

BROKEN

Romeo

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATANA COLLINS

BROKEN
ROMEO

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

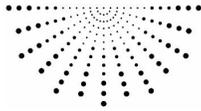
[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[About Katana](#)

Also by Katana Collins

CHAPTER ONE



*M*y ass sweats when I'm nervous. For most people, their hands get a little clammy, or their faces take on a glowing dew. But not me.

Nope, not Kate Harris.

The last time I was this nervous was when I first laid eyes on Holden James Dorsey, the man who ultimately broke my heart in the most irreparable way imaginable. And I do not look cute when I'm nervous. When I'm on edge, not only do I sweat, but my entire body trembles like an addict itching for their next fix.

I can almost hear my college theater professor now: "Kate, what in God's name is wrong with you? In theater, we have a saying: *Women glisten. Men perspire. Horses sweat.*"

Well, then, strap a saddle on my back and call me Seabiscuit.

Yes, actors are allowed to be nervous, but they aren't allowed to let it *show*. And I don't just break that cardinal rule... I smash it into a thousand pieces.

Right now, as I crouch down on the filthy floor at the coffee shop I work at, hiding beneath the espresso machine, I'm more nervous than I've ever been in any show or audition. My yellow apron puffs up around my knees like a debutante ball gown as a single bead of sweat rolls down my spine.

Above me, my coworker, fellow barista, roommate, and best friend all

rolled into one is taking the proverbial bullet for me with our landlord.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Greene,” Jill says. “She’s not working today.”

I hear the scowl in ol’ Gray-Faced Greene’s voice. “Oh, really? I could have sworn I saw Kate through the window just before I came in.”

“Nope.” Jill’s voice is chipper as ever, and as I tilt my head to peer up at her standing beside me, she’s calm from the waist up. But below the counter, her toe taps, bouncing against the dirty linoleum. I guess I’m not the only gifted actress here. “She *was* working. But she had to leave early. For her audition.”

I smack Jill’s leg with the back of my hand, and she smothers her *oomph* by coughing into her fist.

“Audition?” Ms. Greene barks. “She told me she was in *rehearsal* for a new show. That she was waiting on her first paycheck—which she swore was going to be enough to pay for not only this month’s rent, but also last month’s.”

“Yes,” Jill says and kicks me in response. “Yes. Rehearsal. She *is* in rehearsal. She also has another audition. She’s in really high demand right now.”

“Hm. Well, I hope you’re right. Her eviction papers are drawn up. They can take a while to process, though. So, if she can get me last month’s rent *and* this month’s rent by the fifteenth, then I’ll reconsider. But I can’t keep giving her these chances. Between the two of you, I’ve let a lot of late payments pass by and I’m *done*. She’s got two weeks.”

Two weeks to come up with three thousand dollars?

I have six hundred currently in my bank account, which I was planning to use to make the minimum payment on my student loans. Those could wait, though... well, probably. But six hundred bucks still isn’t enough.

When I get paid on Thursday, I’ll have another four hundred in my pocket... Still a long way off from three thousand.

“Yes, Ms. Greene,” Jill says, and I note that the cheeriness is now

stripped from her voice. “Here’s your cappuccino. Extra foam, just how you like it. On us.”

“You mean on *you*. Because Kate’s not here, of course.”

The distinct click of heels taps into the distance, and the bell chimes over the door.

Jill waves me up. “Okay, it’s safe to come out.”

I stand and dust off my skirt, wishing I had thought to put my apron on the floor to sit on, and make a mental note to start mopping beneath the counters. “Dammit. I’m all dirty. I can’t go to my audition like *this*.”

“You didn’t pay rent again?” Jill whispers with a glance around the coffee shop.

A handful of people sit scattered around the store sipping coffees. Some are reading, a few are chatting, but most have their noses in their laptops, the tap of fingers to keyboards providing a low hum of ambient noise. “But I *saw* you put the rent check in the mail! We did it on the same day.”

I sigh. “That was my late payment for *two* months ago.”

Jill tucks her auburn hair behind her ear and gives me a look that is both disciplinary and pity-filled all at once. It makes my cheeks heat with a flush of embarrassment. I avoid my reflection in the espresso machine, knowing that I’m a hundred shades of pink right now.

Neither of us makes a ton of money, but Jill manages to pay rent every month, supplementing the rest of her income with ghostwriting and other freelance writing gigs. And she has the added bonus of zero student loan debt thanks to her parents’ smart financial planning. They started a college fund for her before she was even a fetus in the womb.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper while blinking back the tears that threaten to spill over the edges of my lashes.

She shakes her head and pulls up her phone, opening her bank app. “I don’t have a lot I can loan you, but a couple hundred might help—”

“I’m not taking your money, Jill.”

“But we’re going to be evicted!”

“We aren’t going to be anything.” I move past her, avoiding her eyes. I really don’t want to have this conversation with her right now. Not when I have to leave in five minutes and my nerves are already shot to hell. I grab the dirty dishes from the bin and begin loading the dishwasher. “I will be evicted.”

She follows on the backs of my heels, and I pray for a customer to interrupt so that we don’t have to do this now—here.

“Kate, *no*. If you go, I go. We can find a cheaper place. Maybe out in Bay Ridge? The commute to work will be a bitch, but if we can save—”

“No,” I say and spin to face her.

Her green eyes go wide from my hard tone, but I don’t care. Just because my dreams aren’t panning out doesn’t mean she should quit hers.

“You don’t understand, Jill. If I don’t get this part today, I’m going home to Indiana.”

“You know...” Jill bites the inside of her cheek in thought. “Maybe that’s not a bad idea. You go to Indiana; I’ll visit my parents for a month in New Jersey. We could Airbnb the place again for way more than our rent and get Gray-Faced Greene off your back. Then, when we’ve both saved a little, we could come back—”

“That’s not what I meant,” I say, shaking my head. I don’t state the obvious—which is that it’s illegal to Airbnb our place, and Greene caught us the last time we did it. I take a deep breath, stealing a glance at my phone.

Three minutes.

I have to leave in three minutes for the most important audition of my life.

“If I don’t get this part today, we need to start interviewing new roommates for you. I’ll work something out with Ms. Greene. A payment plan or something, so that she doesn’t boot you from the apartment, too.”

The fact that I’ve been thinking this through for a couple weeks,

preparing for this talk with Jill, doesn't make it any easier. My throat feels clogged like the shitty drainpipe in our shower, and a lone tear manages to spill down my cheek. I swipe it away with the back of my hand, grateful that Jill knows me well enough to ignore it.

"I can't keep living like this," I admit. "I eat ramen every night because it's all I can afford. I work constantly, rushing from double shifts here to auditions and rehearsals. If I'm lucky, I perform until eleven. Then wake up at five to start it all again. Most nights, I can't sleep because I lay awake freaking out about how much debt I'm in."

I gulp back the tennis ball lodged in my throat. "I think I need to face it... I'm probably never going to make it as a professional actress. I can barely get parts in the ensemble in summer stock, let alone something here in New York on Broadway."

Jill grabs my hand and gives my fingers a gentle squeeze. "Don't say that."

"Even if it's true?"

"It's *not* true. You're a great actress."

"So are a lot of people."

Jill inclines her chin in a deliberate gesture, rife with false bravado. I recognize it easily because I, myself, have done it more than once.

"Then you'll just have to knock them dead at today's audition." She leans in, her voice barely above a whisper. "I know you will. You were the most talented actress in your program."

That was before Holden ruined everything.

Just the mention of college sends a spike of icy grief twisting through my heart.

I grab the second tray of dirty dishes and cross to the sink to busy myself washing them.

I don't like thinking about undergrad. It's far too knotted in the tangled ball of yarn that is Holden James Dorsey. Every good memory I have is

associated with him... and every bad one.

No. 'Bad' doesn't do it justice. 'Bad' doesn't even begin to cover the ways he used me, broke my heart, and betrayed me. My stomach clenches as the heartbreak gives way to bitterness. It rushes through my veins, like an angry river through a broken dam. The emotion is a relief, and I relax into the rage.

Anger is better than regret; it's better than the sad, empty hole I feel when I think about Holden. Bitterness and resentment are my shield and I'll cling to it, clutch it, and hide behind it for as long as I need to in order to move on from the devastation he caused me.

That's all the more reason I need to get this part. To show him, and myself, that he didn't ruin me. That I came back better than ever.

"You must be nervous," Jill says. She covers my trembling hands with hers, taking the mug I've been scrubbing.

I relinquish the dishes to her and try to smile, but I can feel the terror-stricken expression locking onto my face. Swiveling my butt around so that she can see the sweat stains on my skirt, I go for levity as I wag my booty and say, "Nervous? What do *you* think?"

Jill scrunches her nose playfully. "Ew. Gross. Yeah, it was more of a rhetorical question, anyway."

She waves the mug in my direction. "Go. You're going to be late if you don't start walking soon. Besides, you need to get there with a few minutes to spare so you can let your ass dry off in the bathroom."

She winks as I stick my tongue out at her.

"You can do this," Jill adds. "I've listened to every one of your monologues, and they're perfect. You could sing your audition song in your sleep."

She's not wrong. It's not as though I'm unprepared.

But this audition is different.

It's not a two-week stint in a shitty fringe festival show for no pay other

than a fifty-dollar Metrocard—not that I wouldn’t take that Metrocard, thank you very much.

This audition isn’t for dinner theater or a touring show or an understudy or even an ensemble role. I won’t have to sublet my room to a chick with eight eyebrow piercings for the summer while I travel to Colorado for Summer Stock.

This is a *Broadway* audition... for the lead role in a new show.

“Yeah.” My throat tightens, and I try to straighten my wobbly smile.

A customer strolls in and peruses the menu board above us. Jill jerks her head to the door. “Go,” she mouths.

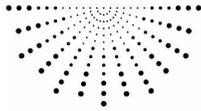
I strip off my apron, grab my purse, and rush out the door. Our café is a convenient eight-block walk from the theater district, and I scurry around the crowds, dodging and weaving the midday foot traffic of executives, artists, and tourists all jam-packed into the same sector of our bustling city.

I make it to New World Stages with fifteen minutes to spare before my audition time slot and pause to stare at the building from the outside courtyard.

Heat tingles behind my eyes as I soak in this moment—my first Broadway audition.

And maybe my last.

CHAPTER TWO



With a gulp and a prayer, I enter New World Stages and follow the signs with arrows pointing toward the audition stage.

When my agent called me with this opportunity, I almost didn't believe her. Apparently, the very famous director, Reid Bradley, had seen me in my Fringe Festival show and wanted *me* to audition for the lead in this new musical. It seemed far too good to be true. A nobody actress who had barely scraped her equity card together by doing summer stock and dinner theater productions was being sought out to audition for a leading role on Broadway?

Even my agent seemed highly skeptical and made that fact *well* known three days ago when we spoke over the phone. *“According to the casting agent, they’re keeping the details of the project super secretive. I only know the director, one producer, and the casting director. I have no idea what other actors, if any, have been signed on. I don’t know who else they’ve called to audition for your part. I don’t even know if the new musical has been workshopped and premiered elsewhere yet.”*

“What do you know?” I’d asked her.

“I know they seem interested in you. It’s unheard of—a director finding an unknown actress at a Fringe show and asking her to audition? I’m not sure what deal you made with the devil, but opportunities like this never happen, Kate. Don’t waste this.”

The director may have asked for me to audition, but this is far from a done deal.

The signs lead me to a woman sitting behind a folding table.

And she is hugging none other than Tony-Award winning actress, Missy Howl.

Missy is a *legend* in the New York City theater scene. She has starred alongside my ex, Holden Dorsey—or rather, Holden James as he is now known—in every Broadway show he has been in.

Fuck. If Missy Howl is auditioning, there's no hope for me.

She and I are as different as different can be. Missy has rich, black hair to my ashy blonde, and striking lavender eyes that make my blue eyes seem mundane in comparison. Hers are probably colored contacts, but they're no less gorgeous.

“Thanks, Maggie,” Missy says with an adorable wave. “It’s always good to see you.”

She blows a kiss before spinning and passing by me on her way out of the audition. I’m dumbstruck, watching her float down the hallway and out the door like some sort of theatrical goddess.

Finally, I snap out of my haze. With a glance around, it hits me how vastly different this experience already is from the other cattle-call ensemble and swing auditions I’ve been to in this exact space.

Prior to joining the Actor’s Equity Union, which is basically SAG but for Broadway, I’d come to auditions here with literally hundreds—if not thousands—of other women who looked, sang, and danced just like me. We’d be herded in, given a number, tossed on stage, and whittled down to the best of the best in the grueling audition process.

But this? This is completely different. Our auditions are by appointment only, scheduled so that there’s only the occasional overlap.

Like this, right now with Missy.

There’s no roomful of blonde-haired, blue-eyed, 5’5” actresses reading

over their monologues as they wait for their five minutes in front of the director.

The stage manager waves goodbye to Missy and her smile grows as she sees me. I like her already. For one, she's *smiling*. At *me*... a nobody actress about to audition. Am I in the damn Twilight Zone? Is this how leading role auditions are usually treated?

"Ms. Harris?" she asks.

"Yes..."

"Fantastic! As you can see, we just finished the other audition. They're running a little behind, so it will be a few minutes. Steep competition out there." Her grin widens and she hands me a clipboard, a pen, and a bottle of water. "My name is Maggie. I'm the stage manager. Your agent sent a messenger this morning with your headshot and resume. Here is a detailed rehearsal schedule with a general timeline of the production. If you have any conflicts with that schedule, please mark it down. Scheduling conflicts will be taken into consideration when casting, so try to be sparing. And of course, here are the production sides for the audition. We'll need you to sign the NDA and initial the second page. Did you bring sheet music?"

I nod, cracking the cap of the water bottle, and take a swig to wet my suddenly dry throat.

"Wonderful," Maggie says as she stands and motions for me to follow her. She leads me down the hall where she opens a heavy door and guides me into a small room with a comfortable looking leather chair and a piano in the corner. "If you want to sing through your audition piece and warm up your voice, you can do so in here. You have about ten minutes before we'll bring you in to get started."

I'm immediately hit with nerves... and the urge to pee takes over my body. "Actually, is it possible to use the restroom?"

"Of course. Unfortunately, our audition green room doesn't have its own bathroom, but the building has one down that hall, on your right. Feel free to

use it and then make your way back here.”

I thank her and do my best to walk, not run, toward the bathroom. As I reach for the handle of the ladies’ room, the men’s room door on the other side swings open.

It takes a moment for me to register who’s walking out of the bathroom, but the moment it does, I gasp.

My knees tremble, knocking together at the sight of *him* here. In front of me.

“Holden,” I whisper.

My water bottle slips from my fingers and smacks against the marble floors, the sound echoing in the otherwise silent hall.

His chuckle vibrates through my body, rattling me all the way down to my bones, and I watch, feet glued to the floor, as he stoops to pick up the bottle for me.

His eyes are just as piercing as I remember them—a honeyed shade of whiskey with mossy green flecks. Captivating with dark lashes and thick brows always in some state of furrow.

The intensity of his stare burns through me, and just like that, I’m the nineteen-year-old college student again, fawning over the hotter, older upperclassman jock who happens to also be a theater God.

Unfortunately for me, out of all of us from our Ivy League university class, *he’s* the one who made it. He’s the one working professionally—not only in touring companies, but on Broadway.

The moment he entered the professional world, he was Broadway’s newest “It” man and he’s been starring in almost every show alongside Missy Howl for the past three years.

Missy Howl. My competition for this show.

I’m so fucked.

My eyes sweep over him. I *despise* how handsome he is. Like somehow, he got sexier as some sort of revenge on me.

His dark hair is longer than it was the last time I saw him five years ago. Tapered and wavy, it falls to his collar in twisted, manly wisps that call to my fingers.

“Katherine,” he says, his tone full of silk and promises. My full name on his lips makes my spine go rigid. No one calls me Katherine...

Except for him.

No, no, no. This is the last thing I need. Nothing can rattle me. Not today.

“It’s Kate,” I say firmly. A sobering thought strikes me like a mallet to the heart. “Are you here to audition?”

If he’s also auditioning for this show, I’m out. There’s no way in hell I can share a stage with that man again.

I hold my breath and make a wish. New World Stages is large and houses several theaters and rehearsal spaces. There are any number of projects he could be connected to.

“No.” He steps forward, arm outstretched to hand me my water bottle. I breathe a silent sigh of relief and take it, careful not to touch him. “I’m not auditioning for anything.”

If I could tear my gaze away from his, I would, but he’s too magnetic. Too beautifully charming... and he damn well knows it.

He’s a spider, and I’m an unsuspecting fly about to become his meal. But I know the moment I touch him—feel his skin brush against mine—I’m done for. I’ll be stuck, locked within him, and no amount of struggling will wrench me free.

“You look good, Kather—” He catches himself. “I mean, Kate.”

The edge in his voice catches me off guard. In a boyish movement, he shoves his hand casually into the pocket of his dark wash jeans. His eyes, *those eyes*, sweep my body, locking me right where I am.

I should say *you, too*. It’s the natural, polite response. And fuck if it isn’t true. But I can’t bring myself to say it.

Slowly, his eyes land south, seeming to fasten to my hips and a smile

quirks his lips. “Are you nervous?”

I gulp. He can’t tell my ass is sweating, can he? Sure, he may remember from our college days, but I’m not sweating so much that it’s visible... am I? Oh, God, *please* don’t let it be visible.

“I... I...” I try to formulate a sentence. *Any sentence*. “I need to pee.”

His smirk lifts, and he shifts, moving closer to me.

“I mean *go!* I need to go. I-I have somewhere to be.”

He nods, his gaze sliding down the hall. “So that’s it? That’s all I get after five years?”

My breath hitches as blood rushes to my cheeks. With a flare of my nostrils, the flustered, stuttering girl is gone, replaced with *me*. Angry, resentful Kate. In a rush of fury, I remember who I am. Who he made me.

“Yep,” I hiss, my voice low with venom that I’ve been suppressing for years. “You don’t deserve more.”

There’s a million things left to say. He betrayed me. Hurt me in ways that I hadn’t even fathomed I could be hurt.

I almost didn’t hear his muttered “*Fuck,*” over the roaring rush of blood in my ears. “Would it help if I said I’m sorry?”

It’s a start. “Nope.”

His jaw ticks. I could always get under Holden’s skin, and I delight way too much in knowing I *still* can.

“What if I said that I had my reasons for what I did?” he asks.

When I don’t answer, he leans forward, and he’s too close, too far into my personal space. I can smell the hint of lemongrass on his skin from his soap—that damn soap hasn’t changed in all these years. It’s too much. He’s too much. And today is too fucking important to let him knock me off my game.

I jump back from him and shove the door to the ladies’ room open, marching through the open door. “There is *nothing* you can say to me to make up for what you did.”

“Don’t be so sure—”

I don’t let him finish the sentence and, instead, shut the door in his face.

Jill is right. I was the best actress in my undergrad program, even if I wasn’t able to prove it all that much. Everyone knew it... except maybe me.

I cannot let Holden James or anyone else for that matter, ruin my potential.

I take an extra minute to clean myself up and press a cool, wet paper towel to my face. When I’m finished, I crack the door open, peering out to see if he’s gone. The hallway is clear, and I exhale the intense breath I’ve been holding as I step out.

Maggie is at the end of the hall, smiling at me. “Ms. Harris. They’re ready for you.”

Fuck. Fucking Holden. My gaze sweeps to the private green room that I didn’t get to use with the piano I didn’t get to warm up on. I force a smile and nod to Maggie, clutching my sheet music to my breasts as she leads me into the theater.

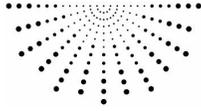
The room is mostly dark, with a stream of spotlights highlighting the stage. In the center of the audience, several shadowed figures sit at a long table, murmuring over stacks of what I can only assume are resumes and headshots from all the women who came before me.

“This is Kate Harris,” Maggie says to the team with a smile on her face, and she hands them my paperwork.

One by one, they introduce themselves to me, but I hardly remember a single name. Because there, sitting in the middle of the table among the casting director and producers... is Holden.

And he’s the director of this show.

CHAPTER THREE



*A*n unspoken rule in theater is that you're not to make eye contact with any of the production team while you're auditioning.

It's two minutes into my audition, and I've already broken that rule.

Twice.

My entire body quakes from the center spotlight of the stage, and I scuff the toe of my shoe across the taped 'X' beneath me. Holden's eyes fasten onto me, shrewdly assessing and unforgiving as he watches my every move. Another man stands from the end of the long table, and I recognize him as the legendary producer, Simon Davis.

He taps the button of a video camera set up on a tripod beside him. "Ms. Harris, thank you for coming today. We plan on videotaping your songs and monologue, if that's alright with you?"

I barely nod before he continues with his speech—after all, videotaping auditions is commonplace.

"Fantastic," Simon says. "Now that you've signed our NDA, I want to fill you in on some details about this show. It's a brand new two-person show by a debut Fulbright award winning playwright and composer, Amy Nguyen. Originally, Tony winner, Reid Bradley, was contracted to direct. However, he was pulled in a different direction, and Holden James is taking over for his directorial debut."

How is this *possibly* happening to me? My one big breakthrough Broadway audition and it's being directed by my ex?

Simon pauses, and I'm not sure how or even *if* I'm supposed to react to this news. How did the other actresses auditioning respond to this change in directors? Did they congratulate Holden on this massive achievement?

Mostly, I just want to punch his scowling, smug face.

"I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity to audition today." I do my best to smile, but it wobbles.

When Holden stands, his colleagues fall silent, heads swiveling to watch him. With a slow stride, he makes his way down to the front row. Each step steals oxygen from the room, making it more impossible for me to breathe the closer and closer he comes. His intense stare pins me in place, just like it used to all those years ago. Just like it did the first time he ever kissed me.

The small brush of his finger to spin his ring is his tell—an old habit that even God-like Holden James can't seem to break after all these years. Somehow, that small humanizing quality makes him even sexier.

"We're only auditioning the best of the best," he says. One of the stage lights catches in his eyes, making them glow a mesmerizing golden hue. "Reid saw your performance in the Fringe show and, before he left, was insistent that you come in for an audition. This show is intimate. Intense. It will require breaking down your walls and being fully vulnerable with your co-star... and with me."

His words slash through me—a direct hit to my heart. He *knows* this is my weakness. He knows my walls; he knows each brick, each crevice, every crack in the foundation.

He knows them because they were built specifically to keep *him* out.

Fear whispers in my ear, crooking its finger and beckoning me to walk out the door. I'm not sure what's worse—the fear of failure or the fear of success. Both could break me at this point.

I roll my shoulders back and, with a quick stretch of my neck, stand taller.

“I understand, Mr. James.”

His name is venom on my tongue, but I swallow it down all the same, knowing how deadly it is.

The world may know him as Holden James, but to me, he will always be Holden Dorsey... the cocky, rich football player turned thespian. When he became famous, he not only got a new career and a new image. He got a new name, too.

I’m jealous of almost everything about him. His swagger, his talent, his confidence, his luck. And maybe most of all, I’m jealous that *he* got to start over. *People who already have it all shouldn’t get a fresh start.*

“Then let’s begin,” he says. Only, instead of going back to the production team table, he lowers into the end seat in the front row of the theater. Right in my line of sight.

I make it through my audition song and half of my monologue before I stumble, voice stuttering as my gaze sweeps across to his face.

Or rather, his *scowl*.

In the shadow of the audience, his eyes are as dark as onyx beneath his low, glowering brows. When I stumble, his gaze darkens even more.

He leans forward with his elbows on his knees, both fists pressed to his mouth, barely hiding his frown. His knee bounces ever-so-slightly, the rustle of his pants against the arm of the chair is the only indication of the movement. His merciless expression pins me.

Words sputter out of my mouth like a dying engine, and next thing I know, I’m standing there, mind blank, searching for my next line.

“I... I...” Fuck. What’s my next line in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*?

“Stop there,” Holden’s voice booms, echoing off the walls.

He shoves to his feet and stalks back to the table, where he and the other producers huddle and confer for the longest sixty seconds of my life.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a brief moment. It *had* been going well. Right up until that moment when the house of cards came crashing down. No, cards

were too harmless. This was a house of glass.

Maybe my audition was good *enough*. Maybe the strength of my singing voice and the beginning of the monologue outweighed my fuckup at the end.

Holden stalks back toward me to the edge of the stage, holding out pages from the script.

“Change of plans,” he says. “I want you to do a cold reading of *this* scene.”

I glance down at the page. Neon yellow highlights my lines, and I skim them as quickly as I can. It’s a love scene—or rather, a confession. My character is professing her love for the first time to the romantic lead.

Not just professing... *Begging*. And apologizing.

Fuck. You.

I glance up to where Holden has reclaimed his position, sitting in the front row. He lifts a challenging eyebrow in my direction.

This is just what he wants. He wants to piss me off; he wants me to storm out. He’s trying to get under my skin, but I can’t let him. I can’t let him rob me of this role, too.

I need this part for the sake of my apartment. My career. And Jill. I’ve been aching for the opportunity to show Holden he didn’t ruin me. Well...

Here. It. Is.

In order to do this scene, I have to reframe this hatred for Holden as love. I need to imagine being the one who was in the wrong; the one begging *him* to take me back.

Basically, I need to *be* Holden.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself.

“Ready, Kate?” Maggie asks.

I nod. “Ready.”

Maggie reads the first line—the character of Zach. “I can’t even look at you.”

She reads it in a dull monotone, without any emotion. It’s pretty typical in

an audition that a stage manager or non-actor reads the other character like this. It's a test to see how well you can emote while acting off a brick wall.

"Please don't walk away from me," I begin, focusing on the glowing exit sign at the back of the room rather than Holden's searing eyes. "You can't honestly tell me we're over."

"There's not a single thing you can say to make this better," Maggie deadpans. "There's no coming back from this."

I shake my head and bite the inside of my cheek. Hard. Forced pain in order to bring tears to my eyes for the sake of the scene. Blood pools below my tongue, and a bit of moisture fills my eyes. I blink and lift my soft palate, trying to draw those tears nearer to the surface, brimming over the edges of my lashes. "I know how this looks, Zach. But it's not what you—"

"Stop!" Holden's shout comes loud and sharp, fracturing the focus I'd had.

Oh, God. The paper wrinkles as I tighten my grip on the script. *Four lines in and I've already fucked this up?*

He stands, and after a few swift strides, he hops onto the stage, rushing into my personal space. He towers over me, his voice cracking like a whip. "What are these tears?"

The tears have all but vanished, drying up the moment he stopped the scene.

I'd felt proud of that acting, as short lived as it was before he interrupted me. I was natural and *real* and—

"I'll tell you what they are. They're *bullshit*," he says, shattering what little confidence I have.

"Tears aren't bullshit," I respond before I have time to think better of it. "They show compassion for the person you hurt. Empathy. And pain—"

"You're right. *Tears* aren't bullshit... but *yours* are." He drives the point home by leaning closer into my face, his whisper so low that no one else can hear him except for me. "I know what your tears look like, Kate."

A swallow sticks to the back of my throat. I haven't been this physically close to Holden in years, and my body is responding in all kinds of fucked up ways. My pulse races, the flutter rapid against my jaw. My thighs clench and I squeeze them together against the ache that settles at the apex.

I hate him. I hate him so much, but somehow the rest of my body never got the memo.

"This character isn't in pain yet," he continues, but he doesn't back out of my personal space. "She's desperate, yes. And fearful of losing Zach. The tears can come eventually... but only if it's organic. Only if it comes from here."

With one finger, he brushes the space between my brows. It's a gesture so quick, so personal, that no one else would understand. A reference to a time when we were young and carefree, and I shared with him that when I cry, I feel the buzz in my sinuses first, before anywhere else in my body.

"In your scene, you were *trying* to cry. But in reality, this character would be doing everything possible to *not* cry."

He's right. Fuck. I *hate* that he's right.

"Try it again," he says. "Only this time, read the lines directly to me."

"What?" My voice catches, and I want to kick myself.

He lowers his voice to a whisper. "I want you to read the lines with me. To me. I want your focus laser sharp."

My attention shifts between the script clutched in my hands and his stare. His expression is an impressive mix of disappointment and doubt.

Yep, starting off on the right foot.

"Look at me, Kate," he commands. "*See* me."

My gaze glides up his body, noting the strong, wide stance of his legs and jeans that shouldn't look this good on him. I see the spoiled rich kid from college; the kid who shines at anything he does. I stare as he fiddles with the antique spinner ring on his finger—his nervous tick. So subtle, almost a silent, imperceptible movement. But it's there. This show is important to him,

too. He's nervous. His first directorial gig—and he has a lot to prove.

His five o'clock shadow shifts against the tick of his jaw, and I notice small worry lines that have formed in the years since undergrad.

I see all versions of Holden in front of me in this moment—the boy I used to love. And the man I now hate.

Energy crackles to life between us and a spark jolts in my spine. Only twelve inches separate us.

Well, twelve inches, one betrayal, and five years.

“Last chance, Katherine,” he whispers.

I'm powerless against him when he uses my full name. Especially in here, since he's the boss. In this room, he can call me whatever he damn well pleases. And he knows it.

“Please don't walk away from me,” I say my first line on an exhale. “You can't honestly tell me we're over.”

“There's not a single thing you can say to make this better,” he says. The lines coming from him ring in my ears, haunting me, like ghosts of our past. “There's no coming back from this.”

Heat pricks against my skin, and the tether of energy connecting us becomes a rope that attaches my heart directly to his. For the first time in years, a single goal connects Holden and me. We're partners. I can't be sure, but here in this moment, it feels like he needs me as much as I need him.

It almost feels like he wants me to succeed.

I cling to that glimmer of hope.

“I know how this looks.” I take a calm step toward him.

Kate would never, could never, step into Holden's personal space like this. But right now, I'm not Kate. I'm Skyler. “But it's not what you think. I didn't—”

“Didn't what? Didn't lie? Right to my face.”

I swallow, my breath catching in my chest. It's too real. Too raw. Too close to home. When I look into his eyes, he's still scowling. His nostrils

flare and that broad jaw catches again.

Stay with me, I can almost hear him say.

“Yes, I lied. For *you*.”

Caught up in the moment, I reach out with my free hand and clutch at his bicep, holding him, bracing against him. His muscles are larger, firmer than years ago, and they twitch beneath my palm.

“For us.” I can barely get the words out. They choke at the back of my throat and come out tight. Shriek. “Sometimes, we lie because we have to. To protect those we love the most!”

I grasp his shirt, tugging him to me, but he barely budes. That rich scent of his surrounds me, fogging my thoughts.

“Love?” His hoarse whisper sends a rush of air against my face, blowing my bangs momentarily off my forehead.

“Yes.” I blink, staring into his eyes. The moment lingers, tense. I sit in it for far longer than is comfortable as the heat spreads from my forehead down my eyes, burning my nose. “*I love you*.”

Those three words are a sob.

“And *Scene*,” Holden says.

He snaps out of character and steps back, out of my space. Away from my *touch*. The thick, heady energy cracks in half and falls to the floor between our feet.

I love you. It isn't the first time I've said those words to him. But by God, it will be the last. It has to be.

I'd forgotten how damn talented Holden actually is. Not only as an actor, but as a director. He's harsh, yes, but I can admit, he produces results. Even if it's at the expense of my heart.

I vaguely register the sound of clapping coming from the table of producers.

“Very nice, Kate,” one of the women at the table says, but I don't respond.

Holden turns away from me, stalking back to his team.

“Thank you, Katherine. We’ll be making our final decision in the next day or two,” he says without even a glance over his shoulder.

I know that tone; I’m dismissed.

That’s all I get. Not a handshake. Not even a nod of acknowledgment or eye contact.

Not even a goodbye.

History always repeats itself.

I clear my throat, the jitters from the character receding, but I’m still drunk on the potent presence of acting alongside Holden. He’s always been a force on the stage, and that hasn’t changed.

But unlike Holden, I can never just snap out of a scene that quickly and go back to being me. Mine is more like a slow fade to black rather than his flip of a switch.

Maggie smiles at me in that practiced way of hers and leads me out of the theater. We barely get out the door when I groan.

“My purse,” I say. “I left it in the last row of the theater.”

“Oh!” Maggie catches the door with her foot just before it closes and yanks it back open. “Go grab it.”

“It’s hard to believe you two didn’t know each other back in college,” Simon says as I enter the theater.

I freeze and hold my breath before creeping forward. It’s a bad idea to eavesdrop, no matter how badly I want to.

“Nope. We met a few times, but we weren’t friends.”

That liar. That fucking *liar*. Am I that embarrassing that he can’t even admit to *knowing* me in college?

No one notices my presence. I bend, silently retrieving my purse, and hitch it over my shoulder as I spin to rush out of the theater before anyone becomes the wiser.

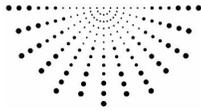
The door shuts behind me, but not before I hear his final parting thoughts

about me to the production team.

“She wasn’t exactly memorable back then either.”

His words spear into my back... right beside the hatchet he buried there years ago.

CHAPTER FOUR



*B*eing a barista is the perfect job for me when I'm in a pissy mood. I get to drown out all the cheerful people around me by steaming and frothing milk. I can bang the portafilters as loud as I want to clean out the espresso grounds. And I can fuel my anger with as much free caffeine as I can drink.

If only the pay wasn't *shit*.

But the real problem with my day job is that even on my best day as a barista, I wish I was doing something else. My passion and my heart lie elsewhere.

It's not enough anymore. Emotionally, physically, or financially.

Jill folds her arms and levels me with a petulant look. "Absolutely not. I'm not meeting this potential new roommate."

With a sigh, I pass her a London Fog latte—her favorite. "Oh, really? Then what the hell are you doing here on your morning off?"

She gently takes the London Fog from the counter and tilts her chin higher, sliding a Post-it covered in her chicken scratch handwriting across the counter. "I found you a job."

"You *what*?"

She clicks her tongue with a roll of her eyes. "Well, I found you a job *interview*. My editor at the magazine is looking for an after-school nanny for her two kids. She pays well and the hours are flexible. You can still work

here and even audition from time to time.”

My sharp inhale lodges in my lungs. “I’m exhausted as it is, Jill. Adding another job is just prolonging the inevitable—”

“We’re *all* exhausted, Kate,” Jill snaps, and her mouth settles into a firm line.

Uh-oh. She’s pissed. Pissed Jill isn’t a pretty sight.

She continues, her voice getting louder with every word. “Newsflash: every single person in this city who’s trying to make something of themselves is overworked and underpaid. Following your dreams is exhausting. But you don’t see me giving up, do you?”

She’s not wrong. Am I just being lazy? Defeatist? I glance at the phone number and address above *Monday - 2pm* scribbled at the bottom of the Post-it.

“It’s not a sure thing yet. She wants to interview you Monday. *But* if you get the job, she’s willing to pay you for the month up front.” Jill taps her finger to the yellow square pinched between my fingers. “This is the answer you’ve been looking for.”

I gulp. The answer I was looking for evaporated with that audition two days ago. More than anything, I want to stay here in New York with Jill. I don’t want to give up.

But I know Jill will drown herself trying to save both of us on one life preserver. And if I love her, at some point, I need to let go so she can survive.

But not yet. I have more fight left in me, as long as I don’t drag Jill down with me.

I force a smile on my face. “Thanks, Jill. I’ll be there on Monday. I promise.”

Jill nods, her frown softening. “Good. I was afraid I was going to have to drag your stubborn ass to the Upper East Side *myself*.”

Despite my doubts, I’m still so grateful for Jill. I don’t know where I’d be without this girl. *Probably back in Indiana.*

“We should still meet with this potential roommate, though,” I add. “Just in case I don’t get this job.”

Her bottom lip wobbles, but she nods. “Just know that if I only have two more weeks with you, I’m going to be a barnacle on your ass for every free moment we have.”

I smile at her. “You’ve been a barnacle on my ass for five years. Why should the next two weeks be any different?”

She bites her trembling bottom lip, and I spin away, stuffing the Post-it into my back pocket. I can’t see her cry, or I’ll lose it, too.

Behind me, there’s a rustle and then the quiet sounds of Jill blowing her nose. I grab the first thing I see in front of me—a rag—then wipe down the already spotless counter as the sniffing behind me quickly subsides.

Our coworker, Curt, finishes an order and slides beside me, tossing his shaggy brown hair out of his dark eyes. He towers over me, never missing an opportunity to glance down my shirt. Sure enough, his gaze travels to my boobs as he asks, “How’s it going, Kate?”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know. Are you asking me or my *tits*? Because *I’m* fine, but as you can probably tell, it’s a little chilly in here.”

His eyes sharpen and dart to my face, a sheepish smile lifting the corners of his mouth. Two little pink circles heat his cheeks, but otherwise, he gives no other indication that he might be embarrassed. “My building has a hot tub on the roof. If you ever want to warm up after work.”

“You mean your *parents’* building has a hot tub.”

He’s tried that line on me before. It didn’t work a year ago when I started my job here, and it isn’t going to work now. Not to mention, a communal hot tub in a New York City apartment building—even on the Upper West Side—isn’t all that appealing.

Jill snorts a laugh that quickly transforms into a sob. She cries into a napkin, dabbing her tears. “See? I’m going to miss this!”

My face twists. “You’re going to miss *this*?”

Damn, she's in worse shape than I thought over my leaving if Creepy Curt sexually harassing his coworkers makes her cry.

Curt glances at Jill's tear-stained face, and his smile fades. "What's wrong with her?"

"*Nothing*," I say. "Jill's... feeling nostalgic."

Curt gives us each a strange look but resumes his spot at the register.

Jill wads the napkin into a ball and chucks it into the trash beside her, sniffing. "Whoever this new roommate is, she's not you. I can't see myself living with anyone else."

"You can't see it because you've never *had* to live with anyone else."

Literally. Jill and I have been roommates since freshman year of college. "Maybe she's awesome. Maybe she doesn't leave her wet towel in a pile at the bottom of the hamper where it gets all stinky and dank. Or maybe she won't steal your oatmilk and claim it was your cat."

Jill points a finger at my nose. "I knew it!"

I roll my eyes. "Well, *duh*. You really think Junie can open the fridge with her little paws? My point is, I'm kind of a shitty roommate. Maybe this new person will be incredible."

And I bet she'll pay her rent on time.

"And maybe we won't need her at all if you nail this nanny interview." Snapping the lid off her London Fog latte, she licks the sweetened foam off the top.

I level Jill with a look that would rival my mother's.

"*Fine*." Jill sighs, then examines her cuticles before she asks, "What time are we meeting her?"

"Noon," I say and tug my phone from the apron pocket to check the time.

My shoulders go rigid. I have thirteen missed calls.

Thirteen.

Most days, I get one or two calls tops... and they're usually spam.

Not only do I have thirteen missed calls, but I have thirteen new voice

messages. All from the same 516 area code.

I press play and hold the phone up to my ear.

Holden's voice filters from the speaker. "Kate, it's me. Look, we need to talk. I don't want to have this conversation over the phone—"

She wasn't exactly memorable back then. The echo of his voice roils my stomach, and I pull the phone away from my ear to look at the phone number he called from.

The same number as the other twelve messages—*Holden's* number.

Holden called me *thirteen* times.

My breath catches. I haven't known his number for years. I haven't known how to reach him, despite the multiple pissed off speeches I've memorized through the years. Speeches I thought he'd never hear because I never had a way to contact him...

Until now.

The power of that makes my heart patter against my ribcage with the speed of a hummingbird's wings.

It's a power I shouldn't be trusted with.

I delete the messages and shove my phone back deep into my pocket as Jill gives me a questioning glance. "Who was that?"

My throat tightens. She's the one person I can't lie to. "It was him."

Her eyes go wide, filling with hope. "Maybe—"

"No," I cut her off.

"You don't even know what I was going to say!"

Curt finishes taking an order and scribbles some initials onto a cup, then thrusts it at me to make the iced matcha latte. I bend, retrieving the green powder from its container, and toss a scoop in the bottom of the cup.

"Fine," I concede, uncapping the almond milk. "What were you going to say?"

"Maybe he's calling to offer you the part—"

"No," I answer again, shoving the ice scoop into the bin.

“But how do you *know*?”

“I just *do*.” I dump the ice into the tea shaker, then push the lid on top. Giving it a good shake, I speak over the clatter. “If you’re being offered a role, the director isn’t the one who calls you. The casting director calls your agent. Then your agent calls *you* with the contracts that you comb through before there’s any formal acceptance.”

I hate the deflated look on Jill’s face. In some ways, she’s taking this even harder than I am.

Or I’m just that good at shutting off my emotions. Which is the exact reason I didn’t get the part. Because Holden knows me too well. He knows I have trouble connecting, exposing my vulnerable side. Especially with him.

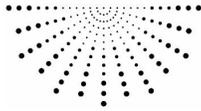
“The only reason Holden would call me himself is if I *didn’t* get the part, and he thinks this somehow makes him the hero to tell me in person.” I stare into the frothy light green beverage and snap the lid on top, avoiding Jill’s pitying stare.

A deep voice speaks up, resonating over the ambient noise of the coffee shop. “Maybe if you returned my calls, you’d *know* what the hell I wanted.”

My breath stalls halfway out of my lungs, and I snap my gaze up.

Holden.

CHAPTER FIVE



*I*t can't be Holden. He can't be here.

But it *is* him, magnificently tall and imposing on the other side of the counter next to Jill. His soft-looking t-shirt offsets the hard lines of his toned biceps. He's backlit by the crisp sunlight flooding in through our floor to ceiling windows, a scowl carved across his face.

Based on his pissed off expression, it's obvious he isn't used to his phone calls not being answered, let alone being unreturned.

A piece of me thrives on the fact that I've gotten under *his* skin again.

His full lips could be described as delicate if not combined with his five o'clock shadow, strong brow, tanned complexion, and muscled jaw. Together, the features form an achingly beautiful, sculpted face that could fit as easily into a John Wayne western as it could a Renaissance painting.

I'm drawn to him, despite that scowl. Hell, maybe *because* of that scowl. Desire pulses through me, simmering low in my belly.

"Holden," Jill greets him with the enthusiasm of a DMV worker.

His austere expression twitches, his acknowledgment of Jill softening the corners of his lips as they curve into a small smile. "Hey, Jill. It's good to see you again."

Emotion claws its way up my chest. There was a time when the three of us were friends. When we'd all hang out and watch movies together on the

couch in my dorm. I tamp that sentimentality down; there's no place for it anymore.

Forever in my corner, Jill crosses her arms. "Is it?"

Holden steps forward and gently answers, "Yes."

With a lift of the paper cup to her mouth, she takes a slurping sip of her London Fog, eyes not leaving him. Then, after she's taken her time drawing out the silence for an extra moment, she leans an elbow against the counter in a seemingly casual stance and says, "Well, that's strange. Because we live in the same city, and you could have called any time."

Holden's shoulders go taut, but there's still a humoring lift to the corners of his mouth. "We both know you wouldn't have answered. Kate got you in the divorce."

He delivers the final thought directly to me with a wink so natural, I may have missed it if I didn't know him better.

"I'm working, Holden. Go away," I mutter, my hips pressing against the counter as I lean to peer around him. With a shake of the matcha latte, I wave at the customer waiting off to the side. But even *she's* captivated by Holden—staring at him, not noticing that her drink is ready.

That's Holden for you. He can command a room and summon the attention of everyone around him by simply taking a step inside. The 'it' factor, our professor had called it.

Holden was far from unmemorable. The antithesis to it. *The antithesis to me.*

I clear my throat, and the woman's attention snaps to me. She takes the iced matcha and scurries away, a spray of pink flushing across her cheeks.

I glare at Holden. "How the hell did you find me?"

"Find you?" he repeats. "Your resume has your social media links. And this place is all over your TikTok."

Dammit. Foiled by social media.

"Fine. You want to talk so badly? Let's talk." *I might as well get this over*

with. I yank off the apron and toss it on the hook beside the barista bar. “Curt! I’m taking my break!”

Twice as many customers fill the cafe on Saturday than on a workday. And instead of quietly typing on their laptops and sipping coffee, they’re all talking and laughing.

I weave through the tables towards the only free one, passing parents who sit with their screaming little ones while eating a special chocolate croissant breakfast; friends who are catching up on the week’s events over a cup of coffee; and even a pair of lovers snuggling over a steaming cup of coffee after what I can only assume was a successful date last night.

The noise only adds to my jitters.

I plop into a chair at the empty table, folding my arms and glaring at Holden as he takes the seat across from me.

I tap my foot on the floor. “You have five minutes.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I only need three.”

The intensity of his eye contact blankets me, and for a moment, I’m transported back to a time when I thrived on the spiraling whirlwind that was Holden James Dorsey’s attention.

His stare is a caress. Burning heat sweeps from my face down my neck and pulses between my legs. With only a freaking *look*, he can stimulate me where no man has touched in years. My lungs burn, laboring to keep each one of my breaths steady and even.

Though neither of us speak a word, it’s anything but silent.

I break the staring contest first. “For a guy who only needs three minutes, you sure are wasting them.”

“I want you, Kate.” His velvet voice skims across me like a gust of wind.

My heart all but stops. *Did he just—*

“I want you to be my leading lady.”

I blow out a breath, deflating as I realize I misinterpreted him. *Jesus, what is wrong with me?*

Outside, a fire engine roars by, blaring its siren. The blasting noise vibrates my sinuses, rattling my brain. I shake my head, trying to get my thoughts in line.

Beneath the small, circular table, Holden spreads his legs wide, casual and comfortable, taking up space like he's on his couch in his very own living room. Whereas I sit here with my legs crossed, elbows tucked into my ribs, trying to not be in the way. *Trying to be invisible.*

I hinge at the waist, leaning over the table, and clasp my hands in a calculated movement. "I'm going to need you to repeat that."

His lips remain in a straight line, neither smiling nor frowning. But his eyes—those eyes spark as he repeats, "I want you to be my Skyler."

My eyes flutter closed. It's everything I ever wanted to hear. It's my dream come true. And yet, it still feels so completely false; so unattainable. "Why do I sense a *but* coming?"

"Because you're a smart girl."

"I'm a smart *woman*," I correct him.

I don't tell him it's his eyes that give him away. He may think he knows me best, but the truth is, I know him just as well. Perhaps better than anyone else. It's my secret weapon. Power lies within this knowledge, and I'll guard it, protect that secret, until I can wield it to my advantage.

Five years may have passed, but the essence of who Holden is remains the same. His tells are the same—from the lift of his left brow to the way he fiddles with his ring.

A frenzy of raw, brash emotion whips around us, unsettling the molecules in the air.

"Simon Davis loved your audition."

I gulp, half of me not wanting to ask the question that I'm burning to know the answer to. "And what about you?"

"I think you gave me a half-assed version of what you *think* an apology looks like."

“Now, how can I give an honest performance of an apology when I’ve never gotten one?” Sarcasm drips thicker than molasses from my voice.

Holden’s jaw ticks. “And what about your other fuck-ups? You forgot lines, fake cried—”

“I fucked up my lines because you were *glaring* at me the whole time!” I blurt out.

His eyes go wide for a moment before a smile breaks out over his annoyingly handsome face.

“What?” I ask while sitting back in my chair.

With a shake of his head, he says, “I just don’t know that I’ve ever heard you say the word *fuck* before. You used to never cuss.”

“Yeah, well things change.” I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of a returning smile. I’m not going to sit here while he goes for a stroll down memory lane.

“You could have warned me, you know,” I say. “Told me outside of the bathrooms that you were directing the show that I was *literally* walking into the audition for. I walked into a lion’s den thinking it was a petting zoo.”

His lips part, and the angle of his jaw sharpens. “You thought walking into a Reid Bradley audition was going to be a petting zoo?”

I lower my voice to a hoarse whisper. “Compared to auditioning for *you*? It would have been a cakewalk.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “If you had auditioned for Reid, no one would be sitting here offering you this opportunity. He wouldn’t have gotten the raw performance *I* got out of you. You would have just been another *fine* audition. Good... but not good enough to get yourself out of this shithole.”

I glare at him, my voice dangerously quiet as I say, “You don’t know that.”

“*I do* know that. Your audition was good. But it was far from great. This is New York. I can throw a rock and hit a *good* actress.”

Any hope that had been blossoming in my chest deflates with his harsh

words. Because they're *true*. I know they are. That's what hits so damn hard.

I can't give him the satisfaction of seeing me upset.

I grit my teeth, willing away the flood of anger and humiliation burning in my sinuses. "Then why are you *here*? Why tell me I'm your 'leading lady' if my audition was *only fine*?"

"It was fine... until we read together. In that moment, I got a glimpse of the girl I once knew." His expression softens, if only for a moment. A fleeting tenderness passes through his eyes but vanishes with a quick blink. He's holding back. There's something he's not saying. "I know how great you *can* be. And as a new director, I want to make my mark with *that*. If I go with a famous Broadway actress, that's what the articles will be about. The news will circulate around her."

A familiar pain squeezes my heart. *We've been here before, Holden and me*. I shouldn't be surprised by what I hear, but I am. "You want the spotlight all for yourself."

"Reid already signed an actor to play the part of Zach before he left the project. Too many big names will clutter the Playbill. But with you—"

"With *me* you can control the narrative." If I'm great, he gets credit for discovering me. If I suck, I become the scapegoat for a failing show.

I fall back in my chair. It shouldn't bother me as much as it does. After all, does it really matter *how* I get my big break, as long as I get it?

"So why come here in person? Why not just have your casting director call my agent?"

"Because this isn't a done deal yet. As I said, your audition was good... when you finally gave yourself over to me."

The way he says that sends a fission of energy kissing up the back of my neck, and my body jerks with a shiver.

"The part is yours if you agree to deep, one-on-one character development sessions with me during the rehearsal process. And a two-week trial period to make sure we can work together after all this time."

All this time. He says it like that's all it was. A simple passing of time that fractured what we had spent the better part of a year building.

"I don't need help with character development. I just... messed up. That's all." *Because you were scowling at me.* "It won't happen again."

"Those are my terms. If you don't want the part, I can call Missy Howl. Her audition was *great.*" He leans back, his thighs still spread wider than the small, round bistro table. My gaze dips to his hands spinning his ring and twitching nervously.

His tick.

Is this a bluff? Calling Missy Howl? Regardless, I need this part. I need it more than he knows.

"You can say no, of course," he says. "But the pay will be substantial. Union rates for a principal role. Plus, overtime with the extra character development hours we work. At the end of the two weeks, I'll either offer you a contract, or we'll fill your role with someone less green."

I do some quick calculations in my head. Two weeks of equity pay and some extra overtime? That's a good paycheck. Really good. Almost enough to pay back Ms. Greene for two months of rent... but not quite. Unlike the nanny gig, which will give me an advance. The problem is, after two weeks with Holden, there's still no guarantee I'll keep that job. I might end up right back where I began.

Maybe I can manage *both* gigs? Jill said the hours were flexible.

"Fine," I say. "I'll do it. When do we start?"

His smile is haughty as it sweeps over me, but his eyes betray that arrogance. He's nervous, too. He has just as much riding on this show as I do. Or at least, he thinks he does.

"I'll send the contracts to your agent this afternoon. We start Monday. One o'clock at New World Stage. Don't be late. We dock your pay for each minute you run behind."

One o'clock Monday. The Post-It note of the nanny interview Jill had set

up flashes through my mind.

“Oh,” I say. “I can’t Monday. I have a thing—”

His gaze narrows dangerously. “You didn’t have Monday listed as a conflict on your audition sheet.”

“Well, it just came up today. It’s really important.”

“If you want this opportunity, you’ll be there Monday. At one and not a minute later.” His cold voice catches me off guard.

“Fine,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “I’ll be there.”

I’m fucked if after these two weeks, Holden decides I’m *not* his leading lady. Without the safety net of the nanny gig, I’ll be right back here searching Craigslist for roommate replacements.

I have no choice but to make this work. To show Holden and the rest of the producers that they’d be crazy not to cast me as Skyler.

As Holden stands, the metal legs of his chair scrape the floor. At some point in our conversation, the loud noise of the café faded into a low hum of background noise.

“Hey, Holden.” I stop him mid-stride and cross the short distance between us. “Do you plan on always offering your actresses their parts face to face at their day job?”

His eyes drill into mine. “No.”

“Then you never really answered the one question I asked multiple times: Why are you *here*?”

His neck goes taut. Even though he towers over me, we’re barely a breath apart. His mouth is so close to mine, I can smell the mint from his Chapstick. *Holden James*: Famous Broadway actor and soon to be director... but he still uses the same ninety-nine cent mint lip balm they sell at Walgreens. Such a tiny fact, but it chips away at my hatred of him.

“Because you’re not just any actress, Kate.” Reaching out, he brushes an escaped strand of hair off my forehead. “Because I’ve spent five years trying to find a way to apologize to you unsuccessfully. I’ve tried to find you, have

a moment face to face to make it up to you, and this was my one chance.”

He’s been wanting to apologize? For five years?

Something in that admission of his doesn’t sit right. He’s claiming that not once in five years had there been a chance to find me and say he was sorry... until now?

My stomach hollows out, and I think I’m going to be sick. *He pities me.*

That’s the only explanation for why now. This part—this chance at a Broadway show—is his olive branch. A way to make up for stealing my *real* lucky break five years ago, ripping it out from under me.

