

SHATTERED

Quiet

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATANA COLLINS

SHATTERED
Juliet

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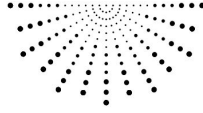
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CHAPTER ONE



*F*ear and loathing are two sides of the exact same coin. We usually loathe that which we fear.

Like heights.

I'm flipping terrified of heights.

And not in that adorable *a date takes me on a ferris wheel and I snuggle him because I'm scared* kind of way. In the *if you take me up there, I will projectile vomit all over you Exorcist style* way.

Bottom line, there are only a few things I truly loathe.

Heights... which we covered.

Being late. Seriously, is there anything worse than walking into a room knowing everyone else is waiting on you? And yeah, I'll admit it. I'm scared of that. I'm scared of the attention I get when all heads whip around to look at who the *late girl* is.

And now, I'm adding a third onto this list: Moving.

I spent my entire life in one home. One school district with all the same students over and over again. I had the same bedroom. Hell, I even slept on the exact same twin bed that I had weaned off the crib from.

I had no idea that moving across the country would be so terrifying.

Yet, here I am. Carrying the last cardboard box to my dorm room with trembling hands.

I shoulder open my door and drop it on the floor with the seven other boxes my parents and I had carried up earlier.

Seven boxes. That's all. My entire life and all my belongings crammed into seven cardboard boxes.

Pretty damn sad if you ask me.

Beside me, my dad puts the finishing touches on lofting my bed while my mom and sister, Mallory rearrange the few pieces of furniture my dorm room comes with.

The desk, they've shifted into the corner and my three-drawer dresser and a half bookshelf are now beneath the lofted bed along with some additional plastic shelves Mom had insisted we buy from Target.

I glance to the left at my roommate's side of the room which is already set up. Rows of cute, colorful dresses hang in her closet. A pink and lavender butterfly comforter set is neatly tucked around the mattress of her made bed. Several posters hang on the walls on her side of the room along with massive picture collages. The letters J-I-L-L are hanging in the center of her wall with quilted 3D letters that appear to be homemade.

I glance down at the comforter set I bought with my mom last week.

Gray.

Just... gray.

It isn't even a pattern or gray plaid or anything. Just a solid, bland color.

I don't have any letters spelling out Kate. Or posters. Or picture collages. Or hell, *any* pictures actually.

Mom comes up behind me and gives me a hug. "Want us to stay and help you unpack?"

I shake my head no. "It's okay. I know it's a long drive back to Indiana. You should leave if you want to make it to Ohio by tonight."

Mallory's classes don't start until next week, but she rented a new apartment off campus this year.

Granted, she *does* have her own car. And even though it's my first year of college, she's a senior and has done this three times before. Theoretically, it's not like she needs mom and dad there to drop her off.

Yet, here we are.

She was always the golden child. The good one. The daughter who did what was expected of her.

Mallory going off to her senior year in college alone without my parents there to help move her in and wave her off was unthinkable.

While I on the other hand could have and would have done this move alone if they had let me. Except for that pesky little detail that I don't have a car. So instead, it's a family road trip to move me halfway across the country to pursue an acting degree. A feat my dad called: *Pointless*.

Dad doesn't argue or blink. He gives me a quick hug, then pulling his keys from his back pocket, he waits by the door.

Mom, the more sentimental one in the family, takes her time hugging me, pausing to pull back and cup my face. “I can’t believe you’re going to be so far away. You barely ever even went to sleepovers.”

“I had to move out sometime,” I say, not mentioning the fact that I didn’t go to sleepovers because I’d never really been invited to any. My best friend, or rather, my only friend in high school, Ian and I had hung out almost exclusively. But despite him being gay, we were never allowed to have sleepovers.

Even though he is a fabulously talented actor, he went south to pursue a career in architecture.

Mom reaches into her purse, pulling me away from my thoughts. “I bought you some Oreos. Your favorite,” she says, handing me the crinkling container.

“Thanks, Mom.” I look down at the package of cookies and force a smile. They’re peppermint flavored. Not the plain, classic double stuffed that I love. In fact, I kind of hate peppermint flavored things. Peppermint should be reserved for gum and toothpaste... not desserts.

She gives me another kiss on the forehead as Mallory steps in beside her. “I got you a gift, too.”

“You did?” I spin to face my sister, touched at her thoughtfulness.

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a tube of what looks like lotion. I take it from her, reading. *Lume Cream Deodorant: For Pits, Privates, & Beyond.*

Heat creeps across my face as Mallory leans in and whispers, “I’m not trying to embarrass you. But I know your buttcheeks sweat when you’re nervous and I swear, this will help. Just smear a little of this down there and you’ll be all

set!” She gives my butt a little smack, just to drive the point home.

“Gee, thanks,” I mutter.

Unfortunately, she isn’t wrong.

When I’m nervous, I sweat a lot. And the space at the top of my thighs is the biggest culprit.

Mallory hugs me awkwardly, which even though we’re sisters, she and I don’t hug often. Like, at all. But she pulls me close and whispers, “I left a box of condoms in the drawer under your bed, too.”

If my face was pink before, then it is downright scarlet now.

It isn’t like Mallory and I are super close as sisters, but she knows I’ve never even been kissed before. Something I tearfully admitted to her after my prom date left me at the dance to go make out with another girl. I had no choice but to call Mallory for a ride home and in my weakened state, I admitted to her that I am not only still a virgin... but a kissing virgin to boot.

And now, she’s giving me condoms.

Is she teasing me? Or does she really think I’m just gonna hit the ground running now that I’m a freshman in college?

And with that little grenade Mallory launched, my sister pulls back from me and with a little wave, she, Mom, and Dad all leave.

I open the drawer and peek at the box of Trojans mocking me from within.

Condoms.

For the girl who's literally never been kissed.

“Hi!”

A cheery voice behind me has me nearly jumping out of my skin.

I slam the drawer shut and whip around, coming face to face with a smiling girl. Auburn ringlets frame her pretty face and a robin's egg blue sundress compliments her pale skin. “I'm Jill! You must be Kate?”

She wraps thin arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug before I can object.

Somehow, her hug is more genuine and tighter than a lifetime of hugs from my own family. Though it takes me a second, I return the gesture, wrapping my arms around her too and hugging her back, still dumbfounded by the chipper energy radiating off of her.

“Jill, hi. It's nice to meet you,” I say, pulling out of the hug. Then, pointing at the wall behind her, I add, “I like your, um, decorations.”

Impossibly, her grin widens more. “My mom really wanted to try to replicate my bedroom at home as best she could. So she remade all the things I had on my wall there, including the photo collages and my quilted name.” Her nose scrunches. “It's sweet, but a little embarrassing.”

I shake my head. “Don't be embarrassed. It looks really great.”

She looks around the room at my unpacked boxes. “Did your parents run out to grab lunch?”

“Um, no. They had to leave. My sister starts at Ohio State, so she was up next for the college drop off tour.”

Jill nods in understanding. Impressive since I didn't even really understand it. My parents try. They really do. They came to every one of my shows in high school. They cheered me on and gave me standing ovations, even though I know they secretly wished they were watching me play softball or volleyball like Mallory.

