kneel down mid-hike and gasp at a cluster of jelly fungus like they'd discovered buried treasure.

And then came Sam.

The mushroom man.

The fun guy.

I don't think either of us saw it coming. That the woman with city boots and emotional whiplash would fall head over heels for the man who spoke in mycelial metaphors and packed mushroom salt in his rucksack.

But here we are.

Now I know the names of mushrooms. I own wellies. I keep emergency granola in my coat pocket. I say things like "fruiting body" and "saprotrophic" without flinching. My friends are concerned. I'm delighted.

But more than that, I'm... still.

Not in a stuck way. In a *rooted* way. There's something grounding about this love. Something that moves beneath the surface, quietly, patiently, holding me up even when I don't notice.

He doesn't try to fix me. Or shape me. He just sees me — weird tangents, bad jokes, anxious overthinking and all — and loves me like it's the easiest thing in the world.

And I love him like moss loves stone. Gently. Completely. Unapologetically slow.

Later, we sit on the sofa with tea, the mushroom in its pot beside us like a little guardian of our shared chaos. The rain starts up again — it always

does this time of year — and he pulls the blanket over our laps without asking.

I lean into him. He hums something into my hair — I think it's the chorus of *Can't Help Falling in Love*, but fungal.

“Hey,” I murmur.

“Hm?”

“Promise me if we ever get married, we'll have a mushroom cake.”

He grins. “With edible moss?”

“And spores in the centre.”

“And little mycelium rings around the base.”

We laugh.

And I think: this isn't just love. This is life growing in the places I never thought anything could take root.

And it's beautiful.

Epilogue: Spores Ever After

Many Years Later

The woods are quieter now.

Not silent — never silent — but softened. Like the forest has aged with us, and knows we don't need to be dazzled anymore. Just held.

We walk slower these days. Sam's knee clicks on hills, and I swear my hip forecasts rain more accurately than the BBC. But we're still here. Boots on, flasks packed, pockets full of oatcakes and lint.

And mushrooms.

Always mushrooms.

He's a little greyer now — well, more salt than pepper — and the beard has gone full wizard. But his eyes haven't changed. Still bright, still kind, still quietly alive when he spots something unusual growing from a rotting stump. He crouches with more effort these days, but the reverence in his hands never changed. He still speaks to the fungi like they're old friends. Maybe they are.

We're in the same woods where we first met.

The old oak grove.

It's overgrown now, the fairy ring long faded into the soil, but we remember. That laugh. That stumble. That first conversation where I learned the forest talks in underground sentences and Sam Rowan was fluent in them.

And now, so am I.

Back home, in the small stone cottage we moved into ten years ago, we keep a mushroom garden. Not decorative — real. Shiitake logs on the shaded side of the shed. King oyster growing in buckets by the door. A few cheeky lion's mane patches on the windowsill that we jokingly call *our little fungal children*.

And in the centre of it all: our wedding photo.

Me in a moss-green dress, barefoot.

Him in a corduroy jacket, with a buttonhole full of mycorrhizal lichen.

We said our vows in a circle of trees, surrounded by friends and family and fungi. Even Ben cried — though he later claimed it was allergies.

Sam leaned in and whispered, "Let's decompose together," and I nearly ruined my makeup laughing.

Now, we sit together under a blanket, sipping mushroom broth, watching the rain tap its rhythms against the kitchen skylight. My hand rests on his, liver-spotted now, but still strong.

He looks at me like he always has.

Like I'm the only thing in the forest that ever really surprised him.

And I think: love doesn't always roar in.

Sometimes, it spools out slow. Unfurling like a mycelial thread. Reaching, rooting, gently holding you until you grow into the space where you were always meant to bloom.

Some people get fireworks.

I got fungi.

And I wouldn't trade it for the world.

The End — and the Beginning.