Heat sizzles in my stomach. My nails bite into my palms, leaving little half-moon crevices as I clench my hands into fists at my sides, picturing that girl I used to be. That joyful, free-spirited, trusting girl who wasn’t afraid to speak her mind and believed in the best in people.

Something in me snaps. I *miss* her. I thought she was gone, but she’s not. For the first time in years, I feel her. Like a single burning ember that sizzles and smokes, desperately wanting to catch fire—she just needs a little oxygen. Oxygen I’ve been depriving her of for years.

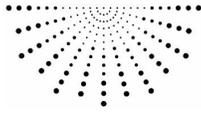
Holden’s gaze darkens.

“There she is,” he whispers, proving that he sees me. That he could *always* see me. Those three words pluck at my insides, sending the vibration thrumming through my body. Even though no part of him is touching me, he doesn’t need to in order to affect me—and he knows it.

He steps away and reaches for the door. “It’s good to see you again... *Katherine.*”

When he says my name like that—the way he used to when we were together, when we’re not anymore—I’m not sure I’ll be able to get through this.

CHAPTER SIX



*I*t's raining, but I'm not wet.

There's thunder, but no lightning.

And the stench of bullshit surrounds me, even though there's no cattle in sight.

"Imagine your muscles melting into the floor, dissolving with each raindrop that falls onto your body." Holden's voice echoes through the rehearsal space over the sounds from the rainstorm app he has playing through the speakers.

The dirty stage floor is hard and cool against my back and I can feel the grit pressing into my bare arms. Do they never sweep this stage?

A bird caws in the rainstorm app and it's so damn loud that I flinch. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from groaning out loud.

I always thought the Alexander technique was stupid. I hated it in undergrad, and apparently, my feelings haven't changed much since then.

Though my eyes are closed, I can feel Holden hovering above me where I lay on the stage. "Come on, Kate. Focus."

How the hell am I supposed to focus while alone in a dark theater with my ex-boyfriend? I try to stifle my sigh as I blink open my eyes and push up onto my elbows, ready to snap at him.

A breath catches in my throat and tingles spray inside my stomach as I

realize he's not standing over me as I'd thought. He's crouched, bringing his face and, well, *other* parts of his anatomy much closer to me than I had anticipated.

I manage to find my voice and say, "I *am* focusing."

Why am I fighting with him? My entire fate relies on the next two weeks, and whether or not I can take direction from this guy.

His already pale lips all but blanch as his mouth presses deeper into a frown. It's unnerving how rapidly he can set me on edge. "If *this* is you focusing, I think we're going to have a real problem."

A cloud of dust surrounds me as I drop to lay back on the floor once more.

How in the hell am I supposed to work for a man whom I can barely *look* at without searing hot rage taking hold of my body?

Liar, a voice echoes in my brain. The heat I feel isn't *always* rage. Sometimes it's searing hot lust.

I take a deep breath and start over. *Focus, Kate. Find the groove.*

I latch onto the soft silk of his voice, picturing the rain hitting the windowpane of an old Victorian house. Thunderclaps in the distance, and I can smell the sweet scent of lemongrass all around me.

I can smell *Holden* all around me.

Lemongrass in a rainstorm.

Holden in a rainstorm.

Wet, with his damp t-shirt clinging to thick biceps that strain against the seams...

My breath deepens, filling my abdomen.

"That's it, Kate," he says, his voice low, sultry, and I feel every word between my legs, causing my desire to pulse. "There it is."

My eyes split open, just the smallest fraction of an inch to sneak a look. Holden's gaze locks onto my breasts, watching as they rise and fall with each rhythmic breath.

I'm not supposed to be seeing this, seeing him.

The erotic flare cuts deeper in my body, and I clamp my eyes shut so he doesn't catch me peeking.

"Okay," he says. The resonance of his voice spears into me, devilishly masculine and so, so sexy. "Now you're ready to begin the reading."

Finally, I'm allowed to open my eyes—and when I do, Holden is seated beside me, holding a few sheets of paper.

The scripts.

"Read," he commands, handing me one of them and keeping the other for himself.

I skim the lines on the page, my breasts grow heavy with every sexy word. It's literally the scene where the two main characters have sex for the first time. The throbbing in my core is so intense that I snap my legs together, squeezing them tight and praying that Holden doesn't see my nipples pearl or remember the way my cheeks flush when I'm turned on.

"Read *out loud*, Kate," he says.

Shit. I'm still on my back, holding the sheet of paper held up over my face as I begin saying my lines out loud. "I had to see you." My voice is raspy, so I clear my throat.

There aren't a lot of lines on the page. It's mostly stage directions. *Sexy* stage directions, which Holden reads aloud.

"Zach teases his nose down Skyler's neck and removes her shirt. They fall against a wall in a passionate embrace," he reads.

Holden is an actor first and a director second, which is abundantly clear with his lines just now. Even reading stage direction, he can't keep the raw talent dripping with sex from his voice.

Hell, the man could read the phone book, and it would be sexy.

His eyes drive into me with a laser focus that strips me bare in front of him where I'm still lying on the stage. He doesn't even need to look at the script, as though he's already memorized every word.

I hold my breath, refusing to exhale because I know how much it would tremble.

“Kate, it’s your line.”

Fuck. He’d have to be blind to not see how he’s affecting me. It’s obvious from the shame that flames red on my cheeks and across the bridge of my nose; from the heaving breath that hitches my breasts, my pebbled nipples, and the quiver of my knees that I can’t seem to subdue.

The script rustles in my shaking hands, and I lick my lips, tearing my gaze from his mesmerizing stare. I search the page for where we left off. *Where the hell is my line?*

His palm drapes over the script, covering the words, gently pressing it down against my belly.

“You’re locked too much in here.” He brushes the tips of his fingers against my temple. The simple contact of his touch to my face heats the tips of my ears and sends a zip of excitement brushing over my flesh.

His fingers glide down my body without actually touching me. Like a reiki specialist, his hand hovers over my face, then it descends past my throat. The heat of his energy emanates against me, and even though his skin isn’t on mine, I can *feel* his touch.

He lands with a single brush of his index finger to my sternum, just beside my heart. “I need you to lock in *here.*”

A ferocious shiver clasps my body.

I can’t. I can’t give him that.

Panic grips my lungs, and I shove up from where I’m lying and push to my feet, pacing the stage like a caged animal.

In many ways, that’s exactly what I am.

“This is acting, Holden! Jesus. Of course I’m in my head. I’m dissecting a character.”

If he’s startled by my outburst, he doesn’t show it.

In fact, he almost looks like he expected it.

He rakes a hand through that dark brown hair and stands as well, cutting my path mid-stride. He looms over me, powerful and hot, his woodsy scent enveloping me. “There’s not much to dissect here, Kate! That’s the point. This scene is sex. It’s about feeling. It’s about giving yourself over to *passion*. You can’t be analytical *and* in the throes of ecstasy.”

Can’t I?

Our gazes collide and every molecule in the air slows until it freezes. We both go still, not moving, not stirring, not even breathing.

He’s not fidgeting with his ring, and I’m not chewing the insides of my cheek. We’re not falling back on our old coping mechanisms; we’re fully here. Fully invested.

A spark of intensity, and maybe even *trust*, crackles between us, swirling around our bodies, entwining us like smoke. It’s dangerous, convoluted, and frail. The smallest misstep could ruin this—whatever *this* is—and cause it to shatter at our feet.

His steady gaze whispers silent expectations between us. Expectations I have no idea if I can fulfill and my foolish heart hammers against my ribcage.

It takes every ounce of self-preservation I have to fight the overwhelming urge to step forward and angle my lips toward him like an offering.

Light smolders in the green flecks of his eyes. His breath comes out harsh, uneven, as he analyzes me. Searching me for answers to questions he hasn’t bothered asking me yet.

While his eyes skim my face, mine slip to his lips and land there, mesmerized by the memory of his bruising kiss. My lips tingle at the remembrance. Even though it’s been years, I can still feel them on me—soft but firm. Intense and commanding, just like him. I’m powerless against those lips.

Against him.

No. I was powerless. But not anymore.

My eyelids slip down over my eyes, and I break the invisible bond that’s

locking us together.

“You don’t believe I can do this,” I state. It’s not a question.

He’s a liar who can’t be trusted. I can’t forget that. I can’t let my guard down around him. Not fully. What’s that old saying? *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, I’m a fucking moron.*

Yep, something like that.

Holden’s hand falls to my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think you could do this, Katherine. I wouldn’t be wasting my time.”

My chest hitches at the sound of my full name. I should be used to hearing it from him by now, but each time, it’s jarring. In only a few years, he’s managed to embed himself like shrapnel, so deeply into my soul, that hearing him say a name I’ve heard my whole life, throbs in my brain.

No, not my brain. My heart.

“One more thing,” he says.

With my eyes still closed, I register the sound of footsteps trailing away from me.

I peek to find him hunched over his expensive looking leather messenger bag, rooting around inside it. He tugs free a weathered composition notebook. The black and white kind found at Walgreens... probably right beside that cheap peppermint Chapstick he buys.

“What’s that?” I ask.

He holds it up and closes the distance between us with slow strides. “Your homework.”

He hands me the notebook, and my spine goes rigid. I recognize the scribbles on the cover: cartoons and small designs drawn with blue BIC pens.

I clench my thighs to keep my knees from knocking together and whisper, “Your journal from college?”

He nods, his eyes searing into the side of my face. “That’s right. My journal from my senior year.”

In other words, his innermost thoughts from the year he met me. From the year he *broke* me.

“Why the fuck do you think I want this?” My words crack with bitterness.

He snorts a laugh that’s anything but humorous. “Oh, I know you don’t *want* it. But this is part of the process. You need help getting into the head of Skyler—into the head of a woman who would betray someone she loves.” He taps his fingers to the journal. “This will help.”

My eyes tingle with unshed tears. Some people cry when they’re sad... I cry when I’m pissed. I trail my glare up his face to find a complacent, dull sheen to his eyes.

Does this mean nothing to him? He’s handing me his thoughts and feelings on a platter, and he’s just standing there casually with one hand tucked into the pocket of his obscenely sexy jeans.

“I want you to read it,” he says. “Every word.”

My throat burns.

I don’t know how the hell I’m going to make it through the next two weeks, let alone an entire show and rehearsal process with this man. I don’t want his apology anymore. I don’t want his bullshit excuses. His reasons. And I certainly don’t want to read his private thoughts on the worst year of my life.

I take the journal from him. It’s heavy in my hands, weighed down by feelings and answers rather than physical size.

It’s like I’m being forced onto a roller coaster against my will, while someone is also pulling my hands off the safety bar and making me keep my eyes open the whole freefall ride.

If I don’t find a balance—a way to bear just enough of my soul within my acting to keep Holden happy and get this part after these two weeks—I’m screwed.

Convincing Holden James that I’ve opened up, that I’m letting him into my heart and life, will be my greatest performance yet.

I flip the cover open to the first page and instead of an actual *Dear Diary* entry, there are more sketches. Intricate, but messy cross-hatchings of faces that look vaguely familiar, scratching at the recesses of my memory.

His palm falls heavily to the page, covering it with a smack. “Not now. Don’t read it here at the theater. It’s *homework*. Emphasis on the home.”

A smirk flickers on my face. It’s not reading it here in the theater that bothers him. It’s reading it here in *front of him* that’s the problem. And that can only mean one thing: there’s still a *shred* of humility beneath that overly confident exterior.

The back door to the rehearsal space opens, and Maggie slinks in. “Nolan Brooks is here to begin rehearsal.”

Tingles course through my body. “*Nolan Brooks*? That’s who I have to act with?”

He’s one of the biggest Broadway actors of our time. Bigger than Holden. Bigger than Missy Howl. He’s on his way to becoming the next Hugh Jackman, crossing back and forth from Broadway to Hollywood.

Holden ignores me. “Thank you, Maggie. Give us two minutes, and we’ll get started on scene five.”

He spins back to face me and gives me a patronizing sigh. “He’s your *co-star*. Within these walls, he’s not your favorite celebrity. You’re not a *fan*—you’re an equal. Got it?”

Logically, I know this is true. He’s just another human, another actor. Another *guy*. But inside, my brain is screaming, *Like hell Nolan Brooks and I are equals!*

I ignore the sweaty, screaming superfan jumping up and down inside me and instead, respond with, “Of course. I’m just surprised, that’s all. You said Reid Bradley had casted a Broadway name, but I didn’t know he casted *the* Broadway name.”

“Well, he did.” Holden’s response lashes out, resonating in the room with a cutting snap.

To anyone else, that may have seemed like a standard curt reply from a prickly director. But I know Holden. I know his ticks. I know his tells. And I know when someone's gotten under his skin.

I'm not sure what has happened between him and Nolan, but there's a story there. And I'm determined to unearth whatever bad blood is between them.

When Holden finally speaks again, he's regained some of his composure. "For the next two weeks, rehearsals will begin at nine a.m. sharp, except for Sunday when we begin after lunch at one p.m. After our regular rehearsal ends, you'll have a thirty-minute break, and then you and I will begin the deep character training in the evenings. Yes?"

I nod. Happily. The more hours we work, the more I get paid. Then, even if after these two weeks he doesn't cast me, maybe, just *maybe*, I'll have enough to buy me more time with Ms. Greene.

With a lithe jump, he hops down off the stage.

"One more thing," he says, and I hate the measured tone of his voice. I'm beginning to recognize it more and more as I spend time with him. "It's probably best that no one knows we used to date. Wouldn't want them thinking that's why you got this part."

His words sting, but I don't let him see that. "I wasn't planning on telling anyone."

He's already turned his back on me and is sweeping down the center aisle toward the back door.

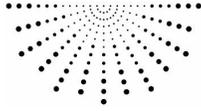
It takes every ounce of effort not to walk out on him. It's not like I expect him to shout it from the rooftop that we used to date, but him wanting to keep us a secret punches a bruise I didn't even realize I had.

I glare at the cover of his journal, still clutched in my white-knuckled grip.

My anger extinguishes the fear and pain that had been lingering like a whisper at the edges of my mind all rehearsal.

I don't plan on telling anyone about Holden's and my relationship...
But I'm no one's dirty secret.
And I'll be damned if Holden expects me to lie for him...
Again.

CHAPTER SEVEN



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

I was two credits short of graduating.

Two fucking credits.

Dad's shout echoed through the phone. "How could you let this happen?"

"I'm handling it," I ground out through clenched teeth as I stuffed fallen books from the backseat of my car into my backpack. I paused, my hand hovering over my journal—a cheap composition book I'd bought from CVS. I wasn't typically a journal-keeping guy, but over the summer, my therapist was insistent that I try it.

Do I bring this stupid journal to class with me? What if someone sees it?

With a cigarette dangling from my lips, I sighed and shoved the journal deep into my bag. Maybe I'd be able to get my daily bullshit entry done in a boring part of class.

Key fob in hand, I locked my car in the student lot, then hurried down the sidewalk while zipping up my backpack.

"Handling it?" Dad asked. "Handling it like I thought you were handling

your schedule last year? This is your senior year. Your final year to play football. You're supposed to start applying to law school for Christ's sake, Holden!"

I inhaled one final drag from my cigarette before tossing it in the ashcan and climbing the cement steps to Turner Hall. This right here was why I'd avoided this call until I'd worked out all the details.

"What the fuck happened?" Dad shouted when I didn't answer him right away.

My mom's muffled voice drifted in from the background. "Honey, please."

I had no doubt she was laying on our leather couch with a wet washcloth across her eyes and a martini in hand.

At ten in the morning.

As usual, Dad ignored her, so I replied with, "Apparently, they changed some of the graduation requirements last year. I missed the memo. Instead of two electives, it's now four elective classes."

"How did you miss something so import—"

"But I've talked to my advisor, and I was able to slip into a class that's an easy A," I interrupted, not wanting to get into how that email about graduation requirements had apparently been sitting in my inbox unopened for months. Was it my fault that I didn't read every bit of fucking spam that's emailed to us from the school? Maybe if they didn't send seven emails a day, I'd be more inclined to fucking open them. "It's totally covered."

"What class?"

I balanced my cell phone precariously between my shoulder and my ear while I tugged my student ID free to show it to the guard at the front of the theater building. I swallowed a curse as my grandfather's platinum spinner ring, that I wore constantly, got momentarily caught on the keychain.

"Introduction to Method Acting," I finally managed to answer my dad.

Dad's snort was an obvious indication of what he thought of the class.

I lowered my voice and tucked myself into a corner of the lobby. “I talked to some guys on the team, and they all said the introductory theater classes were easy.”

Apparently, of all the guys on the team, I was the only idiot who didn’t realize I needed two more electives to graduate. They’d all taken Intro to Theater, which unfortunately had been filled up by the time I tried to add the class to my schedule. But my advisor suggested Intro to Method Acting as an alternative. How different could it possibly be?

“And if I volunteer to help with the fall musical, I can earn a bonus credit,” I said. “Which means I can possibly knock out both these credits in the first semester.”

Dad was quiet for a long minute—which for him could be either good or bad. Without being in front of him to read his expression, I had no idea what was coming.

“How the fuck are you going to manage volunteering for the fall musical and playing football at the same time?”

I’d actually been wondering that myself. “I can do backstage crew or something for a few nights. Swing a hammer, hang some backdrops. Look, Dad, I’ve got to run. Class is about to start.”

“If you lose your starting spot on the team—”

I hung up on him before he could say another word.

Man, he was going to make me pay for that one.

I opened up my schedule on my phone to check where this Intro to Method Acting class was taking place.

Theater C.

I spun and took in the lobby of this building—a building I’d literally never stepped foot inside in all three years I’d been at this school.

It was only then that I was struck with how goddamn loud everyone was.

Loud. Colorful. Eccentric.

All the noise and movement rubbed up my spine wrong, like a palm

grazing a cat's fur in the wrong direction.

This place was nothing like the poli-sci and pre-law building where most of my other classes were.

As I ventured through the lobby, I passed a girl wearing a tutu over her jeans with Doc Martens and magenta hair in tight coils around her head. Another guy had straight black hair that fell to his chin, nails painted to match, and pants straight out of a grunge video. My checkered button-down and jeans felt wildly out of place here.

A group of hot girls came strutting in the door, wearing leotards and skin-tight yoga pants with their glossy hair pulled into taut, high buns.

I smirked. With a hop in my step, I rushed over to them, my eyes trained on their muscled asses as they walked.

"Hey there," I called out to the redhead at the front of the pack.

She seemed to be leading the dancers, like she was in charge. She was hot, and she knew she was hot. Girls like that? They were okay, I guess. Most of my teammates found a way into their skirts.

"Hey, wait up" I called, trying to get her attention. I was actually surprised I hadn't seen her around campus more. Especially since she was clearly a dancer and looked like she could be a cheerleader.

Finally, she spun to face me, annoyance twisting her otherwise flawless face. Just as quickly, that annoyance lifted, and her gaze swept my entire body, before coming back up and landing at my pecs.

Hell yeah, babe. Eat your heart out.

"Do you know where Theater C is?" I asked.

She pressed her unnaturally full lips together and lowered her chin seductively. "Of course." Tossing a glance at the other girls, she said, "I'll meet you in the studio in a couple minutes."

Then, with a suggestive crook of her finger, she inclined her head toward the hall in front of us. "I'll walk you there."

We took a few steps before she said, "I'm Addison."

“Holden.”

“You’re a little out of your league in Turner Hall, aren’t you?. Usually I only spy you out on the football field and at the pool.”

I lifted a brow. So she not only knew I was a football player but she’d seen me easing my sore muscles in the school’s hot tubs. “Guilty as charged,” I said. “I just needed an elective—”

“Hi!” A girl came running up behind us, clutching some books to her chest. “Addison, right? We met the other day at the kickoff thingy.” Bright blonde hair swung around her shoulders with each hurried step. “Um, anyway. Did I hear you right? You’re going to Theater C? Can you show me where it is, too?”

Addison blinked, clearly surprised. Then her delicate features shifted quickly to disdain. In the snap of a finger, she went from sweet and helpful, to murderous and vengeful.

“Of course. But wait... are you looking for Theater C, like the letter?” she asked with an overexaggerated faux sweetness.

If that was the level of acting talent that these classes got you to, then this girl was wasting her money.

When I turned around, I was face to face with the blonde girl and the wind knocked from my lungs.

It wasn’t like me to wax poetic, but she was utterly beautiful in that effortless, girl-next-door way that so many women tried to achieve. Her features were dainty and delicately carved across flawlessly smooth skin—a narrow, ski-slope nose, dusty pink lips, and high cheekbones that plumped across the apples of her flushed cheeks. Her black, thick lashes framed striking blue-gray eyes. A wealth of blonde hair tumbled carelessly down her back, and she nervously smoothed it over her shoulder with her palm.

The blonde girl looked eagerly between Addison and me. “Yes, Theater C, like the letter.”

“Mmm.” Addison nodded. “He’s going to Theater See. S-E-E... like what

you do with your eyes.”

I looked down at my class schedule on my phone where it very distinctly said C like the letter. “Uhhh...” I held a finger in the air to correct her. I didn’t want to be late for this class or go to the wrong space.

Addison shot me a narrowed glance and like a dumbass, I finally realized what she was doing. She was fucking with this poor freshman girl and wanting me to play along like some dumb hazing accomplice.

Addison cleared her throat. “The theater you’re looking for is actually down that hall. The second door on your left. It’s unmarked, but don’t let that fool you. Just walk right in.”

As Addison pointed to the right, the blonde girl briefly narrowed her eyes like she was onto the prank. But just as I thought she might call Addison out on her bullshit, she grinned wide, hugging her books tighter. I noted the worn copy of Romeo and Juliet on top of the pile. “Um, okay. Thank you!” she squeaked and ran off.

I lifted a brow in Addison’s direction. “S-E-E, like what you do with your eyes?”

“Fucking freshman.” She smiled, but in this light, she looked heinous. Any iota of attraction I might have had all but withered away with her mean girl hazing.

“Sure,” I said coldly. “So, the real Theater C is...?”

“It’s right over there.” Addison gestured to a door down the hall and off to my right. Stretching my neck, I could barely make out a black and gold plaque on the door that read Theater C.

“Great, thanks.” With a wave, I took off in the opposite direction, rushing to catch up to the blonde girl.

“Where are you going?” Addison called after me.

I ignored her. I didn’t have time for that hazing bullshit. I didn’t have time for it on my team, and I definitely didn’t have time for it in a stupid elective class.

When I found the blonde girl, she was standing in front of the door Addison had sent her to, unmoving. Static. Frozen.

“Hey,” I said gently, tapping her on the shoulder.

She startled and then turned to face me.

I noted the pretty flush of her cheeks and shine of her glossy lips. She had the cutest, faint spray of freckles across her nose. This school wasn't lacking in gorgeous girls, but something was different about her. She was refreshingly beautiful without needing to be a bitch like Addison.

Nothing's uglier than a mean girl.

“Something tells me this isn't Theater C,” she said.

“Well, I guess freshmen aren't all dumb, huh?” The joke slipped out before I had the sense to stop it.

Her scowl deepened and, somehow, dimples formed on her cheeks. Dimples. With a scowl. Now there's a first. “I'm not dumb.”

Well, there was no going back now. I'd made the stupid joke... I had to live with it.

“I know. That's what I said,” I clarified. “That you're not stupid like most freshmen.”

Her scowl deepened and so did those dimples. They creviced so deep, I could have hidden my loose change in them.

“I knew this wasn't Theater C,” she said, hitching her thumb over her shoulder. “I just wasn't in the mood to stand there with her and argue when she clearly wasn't going to help me.”

I wasn't exactly sure what to make of this girl. On one hand, I was glad she didn't fall for Addison's shit. But on the other hand, it would have been nice to see her stand up for herself and put Addison in her place. “Well, come on,” I said. “Theater C is this way.”

But she didn't move. “Where do you think she was sending me?”

My gaze shifted between her and the closed, unmarked door. “I don't know... and I don't think I want to find out. I'm going to guess it isn't good.”

“I’m flipping curious, though.”

“Flipping curious?” I repeated, doing my best to hide my smile. I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard a college kid talk around a curse word. It was ridiculously cute.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m curious what’s in this room.”

What was up with this girl? She knew this was the wrong door. Knew that Addison was fucking with her. But instead of backing away, it was like she had a death wish. A draw toward the morbid, the macabre.

“Yeah? Well, I’m not.” Using my thumb, I fidgeted with the spinner ring.

Her eyes dipped to the ring before edging back up to meet mine. “It’s unmarked,” she continued. “So, it’s probably not a rehearsal space. And faculty offices usually have their names on the door.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great. Thank you, Sherlock Holmes. Can we go now?”

She went on like I wasn’t even there. Like she wasn’t even talking to me, but rather just journaling in her own head. “I don’t think she would haze me by simply pointing me to the wrong door. There’s got to be something in there.”

She reached out before I could stop her and tugged the unmarked door open.

There was a yelp from inside, and before either Blondie or I could respond, a man and woman tumbled out of the small janitor’s closet.

The woman’s skirt was bunched up around her hips, curly black hair wild around her angled face. She was beautiful, and if I had to guess, probably in her mid-to-late thirties.

The man was only a little older than us with shaggy, chestnut brown hair, and he wore a Ramones t-shirt and jeans that were half undone. The theater building was a hell of a lot more casual if this was how the professors dressed... and acted.

“Oh, my gosh!” Blondie exclaimed. “I-I’m so sorry. I was told this was the entry to my first class.”

The man scrambled to fix his fly, spinning to face away from us.

I would bet a shit ton of money that Addison, and probably a lot of the upperclassmen in the theater department, knew that these teachers used this closet to get busy between classes.

“Well,” the woman snapped and smoothed her hand over her hair, as though that could do anything to tame the curls. “It’s clearly not.”

The only indication that she was in any way flustered was the slight hint of pink on her cheeks. Otherwise, the woman was completely calm and composed.

Unlike Blondie who was a stuttering mess. “This girl, an upperclassman... I swear, she sent me to this door. She told me—”

I hooked my hand around Blondie’s elbow and directed her away from the teachers, who were already whispering fervently to each other and ignoring us.

“Come on,” I muttered, pulling her down the hall. “Give them some space.”

“Excuse me,” the woman said, her voice bouncing off the dull-green walls. Her shoes tapped against the floors as she slowly made her way to us. “I trust that you won’t say anything about this...”

She gestured at the door they’d fallen out of, and both Blondie and I nodded furiously.

“Good. Discretion and the theater tend to go hand in hand.”

With a flick of her fingers, she dismissed us, and neither of us wasted a moment, taking off down the hall.

As we turned the corner, Blondie broke out into a fit of giggles, hunching over, clutching her stomach. “Did we just catch what I think we caught?”

“Come on,” I said, but I was also already chuckling. “We can laugh about this after class, okay?”

“Do you promise?” she asked, wiping the tears from her eyes with one hand and offering me the pinky finger of her other one.

I ignored the urge to roll my eyes at the childish display of a promise and hooked my finger into hers. “There, happy? We’ll grab a latte on our way out of here and laugh all about it then.”

I yanked open the door to Theater C and tugged both of us inside with a quick time check on my cell phone. One minute past. Not too late, all things considered for our first day.

Students milled about, chatting casually, and I breathed easier. We weren’t late. Not officially.

There wasn’t even anyone in sight who could be the professor.

I fell into a seat in the front row of the theater and slumped over, finally relaxing. That’d been stressful as shit.

Two feet clad in Keds appeared in front of me. I knew instinctively without peeking that Blondie was standing in front of me.

I slowly glanced up and saw that she wasn’t looking at me. She wasn’t even facing in my direction. Her back was to me as she stared up at the stage. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

My gaze landed on her adorably perky ass clad in tight denim shorts, enjoying the view. I tilted my head at the little damp spot beneath her butt cheeks. And a single drip of moisture ran down the back of her thigh.

An intense surge of arousal tightened my cock at the sight of her literally dripping wet and I swallowed my groan.

“Um, weird question,” I said, “But why is your butt damp?”

“What?” she squeaked and spun, trying to look at her own ass. “Oh no!” She quickly dropped into the seat beside me, the whole row jostling with the movement.

“I sort of... um, sweat... when I’m nervous,” she admitted biting her lip.

“You sweat from your butt?” I asked, wanting clarification. That admission should have been a boner killer. But it wasn’t. Far from it.

“Yeah. I didn’t, like pee, or anything. I promise.”

I sat there frozen, gaping at her. “Well... that’s good.”

It was also weirdly refreshing that she so openly admitted that. I was so damn used to girls falling all over themselves to impress me. This girl didn't seem to give a shit which made her so much hotter.

She winced. "Sorry. I tend to overshare when I'm nervous."

I cleared my throat, forcing my gaze forward. "Clearly."

"What's your name?" she asked.

It was so sweetly innocent. Genuinely curious. She wasn't trying to hit on me or get an invite to the after-game parties. Hell, if I had to take a guess, I'd say she'd probably never been to a party that didn't involve milk and cookies.

But that was going to change real soon here. She was too gorgeous to not get noticed by the upperclassmen sooner or later.

She was like a walking contradiction.

Blonde, but clearly a smart girl—opening that door aside.

Innocent, but with a daredevil streak.

Sweet, but a little mischievous.

Even her outfit—if I hadn't already met and talked to her, I would have guessed that her tight t-shirt with My Little Pony on it was ironic. And the way it landed just above the curve of her hip was an intentional way to show the sliver of taut skin just above the waistband of her tight shorts. And those legs... fuck me, her legs.

I let my eyes drift up the tight curve of her calf, over the bony knot of her knee to the muscled thigh that was crossed over the other.

She had 'fuck me' legs.

But she didn't know it.

That pony on her shirt was probably her favorite character in the whole wide world... and she probably still watched that cartoon every Saturday morning.

"I'm Kate," she said when I didn't immediately answer her question.

Kate. Even her name reeked of child-like innocence. "Short for...?"

"Katherine," she clarified. "But no one calls me that. What's your

name?”

She offered me her hand like the well-brought-up good girl she was.

I would know, since I was a well-raised boy once. And I preyed upon girls just like her.

I eyed her hand before taking it in mine. “Holden.”

“Holden,” she repeated, and my name coming from those glossy, rose-scented lips caused a shiver to tumble down my spine.

Her face screwed into a frown.

“Holden,” she said again. “Is that what people call you?”

“Do people call me by my name?” I gaped at her. She was beautiful, but maybe she was an idiot. “Yeah.”

“No... I mean, it’s so formal. Is there a nickname for Holden? Like Denny or Hol or Oldy?”

My brows lifted. “You think people call me Oldy?”

She puckered her lips and shook her head. “You’re right. Denny is cute though. Do they call you Denny?”

“No,” I said. I don’t know why she’d gotten under my skin so much. Maybe I resented how attracted to her I was. In only the few minutes I’d known her, she’d floated through life, taking it on the chin that some older student had fucked with her and went through with the prank anyway. I mean, who did that? “It’s just Holden. Some people go by their full names, you know... Katherine.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, you don’t have to be a dick about it.”

I groaned and closed my eyes. Just the word ‘dick’ coming from that innocent mouth had my dick twitching.

I leaned my head back on the seat, keeping my eyes closed. Maybe we’d get lucky, and our professor would be sick today. One class down, only forty-four left to go.

“Uh-oh,” she whispered.

“What?” I asked without opening my eyes.

Her bony elbow nudged against my arm.

Sitting up, I blinked my eyes open and gulped.

Uh-oh was right.

Our professor had just entered... and it was the very woman we had caught in the janitor's closet.

And she was glaring directly at us.

* * *

Kate

Present Day

I flip through the journal pages a little, then shut the journal and fall back on the pile of pillows on my bed. Bile burns my throat, threatening to spill up my esophagus.

I was a well-raised boy once. And I preyed upon girls just like her.

It's not new information. Not at this point in my life. And yet those words—his words—turn in my stomach like week-old leftovers.

There's something else in Holden's words that clenches in my chest. Admiration... for me. He's spent so long denying and ignoring his feelings for me, I've almost forgotten how strong our chemistry was in the beginning.

Or maybe forgotten isn't the right word.

Blocked.

I've blocked my memory about how intense our connection was right from the start. And how much he pushed me away in the beginning.

There's a knock at my bedroom door, and Jill pops her head inside. Her wild, red hair is piled on top of her head, and her glasses perilously cling to the edge of her nose as she looks at me from over the rim.

"How was today?" she asks and slides into the room to sit at the foot of my bed.

I shrug. "It went exactly like I expected."

“And how was Holden?”

I fill her in on the first rehearsal—how he made me lie down on the floor and read the love scene—and finish by telling her about the journal.

Her eyes go wide, and she runs her hand across the cover like it’s the holy grail. “Whoa. He gave you his diary to read?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m pretty sure men don’t call them diaries.”

“Sexist.”

I stick my tongue out at her, but she’s not even looking at me. Her eyes are glued to the composition notebook sitting between us on my soft, teal comforter. “Maybe you can finally get some closure.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m serious. The fact that he’s willing to give you this to read?” She blows out a breath that sweeps her bangs briefly off her forehead. “He either really wants you to do well in this show... or he wants you to accept his apology finally.”

Or both.

“I don’t want to read his stupid thoughts. I don’t want to hear why he—”

“Yeah. And *that’s* why you need to.”

I stare at her. “You’re taking his side?”

She shrugs. “I’m sure you’re brilliant in the role, but it can only help, right? And you need this. *We* need this.”

Dammit. She’s right... and *he’s* right.

A committed actor immerses themselves in a role, reads and learns everything they can to get the part right and do it justice.

That’s what I need to do. I need to be so fucking good at this role that I leave Holden and everyone else dumbfounded, wondering who the hell I am and where I’ve been hiding all these years.

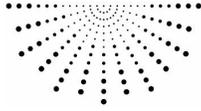
I’ll show them.

I’ll blow them away.

All I need to do is slice open old scars and bleed all over the stage...

Easy, right?

CHAPTER EIGHT



*F*un fact: Most actors are introverts.

The world sees actors as loud and attention-seeking, but in truth, most of us retreat inward and energize from being alone.

And yet, we get so much validation from the stage—from an audience and applause. It's like a drug that allows us introverts to escape from the caverns of our loneliness.

We're walking contradictions.

And right now, I feel it. Instead of the hard planks of a stage beneath my feet, I can feel the soft grass. It's not a hot stage light that's warming the back of my head, but the sun shining down on us as I'm falling in love with Zach.

He lifts his hand to my temple, and I close my eyes, leaning into his silky touch.

The buzz of energy surrounds us, gripping us, drawing us closer and closer together. It's the sort of intense chemistry that only happens occasionally on stage.

And now that I've caught it, I'm not letting go.

Another fun fact: Most actors don't know what the hell they're doing.

It's me. I'm most actors.

Even though I'd spent twelve hours last night memorizing my lines, a single misplaced 'and' can screw everything up. Worse still, that one mistake

could lose me the best part to ever land in my lap... and prove Holden right.

That I'm not good enough.

"How did I get so lucky?" Nolan Brooks says with a glance at the script in his hands. His gaze is intense as he looks back up into my eyes, the striking emerald piercing into me.

He's utterly mesmerizing. He's the sort of actor who could sell out a run of a show simply by being in it—women would pay top dollar for the privilege to stare at his Adonis face for two hours.

He cups my jaw, cradling my face in those strong hands, and before his gaze rakes down my body, he pauses at my mouth. "I get to kiss these lips every day for the rest of our lives."

I pant. I actually *pant*, a chest-hitching breath as he recites his lines. With a generous part to his lips, he leans in, bringing his mouth close to mine.

I'm drawn to him—his raw, magnetic energy while he is *Zach*, not Nolan, is potent and intoxicating. In this moment, I'm also not Kate—I'm *Skyler*. And I'm so madly in love with this man before me.

My eyes slip open, and even though Nolan is leaning in for the kiss, it isn't him I see. Over his shoulder, sitting in the front row, Holden scowls. His brown eyes glow a fiery golden shade. I can feel his gaze, practically hear his heartbeat from halfway across the room.

The energy tethering me and Nolan Brooks snaps, shattering.

The room is too small. My lungs, too tight. And Nolan is too close.

I falter, leaning back just a fraction of an inch with a gasp before his lips brush mine, and Holden's voice rings through the theater. "Stop!"

Nolan and I freeze, our lips a breath away from each other.

I'm no longer pulsing for him, aching in the way I was moments ago. I'm rapidly turning back into Kate—awkward, dull, girl-next-door Kate.

I register the sound of applause, and when I glance into the audience, I find the few members of our production team clapping for our performance—not seeming to notice the way I'd completely broken character at the end.

My stomach drops. As good as their applause feels, I don't deserve it.

Even still, *this* feeling. This is why I put myself through hell and back. Why I'm a damn glutton for punishment and keep coming back time and time again to an industry that's misogynistic and body-shaming and shreds my confidence to pieces. Because in the same breath that it can ruin me, it can also offer a high that no drug can ever reproduce.

Their applause is like the warm sunshine hitting my face after an icy cold dip in the ocean.

Nolan holds up a hand. "Hell yeah, New Girl!"

I stare blankly at his palm. Like an idiot, it takes me way too long to register that he wants me to high-five him.

With his hand still in the air, he leans closer, whispering, "It's called a high-five. It's what people do when you've done something awesome."

I snort an incredibly unattractive sound as my palm connects to his.

Holden climbs the stage, taking the steps in long, fast strides. And he's pissed.

I cringe. Here it comes: a lecture if I'm lucky, but more likely just straight up yelling at me about breaking character and fucking up the scene.

With flared nostrils, Holden sweeps past me, his arm brushing mine. "What the hell was that, Brooks?"

When Holden bypasses me, he curves his arm around my waist to position me out of the way.

The moment his hand connects to my waist, I gasp, shivering at the electric current that pulses from the tips of his fingers. The sensation races up my body and tingles in the tips of my breasts.

If Holden feels anything at all in that simple touch, he hides it well.

His arm falls away from my waist as he goes nose to nose with Nolan. "You don't do a stage kiss without—at the very least—prior approval from your castmate! You should know better."

The room settles into a static silence, the applause around us halting, as

Holden glares at Nolan.

Everyone but me seems completely taken aback by Holden's sudden and seemingly erratic outburst. And somehow that shocks me more—that they don't know him like I do.

Had he managed to control his angry outbursts over the years? Is this a habit he suppresses just fine unless he's in my presence? There wasn't a student in class with us my freshman year who didn't know not to set Holden off.

Moody, they'd called him.

That was one word for it. Another word? *Asshole*.

"I'm sorry," Nolan says after an exacerbated sigh. "We were in a really good zone. I just got caught up in the scene."

"I don't want your excuses," Holden snaps. "Apologize."

Nolan's hands clamp to his hips. "I just *did* apologize—"

"To *her*. Not me." Holden points at me over his shoulder, and Nolan blinks rapidly, his eyes landing on mine.

"I'm sorry," he says, and it sounds genuine enough to me.

"It's okay." I don't want any trouble, especially not with *Nolan freaking Brooks*, but I'm abruptly cut off by Holden's palm swinging in front of my face to shush me.

"Her name," Holden says.

"Excuse me?" Nolan asks.

"What's her *name*, Nolan? You've been working with her for three rehearsals now. You should at the very least *know... her... name*."

A nauseating wave of horror slams into me. *He doesn't*.

Nolan Brooks doesn't even know my name.

"I... it's..." Nolan stutters. If not for his clearly airbrushed spray tan that probably cost more than my monthly utilities, I think I would have seen a blush form on his perfectly sculpted cheeks.

And my cheeks, without any golden stain on my skin to hide it, turn red

hot. I swallow down the embarrassment, and it festers in my stomach.

Even as his co-star, literally the only other human on stage with him in this show, I'm still wildly unmemorable. The man who almost just kissed me can't remember my name despite the fact that we met, shook hands, and introduced ourselves just two days ago.

Oh, God. I think I'm going to be sick.

"It's Kate," I say quietly, glancing at him through my thick web of half-lowered lashes.

Nolan's eyes go wide, and he offers me a grateful smile. "Yes! Kate. That's right. I'm sorry, *Kate*."

Holden whips around, standing in my face. He doesn't say a word and doesn't have to. The rage that had been directed at Nolan ricochets right back where it belongs—directly at me.

After all, is there any doubt about who he truly hates here?

I can't bring myself to look in Holden's eyes, so instead, I fixate on the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

"Everyone out!" Holden shouts. "Rehearsal is over for the day."

I bring my gaze up, dragging it over the thick column of his throat, his ticking jaw, and prominent aquiline nose until I connect with his eyes. The intensity in his stare catches my breath.

He points to me; his profoundly dark eyes search mine. "Except for you, Katherine. Character study begins in five minutes."

He spins and walks away.

What the hell just happened?

Nolan shifts uncomfortably in my periphery. "Hey... hey, Kate."

It doesn't even register that he's talking to me. I stand there, numb. Humiliated. And I'm not even sure why.

"Kate," Nolan says again and brushes my arm. "Hey, you okay?"

I give him my best, most convincing smile, and nod. "Yeah. Of course."

"I'm really sorry about that." He scoops up his phone and keys from the

lip of the stage. “I’m the worst at remembering names. Seriously.”

I follow him numbly down the stairs and off the stage. If I have a five-minute break, I’m not going to spend it up there in the spotlight.

“It’s really okay,” I assure him.

And truthfully, it *is* okay. Yes, we’d been on stage together for three rehearsals, but acting is weird. Spending that time together reading a script is not the same as actually hanging out with a person for two days and not knowing their name. Maybe he needs to continuously think of me as Skyler to get into character.

Or maybe that’s what I need to believe in order to excuse him for not remembering my name.

Nolan’s chuckle drags me out of my own self-deprecating thoughts. “This one time, I was in a show with Kristin Chenoweth—and I swear to God, I completely blanked on her name one morning when we ran into each other getting coffee before rehearsal.”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “Okay, you’re laying it on a little thick. No one forgets Kristin Chenoweth.”

His brows arch, and he raises his hand into the air as though he’s a schoolboy waiting to be called upon. “Oh... I do. I called her Chrissy.”

I hiss a breath through my clenched teeth. “Ouch.”

“Exactly. So, to prove a point, she called me Norman for the rest of the run.”

I laugh out loud and quickly cover my mouth to stifle the barking sound. “And you *still* didn’t learn your lesson?”

He shakes his head and grins down at me. “I know. It’s shameful.”

He’s standing so close that as he swings his bag over his shoulder, I get a whiff of his warm, slightly sweet scent. It’s nice. *He’s* nice, despite forgetting my name.

“Maybe I can make it up to you,” Nolan says, still grinning. “Take you out to—”

From just over my shoulder, Holden claps his hands together. “Okay! Time to get started. Everyone out except Kate.”

How the hell did he sneak up on us like that?

“Good God,” I say to Holden. “Are you secretly a ninja as well as an actor and director?”

Nolan’s brows lift higher, disappearing beneath the mop of hair across his forehead. “See you later... new girl.”

Nolan’s walking away as I whip around and whisper to Holden, “I’m supposed to get a thirty-minute break before we begin.” My stomach growls viciously, reminding me I haven’t eaten more than a yogurt and a protein bar today.

His eyes narrow, drifting over my shoulder to watch Nolan laughs with Maggie.

“You want thirty minutes? Fine. You’ve got twenty-five left.”

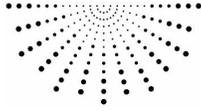
He stomps to the last row of the theater, dropping into a seat there. Nervously, I sit in the front row, as far away from Holden as I can sit and pull a granola bar from my bag as well as his journal.

Nolan’s laugh booms in the theater again before I hear Holden’s voice roar, “What did I say? Everyone out!”

I peek over my shoulder to catch the glimpse of Nolan exiting, along with the other crew members and Maggie.

Leaving me alone with the one man in all the world who can tear me apart with a single scathing glance.

CHAPTER NINE



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

I'm staring at Katherine from across the cafeteria like some fucking weirdo stalker.

Not like the senior starting quarterback I am.

Professor McCay hasn't said a word to us about the fact that we found her wrapped around a random guy in the janitor's closet. But that first day of classes, she glared. She glared so fucking hard that I thought she might burn a hole through my forehead.

So I'd sat as far away from Katherine Harris as I could at our next class. The girl had bad news written all over her. Not because she was bad. It was totally the opposite.

I was bad.

I would ruin her.

Sweet girls like her shouldn't fall for jock assholes like me.

The further away I stayed, the better.

Even still, I smiled thinking about the spray of pink that flushed across her cheeks when she got mad. Who would have thought calling a girl by her

full name would be such a trigger? I shouldn't have pressed her buttons so much, but I couldn't help myself. Maybe I wasn't any better than Addison, hazing her in my own juvenile way.

Except, Addison is jealous of her. And I want her.

And Addison had made it perfectly clear that she was interested in me, seeking me out in the theater building before and after every class.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes.

I should want Addison. Other than being a mean girl, she was just my type. Easy. And expendable.

But I didn't want Addison. I wanted Kate.

All I could think about was Kate.

And I couldn't help but notice the slight moment of pain in her eyes when I avoided her at our last class. When she waved and smiled at me with a chipper "Hey, Holden," all I did was grunt in response and take the seat farthest away from her.

And now here we were in the cafeteria together.

I'd call it fate except it's hardly divine intervention when two students with the meal plan are grabbing lunch at the only cafeteria at noon on a school day.

I watched her from over by the salad bar as she stared at her phone, brow furrowed, concern creasing her mouth. I wasn't sure what she saw on her phone, but something had her worried.

She balanced her tray on her hip and tucked her phone into her back pocket. Then, she spun and grabbed a muffin, a banana, and an apple, adding the food to her already piled high tray.

Huh. Was she that hungry? Or just stockpiling for later?

I move closer as a redhead girl standing beside her adds mac & cheese to her tray. "That bad, huh?" the friend said.

I shifted in closer to them, still out of sight, but so I could hear them better.

Again, like a fucking creeper.

Katherine sighed and grabbed a bowl of pulled pork. “Bad enough that I’m going to try to make one meal card swipe last for all three meals.”

Ah. That made more sense... Money problems.

I’d seen a lot of my classmates do that in my four years here.

You paid the school cafeteria for a swipe of your card and each meal was all you could eat. The poorer students would only eat one meal a day but load up their trays with extra things they could bring back to the room to eat later.

Kate turned around to walk a couple steps in my direction and I dodged out of the way, heart hammering against my ribs that I’d almost been caught.

“Dude,” Duncan, one of my closest friends said to me. “The fuck is your problem?”

“Nothing,” I grunted, then grabbed a brownie from the dessert table as though I’d been there solely for that.

“Aight. I’m gonna go grab us a table.”

I inclined my chin at Duncan. “Yeah, I’ll be right behind you.”

He gave me another strange look, then with a shrug, walked off.

I turned my attention back to Katherine and her girlfriend as I slid around closer to the pizza trays.

“I know a girl who sells her used panties online,” the redhead whispered.

My spine goes stiff as a board.

Actually, not just my spine. The thought of Kate selling her panties made my cock rock hard, too. How wet would she be? Would she leave little damp spots between those pretty little thighs of hers? I imagined wrapping those panties around my shaft and stroking myself while I closed my eyes and pictured Katherine over top of me, riding me—

“She makes like fifty bucks a pop,” the friend added, fracturing my

pornographic thoughts.

Kate's face twisted, jerking around to look at her friend. "Fifty bucks? For used undies?"

"Apparently, some people pay even more than that."

I would fucking pay her my entire trust fund to buy the panties she had on right fucking now.

"Jesus," she muttered.

The friend said something about chocolate and ran toward the other dessert table, leaving me the perfect chance to slide in and talk to Katherine.

I shouldn't. I knew I shouldn't.

But it was like a compulsion. I was a fly drawn to a sticky trap. I knew I should steer clear, but I found myself being drawn in by her.

I close what little distance was left between us and lean down from behind Katherine, whispering, "Do you really think that's the right gig for someone who perspires as much as you do?"

God. I could really be such a fucking asshole when I wanted to. The truth was, nothing about her was a turn-off. Not her sweat. Not her name. Not her fucking adorable retro t-shirts and the innocent blush that tinged her cheeks pink.

She whipped around, glaring at me.

I don't let her answer me or yell before I add, "Then again, you might be able to get top dollar for that. Some guys are into that. A sweat kink—"

It's me. I'm some guys. At least when it comes to Katherine.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped, interrupting me.

My smile widened. "Well, I do go to school here, you know."

"I mean, what are you doing here in the dining hall?"

I grabbed a grape off the tray in front of us and popped one in my mouth. "The meal plan is easier on days that I have back to back classes than going home."

"You know what?" she sneered. "I think I will sell my panties online."

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. Really.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said simply.

She yanked her cell phone free from her back pocket once more and opened up Google.

I raised my brows at her. She thought she would just fucking google how to sell my panties online? Actually, come to think of it, there were probably hundreds of tutorials on TikTok about how to start a panty selling business.

“Would you like me to send you the listing when it’s live?” she snapped at me, typing something I couldn’t quite make out into the search bar.

“Definitely.”

I fucking meant that, too. Not that I thought for one second she would.

But if there was one thing that made me crazier than the thought of her panties wrapped around my dick...

It was the thought of her panties wrapped around some other asshole’s dick.

Fuck that.

I needed to buy them.

I needed to own them.

I need to own her.

Her face turned an adorable shade of peach, but to her credit, she held eye contact with me. “Fine. I will.”

Like hell she will.

Even still, there couldn’t be that many people selling panties in our small college town.

“You know,” I said, “you’ll probably need something other than cotton underwear with rubber duckies on them to sell.”

If her face was peach before, it was downright scarlet now. “I’m covered, thanks.”

“Well,” I said, “I’d actually say the less covered, the better. More likely

to make top dollar, ya know?"

Her nostrils flared and she nibbled at the inside of her cheek. "Less coverage," she ground out between her gnashed teeth. "Got it. But you know, I think some guys might be into the cute, simple cotton thong thing. Gives them that schoolgirl fantasy, you know?"

Oh fuck my life.

Katherine.

In a plain, white cotton thong beneath a plaid schoolgirl skirt.

My mind imploded.

"Good point," I croaked. "Please tell me it will include pictures."

After a moment of panic, evident in the widening of her eyes, she tipped her chin higher. "Of course. How else will they know what they're getting?"

She was toying with me. Thinking she could get the better of me. And she was almost correct. Jealousy knotted in my chest, tightening its grip on my heart. Tightening my desire for this girl.

"Great," I sneered at her. Never one to let a girl—or anyone for that matter—get the best of me, my brain took over and delivered the knockout punch. "Can't wait to see what sweat-fetish basement dweller buys your swamp-ass panties."

Then, I popped another grape into my mouth and turned my back on her.

My dad's voice rang in my head. "Whoever yelled the loudest or walked away first, won." A lesson he and my fucking grandfather had taught me from the time I learned to talk.

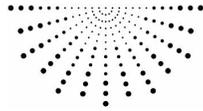
I turned my fucking back on the only girl in years I felt anything real for... and I walked away.

Because that's what Dorsey's did.

We walked away. We hurt the women we cared most about.

I truly was my fucking father's son.

CHAPTER TEN



Once the door shuts behind Maggie, Holden and I are alone in the dark, empty theater. I spin to face him, to confront him, but he's already so close that my nose bumps his chest.

He catches my waist, stopping me as I stumble backwards.

I let loose with a frustrated sound. Waving my hands, I break free from his hold and stomp past him to the stage. "Ugh! You are so *infuriating!*"

"Me?"

"Yes, *you.*"

His booming voice is on my heels, his footsteps directly behind me. "*I'm* not the one who let that asshole get away with not knowing your name."

I halt mid-step and whip around. "I didn't let him *get away* with anything. It was clear he didn't know my name. Making him sweat it out another thirty seconds wasn't going to change that."

Holden's brown eyes smolder, and he rakes his fingers through his hair. "I'm the director, Kate. There's a hierarchy within these walls. *I'm* in charge. Not you... me."

I roll my eyes dramatically. "Oh, as if you could *ever* let me forget that! We've had three days of rehearsals, and you flex that director bicep every chance you get. Overcompensate much?"

He draws back, scoffing. "You think I'm overcompensating?"

I lean forward into him. Relentless. That's my problem. When I get on a tear, I'm ruthless about taking down my prey.

"Oh, I *know* you are. I know you better than anyone in this theater, Holden. You're so goddamn afraid of not being taken seriously, so desperate to prove yourself, that you stomp around and yell and try to establish dominance. And who can blame you? With your dad, whoever yelled the loudest or walked away first won, isn't that right?"

His spine straightens. "Whoever yelled the loudest or walked away first, won," he repeated.

Oh, damn. *What did I say?*

"You read my journal," he says quietly, a smile edging the corners of his pillowy lips up. "That's straight out of—"

I cross my arms and huff loudly. Childish, yes. But I'm running low on options. "Well, it was my *homework*. You made that crystal clear."

He nods. "It was. Any discoveries?"

"None that change my opinion of you," I snap.

"*Yet.*"

Silence suspends between us, and I hold my breath for the longest thirty seconds in history.