We never really got each other. But that doesn't make them bad people by any stretch of the means. I love them. And they love me.

But I also spent my childhood watching from a distance while my mom and sister struck this bond that she and I never quite shared. They were friends as well as mother and daughter. Mallory confided in her. They stayed up late when Mallory would come home for a visit from college and giggle into the night.

I didn't have that with Mom.

I didn't have that with Mallory.

Ian was the closest thing I had to a bestie, but he and I didn't even have a friendship like that.

Blinking, I look up at Jill and smile as a rush of hope washes through me. Maybe Jill will be my person?

Secretly, I hope she will be.

“Well,” Jill says, grabbing a purse that's hanging from her desk chair. “I was going to go check out the kickoff. Wanna come? Afterwards, we can grab some pizza and I'll help you unpack.”

I wave her offer away. “You don't have to do that—”

She grabs my shoulders gently and smiles at me. “I know I don't, but I want to. Plus, I'm nervous to go to the kickoff

alone, so you'll be helping me by coming, too."

I press my lips together. "What's the kickoff?"

"It's down at the football field. The players and cheerleaders have this whole kickoff thing for freshmen. It's stupid, but it'll be fun. Plus... you know. Football players." She wiggles her brows.

I laugh despite the nerves bouncing in my belly. Sports and cheerleaders and football players are *so* not my scene. "I was going to walk around and pick up a few job applications—"

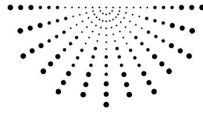
"We can do that on the way! The walk to the football field passes by a bunch of spots. The student store, a bakery, a coffee shop. Please?" She presses her hands together in prayer and pouts at me.

"Well, how can I say no to that?"

Actually, I could think of ten thousand ways to say no to that.

But with Jill? I didn't want to.

CHAPTER TWO



Jill wasn't wrong. There are a ton of little shops and cafes and restaurants hiring. I pick up five applications on our walk to the football stadium, although the ones that make the most sense to me are either the coffee shop or the bakery.

I could work the first shift there before class a few days a week and it shouldn't interrupt my class schedule or, God-willing, a rehearsal schedule if I should be so lucky as to get cast in one of the fall shows.

"What's your major?" Jill asks as we enter the football stadium.

"Theater arts," I respond.

Jill whips around to face me. "Seriously? The theater department here is one of the most competitive in the country. You must be really good to be accepted in and to get the top scholarship for your program!"

Prior to moving into our dorms this summer, the school had placed Jill and I together based on the fact that as freshmen, we both won the top scholarships in our majors.

"You got the top scholarship, too." I shrug, unsure of what to make of her reaction. "Besides, in the theater program, they

reevaluate freshman at the end of the year for the program, though. This time next year? I could be out on my ass.”

Once you got through to sophomore year, you were safe, but at this university, you could waste two years and six-figures only to not get invited back to the program. A fact my father ranted about all summer to me.

“What about you?” I ask as we get in line to buy some sodas. “What’s your major?”

“Creative writing. I was worried it might not be practical enough though, so I’m going to minor in marketing. Originally, I was going to flip that... major in marketing and minor in creative writing, but my mom pushed me to pursue the degree that I was most passionate about.”

“Your parents encouraged you to get the less practical degree?” I repeat as I stare into the dark, fizzy cola.

“Crazy, right?”

I shake my head in disbelief, following Jill as she leads the way into the stadium to find seats. “Our parents literally could not be more different.”

I plop into a seat beside Jill and glance around at the other freshmen who seem to have already found crowds of friends. Did they come to college already knowing people? Maybe they were local and went to high school in the area? In Indiana, almost everyone from my high school ended up at Indiana State, except for the real go-getters who landed at Notre Dame.

I take a large slurp of my soda as Jill launches to her feet like she’s got a spring in her butt, waving maniacally at a girl walking below us. “Emma! Up here!”

She waves at a pretty brunette wearing leggings and a tight tank top. Her dark hair is twisted into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She turns back to look at two other girls she's walking with who look up at us with disdain that I've only ever seen reserved for Bond-style villains.

Jill seems otherwise oblivious to the two girls begrudgingly following Emma as she plops back down beside me. "That's Emma," she says to me. "She's so sweet. I met her at orientation over the summer."

Emma comes over to us, flanked on each side by the two mean-looking girls. They're taller than her, one with auburn long, flowing hair and the other with chestnut brown glossy locks to her shoulders. Emma gives us a little smile, leaning over me to hug Jill. "It's so good to see you again," says.

"Same! This is my roommate, Kate. She's a theater major," Jill says, gesturing at me. "Emma's a dance major. You two might even have some overlapping classes."

Emma turns her sweet smile to me. "Nice to meet you. Do you dance as well?"

I shrug. "I can hold my own with some jazz squares," I joke. In truth, I've taken dance classes my whole life. You can't expect to major in musical theater these days without knowing how to do a triple pirouette, but then again, girls like these live and breathe dance. I only knew enough to get me through callbacks and auditions.

Emma turns and gestures to the girls standing behind her with folded arms. "This is Addison," she says, gesturing to the redhead. "And Millie. Addison's my 'big sister' assigned to me by the department head."

Big sister? Do all departments assign those? I look at Jill, searching to see if she was as clueless as me. Her big, goofy grin is still spread across her face. “That’s so cool,” Jill says. “I wish my department did that.”

Millie gives a bored roll of her eyes. “Dance is the only department who makes their upperclassmen babysit freshmen.”

Addison also sends a tight smile our way and places her arm around Emma. “Luckily, we have a pretty cool freshman. One of the *few* it seems who knows not to go out in a ratty thrift store shirt.”

I glance down at my vintage Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles t-shirt.

Wow. Shots fired.

Luckily, I’m pretty bullet-proof when it comes to people mocking my tastes in fashion. Years of going against the grain and not buying my entire wardrobe at H&M has hardened me against those sorts of insults.

“You know,” I say, “A girl offered me fifty bucks cash once for the Shark Attack t-shirt off my back.”

Millie’s lip curled. “What the hell is Shark Attack?”

“It’s an old Atari game,” Jill says without glancing back at them. “Want to sit with us? We can scoot in.”

“Oh...” Emma nibbles her bottom lip as she looks between us and her new upperclassmen ‘big sisters.’ The pulse of her desire to fit in with those girls is almost so loud I can hear it.

Which frankly, I can understand. They were glam and cool and all those things I’m not.

“A bunch of the dance majors are sitting up there,” Addison says, pointing toward the top of the bleachers.

I smile at Emma. “No worries. I’m sure we’ll catch up with you soon.” Jill nods in agreement.

Before any of them could turn to go toward their seats up top, a cannon shot with multi-colored confetti and dozens of guys came charging through a hoop, tearing through paper with their—or rather, our—team colors.

Leading the group, the most handsome guy I’d ever seen runs, bouncing lightly on his toes in cleats, pulsing his helmet high in the air. Inky dark hair curls around his ears and beckons my fingers to twirl them. As he grins and waves to us in the stands, the rest of the players and people in the stadium fade away.

“Whoa,” I whisper.

“Who?” Jill asks, whispering to me. “Who are we whoa-ing about?”

“Number 14,” I murmur.

Jill looks down at a program in her hand, flipping through the pages. I’m not even sure where she got it.