Finally, Holden sighs, a weariness softening his otherwise hardened features. "You have to stop bailing people out of their own shit. Especially when you won't do the same for yourself. I wanted Nolan to admit publicly that he didn't bother to remember your name. I wanted him to announce it to everyone in the room so that he could maybe, *finally*, learn his lesson."

I swallow and harden my gaze. "Except you weren't just embarrassing him, Holden. You were humiliating *me*, too."

Holden's gaze is piercing, his face stormy and dark. "Why should *you* be embarrassed because *he* was being an asshole?"

My stomach muscles clench, and I squeeze my crossed arms tighter around my body like a shield. "I don't know. Why are women ashamed when

a man in the workplace sexually harasses them? Sometimes, we react out of instinct. And for self-preservation, I gave Nolan my name so that I didn't have to stand there for another painful second while he admitted that I was so fucking unmemorable, he couldn't remember the simplest name *ever!*"

Unmemorable. The irony isn't lost on me that Holden was chastising my co-star for not remembering my name when he himself had told the production team that I 'wasn't exactly memorable' less than a week ago.

I hate that he's witnessing the tears filling my eyes. My throat clogs, and I swallow against the thick blockage, then meet his gaze. "It reminded me a hell of a lot of someone else I once knew who couldn't get my fucking name right."

His eyebrows lift with impressive bravado. Shameless. "I *knew* your name. I just chose to call you by your full name. Not the shortened version."

I glare at him. "So, I should have just continued calling you *Oldie* or *Denny*, then... even though you hated it?"

His masculine chuckle resonates deep in his chest as he leans closer to me. So close that his warm, soft breath floats across my skin, sending a wave of goosebumps skittering down my arm. "The difference is, we both know you didn't hate it when I called you Katherine."

We pause, close enough that a single movement—a push on our toes or a sway forward—would cause our lips to connect. The energy between us tingles down my body.

A knock pounds on the outside door. I launch myself to the other side of the stage like an antelope on crack. *Crackelope.*

A young man pokes his head inside, holding up a large plastic bag. "Delivery for Holden James."

An amused smile crosses Holden's face as he watches me panting from across the stage.

"That's our dinner," he says as he strides to the door.

"*Our* dinner?" I ask with a glance at my phone. It's already six-thirty.

He hands the delivery boy some cash with a quick nod and a quiet exchange I can't hear, before turning and heading back towards me. "Yes. Our dinner. You need to eat. Especially since I doubt you ate at all during your morning shift at the café. The only thing I've seen you eat in three days is a granola bar and coffee."

He meets me back at center stage and sits, pulling takeout containers, chopsticks, and napkins from the bag.

"That's not all I eat..." Sometimes I grab a pack of almonds.

I swallow and do some quick math in my head. I'm desperately trying to save money... and an extra fifteen bucks may not seem like a lot to Holden, but to me? That's another hour and change I will have to work at the café just to pay for one meal.

I reach for my wallet and tug out the only cash I have left in there—a ten-dollar bill—then hold it out for Holden.

He hands me a container. "Dinner's on me."

I narrow my eyes at him. *Like hell it is.* I don't want to owe Holden in any way, shape, or form. Hell, I already owe him for giving me this part, don't I?

Without a word, I toss the ten-dollar bill on the floor beside him, knowing it's probably not enough to even cover the meal, but it's better than nothing. And it's the gesture that's more important, regardless.

I read the receipt on top of the plastic lid. *Cashew chicken and bok choy.*
NO SHELLFISH.

A smile curves my mouth. "You remembered."

"You think I could forget nearly *killing* you?" He chuckles and shakes his head. "Clearly you haven't gotten very far in my journal."

My smile grows, and I hide it by burying my face in the piping hot dinner, inhaling the spices. Trying to use the chopsticks, I pinch the first bite and carefully bring it to my mouth. Most of the rice and cashew fall out of the pinching hold, but at least I get a bite of chicken.

God, it's *good.* I haven't had takeout in months. I've been surviving on

ramen, hot pockets, and peanut butter and jelly for almost every meal.

When I open my eyes, Holden's offering me a plastic fork.

Dammit. I never could get the hang of chopsticks. I've finally managed to use them for sushi, but that's a hell of a lot easier than trying to scoop up bites like this.

Begrudgingly, I take the fork.

He slides my ten-dollar bill back over to me. "Dinners will be comped in our production costs. Union rules regulate that we have to feed our actors if they're at work for more than a set amount of time."

I roll my eyes. "Actually, union rules state that you have to give your actors a sufficient dinner break. Not that you have to feed us. Unless we run into overtime."

Still chewing, Holden brings his wrist dramatically to his face to look at his watch. An expensive looking leather band shifts against his arm, and the platinum edge winks at me from the reflection of the stage lights. "Huh. Look at that. We're in overtime."

I narrow my gaze. "We're only at five and a half hours."

He shrugs. "Potato, pot-ah-to. Do you want the free meal or not?"

"Does the free meal mean I don't get my union specified break and that I have to sit here and eat with *you*?"

He glances up at me, and for a moment, there's a boyish hope in his eyes. "What if it does? Would that be so bad?"

Yes. "Depends. Do I get your scintillating conversations, too?"

"If that's what you want," he says. Again, hopefulness creeps in at the edges of his voice.

A noise outside the theater causes his attention to shift to the door.

Maggie comes in with a wave. "Sorry, I know I'm interrupting! I just forgot my binder!"

Holden's entire body language changes. The casual guy, leaning forward and looking intensely at me for answers, is gone. Instead, he slides back,

stiffening. “No problem, Mags. We’re just on our dinner break, discussing the character.”

My brow twitches at the lie that tumbles so easily from his lips. It’s easy to forget how damn good he is at those lies.

“Ah, yes,” I say, my voice chillingly cold. “My *character*. Right, right. I was just saying how I really see Skyler as a manipulative bitch. She knows exactly what she’s doing when she lies to Zach. She makes a choice. And it’s the wrong choice.”

The hope in his eyes evaporates, and a stony resolve hardens in its place. “No one’s the villain of their own story, Kate. Skyler would never see herself as a manipulative bitch, even if that’s how Zach sees her. That statement just shows me how little you get... *Skyler*.”

The overtones of how he clearly meant to add the word ‘me’ to the end of that sentence hangs heavy between us, and I know if Maggie hadn’t been in here with us, this fight would have escalated fast.

The theater grows silent as we glare at each other over the scent of fried rice and MSG.

“Aha!” Maggie exclaims. “Got it! Carry on.”

Once the door slams shut behind her, I exhale long and slow. “So you’re happy to eat with me as long as no one knows it’s personal. Just like you’re fine directing me, so long as no one finds out we used to date.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Real classy, by the way. Way to make an ex feel special, Holden.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t understand. There are people in this show, on this production team even, who want to find any reason to—”

“Can we just get the rest of rehearsal over with? I’ll eat later.” I can’t sit here and listen to any more of his excuses. My job is to find the truth and pain in my character—not to have dinner with an old flame.

Besides, I’m suddenly not hungry. Standing, I dust off my legs and pack up what’s left of my uneaten dinner.

With a snort and a shake of his head, he covers his own dinner and shoves it aside. “Whatever you want, Katherine.”

“Whatever *I* want? Are you kidding me right now? Nothing about us—our relationship, working or personal, has ever been about what *I* want!” I pace the stage, my voice growing more and more shrill with each passing second; each passing word. “Not even the fucking name you call me is what I want, Holden!”

He thrusts his hands into his hair and launches to his feet. “Forget it. I thought we could sit and have a meal together and talk. Actually *talk*. So that maybe, just maybe, when we work together, and I have to order you to do shit, it might be easier. But if you want to do this the hard way, *fine*. Let’s do it the hard way.”

“Fine by me.” I stomp to the edge of the stage and snatch my script off the floor. “Where do you want me?”

His breath is labored as he slowly closes the space between us. His eyes burn like cherry oak wood in the center of a fire, and he pauses as he leans in, so close to me.

“You know where I want you,” he whispers.

The implication of those six words hangs thick in the air between us.

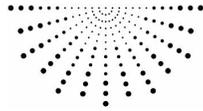
“That’s the thing. I *don’t* know. I never have.” My voice is thick and hoarse in an unusual way that I’m not used to. And judging from the way his eyes graze my throat, he isn’t either.

“You start *Act One, Scene One* stage left,” he says.

We both know that’s not what he meant.

But if he’s not going to admit it, then I sure as hell won’t either.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

Girls were literally writhing and rubbing their scantily clad, tight co-ed bodies on mine...

And all I could fucking think about was Kate and her little white cotton thongs.

I scrubbed my hand down my face and tried for the hundredth time to push thoughts of her out of my mind.

I didn't want to think about Kate tonight.

Kate and Professor McCay were mere specs in the fading rearview mirror as I entered the weekend.

With the first week of classes over, I didn't have football practice until two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, which meant one thing in the world of Varsity: Friday Night Party.

Even on an Ivy league campus, we could let loose. Only, instead of cheap kegs of watery beer and Doritos, we had expensive craft local brews, bottles of Grey Goose and Makers Mark, and catering.

If there was one thing my blue-blooded senator father had taught me, it

was how to throw a fucking party. And this party was in full swing.

We'd already finished four bottles of Grey Goose, although I was still nursing my first beer. These other idiots may enjoy getting shit-faced the night before practice, but not me. Having to run drills while hung over? Not my thing.

Across the room, Addison danced with some friends, standing on top of my coffee table and I gritted my teeth together as she stared suggestively at me while grinding her slim hips against her girlfriend in what I assumed was supposed to be a suggestive way.

But all my dick did was give a lazy yawn.

My best friend, Duncan, slapped a palm to the middle of my back, shoving a red Solo cup at me and telling me to "catch up" before he was off to chat up some girls on the opposite end of the room.

We may have been rich, but we weren't stupid. Pint glasses would have been shattered in no time. At least the Solo cups were easy to clean-up.

I shrugged the brunette dancing up on me away just as a laugh echoed from across the room.

Not just any laugh—Katherine's. That free and beautiful sound I'd grown to know so well in only the last week.

What was Kate doing at my party? I sure as hell didn't invite her.

I followed the sound, nudging my way through the crowd of people. Just when I thought I was maybe hallucinating and made the whole thing up in my damn head, the crowd of people dancing parted, and I saw her talking to Duncan.

She stood behind the table of food, smiling and peering up at my best friend with those stunning cerulean eyes. He circled the table to stand next to her.

Scratch that—to stand too fucking close to her.

Jealousy gnawed at my gut, shivering up my body.

Duncan was fucking hitting on Katherine Harris?

I took a deep breath to calm myself down. He wasn't doing anything wrong talking to her. Kate wasn't mine. She'd never be mine.

And of course he was hitting on her. Anyone with eyes and a libido would hit on her. She was gorgeous. And tonight, she didn't disappoint. She wasn't dolled up like a lot of the other girls here, showing off with cleavage-baring tank tops and tight miniskirts.

Nope, Katherine was wearing a simple black t-shirt and tight-fitting black jeans that hugged her lean frame.

The smallest sliver of skin peeked out between the bottom of her shirt and the waistband of her jeans. On any other girl, I would've thought that peek of skin was intentional, but not Kate. Most of the time, she seemed completely unaware of how hot she was and the effect she had on the guys around her.

That's what made her so fucking magnetic. She didn't try to be sexy. She just was.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was in front of them with a table of sushi between us.

Duncan leaned against the table, tilting his body toward hers. "You are too fucking hot to be a cater waiter. What time is your shift over?"

He reached across the plate of sushi she was arranging to grab a shrimp roll. He popped the whole thing into his mouth, smiling at her.

Kate eyed him while spooning wasabi onto the plate beside the sushi with latex gloved hands.

The same redhead from the cafeteria popped up from behind the table beside Kate, setting a couple bottles of soy sauce beside the sushi platters. "This is her last delivery."

Kate threw her a dagger-filled glare and I laughed.

Everyone's gaze darted to me.

Kate's eyes widened at the sight of me before shifting to venomous. "Holden."

If she'd been glaring daggers at the redhead before, now I was getting

bullets... right to my fucking head.

I reached out and grabbed a spicy scallop roll with my fingers, greeting her before popping the whole thing in my mouth. “Hey, Katherine.”

Oh yeah. Bullets for sure. Except I might have just earned an extra one right to my dick.

Duncan blinked in surprise. “You two know each other?”

I gave him a slight nod.

“Sure. Me and the freshman are old friends,” I said, even though I wasn’t answering the real question I knew he was trying to ask—was she already mine?

Kate narrowed her eyes until I could only just make out the sliver of bright blue. “Oh, we’re friends now? ‘Cause last I checked, you weren’t even speaking to me.”

I grinned. “Oh, come on. What about the cafeteria?” Impossibly, her glare deepened. “Besides, I’m talking to you right now.”

“When you’re drunk? Lucky me.”

I didn’t bother correcting her that I wasn’t drunk. As I reached for a California roll, she smacked the back of my hand. Hard. Harder than I considered playful.

I imagined that rough hand gripping my hair, pulling it. Clawing down my back. Squeezing my ass as I pushed inside her.

“That’s unsanitary,” she snapped and handed me the tongs that were beside the platter.

The redhead looked back and forth between us a few times before saying, “Kate, you didn’t tell me you knew the Jaguar’s star quarterback.”

My smile spread and I offered the redhead my hand. “Holden Dorsey. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Jill. Kate’s roommate.”

“Jill,” I repeated, filing the name away for later.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Don’t you mean Jillian since you apparently call

everyone by their full names?”

Jill gave Kate a strange look as she shook my hand. “Uh, except my name’s not Jillian. It’s just Jill.”

This night just got a whole lot more interesting. “Nice to meet you, Katherine’s roommate, Just Jill.”

Duncan shuffled a few steps away from Kate. Bro-Code and all that.

“Since your shifts are over, why don’t you both stay for the party?” he asked.

Jill smiled and looked expectantly at Kate.

I lifted my eyebrows, challenging her. “They probably need to be home to the dorms before curfew.”

Scowling, Kate crossed her arms, clamping her latex-gloved hands around her biceps. “The curfew’s only for our guests. Not for us.”

“Great!” Duncan exclaimed. “Then you can both stay.”

Jill smiles and brushes her hands against her pants saying, “I actually can’t. I have to bring all the supplies back to the office tonight. But Kate can. She’s technically off the clock now.”

Jill’s smile stayed firmly in place while Kate pursed her lips, glaring at her friend.

After a few seconds of silent communication, Kate huffed a sigh, then turned to Duncan, taking a step closer to him.

My heart slammed into my ribcage as she placed her palm on his chest, and I resisted the primal urge to tear her hand from his body.

“Only if you’ll save me a dance,” she said to Duncan, her voice low and sultry.

The change was so sudden. In the blink of an eye, she turned from girl next door to sex kitten. Holy shit.

Even Duncan seemed momentarily mesmerized. Completely forgetting the Bro-Code, he nodded, murmuring, “Uh, y-yeah. Hell, yeah I will.”

Then, he met my gaze and backed away, excusing himself from the girls.

Jill brushed her fingers along Kate's forearm where some red welts were starting to form. "Kate, did you touch your skin?"

With a glance at her arm, Kate groaned and yanked the latex gloves from her hand, tossing them into the garbage. "Dammit."

Jill was already rummaging around in her purse until she yanked a bottle free, the sound of pills bouncing around the plastic like a maraca. She placed a single, small pill in Kate's palm. "Here, take this. I've got to run. Sandy is waiting for me in the van for the last delivery. But that should help the rash."

Jill pulled Kate into a hug and whispered something in her ear, but the only response she got was an eye roll.

"Have fun! Text me if you need a ride home!" Jill called over her shoulder, before disappearing into the crowd.

Once Jill was gone, Kate's entire persona changed. She shifted her weight, uneasy on her feet.

"So, you have an allergy?" I asked.

Kate rolled her eyes. "Oh, are you a quarterback and a sleuth, too? Don't worry, world, Holden Dorsey is on the case!"

"Well, if I'm a sleuth, I think I should go by my whole name. Holden James Dorsey's on the case."

Kate growled, snatching a red Solo cup off the bar table, and ladled some punch into it.

I tried to interrupt her by grabbing the ladle from her hand. "Uh, I wouldn't do that."

But it was too late. She'd already gulped down half the cup with her pill. Maybe even just to spite me.

I shook my head. "Do you know what you just did?"

She held up her hands, fingers splayed. "If I'm forced to stay here for a while, I might as well have a little fun. Let loose. Isn't that what you upperclassmen are always telling freshmen? To relax?"

She tipped her head back, chugging what was in the cup.

“Kate, no! Stop!” I grabbed the cup from her hands, then inspected what was left of the spiked punch. “Dammit! You’re not supposed to drink with Benadryl! And I’m going to guess from that annoying little halo over your head that you don’t usually drink and don’t exactly have a tolerance built up.”

Warring emotions of anger and panic clenched in my gut. I might’ve been overreacting, but I wasn’t about to take chances. I’d seen this before. Dealt with my mom doubling up on pills and alcohol. Even though it should have been my dad’s job to care for her, somehow it always fell to me to make sure she was okay.

I resented them both for putting me in that position.

But right then, I didn’t resent Kate. Far from it. Her small rebellion spoke to me and for the first time since meeting her, we had something in common.

My stomach turned sour at the thought. I didn’t want Kate to be like me. She was too good to descend into the same pitfalls I did. I wanted to preserve her—protect her.

She smacked her now cherry-stained lips. “So, what? There’s no way I’m the only lightweight here. I bet half the freshmen at this party have only been drunk once or twice in their lives.”

“There aren’t any other freshmen at this party,” I said. As if I was dumb enough to invite underage people to a keg party. Not all of us jocks thought with our dicks, like Duncan.

I grabbed an unopened bottle of water off the table and handed it to her. “Here. Drink this.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t argue with me and cracked the cap, eyeing me as she tilted her head back and drank a third of the bottle in a few gulps. Then, wiping the back of her hand against her chin, she said, “You don’t have to keep nervously spinning that hideous ring. I’m fine.”

I froze, my fingers pinching my grandfather’s spinner ring. I hadn’t even realized I’d been doing it. Releasing my grip on the ring, I saw the pattern of

the etched filigree indented onto the pad of my thumb. Why did she have to be so damn observant?

“It was my grandfather’s.”

The lines around her scowl softened. “Oh. I’m sorry. So that’s like... a family heirloom or something?”

“Yeah. Something like that.” I glanced down at the ring, ignoring the surge of bitterness erupting from my gut. My grandfather was the biggest son of a bitch I’d ever met. Worse than my dad, and that was saying something. After I royally fucked up my freshman year, I wore his ring as a reminder to make good choices. To ask myself: What Would Grandfather Do?

Then, do the opposite.

Kate stepped closer, bending at the waist to get a better look at my ring. In doing so, her hair brushed over my arm, sending goosebumps racing across my skin. As she tilted her head, I got an even better view of the long, svelte curve of her neck, and fuck me, I wanted to run my tongue along that slope.

“It’s, um, not that hideous,” she said. “It’s actually kind of—”

“You were right the first time. It’s hideous.” I chuckled and stretched out my hand to get a better look. I’d grown so accustomed to wearing it that I barely even looked at it anymore. But it was the ugliest piece of jewelry I’d ever seen, large and bulky with yellow gold on the outside band and platinum for the middle spinner part. It was heavily etched with some ornate design that was so damn dated.

But its ugliness was part of the appeal.

It matched Grandfather.

Kate laughed too and took my hand in hers, pulling my fingers close to her face to examine the ring. “So, what kind of heirloom is this? Are you going to, like, give this to the woman you plan to marry someday?”

My skin tingled where her gentle touch skimmed across the back of my hand. “This ugly thing? The only way I’d give this to a woman as a gift was if

I secretly hated her.”

Kate snorted a laugh just as a girl dancing nearby bumped into her, launching her forward into my arms.

I caught her before she went down. Tucking my arm around her waist, I pulled her tight against my body and guided her over to the quietest corner of the room.

Oh boy. Either the alcohol or the Benadryl was definitely kicking in. Maybe both. I steadied her, my hands landing at her hips. She was so small that I probably could have wrapped my entire arm fully around her waist. “Okay, party girl. You know what you’ve won? A chaperone for the entire night.”

“A chaperone?” Her face twisted and she blinked slowly. Too slowly. “Who?”

“You’re looking at him.”

With a roll of her eyes, she hiked a small backpack-purse sort of thing onto her shoulder and shoved past me, moving around the table. “Like heck.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. That’s how it is.”

“If you’re my chaperone for this party, then I’m just going home.”

She tugged a set of keys from the outer pocket of her purse, and I quickly snatched them out of her hand. “Dammit, Kate! You’re not driving anywhere!”

It took a second for her to register that I had her keys.

Yep. Her reflexes were already slower, delayed. No way in hell I was letting her get behind the wheel.

Her eyes softened and she blinked, looking up at me. “You just called me Kate, not Katherine.”

Her voice was so quiet, I almost didn’t hear it over the thumping bass of the music and the thrusting bodies dancing all around us.

“Yeah, I did. Because Kate is a dumb freshman who opens doors she knows she shouldn’t and mixes alcohol with diphenhydramine.”

She spun to face me and the arm draped over my shoulder tightened, pressing that tight body of hers harder to mine.

“If Kate’s the dumb freshman, then who’s Katherine?” she asked.

Katherine was the best version of Kate. The woman I saw beneath the surface of her inexperience and who I desperately wanted to know better. The woman I wanted to be with.

But there was no way. Not with Kate or Katherine. This girl was innocence and sweetness personified, and I was an asshole who was about to leave college in nine months and enter the world of politics with my father after law school. The fucking family legacy.

Like hell I’d drag someone as wholesome and good as Kate into my family’s seedy world.

Even just a night with me ran the risk of papers and tabloids following her and photographing her. Especially if it was an election year. Kids of politicians gone wild is a favorite story of theirs and I’d been in the headlines more than once.

Which was another reason why I couldn’t let her leave here or even just hang out at this party alone. Not only was it dangerous, but if she was in a wreck or something happened to her, I could see the headlines now. Senator’s Son Drugs Underage Freshman at Keg Party.

Kate poked my chest, goading me. “Answer me. Who’s Katherine?”

I opened my mouth, but the words tangled and lodged in my throat. A faint smell of cherry and roses surrounded me from her punch-stained lips and her blue eyes sparkled.

I couldn’t stay mad at Kate. She wasn’t my mom. She wasn’t doing this as some revenge against my dad. And in some ways, Kate was right. She wasn’t any different than any other college student looking to party on the weekend.

Except that she wasn’t as experienced. I wanted to keep her safe.

But who would keep her safe from me?

I cleared my throat. “Katherine is...”

I couldn't think. Not with the way her hand cradled the back of my neck. Or with the press of her breasts against my side as I held her close to me. Too close. Fuck, I wanted her.

Her mouth parted, angling toward mine.

It'd be so easy to give in. To taste her. Feel her. But I couldn't. Probably not ever, but definitely not now while she was drunk and on Benadryl.

With every ounce of self-discipline I had, I untangled her arms from behind my neck. "Kate, no. Not like this."

Pushing her away in that moment was quite possibly the hardest fucking thing I've ever done. And I was damn proud of myself for it.

Pain registered in her eyes, and I swore they darkened at that moment.

"You called me Kate," she whispered. "The dumb freshman who tries to kiss guys out of her league."

Shit. I winced and shook my head. "It's not like that. That's not what I meant."

She swayed on her feet and I caught her around the waist, scooping her into my arms before she fell again.

"Put me down," she shrieked.

Jesus, she was loud. "Not a chance," I grumbled back to her.

She quit fighting me, her body going limp in my arms. "I'm definitely not giving you the link to my panties for sale now."

I snort. "Yeah, we'll see about that." I was getting those panties. One way or another.

Duncan popped up beside us, coming out of nowhere. "Whoa, what's wrong with the freshman?"

Dammit. Under normal circumstances, Duncan rearing his head wouldn't have phased me, even if I had just been about to kiss a girl. I would've just punched his arm and told him to take a fucking hike. But this was different.

Kate was different.

And he couldn't have picked a worse time to call her 'freshman.'

Pushing off my body, she smiled up at Duncan with a grin that I'd wished was only reserved for me. "I chased a Benadryl with the punch and now Holden's freaking out."

Duncan's eyes widened before they found mine. "No way. She drank the Panty Dropper?"

Kate giggled. "Panty Dropper?"

"Yeah, that's what we call it." Duncan looked at me from over top of her head. "Dave spiked that shit heavily tonight."

"I noticed," I said. I tucked her against my side and guided her toward the hallway. From across the room, Addison watched us, face red and expression seething.

I ignored her and lifted Kate into my arms. "I'm going to lay her down in my bedroom—"

"Yeah, you are!" Duncan interrupted, wiggling his brows and holding up his hand for me to high five.

I gaped at it, suspended in the air between us and shook my head. "Jesus Christ, dude. She's practically comatose."

Or at least she would be soon.

He had the decency to look ashamed as he lowered his hand. "I know. I was kidding. I obviously didn't mean it."

I glared at him. "Well, I'm not laughing."

"I'll bring you both some water, okay?" He turned, heading to the refrigerator.

I appreciated that he was trying to make up for his douchebag comment, so I let it go. And I had more pressing matters—taking care of Kate.

** * **

I SPENT ALMOST an hour and a half, watching Simpsons reruns on my iPad

and eating a plate of food that Duncan brought in for me.

I finished most of the sushi on my plate, being careful to keep it far from the bed where Kate was still sleeping. After seeing what her skin looked like after just touching sushi, I sure as hell didn't want to find out what happened if she got it near her mouth and throat.

Her phone buzzed on my bedside table.

Oh, thank God, I thought as I lunged for it. I'd tried to open that damn phone a few times to text her friend, Jill, with no luck. But now that texts were coming through on the home screen, maybe I could respond easier that way.

An alert was on the screen—a new text message from Jill. Yes! I just needed to respond to her and tell her that Kate was okay, safe, and with me. I'd bring her home as soon as she was awake and could tell me which dorm she lived in.

I hit the button to bring up the text message. It beeped and the screen wiggled with the error message.

Please type in your Passcode or use your fingerprint.

Son of a bitch.

I glanced over at where Kate was curled into a ball. Her hand was gently splayed, fingers relaxed and palm side up.

I could just use her fingertip to open the phone. It was for her own good. For all I knew, Jill may even be here at the party, looking for her friend.

Or worse. What if Jill was so worried, she called the cops and told them Kate was here? They'd find her in my bed damn near comatose.

With a gulp, I brought the phone to her finger and gently pressed it to the sensor.

Another message popped up.

Please use facial recognition software to continue.

Facial recognition and fingerprint technology? Jesus. All right. One more try.

I turned the phone around and held it up to her face.

Success! *With a buzz and a beep, the phone unlocked. I quickly brought up Jill's text message, careful to avoid seeing anything else that was none of my business.*

Unfortunately, that was abruptly shattered as all of Jill's texts from the night illuminated the screen.

Jill:

Holy fuck. You weren't kidding when you said Holden was hot. You have to kiss him tonight. I can't imagine a more perfect first kiss than that guy!

Jill:

Well? How was it? Are you no longer a kiss virgin?

Jill:

Okay, either you've gone from the world's biggest virgin to cherry poppin' or you're just having a good time. I hope it's the latter. Text me and let me know you're okay.

Jill:

Seriously... Kate. Are you okay?

Holy fuck. Kate had never been kissed?

Kate's raspy voice made me jump. "What happened?"

I was so startled that her phone went flying out of my hands and landed face down on my hardwood floor.

Shit! I scrambled to pick it up. "Kate, are you okay?"

"Where am I?" she asked, pressing her palm to her forehead.

"You're in my apartment. At my party, remember? You were working with the catering company and had a bad reaction on your arms..." The rash was all but gone. Her dark blonde hair was messy in the sexiest way, almost all parted to one side, and I couldn't help but wonder what the hell she'd look like after I tangled my fingers into that hair of hers, tilted her head back, and took her mouth in mine for her first kiss.

There was something so damn hot about being a girl's first. But to be her

first kiss? It would brand her as mine forever—I'd be sealed in her memory.

Fuck. This was bad. Bad, bad, bad.

She groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "Oh, God. It's all coming back to me. The Benadryl."

"Are you sure you're okay? I was worried I maybe should have taken you to the hospital."

"Oh, my God, no. I'm fine," she said. "A little groggy and a lot embarrassed. But fine."

She glanced down at her phone in my palm and angled her head. Confusion creased her brow. "What are you doing with my phone?"

I turned it over, examining the spider web of cracks on the screen. With a wince, I handed it back to her. "I'm so sorry. I'll pay to fix it."

She took the phone from me, stunned and silent, sitting upright in my bed. With my blankets tangled around her body. And my sheets now smelling like roses.

"Why were you looking at my phone?" Her voice was harder, more serious.

"I was trying to text your friend Jill to let her know you were okay. But I didn't see anything. I swear."

Her eyes narrowed. Yep, she was onto me. "Well, that means you definitely did see something, didn't you? How did you even get past the lock screen?"

"I had to use your fingerprint and hold it up to your face to get it to unlock. Your phone's locked tighter than the Pentagon."

"Apparently not, if you were able to get in that easily." There was a hint of accusation in her voice.

"I'm sorry I broke into your phone, okay? But I was just trying to help. I was just trying to get a message to your friend that you were okay. She's kind of freaking out."

She sighed and relaxed. "You're right. I'm sorry. My parents are just

really protective. Which is why it's a good thing you didn't take me to the hospital. They would have yanked me out of college so fast and dragged me kicking and screaming back to Indiana."

Indiana. She seemed like an Indiana girl. Somehow, it suited her. "I get that. I grew up an hour outside of Boston, and I think my parents would react the same way if I'd needed my stomach pumped one week into my freshman year."

I didn't mention the fact that my dad would have been more concerned about his ratings in the polls than my actual well-being. But still. The results would have been similar.

"Poor Jill," she said, unlocking her phone. "She's probably a mess—"

Her voice shifted the moment she saw the text thread from Jill, turning squeaky. "Were you able to pull up Jill's texts?"

Lie, a little voice in the back of my head whispered. "I was, um, trying to, but I dropped the phone before I got there."

Huh. I was actually pretty good at the whole lying thing. Maybe I had a better chance at acing this acting class than I'd thought.

"Really?" She slowly spun the phone around so that I could see the screen, despite the cracks. "Then why is there a message started in the text box that says: This is Ho..."

There were about half a dozen 'ho' jokes I could have made at that moment, but I was certain neither of us would laugh.

I exhaled and shook my head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to see... that."

Kate lifted her brows, seemingly unimpressed by my apology. "I doubt it's news to a guy like you that a freshman thinks you're hot."

"No. But it's a fucking front page headline that a girl like you has never been kissed."

What was I doing? Why did I say that? My throat went dry at the sound of her gasp.

"Is that so?" she asked and sat up higher on her knees. The blanket

slipped from around her torso, revealing her pebbled nipples pushing against the cotton of her v-neck shirt. My eyes shifted to follow the svelte line of her throat as she swallowed.

“So do it,” she challenged, her voice a hoarse whisper.

My gaze locked with hers. “What?”

“Do. It,” she repeated, putting an extra punch on the ‘t’. The room was dim, and her eyes were dark, like two cobalt stones resting at the bottom of the ocean floor. “Kiss me.”

The alcohol and Benadryl didn’t seem to be affecting her anymore. She was of sound mind and consenting—or rather, demanding.

And fuck, I wanted to. I wanted her lips more than I wanted my next breath. I wanted to be her first. I wanted to go down in history and forever remain in her memory as the man who gave her the best first kiss ever.

I lifted up on my knees and made my way across the bed toward where she was also kneeling. Even in this position, I towered a whole head over her. Cupping her jaw, I tilted her chin toward mine, drawing her near to me. “This is what you want?”

“Yes.” The word on her parted lips was barely more than a sigh.

I wanted to hear that sigh again. I wanted to feel it against my flesh as she pulsed and writhed beneath my body.

Fuck, I wanted her.

But I couldn’t have her. She was too sweet. Too good. And a guy like me, with my family and my past, would ruin someone like her.

But this? This I could give her. A perfect first kiss.

One taste. One kiss. And that was it.

Her light floral scent flooded my senses, wrapping all around me. I teased my nose up her jaw, drawing a line from her chin to her ear, whispering, “To answer your earlier question... if Kate is the freshman, then Katherine is the woman I want in my bed.”

I dragged my mouth to hers and just before our lips brushed, her fingers

slid between our faces, pressing against my mouth, stopping me.

“Wait!”

Dammit. I knew it. I’d pushed her too hard. She wasn’t ready yet. And an eighteen-year-old virgin shouldn’t be in my fucking bed of all places.

I exhaled a whoosh of air and sat back on my heels. “I’m sorry—”

“Sushi,” she said. “Did you eat sushi?”

I nodded and gestured to the almost empty plate across the room, still with a few California rolls on my plate. “Yeah, earlier, I... Oh, fuck.”

If merely touching sushi to her skin caused her to break out in hives, what would it do in her mouth? From my tongue to hers.

Her eyes went wide. “Yeah. I’m deathly allergic to shellfish. You almost killed me.”

My heart pounded as the reality of the situation hit me.

I almost killed her.

With my fucking kiss.

*I glanced to where my discarded copy of *Romeo and Juliet* sat on the nightstand. “This gives that whole Thus with a kiss, I die scene from *Romeo and Juliet* new meaning.”*

We both lowered to sit on our haunches, backing away from each other.

Kate licked her lips, almost like she could taste me on them even though we hadn’t touched. “I will kiss thy lips. Haply some poison yet doth hang on them, to make me die with a restorative.”

“Wow. First assignment for Method Acting 101 already done?”

She shrugged. “I memorized most of that play when I was twelve. It’s my dream to play Juliet.”

I nodded, not quite sure what to say to that. “So this acting thing, it’s not just an easy A for you?”

*She snorted a laugh. “Hardly. I’ve known I want to be an actor since I was ten when I landed my first role in *Annie*.”*

“Like... that chick with the red curls?”

“That’s the one.”

Huh. Kate must be pretty talented to have played a leading role as a kid. I can’t imagine having that sort of passion for anything. Even my hobbies were mostly chosen by my parents because they looked good on a transcript or in the papers. Having a son who was a star quarterback did well in the polls. I doubted a son in theater or the arts would have the same effect.

Kate slid off my bed and gathered her bag into her arms. “Thanks for…”

“Almost killing you?”

She smiled. “I was going to say for taking care of me. Passing out in the middle of a party would have been humiliating.”

“You sure you’re okay to drive now?”

She paused briefly before nodding. “Yeah. I feel fine.”

I stood as well, and grabbed her keys off my desk, tossing them to her.

She caught them easily in one hand, grinning. “So, are you going to sit next to me in class next week? Or continue pretending that we’re not friends?”

She just didn’t get it. Still. I shook my head. “Can’t you tell that Professor McCay gets weird any time you and I talk?”

She shrugged into her backpack. “So what? We didn’t do anything wrong. All we did was open a door.”

“Yeah. A closet door where she happened to be getting it on with someone.”

Kate lifted one shoulder to her ear, impressively unaffected by the fact that we’d caught our professor playing hide the salami with someone who looked half her age in a storage closet. “Who cares? If she’s guilty about that, then that’s on her. Not me.”

I care, I wanted to say. It mattered to me if I passed this class or not and I didn’t want to make life any harder on myself than it needed to be. “Yeah, but maybe it’s just easier for us to keep our distance in front of her. Avoid this becoming even more of a thing.”

“Wow,” Kate said, hiking her backpack higher on her shoulder. “For someone so sporty, I expected you to have a little more backbone.”

My grandfather’s words rang in my head: There’s the right choice. And the right choice for you. Sometimes, you need to choose yourself.

But in this case, staying away was the right choice for both Kate and me. My grandfather would have kissed the girl and broken her heart without a second thought.

With a sigh, I said, “Trust me. You don’t want to be my friend, Katherine. It’s not meant to be.”

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to react to someone who was just about to kiss me telling me now that they can’t even be my friend.”

“Exactly,” I snapped. “I’m an asshole. I would have fucking kissed you tonight and then not have even waved at you on Monday.”

I wasn’t going to be that guy. Not anymore.

The hurt expression on her face sliced into me. I hated that expression. I hated that I caused it.

“You’re not that cruel.”

I gritted my teeth. “Yeah. I am.”

It’s in my goddamn genes. Even if it was for her own good to walk away, I knew she wouldn’t be able to see that. Not tonight. Not Monday. Probably not for a long, long time.

“So what? I’d just be some notch on your bedpost?”

I swallowed hard, knowing that I had to push her away. There was something so magnetically beautiful and alluring about her. And I wanted her so damn badly.

But I couldn’t. We couldn’t. And I had to make sure she stayed far, far away from me.

I hardened my heart and said the one thing that I knew would keep her the fuck away. “To be a notch on my bedpost, I’d need a hell of a lot more than some virgin’s first kiss.”

Her face grew hard, eyes narrowing as she shook her head. “You don’t mean that.”

I stepped closer, towering over her. “I really do. And I’m sure the guys on the team would love to hear all about tonight.”

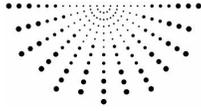
Tears welled in her eyes, but to her credit, she didn’t let them fall. “My only love sprung from my only hate. Too early seen unknown and known too late. Prodigious birth of love it is to me, that I must love a loathed enemy.”

I’d read some Shakespeare in high school, but his words had never sounded so beautiful as they did coming from Kate. Still, I couldn’t let her know that.

So I forced an eye roll and asked, “What the hell does that one mean?”

She snorted and yanked my bedroom door open. “If you can’t figure that passage out, then there’s no hope for you, Holden.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



I arrive at rehearsal the next day still reeling from the journal entry I read last night.

Of course I remember Holden's party in college... well, remember might be too strong a word. Half of that night is hazy.

But I remember waking up in his bed. I remember the humiliation of realizing he'd read that I was not only a virgin but had never been kissed. And I definitely remember challenging him to kiss me.

It'd been so unlike me. Prior to meeting Holden, I'd never met a guy I cared enough about to want to have my first kiss.

I shake the thoughts of Holden's journal away and yank the door to the theater open. Maggie waves to me from the front of the stage. "Kate, come meet the writer and composer of the show! She's also your music director."

I make my way down the center aisle, searching for Holden, but he's nowhere to be found.

That's weird. He's almost always here before anyone.

The creator of the show smiles warmly at me and waves. "I'm Amy Nguyen. It's nice to meet you."

I smile back and offer her my hand. "Hi, I'm Kate."

She cups my hand with both of hers in a firm, but sweet gesture. "I know. I loved your audition."

My eyes widen. “You did?”

“Oh, my God, yes. You have such a powerful voice and you’ve found that gorgeous balance between soprano and belt. I’m so excited to hear what you do with Skyler.”

Pride swells in my chest, but I swallow it down. *There’s no room within these walls for ego*, Professor McCay had told us. *Ego impedes the craft*.

“Thank you so much,” I say, and flip through my sheet music. “I was actually having trouble with this section here while I was practicing at home.”

Amy peers over my shoulder and nods. “Oh, yeah. Those eighth notes in the middle are a bitch. We have a few minutes before rehearsal. Want to run through it quickly?”

“Yes!” I cry out, way too eagerly. “I mean, if it’s not too much trouble?”

She’s tossing me a life preserver in an otherwise tumultuous ocean. Maybe if I fix my issues with this song *before* Holden arrives, I’ll get through one rehearsal without him nitpicking every aspect of my performance, while Nolan can just do whatever the hell he wants as long as he remembers my name.

She waves a hand at me. “Not at all. Come on.”

Before I know it, I’m standing over her shoulder at the piano, running through my big song in the show, trying to hit each and every note, each rest, each breath mark.

And I’m failing.

Again.

Amy pauses playing and turns to face me.

“You’re thinking too much,” she says. Unlike Holden’s notes and criticisms, she’s kind. Her face softens with empathy, and she even smiles at me even though I feel like crawling into a hole to die.

“Who cares about those eighth notes? If they’re not working, they’re not working! The best part about being in a new show that’s never been done

before is we get to *play* with the music. It's a collaboration at this stage. Ever notice that the sheet music of a new show doesn't always match up to the soundtrack? It's because sometimes the composer shifts it to play to the actors' strengths."

I stop myself from giving a self-deprecating snort and saying *what strengths?*

Amy tugs the sheet music from my hands and points to the center of the stage. "Go stand over there. Don't look at the notes and the rhythms and the time signatures. Just... sing from *here*." She presses her palm to her heart. As she tilts her head center stage, her knotted bun of jet-black hair bounces. "Go."

I swallow and clutch my water bottle in my hands, both of us sweating profusely.

Don't look at the notes and rhythm? Sure, I'd already memorized my lyrics for the song, but asking me to sing it without the words in front of me is like asking me to recite a poem without prompts... in a foreign language.

She plays the intro, and I close my eyes, trying to block out the room, ignore what I know about the song, what I think she wants to hear, and just feel the music.

I start singing, hearing her tone, matching it. Not because I know I'm supposed to, but because it feels right. Like a dance, Amy is leading and I'm following, but I get the sense that she's ready to hand that power to me whenever I want it.

I blink my eyes open, and when I look out into the audience, I focus on the circle of light at the back of the theater, imagining it's the setting sun.

The beat pulses against her fingers hitting the piano keys and the vibrations thrum up my body from the floor like an electric current. I feel the syncopated rests and the swell of harmony that sits below the melody in chords.

I don't even know if I'm singing the right verse, the correct words, but it

doesn't just sound good... it feels right. I finish the final note, suspending it, holding it longer and building to a crescendo that leaves the theater ringing with overtones when I stop singing.

I blink, coming back to myself and glance at Amy whose surprised smile warms me from the inside. "There it is," she says.

The acoustics of the theater carry her whisper.

Spinning on her piano bench, she calls out, "Holden, I'm going to need a few minutes to jot down and transpose what she just did! If you want to start without me, go ahead."

Holden?

I follow her gaze to where it's directed at the light booth and sure enough, there's his angular, muscled silhouette standing dead center between the two spotlights.

"No problem, Amy."

My feet stick to the floor like it's made of some sort of rapid drying cement. That is, until I'm being lifted off the ground... in Nolan Brooks's arms.

I'm stunned as he hugs me and swings me around like a ragdoll. "That was fucking incredible! Holy shit, this show's going to sweep the Tonys!"

Finally, I snap out of my fog and smack Nolan lightly on the back. "Put me down!"

I try to channel my serious voice, but he's so damn excited, it's contagious. And soon, I'm back on my feet, but leaning into his arms and laughing, too.

Nolan's grin widens and his gaze lands briefly on my mouth before shifting to my eyes.

"A bunch of us are going out tonight," he says. "You should join us."

I scrunch my nose. "I can't. I rehearse later than you guys."

He waves me away. "No, no. We're all going out later. Like *much* later after curtain call. We're meeting up with some other actors. *Seriously*, you

should come. Meet the gang.” He leans in close, whispering, “You’re one of us now, New Girl.”

“Nolan.” Holden’s voice booms, suddenly somehow directly in front of us. He must have taken the stairs from the light booth two at a time.

Even though he only said a single word, it’s a warning and a challenge all at once.

Nolan puts his hands up in surrender and steps back from me. “I know her name, Holden, I swear. But New Girl’s sort of our thing. Like a cute nickname.”

He punctuates the sentence with a wink at me and my face goes hot. Not because I’m particularly attracted to Nolan... Okay, yes, the man’s hot. You’d have to be blind to not see how gorgeous he is. But the goofy, Labrador-esque jovial dude has never been my type.

My gaze swings to Holden. *Tall, commanding, striking—*

“Katherine,” he barks.

Pretentious.

I plaster the sweetest smile I can onto my face. “Yes?”

He pauses and I brace myself for whatever harsh criticism he’s about to say.

“That was gorgeous. Your voice is as beautiful as I remember.” An earnest smile flicks the corners of his mouth. “Keep up the good work.”

* * *

WITH MY PHONE pressed to my ear, I make my way downtown a few blocks to the bar Nolan texted me about.

“What am I doing?” I hiss into the speaker. “I don’t even have enough money to feed myself properly, but I’m going to blow ten bucks on a cocktail?”

“Ten bucks?” Jill says. “How long has it been since you’ve had a drink in

the city?”

“Eleven bucks?” I squeak.

“More like fifteen.”

I halt mid-step.

“Fifteen bucks? For a *drink*?” I squawk.

Jill doesn’t let me spiral much further. “Just order a PBR.”

I groan and resume walking, only at a much slower pace. “I *hate* beer.”

“PBR is basically water.”

“Yeah, *beer* flavored water.”

Jill sighs. I know I’m acting like a petulant teen, but I can’t help it. Beer is just *that* gross. “Fine, but they’re usually only a couple bucks and it’s ironically cool now to drink PBRs. Everyone will think you’re a hipster and that you live in Brooklyn.”

“I *do* live in Brooklyn.”

I could practically hear the eye roll in her voice. “They’ll think you live in the *cool* part of Brooklyn.”

I pass a group of people standing in front of the building, leaning against the bricks laughing. Cigarettes dangle from their lips, and I walk through the cloud of cigarette smoke, then pause in front of the glowing sign for the pub.

“Are we sure this is a good idea?” I ask.

“Yes,” Jill scolds me. “This is a cast gathering, and *you* are part of the cast. You belong there. Besides, I’m on a deadline tonight, so all you would be doing is coming home to a bottle of cheap wine and that stupid diary you have to read.”

“It’s a journal.”

“*Whatever*. I hate him for making you read that thing.”

Secretly, I love it. It’s like a weird gift he’s given me to be able to relive that time through his eyes. And I hate to admit it, but I think he might be right. I think it might be helping my performance.

“You don’t hate Holden,” I say. “You *miss* him. He was your friend, too.”

“No,” Jill says, her voice frigid. “The guy I miss is a lie. A fraud. He was never really my friend. He’s the guy who *hurt* my best friend.”

I smile despite the poison in her voice. That’s Jill for you. She’s as sweet as can be until you fuck with someone she loves, then the Jersey girl rears her head and it’s over.

“Now!” She claps on the other end of the phone, her voice back to chipper. “Get your butt in there, order a PBR, and for the love of *God*, meet a nice guy so you can finally move on from Holden.”

Just then, Nolan pops his head out of the bar. “New Girl! What are you waiting on? We’re in here.”

Jill giggles in my ear. “Like *him*. He sounds cute!”

“Love you... see you back home,” I say and hang up.

Nolan eyes my cell phone as I slip it into my purse and enter the bar. “Does New Girl have a live-in boyfriend?”

Interest sparks in his eyes and, if I’m not mistaken, maybe jealousy?

“Nope,” I say. “Just a roommate who I love.”

His smile has a sexy tilt to it that I should be more drawn to than I am.

What’s wrong with me? Nolan Brooks is the sexiest guy I’ve seen in ages, and my sad, neglected vagina simply yawns at his attention.

“Good,” he says with a grin.

It doesn’t escape my notice the way his hand slips around to the small of my back, guiding me toward a table in the back. The group of eight is already in full social mode, sitting around a large circular table. Their drinks are half empty and a plate of nachos is in the center of the table, half gone.

My body goes numb, and I nearly stop in the middle of the bar. *Oh fuck.* What if they want to split the check in eight equal parts?

Nolan nudges me forward.

“Come on. They don’t bite.” He leans down, his mouth dangerously close to my ear. “*I* make no promises, though.”

A waitress comes out of nowhere, standing beside my shoulder with her

notepad in hand. "What can I get you?"

For a brief moment, I consider ignoring Jill's advice. But as my hand closes around my crossbody purse, I glance at the chalkboard behind the bar. House red: ten dollars. House whites: eight dollars. PBR and a shot of whiskey: three dollars.

Nolan has left me a few steps away. He's already back at the table, standing and leaning as he chats with one of the guys at the end while I figure out what to order.

I point to the sign. "How much for just the PBR?"

Pressing her lips together, the waitress suppresses a sigh. "It's three dollars either way."

Well, that seems stupid. But I don't say that. Instead, I smile at her. I know how shitty her job can be. And I'm one of eight people at her largest, loudest table. I have no doubt all she wants is to finish her shift quickly and be home with her feet on her coffee table, relaxing.

I glance at her name tag and hand her a five-dollar bill from my wallet. "No problem, Andi. Then I'll just take the PBR special and the shot. I'll also go ahead and close out my tab now. Keep the change."

The waitress's disinterested frown softens, and she slowly takes in my fake leather jacket, designer knockoff from Chinatown, and worn-out Keds. "A two-dollar tip for a three-dollar bill? I'm not in the interest of talking myself out of getting paid, but that seems a little excessive, don't you think?"

It's a loaded response, but I hear her unspoken words beneath it. She sees me. She sees me as one of her own: a fellow food industry server, trying to fit in with this new, fancy crowd.

I glanced back at our loud ass table, filled mostly with people I've never met—everyone but Maggie and Nolan. "Yeah, well, something tells me we're not going to be a low-maintenance group tonight."

She chuckles, but there's not a lot of humor in it. "Actors never are." Folding the five-dollar bill in half, she hands it back to me. "Tell you what,

your first round's on the house."

"I can't let you—"

She shrugs and gives me a smile "It's not on *me*. My boss will never notice. The whiskey is cheap as shit, and we don't keep track of how many PBRs we sell. And don't worry about my tip. With tables of six or more, we include gratuity in the bill. Besides, Nolan comes here a lot. His friends don't always tip well, but he leaves extra and makes up for whatever they lack."

Andi winks at me before turning and heading back to the bar, presumably to pour my whiskey and beer. I take the extra moment to study Nolan.

Maybe there's more to him than I'd thought? I like a guy who appreciates the service industry. Maybe Jill is right. Maybe there's something worth exploring there.

Before I know it, Andi is back, handing me a shot glass and a can of PBR. I thank her and walk the remaining few steps over to the table. As soon as I'm there, Nolan wraps an arm around my waist, tucking me into his side.

"Hey everyone," he bellows. "This is Kate. She's playing opposite me as Skyler."

I bring the beer to my lips, hiding my cringe as I take a sip and then wave at the group. Several people that I recognize, but have never met, smile and wave hello to me. Joaquin Perez, Tony-award winner for best actor in a musical, grins and nods in my direction. Tyler Jansen, another Broadway star, sits with his arm around a man I don't recognize.

Of course Maggie smiles and waves at me. "Hey lady," she says.

Gratitude releases some of the tension in my shoulders at the sight of her. Thank God there's someone here I know... other than Nolan. Who apparently *bites*.

A couple of other women who look familiar wave and say hi, but I can't quite place why I think I recognize them.

A willowy voice rings behind me. "So, *you're* the girl who got my part."

I spin to find Missy Howl standing there. Coal-lined lavender eyes peer at

me as she sweeps her fingers through her curtain of billowing dark hair.

What in the hell am I supposed to say to that?

I open my mouth to answer, but all that comes out is, “Uhhh...”

While I normally hate being interrupted, I’m grateful when Missy tilts her head and clicks her tongue, cutting me off mid-stutter. “You must *really* be something for Holden to ignore our personal history and cast you instead of the person critics call, *The next Laura Benanti.*”

I almost laugh. Who talks like this? Who compares themselves to a Broadway legend publicly? With a challenging glare, she folds her arms, pushing an impressive amount of cleavage higher, practically coercing me into starting a fight.

I smother the urge to roll my eyes. If she wants Holden so badly, she can have him.

Go ahead and lift that leg, lady. Mark your territory. He’s all yours.

But I know with a woman like Missy, there’s not much I can do to convince her I’m not a threat. Nothing will work to get her off my back. If I’m kind, she’ll walk all over me. If I’m mean, I make an enemy for life.

This is the living embodiment of *damned if you do, damned if you don’t.*

Nolan’s protective palm falls onto my shoulder.

“Missy, *chill,*” he says.

It catches me completely off guard that Nolan is standing up for me. And even more so when one of the girls at the table I just met chimes in with, “Yeah. This is what being an actress is. You win some, you lose some.”

Missy’s eyes darken for a brief moment before a cheery demeanor sweeps over her face. But even her fake smile is brittle and plaster. *If this is the extent of her acting ability, no wonder I got the part.* “I know. God, I’m just teasing! Lighten up, everyone!”

Lifting a delicate looking martini glass to her scarlet red lips, Missy falls into a chair next to Maggie. She’s making herself at home while I’m still standing here, not even comfortable enough to sit and join the party.

I study Missy's easy smile as she laughs with the group. Every piece of her face is modeled after a precious gemstone. Her eyes are dark amethyst. Her lips, rich rubies. Her cheeks, a perfect hue of rose quartz. And her hair, onyx. She's rare, exotic jewels... and I'm cubic zirconia. An imposter, standing amidst brilliant, priceless baubles.

"Where did you study acting, Katie?" she asks.

What is so hard to get right about my fucking name? I glance down at the shot of whiskey in my hand. The plan had been to sip the damn thing throughout the night, but something tells me I'm going to need this liquid courage tonight.

I tip my head back and take the shot, then slam the small glass down onto the table in front of me. The amber liquid smolders down my throat and I wince against the burn, trying my best not to let it show that I rarely drink.

I wipe the corner of my mouth with my index finger.

"It's *Kate*," I correct her pointedly. My voice is raw in the way that only whiskey can make you sound. "I got my BFA from—"

Holden's deep voice ripples through me, cutting me off mid-sentence. "*Enough, Missy.*"

Every follicle of hair I have stands on end and gooseflesh shivers across the back of my neck. His presence is heavy behind me.

I sneak a glance at him from over my shoulder. He's standing close to me... so damn close that I can smell the crisp scent of soap and spices. His hair is damp from what I can only assume is a shower, and he leans over me, plucking the beer out of my fingers and handing me a Cosmo.

"You hate beer," he whispers, his lips dangerously close to my ear.

I lift my gaze and connect for the briefest moment to Missy's glower. "Holden," she says with a saccharine smile. "You made it."

Holden clears his throat and shrugs out of an expensive-looking jacket, draping it over the back of an empty chair. "Well, when I heard you were coming to meet my small cast, I figured I should make an appearance."

He pulls out the empty chair beside him, pausing, giving me a look.

Gulping, I slide into the seat. The table falls silent, everyone staring at the three of us, waiting for what might happen next.

Even Nolan is uncharacteristically quiet, as he takes the seat on my other side. It's like there's a secret I'm not privy to... though based on the glares being exchanged between Missy and Holden and me, I'd say that quite a few of us have seen each other naked.

Nolan's elbow brushes mine, while Holden's hand still rests on the back of my chair, staking some weird kind of claim over me that he doesn't have.

I take a heavenly sip of my Cosmo, grateful that it's not the disgusting beer, but well-aware that the simple gesture from Holden has put even more of a target on my back when it comes to Missy.

The group settles into a new conversation, talking about theater and new union rules, but Missy's eyes jump back and forth between me and Holden.

Alcohol courses through my veins, relaxing me. There has to be a way to defuse this situation; to show Missy that I'm not the threat she thinks I am.

I swallow a thick lump in my throat and glance to my left where Nolan sits beside me, leaning his elbows on the table.

Sensing my stare, he looks at me and shoots me a boyish grin and a wink. "See anything you like, New Girl?"

It's probably the alcohol, but in the moment, that's the most charming thing I've ever heard. I giggle, the sound weirdly feminine and... sexy?

Oh, God. It's *definitely* the alcohol.

I steal a glance at Missy, whose head tilts curiously, watching my interaction with Nolan.

Yes, I think. See? I'm not into Holden. I'm not trying to steal your roles or your co-star.

Okay, well, I guess I am kind of trying to steal her role. But as Chelsea said earlier, that's what acting *is*. If she can't handle that, then she's in the wrong business. But if I can at least convince her that I'm not after Holden,

I'll consider this a win.

Something tells me that I don't want Missy Howl as an enemy in this business.

I cozy up to Nolan, shouldering my way against him, and he obliges, slinging his arm around me.

He's warm. And smells nice. He has a light, almost flowery scent, which is weird for a guy. It's not altogether unpleasant, but my pulse isn't racing either.

This isn't about heart-pumping passion, I tell myself. This is self-preservation. This is about moving on from Holden.

Nolan is sweet and talented... and apparently, he likes me.

As soon as I close my eyes, I realize what a bad idea that is. Because with my eyes closed, it's not Nolan I'm picturing snuggling with... it's Holden.

I snap them open and find Holden's attention fixed on Nolan's arm around me. More specifically, locked onto his thumb, drawing little circles at my shoulder.

"So... *Kate.*" Missy pops my name from her mouth pointedly. "Is this your first gig?"

My throat goes dry. The question feels like a trap for reasons I can't quite define.

"It's my first Broadway role. But I've done professional work." I'm intentionally vague, desperately not wanting to cite my sad resume to a room of highly trained professionals.

Missy whistles. "Your first Broadway role and it's a lead part. *Wow.* Most of us begin as understudies or ensemble."

"I've had my fair share of those roles, too," I say. *Just not on Broadway.*

"I'm sure you have."

Her comment needles beneath my flesh before her cackle interrupts any comeback I might've had.

"It's just so odd that you would jump from a *Fringe Festival* show to

Broadway like that.” She snaps her fingers to emphasize the point.

Dammit. She’s not going to let this go. Not even with me snuggling up to Nolan.

“I got really lucky,” I answer.

Missy’s gaze narrows at Holden. He looks like he wants to argue, but instead, he stares into his cup.

“I bet you did,” Missy says.

I clear my throat, forcing myself not to look at Holden. I need to focus on Missy.

Defuse, defuse, defuse.

“Yeah, Reid Bradley was really impressed when he saw my Fringe performance. Before he handed the director gig to Holden, he called my agent and set up my audition. I’ve never even met the man, but I owe him so much.”

Missy’s no longer looking at me. It’s like I’m no longer in the room or even part of the conversation. She’s talking directly to Holden as she says, “Is that so? That’s not what I hea—”

Nolan interrupts Missy and nudges my almost empty martini glass. “Want another drink?”

I could kiss him right now for the change in subject.

When I glance up at him, his smile is soft and friendly, and he gives my shoulder a quick reassuring squeeze.

I’m about to answer that I shouldn’t when Holden growls, “It’s a work night.”

I glare at Holden. He’s not wrong, but the fact that he thinks he can answer for me simmers my blood, causing it to run hot through my veins.

Who does he think he is?

Nolan snorts a laugh. “Okay, *Dad*. I wasn’t asking you.”

“Tomorrow’s rehearsal is going to be a long day,” Holden snaps.

I lift my glass and toss back what little is left at the bottom of the cup.

“They’re *all* long days if you ask me,” I murmur.

“The best actors I know immerse themselves in a role during the discovery of the rehearsal period.” Holden’s amber gaze is steeled onto me. There’s an implied added statement *especially when they’re on a trial run* that he doesn’t say.

I inhale a long, slow breath before smiling at Nolan. “Actually, I should probably get home. Thanks for inviting me out. It’s been...” My gaze circles around the table, pausing at Missy. “Enlightening.”

I push back from the chair and grab my jacket and purse.

Nolan jumps to his feet with me. “I’ll walk you to the subway.”

Normally, I would insist that’s not necessary. But it’s late, and as much as I love this city, it probably doesn’t hurt to have a guy walk with me through the streets of New York.

“Sure,” I say. “Just give me a minute to hit the restroom.”

I bring my stuff with me to the bathroom so that I don’t have to go back to that table after, if I can help it. I finish my business, and as I’m washing my hands, the door swings open and Holden’s reflection is looking back at me in the mirror.

“What the *hell* are you doing?”

The door shuts behind him as he steps closer to me.

“Don’t sleep with Nolan,” he blurts out.

“What?”

He takes another step forward as I spin to face him. “You heard me. Don’t go home with Nolan.”

A thrilling spark explodes in my belly. I shouldn’t be so affected by Holden’s reaction to me and Nolan... but I am. Never mind the fact that I don’t have *any* intention of going home with Nolan tonight, it feels good to know that Holden cares.

My throat burns, and as I swallow, all I can taste is cranberries and vodka.

I square my shoulders. “Why *not*? He’s sweet and sexy and talented...”

and he wants me.”

Unlike some people at this bar.

For all of Holden’s bravado, when push comes to shove, he doesn’t even want people we work with to know we had a history once. Hell, he wouldn’t even let me answer Missy about my Alma mater. He clearly doesn’t want them to know we went to the same Ivy League undergrad.

He seems to want me, but only when it’s convenient to him. And only when no one will see us.

The fluorescent light above us flickers, bathing us in a harsh, cold glow. The unforgiving light illuminates the dark bluish circles beneath his eyes. For the first time, I see how tired and stressed Holden seems.

He rakes his hands through his hair and closes what little space was between us in a few steps.

I sway, trying to back away, but I hit the sink, pressing painfully against the cool porcelain. I can’t tell if I’m hazy from my buzz or from the proximity to Holden, but either way, my mind is fuzzy and my impulse control wanes. I slide a lazy glance down his body and the muscles that push against the high thread count of his cotton shirt. His biceps look thicker than they did in college. He’s bigger, broader and I ache to reach out and grip the muscles to see if they feel different, too.

“Nolan’s not a bad guy... he’s just a serial showmancer.”

“Showmancer?”

“Yeah. You know... showmance. A romance that only lasts as long as the show. I don’t want to see you fall victim to yet *another* one of his romances. Even if it is good for publicity in the short term, his relationships always end badly and usually in the middle of the show, ruining the run.”

I gulp and sink into the realization. Holden’s not jealous. He doesn’t want me for himself... he’s looking out for the show. Again. When am I going to learn?

The bathroom spins and I close my eyes, which only makes the sensation

worse.

When I open my eyes, Holden's standing even closer, towering over me. His fingers trail over the waistband of my jeans and he tugs them, slipping one finger inside and gliding it along the elastic of my panties. "What color are they?" he asks, his voice hoarse.

"Why?" I lift my brow, challenging him. "Are you in the market for panties?"

He doesn't answer me. His gaze is cast down at my hips as he keeps stroking that single index finger back and forth over my hipbone.

"So," I push, "Is that the only reason why you don't want me sleeping with Nolan? Because of the *show*?"

He mutters a string of impressive expletives, yanking his hand back and out of my waistband before saying, "Dammit! You *know* that's not the only reason why."

But I *don't* know. Not at all. It's the first time in years that he's even remotely suggested that he still has feelings for me.

I gulp back the emotion rising in my throat and whisper, "Conceit, more rich in matter than in words, brags of his substance, not of ornament. They are but beggars that can count their worth—"

His humorless laugh cuts off my speech. "Still reciting Shakespeare every time things get tense? Nice Kate. Real mature."

"Oh, I'm *Kate* now, am I? I guess I must be acting really immature, since that's what you call me when I'm acting like a ... what was it... childish freshman?"

He lifts his hands to my face, and with a single finger, he brushes a stray hair off my cheekbone, tucking it behind my ear. "Isn't it exhausting? Hating me so much?"

"Not as exhausting as forgiving you," I whisper.

His brows jump. "How would you know if you've never forgiven me?"

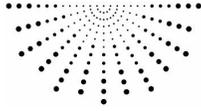
"How can I forgive someone who's never officially apologized?"

He looks like he's going to argue, but instead, his firm lips part and I can smell the spiced scotch on his breath, mixed with a faint scent of peppermint. Thick, dark hair falls in soft waves across his forehead, and it's not fair that he was able to touch my hair and yet I'm frozen where I stand, too terrified to move, let alone touch him. With a blink, his long, black lashes flutter.

"Kate," he whispers, bringing his hand to cup my jaw. He tilts my gaze, forcing my eyes to meet his. "I'm sorry—"

Before he can finish the apology, the bathroom door swings open. My stomach plummets as Missy stands there in front of us, an arrogant smirk displayed on her thick, scarlet lips. "You weren't kidding when you said you 'got lucky' were you, Kate?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

Even though I kept my eyes focused straight ahead on Professor McCay in class, I could feel Kate's presence behind me. Though it was quiet, I heard every little sip of hot tea she took from the to-go cup clasped in her hands. And her light, rose-flower scent drifted toward me each time she shifted in her seat.

And fuck my life, I knew what color panties she was wearing every time she rubbed those pretty little thighs together.

It had taken me only an hour and half to find her listing on Craigslist selling her panties. 90 fucking minutes and a location search. Even though the photo she posted didn't show her face or any distinguishing mark or clothes, I knew it was her.

I could tell from the counter in the shot behind her. The shitty laminate and stainless steel sink behind her was in her particular dorm rooms. The suites that were usually only available to upperclassmen. It was the only picture that I recognized to be on campus.

And hers was the only picture that could have been her body type. It was

Katherine. I had no doubt.

And I needed those fucking panties in the picture.

There was a little birthmark on her ass in the picture that had my mouth watering. I wanted to nibble that birthmark. See my teeth marks surrounding it. Smack it and watch the pink palm print fade.

The thought of any other man owning that pair of panties made me nuts. I literally couldn't think straight all day.

She was asking \$50 for the pair. I would have paid \$500.

So I created a fake email and made her an offer I hoped she couldn't refuse. \$500 for six pairs of panties.

And she had to email me a picture of her wearing the panty every day.

It took all day, but finally Sunday night, she accepted my offer. And twenty minutes ago, just before class started, the first image hit my inbox.

It literally made me skid to a stop mid-step.

It took the fucking breath from my lungs.

It was that space where innocence and depravity collide and I was so fucking hard from that photo, I could hardly concentrate as Professor McCay waved her copy of Romeo and Juliet in the air.

The picture had been cropped again, but she was sitting here. In this very fucking theater. I could see part of the armrests in her picture.

Literally Kate had snapped that naughty picture of her pretty pink lacy panty moments before the rest of the class came in.

And now I had to sit here for the next two hours, hard as a fucking rock knowing that fact.

I adjusted myself, grateful for the fact that I didn't go commando today.

Focus Holden, I told myself. Think about the homework. This stupid fucking play about star-crossed lovers that I skimmed through over the weekend.

"By now," Professor McCay said. "You all should have at least finished an initial read through of what is most likely the most famous love story in

history.”

I snorted, shaking my head while bending my own copy of the play in my hands.

“Mr. Dorsey, you seem to have strong feelings that you’re unable to suppress. Care to share with the rest of us?”

I really didn’t feel like making my jaded case to a room full of bleeding-heart actors.

Especially not when I currently had a raging boner for my classmate.

I slouched deeper in my seat and pulled the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head.

“Pass,” I grunted.

The professor scoffed. “You can’t pass. I called on you. Answer the question or get a zero for the day.”

I muttered a curse. The threat of a zero: the one threat I was powerless against. Fuck my life if I had to take another elective course next semester or, God forbid, not graduate on time because some professor had it out for me because I found her playing squeeze the salami in a janitor’s closet.

“Fine.” I sighed and forced myself to sit up. “Calling it a love story is bullshit. It’s a play about two horny teenagers who think love is about waxing poetic versus putting in the hard work to make a relationship last. Three days together and they take their own lives? That’s not love. That’s emotional instability and codependency.”

Professor McCay flipped her dark brown hair out of her face. “Interesting. That’s certainly one way to look at it. And while you may think you’re an outlier in your opinions of the Bard’s most well-known play, you’re not. Lots of people feel this way about Romeo and Juliet.

Behind me, Kate mumbled, “Yeah, jaded people.”

I might have been seeing things, but I could have sworn Professor McCay’s expression soured as Kate spoke. “Ms. Harris, do you have something to add?”

“Yeah,” she snapped. I didn’t have to turn around to know that her leg was bouncing—a habit of hers I’d noticed when she was agitated. “There’s a reason so many great love stories center around teenage love and first loves. It’s angsty and dramatic, but it’s also defining and pure. You’re not as likely to be clouded by past scars and bad relationships. These are the stories that either make it—go on to be long-standing romances—or they’re the relationships that shape us... and create those walls and barriers that we spend our entire adulthood fighting.”

I spun in my seat and glared at her. “And what exactly do you know about any of that?”

I stopped shy of calling her a virgin, but the implication was there, thick with tension between us.

God I was such a fucking asshole.

And a hypocrite. Mocking her publicly about being so innocent, but behind closed doors, that same innocence got my fucking rocks off.

Her chest heaved with each heavy inhale and exhale. “Don’t confuse inexperience with ignorance, Holden.”

Professor McCay clapped her hands. “Holden... Kate. Please come up to the stage. And bring your scripts.”

My spine went rigid, each vertebra replaced with steel. “Why?”

“Because you two are going to act out Act two, Scene two. Or better known as: The Balcony Scene.”

Kate’s objection was like a dagger piercing my heart. “No!”

“Yes,” Professor McCay said, her tone stern. “I noticed your chemistry on the first day of classes. It’s rare to see a connection so strong between two people initially. So, get up. I want to see how this intense argument plays out on the other side of the coin.”

“What other side?” I snapped. “What are you talking about?”

Begrudgingly, Kate and I stood and slowly made our way to center stage.

“Love and hate, of course,” Professor McCay said.

“We don’t love each other—” Kate said.

While at the same time, I responded with, “We don’t hate each other—”

From where I stood, only a few feet separated us on the stage. Grit scuffed beneath my shoes as I moved closer to her. Three feet of separation became two... then one.

We froze, a mere twelve inches between us. It was both too close and too far, all at once.

“Okay, then,” Professor McCay said. “Skip the big monologues at the beginning of the scene. We all know both of their soliloquies. I want to see the communication. The dialogue. While I’m sure everyone here has read the entire play, as you were assigned to do, let me sum up their feelings. At this point, Romeo and Juliet have met at the party and it was love at first sight. They’ve since realized their families are mortal enemies, but Romeo, you can’t stay away. Nor, Juliet, do you want him to.”

The professor paused, taking the steps to the stage slowly so that she stood there in the corner with us. Like a piece of set in the scene. “You know how wrong this is, but you just can’t help yourselves.”

A lump lodged in my throat as my eyes locked with Kate’s. They were wide and wet, and she looked almost as terrified as I felt.

“And... go.”

As I curled the script back in my hand, the spine snapped against my fingers and, with it, so did my resolve. I cleared my throat, reading the first lines at the top of the page. Romeo’s lines. Or rather, my lines.

“By a name, I know not how to tell thee who I am.” Something felt off. Not looking at her, not seeing her eyes as I recited to her felt wrong.

I lifted the script higher so that my gaze could bounce back and forth between the words on the page and her flashing sapphire eyes. “My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, because it is an enemy to thee; Had I written it, I would tear the word.”

She licked her plump lips and the sheen of glossy moisture that clung to

them had my own mouth watering. “My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words of that tongue’s utterance, yet I know the sound: Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?”

Shakespeare’s words never sounded so sweet as they did coming from her lips. Not that I had a lot of experience in the subject, but she was mesmerizing.

We continued on like that, reading the lines and stealing glances at each other from over the pages of our scripts.

Interestingly enough, Kate kept her eyes fastened to her script as often as possible. The moment I would peer up at her and meet her gaze, her attention would jerk back to the book in her hands... even though we both knew she’d had every line of this play memorized for years.

As the scene continued, we’d somehow drifted closer to each other. Small, shuffling steps that I hadn’t realized I’d been taking until I smelled a bouquet of roses. What the hell was that intoxicating scent of hers? It was light and lovely, and she smelled like my mom’s garden.

Like roses and raspberries and... maybe a hint of chocolate.

I glanced up from my script to see Kate a few inches in front of me, her eyes peering at me from over her script as she recited her lines. “Oh, swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon—”

“I don’t believe you, Ms. Harris,” Professor McCay called out.

I blinked, surprised, my focus broken from where I’d been transfixed onto Kate. That was unbelievable acting? I thought she was incredible.

“You’re giving us what you think the audience wants to see. You’re giving us a Juliet we’ve seen a million times. Yes, she’s an innocent, young girl. But she’s also a volcano, ready to erupt. We need to see your lava simmering beneath the surface.”

Kate’s throat went tight, cords roping from her jaw to her sternum. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes, trying again. “The inconstant moon, that changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable.”

“What shall I swear by?” I whispered, certain that no one could even hear my line, it was so quiet. Kate truly was remarkable.

“Do not swear at all,” she said. “Or if thou wilt—”

“Come on, Kate!” Professor McCay shouted. “Give Mr. Dorsey something to work with. You expect him to want to grab you? Throw you down and make love to you? Whisk you away and marry you, when you’re standing there, stiffer than a statue?”

“—swear by thy gracious self—”

McCay’s voice was piercing. If anything was ruining the moment, making us feel stiff, it was the professor screaming at us amidst the scene. “Take her hand, Holden. Touch her while she talks.”

Kate’s eyes turned fearful as I reached out and threaded my fingers through hers.

Her words hiccupped. “W-which is the god of my idolatry.”

Energy zipped up my arm from where our palms connected, and with a little tug, her body brushed against mine, the script nearly falling from her free hand.

Sweat dotted across her forehead, glistening beneath the hot, yellow stage lights beating down on us.

“That’s it, Holden. Grab her waist. Touch her face. Her neck. Do what Romeo would do if he was unable to stop himself from touching a woman he desperately wanted. And Kate, keep reciting your lines. You want his touch, but you know you shouldn’t want it. Balance the desire to give in with the struggle to keep him at arm’s length.”

Fuck me. It was the section of the scene where Juliet did most of the talking, not me. All I had to do was touch her... want her.

No problem there.

“A-And I’ll believe thou... I mean, thee,” she stuttered, burying her nose further into the script.

My cock twitched, pressing painfully against the zipper of my jeans.

Dammit, Kate. You know these lines. Why are you hiding behind that script?

She gasped as I grabbed the book out of her hand and tossed it across the stage, saying my line, "If my heart's dear love..."

She was supposed to cut me off with her next line, but she didn't. Instead, she stood there, her jaw dropped, nostrils flaring.

Good. Get pissed. Anger is at least an emotion that might get McCay off our backs.

My cock brushed against Kate's pelvis as I snaked an arm around her waist. Even though we were already standing directly in front of each other, I pulled her closer, flush against me.

I leaned in, my lips brushing her ear as I whispered, "I thought this was your dream role?"

Her soft breasts pushed against me as her chest hitched with the gasp.

"It is," she whispered back to me.

"Then show them what I had a glimpse of this past weekend."

I pulled back from her ear, our hands pressed together, palm to palm.

I gave her an extra moment, in awe of the beautiful sight as she closed her eyes and drew a deep breath in through her nose, before releasing it through her relaxed, parted lips. When her eyes opened once more, I saw it—or rather, her. I saw Juliet, not Kate, standing in front of me.

It wasn't until that very moment that I understood what Professor McCay was trying to get out of her. I thought her acting had been good before... and I supposed it had been. But good didn't compare to this. Good didn't compare to the complete transformation I witnessed right in front of my eyes, in my arms.

She was still Kate, only she wasn't. Her posture was different. Shoulders back, regal and chin high with an air of royalty about her.

I cleared my throat and said my line again. "If my heart's dear love—"

"Well, do not swear!" she exclaimed with such commitment, that I

actually jerked back a little. With a brush of her index finger to my bottom lip, she shushed me with a single touch. Then, she continued to drag her fingernail, tracing across my bottom lip, circling up to the bow of my top lip as she spoke. “Although I joy in thee, I have no joy of this contract tonight.”

No joy? I’ll give her no joy. McCay had given me permission after all, hadn’t she? If Holden couldn’t let himself feel for Kate, then Romeo could certainly love Juliet.

I curled my fingers around her hand and drew it to my lips, first kissing her knuckle before I took her index finger and nibbled the end. Her voice caught, knees giving out, and thank God for the hold I had around her waist, because I had to catch her, bear her weight in my arms.

She continued her monologue as I trailed gentle kisses up her arm and circled around until I was behind her.

I swept away the curtain of blonde hair from her shoulder and drew a line from the birthmark behind her ear down to the edge of her shoulder.

Gooseflesh lifted on her skin, and she shivered. “Good night, good night! As sweet repose and rest...”

I crept my arm around her torso and pulled her ass against me. With a slow pulse of my hips, I pushed my rigid cock against her and felt her gasp press her firm, flat stomach to my palm.

Fuck me. I was drowning in her. I was drowning and begging for more even as I was deprived of oxygen and being pulled into the dark depths of an ocean. I dropped my face into the curve of her neck and inhaled the sweet, floral scent pulsing at the hollow of her jaw. The scent was more intense here... I’d found the point at which she applies her perfume, whatever it is. I wanted it on me. I wanted to wake up smelling it beside me until the end of days.

Each erratic breath of hers was like an aphrodisiac to my senses.

“Come to thy heart as that within my breast,” she said.

My line was next, but I didn’t want to glance at my script. I didn’t want to

tear my face from this hot, heady magnetic force that was Kate. I knew the scene vaguely well enough that I took a guess at what my next line was. Something about unsatisfied.

“Are you going to leave me so unsatisfied?” I murmured into the crook of her neck.

Dragging my hand up to the base of her ribcage, I stroked my thumb, catching the bottom swell of her breast. As she squirmed against me, wriggling that thin body of hers, her ass brushed my cock. She squeezed her thighs together in a needy, unsatiated motion I recognized immediately.

Images of her pink panties flashed through my mind. Feral thoughts of her dripping into those panties as she fidgeted and rubbed her thighs together.

And those panties would be mine soon enough. Mine to wrap around myself, fist in my hand while I rubbed her scent all over my cock.

I groaned as my lips came to her earlobe. I grazed my teeth against the sensitive skin, nibbling and sucking. The small of her back arched off my torso and she gasped, the sound loud enough to ring through the theater.

The moment resonated within me... I'd found her spot. The spot to make her squirm, writhe, and sing in my arms.

Reaching back, she fisted my hair and yanked my head away from her neck. Still pressing her back to my front, she twisted her neck to look at me from over her shoulder. “What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?”

Those plump, wet lips parted up at me, and fuck me, I wanted to kiss her. Romeo would kiss her, right? With a glance at my script, I read aloud, “The exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine.”

Her fingers tightened in my hair, pulling my face down to hers. “I gave thee mine before thou didst request it...”

Her eyes searched my face. It was still her line to say, but she went silent, her gaze settling on my mouth.

I dipped my chin, my lips brushing against hers in a kiss that wasn't a

kiss, but simply parted lips meeting and buzzing a hair's breadth away from each other.

“Okay!” Professor McCay’s loud voice broke the moment between us. “I think that’s a good stopping point.”

I released my hold on Kate as the curtain dropped between us, shattering the moment. Applause broke out from our classmates.

While Kate scrambled away from me, stumbling back a couple steps, I threw my hands into my hair and tugged at the strands hard.

Holy fuck. Was that me in that scene, reading those lines? It felt like me... but not. The feeling was completely liberating. A way to release all that tension that had built up inside of me.

I felt... I felt alive in a way I’d never felt in my entire life.

When I looked up at Kate, fire burned in those blue eyes, and her mouth pressed into a blanched, white line, draining the blush color from her flesh.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she whispered, pointing a finger in my face before turning away from me.

“Do what?” I asked, even though I was pretty sure I knew what she was referring to.

“It’s unprofessional to touch a fellow actor... to put your lips on them without discussing first.”

“Professor McCay’s the one who told me to touch you!” I glanced at our teacher who was surprisingly—and it seemed intentionally—staying out of it.

Was this our punishment? For walking in on her fucking some dude in a closet? She was going to allow us to just torture ourselves for the semester?

“Yeah,” Kate spat. “Touch me. Not kiss me. Not put your lips on my ear.”

What the hell was she so mad at? We rocked that scene. We should be reveling in the applause from the class and basking in a sense of accomplishment.

And I shouldn’t feel so fucking pissed that she was lashing out at me like

this. “Are you really mad at me for touching you? Or are you mad that you sucked at playing your dream role until I touched you?”

Her jaw ticked, and I would have felt bad, except that she responded with, “Well, feeling up a girl and kissing her on stage doesn’t make you a talented actor, either, Holden. It makes you a porn star.”

I laughed, my lip curling back. “You’ve been watching some pretty pathetic porn.” Then, I leaned in, whispering so that only she could hear me. “And if you think what we just did was a kiss? You really are a vir—”

I didn’t get the insult out before her hand flew across my cheek, slapping me. Hard. It wasn’t the sort of girlie smack that was playful and innocent. The sound cracked, echoing through the theater and a few gasps followed from the audience.

“Enough!” McCay said, stepping between us. “You two put on quite a show... on script and off.”

Unlike Kate, who was already halfway down the stairs of the stage and rushing to her seat in the auditorium, I was locked in place. My feet were heavy, cemented to the stage floor.

Professor McCay lifted an eyebrow at me. “You can take your seat now, Holden.”

I shook off the disturbed feeling and the giggles and murmurs of our other classmates as I headed back to my seat. Now more than ever I could feel Kate’s gaze burning into me.

She leaned forward and I felt her breath on the back of my neck as she whispered, “Never touch my ear again. I hate that.”

“That might be more of a believable statement if you hadn’t pulled out my hair and humped my leg after I touched your ear. But sure... whatever you need to tell yourself.”

Professor McCay cleared her throat, looking pointedly at us. “You might be wondering why we’re starting the curriculum with Romeo and Juliet? Well, I want to introduce you all to one of our graduate students in the

theater department. He has written an original play—a retelling of Romeo and Juliet. And for his final thesis project, this class is going to workshop his show. Your final will be the performance. And his MFA will be dependent upon you all.”

She waved a hand, and from the back of the theater, a shadowed figure came down the center aisle.

“Everyone, this is Keith Langley, your playwright and teacher’s assistant for the semester. Think of him as an extension of me.”

As he stepped into the light, I recognized him and gulped. Extension of Professor McCay, indeed. I turned to glance at Kate, who’s eyes were wide. She recognized him, too.

He was the man we’d found Professor McCay in the closet with on the first day of classes.

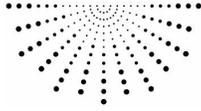
Professor McCay cleared her throat, and I jerked my attention back to the stage. Her glare was set directly on Kate and me. “I think it goes without saying that discretion is of the utmost importance. This play is Mr. Langley’s work for the last two years. He will hold auditions for the parts next week. And if I find anyone has leaked the script—or any other private information—I will hold the entire class personally responsible and make sure that none of you see the light of the stage for your remaining time here. Is that clear?”

It was crystal fucking clear. Message received, Professor McCay. The threat: Keep your mouth shut or she’d ruin us.

Lucky for me, I didn’t give a fuck about the theater department. At least not until I got my A for the term. But the idea that this lowly theater professor thought she could ruin me?

I smirked to myself. Think again, McCay.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



There's a knot in my back the size of the Washington Monument. It's so damn tight that no amount of stretching, yoga, or Icy Hot is easing the pain.

On my hands and knees in the center of the stage, I warm up my spine and body with some cat/cow yoga poses, trying to center myself; to focus for today's rehearsal.

But my mind's far from focused. Instead of being in Skyler's head, I'm staring at the gray dust gathering on the knees of my black yoga pants.

I inhale deeply through my nose and release it slowly out of my mouth.

Inhale. Exhale. Focus.

Inhale. Exhale. Focu—

“Hey,” a soft voice breaks my concentration. Well, it breaks what little concentration I had scraped together.

When I glance up, Nolan's standing over me, his eyes on my ass.

A blush heats my cheeks, and I sit up on my heels, tugging my t-shirt down over my yoga pants. “Hi.”

It's just so weird. Guys like Nolan don't desire girls like me. I'm small—and not in the sexy, fit kind of way. I'm just petite with the body of a tomboy high school girl still waiting on her period. My hair is a weird shade that's not quite blonde and not quite brown. Jill says that people pay a ton of money

to get natural highlights like mine, but she's full of shit. I've been around enough actresses to know that none of them have my caramel undertones. They go bold—all-in blonde or all-in brunette.

The really ballsy girls go redhead.

“So,” Nolan says, flashing me a sheepish grin. “About last night. I have to ask... are you and Holden—”

“No. God, no.” Leveraging my weight on my knees, I push to stand in front of him. Which does very little to actually bring me to eye-level with Nolan considering he's a whole head taller than me. “Holden and I are not... um... you know.”

“Fucking?” he asks bluntly.

Jesus. Are all men this crass? I clear my throat. “Yes. I mean, *no!* No, we're not fucking.”

“But you used to?” Nolan pushes.

I gulp and Holden's voice rings in my head from our first day of rehearsal. *It's probably best that no one knows we used to date. Wouldn't want them thinking that's why you got this part.*

I wouldn't have to lie if Holden had just kept his shit together the other night when we all went out. Or better yet... if he hadn't shown up at all.

“Kate.” Nolan chuckles and takes my hand. “It's okay... God knows you're not the first person to sleep with their director—”

Oh, God. I think I'm going to be sick. Holden was right—everyone thinks I slept with him to get this part. My throat tightens and my sinuses burn.

“Because *that's* the only conceivable way that Holden would cast me and not Missy Howl, right?” I interrupt him.

Nolan blinks, surprised by my accusation. “I didn't say that.”

“You didn't have to.”

I turn away from him to grab my script. No matter what happens between Nolan and I, we still have to work together and fall madly in love with each other every night on stage.

“Kate, wait.” He grabs my hand, stopping me from walking away. “I wasn’t talking about you when I said you’re not the first person to...”

His voice trails off and I lift my brows. “Are you telling me *you* slept with Holden?”

Now, that would be a surprising turn of events.

He laughs and shakes his head. “I’m telling you *I*’ve slept with directors in the past. And it never ends well. I don’t know what’s going on with you and Holden, but it’s clear *something* is happening.”

His confession warms me, and when he grabs my hand, my heart squeezes. Nolan is handsome. And sweet. And... kind of a goober. But liking him—dating him—would be so much easier than anything with Holden.

I return his smile. “Holden and I went to the same college.” I shrug, trying to brush off our history as mere college kids. “That’s all. He was a senior when I was a freshman, and we had a show together. We didn’t get along back then. And I think it’s pretty clear we still don’t.”

It’s not even a lie. An omission of truth, sure. But not a lie.

We’re still holding hands, only now Nolan’s thumb is drawing gentle figure eights along my knuckles. “Just be careful. Okay? And hey, if you really need to burn off some sexual energy and sleep with someone...” He leans back and gestures at himself with his free hand that isn’t stroking me. “I’m always here for you, babe.”

“Haven’t you heard the theory that as soon as actors sleep together in real life, they lose all their chemistry *on the stage*?”

He snorts and shakes his head. “Total bullshit.”

“And you would know?”

He bellows a laugh. “You know, Kate, you’re making it really hard to woo you by bringing up my past indiscretions.”

In a most unsettling way, my throat bottoms out to my stomach. “You’re trying to woo me?”

Instead of laughing and pulling away from me as I expect him to do, he

drags my knuckles to his lips, brushing a kiss across them. “If you can’t tell, then I guess I need to up my game.”

A gasping breath grinds in my throat. I can’t sleep with Nolan. I wish I could. My life would be so much easier if that whole *get over someone by getting under someone else* thing worked for me. But it doesn’t. I’ve tried and I usually end up sobbing in the shower after, wishing for a man I’d sworn off five years ago.

Nolan peers at me from over my hand through a web of long, black lashes.

“Nolan—” My tone comes out much sharper than I intend, and I sound like a schoolteacher rather than a young woman who was just propositioned for sex. I have to let him down. I have to put an end to this. I’m a lot of things, but a tease isn’t one.

“Uh-oh. I know that tone.”

Holden stands over us, out of nowhere. “Can we get you two on your fucking marks, please? It’s ten-minutes into rehearsal and there’s no *rehearsing* happening.”

The ten-minute delay wasn’t our fault. Holden had spent the first part of rehearsal figuring out the costumes and set dressings with the designers and we were asked to wait in the wings.

Holden pivots away from us, stalking across the stage and yelling at a couple of stagehands bringing in the set piece for the day.

I gulp. Not just any set piece.

The bed.

Today of all days, we’re blocking the sex scene.

Fuck my life.

With a scowl that reeks of intimidation and superiority, Holden marches back to me. He grabs my arm—not hard or violently, but with an authority that I have no doubt he thinks is untouchable. He guides me away from Nolan. Far away to the other end of the stage.

Indignation spikes in my body as I wrench my arm from his hold. “You could have just asked me to join you over here. There’s no need to manhandle me.”

“Manhandle.” He snorts the word. There’s an unnerving gleam in his eyes. “Funny use of that word since I just saw Nolan sucking your fingers.”

I roll my eyes. “He kissed my hand, Holden. That’s hardly the pornographic display you’re making it out to be. Besides, maybe we’re just getting into character for the scene.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw as I lean in and whisper, “You know, like you and I used to warm up before a performance.”

Okay, maybe that was mean. And unnecessary. Then again, the look on his face is priceless.

Darkness swirls in his eyes and they narrow onto me.

I should be celebrating the small win. It’s so rare when I can burrow under his skin like this. But instead, my pulse leaps, slamming into the base of my throat as his already sour mood turns even more bitter.

My body throbs as he takes a step closer to me, each exhale coming out hot and fast. I can’t seem to take a deep breath when he’s this close to me... and he seems to relish in that knowledge.

“Today’s scene is all about the passion, Katherine,” Holden says. “Unbridled lust. But more importantly, it’s not just about the sex between your characters, but the fact that Skyler has let him in emotionally, too. It’s not just sex. It’s intimacy.”

Even Holden’s words as a director are seducing. They simmer my blood more than Nolan’s lips on my skin ever could.

A shiver races down my spine.

Holden’s gaze locks onto mine. “Can you do that? Show me intimacy and not just some cookie-cutter, boring sex scene?”

Truthfully, I’m not sure I can. I haven’t been intimate with a man since Holden. Physically? Sure. Not emotionally. Not *true* intimacy. I’ve tried—

God, I've tried. In many desperate attempts to move on, but they never worked.

The only man I've loved... the only man I've been vulnerable with... was Holden.

And then he shattered me beyond repair.

Instead of pulling away, Holden rocks forward. "I don't want to have to take drastic measures. But I will if I need to."

I nod. "The show is priority."

As always. And that fact hurts more than it should.

He doesn't disagree. Yanking a hanger off a costume rack, he passes me a bra and panty set, as well as a wrap dress. "This is your costume for this scene. Nolan will have to practice taking the dress off you to get the timing right."

I gulp, my gaze fixed to the scrap of silk dangling from the hanger. "Will I be in a bodysuit beneath?"

Reading the tag, he says, "Not exactly."

Grabbing the second hanger that had been beside the bra and panties, he hands it to me as well.

"Dance briefs beneath," he says. "Well... a dance thong. And a whole lot of pasties and double-sided sticky tape to prevent a, uh, wardrobe mishap."

My brow arches. "Can't have Nolan and me pulling a Janet Jackson-Justin Timberlake move, now can we?"

To my surprise, a blush heats Holden's cheeks. I swallow my smirk, relishing in the thought that the idea of a nip-slip has prodded this reaction from him.

"I want you to start rehearsing in your costume today. The blocking will require you and Nolan... to undress each other. It might take you a little while to get comfortable being half naked on stage." It didn't escape me, the way his voice cracked on the word undress.

I huff a laugh. "I'm not an eighteen-year-old virgin anymore, Holden. I

can handle flashing my naughty bits on stage when it's called for."

Heat ignites in his eyes and they roam down my body for the briefest moment. If I hadn't been paying such close attention to him, I would have missed it.

With a fisted hand covering his mouth, he clears his throat. "Yeah. Well... go get changed and we'll start when you're ready."

I nod and head to the dressing room in the back when his voice stops me, mid-step. "And Kate... about last night? I'm sorry."

I slowly turn to face him. "For what?"

"For... everything."

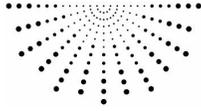
"Not good enough," I say, shaking my head.

His expression sours. "Being sorry for all my shit isn't good enough?"

It's a copout. A blanket apology rather than listing and owning the multitude of ways he's hurt me. It means he never has to list them all out and learn about the ones he maybe doesn't even realize yet. I refuse to give him that satisfaction of accepting something so vague. So equivocal.

"Nope. Ambiguity is not a good look on you, Holden. If you feel like getting more specific with an apology, you know where to find me."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



*F*uck. Me.

I might as well be naked on stage.

The black, lacy bra is cut low across my cleavage and has an immense amount of padding pushing what little goods I have up to my chin.

The panties are worse. The cheeky cut of them leaves very little to the imagination. And the dance brief thong layered below it doesn't do much to mask what's beneath. Thank God I shaved today. *That* would have been humiliating.

Why did I have to throw down that false bravado about being totally cool with showing my body in the theater?

I spin in the full-length mirror in my dressing room and gulp back the bit of bile rising in my throat. *Seriously, what was I thinking?*

My breaths come in short bursts. I can't do this. I cannot go out there with my ex-boyfriend directing me while I strip down in front of him and simulate sex with another guy who clearly wants to see me naked.

There's a knock at my dressing room door and Maggie's voice echoes through the crack. "You ready, Kate?"

"Yep," I say, and swallow against the lump in my throat. With a sweep of my arms, I shrug into the wrap dress, cinching the belt at the side of my waist, before making my way out to the stage.

Nolan's already there sitting on the bed, elbows on his knees, and Holden is kneeling, talking to him.

From over Nolan's shoulder, Holden's gaze lifts to mine. I search his face for clues as to what they were just talking about.

There must be something Nolan's not so good at. If my kryptonite is showing vulnerability, what's his? I'd feel a whole hell of a lot better knowing I'm not alone in my imperfections.

Holden's stare—that infuriatingly sexy, brooding stare—sends goosebumps pebbling across my bare flesh.

A small twitch of a smile flashes across Holden's mouth and he stands quickly, addressing both Nolan and me together. "I want you to start the scene here, in front of the bed. You've just come home from your date and you both are fully aware of what comes next at this point. But Skyler, you're more forceful than Zach. You're aggressively sexual versus Zach... you want to take your time. Savor the moment. Of the two characters, Zach, you're the more sentimental one."

Nolan smirks and tosses a wink in my direction. "If that's the case, I'll deserve an Oscar for this role."

Holden scowls in a sexy way that only he can accomplish. "It's a Tony award, not an Oscar, you dumbass."

Nolan rolls his eyes. "You know what I mean."

Holden growls a raspy sound before scrubbing his hand down his face. "Can you two please stand center stage and start? Katherine, I want you to be aggressive. You're the dominant one in this scene. Start by tearing his shirt and pants off. Throw him onto the bed. Just like you, he's wearing his costume and he'll be in boxers for the scene."

"Don't worry, I'm all strapped down, too." Nolan grins and pats his palms against his pelvis. "Gotta love a dance belt... basically a glorified jock strap."

Shaking my head, I chuckle. He reminds me so much of Duncan that I

find nostalgia peeking its way into my heart... and for once in a sweetly positive way. That meathead had a heart of gold. Prior to leaving college, I didn't think meatheads existed in the theater...but God, did they ever.

Surprisingly, even Holden shakes his head and laughs at Nolan. "Okay, guys. There aren't many lines in this scene, and I don't want you focusing on the words just yet, so toss your scripts aside. If you need a line called out for reference, ask Maggie."

I wipe my damp palms on the dress, already feeling the nervous sweat breaking out across my skin.

Nolan holds his hands up, palms out. "It's okay if I touch you... kiss you, right, Kate?"

Is he serious with that question? It's the sex scene. Of course we're going to kiss and touch.

I gape at him like an idiot as I answer, "Um, yeah. It's fine."

"Okay. I just don't want to get reamed out by anyone." He hitches his thumb over his shoulder at Holden, whose glare is dark and stormy.

Holden rolls his eyes. "Take a minute and talk over what you're both comfortable with."

He walks to the edge of the stage, giving us a little space.

"Seriously, though," Nolan says. "Anything I should avoid? Any part of your body off-limits? Other than the obvious areas, of course."

"My ears," I blurt out before I'm too embarrassed to admit it. "They're... ticklish."

That isn't entirely true. Sensitive is a better description, but I don't exactly want to tell Nolan that my ears are my top erogenous zone and guaranteed to have me squirming with arousal that is *far* from acting.

"Okay," Holden calls out. "Breathe. Get into character. Then begin when you're ready, Katherine."

Oh, fuck. I actually have to start this... initiate with Nolan. With deep, calming breaths, I close my eyes—picturing an ocean, the waves lapping at

the wet, dark sand—to center myself.

I'm just on the precipice of finding Skyler when Holden's voice pierces my concentration. "Any minute now, *Kate*."

His tone grates on my nerves. Grinding my teeth, I open my eyes. I'm not centered yet. I haven't found Skyler, but it's clear that he's growing impatient.

With a gulp, I throw myself at Nolan, pressing onto my toes and devouring his mouth.

His muffled surprise doesn't strike me at all as Zach—and the fact that he isn't centered yet either makes me feel a hell of a lot better.

My kisses are sloppy and porn-y, but what the hell? I have to do *something* and not just stand there dabbing the sweat off my forehead. I clutch the hem of his shirt, yanking it over his head. Only, even on my toes, I'm not tall enough to strip him, and the collar of the shirt gets caught between his top lip and nose.

"Oh, shit. Sorry!" I say and step back, falling entirely out of character.

His "It's okay," is muffled by the cotton shirt, and he manages to finish taking it off himself.

With a glance over my shoulder, I catch Holden's bored gaze. He massages his temple with his index finger. "Keep going. We'll work that out later."

"Right," I squeak, and my eyes fall to the top button of Nolan's jeans. Shit. I have to literally pants the guy. Right here with my ex watching.

Heat blooms across my cheeks and I gulp, hooking my fingers into his waistband and tugging him closer to me.

"Would Skyler really stand there with her hand clawed into his pants?" Holden calls out.

A knot forms at the base of my throat. Maybe he was right to doubt me. Maybe I can't do this.

This part. This show.

When I freeze, Holden sighs. “Push him onto the bed, Kate. Push him onto the bed and have your way with him. He can’t try to convince you to slow down if you’re not revved up in the first place.”

Humiliation burns through me as I blink and glance up at Nolan.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

His friendly smile reassures me in a way that Holden never did—not when we shared a stage in college and certainly not now.

“It’s okay,” Nolan whispers back. “Just relax.”

Relax. Right. He makes it sound so simple.

I shove Nolan onto the bed and crawl into his lap, straddling him. Raking my fingers through his hair, I jerk his head back and kiss him, simulating a thrusting motion with my hips.

Even through his jeans and dance belt, I feel a twitch of motion in his pants, pressing between my legs.

In acting, this happens, but for professionalism’s sake, we aren’t supposed to touch naughty bits if we can help it. I leverage my weight, pushing more onto my knees so that I’m not nestled directly onto his erection. Folds of fabric from my dress drape over our laps, hiding the fact that we aren’t actually touching.

“That’s... well, good isn’t quite the word. But it’s better. Nolan, this is the moment you say your line and untie her dress.”

Curving a strong arm around my waist, Nolan turns me so that we’re each profile to the audience, kneeling on the bed. He cups my face. “Skyler, slow down,” he recites, and it’s utterly perfect. His words, the emotion behind them... it’s so simple. So endearing. In a snap, with me fumbling around like an idiot, Nolan has found Zach’s character.

“We don’t just have all night,” he says, tugging at the belt of my wrap dress. It billows open in the center, and his breath hitches as he skims his eyes down my body. With a flick of his hands, my dress glides down my arms, pooling onto the bed around us. “We have a lifetime.”

And just like that, I'm left in only underwear on stage.

Half-naked.

Straddling a man.

In front of my ex.

I stare at Nolan, frozen in place as he closes his eyes and presses his mouth tenderly to mine.

"Stop!" Holden stomps over to the bed. I can feel how panicked and wide my eyes are, like a shoplifter caught stuffing merchandise into my pockets. "Kate, why the fuck are your eyes open while the man you love kisses you?"

I open my mouth to answer, but only silence fills the space between us.

With a sigh, Holden waves Nolan off the stage into the wings where the two confer, whispering back and forth. I'm left kneeling on a prop bed half-naked.

Maggie rushes over, draping a robe around my shoulders. I'm so grateful for her in that moment, I could cry.

"Thanks," I whisper.

She smiles sweetly at me. "Of course. Do you need to look at any of the lines in the script?"

I shake my head. I only have one line in this scene, other than *yes, Zach!* And *oh, God!*

Yep, Amy really pulled out the big guns of prose for this scene.

Though I can't make out a word they're saying, I try to sneak a glance at the guys from the corner of my eye. Huddled together as they are, Nolan looks briefly at me before shaking his head. They seem to be disagreeing about something, but Holden points a finger at Nolan, clasping a hand to his shoulder.

Whatever they're arguing about, it seems Holden is winning.

After another minute of whispers, Nolan comes back over to the bed, resuming his position kneeling in front of me.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod and roll my eyes in spite of myself. “Fine. Just... a hot fucking mess, you know?”

“You’re doing great.”

I snort. “Well, you don’t have to lie. I’m a disaster.”

“Come on. We’ve got this.” His smile is infectious, and I could kiss him right now... except that the very thought of kissing him catapults me into a panic attack.

I slip the robe off and hand it back to Maggie. To his credit, Nolan remains totally professional when we’re not in the middle of the scene. His hands remain at his sides and his eyes stay north of the border.

Pretty damn impressive for a guy who’s already admitted he’s trying to get into my pants.

“Okay,” Holden says. There’s something different in his voice. Confidence. There’s a knowing smugness that hadn’t been there when we started the scene. “Let’s try it again. Take it from your line, Nolan.”

“We don’t just have a night,” Nolan says as he shifts to move behind me. His arm clamps around my torso, hand splaying across my stomach as he buries his nose into my neck. “We have a lifetime.”

The words vibrate across my skin. He drags his lips up my neck, and I turn my head to kiss him. Tendrils of desire lace between us—and there she is. Threads of Skyler weave into my consciousness.

I spin to face him. When I open my eyes, it’s not Nolan I see in front of me. It’s Holden. He’s standing on the stage behind Nolan, arms crossed, intense and brooding.

I stare pointedly at Holden as I glide my hand up to the back of Nolan’s neck. Even though my fingers grasp onto my co-star’s hair, it’s not him I’m reciting my lines to. My eyes lock onto Holden’s as I speak.

“No one’s guaranteed a lifetime.” I lean forward and graze my teeth along Nolan’s jaw. “We’re not even guaranteed tonight.”

I blink to find Holden’s simmering amber gaze locked onto me, fire

boiling below the surface.

Well, deal with it, asshole. This is what *he* wanted, isn't it? Me as this part... me on stage in my underwear simulating sex with Nolan. *Be careful what you wish for* and all that.

"Well, then," Nolan says.

I close my eyes. His voice is breaking my focus. *Because it's not Holden's.*

"We better make tonight good." He scoops me into his arms, laying me gently onto my back.

I arch into him, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to cling to the character I'd only just barely begun grasping. She's almost there, but not quite. It's wrong. His touch is wrong. His caress is clunky. His kisses are off.

Because he's not Holden.

He peppers kisses up my neck and I turn my head to look at Holden who's still standing stage left. Self-doubt edges into me. I'm not sure that I can ever perform this part with Holden here, scrutinizing my every move.

His jaw ticks at the very moment Nolan's mouth clasps to my ear. He sucks and nibbles me there—in my most sensitive spot.

The exact spot I told him not to touch.

I cry out, an involuntary noise, and I buck against Nolan's body pinning me to the bed.

He didn't.

He didn't tell Nolan to kiss the one part of my body he knows is off-limits.

And on top of that, Nolan did it. Even after asking me what areas to avoid.

But the way Holden's expression ignites, my body can't help but respond with pulses between my thighs and tingles in the tips of my breasts. The press of Nolan's body to mine isn't enough. I ache in my core, empty without Holden inside me.

With a gasp, Skyler is gone.

It's just me. Horny, broken Kate.

I feel so fucking betrayed... by both of them.

“No!” I squirm against Nolan, pounding my fists into his chest. “Stop... Stop!”

That coiling, volatile feeling spiraling inside of my core is too damn much and I need out. I'm not cut out for this.

Nolan's face is stricken, horrified, and he sits up quickly. “Kate—I-I'm sorry. I know you said not to, but Holden told me—”

I don't wait for the excuses because I know it's not his fault. Not entirely.

I know he didn't choose that blocking for himself.

It's Holden. Holden knows how to get to me. He's always known, even subconsciously.

I rush past Maggie, holding out my robe, and run for my dressing room, slamming the door shut behind me. But there's no satisfying bang of the door closing.

Instead, Holden's there to catch the door, standing in front of me, panting. It's just him and me... and that invisible tether pulsing between our aching bodies.

I don't take my eyes off him as he strides into my room, shutting the door gently behind him.

I'm no longer acting. Every bit of my body is screaming for him as he moves closer, standing before me. I hate that he can make me lose myself in this way; that he has so much power over me.

There are a million things I want to say to him, but they all vanish the second his low growl vibrates between us. “Fucking hell, Katherine. I forgot how sexy you look when you're turned on.”

Heat blazes under my skin. We both rush for each other at the same time, our ravenous lips meeting for the first time in five years. I suck on his bottom lip, and he inhales sharply with a groan.

When he glides his tongue against mine, the world goes dark around us.

With only one kiss, my world is turned upside down. I'm dizzy with desire and ravenous for more. I clutch at his shoulders, gripping the strong muscles. Holden has always been strong, but what were once the muscles of a young, athletic boy are now roped with masculine strength. He's the same... yet, so, so different.

Everything I thought I knew and wanted is annihilated by his kiss. When he curves his hands around my ass, his palms hit my bare flesh and I'm suddenly all too aware of how naked I am.

It's not just that I want Holden. Want is too casual. Too simple.

My demand for Holden is one that my body and my brain haven't let go of in five years. He's a necessity. An obsession.

Then, I'm hoisted up and against his body. I wrap my legs around his waist. His swollen cock presses the thin fabric between my legs as he sets me on the table, kissing down my neck.

"Fuck, I've missed you," he groans, his lips still on my throat.

I've missed you, too, I think. But I still can't speak. It's like I'm underwater, and when I open my mouth, words are only muffled moans. I'm still too overwhelmed by the clutching lust I feel with him.

As he rocks against me, tension unwinds in my core, and I pulse my hips in a movement that's so out of my control, I don't even realize I'm doing it. His mouth brushes my ear, his tongue tracing the edge as he whispers, "I've always loved how your body reacts to me."

He nips at my earlobe again, and it's the douse of ice water I need to wake up.