“Holden Dorsey,” Addison sighs.

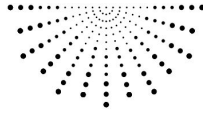
I startle and look up at them. I didn’t even know they were still here.

She glances down at me, one reddish brown eyebrow arching. “Trust me, Freshman,” she says, directed right at me. “He’s out of your league.”

I hold her stare. Like being in front of an aggressive dog, the worst thing I could do right now is show fear to this girl. A lesson I learned the hard way during my years of dealing with

mean girls in high school. The more I could show her that I'm not a threat, but also not intimidated by her? The better. "Believe me," I say, tilting my chin higher. "I *know*."

CHAPTER THREE



O h no. No, no, no, no. It's already happening.

It's day number one of classes and I'm already running late.

I'm the late girl.

How was I to know that dropping my resume off at the cafe would take more than an hour? I thought I had given myself plenty of time to show up, hand in my application and resume, grab a chamomile tea for myself and still get to class with time to spare. But I didn't realize the manager would want to interview me right then and there.

Or rather, as soon as the line calmed down. Those were his exact words. *As soon as the line calmed down.* Which I had assumed meant within a few minutes. Not twenty minutes later. Plus a fifteen minute interview.

I didn't even have time to order myself the ding-dang tea. Now I'm running into the performing arts building, Turner Hall, at full speed.

I barely remember to flash my student ID badge at the guard, I'm in such a hurry. I have one minute until class starts. One minute *exactly* to find Theater C where my Intro to Method Acting class is.

Unfortunately for me, this building is massive.

Normally, I prefer to get to my first class at least twenty minutes early to find the best seat and familiarize myself with the building.

So much for that.

I wander down a hall, speed walking. Theater C. It has to be nearby, somewhere around here on the first floor. They wouldn't put one of their theaters upstairs... would they?

"Do you know where Theater C is?" A deep voice asks from somewhere down the hall.

My spine goes rigid at the sound of his question.

Someone else is looking for Theater C!

I take off running again toward the voice and dang near skid to a stop when I see who's talking.

Addison. Prima Ballerina and Mean Girl Extraordinaire.

I exhale a heavy breath and rush forward anyway. I don't have much of a choice here. Almost everyone has already gone into their classrooms, so other than Addison and whomever this guy is she's talking to, there are no other options to help me find my correct theater.

"Usually I only spy you out on the football field and at the pool." Addison says, her voice deeper and more sultry than when I first met her the other day.

The guy she's with starts to respond, but I don't have time for their flirting or whatever other national geographic bull hockey is about to happen here.

"Hi!" I interrupt. "Addison, right? We met the other day at the kickoff thingy." Oh boy. Addison glares at me like I just

dared to spit in her face. “Um, anyway. Did I hear you right? You’re going to Theater C? Can you show me where it is, too?”

The glare morphs quickly, slipping into a soft, delicate smile. I don’t trust that smile for one second. “Of course,” she says. “But wait... are you looking for Theater C, like the letter?” Her voice carries a thick, faux sweetness like slow-dripping molasses.

I glance away from Addison, my eyes finally landing on the guy she’s with and I nearly drop all my books.

It’s number 14, here in the flesh standing before me. Though... I can’t remember what they said his name was yesterday. Henry, maybe? No, that’s not right.

But wowza. He’s even more stunning up close.

I drag my gaze back to Addison. She clearly has a thing for this guy and right now, all I need is help finding the right classroom. I’m not looking to steal her man or wager WWII over this dude, no matter how hot he is.

Yes, Theater C, like the letter,” I say after clearing my throat.

“Mmm.” Addison nods. “But *he’s* going to Theater See. S-E-E... like what you do with your eyes. The theater you’re looking for is actually down that hall. The second door on your left. It’s unmarked.”

Theater See, like what you do with your eyes? Just how dumb does she think I am?

But it’s obvious, she’s more interested in hazing me than helping me find the right classroom. So instead of standing there arguing, I squeak out thank you and run off.

It's pretty fruitless trying to get to class on time. But maybe I can at least mitigate the damage. If I can find any faculty member at all to point me in the right direction, I can still make class within a buffer time. I mean, it's the first day, surely they'll be a little forgiving about tardiness and getting lost on the first day of classes with a freshman, right?

I don't find any faculty, but I do find the door Addison has pointed me to. I stand there in front of it, clutching my worn copy of *Romeo & Juliet* to my chest like it's a lifesaver in the middle of the ocean.

"Hey," the same deep voice says. It isn't his voice that startles me. It's the gentle tap of his fingers to my shoulder.

I twirl around to face him and all the air punches from my lungs and pressure clamps down on my ribs. I knew he was going to be handsome. I just didn't expect this level of handsome from one human.

It isn't fair. He should leave some good looks for the rest of mankind.

All the oxygen is gone from my lungs. I need to breathe. Inhale, Kate. Inhale some air for the love of God.

I'm hypnotized by his golden eyes. The color of honey with flecks of green peppering his irises.

"Something tells me this isn't Theater C," I finally say.

"Well, I guess freshmen aren't *all* dumb, huh?"

Any bit of feelings I might have caught for this jerk evaporates with his statement. I scowl, narrowing my eyes at him. "I'm not dumb."

"I know. That's what I said. That you're *not* stupid like most freshmen."

Yeah, that doesn't exactly make it better. My mouth openly gapes this time and I don't try to hide it. *What. An. A-hole.*

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

He gives me a look like he either doesn't believe me or I'm the most boring girl in existence. I'm not sure which. "Well, come on. Theater C is this way."

I don't move. I simply stand there, staring at the blank door she had directed me to. At this point, we're both already late for class. And now, my stupid curiosity is piqued. Why here? Why did Addison point to this door specifically? Was it just to send me in the wrong direction? Or is there something behind this door? "Where do you think Addison was sending me?"

His gaze shifts between me and the unmarked, closed 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?" he repeats, then lifts a hand to cover the bemused grin lifting his full, lush lips.

"Yeah," I say, ignoring the condescending grin he gives me. "I'm curious what's in this room."

"Yeah? Well, I'm not." Using his thumb, he fidgets with a spinner ring on his hand and I eye it curiously. It's large and gaudy and not at all a piece of jewelry I'd expect to find on a guy in college. Let alone one that was super popular, star of the football team, and clearly dripping with wealth I only read about in Fitzgerald novels.

“It’s unmarked,” I continue, tearing my gaze away from his ring. “So, it’s probably not a rehearsal space. And faculty offices usually have their names on the door.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Great. Thank you, Sherlock Holmes. Can we go now?”

I can’t explain it, but I’m dying to know what’s behind this door. Why did Addison send me here? Why this door? “I don’t think she would haze me by simply pointing me to the wrong door. There’s got to be something in there,” I murmur.

I reach out before he can stop me and tug the unmarked door open.

There’s a yelp from inside, and a man and woman tumble out of what looks like a small janitor’s closet.

The woman is older than us... probably in her thirties... and very attractive. She struggles to pull the bunched skirt down her thighs from where it’s hiked up around her hips. Her curly black hair is wild around her angled face.

The man seems only a little older than us with shaggy, chestnut brown hair and jeans that are half undone and hanging open off his hips.