My spine goes steely. He just took what he knew from having had sex with me in the past—from having been on stage with me half naked before—and used it against me.

The passion between us dissolves faster than a sugar cube in a fresh cup of tea, and I shove at his chest.

His eyes go wide, alarmed, and he blinks, staring at me in confusion. "Kat

—”

“No!” I slide off the table and shove at him again. Only this time, he’s stabilized. Ready for me and he barely budes even though I pushed him with every ounce of muscle I have. “You don’t get to cross boundaries just because you’re my boss!”

I yank my clothes off the hanger and shove my legs into my yoga pants over my costume panties. “Good fucking luck trying to make it as a director. You’re going to be slapped with a lawsuit if you keep this shit up.”

I scramble into my t-shirt, yanking it overhead before I stomp to the door. Only his wounded expression gives me pause, and I stand frozen with my hand on the doorknob. He’s leaning against the wall with his head in his hands. A strangled sound escapes from his pursed lips.

“Katherine, don’t go. *Please.*”

His tortured tone almost sinks me.

I’ve spent five years deluding myself that I was over Holden. That what we’d had in college wasn’t real, and that he’d never truly loved me.

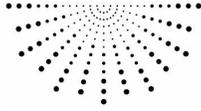
In a single instant, Holden has turned everything I thought I knew onto its head.

If the love I felt in that kiss is real, then I can’t fool myself any longer. And I certainly can’t continue working with Holden in any capacity.

Avoiding his gaze, I yank the door open.

“I quit, Holden.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

The second week of classes were surprisingly quiet. At least they were after Kate and I molested each other on stage. We pretty much avoided not only talking to each other for the remaining week.

Even at the auditions for Keith Langley's new show, we escaped without having to read together... not even once.

But I had to admit, watching Kate audition with the modern soliloquy Keith had written for Julie, she was good. So damn good. I wasn't exactly a theater aficionado, but I'd seen good acting enough to recognize it... Meryl Streep, Al Pacino, Paul Newman. And bad acting... hello, Charlie Sheen.

Kate definitely fell into the former category. In our class, she was easily the best.

I should know. I read lines at the audition with every other girl in class and none of them compared to Katherine.

Not even close.

But the real question was why the hell was I thinking about her on a Friday night after my team's first win of the season?

I knew why.

Because right before the game started, a photo pinged in my inbox.

A black lace thong.

Her underwear was getting more and more daring as the week continued. And today was the sixth day. The last pair... the last picture I'd get.

Even her photo had revealed more of herself than any other image. I got glimpses of her torso and upper thighs. A full view of her ass in that thong. I honestly didn't think she had it in her. The false bravado of anonymity.

Except it isn't anonymous, despite the fact that she thinks it is.

I was lying to her.

I was a fucking creep who was lying to Kate every day and secretly buying her panties.

And I was so fucking turned on by it that I couldn't even stop myself.

She needed the money, the little voice in my head whispered. You're helping her by offering her that \$500.

Who knows what kind of pervert would have bought those panties from her if I hadn't stepped in.

With a sigh, I slid my fingers through my shower-damp hair. I could justify it all I wanted until I was blue in the face, but the fact of the matter is I'm a fucking dick of a man for doing this.

This was it. Tonight, it was over. After we do the drop off of cash tomorrow, I'm done.

I had a whole day Sunday ahead of me to not think about her or see her again.

I stood outside of Magic Mushroom, looking in the window at several of my teammates who were already inside pushing tables together.

The last thing I wanted to do was go in there and celebrate with them. But it was part of being a team. Camaraderie and all that bullshit. Plus, most of the guys had gone to Kelsey's sorority party, so it was just a few of my closest friends, thank God.

One beer wouldn't be so bad. I could have a beer and a couple slices and still be in bed before midnight.

So with a tired breath, I pushed open the door and entered my team's favorite pizza joint. Well, the only pizza joint open this late. But that was beside the point.

I entered Magic Mushroom and waved at my group. The guys all hooted and slammed their fists on the table in our own post-game battle cry.

I was the last one there, as usual, and froze when I saw the only open seats were beside and across from Addison.

Who the hell invited her?

Hesitating for the briefest second, I took my normal seat at the end of the table beside where Addison was sitting. "Hey," I said, then gave a nod to Duncan and the rest of the guys.

"Hey," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Good game tonight."

I did my best to give her a smile. "Thanks. Didn't peg you as the football type though."

She gave a shrug and bit her bottom lip suggestively. "I'm full of surprises." Then, leaning in, she whispered, "And you can peg me anytime."

Classy.

Surprisingly, there were more of us here than I'd expected tonight... but that had less to do with my stellar company and more to do with the fact that Brandon and Kelsey broke up last week, so a lot of our guys refused to go to her sorority's party. Team solidarity and all.

It was pretty easy to ignore Addison most of the night. Our group was already louder than most of the other people there, high-fiving and going over our favorite plays from the night, except for Brandon, who had his eyes set on our waitress. A rebound if I ever saw one.

"I can't believe you caught that pass." Duncan laughed, punching my arm. Then, he gestured for the waitress to bring another round of shots. I groaned. I'd already dumped the first shot out instead of drinking it without

anyone seeing. I wasn't sure how much more I could get away with that.

As I lifted my first beer of the night, still nursing it, my cell phone buzzed in my pocket, and I knew without looking that my dad was calling to check in on how the game went. Even though he'd probably watched it on college ESPN, every week was the same thing. He wanted to hash out the details of what I could have done better.

It was never a phone call to congratulate me or say he was proud...

My fucking father. The King of Criticism.

The waitress set the tequila shot down in front of me and I stared at it. One shot wouldn't hurt. I played a good game tonight, I deserved it, right? I tipped my head back and swallowed it down. It burned in all the best ways. Even though I hadn't planned on drinking too much tonight, one... or two, wouldn't hurt.

"Isn't that your roommate, dude?" Sam asked Chris.

"Hell, yeah it is," Chris said. "And he's on a date."

Addison snorted. "With her? Seriously? Never thought he'd be the type to slum it with a freshman."

I glanced up to find Dave, Chris's roommate walking into Magic Mushroom with his arm draped casually around Katherine.

My Katherine.

"Uh-oh," Duncan groaned.

The temperature of the restaurant went up by at least five degrees, and even though I'd just showered, my shirt felt damp and sweaty.

The room went empty and nothing else existed except her. Not the crowds of people eating pizza, not the servers bustling around us, not even Dave, touching her arm. All I saw was her.

She was beautiful... but that wasn't anything new. She'd been beautiful since the moment I laid eyes on her the first day of classes. But in a sea of undergrads, being beautiful wasn't exactly unique.

No, there was something different about Kate... especially tonight. Her

denim skirt was short, falling halfway down her muscled thighs.

I'd seen that skirt earlier. Hiked up around her waist in the panty photo she'd sent me.

My mouth went dry.

That fucking sexy black thong was put on for Dave?!

Heat seared my chest as I skimmed my gaze up over her low-cut tank top, revealing a swell of breasts that made my jeans tight and my mouth dry. My gaze followed the slope of her ribs and the curve of her waist, studying the form-fitting outfit way too closely as it hugged against her toned abs. It was a far cry from the t-shirt and jeans she usually wore.

Before I could object, Chris cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed, "Dave! Hey, Dave! Over here!"

I groaned as he waved them over.

She abruptly stopped in front of our table, her eyes landing first on me, then on Addison.

It's not what you think, I wanted to say.

But what good would that do?

Dave high-fived Chris and Sam.

"What's up, guys? Great game tonight, huh?" he said.

Seriously? She couldn't possibly be on a date with Dave. The guy's a total tool.

Then Dave added, "Oh, this is Kate."

Just like that—oh, this is Kate—like she was an afterthought. Kate should never be an afterthought.

Across from me, Chris kicked out the two chairs beside him.

"Join us," he said.

Duncan cleared his throat, stealing a quick look at me before he said, "I'm sure they want their own tab—"

He didn't even finish his sentence before Dave was sliding into the chair beside Chris, holding out the seat next to him for Kate. The seat next to him...

that was directly across from me.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I gave her the friendliest nod I could manage. "Hey, Katherine."

I noted the eyeliner and makeup surrounding her icy eyes as they narrowed at me.

She looked older wearing makeup. More sophisticated. And her hair fell in soft waves around her face.

The fact that she'd dressed up for him turned my stomach. Had he kissed her yet? Had she managed to finally get that toe-curling lip-lock she'd been dreaming of?

In those panties.

In my panties.

Fuck. This.

"Your top is so cute," Addison said to Kate, her smile as fake as her nose.

"Um. Thanks," Kate responded.

I glanced at Dave who had his hand draped casually across the back of her chair and reached with the other for the bowl of garlic knots. I smiled.

Yep, you eat those garlic knots, Dave. Make that first kiss of hers wretched.

Katherine folded her arms and snapped at me, "What?"

"Nothing."

Her fingers drummed against her bicep. "Well, it must be something. You're smirking."

With a glance, I checked that Dave and the guys weren't listening, and sure enough, they were engaged in recounting the game. Addison was watching intently, but I didn't care. Let her hear us. Let her watch. "I was thinking... you look nice."

If for a second, I thought flattery would get me anywhere with this girl, I was sorely mistaken. Her scowl deepened.

I leaned across the table, resting my forearms against the cool resin. “Be honest, did you dress up for me? Hoping I’d see you sitting there in the bleachers during the game cheering me on?”

Beside me, the screech of Addison’s chair against the floor echoed. She stood up and stomped to the other end of the table.

“Way to go, dummy,” Katherine said. “Guess you won’t be getting laid tonight.”

Dummy. God, she was adorable.

I flicked my eyes toward Addison who was leaning down and whispering to one of her girlfriends. “C’mon. You should know me better than that by now. I’m not on a date with Addison. She ambushed me here.”

The hum of laughter swelled around us. It was humid and hot in the pizza place, the little air conditioning unit above the door unable to keep up with the crowd of people filling the space.

Dots of perspiration beaded down Katherine’s neck and cleavage. Holy shit. Either this girl was a sexual mastermind... or she was just the most unassumingly sexy person ever. My guess was on the latter.

Her body shifted, her thighs rubbing together from beneath the table and I couldn’t help but think about what’s happening to her body beneath that tight denim skirt. Was she wet right now? Swollen, pink, and throbbing for me while sweat dotted her thighs.

My cock pressed against my jeans and I swallowed my groans, unable to think of anything but her damp panties.

Maybe this could help me. Maybe I could tease enough that she’ll figure it out on her own that I’m her buyer.

I swallowed before building up the strength to ask, “How are your panties holding up in here?”

Her face went pale. “M-my what?”

I took an extra second to stare at her meaningfully. That’s right. Come on. Put two and two together.

“In this heat,” I whispered, teasing her. Pushing and pulling. What I do best. “You know. With your sweat issues.”

“My panties are none of your concern. But Dave hasn’t had any objections tonight,” she whispered back.

Damn. One, two, three, and I am down for the count. It was a comeback I never expected from her and it threw me for a loop.

Her large, cornflower blue eyes watched me intently as she smiled triumphantly.

A reminder that I wasn’t the one here with a date on my arm. I wasn’t the one crashing her friend group after one of her games... or shows... or whatever.

“Hey,” Duncan said, nudging me. “Didn’t you two have some sort of big theater thing this week?”

The waitress came over and set down a Coke in front of Kate that I didn’t hear her order and some more beers for the rest of us.

Kate nodded. “Auditions. For a modern Romeo and Juliet retelling.”

Dave snorted. “Sounds boring.”

She snapped her gaze to him, but he wasn’t looking at her. His eyes were settled right on our busty waitress’s long legs.

Kate’s “Hm,” was short and sharp. Uh-oh. I knew that tone all too well. “Well, I think football’s boring.”

“What?” Dave cried.

Chris laughed and nudged his roommate. “Dude, you gonna let your girl do you dirty like that?”

Brandon rolled his eyes and stood to grab a handful of fries from the center of the table. “Ignore them, Kate. How’d it go? The try-outs?”

“They’re called auditions, numbnuts,” I correct him, to which Brandon responded by flipping me the middle finger.

Kate smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear, shrugging. “I don’t know. I guess it went fine.”

“Fine?” I repeated, incredulous. She had to be kidding. “You were the best Julie in the damn class. Keith would be crazy not to cast you as the lead.”

“Maybe,” she started to say. “But Professor Mc—”

Dave interrupted her, looking back and forth between us. “Wait, you two have class together?”

“That’s his easy A!” Brandon exclaimed. “Remember? He needed a free ride elective.”

Ignoring them, I continued looking directly at Kate. “Seriously. You were phenomenal. No one in the class could take their eyes off you when you were on stage.”

Least of all, me.

She shook her head and nibbled on a French fry. “But McCay doesn’t like me. She’s so hard on me that I doubt I’ll get any leads for a while.”

I tilted my head and after a quick glance at Addison, who had the decency to look sheepish, I leveled Katherine with a look. We both knew why McCay was hard on her... and it had nothing to do with Kate’s acting skills and everything to do with Addison’s little prank.

“McCay is just feeling you out still... after that memorable first meeting you had.”

Kate flung the fry at my face. “You had that memorable first meeting too, and she’s not tearing your performance a new one.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, because my audition sucked. Everyone knows I’m not going to be an actor. Like Brandon said, I’m only here for the easy A.”

Kate blinked, her hands falling to her lap. “You seriously think you sucked?” I opened my mouth to answer her, but she didn’t let me. “You’re an incredible actor, Holden. You’ve got this raw, natural talent that most people in our class would kill for.”

I snorted. “Yeah, right. I’ll probably be cast as Montague number three

in the fight scene and that'll be that. Fine by me."

Kate shook her head, still staring at me in that incredulous way. "You're crazy. They're supposed to post the cast list any minute now, and you need to prepare yourself, Holden. You're going to be a lead role in this show—Tybalt or Mercutio... or yeah, maybe even Romeo."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't you mean 'Tyler, Mercer, or Remy?'" I threw air quotes around the stupid modernized versions of the Shakespearian names.

"Whatever," she snapped. "This show means a lot to us in the class... so if you're cast as a lead, you'd better take it seriously."

All the guys around the table were staring at us and even Duncan looked speechless. And that asshole was never without words.

Finally, he slapped a hand on my back. "I guess that 'A' really will be an easy one for you."

Dave's hand slid from where it was resting on the chair down over her shoulder, his limp fingers grazing her bare, dewy skin.

"Oh," Dave said, leaning into her ear. Her overly sensitive ears. The memory of my lips on her sent my senses into overdrive. "You're kind of sweaty, babe."

I gulped back the thick lump in my throat and watched as his fingers glided up and down her arm.

"Yeah," Kate said, "It's kind of stifling in here, isn't it?"

My jaw hardened at the sight of Dave's eager eyes. "Want to get out of here?"

Slowly, Kate lifted her eyes to mine as she said, "Yes."

The heady combination of her damp, glistening skin, her heavy breath, her wide eyes framed by spiked black lashes—and the fact that she was going home with Dave—knocked the breath clean out of my lungs.

As they stood from the table, I pulled up my phone, went to our theater class message board, and sucked in a breath when I saw the cast list posted.

My pulse raced as I opened the document. At the top, was Julie/Juliet – Kate Harris. And below that, Remy/Romeo – Holden Dorsey.

Clearly, I was a glutton for punishment. I watched Dave press his palm into her lower back and guide her out the front door. Envy and rage at the sight of them collided with relief, excitement, and lust at the thought of being her Romeo.

But I had no right to feel any of those things.

More than anything, I wanted to reach out and stop them. To rush to her, show her the cast list, scoop her into my arms, and claim her as mine.

But Katherine Harris didn't belong with a guy like me. She didn't belong with a guy like Dave either. She deserved better than all of us.

I gulped and leaned into Duncan. "Can you go—"

"Sabotage them?" He cracked his knuckles and gave me a wink. "Oh yeah. I'm on it, buddy."

He ran after them out of the pizza place.

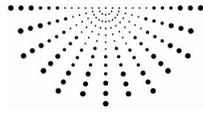
It wasn't that she didn't deserve to date a good guy... but Dave wasn't that guy.

I'd never wanted something so badly that was so far out of reach. The privileged son of a bitch that I was, there wasn't much I wanted that I couldn't have.

But my family would ruin her. Because that's what we did. It's why my grandmother took her own life. Why my mother drinks herself into a stupor each night to escape the truth of what a sham her marriage is.

For her own good, Kate was off-limits in every possible way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



*I*t's Friday night. I'm out of a job. Out of money. And out of hope.

There's only one thing left to do...

I'd promised myself that I'd never stoop to this level ever again. That I'd never ask for their help or money again.

On the walk home from the subway, I press *dial* and wait while the phone rings.

A soft voice answers. "Harris residence."

At only eight p.m. It's not late, but she sounds as though I've woken her up.

I gulp. "Hey... Mom."

"Sweetheart! How are you?"

I clutch the phone tighter in my hands as my purse strap cuts into my bare shoulder. "I'm..."

"Oh! Did your sister send you the video of Avery trying to eat Cheerios for the first time?" Mom asks, interrupting me. Her laugh is sweet and joyful and genuine, which only makes my grief that much more intense. "It was the cutest thing!"

Literally, I couldn't even answer the question *How are you?* before she was moving on to talk about the real pride and joy of the family—my big sister, Mallory, and her magical procreating vagina. Yep, in my family, that's

what you needed to do in order to be seen as successful: marry an upper-middle-class dude and pop out babies.

“No,” I say, “she didn’t.”

“Oh, I’ll send it to you. It’s adorable. So, how’s city life?” Even with the simplest question, I hear the disdain in her voice. She’d stopped asking me about auditions altogether a few months ago when I didn’t get a part in a national commercial. In her words: *Well, why don’t you just let me know when your unemployed actor status changes?*

My steps slow to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk, and I squeeze my eyes shut. *What have I done? Why did I quit the one big acting credit of my life?*

Behind me, a man slams into my shoulder. Hardly stopping, he spins over his shoulder and yells at me, “Keep moving, shorty!”

Mom gasps on the other end of the phone. “Are you being attacked? Hang up! Call 9-1-1!”

“Mom, relax! It’s just some asshole. He’s gone already.”

“Sweetie, *language*,” she scolds.

I want so badly to tell her I got this part—that the daughter she never believed would amount to anything landed a Broadway leading role. But I can’t even say that anymore. Because just as quickly as I’d landed that role, I’d lost it.

“So... is there any specific reason you’re calling?”

I clear my throat, trying to summon every ounce of courage I have. This is going to be humiliating, without a doubt.

“Well...” I start. “Things have been pretty tight around here—”

Mom’s sigh cuts me off. “I see,” she says, disappointment dripping in her tone. “You’ll have to ask Daddy, but I bet he’s willing to send you your birthday money early this year.”

Flames creep across my cheeks. I’ve really earned that disappointing daughter medal throughout the years.

“No,” I say quickly. “I’m calling because... because...”

“What honey?”

My throat burns as I blurt out, “Because I got a leading role on Broadway! And... and I want you and Daddy to be there opening night.”

Shit. I stop in front of my apartment building and lean back against the warm brick.

“You got a leading role on *Broadway*?” Mom repeats, dumbfounded. And who can blame her?

“Yep. It’s going to be a big deal, I think. And I-I want you and Dad to be there. Our preview is the last Thursday of next month.”

I hear the flipping pages of my mom’s day planner—the thing she can’t live without.

“Well, this is exciting!” she says. “Let’s see. The last Thursday of... oh. Oh, dear.”

“Mom?”

“Well, it’s just, Mallory and Jason are going away that weekend and we promised to babysit the kids.”

My heart sinks. Of course. *Mallory*. Mallory takes priority always.

Tears fill my eyes, and I can’t help but feel stupid for my reaction. I invited them to a show that I’m not even in anymore. The fact that they can’t come should be a relief.

I ask, “Maybe the weekend after?”

Why am I pressing this matter? *Because you know they’re not going to come...*

“The next weekend...” Mom says, “Oops. We have Derek’s karate belt ceremony.”

My jaw tightens and I look up at the inky sky. Somewhere behind the clouds and smog are stars—the same stars she sees in Indiana.

Mom gives a little chuckle. “You know your dad and I just aren’t city people. Why don’t you keep us posted and if this one actually pans out, we’ll

talk about coming up for a visit?”

“Sure, Mom,” I whisper.

The truth is, she’s right. This one *won’t* pan out. So I’m not sure why I’m pressing her so hard for it, especially since my backup plan had been to go home to them in Indiana ... and now I’ve made it impossible to do that.

“I’ll talk to you later.” I hang up feeling even worse than before.

More than anything, I can’t wait to throw on a pair of pajamas and crawl into bed to lick my wounds. The elevator ride up to my apartment is loud with the sound of music thumping through the walls.

Someone cooler than me is throwing a party. *Good for you.* As the elevator doors slide open onto my floor, the music blares louder and I groan, wishing the party wasn’t happening so close to where I want to bury myself in blankets and wallow.

I freeze when I see my apartment door propped wide open with at least twenty people milling about in the less than six hundred square feet of space.

I step cautiously inside and recognize a few of Jill’s friends from her critique group... and a whole lot of other faces I’ve never seen before.

It doesn’t take long to spot my bestie who’s standing on our coffee table dancing.

She finally sees me and, with a squeal, hops down and runs over to greet me with a hug. “You’re home early!”

“What the hell’s going on?”

“Sorry! It started as a little get together with my critique group, but then they all asked if they could bring a friend and quickly it turned into this.” She waves her hands around the room. “Just don’t open my bedroom door. I’ve locked Junie in there.”

“Can I hide in there with your cat, too?” I sigh and reach for one of the many wine bottles on our counter, pouring a full red Solo cup’s worth. If they’re partying in my house, then I at least deserve some free booze out of it.

Jill’s face sinks. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“It’s fine,” I say, and then down half the cup in a few gulps.

Jill studies me. “You sure? You don’t seem fine.”

“Well, I quit today, then when I called my parents to beg them for money, I chickened out and invited them to the premiere of my non-existent Broadway show. But other than that, I’m peachy.” I fill the cup again and hold it up in mock toast to Jill.

Tears well in Jill’s eyes as she yelps a strangled, “What?”

“Now I can’t even move back home after I’m evicted without admitting that they were right. That another show slipped through my fingers.”

“Quitting isn’t *slipping through your fingers*.” A flash of anger lights in Jill’s eyes. “It’s tossing it out the fucking window!”

Guilt clutches in the pit of my stomach, and I press my palm against the growing ache in my belly. “You don’t understand, Jill. I *had* to quit.”

“Why?” Jill pouts. “You were so close.”

Don’t I know it.

Over the pounding bass of the music, I fill her in on everything that happened at rehearsal today.

Jill paces back and forth in our kitchen while I talk.

Our kitchen is only six feet long and, despite our serious conversation, is filled with people partying. So, really, her “pacing” includes two steps in one direction before she bounces off someone’s shoulder, pivots, then takes three steps in the other direction.

“This is a disaster,” she mutters.

“It’s not a disaster,” I counter. *Yet*. “I’ll still get paid for the first few rehearsals I did attend and I’m going to apply at the pub tomorrow to be a bartender.”

Jill’s expression shifts, growing more concerned.

“You can’t do any shows if you work a night shift,” she says.

I’m pretty sure that ship has sailed, but I know saying that won’t help Jill’s souring mood. “But I’ll make a *lot* more in tips there than at the coffee

shop.”

Jill crosses her arms while I grab a handful of potato chips from a communal bowl on the counter and eye the boxes of pizza that I hadn't contributed any cash towards.

“Three thousand dollars more?” she asks.

Fuck it. I lunge for the pizza box closest to me, flip the lid open, and grab a slice. *Ick. Meatlovers.* Still, beggars can't be choosers. And I'm starving. Free pizza is free pizza.

“Probably not,” I say, my voice getting louder so I can be heard over the music. “But maybe I can get close enough to get Gray Faced Greene off my back and avoid getting evicted.”

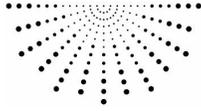
Just as I start that sentence, the song ends, and I'm shouting loud enough that just about everyone at the party hears that I'm going to be evicted.

I wince as all eyes in the room turn toward me.

But it's Holden's voice behind me that has me curling in on myself, as he asks, “*Evicted?*”

Of course. Why wouldn't my ex-boyfriend-slash-ex-director follow me home after I bitch him out and quit?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I spin around to find Holden standing behind me, and I exhale a frustrated growl, throwing my non-pizza-bearing hand up. “Jesus Christ! Are you a ninja? How do you *always* sneak up on me?”

Holden blinks, ignoring my outburst, and as the next song comes on, the party resumes with no one caring in the slightest that my world is crumbling around me.

“How did you even get in here?” I ask.

“Literally every door to your building is propped open. Real smart, by the way.” He stops mid-eye roll, almost like he’s catching himself being the condescending prick he is. With a pause, he draws a deep, audible breath before asking me, “Are you really getting evicted?”

When I don’t answer, he looks to Jill. “How long do you have?”

Jill gulps before answering, “We have one week to get her three thousand dollars.”

“Jill!” I shriek. *Traitor.*

My best friend smacks her hands to the kitchen counter. “Well, it’s true, isn’t it? And we’re running out of options.”

“Kate,” Holden says, his voice aching soft.

My skin heats with humiliation at the pity in his eyes.

“Don’t,” I snap, holding my palm between us. “I can’t do this with you

—”

Jill interrupts me by grabbing us both by the arms and dragging us out the door. “You know what? It’s really rare that I let loose like this and you two are *not* going to ruin my party! Take this elsewhere!”

I stare in shock at her. Never in the years we’ve known each other has she ever kicked me out of our apartment. Literally, not once.

“Where the hell am I supposed to go?”

“It’s eight o’clock on a Friday. Figure it out!” With that, she slams the door shut and the deadbolt clicks from the other side.

I whirl around and step into Holden’s face. “See what you did? You got me kicked out of my own apartment!”

“Sounds like you’re not long for this apartment, anyway.”

I mash my index finger into the elevator button.

“Where are you going?” Holden asks.

“*Out.*” Why is the fucking elevator taking so long? I push the down button again, crossing my arms and tapping my toe impatiently.

After another long minute, there’s still no elevator in sight. “You know what? I’ll take the fucking stairs.”

Pivoting on my heel, I push past Holden and rush through the door behind us. The sounds of the party fade and the metal handrail is cool against my palm as I run down the first flight of stairs. Seven stories up... that’s a lot of stairs. At least I’m going down.

Holden calls my name from just behind me, his footsteps faster and louder than mine.

“Dammit, Kate! You’re *really* not going to talk to me?” he calls out.

I freeze on the landing between floors, still clutching the handrail, but refuse to turn and look at him.

A bubble of humorless laughter rises in my throat. “I don’t know what we possibly have to talk about.”

“How about how sorry I am?” His voice throbs, laden with emotion that

vibrates across my nerves. “Not just for tonight, but for everything. I’m sorry for how I treated you in college. For how I lied to you. How I ruined our show. For how I pushed you away. I’m sorry that I was too stupid to see how madly in love with you I was...”

His hands fall gently to my shoulders, and he brushes my hair over to one side, revealing the nape of my neck. The molecules between us buzz to life as his warm breath fans across my sensitive skin.

“How madly in love with you I *am*,” he clarifies.

My heart swells at his words, drilling against my ribs. His hands slip from my rigid shoulders, gliding a gentle caress down my arms until his fingers link with mine.

“How can you claim to love me, while also being so ashamed of me that you ask me to stay silent about our past?” I barely manage to keep the tremble out of my voice.

“You just have to trust me that that’s for your own good... not because I’m ashamed to have been with you.” He leans into my ear, not touching, but his breath stirs the air as he speaks.

“Why? Because of Missy?”

“Missy is the least of it.”

Missy is the least of it? What does that mean?

I don’t get the chance to ask. He interrupts my thoughts with a shake of his head. “You have to know, watching you with Nolan is torture. Directing sex scenes is hard, but what’s worse is the smaller intimacies. Watching how you curl your fingers into his hair, or the way your thumb draws circles on his knuckles when you’re holding hands.”

How do you think I felt every time I had to see you on stage or in interviews with Missy Howl?

I refrain from saying that and instead, I choke, “Acting, Holden. It’s acting. What did you expect to happen when you cast me in this part? When I’m not good enough in a scene, you berate me. And when I *am* good, you

sabotage me by giving Nolan direction that you know is off-limits?”

My words give me courage, and I spin to face him, shoving at his chest. He barely sways against the pressure of my push.

“That’s not directing. That’s *abuse*, Holden!”

The color recedes from his cheeks and his dark eyes blaze down at me.

“You’re right,” he whispers. “I’ve been a terrible director. It’s not fair to you... or the show. But if you come back, I promise you, it’ll be different. Please, Katherine.”

He takes a deep, steadying breath, waiting for my answer.

Finally, I ask, “How can I trust things will be different?”

A twitch of a smile touches his lips. He knows something I don’t; he’s got a plan. Should I expect anything less from Holden?

“Because I told Maggie about us. *Everything* about us. She’s your new liaison—like an HR person you can go to if I step out of line again. She, and only she, has the power to fire you... not me. And she also now has the power to fire me, if it comes to that.”

I draw in a quick, sharp breath of air through my teeth. “You want me back that badly? That you’ll risk your debut directorial gig?”

Holden gives a single, solemn shake of his head. “That’s how much I believe in you. And in us as a team... because I know it’s not a risk at all.”

With a deliberate step forward, he towers over me, controlled, but his primal ferocity sits dormant below the surface.

Reaching up, I skim my fingertips across the coarse stubble on his sculpted jaw. The flickering florescent lights accent the shadows beneath his sharp cheekbones and strong nose. Pinched lines collect near the corners of his worried frown, and his amber eyes glint with genuine remorse.

“I want you to come back to the show,” he says, his voice a hoarse whisper. I open my mouth to speak, but he presses his index finger to my lips. “But before you do... before you’re officially under my employ again —”

He leans forward and in a smooth movement, his mouth presses to mine in a mindlessly drugging kiss. It's all I've ever wanted and everything I've feared in a single action, but I'm powerless against his kisses.

The shock of pleasure steals what little breath is left in my lungs, and I bury my fingers into the soft tangle of his hair. His arms curl around my waist, pulling me firmly against the hard plane of muscle that is his chest. The first eager stroke of his tongue against mine draws a strangled moan from deep in my throat.

He backs me against the wall, lips never leaving mine, and hoists me so that I'm sitting on the railing, his grip firm against the backs of my thighs. Dazed in pleasure, my world narrows to nothing but his kiss, his touch, and I arch into his body, his arousal pressing between my legs.

With a growl, he tears his mouth from mine and gently lowers me back to the floor, chest heaving with each pant.

"Fuck!" Thrusting his hands into his hair, he turns away from me and paces a few steps.

I smooth my hair and press my fingers to my lips, already swollen from his bruising kiss. A shudder trickles down my spine, and even though the temperature between us has shifted in an instant, no one sent that memo to my body, still hot and achy and longing for his touch.

"If I asked you to stay with me tonight, would you?" I ask him quietly.

The question draws a fierce, savage gleam in his eyes and the lines of his throat tighten.

"Katherine," he says, his voice a velvet-soft rasp of pleasure. Torment swirls in his eyes. My name on his lips in that needy, strained voice winds like a silken thread around my heart.

If I hadn't already been totally and completely bound to this man, I am now.

I swallow. It wouldn't take much to crack his resolve. A few pleading cries from me and I'm pretty sure he'd take me right here on the landing of

the fifth-floor staircase.

“Don’t,” he whispers. “It could ruin us both.”

The pain of rejection spears into my heart like a branding knife.

This.

This is the Holden I know.

Confusing. Frustrating. Hypocritical.

Learning this and holding it like an Ace up my sleeve served me once, but I don’t want to be that girl again. I don’t want to be the girl who clings to that sentiment like driftwood trapped amidst a stormy ocean’s riptide.

“Then why did you kiss me?” I ask.

“Because *not* kissing you could ruin us both, too.”

“You’re confusing as hell, Holden.”

He shrugs and in a boyish movement stuffs one hand into his pocket, while the other rakes through his mop of dark hair. For a moment, I’m back in college, standing in front of my Romeo, still so uncertain and insecure.

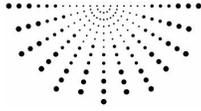
“Some things never change, I guess,” he says and then makes his way down the stairs.

I watch him for a few steps before calling out after him. “Hey, Holden?”

Without a word, he stops and turns to look up at me.

“I’ll see you at rehearsal tomorrow.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

Someone was pounding on my bedroom door. Bleary eyed, I checked my phone. 1:35 a.m.

This was why I made sure to lock my bedroom door every night. If that door hadn't been locked, Duncan or Chris would've just barged right in.

I crawled out of bed, grumbling, "Jesus Christ, hold on."

As soon as I unlocked the door and tugged it open, Kate swept into my room in a blur of blonde hair and frenetic energy.

Katherine.

In my bedroom.

Again.

"You owe me a kiss!" she said, poking her bony index finger into my chest. Gold bangles clanked against her thin wrist, sliding around as she waved her arms dramatically before she clamped her hands to her hips.

"What?" I really wasn't sure I'd heard her correctly or if my hormone-addled brain was still in dream mode.

"You. Owe. Me. A. Kiss." She spoke slowly, like she was a teacher trying

to get a point across to a bored student.

“How’d you get in here?” I swiped my hand down my face and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, still trying to figure out if this was some weird, fucked-up fantasy I was having in the middle of the night.

“Duncan was up playing video games,” she said, then pointed a finger into my face. “Now... kiss me.”

“Kate, I’m not going to kiss you. Go home.” I grabbed a bottle of water from my desk and took a swig.

“Oh, no,” she said, yanking the plastic water bottle from my hands and tossing it aside. “You’re not getting off that easily. You think I don’t know that you sent Duncan out to break up my date with Dave earlier tonight? He could have been my first kiss, but no. Duncan had to come running after us with some ridiculous excuse that his car was out of gas. So Dave rushed me home in order to take stupid Duncan to the gas station.

“So?” I asked.

“Do you think I’m a total idiot? Come on. I know that was some sort of code. I searched that parking lot for Duncan’s car and didn’t see it anywhere.”

I snickered. “Fine. You’re right. ‘My car’s out of gas’ is the code we all use when we’re telling each other to end a date early.”

Her expression dimmed, growing serious. “Why would you do that?”

My stomach turned with guilt. Maybe it was shitty to have ruined her date. Juvenile. Cruel. A storm of remorse churned in my stomach. “You’ll have to ask Duncan—”

“Oh, please. I know it was you. You were glaring at Dave all night. Staring at his hand when it brushed my shoulder. So, let me get this straight. You don’t want me, but you don’t want anyone else to have me. Does that about sum it up?”

It did, actually. And it was super fucked up. “It was for your own good, okay? Dave’s a fine guy, but he’s a serial cheater.”

Kate snorted and crossed her arms. “A serial cheater is a ‘fine guy’ in your book?”

“No—I mean, yes. He’s a good enough friend, but I wouldn’t want my sister to date him or anything.”

She stared at me, her eyes irritatingly bright and unblinking before saying, “Oh. So now I’m your sister in this scenario?”

“No!” I threw my hands in the air and growled, frustrated. I never expected to want Kate—not as badly as I did.

“Look,” she said, “I wasn’t planning to marry the guy. I just wanted to kiss him! And you ruined it.”

I kept my composure for all of a second before I cracked under the thought of her wanting to give Dave her first kiss. “Why? Why the hell do you want to kiss Dave so damn badly?”

“Because if I don’t have my first kiss soon, then it will be on stage with you in front of our entire class! Is it so crazy that I want my first kiss to be while I’m me, not some character I’m playing?”

A trembling breath pushed from her lungs. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she added, more quietly, “I just... I can’t have an audience for my first kiss, okay?”

Her anger faded, melting with her admission.

Oh, fuck. She was right. I hadn’t thought about that.

“You saw the cast list?” I asked.

She nodded, peering up at me with widely set innocent eyes. “Congratulations... Romeo.”

“You too, Juliet,” I said with a chuckle, even though nothing about this situation was funny.

“The rehearsal schedule is attached to the cast list. We’re supposed to do the kissing scene next week.”

“Next week?” I raked my hands through my hair and groaned. “Professor McCay really is trying to torture us, isn’t she?”

Kate snorted a humorless laugh and crossed her arms. "I didn't realize kissing me was such torture."

I turned slowly to look at her from across the room. Space. Yes. That was what we needed. Space between us.

Because she was breathtaking. The way her smooth, tanned skin glowed in the moonlight, backlit by the hallway behind her, creating this supernatural radiance.

"Kissing you on stage and not being able to kiss you in real life would be torture," I clarified, in a moment of raw honesty.

"Then why are you so opposed to kissing me in real life?"

Because my parents would eat you alive, I thought. But I didn't say that. Unless you were the child of a politician or a celebrity, that wasn't something anyone could understand. Instead, I answered with, "You're young."

"I'm eighteen."

"Exactly. You're eighteen. And I'm twenty-one."

"That's stupid. We're both legal and in college. What other excuses do you have?"

Oh, I could play this game all night long. Kate wasn't the first girl I'd pushed away... but she was the first girl I'd had such a hard time pushing away. "I don't do commitments. And you're girlfriend material."

Her eyes narrowed. "I think there's a compliment somewhere in there."

"It is a compliment."

"A compliment and a rejection all at once?"

I lifted my hands in the air. "See? You get it."

"I call bull shitake."

A brief laugh broke through my steely demeanor. "Shitake? I thought you said you were eighteen ... not thirteen."

A dash of pink flushed her cheeks, but to her credit, she stood tall. "My parents are super religious. If I wanted any social life at all, I had to make sure they never heard me cuss. It kind of stuck."

“It’s kind of adorable,” I said without thinking.

The pink blush turned coral and spread across her nose as anger blazed in her eyes. “Puppies are adorable. Coeds asking you to kiss them are sexy.”

My joking retort strangled in my throat as my gaze raked down her body. Her tank top held up tight, small breasts with only thin spaghetti straps. Though she was shorter than me, her lean legs went on for days and did crazy things to my pulse. And her pajama shorts were thin cotton with lavender stripes. If I squinted, I could almost make out the outline of her panties.

Black.

Lace.

Thong.

Fucking Christ.

She was still wearing the panties. My panties.

I grew instantly hard, suddenly very aware of the fact that I was asleep in only my boxer briefs. There was no hiding her affect on me.

“Kate—” Her name was a tortured cry on my lips.

She threw her hands into the air. “Fine. I get it. You and I will never date. Never be a couple. And never have sex. But one way or another, you’re going to be my first kiss... whether it’s in the privacy of your bedroom tonight or on stage in front of twenty of our classmates, including Addison’s newest little lap dog, Bailey. So, which is it going to be?”

Maybe I was just exhausted, or still half-asleep, because her argument actually sounded reasonable to me.

I must have taken too long to respond... or she’s just an impatient little thing. Glaring at me, she folded her arms and quirked her brow. “Or I’ll just go ask Duncan to do it. I think he’s still up playing video ga—”

She barely had the threat out before I closed the gap between us and grasped her in my arms, pulling her tight against my body. My lips hovered over hers, our noses brushing. We were so close that I felt the suction of air

as she gasped.

But I didn't fucking kiss her. Not yet.

I needed to savor this moment.

Give her the sort of first kiss that every girl deserved.

I hovered over her an extra long moment. A hot ache seared in my gut when her palms skimmed up the corded muscles of my chest. I groaned, struggling to keep control of my senses. The room swam, shifting and morphing like we were under water. She relaxed into my arms, sinking against my body.

That's right, Katherine. I've got you. Though I couldn't admit it, I needed this kiss as much as she did. If I had to kiss her for the first time on stage, I was pretty sure I'd ravish her in front of the whole damn class.

Forcing myself to slow down, I dipped my lips, brushing them across hers. A skim of parted, wet lips. That was all it was.

And still—the world around me exploded.

Her whimper crushed my restraint. She was a walking embodiment of contradiction—her lips, warm and soft as they caressed mine, her fingernails, rough and assertive as they scraped my back. She was sweet and measured in the way her mouth parted, opening slowly for me, but also bold and impulsive with the needy grind of her hips and breasts against my body.

I scooped my hands up to her jaw and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. The room spun around me.

This. This was why I didn't do relationships. Because when the intense, raw lust combined with that inner swirl of feelings that Kate gave me, it was implosive. Like swallowing dynamite, it was only a matter of time until it went off, ruining both of us.

But when it felt this good? I had no doubt I'd light the fuse myself.

Sex without connection was easier. I'd had plenty of that in my lifetime.

But it didn't come close to this.

I scooped my hands down to her hips, dipping my thumbs beneath the

waistband of her shorts. I groaned as my thumbs glided across the lacy thin straps of her panties.

These fucking panties would break me.

Tearing my mouth from hers, I managed to gasp in a breath. Moaning, she nibbled my bottom lip, grinding her greedy hips against my erection and brushing her pointed nipples against my chest. Fuck me.

I peeked down, catching a glimpse of black lace beneath her shorts and I groaned.

I squeezed her hips and pushed her to arm's length and tried to ignore her desperate, objecting whimper.

Her eyes snapped open, and she pressed her fingertips to her swollen lips with a gasp. Then... she smiled.

I was done for.

That smile and those lips and, fuck me, that body... there was no way I could walk away from this girl now. Not after having one taste.

She blinked, regarding me carefully, saying, "That was... wow."

I swallow hard, doing my best to gulp down and bury the torrent of emotion swirling through me.

"Is it always that good?" she asked. It was a seemingly innocent question, but the gleam in her eyes told me she knew exactly what she was doing.

I thought back to my first kiss in high school. A sloppy mash of lips and tongues. I remembered my chin being wet at the end of it. It's rarely this good, I wanted to answer. Even with the hundreds of kisses I'd had, I couldn't remember a time when one had knocked me down like that.

"No," I said, my voice hoarse. "I guess you're just a natural."

She laughed, her tongue trailing across her bottom lip as though she could taste remnants of my lips on hers.

"Thank you," she whispered. And with another shy, quick smile over her shoulder, she walked out of my room.

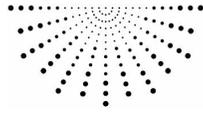
Leaving me alone.

Wanting.

Needy.

And totally ruined.

CHAPTER TWENTY



*M*y parents would eat her alive, he had written in his journal.

He wasn't wrong. They did... or at least, they tried to. But what Holden didn't know at the time was how resilient I was to not being "enough" in the eyes of parents, peers, and friends.

My parents are good people and hard workers and had built our life from almost nothing. But as the daughter of the man who owned the only dive bar in town, it wasn't just Dad's business that was seen as seedy... it was our whole family.

Which was why my parents were so damn protective. Why they worked so hard to keep a clean image of our family. Why we had to wake up every Sunday and attend church amidst the whispers.

So, when Holden's dad tried to make me feel like gum on the bottom of his shoe, it didn't bother me. I was used to it.

What *did* bother me was Holden's reaction to them.

"Excuse me?"

I blink, glancing up from Holden's journal to find an impatient customer staring at me, tapping their foot from the other side of the register.

Shit. It's been a slow morning at the café, so I've been doing some reading before my rehearsal. Closing the journal, I tuck it under the counter and smile at the woman, saying, "Sorry about that. What can I get you?"

“A cold brew, please.”

Perfect. Easy and fast to make.

I grab a plastic cup from the stack and scoop some ice into it before pouring our cold brew coffee.

The bells on the door jingle as Curt comes strolling in fifteen minutes late. As the manager, shouldn't he at least be on time for his shifts? How many times has he lectured me if I was literally one minute late? I bite the inside of my cheek, suppressing the urge to scream at him and instead, settle on a simple, “You're late.”

He shrugs as I hand the woman her drink. She gives me a tight smile as she drops fifty cents in the tip jar. I'll take it. A fifty-cent tip is better than no tip.

“Yeah, yeah,” Curt mumbles and opens the register. Grabbing an envelope tucked beneath the tray, he opens it and flips through the paychecks inside, handing me mine.

I sigh in relief and clutch it to my chest. This, combined with my savings and my first paycheck I got yesterday for week one of rehearsals has me more than halfway there to pay back Ms. Greene. One more week of rehearsals and I'll almost make it to three thousand bucks. I just might pull this off, after all.

I grab my bag and shove Holden's journal inside when Curt extends a second card toward me.

I take it carefully. “What's this?”

He shrugs. “A thing I'm doing.”

“A... thing?”

I glance at the flyer for a band playing at a pub downtown.

“My band,” he says, his eyes on my tits again, though he quickly redirects them back to my face. *Well... A for effort, I guess.* “We're playing a gig next week. You should come. Bring Jill.”

“Um. Okay. I'll... try to make it.” Ah, yes. The perfect general ‘maybe’

answer.

I shove the flyer into my bag as well and book it for the ATM to deposit this check, then hop onto the bus to rush across town.

I still have forty minutes before I need to be at rehearsal, which leaves me just enough time to swing by Ms. Greene's midtown office to drop off my rent check.

I don't have the entirety yet, but I figure if I give her some now, earlier than her deadline, it may earn me some goodwill.

For someone who owns several buildings in New York, Ms. Greene's office is pretty small and generic. It's an old office building where she rents a single room for herself and her assistant—who always seems to be at lunch when I call or stop in.

So much so that I wonder if she even has an assistant or if she just pretends to in order to make herself seem more important.

I knock on the glass door and open it, poking my head around to where Ms. Greene is standing at a memo board, staring at something pinned there. "Uh... Ms. Greene?"

She turns, seeming genuinely startled to see me. And who can blame her? I've spent the better part of a year avoiding her to dodge rent payments.

"Kate," she says. "What are you doing here?"

I clear my throat and hold out the hand-written check for her. "It's not quite enough... yet. But I'm working on it. And I should have the rest for you by next week—"

"The rest?" she asks but doesn't take the check from me. "You're already paid in full."

I snort a laugh and wave the check. "Uh, I think I'd remember paying you three thousand dollars."

"Someone from your show brought it in this morning."

I drop my arm, my eyes drifting closed, exhaustion sweeping my heavy limbs. *Holden.*

It *has* to be Holden.

A couple nights ago he overhears that I'm going to be evicted and, magically, a check appears saving me from said eviction?

"Was it a man?" I ask. "About my age? Dark hair, brown eyes—"

"And an ass you could bounce a quarter off of?" she says wistfully, then gives me a sheepish smile.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

Gray Faced Greene is apparently a cougar, and I can't help but snort a laugh as her grin widens. I don't think I've ever even seen ol' Gray Faced Greene smile before.

Certainly, never *at* me.

"Yeah, that's him," I say, laughing.

Ms. Greene winks at me. "Be careful with that one. The charming bosses are always trouble."

Don't I freaking know it.

She smooths a weathered hand across her sleek bun. "I had to admit, I thought you were lying when you said you finally got your big break. I can't wait to see it."

"You're coming to see my show?"

"Opening night tickets were in the envelope with the payment."

Even as a famous actor, Holden is still so clearly the son of a politician—adept at smoothing and schmoozing. I hold out my check for her once again and urge her to take it. "Well, then consider this an early rent payment for next month."

She gives me a strange look. "Did your employer not talk to you about this? You're paid through the end of the year for the apartment. In full."

My jaw unhinges. "Jill's half, too?"

She nods. "He said it was standard practice for professional theater to cover housing for their cast and crew. Seemed weird to me, but what do I know?"

That's true if you're in a touring company or doing a show in a city that you don't live in—the union regulates that the production budget must cover your living expenses. But not for actors already living in New York. And usually not for Broadway shows. It's understood... to be on Broadway, you have to live in New York. That's just how it is.

Warmth tingles down my spine and I'm not sure what I feel. Angry? Maybe a little. Relieved? Hell yeah. And also, completely uncomfortable with the situation.

Even still, Ms. Greene has never been this nice to me. *Ever*. Hell, I guess I wouldn't have been nice to me either if my tenant wasn't able to pay me the reasonable rent I was owed.

I lower my arm and shove the check into my bag. No point in giving it to her, not when it's really owed to Holden.

“You really didn't know?” she asks.

I stand there, dumbfounded before shaking my head. When I don't offer anything more, she says, “That's strange. Why wouldn't they have told you?”

Because I wouldn't have accepted it. Because I would have fought him. Because it's inappropriate. Take your pick, any of the answers are true.

I merely shrug and say, “I don't know.”

* * *

I THOUGHT the fifteen-minute walk to rehearsal would be enough time to figure out what to say to Holden when I saw him. But as I approach the front door and see him standing outside, unlit cigarette pinched between his index and middle finger, all the arguments I have fly out the window.

I can tell the moment he recognizes me from across the street from the tension that bunches in his shoulders. The world around us stills with my approach. Traffic ceases. Pedestrians freeze. Even the breeze seems to stop until the only sound I hear is his breath and mine, syncing with each inhale

and exhale, and the rapid thrum of my pulse.

“Hey,” he says, tapping the cigarette with his thumb.

I always hated that he smoked in college. It was a disgusting habit. Maybe the only disgusting thing about Holden.

When I don’t speak, he continues, “I quit smoking, I swear. But I always carry this one with me. I hold it when I’m nervous. It reminds me that if I want to smoke, there’s always one ready for me. It’s weird, but it helps.”

“I remember,” I say.

His brow dips. “From when? I didn’t quit until after college.”

That’s not entirely true. He quit multiple times in college. He just could never last as a nonsmoker.

I shrug. “I read it in a *Backstage* article last year.”

His laugh comes out as a single huff.

I reach into my bag and hold out the check I wrote for him on my way over. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“I hear you’re kind of my landlord now.”

He mumbles a curse. “I thought I had at least a week before you found that out.”

“Oh yeah? And what did you expect to happen when I did? I wouldn’t take a handout from Jill, but somehow you thought I’d magically be okay taking one from you?”

He holds up a finger, mouth pressing into a firm line. “*Technically*, it’s not my money. It truly is a loophole in union rules that allows us to allocate some of the budget for actor housing—”

“Yeah, a *relocation* budget! Like when they bring in a famous box office draw from LA or London. It’s not meant for nobody New York City actresses that are a dime a dozen.”

“Dammit, Kate! Stop saying you’re a nobody. You’re one of the most talented people I’ve ever seen on a stage if you could just get your head out

of your ass. This role could make your career. You'll be sensational... if you'd just let yourself fall into the character."

"How can I fall into a character with my secret ex-boyfriend glaring at me ___"

Holden presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Stop! Okay, just... stop. Look, Equity guidelines don't state explicitly what or who the housing budget is for. It's discretionary. If you're evicted, then I lose my leading lady." He pauses, whiskey eyes capturing mine. "And I can't let that happen."

"We still have a week of trial rehearsals," I say, my voice hoarser than I intend. "And you paid my rent for the rest of the year."

Holden nods, but his gaze remains fastened onto mine. "I'm optimistic."

"Since when?" I scoff.

He inhales and lets it go slowly through his nose. "The night you sang." *The night the cast went out to the bar.* His eyes flutter closed. "Your voice... God, Kate. You have no idea what it does to me."

I gulp as he opens his eyes and somehow in that moment, I've drawn closer to him without even realizing it.

Lifting his hand to my face, he sweeps his thumb across my jaw and says, "You have no idea what *you* do to me."

"You've made it almost impossible for me to quit the show now." I'm not sure if I'm talking about him paying my rent or the way he touches me... affects me.

His lips turn up in a small smile. "Maybe that was my plan all along."

"Pretty dumb plan."

He gives a boyish shrug, tucking the unlit cigarette behind his ear. "Guess that depends on who you ask." Turning, he offers me his elbow. "Shall we?"

I slide my palm into the crook of his elbow and relish in how naturally we fit like this. Arm in arm. Holden and Kate. Romeo and Juliet. Director and leading lady. Technically, those girls are all me, and yet, I feel like none of

them. “I guess I have no choice.”

He holds the door open with his free hand. “You always have a choice. Some are just more obvious than others. Besides, rehearsals this week will be different. I promise you.”

With a deep breath, I reach for the cigarette, pulling it out from behind his ear. “If I’m beholden to your safety net, then you should be to mine, too.”

An amused smile plays on those hypnotizing lips of his. “Another cigarette is a lot easier to get a hold of than another apartment.”

I examine the worn cigarette. A lot of the tobacco has fallen out. The paper is wrinkled and worn. It’s bent in some places.

“Yeah, but you’ve literally had this exact cigarette for years. I’ve only been in that apartment for one and a half.” I hold up the cigarette to drive home the point. “This holds a lot more emotional weight than my apartment.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. This cigarette represents all your vices.”

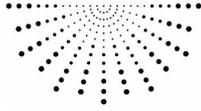
I feel his gaze sweep my body like a flame licking across my flesh. “Not *all* my vices.”

The muscles at his bicep clench as we step into the building, and he guides me with our arms still entwined.

His *vice*. Though I’m sure he didn’t mean any harm by that statement, it punches me in my lung, knocking the wind from my chest. Truer words had never been spoken. That’s truly what I am—a habit that needs to be kicked.

Maybe he wasn’t wrong all those years ago, writing in his journal. Maybe I could have ruined him. But he beat me to the punch first.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

I truly expected Kate to chicken out delivering the panties.

I had emailed her the drop-off details for the panties on Sunday morning after our kiss. The lockers outside of the school indoor pool were the perfect spot. They weren't assigned to anyone specific, but I had been keeping my lock on 455 since the first week of school.

I did a shit ton of cross training at the pool to remain limber and help my breathwork as a quarterback. I'd felt fucking stupid when Dad made me train in the pool in high school, but I'd be goddamned if Dad wasn't right about it.

But she didn't come at all yesterday.

Sunday came and went and on Monday morning at 4:45 a.m., I came to the pool to warm up and work out before class. I eagerly went to locker 455 in the common area and my stack of hundred dollar bills was still there.

Mocking me.

Maybe she wouldn't come at all? Maybe she was willing to take the loss on the cash? Or maybe she found another way to make a quick buck?

I slammed locker 455 shut and then opened up the one next to it to put my

stuff into, since for obvious reasons, I couldn't use 455 for my clothes and bag anymore.

Grumbling, I stomped into the men's dressing room and put on my Speedo. Then, snapping my swim cap on, I took a quick shower to wash up before heading into the pool. Most guys skipped this step, but it was a rule for a reason.

More sanitary for Christ's sake.

This is bullshit, I thought as I scrubbed myself down. What is she waiting for? And why the fuck was it bothering me so much.

I yanked the lever, turning the water off and didn't bother to dry off as I grabbed my goggles and flung my towel over my wet shoulder.

Maybe I should email her again. Just to double check she was planning on coming—

Through the window of the men's locker room door, I spied her.

My lungs seized their breathing. I swear my fucking heart stopped beating for a second.

My stomach leapt into my throat. She was here.

And there was only one reason she'd be here at the asscrack of dawn.

Unfortunately, she wasn't alone out there.

She was being interrogated by Addison and another girl that I recognized as another freshman in our Method 101 class. Addison hovered over Kate like a vulture picking at a carcass on the side of the road.

Addison's voice grated on my brain as she talked down to Kate. "Since you are neither swimmer nor dancer, I have to echo Bailey's question and ask you what the hell are you doing here?"

Clearly she never thought in a thousand years this freshman would pose such a threat to her.

Because that's what Kate was.

A threat to Addison.

Hell, she was a threat to us all just in very different ways.

“I, um...” Kate stuttered, searching for an answer. “Well...”

I pushed through the men’s locker room door.

“She’s here to see me,” I said, crossing to Kate and dropping my arm casually across her shoulders.

My eyes met the younger girl’s briefly.

I knew her. I knew her from something other than our class... but why? Where did I know that girl?

I didn’t have a lot of time to dwell on it because Addison screeched, “What?” Her eyes darted between me and Kate. “But she’s with Dave.”

My arm around Kate tightened at the mention of Dave’s name and I was suddenly anything but casual.

Kate cleared her throat. “Oh. Um, I’m not with Dave. We only had that one date—”

Addison’s glare became downright hostile at that.

We needed to defuse this shit and fast. I slid my arm off Kate and sauntered toward my locker... the one with my personal items, not the cash for Kate.

I can feel her eyes on my every movement. I’m practically naked in the speedo and I clench with each step to really give her a show.

Eat your fucking heart out, Kate.

I opened my locker and pulled out an EpiPen from my bag, holding it out to Kate.

She blink at it—and me—completely confused.

“Here,” I said. “Take it.” Then, I looked at Addison. “Kate has a shellfish allergy and I told her I had an extra EpiPen she could have.”

Addison shifted her weight, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes at both of us. “So you’re just here to pick up a random ass EpiPen?”

Kate took the pen from me and nodded. “Um. Yeah.”

For an actress, she really wasn’t playing this off well.

“Girls!” The women’s swim coach came out and clapped her hands, the

sound echoing loudly in the cavernous hall of the pool. “You’re two minutes late to practice!”

The freshman scurried into the pool, the steamy glass door shutting behind her while Addison took another long moment to glare at us before she too turned and went inside.

“Thanks,” Kate murmured and stretched out her hand to give me the EpiPen back.

“Keep it. I was planning to give that to you anyway.”

“So... you just keep random EpiPens around?”

I shrugged. “When I was a kid, I had an intense reaction to penicillin and my mom insisted that I have an EpiPen on me at all times after that. I’ve literally never used it and I get a new three-pack every six months.”

“Well, thanks. Hopefully I never have to use it either.” She stuck the EpiPen into her backpack, then added, “I didn’t know you were on the swim team.”

I gave her the perfunctory answer. That I train here and blah, blah, blah. I should leave her alone. Let her leave the panties and get her cash and get out of here.

But she’s so fucking cute and fidgety, I wanted to watch her squirm just a little bit longer. “What are you doing here, anyway?” I ask.

Her eyes swung guiltily toward the bulletin board beside the lockers where tons of flyers, ranging from private lessons to tutoring, littered it. “Um, it’s kind of embarrassing,” she said. “But I can’t swim. And I thought maybe I’d come check out the pool and look into... lessons.”

I narrowed my eyes at her as she reached up and ripped a phone number off one of the flyers and I couldn’t help but wonder if there was any truth in her excuse. Could she really not swim?

She shoved the phone number into her pocket, then added, “I thought Monday morning would be empty in here but clearly I was wrong.”

I back away toward the locker room again, nodding, trying to give her a

little space. “Weeknights and mornings before class are always packed here. Friday and Saturday evenings are the quiet hours. Everyone’s at the football games or parties or whatever.”

My gaze traveled over her black jeans, hugging tight curves. And her blonde hair that fell in messy waves past her shoulder. I imagined what she’d look like spread across my bed, that hair tousled and messy—

Fuck.

I had to stop. Save this shit for my spank bank.

Masturbatory thoughts only. Every other moment, she was just Kate. My classmate. A freshman I was in a play with. That was it.

I tried to clear the thoughts from my mind as I turned to head into the pool.

“Hey, Holden,” she said my name quietly, like she was merely tasting the way it felt on her tongue. The sound tingled up my spine and knotted in my chest.

I turned around again to face her, gripping the door handle tighter like it was my life raft. The tether to keep me from rushing toward her and kissing her again.

She pointed to locker 455. My locker. “Do you know whose locker this is?”

My breath strangled in the back of my throat.

This was it.

I could just tell her now.

Let this game be over.

She’d hate me for fucking ever, but at least the exchange wouldn’t have happened.

Except... she needed the money.

And she wouldn’t take it if she knew it came from me. I knew that about her.

I hated myself as I shook my head. “Beats me,” I croaked. “They’re not

assigned or anything. It's just first come first serve and bring your own lock."

I forced myself to leave the room. I walked into the pool and pressed my back against the door.

Fuck. Me.

What was I doing? I wasn't a good guy... I knew that. But this was next fucking level.

This wasn't just being a bad guy. This was the fucking villain of the story.

I had to face that fact. I was the fucking wolf and she was little red riding hood. I cloaked myself in grandma's clothes, pretended daily to be someone I wasn't...

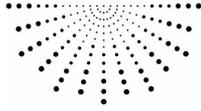
And then, when she least expected it, I would devour her.

But was it really the wolf's fault? It was his nature to deceive. To eat.

To slaughter.

And no matter how many disguises I put on, how many costumes and personas I hid behind, at the end of the day, I was still a fucking wolf.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Nolan holds my eye contact, more intensely than usual. The theater is so silent that the quiet buzz of the stage lights sounds deafening. “I really like your eyes,” Nolan says. “The way they’re not only blue but also have a ring of gold around your pupil.”

He smiles at me. *Nolan*—not him as his character, Zach. A flash of heat sweeps my body as a flush rises up to my cheeks from my chest as the realization slams into me: *This isn’t acting*.

It’s just Nolan and me. Me and Nolan—

“Good job, you two.”

Oh, yeah. And Holden.

Just one happy throuple.

Nolan smiles—not a smile of pride for a job well done. A smile to me. For me.

My insides feel seven sizes too large for my body, and I wriggle under that smile, dropping my gaze to my bare toes peeking out of flip flops.

“Don’t lose the connection, Katherine,” Holden instructs. “Let yourself be vulnerable. Accept the compliments as they come and don’t fight with them—even in your own head.”

Damn him. He knows me way too well.

“I like your...” Panic chokes high in my throat. There are a million things

I could compliment about Nolan. His eyes, his hair, his talent... *Just say something, Kate! Anything. Pick a random body part and just go with it.* Anything is better than standing here like an idiot saying nothing. "...Butt."

Shit.

His smile edges wider. "You like my butt?"

I was wrong. Saying anything was *not* better than saying nothing.

Holden's cough comes from somewhere over my shoulder, and for once in this stupid chemistry-building exercise, I'm grateful for the fact that I'm not allowed to take my eyes off Nolan.

"*Butt—ery* voice," I say, trying to salvage it. "I didn't finish—I meant to say, I like your buttery voice."

Yep. Good save, Kate.

Nolan squeezes my hands. There's about two and a half feet between us, so we're not standing right on top of each other, but for how uncomfortable this exercise makes me, I might as well be naked at the SATs.

"I really like your *butt—ery* voice, too," Nolan says.

Oh, fuck. The tips of my ears go hot and even though I can't see myself, I'm sure my face is flame red.

"No repeating," Holden snaps, sliding into our moment like a knife's edge. "Stay in the bubble with each other. As soon as I see you two deeply connect, I'll start the music, and I want you two to jump right into singing your duet."

Nolan seems completely unfazed by Holden's correction. "Right. In that case... I like the way your hair always seems to fall into your eyes." He lifts his hand to my temple, brushing a few fallen strands off my forehead. "And the way your nose scrunches when you laugh really hard."

"One compliment at a time," Holden says. His voice grows tighter by the second. He'd promised me he had changed. That he could do this—direct us and not allow his own feelings to get in the way. Besides, this is *his* stupid exercise.

“I admire how easy you make all this look,” I admit. “You act and sing and dance with a confidence I wish I had.”

Nolan steps closer to me, and I have to fight every instinct I have not to back away from him. “I love your work ethic. You’re like this force to be reckoned with. So talented, hard-working, and natural... you’re going to take Broadway by storm.”

I work hard because I’m not good enough to have a normal rehearsal schedule, like you, I think. My raw talent and charm aren’t enough to land me a normal leading role. Instead, I have to endure this grueling schedule. Tears well in my eyes, and I press my lips together to stop them from trembling.

The music starts—our cue to sing. But... I can’t. It’s too much. I open my mouth, singing my first verse. I’m on key. The notes are correct. But I’m off... distant. I can feel it, like an object I’m reaching for that’s just out of reach, brushing my fingertips. It’s all there, and yet, also not.

“Don’t lose it, Kate!” Holden calls out over us singing.

The intense eye contact, the hand holding, the forced compliments that neither of us means—and now I have to stare into Nolan’s eyes and sing about undying love to him?

The stage spins around us and it’s too much. I close my eyes against the intense eye contact.

An uncomfortable laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep inside of me. That sort of stupid laughter that happens when you’re awkward and uncomfortable.

The music stops and next thing I know Nolan is chuckling, too.

Something tells me it’s not hard to get Nolan to laugh.

Even still, humiliation burns in my cheeks and when I open my eyes, I expect to see Holden completely pissed off.

But he isn’t.

In fact, he’s... smiling.

Or, at least, smirking. That little tilt of the corners of his lips he does is

usually the biggest smile we get from Holden on any given day.

Holden steps between us, literally breaking our hands apart. “Okay. Good job you guys. That’s enough for today.”

But I know he’s just talking to Nolan—not me. Because it’s never “enough for today” when it comes to me.

“Good work today.” Holden’s mouth twitches into even more of a smile, and he briefly looks to Nolan before settling onto me. “I know that’s really challenging and you both handled it well. Having intense chemistry on stage means also taking care of each other off stage, too, though. And with this work being so intensive today, I want you two to take a few minutes together before you leave. Take at least five minutes together—I want you watching out for each other. Use this time however you each need to come down off of that hard work.”

“Before we leave?” I ask, then look between Holden and Maggie. She’s standing beside Holden and even though I know she’s the only other person in this show who now knows everything between us, her face is even and unreadable.

“That’s right,” Holden says. “Today was a lot of emotional work and Maggie and I thought you should have at least one early night. But be ready to work tomorrow.”

Holden gathers his messenger bag and heads toward the door, leaving Nolan and I standing there, watching in silence as the theater clears of people, leaving just him... and me standing on a mostly dark stage.

“You okay?” Nolan asks. “I feel like I should hug you or something.”

I shift, crudely aware of how out of character it is for Holden to leave us here alone. To bond. “Yeah. Who knew accepting compliments can be so exhausting?”

It’s such a wildly different experience—a different Holden—than anything I’ve experienced in my life, I’m not sure what to do with it.

He shuffles forward and folds his arms around me in an awkward hug. Or

at least, *I'm* awkward in the hug. I don't know where to put my hands, so I stand there, my arms hovering over his body, not touching them.

His body shakes with a chuckle, the low rumble of his laugh vibrating against me. "You afraid to touch me after all we've been through together on this stage?"

He's teasing me, but there's an edge of truth below that question. Like he's trying to figure me out. That unnerves me even more than the litany of compliments we had to give each other today.

Although Nolan's dark, curly hair is damp with sweat, he smells faintly of soap and deodorant. He leans in closer to me. Hot breath skims my ear as he whispers, "I worry about you, New Girl."

I tense with his declaration. "Worry about me? Why?"

I try to pull out of his hug, but he holds me firm against him until I finally relax into his arms and rest my cheek against his chest.

I feel the weight of his chin on the top of my head.

"Most people don't know my mom's a trauma surgeon," he says. "She's proud of me and all, but she doesn't like the spotlight, so I try not to talk about her in interviews. But she used to tell me that, when she was dealing with her most serious cases, she always felt calmer with the bloody, gaping wounds and broken bones. She knew just how to fix them. It was the internal hemorrhages that were the most dangerous. The internal bleeding that she couldn't see that could kill her patient. I guess she trained me to look for those nuances—the person who might be bruised deeper than we can see."

He pulls back from the hug, hands still clutching my shoulders. "I like you, Kate. I don't want to watch you bleed...not if I can stop it."

I'm not even sure I know what to feel anymore. My feelings about men have been tied in knots ever since Holden and I broke up five years ago. But now since Holden kissed me in my stairwell, that knot isn't just a single entity; my insides are more twisted than a forgotten string of Christmas lights in the back of the attic.

I lower my gaze to my feet, unable to look at him. It's like he's seeing through me, cutting into me and spilling my secrets on the floor between us.

"It's weird to be seen," I admit.

Nolan laughs. "You should probably get used to that if you're going to be in this business."

I gulp, unable to laugh and pretend the core of this exercise isn't because of my blockage. "Tell me about it. I'm pretty sure that's why Holden has us doing this. I'm not great at opening up to people."

I omit the fact that it's a direct result of Holden's treatment of me in college.

Nolan grips my hands, warm and firm. "Then Holden's smart to make us do this. We need to be able to open up at least to each other in this show, even if it's painful."

He's not wrong. "But my character betrays yours. She cheats on you and lies and—"

"And in the end, Zach forgives her. Not because she deserves his forgiveness, but because he deserves the serenity of letting the anger go."

I don't think we're discussing our characters anymore.

Nolan tilts his head, and with a resigned chuckle, hands me his cell phone. "Call yourself from my phone... that way you'll have my number."

When I hesitate, he rolls his eyes, but even that action is still sweet and good-natured. I'm not sure that this guy has a malicious bone in his body.

"Look, you're clearly shaken from rehearsal. I just want to check on you later. And I want you to be able to call me if you need to. I'm the only one who will understand these intense feelings Holden is putting us through. And he told us to be good to each other. To check on each other." Nolan's voice drops quieter. "Let me be here for you."

With a sigh, I punch in my number and feel my phone vibrate from within my back pocket. I hand his phone back to him.

"I'm not good at making new friends," I say. "I don't know that I ever

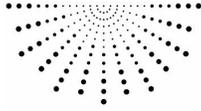
have been... but when I was younger it was for different reasons. It wasn't because I was guarded, it was because I was loud and outspoken.”

He narrows his eyes at me, playfully. “This is you *not* loud and outspoken?”

I laugh and punch him in the arm. “I *was* loud, outspoken, and sweet. Now I'm loud, outspoken, and bitter.”

Nolan rests his arm around my shoulders as we walk toward the exit. “Lucky for me, I've never had much of a sweet tooth.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

I felt like a total idiot.

And a poser.

And based on how all the guys in this class, who actually wanted to be actors, were glaring at me? I'm pretty sure they all knew it, too.

Professor McCay sat in the front row, an open binder with the script resting in her lap, watching as Keith tried to direct us.

"Holden, you need to feel her presence before you even see her across the room. Then, when you two do make eye contact, we need to see the fireworks. You need to make even the biggest skeptic in the audience believe in love at first sight."

I snorted and rolled my script in my clenched hands. "Even if I don't believe in that shit?"

"You may not," Keith said, "but Remy does. This moment makes a believer out of Remy."

Fuck. My. Life.

I would have much rather been on the football field pummeling my best

friends than doing any of this shit.

Keith turned his attention to Kate, standing on the opposite end of the stage. So far, she and I had been the world's worst Romeo and Juliet known to audiences everywhere.

“And Kate. You're here with a date—and up until you see Remy, you think those lukewarm feelings are good enough. Until he shows you what you should be feeling on a date. Got it?”

She blinked slowly, her black lashes lowering across her flushed cheeks. “Yeah. I think I got it.”

Keith stepped back, pressing his fingers to his lips in thought. “Go ahead when you're ready.”

I sighed and took a glance at the lines in my script, even though I didn't have anything to say yet. I was just supposed to look up and see her and be immediately in fucking love? What sort of lame bullshit was this, anyway? Why did so many people think Shakespeare had this shit figured out? It was fucking stupid.

“Any minute now, Mr. Dorsey,” Professor McCay's voice rang out, and it was the first indication that she was actually paying attention.

“Fine,” I muttered.

Our classmates who were in the party scene with us milled about, pretending to drink out of invisible cups and silently mimicking talking.

None of it looked real. Not the party goers. Not the dancing. And most of all, not me being in love.

I lifted my gaze from where I was staring at my toes, and Roxie and Mark, two sophomores in the class, crossed downstage, opening up a break in the crowd for me to see Kate across the room.

Her throat tightened, working into a swallow before she lifted her eyes to meet mine. With a hitch of her chest, her wet lips parted on the inhale.

Energy coiled around my spine at the sight of her rosy cheeks flushing a deeper shade of pink. I took a step toward center stage. Slowly. Just as Keith

had instructed me to do, trying to hold her eyes.

Flashes of our kiss infiltrated my thoughts. That blush was her heated cheeks beneath my thumb as I pressed my mouth to hers. The hitch of her chest and the moan that I drank as my tongue explored her mouth.

Kate. Sweet, beautiful, smart, and talented. And too good to get caught up in all my bullshit.

Fuck. It was too much. The thoughts. The memory of her taste. The prospect of what could have been if I'd just let her stay the night with me. I blinked away from the eye contact and coughed into my fist.

“Stop!” Keith shouted and scrubbed his hands down his face. “That was... closer.”

He was being generous. With a glance at his watch, he waved to the crowd of our classmates standing on the stage, bored. “The rest of you take your seats. Kate, Holden, stay where you are.”

Professor McCay stood, setting her binder on the seat behind her. “Keith, give me a moment with them?”

Keith nodded, and as they walked past each other, I saw a subtle flex to her index finger as she brushed it suggestively along the back of his knuckle. Kate caught my eye, her brows twitching in a way that told me she saw it too.

McCay waved us both into center stage. Gritting my teeth, I shuffled in as Kate did the same, each of us walking so slowly, you would have thought we were making our way to the gallows.

“Okay,” Professor McCay said, crossing her arms and glaring at us. Even though she was barely talking above a whisper, her voice was stern. “What’s going on with you two? Your chemistry in class last week was off the charts and now it’s like you’re barely even looking at each other.”

She glanced between us, ping-ponging her gaze back and forth.

I couldn’t exactly answer for Kate, but I’d spent the last 48 hours fucking my hand with her panties wrapped around my dick.

And now I was supposed to lovingly look into her eyes and pretend I

wasn't this lying pervert?

Finally, I broke the silence, unable to take it for another second. "I think you should cast someone else as Romeo. I'm not an actor... that's pretty obvious. And a lot of people in the class would kill to have this on their resume."

McCay looked to Kate. "Do you agree with his assessment?"

Kate swallowed hard, eyes panicked as they flitted from the professor's to mine. "It's not my place to agree or disagree."

"Not true," McCay stated. "You're the other lead in this part. Every choice Holden makes during this show affects you. And therefore, choices should be made with each other in consideration. So, what do you think? Should I recast Holden?"

Yes... just say yes, Kate. I glared at her, willing her to agree with me. This would fix everything. It would be so much easier if I could just be Tybalt, or rather "Tyler" in this show, her cousin. Her cousin who never has to touch her or kiss her or simulate sex with her. Because, yes, fuck me, there's a sex scene.

Looking directly at me, Kate's eyes narrowed as she said, "No. Holden's audition was the best, even if he doesn't see that."

McCay's brows arched higher, indicating that she was surprised by Kate's answer. Well, step in line McCay, because I was stunned.

The professor slowly looked to me. "But Keith and I can't have a broken Romeo who holds back. It's not fair to Keith and his final graduate thesis. It's not fair to the other classmates who also work hard in this show. And it's not fair to Kate."

I threw my hands up. "What do you want from me? I'm not an actor. You knew that when you gave me the part. This isn't going to be easy for any of us."

McCay's expression softened. "You're right, Mr. Dorsey. Remember when we read Stella Adler's book in class the other day? She talked about

using ‘as if’ scenarios to help actors such as Marlon Brando get into character.”

Tucking my script under my arm, and my hands in my pockets, I nodded.

“Well,” McCay continued, “use that now. Be Remy. But be Remy as if you were at a party and a gorgeous girl walked by you. What would you do... as that character?”

My throat went dry. “I’d run in the opposite direction, that’s what.”

It didn’t mean I was celibate, but I sure as fuck never leaned into those intense feelings. Not since my freshman year. I ran from them, instead choosing to engage with the girls I felt mostly nothing for. Get my kicks. Get my dick wet. And get out with neither of us getting crushed.

I’d seen what getting crushed by the weight of a politician’s son can do to a woman. I wasn’t going to let that happen again.

“Okay...” Professor McCay said carefully, before waving Keith back over to the three of us. “That sounds like what you, Holden, would do. But what would you do as Remy?”

I dragged a shallow breath in before answering. “I would run in the opposite direction,” I reiterated. “Remy just had his heart broken by Rosalyn. Why the fuck would he jump from that heartbreak into another?”

“Why does anyone?” Kate said.

Gooseflesh broke out along my skin at the sound of her voice. What the hell was it about her that affected me so viscerally?

“She makes a good point,” Professor McCay said. “Why do you think Remy falls so hard, so quickly, after such a bad breakup?”

I sighed and scrubbed my palms over my face. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s... like, a rebound thing.”

Professor McCay and Keith shared a look, and I felt like I’d just failed some sort of oral exam.

I dropped the script to the ground. “I told you I’m not cut out—”

Professor McCay silenced me with her outstretched palm. “Hold on. This

could be an interesting acting choice. What if, when Remy sees Julie before she sees him, he's momentarily mesmerized... but you go with that instinct to run away. Turn and book it for the door. But something has to stop you."

Keith examined me closely as he asked, "What would stop you?"

"Her laugh." The answer was out before I had the sense to stop myself.

A smile flickered across professor McCay's face. "Her laugh," she repeated, before turning to face Kate. "So, as he's walking toward the door, you laugh at something your date says to you and it makes Remy halt mid-step."

"You turn around and that's when you two make eye contact for the first time," Keith finished the statement for her, trading a brief look with McCay. "That could work. After that moment, cross to each other and meet center stage. Say your lines. Then you kiss."

Across from me, Kate's electric blue eyes lifted to meet mine as Keith kept talking. "I just want to remind each of you really quickly why you got these parts. Holden, your audition brought a cynicism to Remy's character that I've literally never seen before. And I've seen Romeo and Juliet a lot. That raw, rugged, and jaded sensibility is going to breathe new life into this show. But the key with that character is you have to make him learn through his newfound love of Julie that his cynicism is misplaced."

Yep, there was the hard part. Jaded and cynical I could do. A sucker in love? Not so much.

Keith looked intently in Kate's eyes. "Kate—you're a girl any man could fall in love with. But what made your performance so unique was how strong you made Julie. She's not just a lovesick flower or a set piece where things happen around her. Your performance gave her agency. Focus on those things and you two will make something really beautiful."

Professor McCay eyed us both carefully. "You two, take a couple minutes to talk over the scene before we start, okay? I want to see the scene with just the two of you before we incorporate the other actors back on stage."

“Let’s get Parker, Tyler, and Julie’s father on stage too to read their lines as Julie and Remy walk toward each other. It’ll give them a sense of how long they have to get to center stage,” Keith said as he and the professor took their seats in the audience.

One of our classmates, a good-looking all-American mother fucker named Nate smiled encouragingly at Kate from the wings giving her a goofy fucking thumbs up.

She grinned a glowing smile and waved back at him.

That smile, that electrically beautiful smile was being tossed toward that guy? What the fuck.

I snorted and shook my head. “New boyfriend?”

She jerked her gaze to look up at me. “Who, Nate?” she whispered.

All I did was lift my brows in response, then she quickly shook her head. “We’re just friends.”

“Newsflash, Katherine. He wants to get in your pants.”

Two splotches of pink formed on the apples of her cheeks. “Not everyone is only interested in sex.” Then she dipped her head back into her script to study her lines... or probably more accurately, avoid my gaze.

Fuck. The thought that Nate was some lovesick puppy that followed Kate around and could give her all the things I couldn’t made it even worse.

I shoved my hands in my pockets as Kate blew a long breath from her pursed lips. “Can we just get this fucking scene over with?”

Kate glanced up from where she was reading her script, the arch of her eyebrow impressively high. “Wow. The words every girl longs to hear before getting kissed in front of an entire class of her peers.”

Threading my fingers through my hair, I sighed. “I just meant, it’s been a long day. I’m not like you. I’m not used to standing in front of a shit ton of people and pretending to be someone I’m not.”

Her eyes narrowed at me. “Maybe that’s your problem. Stop thinking you’re pretending to be someone. Be you. Be you in this particular scene and

this particular character.”

With a shake of my head, I snorted. “Except I would never be in this scenario because I’d be out that fucking door.”

She rolled her eyes and stepped closer into me. “You’re not getting it. Method acting is about being you... if you were someone else.”

I clenched my eyes shut. “I’m not getting it because it’s fucking stupid and makes no sense. How can I be me and someone else at the same time?”

“Because it’s you under different circumstances, you idiot!” She took a deep breath before speaking again. “Look, I don’t know why you are like you are. I don’t know what happened to make you so anti-relationship. But imagine that thing had never happened. Imagine that guy—like alternate universe Holden—in this scenario. How would he act?”

A Holden whose parents weren’t in the spotlight twenty-four-seven. A Holden whose ex-girlfriends weren’t dragged through the mud for a sensationalized headline or a smear campaign during an election year.

“Alternate universe Holden,” I repeated.

But she was already gone. Across the stage on her mark, waiting for me to begin.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled a deep breath and when I opened them, my gaze landed on her—across the stage. She wasn’t looking at me yet, just as she had been instructed to do. Instead, she leaned into Parker, her elbow brushing his.

Even though I knew it wasn’t real, jealousy spread through my limbs, burning and numbing me, at the sight of Parker’s hand brushing against her lower back.

But at least it wasn’t Nate’s fucking hands. In this show, he played her cousin. Which only made me grin wider.

I tore my gaze from her and spun to leave—stomping so quickly away that I was already halfway off the stage in the wings when her laugh stopped me. It literally halted me mid-step.

Her laugh. It wasn't quite her real laugh—the one I'd heard that night at the party. This time, it was a little more forced but no less beautiful.

God, I loved her laugh.

Heat coiled down my spine at the sound, knowing that with that laugh, she'd also be smiling. Her eyes bore into my back, and I knew even before turning around that she was looking at me.

I spun slowly to face her once more, connecting with her gaze. This was normally the point where I'd force myself to look away from a girl as gorgeous and sweet as Kate. I'd shove my gaze down and bury it in my phone, sexting someone I cared nothing about as a distraction.

But here, there was no consequence to staring. I was supposed to stare. And I was supposed to like it.

Maybe acting wasn't so bad after all. Something in me shifted. A buzzing intensity took hold of my body and mind. With each step that propelled me forward, I was drawn to her, incapable of stopping myself... which while I was playing the part of Remy, I didn't have to stop myself.

Somewhere in the distance, I registered lines being read by the other actors. Something about me being a Montague.

And then, she was in front of me, her scent so potently surrounding me, that I might as well have been standing in a rose garden.

Kate looked up at me, blinking slowly—only, she wasn't Kate. I couldn't quite describe the feeling of staring at someone who both was and wasn't who you knew them to be. She was standing differently—taller, shoulders rolled back, with a stronger, quieter confidence.

She giggled, a real laugh this time. A glimpse of Kate, not Julie. She bit her lip, squeezing her eyes shut. But it was too late. I chuckled too, clenching my hand around the back of my neck and giving it a good crack.

Our laughs subsided quickly, thank God, and I was grateful that Keith and McCay didn't stop the scene to yell at us. This was hard enough as it was. We both managed to pull it together before Kate looked over each

shoulder and said her first line. “You’re staring.”

“Can you blame me?” I whispered, not needing to look at my script. Suddenly every poetic line I had didn’t feel so cheesy anymore. It was like, as Remy, I got to say everything I’d ever wanted to say to Kate since the moment we met.

And I got to kiss her. I got to kiss her over and over again as long as I was on this stage.

I lifted her hand in mine, dragging my football calloused fingers over the soft silk of her skin.

She stared at me with a mix of wary adoration and lust as I recited the rest of my lines. I scooped my hand into her mess of blonde hair tumbling in careless waves, brushing it back from her face. Her high cheekbones flushed pink beneath my touch, and she parted her delicate lips.

She took my hand, removing it gently from her face, and pressed her palm to mine.

“You’re pretty harsh on these hands of yours,” she said, her voice breathy. “Anyway, isn’t holding hands sort of like a kiss... of the palms.”

Everything about her was cool and confident—except the tremble of her hand against mine—and a fierce shiver of electricity coursed through me as I closed my hand around hers and gave her a tug, pulling her body against mine. Each breath she took pulsed her against me; each inhale brushed her sweet nipples to my chest, and I felt the low vibration as she groaned quietly.

I lowered my lips to a hover just above hers and she teased me, pulling her chin back a fraction of an inch. Her smile was playful; delight sparked in her eyes. The irony of our role reversal wasn’t lost on me. Just the other night, she was the one begging for my kiss—and now here I was, doing the same. And I wasn’t allowed to stop until I accomplished the objective of kissing her.

My heart raced as she finally allowed me to brush my lips against hers. In my head, I’d planned for that kiss to be chaste.

We barely pulled back for a breath. Just long enough for me to say my line, “Dear God, give me my sin again.”

Our mouths parted into each other’s, and we sighed against the final, sweet release of tension, my hands curling around her lower back and lifting her against my body.

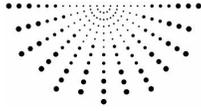
Her fingers tangled into my hair, tugging in a sharp movement that left me growling into her mouth.

“Okay! We may need to save some of that for the bedroom scene. But overall, that was a vast improvement.” Professor McCay’s voice broke the trance and we jumped back from each other.

Oh, God. The bedroom scene.

I could barely keep it together during a kiss. How the hell was I expected to remain professional with us half naked beneath sheets?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

Her scent was fading from the panties.

I fucking hated myself for knowing this.

But it'd been two weeks since the drop off and I'd used each panty more than once... if you know what I mean.

I set my pen down on the journal, pausing my writing to pinch my cigarette between my lips and take a long drag.

I'd be damned if my therapist hadn't been right about this journal. I thought the exercise was gonna be bullshit when we started it this year, but I had to admit, it helped to get my thoughts down on paper.

I only met with Dr. Zambetti every other week on Zoom and we rarely even talked about what I was writing... unless I wanted to.

Which I rarely did.

Especially since meeting Kate.

I glanced down at Katherine's name on my page. And all the horrible things I'd admitted within these pages in only the first few weeks of class.

Fuck no was I going to admit any of this, even within a safe place like

therapy. Even still, I felt lighter confessing to someone.

Even if that someone was just me and my journal.

I lifted my phone, the open email thread between me and Katherine under our dummy email addresses already open and pulled up on my screen. I'd read it a hundred times in the last two weeks like some kind of obsessed stalker.

Would it really be so bad to email her one more time? She hadn't emailed me since the five-word message I got on Monday from her that said: The drop-off's been done.

That was it. That was how our sick little game had ended, despite me trying to keep the communication open after the drop-off. She never took the bait. Never engaged. Like the good little girl she was.

Would she respond if I offered to buy more panties? I wondered.

I typed out my email quickly and swiftly.

The fact of the matter was, I didn't just want her panties. I wanted more than that.

I wanted her innocence. I wanted to hold her innocence in the fist of my hand while beating off to thoughts of her kisses.

The insatiable greed consumed me and I typed out the email in a haze of lust.

Good morning,

As much as I love the 6 pairs I have from you, they're losing their ... shall we say 'essence.'

I have a request for another pair of panties. I want a pair that you make yourself come in and then I want you to sleep in those panties, drenched in your come all night.

Signed,

Your admirer

I was fucking hard already at merely the thought of her coming. Had she ever touched herself before? Just how far did this virginal thing go?

Behind me, footsteps rustled, and soft hands covered my eyes.

Kate's face pops into my mind, but the scent was all wrong. I didn't smell her signature scent of roses and cherries. No, this was a more pungent, sickly-sweet perfume. Something manufactured and produced in an expensive bottle.

I know that smell.

"Addison," I murmured aloud.

Her lips were so close that they brushed my ear as she responded. "Good guess. Does that mean you're writing about me?"

Fuck. My journal. The pages were open and Kate's name was scribbled at least half a dozen times.

With my cigarette still dangling from my lips, I slammed the journal shut, then tugged her hand free from covering my eyes.

Across the quad, I saw her... My Katherine.

Walking into Turner Hall for our class. Or was it rehearsal? They were basically one in the same. When McCay got wind of how intense my practice schedule was for football, she made the executive decision to rehearse almost exclusively during class and use Keith's show to teach Method acting.

Her eyes were glued onto me... and Addison. The sun glinted off the blue of her eyes, cold as glaciers despite the warm early fall morning.

I pulled the cigarette from my lips, not even listening to whatever the fuck Addison was yammering on about... this girl did not take a hint well... and I tamped out the ash end of my smoke against the rock beside me.

I was about to shrug Addison off me when an expression so unnerving passed over Kate's face.

Longing.

Her eyes tilted.

Her frown twitched and he nibbled her bottom lip between her teeth.

I knew she wanted me, of course.

I also knew she shouldn't want me.

No, scratch that... she couldn't want me.

Because a girl like that had commitment written all over. Kate didn't know how to do a single damn thing casually. It was bad enough that we were in this show together and had to touch and kiss every other day. Not to mention, I was jacking it twice a day to thoughts of her.

But worse than what her face showed was the way my heart lunged in my chest at the sight of her.

Because I wanted her, too.

So fucking badly.

I didn't want to want this girl.

This freshman girl.

This freshman virgin girl.

She was the absolute last person I should be desiring. And yet it was because of that innocence that I craved her so goddamn much. I needed a cleanse. Someone to wash Katherine from my dirty fucking thoughts. Someone to rinse away all spank bank dreams I'd been collecting.

I glanced up at Addison. She wasn't perfect. But she was here. And she was far from innocent.

I reached up and tugged at Addison's hand, pulling her down into my lap.

"Holden!" Addison squealed, but she buried her face in my neck.

Kate's face went cream white. The adorable pink splotches that almost always colored her cheeks blanched at the sight of Addison and me together.

Jaw tight, Kate scurried away like a cockroach sensing a nuclear explosion, disappearing behind a group of people at the front steps to the theater building.

I cringed as Addison's tongue lapped up my neck and then shifted to nibble on my ear. She wiggled her ass into my lap, my erection from thoughts of Katherine quickly shrinking.

What was I doing? What the fuck was wrong with me? Maybe I did need to talk to my therapist about this Kate bullshit because I was acting like a

lunatic with split personalities.

One minute I was fucking ravaging Katherine's mouth and the next I was shoving her to arm's length.

I curled an arm around Addison and tugged her off my lap.

"What the hell, Holden?" Addison snapped as I plunked her down beside me. And I didn't blame her. Not one fucking bit.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, then swiped a hand down my weary face. "Do us both a favor, Addison. Stay far away from me. I'm bad news."

Her hand skimmed up my arm, squeezing when she reached my shoulder. "I thought I told you. I like bad."

She wasn't getting it. And who could blame her with the mixed signals I was throwing her way. "I'm serious. It's not gonna happen, you and me."

"Why? Because of her?"

She didn't need to specify who she meant, and I didn't ask her to. We both knew.

"No," I said. I was lying, but it was fine since I was also lying to myself, right? "Because I don't do relationships—"

"I'm not looking for a relationship either."

I barely managed to hold back my snort.

Addison was a trust fund kid, just like me. Our parents maybe didn't run in exactly the same circles... her family money came from Connecticut, mine from Boston, but nonetheless, I knew her type.

No matter what she said, she was looking for a big fat diamond ring. It was programmed into her.

I was about to say as much when Duncan dove into the grass beside where Addison and I were sitting.

"What's shakin' bacon?" he said, his face splitting into a goofy grin.

It was the perfect opportunity to unhook Addison's arm once again from where she had latched onto me and pass her off onto Duncan. Hell, why didn't she just go for Duncan in the first place? He was just as much a catch

as me... maybe even more so since he actually dated the girls he fucked.

“Nothin’,” I grumbled and started packing my shit into my backpack.

“He’s grumpy this morning,” Addison said.

“I’m not grumpy,” I snapped. Okay... I was a little grumpy. But I didn’t need a chick I barely knew telling that to my best friend. The motherfucker lived with me. He knew when I was grumpy better than anyone.

“I think it’s this stupid notebook he’s always writing in,” Addison snatched the journal from my hands. She started to open it but I yanked it back, tearing a few pages in the process.

“Fucking hell, Addison. That’s private! What’s wrong with you?”

“Jesus, sorry.”

But she wasn’t sorry. She was smiling. This was a goddamn game to her.

In front of the doors to Turner Hall, a glimpse of Katherine once more caught my eye. I thought she’d gone inside the building, but I’d been wrong. She was standing outside, leaning against the railing at the stairs talking with Nate.

Fucking. Nate.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth.

Was she... was she flirting?

Was it because I tugged Addison into my lap? Did that stupid plan backfire within goddamn minutes?

“Ain’t that your girl?” Duncan asked.

“She’s not his girl,” Addison snapped.

Duncan gave me a knowing look, but neither of us said another word. With that, Addison hopped to her feet and stomped off. “Thank Christ,” I muttered.

“Damn, that one’s like herpes, isn’t she?” he asked while jerking his chin toward where Addison was walking away from us. “No amount of antibiotics is gonna prevent her from popping up at the most inconvenient time.”

“Poetic, Duncan.”

“I know.” He grinned and took a sip of his coffee.

I turned back to where Katherine and Nate were talking and—Jesus Christ. That mother fucker brought her a muffin from Starbucks. A fucking muffin. The pussiest pastry ever.

“He brought her a muffin?” Duncan snorted. “That’s a pussy breakfast.”

I snapped my gaze at my best friend, the fucking mind reader. “It is, right?”

“Fuck yeah. Real men eat scones. And biscuits. Muffins are for pussies.”

It made sense. I didn’t know why, but it did. Thank God for Duncan. This was why we were friends.

I finished shoving all my things into my backpack and gave Duncan a quick goodbye before crossing the quad to Turner Hall.

I could hear Nate talking as I got closer. “I would even venture to say you’re the farthest thing from a basic bitch I’ve ever seen.” I rolled my eyes at him.

Fucking Prince Charming right there.

Maybe I was overreacting.

She couldn’t actually like this Gomer of a dude.

Then, flustered, she pulled her phone free from her back pocket, looking at the screen.

I froze like a deer in the headlights.

My email.

I forgot about the email I’d just sent her before all this started.

I took an unhealthy delight in the fact that I fractured whatever stupid Saved by the Bell innocent muffin moment they were having.

Nate was holding the door to Turner Hall open for her, but her face had flushed a peachy-pink shade and flustered, she shook her head. “I’ll, um, be inside in a second. Thank you again for the muffin.”

His smile dropped briefly, but he nodded, then disappeared into the

theater. Buh-bye Nate.

I smiled wider, noting that she tossed the chocolate chip muffin Nate had brought her into the trash.

She turned her back to me, not realizing I was watching her, then she quickly typed something on her phone. In seconds, my phone buzzed with her reply.

That was a one-time thing. I'm out of the sex work business.

Smiling, I hiked my bag higher onto my shoulder, wincing at the tweak of pain that stabbed down to my elbow from practice yesterday.

A one-time thing, huh?

I ducked behind a nearby tree and fired off three more emails to her inbox.

I'll pay you three hundred dollars for one pair that you masturbate in.

I'll make it a six hundred if you include a picture of your hand in your panties.

Twelve hundred if you include a video.

How many times in my life would I get a chance like this? A chance to watch Kate be scandalized by my suggestions.

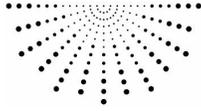
The girl blushed all the time, but I'd never seen her so beet red before.

She licked her lips and fell back against the wall.

She'd say no. I knew she would. Never in a million years would sweet, virgin Kate Harris agree to taking masturbatory images and then sell me the panties she creamed in.

But I could sure as fuck delight in asking and watching her squirm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“*S*o, Holden just *paid* our rent for the year? Just like that?” Jill snaps a finger and pokes her head around the door to the bathroom.

Steam billows around me as I towel dry my hair and twist it up into a high, wet bun on top of my head.

“Yep.”

“That’s like over *twenty thousand* dollars!” I ignore her incredulous look as I smear moisturizer onto my face.

“Uh-huh.” I shut off the light and breeze past her, out of the bathroom.

“Are you seriously not freaking out about this?” she asks, following me into my bedroom.

“Nope,” I lie. Internally, I’m having a total and utter meltdown. In some ways, it’s like Holden owns me now that he paid for our apartment. I can’t quit the show now... even if I wanted to.

“Well, I hope you *at least* gave him a blowjob for it.”

“What?” I whirl around to face her. “You seriously think I owe him a sexual favor because—”

Her smug grin halts me mid-sentence. *Dammit.*

“Ha! I *knew* you weren’t cool with this!”

With a sigh, I grab a bag of popcorn and throw it in the microwave. “Well, *duh.* Of course I’m not cool with it! If I’m not able to take money

from my own parents, you really think I'm totally fine taking it from my ex?"

The smell of salt and butter fills the room, and the cracking pops of the kernels are strangely soothing.

I fold my arms, bending at the waist to rest my cheek on the counter and watch as the bag of popcorn inflates. "But I don't know what I'm supposed to do about it now. What's done is done, I guess. I owe Holden yet another *non-blowjob* favor."

Jill pauses, head ducked in the refrigerator, can of whipped cream in hand. "What was the first favor?"

"Giving me this part in the first place."

"What if giving you the part wasn't a favor? What if you truly were the best and you earned that part?"

I snort and shake my head, still not lifting it from the counter. The cool granite feels nice on my warm skin. "Up against Missy Howl? I don't think so. That woman has won three Tony Awards. Besides, if it were true that I earned my part, he wouldn't have needed to give me this 'trial run' for two weeks."

"Or the trial run is more about if you two can work together as a team and less about your talent."

Yeah. Right.

"It still blows my mind that Holden—our football star, Holden, from college—became a famous actor," she says. "He was just *such* a jock."

"Believe me," I mutter. "No one is more shocked than me."

"Tilt back," Jill says, nudging my chin with her fingers.

I do as she says and open wide just in time for her to fill my mouth with whipped cream. With a grin, she does the same in her own mouth as there's a knock on our door.

Still trying to swallow her mouthful of whipped cream, she slides over to the door and peeks out the peephole.

"Oh, my God," Jill says. "There's a freaking Greek God knocking on our

door.”

“What are you talking about?” I laugh and push off the counter, walking toward the door.

She still has her eye pressed to the door. “He has to have the wrong apartment. I mean, seriously. He looks like if Hercules and Apollo had a lovechild.”

“Hercules was only a demi-God. His mother was human—”

“Oh, my God!” Jill hisses. “That’s so not the point!”

There’s another knock and we both freeze as a deep voice I recognize says, “Kate? Are you home?”

I know that voice.

I know that voice very well actually.

“The Greek God knows your name,” Jill whispers.

“He’s not a Greek God,” I whisper back. “He’s my co-star, Nolan.”

I nudge Jill to the side and open the door. Nolan is leaning casually with one arm on the doorframe. A plastic bag is in his other hand. His eyes shift between me and Jill, and he grins a wicked smile. “Hey.”

“Uh... hey.”

I glance down at my disheveled and freshly showered self. I’m not wearing a stitch of makeup. My sweatpants are two sizes too big and ratty. My favorite t-shirt is nearly threadbare because I wear it so damn much.

At least I’d put on a sports bra after my shower. Thank God for small favors.

“What, uh, what are you doing here? And how do you know where I live?”

“It’s on the contact sheet Maggie sent out last week. And I wanted to check on you after rehearsal. Make sure you’re okay.”

I feel the penetrating heat of Jill’s stare and all her unasked questions.

“Why wouldn’t she be okay?” Jill asks.

Nix the ‘unasked’ part.

“It was a tough rehearsal where we had to do all these trust exercises. I’m Nolan, by the way.” He flashes Jill a boyishly sexy grin and holds out his hand to her. As she slides her palm into his, he winks and adds, “But you can call me Apollo if you prefer.”

Jill’s face blanches, growing impossible paler.

“This is my best friend, Jill,” I say in an effort to spare her any more humiliation. Then again, knowing Nolan, he’s eating this up.

Jill gives an awkward wave and says through a giggle, “Yep, that’s me. Jill the loudmouth.”

I hip check Jill playfully and continue speaking. “And as you can see, I’m fine—”

He holds up the plastic bag. “I brought Magnolia cupcakes. But you only get them if you let me in.”

I cross my arms. “You’re going to hold cupcakes hostage?”

He sighs and a weariness passes over his face as he lowers his voice. “Truth? *You* may be fine... but I’m not. I’m not really used to being that *exposed* in a rehearsal. And since we’re supposed to be leaning on each other in this show—”

“I’m so sorry, Nolan.” *Shit*. I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’ve been so self-absorbed with my own bullshit, I didn’t even think to check on how you’re doing.”

I hadn’t done the *one* thing Holden asked of us after rehearsal: to take care of each other. Nolan had taken care of me—but maybe it had been a cry for help, his way of asking me to do the same for him.

“You want to come in for a while?” I open the door wider and gesture for him to enter.

“We’re going to watch *Les Mis*,” Jill says. “And mock Russel Crowe mercilessly.”

Nolan’s grin widens. “Well, how can I say no to that?”

* * *

WHAT IS my life right now? How is it that Nolan freaking Brooks, Broadway star, is sitting beside me on my shitty Ikea couch beneath my tattered fleece blanket?

“You seriously haven’t caught a single piece of popcorn tonight!” Nolan teases me with a poke to my ribs.

“It’s not so easy!” I defend myself.

Jill snorts and shakes her head. “Sure it is. Watch!”

She tosses a piece of popcorn at Nolan and without a single flinch, he opens his mouth and catches it perfectly on his tongue. With an eyebrow wiggle, he eats it and winks at me.

“See?” he says with a laugh, holding a kernel of popcorn between his pinched fingers. “Your turn now.”

Before I’m ready, he throws the popcorn at my face and it bounces off my cheek.

“I wasn’t ready!” I cry out as Jill and Nolan crack up.

Nolan reaches over with a pinch to my cheek. “You’re adorable. How is it, you’re so graceful on a stage and yet so uncoordinated with popcorn?”

I roll my eyes and pick a piece of popcorn out of my hair that had been there for God knows how long. “Who says I’m graceful on stage?”

“Um, everyone,” Nolan says. “You should hear how the crew is raving about you. Everyone’s wondering where the hell Holden’s been hiding you all these years.”

Heat flushes my cheeks as Jill and I share a quick look.

“Well, you’ll soon learn that Katie is her own harshest critic,” Jill says and I’m grateful to my best friend for the millionth time in our lives.

“I can see that,” Nolan says.

The atmosphere in the room shifts, tension vibrating the air between us. I stare at the movie, pretending not to notice Nolan’s eyes locked onto me.

His laser focus is so intense that when my phone vibrates with a call, I jump up, relieved at a distraction to release the pressure of his stare. Without looking at the number, I answer, stepping behind the couch.

“Kate.” The deep voice on the other end of the line has me freezing mid-step.

“Holden?” I pull the phone away from my ear briefly, shocked to see Holden’s name illuminated on the screen. Dammit. The one time I don’t look before answering.

“I wanted to check on you. After that exercise—”

“That’s Holden?” Nolan calls from over his shoulder. “Tell him I think we were all too harsh on Russell Crowe! He’s not as bad as I remember.”

Holden goes silent on the other end of the line. I clear my throat, praying he didn’t hear that.

Finally, he says, “Nolan’s there? At your apartment.”

Jill eyes me and, sensing the tone, hops to her feet, grabbing Nolan’s hand and tugging him into the kitchen. “I need a popcorn refill. Let’s do cinnamon sugar this time!”

I breathe easier with them both gone. “Yes,” I say into the phone. “Nolan was a little, um, raw after rehearsal today and he didn’t want to be alone—”

Holden snorts, a disdainful sound. “I bet he didn’t.”

“*You’re* the one who told us to take care of each other. *You* told us to bond. Remember that?”

“Yeah, I meant, like *text* each other. Maybe a quick phone call to discuss how you each felt today. Not have a fucking sleepover!”

“Calm down. No one is sleeping over,” I say. With a sigh, I peek around to the kitchen where Jill and Nolan are laughing about something.

They look adorable together and curiosity piques inside of me. Nolan’s a total flirt—that’s pretty damn obvious. But he’s beaming at Jill in a way that I’ve never seen.

“Why are you calling, Holden?”

“As I said, I wanted to make sure you’re okay. Trust exercises can put actors through the ringer more than they anticipate.”

I clear my throat and change the subject. “Holden, are you sure you don’t need like, producer approval, or anything to use the show money to pay our rent?” I whisper and look around to make sure Nolan can’t hear me.

It’s silent on the other line. “Like I said to you before, it was a loophole I found. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“So... you don’t need producer approval for it?”

“I did. But I got it. From one of the producers.”

A fission of energy pulses down my spine. That should make me feel better... but it doesn’t.

“I’ll let you get back to your... company,” Holden says.

“Holden, it’s not like that—”

He’s already hung up before I can finish my sentence.

Jill and Nolan come back into the room, freshly popped bowls of popcorn in hand. Jill sets hers down and heads to the bathroom as Nolan comes to stand next to me.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

I don’t want to lie to him. After all, he has worked with Holden before. He knows him really well, right?

“I’m not sure,” I answer honestly. “I think so, but Holden seemed weird when he heard you here tonight.”

Nolan gives me a small, reassuring smile. “I think he likes you.”

‘Like’ isn’t the word I’d use. It’s too generic. Too small to encompass the feelings Holden and I have for each other. Hell, I’m not even sure I know *what* I feel anymore.

“I think I need to make something clear,” Nolan says quietly.

Panic surges up my spine. *Oh, God, no. Is this a profession of love? Has Holden been right all this time, and this has been one big ruse to get into my pants?*

“Nolan—” I try to stop him from continuing, but he ignores me.

“Kate, you are talented and beautiful and so fun. You’re chill in a way that few girls I’ve been in shows with are. And I kind of have this stupid, bad habit of sleeping with my co-stars. I’m sure you’ve heard.”

Oh, fuck. Of course I’ve heard. Not only from Holden, but from every Backstage article I’ve read. Anyone who’s ever been in a show with the guy knows how he falls in and out of love with his co-stars quickly. But I don’t say any of that. Instead, I simply nod.

He blows out a breath and rakes his hand through his hair. “Yeah, well, I’m working on that with my therapist. Every one of those times, I was just trying to get back at an ex of mine. But with you and me... I think we could be really good friends.”

I blink, momentarily stunned. “You... want to be my friend?”

“Yeah. I like the idea of being friends with you. And remaining friends even after the show.”

“And that’s never happened with you?”

He laughs in that uncomfortable way and rubs the back of his neck. “Not really. I mean, I guess I can stay friendly with some of my co-stars, but it doesn’t usually end well with my leading ladies once the show closes.”

A deluge of relief fills me, and even though the idea of being friends with a co-star isn’t foreign to me, I know that for Nolan this is a huge step. I push onto my toes and hug him. “Of course we’re friends, Nolan. I want to *stay* friends, too.”

His shoulder muscles release, relaxing against my palms and he hugs me back tightly. “I’m sorry for hitting on you in last week’s rehearsal.”