“Oh, my gosh!” I cry out and turn my head. I’m not sure what I was expecting behind the door here, but it definitely was not this. “I-I’m so sorry. I was told this was the door to my first class!”

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

“Well,” the woman snaps while she smooths her hand over her wild curls. “It’s clearly *not*.”

“I’m so sorry. This girl, Addison, an upperclassman and a total mean girl... I swear, she sent me to this door. She told me it was Theater—”

The handsome jock hooks his hand around my elbow and pulls me away from them. “Come on,” he mutters, pulling me down the hall. “Give them some space.”

Thank God for that. Thank God for *him*. I’m pretty sure I would have stood there babbling until one of them punted me away.

The click of heels follows us, the tap of her shoes against the floors of the hall. “Excuse me,” she calls out. “I trust that you won’t say anything about this...” She gestures at the door they’d fallen out of, and the quarterback and I both nod furiously.

“Good,” she says. She already looks more polished and put together than just a minute ago. I’m impressed with how quickly she was able to tame her sex hair. “Discretion and the theater tend to go hand in hand.” With a flick of her fingers, she dismisses us, and neither of us wastes a moment, taking off down the hall toward the real Theater C.

As we turned the corner, out of their sight, I bend at the waist, gulping in a breath. A nervous laugh bubbles from inside of me. I clutch my stomach as my chuckle morphs into a fit of nervous laughter. “Did we just catch what I think we caught?” I ask.

“Come on,” the guy says, “We can laugh about this after class, okay?” He gently takes my elbow, pulling me toward the double doors to Theater C. But even though he’s clearly annoyed, he exhales his own quiet laugh, too.

“Do you promise?” I ask, wiping the tears from my eyes with one hand and offering him the pinky finger of my other one so that he pinky promises me. No one else will understand the absurdity of this situation and I really needed someone to share a good laugh about it. After we get to class, that is.

He hooks his finger into mine. “There, happy? We’ll grab a latte on our way out of here and laugh all about it then.”

He yanks open a door marked Theater C and pulls me inside.

In the theater, the other students in our class mill around, chatting casually, and I breathe easier at the sight of them. We must not be too late if students aren’t even in their seats yet.

I search the theater for anyone who could be our professor, but don’t see anyone who looks older than twenty-two.

I turn to ask the guy who came in with me if he knows who our professor is, but he’s already moved past me to sit in the front row of the theater, hunched over his phone.

I cross to him, but as I spin around, the stage catches my eye, distracting me. In my nervousness about being late, I didn’t take a good look at first.

It’s... it’s an absolutely gorgeous theater.

Huge.

With a fly system in the rafters and ornate detailing of carved marble around the proscenium. A massive red velvet curtain is tied back on each side.

It’s unlike any theater I’ve ever stepped foot inside in Indiana.

Even our old opera house isn’t as intricate as this.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper to myself, standing there in front of the first row of seats, staring up at the stage like I’m in a trance.

“Um, weird question,” the quarterback says from where he’s sitting in the first row behind me. “But why are your, um, shorts wet?”

“What?”

I barely hear his question, I’m so lost in my thoughts.

“Your shorts. They’re wet.”

Oh, God. No. No, no, no, no...

I swivel and try to get a view of my butt from over my shoulder. Why didn’t I think to grab a sweater or something I could tie around my waist? Have I learned nothing in my eighteen sweaty years on this planet?

“Oh no!” I drop into the empty seat beside him and bury my face in my hands.

This is bad. Really, really bad.

Not that I expect the star quarterback to be interested in me at all, but at the very least, it would be nice if he wasn’t repulsed by me and my sweaty bum.

Worrying my lip, I look up at him, doing everything in my power to keep the mortified tears away. “I sort of... um, sweat... when I’m nervous,” I admit.

“You sweat from your butt?”

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

He gapes at me for a long breath before finally saying, “Well... that’s good.”

Jesus. Based on the look he's giving me, maybe it would have been better if I'd said I'd peed. I clear my throat and shift in the seat. "Sorry. I tend to overshare when I'm nervous."

He looks forward, avoiding my eyes. "Clearly."

Change the subject, Kate. For God's sake just stop talking about your sweaty tushie. "What's your name?" I ask.

His gaze sweeps slowly over my body, gliding across the My Little Pony t-shirt I'm wearing before skimming down to my bare, crossed legs. My body responds accordingly, my breasts growing tight and heavy, nipples puckering against the soft cotton of my sports bra.

I uncross my legs, shifting uncomfortably as his eyes lock onto my knees.

"I'm Kate," I squeak when he doesn't answer me.

With that, he finally drags his gaze back to my eyes as though it's the hardest thing he's ever done. My mouth goes cotton ball dry as he asks, "Short for...?"

"Katherine," I answer him instinctively. "But no one calls me that. My parents and sister sometimes call me Katie but I might have to kill you if you call me Katie. Your turn. What's your name?" I hold out my hand for him to take. Again, instinct. Upbringing. All that jazz.

He eyes my hand before taking it. "Holden."

"Holden," I repeat.

Holden. I stare at his face.

He doesn't look like a Holden. It doesn't suit him. It doesn't feel boyish or playful enough to match the teasing grin that glints in his eyes. "Is that what people call you?"

His brows lift. “Do people call me by my name? Yeah.”

Jeez. He probably thinks I’m an idiot. Or psychotic. “No... I mean, it’s so formal. Is there a nickname for Holden? Like...” I stare at him for another second, trying to imagine what nickname he might go by. “Denny. Or Hol... or Oldy?”

“You think people call me Oldy?”

Okay. No doubt about it based on the way he’s staring at me. He definitely thinks I’m an idiot. And honestly he’s not wrong. What kind of dumbass nickname is Oldy? “You’re right,” I agree. “Denny is a cute nickname though. Do they call you Denny?”

“No,” he says. “It’s just Holden. Some people *do* go by their full names, you know... Katherine.”

Guys and their egos, I swear. All because I simply asked a question about a dang nickname. I roll my eyes. “Well, you don’t have to be a dick about it.”

I immediately flush bright red. I’ve literally never called anyone a dick in my life. I hardly ever cuss, if ever. The religious upbringing my parents instilled in me really stuck through the years. So where in the H-E-double hockeysticks did that come from?

His eyes drift closed and the quietest groan escapes his barely parted lips. Then, he leans his head back against the seat.

The door beside us swings open silently and every student’s head except for Holden’s whips around to see our professor enter the theater.

“Uh-oh,” I whisper.

“What?” he asks without opening his eyes.

I nudge him, trying to get him to look. To wake up. Anything.

Finally, he blinks his eyes open and sees what the rest of us are looking at.

Our professor.

The same woman we'd walked in on in the closet mere minutes ago.

And she was glaring directly at us.

Her eyes bore into mine. And I quickly break the eye contact, looking down at my hands folded in my lap.

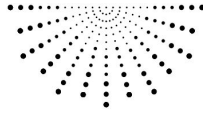
“Shit,” Holden whispers beside me.

“Good morning, class,” the professor says. “I’m Professor McCay. Sorry for my lateness. I was... held up for a moment.”

Flames lick my cheeks.

As if this day couldn’t get any worse.

CHAPTER FOUR



§2 4.38.