“It’s okay,” I say.

We pull back from the hug and Nolan laughs in that macho, uncomfortable way men do after exhibiting emotion. “Damn. That vulnerability exercise is powerful. Maybe you and Holden need to do that. Together.”

My laugh chokes. “Me and Holden? Wh—”

Nolan levels me with a look. “*Kate*. I may be pretty dense when it comes to a lot... but not when it comes to chemistry. I don’t know what happened between you two, but it’s pretty damn obvious you two didn’t just ‘meet’ in college.”

I’m immediately transported back to that day at the auditions. *She wasn’t exactly memorable back then.*

Enough is enough. Nolan’s right. I need to confront Holden about that. And a lot more.

Nolan sighs and grabs a handful of popcorn. “Look, I’m just saying, whatever history is there, you should work through it. I’ve known Holden for a few years. He’s always closed off. Guarded. It’s like no one in the theater knows anything real about him.”

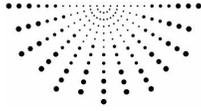
“Even Missy Howl?”

Something intense rolls through Nolan’s expression that I can’t quite put my finger on. “I mean, I don’t know details. But with you? With you, I see sides of him that he’s never shown the world before. Not even when he was with Missy. You’re good for him.”

I gulp, tears stinging the backs of my eyes.

Nolan touches a finger beneath my chin, dragging my gaze to meet his. “I guess the more important question is, is *he* good for *you*?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

I had successfully avoided interactions with Katherine for the rest of the week.

Well, if we weren't counting making out on stage at rehearsals. We still hadn't blocked the sex scene, thank Christ. I wasn't fucking sure how I was going to survive that.

There were only so many cold showers a guy could take.

After football practice, I got home a bit after Duncan did and he was already in the kitchen making some dinner when I came in the front door.

I put my shit away, then came into the kitchen to grab a Coke Zero from the fridge. He clapped me on the shoulder with a big burly hand. "Hey man, want some spaghetti?"

I winced, unable to hide my painful expression and he yanked his hand back. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was that bad today."

I rolled out my shoulder doing some of the stretching exercises my physical therapist had taught me years ago. "It's okay. It's been extra creaky this week."

Sophomore year, I tore my rotator and the damn thing never quite healed fully. I just kept playing on it as soon as I could lift my arm above my head again.

Now, it only took one wrong hit, one askew snap of the football, hell even one rainy day to flare the pain.

“Did you tell Coach?” Duncan asked.

I shook my head. “Nah. Didn’t need to. He sees everything.”

Duncan clicked his tongue and dumped a whole jar of Prego into the saucepan on the burner. “You think he told your dad?”

Comically on cue, my phone buzzed in my hand. The word HOME scrawled across the top of the screen.

With a sigh, I held it up for Duncan to see. “I’m gonna venture a guess that yeah, he did.”

“Damn. This is why I didn’t go to my dad’s alma mater.”

I snorted. As if I had a choice in the matter. “I might as well get this over with,” I muttered, then backed out of the kitchen. “Save me some of that spaghetti though.”

I crossed down the hall toward my bedroom and answered the call. “Dad, I swear, it’s not as bad as Coach—”

“Sweetheart, I miss hearing your voice.”

I stopped dead in my tracks at the sound of her slurred words. “Mom?”

“My sweet baby boy,” she cooed.

Drunk.

Really fucking drunk if I had to guess. And there was a good chance she’d washed down some pills with that vodka, too.

I shut my bedroom door quietly behind me. “Hey Mama,” I said gently. “Everything okay over there?”

“Oh, fine. It’s all fine over here. Not a thing to worry about.”

Which meant I definitely had something to worry about. Mom being drunk wasn’t exactly a headline in my world, but she didn’t usually call me in

this state of drunkenness. A little tipsy? Sure. So drunk she could barely string her words together? Never.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Client dinner,” she mumbled. In the background, I heard the distinct clink of the decanter tapping the edge of a glass, followed by the slow trickling pour of another beverage.

Client dinner my ass.

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut. Dad had promised me that he wouldn’t do that shit anymore. No more affairs. He’d promised he’d look out for mom. It was the only reason I had agreed to come here to school.

The only reason I’d agreed to leave her.

Without me, there was no one to take care of her.

For three years, it seemed like he’d been holding up his end of the bargain.

“I think about Megan a lot,” Mom said out of fucking nowhere. My spine went steel straight.

She never brought up Megan. Ever.

And for good reason.

“It wasn’t fair of us,” Mom continued, blathering on. I wasn’t even sure she knew what she was saying.

“You’re right,” I croaked. “It wasn’t.”

“Megan was a nice girl,” she slurred again. “I was a nice girl, too, you know? Back before I met your father.”

“I know, Mom. You’ve always been kind.”

“I wasn’t to Megan.”

Silence.

I couldn’t argue with that. Mom was right. Whatever nice girl she was, my Dad destroyed that. Ruined her. Turned her into one of the many bitchy Stepford wives who would stop at nothing to take down someone in their path.

But deep down, that woman wasn't my real mother. My real mother was kind. She was thoughtful. She was caring.

"I should call her," Mom said. "Apologize to Megan—"

"No! Jesus, no Mom" I winced at the volume in my voice, then tried again, softer this time. "Mom, Megan doesn't need you to call her. If anything, I think that will just hurt her more."

There was a quiet snuffle.

Fuck. No.

"Mom, please don't cry..."

"I want you to be happy. And now, it's been years and you haven't dated anyone. I'm just... I'm so scared you've closed yourself off." Another snuffle. Her voice cracked as she said, "I wouldn't have gone along with your father if I'd known—"

"There's a girl here I like, Mom." Fuck. Why'd I say that? I had just needed her to stop crying and I would have said just about anything to get my mom away from the thought of calling Megan.

The line was silent for a long moment. If not for the even breaths on the line, I would have thought we'd gotten disconnected. "You like a girl? Who is she?"

"We're not dating or anything. I just... I like her. She's a freshman in my acting class and she's great. The most talented girl in the class." Hell, probably the most talented girl in the whole school.

"You like her," Mom repeated, but her words were still slightly slurred. "But you're not dating her. Would you date her?"

Yes, I thought. My heart raced at the fact that I answered so quickly in my own head. "I don't know. Maybe. We're just friends right now." Yeah, some fucking friend I am. With a friend like me, Katherine won't need a single goddamn enemy.

"Friends..." Mom said, dragging the word out. "I miss having friends."

"You have friends," I said, relieved for the change in conversation.

“What are they up to tonight, Mom?” I’d do just about fucking anything right this second for a change in subject. “Any of your friends around and want to pick you up for a girls night?”

I started running through the list of Mom’s friends at the club and who might be available to go sit with her.

“They’re all busy,” Mom said. “Busy with their husbands who take them to their client dinners. Busy at the theater tonight because they had season tickets. Everyone’s busy!” she shouted.

A glass smashed in the background and Mom hissed a string of curse words.

Fuck. It was worse than I thought. “Mom,” I tried again gently. “Did you take your Lexapro today?”

She sniffled. “No. I needed to pick up the refill this week and I forgot.”

“From the Walgreens, right? The one in the shopping center with the Starbucks?”

“Yeah. I can go now—”

“No,” I snapped. The last thing I needed was her climbing behind the wheel when she was this drunk. “I’ve got you, Mama. You know that. I’ve always got you.”

She gave a little whimper that came out like a sigh. “I know you do, baby boy.”

I put my mom on speaker phone, then texted my godmother... Anne Marie. My mother’s best friend from childhood.

I hadn’t spoken to the woman in years.

Not after the unspeakable happened.

But right now, there was no one else.

Holden:

Can you pick up my Mom’s prescription and sit with her tonight until my dad gets home?

To her credit, despite everything that went down in our families, Anne

Marie got back to me within seconds.

Anne Marie:
Of course I can.

I quickly logged into her Walgreens account online, I'd had the password ever since high school, and paid for Mom's Lexapro prescription. Then, I forwarded Anne Marie the pin of the Walgreens location and the order number I'd already paid for.

In the background while we texted, Mom mumbled the occasional, "Sweet baby boy," and other nonsensical things.

Anne Marie texted back again.

Anne Marie:
How are you otherwise, Holden?

I gnashed my teeth together, fire burning in my veins as I responded back.

Holden:
You and I aren't okay. But you owe my Mother this favor.

It took several more minutes for her next response to come in.

Anne Marie:
Understood. I'm on my way to Walgreens now. I should be at her house in twenty minutes.

I took a deep breath, calming down my rage before saying to Mom, "Anne Marie's on her way, Mom." The woman's name was like acid in my mouth, but it wasn't anything my Mom knew about. Or ever would know about if I had anything to do with it. "She's bringing your Lexapro and I also got you those eye masks you like. The ones with the gold flecks."

"Oh, I love those," she cooed.

"I know, Mom. And for old time's sake, I got you the peppermint Chapstick, too."

She chuckled, the sound raspy and muffled. “You loved those Chapsticks,” she murmured.

“I did. I thought I could get away with not brushing my teeth when I wore it.” I tried to trick her once or twice, but then the Chapstick became part of our nightly routine. I’d never seen my mother use any other product that wasn’t above \$100 an ounce... except for those Peppermint Chapsticks.

To this day, I still carry one around with me.

It grew eerily silent on the line. “Mom?”

Then, a quiet, steady breath.

She was asleep.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I texted my father next.

Holden:

Whatever ‘client meeting’ you’re at ends now. Get home to take care of your wife. She’s trashed.

His response took a bit longer than Anne Marie’s, but he texted back.

Dad:

I’ll be home in forty-five minutes.

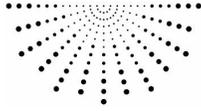
Exhausted, I fell back on my bed and groaned, listening to the ambient background noise of my mother’s quiet snores.

This was why I couldn’t date.

Couldn’t fall in love again.

This was what happened when you fell in love with a Dorsey and I wasn’t about to subject any more women to the poisonous well that was my family.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



I'm covered in emotional bruises and scars.

And I can trace every last one of them to Holden.

Ever since that phone call last night where he discovered Nolan hanging out at my apartment, I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I've spent the whole rehearsal today walking on eggshells around Holden—waiting for the moment he yells. Or snaps at me for forgetting a line. Or fires me.

But that moment doesn't come.

We're, dare I say, acting professionally.

Which is actually *more* unnerving than our bickering of past days.

For most people, one day is hardly something to celebrate. For us, it's a notable bronze medal. Maybe if we're lucky, we can finish the week without an altercation.

I'm more and more excited as I watch the clock—our group rehearsal is coming to an end, and the private rehearsal with Holden drawing nearer. I almost don't recognize myself. Who is this girl who can look at the man who broke her heart and not want to smash a window?

The cold, wintery bitterness I've held onto for so long is thawing, melting and revealing that beneath my surface, a warm summer has been waiting to emerge.

I'm ... *happy*.

Like, actually, truly happy. Sure, I'm exhausted and working constantly, but I don't have this unending cloud of doom suspended above me and the fear of its inevitable torrential downpour.

Upstage, Holden chats with Nolan and they're both smiling. A smiling Holden. Talking to the actor I just kissed onstage.

I barely recognize this man before me.

Holden claps his hands together to get our attention. "Okay! Great job today, everyone. Now, get out of here. Go have a life." He points in my direction, a wide grin illuminating his gorgeous, chiseled face. "Except for you, of course. Your life is here, with me."

I freeze on my way down from the stage, my face going hot at his words.

Nolan touches my arm as he passes me, his eyes bright and friendly as he gives me a playful wink. "Is he right? That your life is here... with him?"

A swallow is thick at the back of my throat and slow to go down.

"These days, it feels like it." I laugh, but the sound comes out strangled in my poor attempt to try to play off Holden's comment.

"Too bad," Nolan says, grabbing a clean towel from the pile Maggie keeps for us offstage. He dabs the bit of sweat dripping down his temple. "I wanted to see if you wanted to be my date at a party tomorrow night."

Date. The word chokes in my brain, sputtering like a dying engine. I thought Nolan and I had come to an understanding the other night. At the sight of my shocked expression, he rolls his eyes and smacks me with the rolled-up towel.

"My *friend* date," he clarifies. "It's an industry party. The cast of *Pillow Fight* is having their opening weekend party. It will be flush with industry folks—producers, directors, actors. You should come. It would be good for them to see your face."

I bite my lip, hesitating with a glance at Holden across the stage, talking to Maggie. I'm not sure why I have this weird desire to ask him permission to

go, but it's bullshit. I don't need permission from my director or my ex-boyfriend to have a life outside of the theater.

"Come on," Nolan coaxes. "It'll be fun. Everyone gets drunk and starts performing numbers from their shows. It's hilarious."

A flash of heat sweeps up my neck. "Oh, God. We aren't expected to perform from our show, are we?"

Nolan drops his cheek to his shoulder. "Don't tell me you're afraid to perform in front of people? How the hell are you going to make it to opening night?"

That's a question I've been avoiding asking myself. "I don't even officially have the contract for the show yet," I whisper, making sure no one is listening to us. "I have to finish my two-week trial first."

Which is over after this weekend. This is it. My last chance to show Holden that I can do this. Even with the security of him paying for my apartment, that's no guarantee. Not if things go south.

Nolan shakes his head, regarding me with a smile. "You'll get that contract. You're killing these rehearsals."

I do feel confident lately. And Nolan is right. It's probably a good idea to get out there and network. Whether I land this contract or not, it would serve me well to meet some other producers and directors.

"Okay, fine," I agree. "I'll go with you tomorrow night. Happy?"

His grin widens, and he hops off the stage. As he backs his way down the aisle, he points at me dramatically. "Almost. Ask me again tomorrow at the party! I still think you might chicken out!" He kisses his middle and index finger and splits them in a peace sign. "Deuces! Nolan out!"

"You're such a nerd!" I shout after him as those peace fingers morph to flipping me off before the door to the theater shuts behind him.

"Party?" Holden's voice is rough behind me.

My skin prickles with gooseflesh and I take an extra moment to gather myself together before turning to face him.

I shake my head and wave Holden off. “That’s just Nolan being Nolan.”

“You say that like you’ve *known* Nolan more than nine days.”

Change the subject. My brain skitters, unable to think of something non-Nolan or non-party related to talk about. Cats? No. Theater? Ugh, no. Too much theater talk lately overall. Football? Hm. Football could work.

Before I can bring it up, he asks, “So... you’re going to a party? With Nolan?”

“Not *with* him. We’re going as... friends.”

“Friends?”

“Colleagues,” I clarify quickly. “He thought I might want to meet some industry people at the opening night party for some new show.”

Holden’s face drains of color. “Pillow Fight?”

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s the one.”

He shakes his head violently and reaches for my hand, clutching it. “Don’t go to that party.”

“What? Why?”

I try to wrench my hand back, but he holds tight. “I... I can’t explain yet. But please. Just *trust* me on this. It’s in everyone’s best interest if you don’t come.”

I’m not sure how to respond. He seems genuinely concerned. Like this party is a life-or-death situation. Then again, everything with Holden feels like life or death. Every look in my direction, every touch of hands, every smile or frown could be our last until we go back to being strangers who never speak again.

After a few moments of silence, Holden says, “Look, I don’t know what’s going on with you and Nolan—” Holden’s eyes flutter closed, and I seize the opportunity to yank my hand away from him, flinging them into the air.

“Oh, my God. Nothing! *Nothing* is going on with me and Nolan. He’s being nice. He’s being my friend. He’s treating me like a colleague in his industry and not some project he’s attempting to tackle!”

Holden's face goes stony at that accusation. "I'm not treating you like a project—"

"Aren't you? I have to rehearse double the amount of time as Nolan. And face it, it's not because I'm a bad actress! You said it yourself in your journal dozens of times... I'm a *good* actress. Great, even." It's taken me twenty-three years to be able to look in a mirror and give myself a compliment like that, but in that moment, I realize how true it is.

"You *are* a good actress—I've said so a million times. But you're also guarded. And you make *safe* acting choices. I'm trying to draw more of a raw performance out of you."

I fold my arms and glare at him dead in the eye. "Maybe the problem isn't me not being a good enough actress. Maybe the problem is you're not a good enough director. You want to talk vulnerability, Holden? Look in a goddamn mirror."

"I gave you my fucking journal. It doesn't get much more vulnerable than that."

"Doesn't it?"

"No."

I seethe, my rage mounting. "Maybe you're trying to make me more *memorable* as my director? Is that it?"

He stares at me, baffled. "Memorable? What are you talking about?"

"I *heard* you after my audition," I say, drawing a step nearer to him. "I came back into the theater to get my bag and I heard you tell Simon, no, *lie* to Simon, that you didn't know me well in college. That I was *unmemorable*."

There's a slight hesitation in his hawk-like eyes before the memory appears to click. "Oh. I wasn't talking about *you* to Simon."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Oh, really? So there was someone else from undergrad who auditioned for you that day?"

"Yes. Addison."

A soft gasp barely escapes my tight throat. "What?"

He nods. “Yes, Addison. From undergrad. She emailed me asking for the favor of the audition. I *swear*, Katherine. I wasn’t talking about you. You are anything but unmemorable. You trust me, right?”

I want to trust him. So badly.

But I’ve been here before. I’ve been charmed by the sincerity that even he wants to be true.

The set of his face softens and he moves to step toward me. I counter the movement with a step back, holding up my hand. “Tell me why you don’t want me to go to this party tomorrow? Is it because of Missy?”

His eyes drift shut, and his head falls back. Lights from above spill across his features, highlighting his strong, broad nose and angled jaw. Finally, he looks back at me and says, “You just have to trust me. I’m trying to take care of you. Protect you.”

That’s not a *no*.

Something in me snaps with that bullshit answer.

“Same ol’ Holden, different day, huh? This is the same shit you used to pull back in college.” I take a step into him.

For years, I feared this moment—being in front of him. Confronting our demons after all this time. But now I *see* him. I see him for the same terrified boy he’s always been and the man he still hasn’t become.

“Always with the same excuses. And the same non-answers under the guise of *protecting me*. Well, guess what, Holden? I’m not your mother. I can protect myself.”

He steps back, pain visibly tightening his features. “Low blow, Katherine,” he says, his voice dangerously quiet.

But I don’t back down. My fists tighten at my sides. “I’m no longer the eighteen-year-old virgin who needs you to shelter me.” I give a humorless laugh and shake my head. “And you know what? I never was. That was a label *you* put on me. And I’m done letting you tell me who I am. If you decide you want to talk to me like an adult and tell me a good enough reason

why I shouldn't go to this party, then I'm all ears. Otherwise, I'll see you there."

I snatch my script off the lip of the stage and take my mark on the center ex. "Now, let's get to work, shall we?"

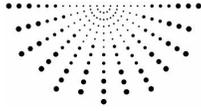
For once, I'm not running away.

For once, I stay and fight.

Not for Holden, but for me.

It might end badly, but at least this time, I'll be ready.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“*J*ill!” I shriek as I tear through my closet. “What the hell am I supposed to wear to some opening night party? How fancy do they get?”

Jill pokes her head into my room, and I can’t help but chuckle at the sight of her.

She’s gorgeous as ever—and eccentric as ever, too. Her mop of fiery curls is pulled into a high messy bun that has multiple pens and highlighters poking out of it. One pair of glasses rests on the bridge of her nose and a second pair, her readers, are pulled on top of her head, acting like a sort of headband.

“What did Nolan say?” she asks.

I groan and flop onto my bed. “Nothing useful. *Cocktail attire*,” I repeat his text and throw air quotes around it. “What the fuck even *is* cocktail attire?”

“Like... cocktail dresses,” Jill says. There’s a distinct screech of the hangers sliding along the metal bar in my closet as she searches through my small selection. “So, Holden really said nothing else about the party? Even when he made such a big deal about not going?”

My sigh is all the answer she really needs. “Not a word. We spent the whole rehearsal working on my duet with Nolan. And when it came time for us to have our solo rehearsal, he sent me home early. Which may not bode

well for my getting a contract... if he's sending me home early from rehearsals when we only have a couple left."

"Or it's a good sign. Maybe it means he's really happy with the improvements you've made, and you don't need as many rehearsals."

Maybe. But I doubt it. I just can't figure that guy out. He's like an escape room, full of puzzles and misdirects that lead nowhere.

"Here," Jill says. "What about this one?"

I push up onto my elbows as she pulls a black strapless dress from my closet.

I scrunch my nose at the dress which had been a David's Bridal find for my sister's wedding.

"Yeah," I say. "It'll do. I guess."

She hangs it up on my closet door. "It'll look amazing. Do that swoopy soft curl thing you do with the flat iron, too. It's sexy and understated. I'll see you when you get home."

I follow Jill into the hallway as she packs up her laptop and notebooks. "Where are you going?"

"I have my critique group, remember?"

I take in her outfit. Even though her hair is in its messy bun, she's wearing more makeup than I've ever seen her wear for a critique group. And she's got on her tight jeans and a sexy green lace crop top. "You're going to a critique group dressed like *that*?"

"I might be meeting up with someone after."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Hmmm. Might be? I want to hear about this guy when you get home and what he's done to deserve your lucky scrunchie," I add, noting the glittery silk scrunchie that Jill reserves for important nights.

She gives my hair a little, teasing tug. "Deal. If he's worth telling you about, I promise I'll dish later. Now go get ready!"

With a smile and a wave, she's out the door and gone for the night.

An hour later, I'm out of the shower, putting the finishing touches on my hair and makeup.

I pull back, examining my reflection feeling pretty pleased with myself. I don't have a stylist, or a makeup artist, yet I look polished and sophisticated in a way I typically don't.

I still have an hour before Nolan's car service will be here.

Not Nolan himself, of course. Nolan's mouth had screwed into a frown when I gave him shit for not picking me up for this party himself, and he'd teased me about already making the trip all the way out to Brooklyn once this week. Apparently, the next movie night is going to be at his apartment.

My phone chimes and I lift it to see a text from Holden.

Holden:

Do you need a ride tonight?

I freeze, my phone clutched in my palm. What the hell does this mean? Has he changed whatever the reason was that he didn't want me there? Covered his tracks? Or has he simply accepted that I'm no longer a young girl hell bent on doing anything to please him and win his affections?

I hesitate before writing back.

Kate:

I've got it covered, thanks.

Three little dots appear, then disappear beside his name.

Finally, his response comes through.

Holden:

Is Nolan there?

Jesus Christ. I press my thumbs so hard into the keyboard that it physically hurts.

Kate:

You're such an asshole.

His reply comes seconds later.

Holden:

That's a shock to no one. Besides, it's not like I didn't warn you back in college. And you didn't answer my question.

My nostrils flare and my anger gets the best of me as I type.

Kate:

Yep. Nolan is here fucking my brains out right now.

Holden:

Now who's the asshole? And clearly, he's not very good if you're texting me. Small penis?

Busted. I smile, biting my lip at the playful banter that comes so easily to us, even after all these years. From the little time Nolan and I have spent together rehearsing our sex scene, I'm pretty damn sure he isn't small... anywhere. But I could only imagine how well *that* comment would go over.

When I don't answer, another text comes through.

Holden:

What are you wearing tonight?

Kate:

A little black dress. The usual.

Holden:

A little black dress is classic. Beautiful. You'll blend in perfectly...

There's a lapse in the text messages, the three dots disappearing and reappearing over and over again. Until finally, his message pings my phone.

Holden:

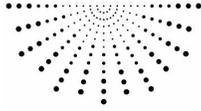
... but you deserve to stand out in the crowd tonight.

I gasp at the loud knock on my door and clutch my robe closed at my chest as I make my way down the hallway.

I don't bother looking through the peephole. I don't need to. I know who's out there waiting for me.

I swing the door open and standing there... is Holden.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



*H*olden's eyes dip to the hollow of my throat.

"Katherine," he growls my name like a plea. As though I can answer all his prayers.

Even though his suit is flawless without a single wrinkle, his tie is loose around his neck and his hair stands up in a dozen different ways, as though he's been needlessly running his hands through it.

I barely register the long garment bag and folder that he holds out for me.

"I brought you something," he says, tucking the folder beneath his arm and slowly unzipping the garment bag, revealing a dress inside.

It's a gorgeous backless gold and black Marc Jacobs cocktail dress. His eyes scan my body in appreciation, landing on my face. "But fuck if you need it. You could go to the party like that and be the most gorgeous woman in the room. You look... fuck. You look amazing."

Heat rushes through me. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Holden."

It's the biggest lie I've ever told and we both know it.

It's not fair that he has eyes so captivating with long, silky lashes that most women would covet. The sparkling amber of his eyes pull my focus and even though he's gorgeous everywhere, it's his eyes that captivate me.

It has always been his eyes.

He volleys my stare right back at me, his gaze skimming across me in a

slow, deliberate crawl. His expression heats and his mouth presses into a suppressing, firm line.

I gulp as he gives me *that* look. The kind that tells me he's thinking about all the ways he's had me—and could have me again—if only he plays his cards right.

It takes every ounce of willpower I have to say, “No. I'm not doing this with you.”

I move to close my door, but his foot kicks out, stopping me.

“Wait,” he says. A whiff of whiskey drifts toward me. Though he doesn't seem drunk, it appears he's had a little liquid courage to get him here tonight.

“Why? Why should I wait? Why do you deserve for me to give you any more of my time?” *Any more of my heart.*

I hate the way my voice cracks, and he winces as tears fill my eyes.

“I don't deserve you,” he whispers with a lift of his hands toward my face. “I never have.”

My body goes stiff as his fingers glide a long caress from my jaw down the tight cords of my neck until his hand curves around the back of my head. Giving a quick, sharp tug of my hair, he pulls my head back, exposing the curve of my neck to him. The position is achingly vulnerable in a way that leaves me whimpering and gasping for more.

His mouth dips to the hollow of my throat.

“Fuck,” he mutters, his warm breath fanning across my flaming hot skin.

A rush of memories follows with his mouth so close to me. I can still picture his younger, naked body and the confident way he pushes his pants over his hips. I can still feel the flex of his biceps as I clutch them, digging my fingers in upon his first thrust inside of me. I can smell the sweet rush of lemongrass and cedarwood and smokiness flooding my nostrils. It almost makes me nostalgic for the days when he still smoked.

He lifts his head, gaze falling to my mouth. For a moment, he draws the curtain back, leaving himself exposed. In his expression, I can see his

conflicted, suppressed yearning. The ripe desire. His unquenched thirst... for me. An oasis is at arm's length, if only I would open the doors to him.

That power simmers beneath my breasts, molten hot. The promise of sweet release and pleasure; pleasure I haven't been able to achieve in the years since he left me.

He holds me captive with that intense stare and his heady breaths.

"Tell me to leave, Katherine." His gaze fastens onto mine, his amber eyes bright and volatile. "Tell me to leave... or kiss me. But don't just stand there torturing me."

My knees tremble as I push onto my toes, parting my lips and brushing them against his in a teasingly gentle kiss that betrays the fervor burning my lungs. "Like this?"

With a groan, he puts us both out of our misery and drags me against his body, rushing into my apartment, and kicking the door closed behind him. I vaguely register the sound as he drops the garment bag and folder to the floor in a heap at our feet.

My apartment which I know so well recedes, spinning like a vortex around us as he devours my needy whimpers.

His body presses mine to the wall and my robe billows open, the cool air conditioning teasing its chilly breath over my nipples. His hands skim my jaw, my neck, then down to cup my breasts, pinching and caressing my nipples.

"God, Katherine," he moans between each movement. "You feel so amazing. So fucking good."

It's everything I've wanted for five years and everything I've feared wrapped up in one giant, messy ball.

I clutch his shoulders, my nails leaving indentations on his suit as he lowers his mouth to my breasts, latching onto my pebbled nipples.

I crave that talented mouth of his elsewhere, and I scoop my hands into his hair, tugging and clawing at the silky strands between my fingers.

He drops to his knees before me and looks like a man worshiping an altar as he tears my robe open.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he growls.

My thundering heart reprimands me with each heavy beat against my breastbone.

Thump. Thump. Thump—Don’t. Don’t. Don’t.

But every other inch of my body screams, *Yes.*

My robe hangs open on either side of my body, a thin drape of silk that brushes my flesh each time I squirm.

“Holden.” I mean for his name to be a warning, but it comes out a desperate, strangled cry.

“I want to taste you,” he whispers, looking up from between my thighs. “Please. Let me taste you.”

“I want to…”

There’s a *but* somewhere in there, yet I can’t manage to bring myself to say it. I want this so badly.

“Then say yes,” Holden prods, pausing to lean into my sex. The tip of his nose brushes my clit and my knees go weak. If not for his hands gripping my hips, I would have crumpled to the ground.

“Yes.” The word is out before I can change my mind. I’ve spent the better part of five years pretending and lying to myself that I don’t love and miss this man with every ounce of my soul. I’ve deprived my body and my heart—for once, can’t I indulge?

I expect him to dive in and devour me.

Instead, ever controlled, he spreads me and with a slow drag of his tongue he samples me. The long glide from my opening to my clit is sublime torture, and my groan echoes through the apartment.

“So wet for me already,” he murmurs before flattening his tongue against me.

The intense whirring sound in my head dizzies my mind and my hands

fist into the silk of my robe.

His mouth covers me, the hot caress of his tongue rotating between sucking and licking. My thighs quake. God help me, I could never turn Holden away—never wanted to. Who was I kidding thinking I could harden my heart to him? There's only one thing I want hardened when it comes to Holden—and it's not any body part of mine.

Now I'm too far gone to turn back, a thought that both exhilarates and terrifies me.

“Give yourself over to me, Katherine,” he murmurs against my skin, the warm vibration of his words rippling through me.

So many meanings in one single phrase.

With his tongue still laving my clit, he presses two fingers to glide inside of me. Sheathed to the knuckles, he pulses slowly, in and out as I arch my back off the wall behind me, pinpricks of light invading my vision.

“Holden,” I pant. Gripping his hair, I cry out and thrash against the wall. The building pleasure is too exquisite to stay silent.

“Come for me, Katherine.”

I'm powerless against his demand. Heat sparks through my body as the spasms clutch my legs and core. That sinful mouth of his is relentless. Even through the clutching spasms, his lips, tongue, mouth, and fingers ravage my body until the final wave relaxes, leaving me a heap of exhausted muscle.

He grips me, kissing up my body, pausing above my lips and holding me gently against him. Even though his suit is cashmere, it's rough against my ultra-sensitive skin and reminds me that he is still fully clothed versus the thin veil of fabric not covering my body at all.

I reach between us, cupping his hard length in my hand, and my throat goes dry at the heavy girth pressing against his flat front pants. I'd almost forgotten how utterly perfect Holden's body is—every inch of it.

I squeeze and he groans, slanting his mouth over mine, he kisses me again, his tongue stroking gently against my lips, parting them.

We stay there like that. Holding each other. Kissing. Panting. Until I shift, my toe hitting the folder that had fallen from his hands earlier. A stack of papers is half out.

“What’s this?” I ask, nudging the folder with my bare toe.

Holden exhales and bends to retrieve the folder, also picking up the garment bag and hanging it on the door beside us.

“This,” he says, handing me the papers. “This is your official offer. Your contract to play Skyler. I don’t need any more rehearsals to know that you deserve this part.”

I clutch the contracts within my shaking hands. “I... I got the part?”

He smiles shyly and his fingers wrap around his ring, spinning it. “You earned it.”

Tears fill my eyes as I hug the folder to my chest. A contract. My first Broadway contract.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

We stay there, locked in each other’s eyes before finally, Holden clears his throat, pulling away from me and asking, “Are you sure you don’t want to ride to the party with me?”

The question is a tether back to reality.

Holden is my director.

My ex who hurt me.

And he doesn’t want me at this party for reasons he’s not willing to divulge.

Handing me the contract for the show doesn’t change any of those other things.

It doesn’t change the secrets. The lies. The deception.

All under the guise of ‘protecting me.’

I hug my arms into my body, pulling my robe closed and tying a knot at my hip. “I guess that depends. Are you going to tell me why you didn’t want me going tonight?”

“This party tonight—you don’t understand...”

“*Make* me understand!”

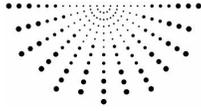
Finally, he blurts out, “It’s my dad. He’s one of the producers of Pillow Fight.” He scrubs his hands down over his face. “And he’s going to be at the party tonight with Laurie.”

There are a million things I’d expected Holden to say, but that wasn’t one of them.

My blood runs cold at the thought of Erik Dorsey, Holden’s dad.

An icy grin curves my lips. “Good,” I say. “I’d *love* to have a talk with him.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

I was so fucking tired and it wasn't even eight p.m.

I spent twenty minutes on the phone, listening to my mom sleep, waiting for each breath like it may be her last, until Anne Marie got there.

When I heard her arrive in the house, I'd hung up because the last thing I wanted to hear was my mom fawning over her best friend and asking why she hadn't been around as much. Everyone knew why Anne Marie stayed away.

Everyone except Mom.

I waited anxiously for my Dad to text me, busying myself with a bowl of Duncan's spaghetti.

Another 25 minutes later, I was finally able to relax when my dad texted me that he was home and put Mom to bed.

I texted Anne Marie after that.

Holden:

I need selfie proof that you're no longer in that house alone with my father.

She knew better than to argue with me or ask why.

Seconds later, I got a selfie of Anne Marie holding up the receipt from Walgreens, sitting on her couch.

Finally, I breathed easier.

As much as I hated Anne Marie, I was grateful she was there tonight for my mom. Even if it was the least she could do.

For a moment, I debated texting her back a thank you, but I thought better of it.

I fell back on my bed, draping an arm over my eyes. I could fall asleep right now. Hell maybe I would.

My phone buzzed and I debated ignoring it completely. It was probably just Duncan asking if I was coming out tonight. Most of my friends were going out to the pub tonight, but after listening to my mom slur her words and smash her cup, drinking was the last thing I wanted to do right now.

Curiosity got the better of me and I raised my phone to my face, expecting to see a message from Duncan, or Dad, or even Anne Marie.

The last thing I expected to see was an email from Katherine's used panty account.

I bolted upright in bed and opened the email that had no subject line and nothing written in the email.

Only one attached image and a video.

A fucking video.

I held my breath as I hit the little arrow play button.

The video started with her hand already inside pale pink panties covered with bright red cherries. Though I couldn't see anything but movement and her toned thighs wriggling against her plain gray comforter, I know exactly what those small fingers are doing in there and I was instantly hard as a fucking rock.

Then, there's the quietest little gasp, followed by her moan echoing out of the speaker of my phone.

The sexiest sound I've ever heard in my life.

Her thigh muscles clenched, her hips bucking until she pulled her hand out of the waistband of her panties. The video ended, freezing on a still image of her fingers... glistening.

Glistening with Katherine.

If I thought I was hard before, there was a goddamn steel pipe in my pants after that image.

My mouth watered for a taste of those fingers.

The entire video lasted only a minute, but it was easily the best minute of my life.

I emailed her quickly. Just two words.

Fucking. Hell.

I didn't think she'd ever do it.

I would have bet my life savings against ever receiving a video like that from Katherine.

A terrifyingly sober thought slammed into me. If she sent this, she must really need money.

A lot of money.

And fast.

It was the only reason.

Katherine needed money. I needed to help her. I needed to get her this money as soon as possible. But how?

Gulping, I send another quick email, trying to keep it casual and unthreatening.

If I had your venmo, I'd pay you right now. Would be easier than a locker, wouldn't you say?

The tensest forty seconds of my life tick by until her response comes in.

Wouldn't my venmo account reveal my identity? And yours?

I shook my head as I emailed her back.

You can create an account with any sort of handle you want and no photo. The only people who will know it's you is someone you tell.

I wait, not pressuring her anymore than I already did. But it was no secret how badly I wanted her to create this account. If for no other reason than the fact that I can pay her right now.

Fuck me, what if she was in trouble?

I launched myself out of bed, pacing the bedroom when another email lights up my inbox. A QR code.

I breathed a sigh of relief. It may only be a small thing but if the only way I could take care of her was from behind the curtain of anonymity, then goddamn it that's what I was going to do.

I smiled at her username. @AnyOtherRose.

She really wasn't trying too hard to conceal her identity. Granted, lots of people loved Romeo and Juliet, but no one as much as Katherine.

I created a quick account for myself with another nod to Romeo and Juliet myself, certain that she'll notice the reference. @LightBreaks90. I send the \$1200 immediately and relax, lowering myself back onto my bed.

I hadn't exactly planned to spend that kind of money tonight, but fuck, it was worth it. I couldn't think of any better way to spend my trust fund. And it wasn't like there wasn't plenty in there. Hell, half of it was tied up in stocks and earning me even more every day. I didn't even need to go to law school. The funds in there could coast me easily for the rest of my life.

A little green dot taunted me beside her avatar picture—a cartoon drawing of a red rose. She was on the app right now.

Through the app, I sent her a message.

@LightBreaks90:

Anytime... and I mean anytime you want to send me photos or videos, I'll pay.

I meant it, too.

Because I would rather Kate come directly to me for this money and not some stranger. I might be a lying pervert, but at least I was a safe lying pervert.

@AnyOtherRose:
Really? Anytime?

I ignored the little thrill that busted through my chest like a firecracker at the fact that she messaged me back.

Or maybe it was more about the thrill that we were messaging in real time. That I knew she was laying on that gray comforter, laying in those wet fucking panties that she'd just finger fucked herself within.

It was my turn to groan aloud.

@LightBreaks90:

Yes. Like right now.

@AnyOtherRose:

I just sent you a video and a picture, what else could you possibly want to see?

Oh, Katherine. Oh sweet, innocent virginal Katherine. She had so much to learn. So much I could fucking teach her.

I grin as I type my response and hit send.

@LightBreaks90:

Your face, for one.

Her response is almost instant.

@AnyOtherRose:
Absolutely not.

I smile wider. Exactly the answer I expected. "Good girl," I whisper out loud. Those two words gave me a thrill even though she wasn't here to hear them.

Our next messages came in rapid fire succession.

@LightBreaks90:

Okay, then. A picture of your spread legs.

@AnyOtherRose:

Try again.

@LightBreaks90:

A picture of your spread legs wearing the panties.

Another long pause between messages.

Heat simmered in my chest. She was considering it.

She was fucking considering it and that thought alone thrilled me.

@AnyOtherRose:

Why?

I gripped my dick through my boxers and gave it a firm stroke before I replied.

@LightBreaks90:

Because I want to see the wet spot you left. By the time I get the panties in my hands, they'll be dry.

@AnyOtherRose:

How much?

I paused to think about that. I wanted to throw my entire trust fund at her, but that would be a red flag. I had to be fair enough with my prices that they were believable. But generous enough that she wouldn't need to seek any other buyers.

It was a tricky tightrope to walk.

@LightBreaks90:

\$400.

The picture came through a minute later and I hissed a curse. "Fuck me," I muttered. Those sweet little thighs were parted just for me revealing the largest damp spot dead center of the pale pink panties. I could make out the tiniest little nub of her clit. I wanted to draw her swollen button of need

into my mouth right through those lacy panties and suck on her until those knees locked around my face.

I lunged for my nightstand drawer and pulled out a pair of her panties. The ones from the night I kissed her.

Her first ever kiss.

I brought them to my nose, inhaling deeply before shoving my boxers down and pressing her scent against my hard cock. I jacked myself with one hand holding the panties, the friction of lace against my shaft just abrasive enough to feel fucking good. In the other hand, I stared at her picture. At that wet spot that I desperately wanted to taste. To lick. To make wetter.

Her little denim skirt was bunched around her hips and even her tits were in the photo a little, too. Not in anyway that revealed them. Even though I ached to see those pretty pink nipples, there was something incredibly fucking hot about her small tits bound by the tight tank top she wore. Like with her clit, I could just barely make out the outline of her nipples, hard pearls begging for my mouth, pressing against the soft cotton of her shirt.

My climax edged closer, tightening my balls and sending a current of energy up my spine. I grunted as come shot out, coating her panties and my knuckles in hot spurts. Fuck that felt good.

Once I cleaned myself up, I sent her the \$400 then fired off another message.

@LightBreaks90:

Are you a virgin?

I knew the answer already, of course, but it felt like the kind of question a panty-buyer might ask. Besides, I sort of loved watching her squirm through this conversation.

Her answer came fast.

@AnyOtherRose:

Yes. Can I ask you a question?

Fuck, baby girl. You can ask me anything, *I thought. I wanted to teach her. I wanted to teach her everything there was to know about this kind of carnal pleasure.*

@LightBreaks90:

Anything.

@AnyOtherRose:

What do you do with my panties?

I paused for a long moment, glancing at her panties, now covered in my come. I grabbed a clean face cloth from my closet and wiped it down carefully before folding the pair and putting it back into its sandwich bag.

I had marked each individual bag with what day they were from. What I knew she had done that day, if it was anything specific. I knew from the photos she sent daily as proof which panties were which day. I knew the ones she wore when I nibbled her ear in class reading lines. I knew which pair she wore on our audition day. And I kept detailed notes.

Because I was a sick fuck.

So the question was... how much did she really want to know?

@LightBreaks90:

How detailed do you want me to get? How much can your virgin ears handle?

Sometimes, you just had to blatantly ask. And because I'm me, I threw in an extra little insult.

A minute ticked by. Then two.

Well shit. Maybe I shouldn't have been so harsh.

@LightBreaks90:

Rose? Did I scare you off?

Thirty tense more seconds go by before her response came through.

@AnyOtherRose:

I want to know.

@LightBreaks90:

Good girl.

I really hoped that phrase excited her as much as it did me. But I didn't pause to find out. My fingers flew across my phone, typing furiously.

@LightBreaks90:

I run my fingers over your panties, imagining I'm touching you. I smell them. I wrap them around my dick and fuck my hand with your panties rubbing me raw. Once, I tasted them, imagining I was licking your pussy.

I stopped there and waited for a response from her, figuring I'd just dip my toes in.

Nothing.

No response at all.

Not even three little dots near her avatar that shows she's typing.

She just went...silent.

Well, fuck. If that scandalized her then there was no hope for me. Could she really be that surprised at learning I masturbated with her panties? What did she think men did with these kinds of things? Frame them?

Finally, after a tortuous few minutes, another message pinged.

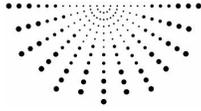
@AnyOtherRose:

I'll drop the panties off at your locker tomorrow.

The little green dot disappeared from behind her name... and with that, she was gone.

Logged off before I had a chance to even respond to her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Everyone at this party is staring at me. *Everyone.*

Including Holden.

He's shooting daggers across the room at Nolan and me as we shuffle around the bar to order drinks.

And yet, *he's* standing over there with Missy Howl on his arm.

Kettle. Meet the pot. You're both freaking black.

I'm pissed watching him with her— *The King and Queen of Broadway*— maybe irrationally, considering I'm also here with Nolan. *But* Nolan's not my ex. *And* we're currently in a show together. Besides, Holden could have given me the heads up that she was going to be here tonight. Especially after he... after what happened with us in my apartment...

Thank God Holden brought me this dress to wear tonight. And the orgasm he delivered with it.

But more so the dress.

Because even with the gorgeous Marc Jacobs gown, I am still so out of place. And it shows by the dirty looks most of the women are throwing my way. If I'd had to wear that bridesmaid's dress I got off the rack, I'd have felt even more ridiculous.

I twitch, tugging at the material clinging to my hip. Even though it's exquisite and fits perfectly, I still feel on display.

Shrinking back from the crowd, I press myself against the wall, hoping that I'll disappear—or at the very least, that people will stop wondering who I am and what the hell I'm doing on the arm of one of Broadway's most coveted actors.

Nolan eyes me, handing me the Cosmo the bartender finished making.

“Why are you so twitchy?” he asks, giving me a strange look.

“People are staring,” I whisper. Every nerve ending is on edge, and I glance around the party, trying to see if Holden's dad is here yet, while also actively avoiding the area near the piano where Holden and Missy stand. Together.

“You're an actress,” Nolan whispers in my ear and snakes his arm around my waist, pulling me in for a hug. “Act like you belong here. Which, for the record, *you do.*”

I smile up at him, grateful to have a friend—a real friend—not only tonight at the party, but in this industry. It can be a strangely lonely career for something that involves such large teams of people.

A bright flash of light pops in front of us. I startle and spill my drink. The pink, sticky liquid sloshes over the edge of my martini glass onto my hand. Thank God I was quick enough to move it away from my dress, avoiding a disaster I couldn't afford to have. I'm already in debt to Holden for my rent. I can't be in debt to him for this dress too.

“What the hell?” I mutter and glance up at a man with a giant camera directed right at Nolan and me.

Nolan is totally unfazed and leans in closer to me, holding me tightly and smiling.

The man holding the camera waves to me, calling, “Ms. Harris!”

He knows my name? How does this stranger know my name?

“Are you and Nolan here together?” he asks.

“Uhhh... yeah. I mean, no. We're here together, but not *together* together —”

Nolan cuts me off with a squeeze to my hip. “Katie was kind enough to let me escort her tonight. Even if I had to cut to the front of a long line of people who’d asked her.”

Katie. The only people who call me that are Mallory and my parents. And sometimes Jill if she’s looking to piss me off. But with Nolan, it’s almost endearing.

His eyes spark as he glances down at me, smiling, and pulls me flush against his body in a hug that I’m pretty sure is more for the camera than for me. “Isn’t that right?”

Shit. He’s practically berating me with that hug. Silently begging me to get it together. We’re playing a part tonight. Nolan had warned me that these parties were giant PR stunts filled with media.

I take a deep breath. He’s right. I’m an actress. And this is one giant performance.

I grin and deliver a wink to the man with the camera. “Something like that.”

I feel the relief in Nolan’s sigh as he guides me away from the bar, his palm still heavy on my hip. “I thought you weren’t going to play along.”

I laugh and grab a napkin off a table as we walk past to wipe the spilled drink off my hand. “Hey now, I thought you said I was a good actress!”

“You’re a great actress. And apparently terrible at improv.”

I knock my elbow into his ribs and revel in the muted grunt he gives me.

“Damn, Harris, I was kidding,” he mutters, but manages to chuckle in that good-natured way of his.

“What’s that about anyway? Why are we pretending to be more than friends?”

Nolan gives a quiet snort. “Are you kidding? Every time the media thinks I’m dating my co-stars, ticket sales soar. It’s like guaranteeing that we have a sold-out opening week.”

I glance at him curiously. “But usually you *are* dating your co-stars,

right?”

He winks at me from over the edge of his gin and tonic before answering, “True. But usually, we don’t really date until after we’ve pretended for the cameras. Don’t worry, though. You’re safe this time. I meant what I said the other night about wanting a friend. A *real* friend.”

“A not naked friend?” I tease.

He clinks the edge of his glass to mine. “Exactly.”

After another sip of my drink, I ask, “So none of those reported shomances were more than just a fling? None of them meant more to you?”

“Only one.” His gaze swings across the room to where Missy is standing, posing in her own photo op, cuddling up to Holden.

“Wait,” I say. “You and Missy were *together*?”

“During the revival of *Les Mis*.” Nolan nods, his eyes fastening onto Missy and Holden across the room. She’s angled her body in towards him, her cleavage nearly popping out of her low-cut ruby red dress.

Almost as though she could sense us watching, she catches my eye from across the room and a chill prickles down my spine. She leans into Holden, whispering, her glare locked onto me the entire time.

Holden’s arm snakes around her waist. His other hand casually dips into his pocket as she tilts her head into the crook of his neck, nuzzling him as another camera flashes, taking their picture.

My blood runs cold at the sight.

Swiveling around, I shift so that my back is to them. It’s too hard to watch. *They’re posing for photos*, I tell myself. Exactly the same way Nolan and I are. It’s all for the publicity.

Holden has a lot of faults, but he’s not a cheater. He wouldn’t do that to me... and even though I’m not Missy’s biggest fan, I know he wouldn’t do that to her, either.

I look back to *my* date for the night as a realization hits me. “Wasn’t Holden in that production of *Les Mis*, too?”

“It was the Broadway debut for all three of us. The papers ate up our love triangle.”

I had no idea. Granted, back then I made a point of ignoring any and all papers that may have talked about or featured Holden.

Nolan clears his throat, and in a blink, the glimpse of the brooding man with the unrequited love is gone. Sweet, goofy Nolan is back in his place, shrugging nonchalantly at me.

“That’s when I really learned that having a romance with one of your co-stars is a surefire way to not only make headlines but also sell tickets.”

The memory of Holden’s face between my legs pulses through my body. It was only a couple of hours ago when he had been devouring me, making me tremble.

I clear my throat and with it, attempt to clear my thoughts.

“We should probably go say hi to them,” Nolan says, swiping his palm down his face.

Dread rolls in my belly at the thought of having to go talk to Missy and Holden. Together.

I’d rather lay in a pit filled with copperheads.

“You go,” I say to Nolan. “I need to use the restroom.”

He glances at me, his thumb at my waist drawing small figure eights across the silk of the dress. “You sure? I don’t mind waiting—”

“No, I’ll come find you in a bit.”

Or maybe I’ll just lock myself in the bathroom until the party’s over.

“Okay.” With a big boyish grin, he drops a kiss to my cheek. It’s sweet and playful and I get the sense that although we’re playing up this “date” thing for the cameras, he’s being completely honest that he doesn’t see me that way anymore.

I shrink back towards the bathroom, and just as I think I’ve cleared the crowd, I bump into someone. Still hopeful that I can slink away unseen, I mutter a quick apology over my shoulder. Maybe if I’m lucky I can sneak out

of the party altogether and *Irish goodbye* this thing.

I'm even doubting my plan to confront Senator Dorsey, which had seemed like such a good idea only a couple hours ago.

"I can still taste you." There's a wicked inflection to Holden's deep voice. The soft rumble nearly takes my breath away.

I brush the side swept hair out of my eyes and glance up to find him towering over me, just over my shoulder.

I spin to look back over my shoulder to where he and Missy had been only minutes ago. "How'd you get here so fast? You were just over there in a photo op—"

He gives me a devilish smile. "It's not *that* big of a room, Katherine. It only takes about twenty seconds to walk across it."

Inwardly, I snort at his naive remark. It may only take twenty seconds for *me* to walk across this room because I don't get stopped by anyone. But not Holden. Not one of Broadway's most esteemed stars and newest directors.

I inhale sharply and allow my eyes to roam over his body. His suit should be illegal. No man should look as good as he does. Whether he's in this Givenchy suit, or dressed down in a t-shirt, the man oozes sex and power. He always has.

It has nothing to do with the clothes on his body and everything to do with the gleam in his eyes, the confidence in his swagger, and maybe most effectively, the walls he erects around himself. He creates intrigue everywhere he goes. Women want to know him, and men want to emulate him.

"You look gorgeous." Holden's whisper drags heavily down my spine. "That dress... fuck."

A primal urge grips my insides. "I would say, it'd look better on the floor of your bedroom, but it looks like you may officially be leaving here with someone else."

His eyes widen at my brazen comment. With Holden, I never used to hold

back. He's the one guy I'd been able to say exactly what I wanted to say to time and time again. Until it all crashed down on us in college.

But I haven't been that girl in years. Not with him. Not with anyone. The direct statement is creaky coming from me, like an unoiled hinge.

"Missy means nothing to me. It was a photo for the New York Post. That's all."

My brows lift. I'm not sure I believe him. Then again, he's got no reason to lie. "That expectation will only stop if you stop the rumors from perpetuating, Holden. Besides, you two looked really cozy to me."

"I could say the same about you and Brooks."

He has me there. I take another big gulp of my drink, letting the sugary alcohol coat my throat and ease my nerves. They don't call it liquid courage for nothing.

"It was just a photo," I say, repeating his words.

"Exactly." His eyes flash and a smile edges higher on his lips. "Missy and I are here as friends... just like you and Nolan. It's for publicity."

Then, he adds, "And while I may be here with Missy, I want to leave with *you*. In fact, I'm desperate to leave with you, Katherine." He draws a line down my bare arm with the back of his knuckle, the metal of his ring cool against my flesh.

Tingles caress my skin like a thousand kisses.

He dips his mouth to my ear, the heat of his breath skimming over me as he speaks. "Come home with me. Now. Neither of us wants to be here anyway. We can be at my place in fifteen minutes."

The heady promise resonates between my legs and with every fiber of my body, I want to say yes to him. But then I catch a glimpse of Nolan across the room. And so many other Broadway actors, producers, and composers.

I need to stay. I need to come out of my shell and network. Make the most of these moments while I have them. I can't become blinded by the fog that is a Holden-induced orgasm.

“I can’t leave yet,” I say. After taking a sip of my Cosmo to calm my nerves, I look up into his amber eyes over the rim of the glass.

“I can introduce you to anyone at this party another time.” Heat flashes in his eyes.

With a graceful arch of my eyebrow, I hold his stare steadily. “Even your father?”

A growl is the only response I get.

“That’s what I thought.”

Somewhere to my left, I hear a gasp. Then our names. “Holden? Kate?”

We jump back from each other, spinning to find Keith—the grad student and playwright from college standing before us.

“Keith!” Holden’s practiced smile is back as he leans forward and shakes Keith’s hand.

I, on the other hand, rush forward, hugging Keith hard. “Oh, my God!”

“Little Kate Harris!” Keith laughs. “Wow, I haven’t seen you in—”

“Five years!” I finish the thought for him.