That's what's left in my bank account after I bought my books for this semester.

I balance my lunch tray on my hip as I slip my phone into my back pocket and fill my plate at the dining hall with as much food as I can, grabbing an apple, muffin, and banana for later. Might as well get as much as I can out of this one swipe of my meal card, right?

Jill winces as she watches me load up a plate with pulled pork and mac & cheese. "That bad, huh?"

"Bad enough that I'm going to try to make one meal card swipe last for all three meals."

It's not impossible. I have packets of oatmeal in the dorm room for breakfast. And I could really fill myself up at lunch and sneak a few things away to eat a light dinner.

"Would the coffee shop advance you your first paycheck?" Jill asks, her eyes wide and hopeful as she grabs a slice of pizza.

"I doubt it." My first shift was only yesterday and I won't get paid for two weeks. Besides, even if they did front me a

paycheck, that still would leave me right back where I started in a couple of weeks.

“You could join me at my catering job,” Jill says. “It’s hard work, but it pays really well. Plus some of the fancier parties allow you to take tips.”

“I didn’t know you were catering.”

“My dad is friends with the owner and he got me the gig. I’m only working Friday and Saturday nights and maybe the occasional Sunday brunch soiree. There’s multiple parties happening this Friday and they mentioned they need extra hands.”

I scrub a hand down my face. I’m not sure how many jobs I can take and still maintain a 3.5 GPA. But a girl has to eat, right? “I’ll do it,” I say.

Whatever it takes.

I’m *not* going home to Indiana.

“I know a girl who sells her used panties online,” Jill whispers. “She makes like fifty bucks a pop.”

My face twists as I snap my gaze to Jill. “Fifty bucks? For used undies?”

Jill shrugs. “Apparently, some people pay even more than that.”

“Good gravy,” I mutter.

Jill doesn’t hear me, her eyes going wide at the sight of the dessert table across the room. “Oh, chocolate!” she squeals and runs off, enamored with her decision between the brownie or the peanut butter cookie.

I hate to admit that I'm still considering the whole panty sale thing while I debate grabbing a slice of pizza, too. It'd be awfully nice to earn fifty bucks a day for doing something I literally do every day... putting on underwear.

“Do you really think that’s the right gig for someone who *perspires* as much as you do?”

Holden.

He’s so close that I can feel the heat of his breath skim across my ear.

I whip around to direct my glare at him.

A smirk tugs at the corner of his plump lips. “Then again, you might be able to get top dollar for that. Some guys are into that. A sweat kink—”

“What are you doing here?” I snap, interrupting him.

His cocky smirk widens. “Well, I *do* go to school here, you know.”

“I *mean*, what are you doing here in the dining hall?”

There’s no way this guy lives in the dorms. He probably lives in a frat house. Or some big fancy high rise off campus that Mummy and Daddy pay for.

He grabs a grape off the tray in front of us and pops one in his mouth. “The meal plan is easier on days that I have back to back classes than going home or going out to eat for lunch.” He shrugs as if this is nothing.

It’s not nothing.

Not to a girl like me. I wasn’t raised poor by any means. We were comfortable. Never lacking for food on the table. But we also don’t have expendable income. My parents own a

little bar back in our small town of Indiana. It's not exactly a thriving enterprise, but it pays the bills for us.

But when I chose to pursue acting, Mom and Dad made it quite clear: I was on my own financially. Thank God for scholarships and student loans.

But watching an entitled asshole like Holden shrug off his meal plan like it's nothing makes me fume.

"You know what?" I snap. "I think I *will* sell my panties online." I yank my cell phone free from my back pocket and open up google. Although I'm at a loss for even how to begin googling this stuff. Like, where do people even go to sell their underwear online? Reddit? It feels like a weird Reddit or Tumblr thing.

"*Really?*" he asks and smugly folds his arms.

"Yes. *Really,*" I repeat, mocking his tone.

"I don't believe you," he says simply.

"Would you like me to send you the listing when it's live?"

"Definitely."

My face burns but I refuse to break eye contact first. "Fine. I will."

"You know, you'll probably need something other than cotton underwear with rubber duckies on them to sell."

The tips of my ears go piping hot and I'm sure my cheeks are flushed scarlet. My underwear doesn't have ducks on them... but they do have little hedgehogs skiing. Not exactly a sexy pair some weirdo dude wants to buy if I had to guess. "I'm covered, thanks."

He pauses, scratching the backs of his knuckles over the stubble at his jaw. Sexy stubble.

Dang it, why does he have to be so freaking handsome? It isn't fair.

"Well," he says, "I'd actually say the less covered, the better. More likely to make top dollar, ya know?"

I swallow. "Less coverage. *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?"

Where the heck did that come from? Score one for Kate! I mentally fist bump myself as Holden's pupils dilate and two pink circles flush on his cheeks.

"Good point," he says and if I'm not mistaken, his voice is more graveled than a moment ago. Then, in a flash, he's back to normal as he says, "Please tell me it will include pictures."

Oh sweet baby Jesus. I didn't think about including pictures. Of me. In my *underwear*.

"Of course," I say, pretending I've already thought this all through. "How else will they know what they're getting?"

"Great. Can't wait to see what sweat-fetish basement dweller buys your swamp-ass panties." With a final grin, he pops another grape in his mouth, then saunters away.

"Jagweed," I mutter to myself once he's a few steps away.

"You know," Jill says from behind me. "You're really going to have to learn how to cuss better. Especially when the hottest guy in the damn school calls you a swamp ass."

I groan, but don't exactly disagree with her. If there is ever a time to call someone an a-hole, it's right now. "I'm gonna

need your help photographing some tasteful pics of me in my panties,” I say.

Her eyes go wide. “Seriously? You’re doing that?”

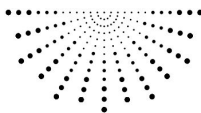
I gulp with a glance over my shoulder at Holden, pushing out the front door as he tosses a green apple in the air. “I guess I am.”

“Does this mean you’re not joining me on the Friday night catering gig?”

“Oh, no. We’re still doing that, too. I can multitask.”

Unfortunately, that’s not exactly true. I’m the world’s worst multi-tasker, but neither Jill nor Holden needs to know that.

CHAPTER FIVE



“Can you make your face better?” Jill asks, positioning the camera above me.

“Make my face *better*?”

“Yeah. You look like you’re in pain.”

“Ummm, this is a picture of my panties. My face shouldn’t be in it at all!” I squeal and twist around to look at her.

Her pink mouth is pressed into a firm line and she’s trying hard not to laugh, which immediately spirals me into laughter, too. Even though Jill and I haven’t known each other long, we clicked immediately. I love having her as a roommate and this week, we’ve spent more nights staying up until three in the morning giggling than I’d ever thought possible.

“I know and it’s not!” Jill squeals through her laughter. “But I feel a little predatory taking these photos when you look so miserable.”

My groan cuts through the laughter. “Do I really have to wear the panties in this picture? Can’t I just post a picture of them draped on the bed or something?”

“You could...” Jill offers with a shrug. “But I doubt they’d sell. I’m guessing they really want to see who’s wearing them. That’s part of the sale. Arch your back more,” Jill instructs me.

I do as she says. I couldn't quite bring myself to wear a thong for these photos. So instead I went with my black lacy cheeky panties that I got in the 5 for \$25 sale during my last Victoria Secret run. For \$50? I could part with them.

"There we go!" Jill says and hands me my phone back. She'd already done some editing magic to the photo and I have to say, it looks pretty good. She got rid of the background so all that was behind me was a nondescript counter. The only thing that distinguished me from anyone else was the birthmark on my left buttcheek, but even that was small and barely noticeable. More like a freckle.

"Here goes nothing," I mutter and hit post on Craigslist.

"Now hurry up and get dressed," Jill says. "We need to be downtown in twenty minutes to help load up the van for the first party."

I pull on my black jeans and a black t-shirt, ignoring the disapproving once over Jill gives me. "What?" I ask, "It's the only all-black outfit I have!" I note her short-sleeved black polo and black dress pants.

"I didn't say a word," Jill says.

"Your thoughts were very loud, though."

"You're lucky my dad knows the owner," she says through a grin. "Come on. We're going to be late."

* * *

FOUR HOURS LATER, we're setting up at our second house party of the night. The first was some faculty kick off party where I narrowly avoided running into Professor McCay. Every time I

would see her across the room, I'd pivot and offer my egg rolls to literally anyone else.

I'm grateful when the second party of the night seems to be a non-professor event where I don't have to worry about making a total idiot out of myself. Again.

The party is already in full swing when it dawns on me exactly what this party is... some sort of upperclassmen fancy shindig.

For football players, if I have to guess based on all the jerseys around the room.

I unfold the tables and peek around the already crowded living room as Jill brings in trays of food from the van. "These are students," I whisper to her. "From our school. They're our freaking peers, Jill."

She rolls her eyes and uncovers a tray of sushi, setting each roll onto its own silver platter. "Ridiculous, isn't it? I always thought frat parties meant beer pong and deli meat trays from the grocery store. But here? It's craft IPAs and catered sushi."

"Unbelievable," I mutter and flip open the table cloth, spreading it out. I eye the sushi warily. I've had an intense shellfish allergy most of my life and even though being near it isn't a problem, even touching the stuff can cause me to break out into hives.

"Here," Jill says, handing me gloves. "I told Dan you were allergic and he gave me these for you to wear."

Well, gloves are better than nothing, I guess.

I snap them onto my hands and feel a little more at ease with the extra layer of protection between me and anaphylactic shock.

A cute guy with sandy brown hair comes bouncing over to us, red solo cup in hand. And based on the way his inhibitions are lowered, I'm going to take a guess that it's not his first drink. Granted, he's not sloppy drunk... *yet*.

"Hey!" he shouts more than he needs to over the music.

"Hi," Jill says back, all smiles. "We're here with Durigo Catering. We're on the schedule to serve the sushi for an hour. After that, we can leave the remaining food, but we'll pack up the servingware."

"Cool, cool," he says nodding. His eyes do a slow, appreciative sweep over Jill and she hardly notices, still busy serving sushi to any party goer who slows down near the table.

"Were you the one who booked the catering?" I ask him as I pull out the clipboard of paperwork we need someone to sign.

"Nah, that was my roommate. He handles all that shit."

"But you live here right?" Anyone who lives on the premises can sign for it.

With a smirk, he nods. "That's right." That same appreciative gaze he gave to Jill moments ago is now on me. "I'm Duncan, by the way."

"Hi Duncan. Could you sign here?" I hand the clipboard to him along with a pen, then turn my attention to plating the ginger and wasabi on each platter.

"What's this?" He circles around the table to stand next to me under the guise of getting a better look at the contract. He's so close, our shoulders brush with every movement.

"Just your typical waiver that states all food was delivered and adequate."

He scribbles his name at the bottom without even reading the document, sliding it back to me. I take the clipboard and tuck it into the bag of items to bring back to Dan at the end of the night.

But Duncan doesn't leave. He leans against the table and angles his body toward mine. "You are too fucking hot to be a cater waiter. What time is your shift over?"

He reaches across the plate of sushi where I'm arranging the garnishes and grabs a shrimp roll, popping the whole thing into his mouth, smiling.

Even if I had been interested in him, that would pretty much seal the deal that nothing would happen tonight. One kiss and my throat would close faster than a politician changes his mind.

Jill pops up beside me from where she'd been grabbing the soy sauce from beneath the table. "This is her last delivery."

I narrow my eyes at her and grab the soy sauce, setting them in the center of the serving trays.

A booming laugh interrupts our stare-down from a few feet away and all of us, me, Jill, and Duncan swivel to look at where the laugh is coming from.

I taste venom as I see who is laughing at us. "Holden," I whisper.

Other than our run-in at the cafeteria, he's pretty much ignored me all week in class, barely looking at me, let alone speaking to me.

He reaches out and grabs a spicy scallop roll with his fingers off of my tray, popping the whole thing in his mouth. "Hey, Katherine," he says, mouth still full of sushi.

It should be gross, but it's the farthest thing from it. He's still so freaking handsome that it hurts to look at him. Like looking into the sun.

Duncan blinks in surprise, looking back and forth between us. "You two know each other?"

Holden gives him a slight nod. "Sure. Me and the freshman are old friends."

There's a long pause as the two guys stare at each other. A face off of sorts. Some sort of annoying display of masculinity that I'm way too inexperienced to understand.

I narrow my eyes at Holden. *Friends?* That's rich. Other than him making fun of me in the lunchroom the other day, he'd barely spoken two words to me in class all week. "Oh, we're friends now? 'Cause last I checked, it seemed like you were avoiding me."

His grin is as annoying as it is sexy. "Oh, come on. What about the cafeteria? Besides, I'm talking to you right now."

My eyes flick to the red solo cup in his hand. Just how many drinks did that make for him tonight? Three? Four? "When you're drunk? Lucky me."

Still sporting that obnoxious smirk, he reaches for a California roll. Just before his fingers brush the rice, I smack the back of his hand.

The latex of my glove made the slap sound even louder and harder than I intended it to be.

"That's unsanitary," I snap and hand him the serving tongs from beside the platter.

Jill clears her throat quietly, looking back and forth between us a few times before saying, "Kate, you didn't tell

me you knew the Jaguar's star quarterback."

I glance at my friend, unsure what she's trying to do. Change the subject maybe? Because she definitely knows I know Holden. She spied us chatting in the cafeteria and I've complained to her about him all week.

Holden's smile spreads and he offers Jill his hand. "Holden Dorsey. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Jill. Kate's roommate."

"Jill," he repeats, charming as hell and based on the little smile splayed on Jill's face, she's falling for his charms, hook, line, and sinker.

I roll my eyes. "Don't you mean Jillian since you apparently call everyone by their full names?"

Jill gives me a strange look. "Uh, except my name's not Jillian. It's just Jill."

Holden ignores me for what feels like the thousandth time since we've met. "Nice to meet you, Katherine's roommate, Just Jill."

Duncan shuffles a few steps away from me, his demeanor entirely shifting away from the flirty guy moments ago.

"Since your shifts are over, why don't you both stay for the party?" Duncan asks.

"Don't bother, Duncan," Holden says. "They probably need to be home to the dorms before curfew."

Scowling, I cross my arms, my latex-gloved fingers smooth against my biceps. "The curfew's only for our guests. Not for us."