“Not since after the…” He trails off, glancing between Holden and me.

Holden puts a fist to his mouth, clearing his throat. “It’s good to see you, Keith. Let’s catch up soon, okay?”

With that lame exit line, Holden scurries away and Keith stares after him, shaking his head before turning to face me. “I have to say, I’m surprised and *happy* to see you two together. I read in *Backstage Magazine* you’re working together again. I didn’t even know you were still acting.”

I shrugged, feeling my face go hot. “I think you could say I’ve been a professional auditioner since graduation. I haven’t had a lot of luck since—”

“Yeah.” I’m grateful that he cuts me off. The last thing I want to do is talk about that night.

Both Keith and I look over to where Holden took off to, where he is now glad-handing with a group of older men.

“You sure you can trust him?” Keith asks.

“No,” I answer quickly without thinking. “But I don’t really have a choice.”

Keith nods, giving me a pitying glance. “You know, after McCay and I ended things, I was so mad at her. I didn’t want her help. I didn’t want her references. I wanted to do everything on my own.”

“What Professor McCay did to you was unspeakable,” I say, looking Keith dead in the eyes.

“It was nothing compared to what we all did to you,” he says back to me.

A swallow sticks to the back of my throat. He’s right. But hearing him admit it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“You were young,” I say. “I don’t blame you.”

“Holden was young, too. Does that mean you’ve forgiven him?”

I stare across the room at Holden’s confident swagger and smile. It’s infectious and I find myself smiling too.

“I... I don’t know yet,” I whisper. “But I think I’m getting there.”

“Keith!” Amy, our writer and composer for the show, comes up and gives Keith a big hug and kiss on the cheek before turning to me and taking my hands.

“Do you know our beautiful new starlet?” Amy asks, beaming at me.

I’m grateful to see her, and as I scan the party, I catch glimpses of other people I know. Maggie’s standing across the room with some of the people I met at the bar last week. With Amy, Holden, Nolan, and Keith, I almost feel like I belong here, too.

“*Know* her?” Keith pushes his glasses up his nose. “Some might say I discovered her first.”

Amy’s dark brows bounce up and down. “Oh, intriguing!” She gives my hands a squeeze. “Kate, can I steal you? Holden and Nolan want you to perform the duet from our show!”

Panicked, I look around. “Here? Now?”

“It’ll be great press for the show!” She leans in closer to me, whispering,

“Plus, once people hear you sing, no one will be questioning why certain other actresses didn’t get the part. Not that it should even be a question, but I would love to see you blow them all away.”

Missy. She’s talking about Missy. I’ve loved working with Amy these last two weeks. She’s been so supportive and wonderful.

“And what if I *don’t* blow them all away?”

“You will,” she says. “There’s no doubt in my mind.”

Grateful tears fill my eyes, and she tugs me into a hug.

“Nolan and I will be at the piano,” she says. “Come on over when you’re ready.”

She gives a quick wave to Keith and weaves across the room through the party.

“Go on.” Keith grins. “I can’t wait to hear you sing again.”

Nerves bounce in my belly, and I tip my head back, finishing the rest of my Cosmo in a couple of gulps. “Oh, God. I have to sing. In front of *Broadway* actors.”

Keith laughs and stirs a tumbler of what’s now mostly ice. “Newsflash, Kate. *You’re* now a Broadway actor.”

Fuck. He’s right... kind of.

Keith pulls a business card from his pocket and hands it to me. “We should catch up soon... as friends, I mean. And away from all this.”

I slip his business card into my clutch and grin at him. “I would love that. Really.”

“Don’t take offense if you don’t see me after you sing. I’m probably going to slip out right after.” He waves a hand around the party. “All this isn’t really my scene.”

I glance around the party as well, realizing not for the first time how much Keith and I are alike. “I hear that. I’d rather be at home in pajamas right now.”

He leans in to give me another hug, whispering in my ear. “Of all the

students I TA'd for, *you* were the one I most wanted to see make it, Kate. Break a leg up there."

Warmth spirals down my chest as I respond, "Thank you."

I didn't think anyone at that school wanted me to succeed after that first semester. It would have been nice to have known Keith was in my corner back then, but rationally I know he was in just as precarious a position as I was.

With a deep breath, I make my way toward the piano. My stomach is swarming with bees, spinning and buzzing, and I think I might throw up the Cosmo I'd just finished.

Nolan gives me a big goofy grin. "You ready for this?"

"God no," I whisper as Holden hands me a full glass of water. My throat feels dry. My voice, raspy. This is going to be a disaster.

"Aw, come on," Nolan says.

Holden gives Nolan a quick, dirty look before addressing me. "You have to do this, Katherine," he says quietly.

I know in my gut he's right. If I can't sing now, in front of a small group of peers, how can I expect myself to keep it together in a theater full of critics and thousands of audience members?

"Okay," I say. "Let's do this."

"Yes!" Nolan claps his hands together and crosses to where two microphones are positioned while Amy takes her spot at the piano, leaving Holden and me standing off to the side. Alone. Together.

I take a few swigs of water and feel the warm press of Holden's hand squeezing mine.

Holden holds my gaze steadily for a long moment while I breathe deeply. In and out. In and out.

In this room full of strangers, the sight of him is a lighthouse, beckoning me to safety. Or maybe he's false hope and he'll maroon me on the jagged rocks of the jetties. Only time will tell.

“You’re going to be spectacular,” he whispers in my ear. “And then after, we can make good on that other promise we talked about.”

Heat rushes to my skin, and I give him a look. “You can’t say things like that to me right before I’m about to perform.”

He gives me an amused grin. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right, I’m not. But you’re also right that I should try to maintain some decorum and professionalism in these moments.” He licks his bottom lip, and the sight of his talented tongue does things to my body. “I’ll be standing right over there. If you start to panic, find me.”

I roll my eyes at him. “We all know that me finding your eyes is anything but helpful in this situation. As evidenced by my audition.”

His grin widens. “You’re right. I’ll be over there in the back... so maybe *avoid my eyes.*”

“Har-har.”

He winks, then disappears into the crowd.

My heart pounds in my throat as I take my place at the microphone and I slide a look to Nolan, whispering, “I don’t think I can do this.”

“You can,” he says, his hand covering the microphone. “You have to.”

Amy’s fingers dance over the keys of the piano, and the opening riff causes my heart to stutter clumsily against my ribs. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, wrapping my hand around the base of the microphone.

It’s just another rehearsal. It’s just another rehearsal.

As I sing, I focus on my breath. On my support. On the lift of my soft palate and the resonance of the sound. I cling to the emotions around the notes and in my words, pouring my soul into every vowel, every consonant, until I’m singing the final note—ending strong with Nolan singing the harmony.

Applause roars through the room. Opening my eyes, I exhale, as the nervous tension from performing melts from my shoulders.

Before I can react to the standing ovation and whistles from the crowd surrounding us, Nolan clasps his hand in mine and whispers, “Take your bow, Katie.”

Every set of eyes at the party is fixed on me as I dip into a small curtsy. But it’s only one set of eyes I’m searching for in the crowd—Holden’s. And it’s the one set I can’t seem to find.

And then I see him. Standing to the side of the crowd... with Missy. Although they aren’t touching, they’re close. And talking. Or rather, she’s talking. Holden’s listening intently.

She lifts a hand and brushes her thumb to his bottom lip in a gesture so intimate that it knocks the air from my lungs.

Push her hand away, push her hand away, I think to myself, trying to will it to happen.

But Holden doesn’t. He just stands there and lets her caress his face like he’s hers to touch.

It’s a sucker punch, and yet, even I can admit I’m not all that surprised to see it. If history always repeats itself, then a betrayal from Holden shouldn’t be a shock to anyone. Least of all, me.

Nolan sweeps me into his arms, lifting me off the ground and spinning me in a tight embrace.

“That was fucking awesome,” he whispers in my ear.

Even though I’m numb on the inside, I hug him back as the warmth of a good performance floods my belly and collides with the cold realization of what I saw.

I close my eyes and let the applause and whistles from the audience feed my soul. Heal my wounds.

This is why I do this. This is why I put up with grueling auditions and tedious rehearsals and nepotism and heartbreak—the applause. The satisfaction of a good performance. The release of acting like someone else and pretending, if only for a few minutes, that these strong emotions that

consume me aren't my own.

“Ready for the encore?” Nolan asks.

My entire body clenches. “Encore?” *No*. No one mentioned I had to do *two* performances. “I can't. I barely got through our one song—”

Nolan gently releases me to the floor. “Trust me. This one's easy. And the crowd and the media are going to fucking love it. Don't freak out. And remember, we're just friends. This is acting.”

“What are you talking about—”

Before I can finish the question, Nolan cups my jaw and draws my mouth to his, kissing me.

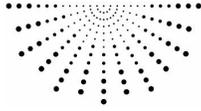
I barely have a moment to register the kiss when I feel Nolan jerk back away from me.

Holden's voice snaps between us, and his fists clench into the lapels of Nolan's jacket. “What the fuck are you doing, Brooks?”

“Dude, relax—” Nolan seems genuinely surprised and attempts to untangle himself from Holden's grip.

“Holden, stop!” I cry just as his fist launches across Nolan's jaw with a deafening crack.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

Tonight's game was a disaster.

Not only did we lose the game, but I got hit hard on my left side, making my already tender shoulder scream in pain.

To add insult to injury—literally—my dad called me on my way out of the locker room, berating me for a shit game.

Even though it wasn't my fault I got slammed into. My team should have been watching out for me, defending me.

But that never matters. Not to Erik Dorsey.

Mom was back to her chipper, slightly tipsy self, tittering in the background of the call as though nothing happened last night.

I was fucking exhausted and in throbbing pain. The last thing I wanted to do was stand there and talk on the phone with my parents like we were one big happy fucking family.

I popped a few muscle relaxers, then headed to the pool. A little time in the hot tub would do my shoulder some good and I could check to see if Katherine had dropped off the panties yet.

I'd spent the morning at a little sexy boutique I knew of downtown, buying her some presents to leave in the locker. Originally, I'd planned on only buying her a sexy pair of panties to wear, but the saleswoman talked me into the pearl thong, explaining to me that the pearls will tease her with every step she took.

The mere thought of those pearls drenched in Kate's arousal had me fucking hard just thinking about it. It was a spending spree once I was that turned on. I got her the panties, a vibrator, and nipple clamps. After the saleswoman gift-wrapped the presents for me, I bought some stationary with hand pressed roses on the cards and jotted a quick note, leaving them all in the locker before I headed to the game that afternoon.

Now, it was almost eleven and the pool was utterly empty. There wasn't a soul in sight as I entered and gave a wave to the half-asleep security guard stationed at the door. No surprise there, of course. Most students were out partying or home. No one wanted to come to the pool for a swim on a Saturday night.

But after a shitty game? There was no place I'd rather be. Some of our teammates were hosting a huge party. Losing tonight had been an upset. We never lost against the Rams, so the fact that we let this one slip through our fingers pissed me off to no end. That combined with my shoulder? I didn't want to be anywhere near that party. The hot tub beckoned me, though.

After changing into my swimsuit in the locker rooms, I froze at the door to the pool. Through the window, I could see one person already relaxing in the hot tub.

Katherine.

I glanced at the locker. Her panties were likely there right now. Which meant she'd likely already gotten my presents for her... not knowing they were from me, of course.

"One thing at a time, Holden," I muttered to myself, then pushed open the door, walking toward the hot tub.

She didn't open her eyes as I approached. The roar of the bubbles must have drowned out my footsteps.

I didn't mean to sneak up on her, but as I sunk into the swirling, steaming water beside her, her eyes flitted open, taking a long moment to land on me and see that I was sitting next to her.

She screamed and almost jumped out of the hot tub.

It wasn't until recognition registered across her features that she realized it was me and calmed down, resuming her position and lowering herself back down into the water, palm pressed to her sternum. "Horking jackrabbit, Holden!"

A laugh exploded out of me. It shouldn't have been funny, but it was. They were just such random ass words to be used as expletives. "Horking jackrabbit?" I repeated.

She gave me one of her signature eye rolls. "We've been through this already. Religious parents, remember?"

"Oh, I remember. Ever care to try cursing though? You know, now that you're on your own?"

"I wouldn't call college on my own exactly," she said. "But I dunno. Cursing just seems so... unnecessary."

I shouldn't have pressed her for more information, but I couldn't stop. There was something about this girl that kept reeling me in. Some invisible, indestructible tether tying her to me. "How so?" I asked.

"Why say fuck when frack or flip works just as well? Saying fuck seems so uncreative."

The fact that she found a little game in not cursing was so fucking endearing that it took everything in me not to smile. It was goddamn adorable. "Noted," I said. "Fuck is uncreative."

I wasn't even lying when I repeated her, but the look she gave me suggested she wouldn't have believed me even if I'd said as much.

"Exactly," she said, narrowing her eyes at me. "Wait a minute!" Her

eyes went wide and she popped higher in the water, shifting to sit on her knees. The water splashed around her and the new vantage point gave me a delectable view of her lush tits. Small, round, just big enough to fit into the palms of my hands and squeeze. They curved into two small mounds beneath her bikini as droplets of water dripped between them.

My cock swelled within my swim trunks and I swallowed my groan. She was going to fucking kill me.

Death by blue balls.

I didn't get to stare at her for long before she dipped back into the water, asking, "Why aren't you at that football party thing?"

I tilted my head, surprised she knew anything at all about that party. Not because the guys wouldn't all be thrilled to have her there, but ever since last year, our policy of no underage students at our parties was intensely enforced. Granted, it was usually enforced by me and since I was nowhere to be found at tonight's party, I wondered how many freshman and sophomores Duncan and the guys were letting slip in past the bouncer. "How do you know about that party?" I asked.

"Maybe I was invited," she challenged me.

I hoped that wasn't true. On one hand, I didn't think Dave was interested anymore. As soon as the BroCode was invoked by Duncan, he backed all the way off. Who else could have invited her? James? Maybe Cooper who was a junior?

Just the thought of one of my teammates setting their eyes on her had my ears ringing.

I chose not to think about it and instead answered her question. "I tweaked my shoulder in the game. Took some muscle relaxers after the game and decided to come here and sit in the hot tub rather than drink like an idiot on the meds."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized the dig I'd inadvertently taken at her. I hadn't even been thinking of that night with

Katherine and the shellfish and the Benadryl. But based on the glare she sent me, she clearly thought I was calling her out. “Well, aren't you the responsible one?”

Okay. She was pissed about something tonight. I closed my eyes and sank deeper into the water, relaxing as the jets hit my bad shoulder. “Just pretend I’m not here.” When she didn’t say anything in response, I peeked an eye open, catching her eyeing the exit. “Don’t even think about it, freshman.”

She turned her glare from the exit to me and snapped, “Don’t call me that.”

“Fine. Don’t even think about it, Katherine,” I said, pointedly, knowing that would annoy her just as much.

“That’s not much better.” Her blue eyes flared like gasoline tossed onto a flame.

Inwardly, I smiled, loving that I knew just how to provoke her and light her up. “Your name isn’t much better than freshman? Noted.”

“You know what I mean,” she countered.

“Do I? What I know is that you were debating making a run for it.”

There was no point in denying it. We both knew she was. This time, I did smile and closed my eyes once more, resting my head against the smooth lip of the hot tub.

I could feel her eyes on me even though mine were closed. And after a few minutes, her touch on my bad shoulder startled me.

“Holden,” she said my name like it was an exhale. Barely a breath with my name being carried by the breeze of her air. “You need ice, not a hot tub,” she added, her tone horrified. “What happened?”

I gave her a long look before answering, “I got sacked by the other team and landed on it weird.”

“Is it broken?”

“It dislocated on the field, but the medic popped it back in during halftime.”

She gape at me, eyes wide. “I’m sorry. The medic popped it back in and then what? You just kept playing?”

I gave her a little smirk and shrugged with my non injured shoulder. “The show must go on, right?” I said, repeating the phrase she’d said herself in rehearsal on Friday when she stubbed her toe on a set piece being built.

“Not if you dislocated your fudging shoulder, Holden! Cripes!”

Once more, I fought a smile only this time I’m pretty sure I lost the battle. “You’re cute when you’re worried about me, you know that?”

She opened her mouth to object, but no words came out.

Because we both knew they’d be bullshit, so what was the point in even saying them? She cared.

She cared about me.

My eyes roamed over her blonde curls piled on top of her head in a messy bun. Some of the strands at the nape of her neck are slick, wet, and sticking to her damp skin. I dragged my gaze across her face, over her full pink lips—

“We have a show to do,” she reminded me pointedly. “I need my Romeo to be able to use both his arms.”

Shit.

I inhaled sharply, doing my best to refocus my thoughts away from Kate’s gorgeous porcelain skin and back on our conversation.

My shoulder.

The show.

“It’ll be fine in a week,” I said, though I’m not sure I believe myself. If tonight was any indication of my acting skills, Professor McCay had it all wrong casting me as the fucking lead. I gave her a reassuring smile. Or at least, what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “Don’t you worry about me, Freshman.”

“Stop that,” she snapped, scowling in a way that I’m sure was meant to be menacing, but left me chuckling.

A few silent beats passed between us and she closed her eyes, taking long

deep breaths in and out. I utilized my time to stare at her as the water between us churned like a building tornado.

Her bathing suit was seemingly innocent. The bikini showed me more of her body than I'd seen all semester. It was white and in the water like we were, it would have been see-through except for the strategically placed red roses on it.

When I lifted my gaze back to her face, her bright cobalt eyes were wide open, set right on me. Caught red-handed staring at her beautiful tits bobbing beneath the water's edge.

I was caught and yet I refused to break the stare first. Her eyes were too mesmerizing that even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't. I was locked in like some erotic Jedi mind trick.

I wanted to tell her everything.

I wanted to spill my guts. Reveal who I was. What I'd been doing. How I'd been bankrolling her for the last couple weeks. I didn't want to lie to Katherine anymore, my Juliet.

My Rose.

I gulped and opened my mouth as a voice shouted in my brain, Tell her you fucking pussy! Man up and accept the consequences of your choices.

"Rose," I whispered.

Kate's face blanched, the beautiful flush draining from her cheeks. "Excuse me?"

I wasn't sure if it was the ghostly shade of her face or the way her lips parted in a gasp or the croak of her voice, but for that one second, she knew. She knew who I was. She knew she was my Rose and I was her Light.

And then, I chickened out.

"Those roses are dangerous," I croaked. Then, just to make sure there wasn't any thought that I was her panty buyer, I gestured to her bathing suit and added, "On your bathing suit. Roses."

With a laugh, she shook her head, the spell broken. "Right. Of course."

“You love roses,” I said, stating the obvious.

“I do.”

“What is it you love about them?”

She paused to think for a long moment. I loved that she did that. I loved that Katherine didn’t just give me any old perfunctory answer. She took the time to dig deep and really consider her words before speaking.

“The smell,” she finally answered. “I was really close with my grandmother and she had this incredible rose garden,” I say, recalling the bitter-sweet memory. “She read me Romeo and Juliet for the first time, too. She loved Shakespeare. Loved the theater.”

“So that’s where it all began.”

“I guess so. I even use the same rose oil she used to use.”

Rose oil.

A smile lifted at the corners of my mouth.

I knew she smelled of roses, I just didn’t know how she had such a delicate scent and not that fake perfumy smell most other girls had. A smile lifted at the corners of my mouth.

“I’ve noticed,” I said. “You always smell like roses and cherries.”

“You noticed that? My perfume and cherry lip balm?”

Only it wasn’t perfume. That was the point. It smelled like she rolled around on a bed of rose petals while she ate fresh cherries.

“Noticed it? You’re like a walking garden most days.”

Her blush crept back along her cheeks and while I should have felt bad that I caused it, I couldn’t help but delight in the fact that I could affect her so easily. “Don’t blush,” I said and dragged my knuckle across the spray of pink on her razor-sharp cheekbone. “You smell perfect.”

The pink flush deepened and spread down her neck. I groaned and traced a line to where her flush disappeared beneath the water, pausing at the stringy strap of her bikini top.

Her breasts hitched higher with her sharp breath and fuck me... all it

would take was one little tug. One little tug at the loop and that top would be gone.

Sweet, innocent virginal Katherine offered up to me like a sacrifice.

Instead, I hooked my finger into the strap of her bikini top and tugged it away from her skin. Then, letting it go, it ricocheted back, snapping against her porcelain skin and leaving a small red welt.

Fuck me.

I wanted to nip that little red welt.

Lick it.

Suck on it.

Mark her as mine and show her all the ways this Romeo could make her purr.

And for the first time, I didn't want to talk myself out of it.

If she wanted this... if she wanted me... maybe it was time.

Maybe I could be different.

Maybe I could give Kate all the things she deserved.

Maybe I could defy odds and not turn into my father.

I leaned in closer, my lips hovering over hers, our breath synchronized as one.

She didn't pull away.

And neither did I.

I brushed my mouth over hers, gently, my heart thumping against my ribs.

May-be...

May-be...

May-be...

An alarm on her phone blared, echoing in the otherwise silent pool and she leapt back away from me.

Tears glistened in her eyes, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out why. "What's wrong?" I asked, the concern I had for her rattling me more than I wanted to admit.

For a second, I thought she was going to talk to me. Really open up. But then, she shook her head and muttered, “Nothing. Nothing’s wrong,” as she jumped out of the hot tub and quickly wrapped her towel around her body before turning off the alarm on her phone.

Goosebumps covered her skin from the back of her neck all the way down to her calves.

She stood there for several breaths, clutching the towel, not facing me. Then, she whipped around, fear widening those cerulean eyes of hers and said, “You’re going to ruin me, Holden.”

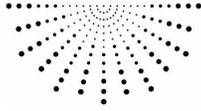
My gaze darted up to hers at those words, my breath like dry ice in my lungs, brittle and cracking.

It was such a brutally honest confession from her.

So beautiful and poignant and raw... I didn’t just want to return it, I owed it to Katherine after everything we’d been through up until now to be honest.

“You’re already breaking me, Katherine. And I can’t find it in me to stop you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



I rush forward, stepping between Holden and Nolan before Holden can throw another punch as cameras click and flash around us. “Holden, stop!”

He doesn’t listen to me. I don’t even think he hears me.

“Holden!” A voice that I recognize from years ago booms from somewhere behind me. “That’s enough.”

Without turning to look, I know Senator Dorsey is standing behind me.

Holden releases his hold on Nolan’s lapel, an eerie, intense calm sweeping his body. But his eyes are still wild, like a caged tiger.

His gaze skims up my body and lands over my shoulder.

“Dad,” he says, his voice dangerously low. “So glad you could join us. You remember Katherine, right?”

Knees trembling, I turn to face Holden’s dad, a ghost from my past I had no intention of ever revisiting until recently.

Holden might be to blame for breaking my heart, but it’s his father who’s truly at fault for ruining my chance at a career in acting.

Until now.

Until Holden appeared and offered me a second chance.

Senator Dorsey gives me a formal nod of his head and extends his hand. “Katherine. It’s good to see you again.”

I back away from both him and Holden and turn to Nolan where he’s

sitting with Amy looking over his bloody lip.

The speech I've had planned for five years flies out the window. No words—no amount of yelling or apologies will matter.

Holden moves to cross behind his dad, heading toward Nolan, a look of regret tilting his expression into a frown. “Nolan, I'm sor—”

Senator Dorsey stops Holden mid-stride with his outstretched arm. Instead of doing the human thing and rushing to check on Nolan, he takes the microphone, addressing the crowd.

I'm not sure what the hell he can say to salvage this in front of the hundred or so people who just witnessed one of Broadway's golden boys crack his fist into another... over me. Then again, Nolan's words from earlier pop into my mind. All press is good press. And the media loves drama.

From the back, Nolan grunts.

Amy is holding a handful of tissues up to his lip, whispering, “What the hell happened? He's seen you two kiss on stage dozens of times.”

“He's seen *Zach and Skyler* kiss. Not Nolan and Kate,” I say, quiet enough so no one else can hear.

Amy's eyes widen. “Are you two...”

She lets her question fade without actually asking it.

“No.” Nolan pulls the tissue back, inspecting the amount of blood before sighing.

From the microphone, Senator Dorsey clears his throat and the three of us grow silent as he starts speaking. “Hello, everyone. Thank you for coming tonight. As you can see, with talent like that, this show's going to be phenomenal when it opens in a few weeks. But I guess the cat's out of the bag. Not only am I the producer of *Pillow Fight*, but I'm also the silent producer of this new musical...”

My breath catches. *What cat? What the hell is he saying?* He pauses, tossing a quick, but pointed look over his shoulder in my direction before continuing. “What you thought was a two-person show is actually a *three-*

person show about a love-triangle, with Holden both starring in *and* directing the show.”

Amy gasps. “What’s he talking about?”

Nolan glances at Amy, muttering, “He’s going to make you rewrite half the damn show so that his son’s golden boy image is preserved.”

Senator Dorsey gestures behind at us. “How about a round of applause for his co-star, Nolan Brooks, as well as the Broadway debut of the mesmerizing Katherine Harris—”

“Dad—” Holden tries to interrupt, but his dad clamps his hand around Holden’s shoulders, warning him with his white-knuckled grip.

“It’s going to be sensational!” Senator Dorsey finishes saying, with that practiced smile of his.

Cameras flash. The crowd murmurs and applauds approvingly. If they haven’t bought his bullshit story, then they’re hiding it well.

My head spins. Holden’s dad is the silent producer of our show? Why didn’t Holden tell me?

Then with a quick flip of his thumb, Senator Dorsey switches off the microphone and spins to face us. “Back room. *Now.*”

He doesn’t wait for our reactions or to see if we’re following him. He crosses to the nearest door in the back corner of the room. Silently, we all follow him. Like sheep.

Or worse... like lemmings. Small rodents who commit mass suicide.

Senator Dorsey clicks on a lamp on the bedside table, illuminating what looks to be a spare bedroom. The closet door is ajar, with empty hangers. A soft gray comforter adorns the bed with half a dozen decorative pillows. Beautiful cream white walls reflect the soft yellow glow of the lamp.

A lamp that Senator Dorsey knew right where it was. Where the hell are we? And how did he know his way around so well?

Holden is the last to enter the room and shuts the door behind him before spinning to face his dad.

Chest puffed, he steps forward, going toe to toe with his dad. “You can’t just change our whole fucking show weeks before we open—”

“I can and I will if it’s going to save the six million dollars I’ve invested.”

Amy steps forward with a roll of her shoulders. “What if I refuse to rewrite my show?”

“Then we’ll hire a ghostwriter to do it for you.”

Amy gasps, her hand coming to the base of her throat. “You wouldn’t.”

Senator Dorsey’s expression drops, and for a moment, I see uncharacteristic regret in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Amy, but it’s in your contract. I’ll call a production meeting for tomorrow to discuss specifics.”

Nolan shakes his head, looking directly at Amy. “You don’t have to do this. That was a bullshit clause in your contract that won’t hold up in court —”

Senator Dorsey steps forward, addressing Nolan. “Do you have a better idea for how to save yourselves from tonight’s disaster?”

Holden folds his arms. “Yeah. I could resign as director. Admit that what I did was wrong and unprofessional and step down—”

“I am not paying a small fortune to fund someone *else*’s directorial debut, Holden,” his dad sneered. Then, he turned to address Amy. “I’m truly sorry for this. You’ll be compensated, of course, for the extra work. And it doesn’t have to be a large part for Holden. A couple of songs. Maybe two or three scenes. That’s it.”

Then, once again, Senator Dorsey rests his hand on Nolan’s shoulder. Ever the mediator. Ever the politician. Constantly looking for the best way to mend fences and repair his image. “I know a cosmetic surgeon who would be willing to take a look at your lip tonight—now, if you’d like. Get it stitched up by one of New York’s best—”

Nolan shrugs off the senator’s hand from his body. “No, thanks. I know people in this city, too, you know.” Then, he turns his pointed glare toward Holden. “And I didn’t need *Daddy*’s help to make it. I’ll see you all at the

production meeting *tomorrow*.”

Nolan turns to leave and is stopped by Senator Dorsey grabbing his elbow. “Actors aren’t a part of production meetings—”

Nolan whips around, breathing heavily, and I think another punch is about to be thrown. I launch myself forward, stepping between Nolan and Senator Dorsey.

“It’s not worth it, Nolan,” I whisper. Glancing around, my eyes find Holden’s. Their whiskey hue reflects more gold and I’m not sure if it’s the low light or fury in them.

Nolan tosses his bloody tissue into the waste can beside the door. “Let me make this clear,” he says. “I wasn’t asking your permission to be there. I’m a part of this production team, and Katie and I will *both* be at that meeting tomorrow. With my *lawyer*.”

That’s the *last* place in the world I want to be tomorrow.

“He’s right,” Holden says, his gaze fastened onto me. “You both helped create these characters. You earned the roles. You deserve to be at the meeting that determines the fate of the show.”

Shaking his head, Nolan mutters, “Well, look at that. He *does* have a spine.”

“I’m sorry about this,” Holden says, stepping closer to Nolan and me. It’s non-confrontational, and only then do I see the real reason his eyes glow. Regret. “I really am. I shouldn’t have lost control like that. But *you* need to apologize, too.”

Holden’s gaze skims over me, and my heart sputters, skidding to a stop in my chest. I know what he’s saying. I can read his thoughts. He’s right. I’m owed an apology. Nolan was so out of line after our song.

Nolan snorts. “Like hell I’m apologizing to you—”

“Not to *him*,” I interrupt them both. “You need to apologize to me, Nolan. You can’t just kiss me without my consent. You were warned of that the first week of rehearsals. It doesn’t excuse Holden punching you, but at the very

least, you owe me an apology.”

Nolan’s mouth firms into a frown and he nods. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Katie.”

With that, he tugs the door open and disappears through the crowd as Amy and Senator Dorsey break off into their own conversation. It seems like the perfect opportunity for me to slip away. It’s been a long night and I’m exhausted.

Senator Dorsey looks up, catching me as I back toward the door. “So, I take it Holden never told you I was one of the producers?”

“No,” I say, moving my gaze to Holden. “He didn’t.”

Holden launches forward and this time I don’t step back as he takes my hand in his. “Because he wasn’t *supposed* to be. I didn’t even *know* he was a producer of our show until a few days ago.”

Senator Dorsey scoffs a mean sounding laugh. “What? You think Reid Bradley just stepped down from his position as director on his own? I had to pay that man a million dollars to leave the show so *you* could have this chance at directing.”

A gasp strangles in my throat, and Holden’s face pales, going a ghostly shade of white.

“You did *what*?” he hisses.

Senator Dorsey rolls his eyes. “Well, I wouldn’t have bothered if I’d known you were just going to cast your college crush in the other leading role.”

Holden shakes his head and his trembling hands ball into fists. “You bastard.”

Senator Dorsey snorts, directing the next statement directly to me. “Then again, maybe I *should* have known this would happen after you dragged Reid to that awful Fringe show of hers.”

I blink, the realization of his words hitting like a blow to my gut. I glance up at Holden who’s not looking at me. “*You* dragged Reid to see my show?”

You said... you said *he* discovered me on his own. That he saw me and contacted my agent to have me audition.”

Holden takes a step toward me, but I counter it, moving back. “Katherine, please. Let me explain. Having you audition *was* Reid’s idea. The moment he saw you on stage, he wanted you to come in and read for this part. All I did was plant the seed—”

“All you did was plant the seed?” I repeat, his words like poison on my tongue.

Senator Dorsey pulls his phone from his pocket, interrupting Holden by reading aloud from a text message on his screen. “Dad... I wish I could see your face as I deliver the news that I’ve casted Kate. All your bullshit was for nothing. And now you’ll be forced to see the two of us together. Week after week. Making headlines. And it will drive you crazy.”

Senator Dorsey finishes reading, then holds his phone up to me. The text message on the screen is from Holden and dated the day he came to see me when I was working at the coffee shop.

“I’m sorry, Kate,” the senator says. “You weren’t ever supposed to have this part. It was all just a giant revenge plot my son cooked up.”

“No!” Holden rakes his hands through his hair. “I mean, *yes*, I sent that. But it’s not what you think. That’s not why you got this part, Kate.”

Kate. Not Katherine. Somehow, even though Holden calling me Katherine started off as a source of frustration, it now means more when he *doesn’t* call me by my full name.

“Please. Let me explain—”

“You lied to me,” I whisper. This shouldn’t be a surprise. But it is. Somehow, after all this time, I still find it surprising that Holden can lie so easily to me.

I need to get out of here. I need to get away from everyone at this party. These horrible, lying assholes who will do *anything* to get ahead.

They aren’t my people. They never will be.

As much as I want to belong in this industry, it's becoming abundantly clear that maybe I don't have what it takes to make it. Not if making it means lying, cheating, and hurting the people you claim to love.

I press my palm to the growing ache in my chest and turn to leave.

Senator Dorsey's voice stops me before I make it a single step away. "I was right about you five years ago, wasn't I? Bad luck just follows you around."

I spin to face one of the main people responsible for making my life in college—and after—such hell.

"Don't," Holden whispers, turning me towards him. He cups my face gently. "He's not worth it. Please, Katherine. Just let me take you home—"

But I'm not even listening to him. I *know* Senator Dorsey's not worth it. I recited that rhetoric to Holden for months in college. But I can't seem to stop myself from responding. I tear away from Holden, spinning to face his father.

"Bad luck follows *me* around?" A bitter laugh cracks at the back of my throat. "I'm not the one with a son who hates me, a disastrous marriage, and a political career that ended in scandal."

I always expected this moment to be more rewarding. For five years, I'd thought I wanted to look this man in the eyes and tell him just what I think of him. The reality is, it's anything but rewarding. I feel even worse now than I did before.

And I should've known that flinging insults at Holden's dad would have no impact. Instead, his mouth twists into a sadistic smile.

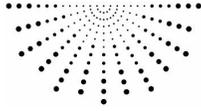
I step back from Holden's embrace, shaking my head. "And you? I thought you'd changed." Tears fill my eyes. It's like I'm right back in college again. In love with a boy who can't seem to get out from under his dad's thumb and feeling like I'll never be enough for him. "I wish you'd never come back into my life, Holden."

With that, I turn and run from the party.

But here's the thing about wishes. You never know if you truly mean

them until they come true.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



*H*olden

FIVE YEARS AGO...

Monday morning, I woke up like a different man. The ache in my shoulder was almost entirely gone. An entire day of sleep and heavy duty pain meds were just what I needed.

I opened the last text message thread I had from Kate ... or rather from Rose. To Light.

She had sent the message right after she'd run away from the hot tub.

@AnyOtherRose:

The panties are in the locker. But I can't do this anymore.
Consider me retired.

I'd nearly bolted out of the hot tub to respond to her immediately.

@LightBreaks90:

Understood. No pressure to continue, but out of curiosity, can I ask why?

I held my breath, wincing as I wrapped the towel around my waist and waiting for her reply. I didn't have to wait long.

@AnyOtherRose:

I like someone. And I can't do this and pursue that someone.

I was on cloud nine the rest of the night. Despite my aching shoulder. Despite the terrible game I'd had. Despite everything.

Because Katherine liked me.

She liked me so much, she was walking away from the money. Good girl that she was.

I arrived to rehearsal a few minutes early on Monday after knocking myself out with pain meds and sleeping virtually all day Sunday.

We were blocking the show out of order and today's schedule had the death scene listed.

I took my seat in the front row as usual, going over my lines in the last scene and I wait for Katherine to arrive. Even though it was rare that I beat her here, I didn't think much more of it.

Not until Professor McCay stood in front of the class and clapped her hands for silence. "Change of plans, everyone. We had a student transfer into our class. And even though it's pretty rare this late in the semester, I want to introduce you all to Addison Wright."

My gaze snapped up from where I'd only been half listening and still reading my script to finally notice that Addison was sitting a few chairs down from me.

"She's a dance major," Professor McCay continued. "And while we don't have any parts left in Keith's show, she's going to act as Kate's understudy for the part of Julie. And she'll be reading with you today, Holden."

"What? What the hell happened to Kate?"

Professor McCay cleared her throat and gestured for me to join her in the hall. "Why don't you join me out here for a moment, Holden?"

The rest of the class erupted into murmurs as I shoved out of my seat and followed Professor McCay and Keith into the hall. I didn't wait for them to

speaking first. "Where is she? What's going on?"

McCay held up her hands, palms out in that way people do when they're trying to calm you down. "We're still trying to get the whole story," she said.

"What whole story? What are you talking about?"

"Kate emailed me yesterday," Professor McCay started. "She said she wouldn't be here today at class."

"Is she sick? I just saw her on Saturday and she was fine."

Keith and Professor McCay exchanged an odd look just before Keith managed to say, studying me, "Think Holden, did anything happen on Sunday? Between you two?"

I shook my head slowly. Yesterday was all kind of foggy anyway thanks to my pain meds. "I didn't even see her yesterday." Hell, I didn't see anyone yesterday. By the time I joined the living and woke up from my nap, it was past dinner time and Duncan had gone out for the night. "What's the big deal, though? People miss class here and there, right?"

Keith worried his lip and adjusted his black rectangular glasses on his nose.

"It's not just today," McCay said. "In her email, Kate quit the show. And she's currently trying to transfer out of our class entirely."

I blinked.

No.

I couldn't have heard that right. "Kate's quitting the show? But... she loves this show?"

Keith shrugged. "We can't figure it out either. She didn't give any reason —"

I was already halfway toward the front door, on a mission to find Kate.

"Holden, stop," McCay demanded, her voice echoing through the acoustics of the hall. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to bring our Juliet back."

At the very least, she owed me an explanation as to why she would quit

her dream role.

Was it Addison? Did she do something? Threaten Katherine in some way by transferring into the class and acting as her understudy?

But the Katherine I knew didn't back down from a girl like Addison.

I got to her dorm in record time, whipping my car into the closest parking spot and not bothering to lock it.

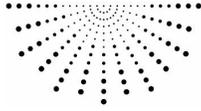
I made a run for the front doors, but skidded to a stop. Because Katherine was already out front of her building.

Arms crossed.

Fighting position.

And she was talking to my mother.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



I stare at the peeling paint in the corners of the ceiling of our café. I've always thought this place was spotless and that I knew every inch of it, yet I've never noticed that before. Staring at that peeling paint is like looking in a mirror. On the surface, I look clean and put together. Strong. Resilient. But if anyone takes the extra moment to look closer, they can see my peeling paint. The rough parts around the edges.

The cracks in the veneer.

Holden always saw it. He saw me. For better or worse, he saw it all.

Even though I have a signed contract from Holden for the show, I can't help the itchy feeling that something is wrong. That Holden's dad has gotten to him and somehow changed his mind about casting me. Could he rescind that contract if he wanted to? I don't think so; if I sign it, it's legally binding. End of story... right?

Movement catches my attention out of the corner of my eye as Keith lifts his teapot, pouring more of the steeped Jasmine Dragonpearl tea into his cup.

"You didn't have to buy my tea, you know." He smirks, setting the teapot gingerly back to its saucer.

I take a sip of my lemon ginger tea. I'm not sure if I'll be expected to sing at today's rehearsal, but I'm not taking any chances on dairy.

"If by 'buy' you mean 'sneak behind the counter while Curt wasn't

looking and steal a couple teabags' ... sure." I chuckle and give a self-deprecating shrug. "I still work here. And one of the perks of being a coffee shop employee is all the tea and coffee I can drink."

Keith grins and adjusts the exact same black rectangle glasses which are a good ten years out of style. If he waits another few years, they may come back. "Well, I'm pretty sure I should be treating *you* to coffee."

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

Keith takes a breath. Leaning forward, he wraps his hands around his cup. Every hair on my body stands on end.

Oh, god. Why is he staring at me like that?

"Because," he starts, his voice serious and intensely quiet, "it's customary for a producer and playwright to wine and dine an actor before they offer her a part in a Broadway show."

Offer her a part. Me? Is Keith offering *me* a part? I shake my head, trying to escape the water-logged feeling. I didn't hear that right. I couldn't have. There's no way after several years of struggling as a professional actress that I get not one, but *two* Broadway offers in less than a month. And from two people who had essentially crushed my career before it even began?

No. I've definitely misheard him. Between my hammering heart, gaping jaw, and narrowed gaze, my *don't-fuck-with-me* vibes are strong. "I'm sorry... *what?*"

"As I mentioned last night, *Remy and Julie* is doing really well in workshops and Off-Broadway. There's only one hitch with our Julie..."

His pause triggers my question. "What's that?"

"She's not *you*."

The whir of the air conditioner kicks on and a manufactured cold breeze kisses the back of my neck.

"Funny," I whisper. "I recall the only hitch with your first production *was* me as Julie."

His light gray eyes flash with regret. "You were a scapegoat. It's the

biggest regret of my life that I went along with that plan. But I was stupid, and I *thought* I was in love—”

“And it didn’t hurt that McCay made sure you and your career were taken care of for going along with their little *plan*.”

Leaning his elbows on the table, he kneads the back of his neck, not meeting my gaze. “It was less about her making my career... and more about her not *breaking* it.”

“Like she broke mine.”

Slowly, his eyes lift to mine and he nods. “I’m sorry. And I finally have power to offer you the role that should have been yours in the first place. Come work with me, Kate. Come be my Julie and you won’t have to see Holden or Nolan or Missy every day at work—”

“Missy?” I ask. “Why would I have to see Missy every day?”

Just the sound of her name makes my insides curl in on themselves.

Keith’s brows lift with genuine concern. “Well, not *every* day, but she’ll be there a lot, I assume. Since she and Holden are back together.”

“No, they’re not.” I snort a laugh in response, but almost immediately, my laugh dies at the sight of his pale face.

“I’m sorry,” Keith says, passing me today’s copy of *Backstage Magazine*. “I hate to be the one who has to show you this.”

The magazine is already open to an article with a picture of Holden and Missy from last night. *Reunited! Missy Howl and Holden James are Together Again*.

Keith’s hand drapes over mine. “Just think about my offer, okay? The rest of the creative team saw the rehearsals and recordings I had from you in undergrad and everyone agrees that the part is yours if you want it. You’re even invited to a dinner at our producer’s apartment in the Hampton’s next weekend. You should come regardless of what your answer is.”

“Keith, come on. The press can twist just about any picture to look like a couple is back together. I mean, think about it. Holden punches Nolan in

front of a crowd of people and *this* is the story they're reporting on?" I toss the paper onto the table between us and take a sip of my tea. "I mean, it would be laughable if Holden did this to me again."

A simple silver band slides to his knuckle as Keith taps his bony index finger to the page. "Look, I thought it was weird, too, that no one reported on that punch. But I don't think this is made up, Kate. Read the third paragraph."

I skim down the article, searching for anything concrete. And that's when I see it. A direct quote from Holden himself.

Holden James wraps his arm around Missy's waist with a twinkle in his eyes, "We tried being apart, but in the end, we always come back to each other. Someday I'm going to marry her."

I can't breathe. My lungs constrict, tightening like someone's cold, clammy hand is clenching me on the inside.

"It can't be," I whisper, my grip on the paper tightening.

With a glance at the clock on the wall, I shove my chair back and stand.

"Where are you going?" Keith asks, startled.

I fold the *Backstage Magazine* and tuck it into my purse. "To Holden's apartment... to see for myself if they're really back together."

It's eight-thirty in the morning. If they're truly together again, then she would have spent the night.

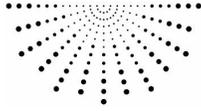
"What if Missy is there?" Keith calls after me, following me out of the café.

I throw my hand up, hailing the first cab I see. "If she's there, then I'll know this story is true."

And I can move on. Truly, and finally move on from Holden and his toxic bullshit.

If it's true, I need to see it for myself. This time, he's not going to get away with stabbing me in the back. If history is repeating itself, then this time I'll force Holden to look me in the eyes when he betrays me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



*O*n the entire walk to Holden's apartment, I replay the last couple weeks in my mind. And the more I go through the details, the more I'm convinced it's not true. It can't be.

Holden is a lot of things. He's selfish. Witty to a fault. And vengeful. But he's not a cheater.

We had one hookup last night. A hookup where we didn't even have sex. There were no promises made. No declarations of love or monogamy.

A little voice whispers in the back of my mind, *So, is it cheating if you two were never together?*

Yes. It is. Because if they're truly together, that means he was cheating on her... with me.

And even if this Missy story isn't true, I can't be with him. Not knowing that casting me was some sort of plan to get back at his father. Yet again, I'm another casualty in the Dorsey political war.

Regardless of any of these facts—true or not—one thing is for sure: Holden owes me answers. And I'm going to get them. Now.

I gulp in a shallow, trembling breath as I yank open the heavy glass doors to his apartment building.

Up until last night, I wouldn't have known his address. Up until the moment he texted me that info with the intention of going home from that

party with me.

Me. Not Missy Howl.

That fact alone gives me the courage I need to cross the lobby, heading to the security desk. My flip flops smack against the white marble floors and the sound echoes off the thirty-foot ceilings.

The man sitting behind the desk looks up from his computer, smiling broadly at me.

“Good morning,” he says.

I do my best to smile, but I’m pretty sure it comes out as a grimace. “Morning. I’m here to see Holden James—”

Before I even finish, his fingers are flying across the keyboard. “Oh, I’m sorry. There’s a ‘Do Not Disturb’ flag on his room. With only a couple of exceptions. Do you have any ID?”

My heart plummets to my stomach, and I swallow the screams of frustration at the idea of having to wait until rehearsal to talk with Holden.

It’s only a little after nine. Late enough to be a respectful time, not barging in at the crack of dawn.

“Um, sure,” I say and dig out my driver’s license that has gone relatively unused for the years that I’ve lived in New York. I slide it across the counter, a hopeless despair settling in my chest.

I’m going to have to talk to him at rehearsal. In front of everyone.

The man behind the desk slides my ID back to me, his grin widening. “Oh, Ms. Harris! Great—he’s been expecting you.”

It takes a moment to register what he’s said and I pause, having already turned to leave. “I’m sorry... he’s what?”

“You’re on the list of exceptions for the ‘Do Not Disturb’ flag. He’s been expecting you. Let me just call up and let him know you’re here.”

How in the hell is that even possible? *I* didn’t even realize I was coming over until about forty minutes ago.

The guard hangs up the phone and points to a plush seating area in the

corner of the lobby. “He’ll be right down if you want to have a seat.”

Everything around me becomes white noise as I fall into a leather loveseat in the corner. *He’ll be down.* But all I hear is: *I can’t go up.*

What in the damn hell is going on? I stare out the massive floor to ceiling windows as people hurry by, some with their eyes cast down at their phones. Others sip coffee. Every one of them lost in their own little world. Soft instrumental music croons quietly in the lobby and I find myself lost in the melody. Lost in my thoughts.

Behind me, the elevator dings and quiet, confident footsteps grow louder, the closer they come. I don’t need to turn to know it’s him.

His touch is soft against my elbow, and the cushion beside me dips as he takes a seat.

“I was hoping you’d come,” Holden says, his voice low and calm in a practiced way.

“Is it true?” I ask, fighting the urge to turn and look at him. But I know the moment I do, it’s over. The tears will fall. I’ll ache to touch him. To kiss him. To hold onto him. Right now, more than anything, I need strength and willpower.

He blows out a quiet sigh before answering. “I did text my dad that stuff when you first took the role. But I swear on my mother’s grave, Katherine, that’s not why I offered it to you.”

That wasn’t exactly the question I was referring to when I asked if it was true. But I’ll take every explanation I can get right now. “And what about Reid Bradley? He never really wanted me in this show, did he?”

I can’t fight it anymore. I slide my gaze to peer at him.

After last night, I only got a few hours of sleep. But Holden looks like he got two... Tops. His hair is wild, wavy and falling into his weary eyes.

Almost reading my thoughts, he rakes a hand through his hair, brushing it away from his face. “He did want you to audition. I had no idea my dad paid him to step down in order to give me this shot. So, before I knew Reid was

leaving the production, I took him to your Fringe show. That's it. Everything else was true. Reid loved your performance and wanted you to read for the part. Simon, Amy, and the other producers were obsessed with your audition. I may have cracked the window of opportunity, but everything else was your talent that got you here."

I snort a laugh. "My talent. You really had no idea your dad was a silent producer?"

His eyes flash a golden color against the morning sunlight streaming in through the windows. "I had no clue. I thought for once I'd done something on my own. But as usual, I'm a joke. Dad purchased this job for me, just like he's always done."

I pull the magazine from my purse and drop it on the couch between us. "And what about this? Is *this* true?"

I hold my breath, heat buzzing in my sinuses, awaiting his answer. His reaction.

He stares at the open page before dropping his head into his hands. With his elbows pressing into his knees and his face buried, he says, "I was hoping to talk to you before you saw that."

His words stifle my next breath, suffocating me. They're a sucker punch to the gut. But instead of letting myself feel the intense pain, I shut it off. My body goes numb with a slow, tingling warmth that begins at the top of my head and descends down my body. "So, it's true."

The elevator dings. Jerking his head from his hands, he glances over his shoulder. A mom with several kids come tumbling out of the elevator as well as an older woman with a silver-streaked bun. She struts by us, exiting the building while the mom and kids hang out in the lobby, filling what was once quiet with shrieks of youthful joy and cries for more Cheerios.

Holden releases what seems like a sigh of relief and whispers, "It's complicated, Kate."

Complicated. That's the bullshit people say when they're acting like a

dick but looking for ways to justify it. And I don't want to hear it from Holden. I listened to those excuses once... Five years ago. They were bullshit then. And they're bullshit now.

He turns to face me, tucking his leg under him, as he says, "Missy is—" "I've been offered another part," I blurt out. "In Keith's new show."

He goes silent and stands, pacing with slow, measured steps with one hand kneading the back of his neck.

"Another part," he murmurs.

I mirror him, my legs wobbly as I push to my feet as well.

Behind us, one of the kids starts crying, the shrill sound echoing in the cavernous lobby. I'm grateful for the noise. It drowns the dizzying thrum of my pulse in my ears.

Finally, Holden stops pacing, and spins to face me. "Take the job with Keith," he says. "It's a great opportunity."

Moisture wells at the edges of my eyes. "You're not even going to fight for me? Just yesterday, you offered me a contract. You said the part was mine." I yank the contract from my purse, clutching it in my fist like some sort of show and tell that'll demonstrate just how crazy he sounds. "What the hell changed?"

A delicate hand clamps onto my shoulder, spinning me around, and I find myself face to face with Missy Howl. With a tight smile, she says, "Me. I'm what's changed."

Missy moves past me and slides into Holden's side, slipping her arm around his waist. Clearing his throat, Holden pulls her in close to him. "Missy was brought on as one of our producers last night."

And the blows keep on coming. *She's a producer now? Along with his father?*

"That's right," Missy says. "So, if you continue with *our* show, the three of us will be working very closely together."

I'd let myself get strong-armed out of a part in the past. And I vowed to

never let that happen again. Keith's show is a great opportunity... but Holden's show is a better one. And I'll be damned if I'm going to step aside and let things be easy for Holden and Missy.

It's my turn to make Holden's life a living hell. And I had the iron-clad contract literally in hand to make that happen.

She glides her bony hand up Holden's chest in a transparently possessive display.

But more notably than her efforts to drive me into jealousy, is that there, on her index finger is Holden's grandfather's ring, winking back at me.

"This ugly thing?" Holden said. "This is the very reminder of everything in life I don't want... And don't want to be. I'd never give this to a woman I loved. Maybe I'd give it to someone I hated. Like a cruel joke."

I smile—a real smile—and meet Holden's sharp gaze. "You're right," I say. "This really *is* a complicated situation."

I grab a pen out of my purse and scribble my name and date at the bottom of the contract and shove it against Holden's chest, pausing to lean into both of them.

It takes every ounce of energy to ignore the pulse of heat between us and the scent of lemongrass that drives me wild. "I'll see you both at rehearsal. Because this time? You're not getting rid of me *that* easily."

THANK you for reading BROKEN ROMEO!

I hope you loved the start of Holden and Kate's epic, emotional love story.

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And be sure to check out the prequel,
SHATTERED JULIET if you missed it!



ABOUT KATANA



Katana Collins is a *USA Today* bestselling author of over twenty novels, novellas, and comic books in a variety of genres. She is most known for her sensual contemporary romances and her comic books writing, including

Batman White Knight Presents: Harley Quinn & Generation Joker with DC Comics.

When she was younger and stole her mother's Harlequins to read beneath the covers with a flashlight, she wanted to read about the tough as nails heroine. The perfectly imperfect girl with quirks and attitude and sass. And the anti-heroes who were anything but "Prince Charming." Forget the knight on a white horse ... she wanted the bad boy on a motorcycle.

An avid animal lover, she lives in Portland, Maine with her kind of mean cat, derpy lab-pitt mix, mellow chihuahua, and very *not* mellow cairn terrier puppy. Oh, yeah... there's a husband somewhere in that mix, too. She can usually be found in a coffee shop with her nose buried in a laptop wearing fabulous (albeit sometimes impractical) shoes.

She loves connecting with book lovers like herself, and fellow sassy storytellers, so feel free to drop her an email, visit her on her website. She also loves connecting on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) or in her [reader group, Kat's Kittens!](#)

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