"Great!" Duncan exclaims. "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 despite my harrowing glare. We may not have known each other long, but in the week we’ve been roommates, we’ve gotten to know each other really well. Well enough that she knows I *don’t* want to stay at this stupid party, but she offered me up anyway.

After a few seconds of silent communication, I huff a sigh. If I have to stay at a stupid party, then I’m going to make Holden regret inviting me. I turn to Duncan, taking a step closer to him in what I hope is a flirty way. Even though I don’t know anything about batting my eyes and twirling my hair, how hard can it be?

Swallowing, I place my palm on his chest and blink my eyes up at him.

“Only if you’ll save me a dance,” I say, lowering my voice. I was going for low and sultry, but I think I simply sound like I’ve got a head cold.

Apparently, this flirting thing was dummy proof because Bro-Code be damned, he nods, murmuring, “Uh, y-yeah. Hell, yeah I will.”

Over my shoulder, he meets Holden’s gaze, then backs away slowly, excusing himself from me and Jill. I smirk in triumph.

Jill brushes her fingers along my arm. “Kate, did you touch your skin?”

Sure enough, red hives are starting to form on my bicep. With a groan, I yank the latex gloves off my hand and toss

them into the garbage. “Dammit.”

Jill has her nose in her purse, pulling out a bottle, the sound of pills bouncing around the plastic like a maraca. She places a single, small pill in my palm. “Here, take this. I’ve got to run. Sandy is waiting for me in the van, but that should help the rash.”

She grabs the clipboard from beneath the table, then pulls me into a hug. “Holden Dorsey is *so* into you,” she hisses into my ear, her red curls tickling my neck. “You’ve been holding out on me!”

“Trust me, I haven’t,” I whisper back. “And he isn’t.”

“Dance with him,” she whispers again as we finish the hug. “Have fun! Text me if you need a ride home!” Jill calls over her shoulder, before disappearing into the crowd.

With Jill gone, I feel suddenly uncomfortable at this party. I shift weight from foot to foot. Jill’s like my shelter in the middle of a collegiate social storm. I miss having her here at my side already.

I swallow against my dry throat and cough a little into my fist where I’m still holding the Benadryl pill Jill had given me. Even though I hadn’t had a bite of sushi, the hives are itchy and my throat has the tiniest tickle. Nothing to be too concerned about. As long as I don’t eat it, I’m in the safe zone. Nothing that a little Benadryl can’t take care of.

I just need something to wash the pill down with.

“So, you have an allergy?” Holden asks me, breaking the awkward silence.

I roll my 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.”

Beside the sushi platters, a punch bowl sits with a bunch of stacked red Solo cups. I grab one and ladle some punch into it, giving it a quick sniff. It might have a little alcohol, but it smells mostly like Hawaiian punch. I pop the pill onto my tongue and as Holden makes a grab for the cup in my hands, I gulp down half the liquid with my pill.

Holden shakes his head, staring at me incredulously. “Do you know what you just did?”

He’s acting like I kicked his puppy. All I did was drink a little punch to take my allergy pill. That’s nothing compared to how many drinks most of the girls at the party are having. “If I’m forced to stay here for a while, I might as well have a little fun,” I tease Holden. “Let loose. Isn’t that what you upperclassmen are always telling freshmen? To relax?”

I tip my head back, chugging what’s left in the cup just to spite him.

“Kate, no! Stop!” He grabs the cup from my hands, then inspects what’s left of the punch... which admittedly, isn’t a lot. “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.”

Heat stains my cheeks. He’s not wrong. Drinking with Benadryl isn’t the smartest thing I’ve ever done. I hated that he was right on all accounts—about mixing alcohol and Benadryl and about me not having a tolerance built up. I’d only ever had a few sips of champagne that my parents let me have on New Year’s Eve.

But I can't exactly admit that to him, can I?

I smack my 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," he says.

I look around the party and sure enough, it's filled with upperclassmen. *Only* upperclassmen.

Dang. It makes me respect Holden that he doesn't allow anyone underage to drink at his parties.

I didn't want to respect him. I didn't want to like him.

He grabs an unopened bottle of water off the table and hands it to me. "Here. Drink this."

I don't argue with him. Cracking the cap, I tilt my head back and drink a third of the bottle in a few gulps. "You don't have to keep nervously spinning that hideous ring. I'm fine."

His fingers freeze against the ring momentarily before releasing it. "It was my grandfather's."

My throat bottoms out to my stomach, guilt edging across my skin. "Oh. I'm sorry. So that's like... a family heirloom or something?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

I step closer, bending at the waist to get a better look at it. He must have been very close with his grandfather to wear that ugly thing day in and day out. Even still, I felt bad that I insulted something that means a lot to him. "It's, um, not *that* hideous," I say, trying to backtrack my initial comments. "It's actually kind of—"

“You were right the first time. It’s hideous.” He chuckles and stretches out his hand to give me a better look.

I feel a little better knowing he thinks it’s hideous too.

I giggle along with Holden and take his hand, pulling his fingers close to my 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?”

It’s the biggest ring I’ve ever seen. Large and bulky with yellow gold on the outside band and platinum for the middle spinner part. Heavily etched with some ornate design that looks very sixties and gaudy.

I gulp, realizing the intimate way I’m holding his hand in mine.

“This ugly thing?” he says. “The only way I’d give this to a woman as a gift was if I secretly hated her.”

I smile, looking up into his striking eyes just as a girl dancing nearby bumps into me, launching me forward into Holden’s arms.

He catches me before I hit the floor.

The room spins around us, the music, the laughing, the noise all growing farther and farther away as Holden tucks his arm around my waist. He pulls me tight against his body and guides me over to the quietest corner of the room as I dip my nose into his neck and inhale deeply.

Good heavens, he smells good. Like cotton. And soap. And something else that I can’t quite recognize but that smells woody and rustic and all man. A scent I don’t know at all, but like a hit of a drug, once I’ve smelled it, I need more.

“Okay, party girl,” he says, but his voice sounds far away even though we’re nose to nose. I try hard to focus on his eyes and keep myself steady. “You know what you’ve won? A chaperone for the entire night.”

“A chaperone? Who?”

“You’re looking at him.”

I hike my purse higher onto my shoulder and clumsily try to shove past him. “Like heck.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. That’s how it is.”

“If you’re my chaperone for this party, then I’m just going home.” Am I slurring my words? I think I’m slurring.

I open my purse, trying to dig around for my phone to get an Uber. I pull out my keys, trying to find wherever I’d tucked my phone in this stupid, giant carpet bag.

But before I can find my phone, Holden quickly snatches my keys out of my hand. “Dammit, Kate! You’re not driving anywhere!”

Drive? I’m not going to drive. I don’t even have a car... But then again, I guess *he* doesn’t know that.

I blink slowly as his words register in my mind. “You just called me Kate, not Katherine.” I’m not sure what to make of that. I’ve never heard him call me Kate before this moment and even though I should be rejoicing, it weirdly feels like an insult.

“Yeah, I did. Because Kate is a dumb freshman who opens doors she knows she shouldn’t and mixes alcohol with diphenhydramine.”

His words sting for a brief moment and in my drunken stupor, I’m somehow a flirting genius. Because for the first

time in my entire life, I can read between the lines of what he's *not* saying.

I spin to face him, finally understanding the phrase liquid courage and drape my arm over his shoulder and press my aching body harder against his.

His very muscular shoulder.

Good. Heavens. All the muscles.

“If Kate's the dumb freshman, then who's Katherine?” I ask, breathless.

He says nothing for a long moment. Staring at me. Silent.

I poke his chest, goading him. “Answer me. Who's Katherine?”

He clears his throat. “Katherine is...”

He doesn't finish the sentence.

He doesn't need to.

I'm drawn to him. My gaze drops to his lips as the floor and ceiling switch places. Those lips, full and damp. I want to taste them.

I want to kiss him.

I've never been kissed before and at this moment, I can't imagine a better moment than this or him.

My mouth parts, angling toward him. An offering.

All he has to do is take it.

He untangles my arms from behind his neck and murmurs, “Kate, no. Not like this.”

The rejection is a bucket of ice water. It hurts like a punch to the gut. “You called me Kate again,” I whisper. “The dumb

freshman who tries to kiss guys out of her league.”

He winces. “It’s not like that. That’s not what I meant.”

The threat of tears clogs my throat.

Tears of humiliation. Frustration. Sadness. Pain.

My first week of college and of course Holden Dorsey has to be witness to me at my lowest point ever. My first drunken stupor.

Whatever chance I’d had with Holden James Dorsey, I’ve clearly ruined. And I have no one to blame but myself.

I’m about to say something else when I sway, barely able to keep myself upright. Before I can fall again, Holden throws me over his shoulder and drags me down the hall...

...to his bedroom.

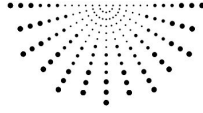
“Put me down!” I shriek and pound my fist to his back.

“Not a chance,” he grumbles.

“I’m definitely *not* giving you the link to my panties for sale now.”

He snorts. “Yeah. We’ll see about that.”

CHAPTER SIX



I wake up disoriented in a bed that isn't mine and a room I don't recognize. Someone is sitting on the bed with me and through navy curtains, the moon glows high in the sky.

My throat is dry and my voice, raspy. "What happened?" I squeeze my eyes shut and press my palm to my throbbing forehead.

"Kate, are you okay?" A deep voice asks.

I nod.

I am okay. I think.

A little headache. Cottonmouth. But otherwise, I'm fine.
"Where am I?"

"You're in my apartment. At my party, remember? You were working with the catering company and had a bad reaction on your arms..."

I groan and drop my head into my hands. "Oh, God. It's all coming back to me. The Benadryl." Everything from tonight comes rushing back to me. The shellfish, the Benadryl, the alcohol, the throwing myself at the school's football star and getting rejected. I glance down at my arms where the hives are almost entirely gone.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Holden asks. “I was worried that I should have taken you to the hospital.”

“Oh, my God, no. I’m fine,” I say. “A little groggy and a *lot* embarrassed. But fine.”

I steal a glance at Holden’s ridiculous body, but my gaze freezes on his hands. Or rather, on my *phone* in his hands. “What are you doing with my phone?”

With a wince, he hands it back to me. The screen is shattered; a spiderweb of cracks that weren’t there a few hours ago.

“I’m so sorry,” Holden says. “I’ll pay to fix it.”

Stunned and silent, I sit upright in the bed. *Holden’s* bed. With *Holden’s* blankets tangled around my body. His scent surrounds me.

Focus, Kate. He has my phone. He’s been reading my phone?

“Why were you looking at my phone?” I ask. This time, my voice is 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.”

My eyes narrow. “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.”

“I’m sorry I broke into your phone, okay? But I was trying to help. I was just trying to get a message to your friend that you were okay. She’s kind of freaking out.”

I sigh and relax. I need to chill out. Who knows what would have happened to me without Holden here tonight. He’s taken care of me. Made sure I didn’t make a total fool of myself out there in that party or worse... get taken advantage of. The least I could do is cut him a little slack.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” I say. “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.”

“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 don’t mention that my parents would have delighted in a big fat *I told you so*, too.

“Poor Jill,” I say, unlocking my phone. “She’s probably a mess—”

As soon as my screen lights up, her text thread to me is open.

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?

I swallow the lump in my throat, trying to steady my squeaky voice. "Were you able to pull up Jill's texts?"

"I was, um, trying to, but I dropped the phone before I got there."

"Really?" I slowly spin the phone around so that he can see the screen, despite the cracks. "Then why is there a message started in the text box that says: This is Ho..."

He exhales and shakes his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to see... that."

Well that's a lame apology if I've ever heard one. "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."

I gasp.

Actually freaking gasp like this is a plot twist. Which to be fair, for me, it is. Because, was I glitching, or did he just basically say that I'm hot? It's a front page headline that 'a girl like me hasn't been kissed before.' That means he thinks I'm hot, right? Dangit, I really wish Jill were here to help right now.

No wait. Scratch that.

That's weird.

"Is that so?" I ask, trying to sound as casual as possible and sit up higher on my knees. The blanket slips from around my torso. The air conditioning blows against my skin and my nipples pebble, pressing against the cotton of my bra. As I swallow, his eyes shift to follow the line of my throat.

"So do it," I challenge, my voice graveled.

His gaze snaps to mine. "What?"

"Do. It," I repeat, putting an extra punch on the 't'. "Kiss me."

I want him to kiss me more than I want my next breath.

Lifting onto his knees, he makes his way the short distance across the bed to me where I was still kneeling. With a large hand, he cups my jaw, tilting my chin up and drawing me in closer to his body. "This is what you want?" he asks.

"Yes," I sigh.

I shiver as he traces a line up my jaw with his nose. His mouth brushes my ear as he whispers, "To answer your earlier question... if Kate is the freshman, then Katherine is the woman I want in my bed."

I gasp again. A ragged inhale that catches at the back of my throat as his mouth hovers centimeters from mine. His scent is sweeter than before. Soap. Cotton. Lemongrass... and rice?

Sushi.

"Wait!" I slide my fingers between our mouths, pressing them to his lips.

He exhales a whoosh of air and sits back on his heels as he thrusts two hands into his mop of hair. “Shit, you’re right. I’m sorry—”

“Sushi,” I say, ignoring his apology. “Did you eat sushi?”

With a nod, he gestures to the almost empty plate across the room, still with a few California rolls on it. “Yeah, earlier, I...” he trails off, his face blanching. “Oh, fuck.”

I see the realization touch his expression. “Yeah. I’m deathly allergic to shellfish. You almost killed me.”

My heart pounded as the reality of the situation hit me.

My first kiss could have killed me.

I follow his gaze to where a discarded copy of *Romeo and Juliet* sits on the nightstand. “This gives that whole *Thus with a kiss, I die* scene from *Romeo and Juliet* new meaning,” he says.

We both back away from each other.

“I will kiss thy lips,” I say, repeating the lines I’ve known by heart for years. “Haply some poison yet doth hang on them, to make me die with a restorative.”

“Wow. First assignment for Method Acting 101 already done?”

I shrug. “I memorized most of that play when I was twelve. Juliet is my bucket list role.”

He seems to consider that for a moment. “So this acting thing, it’s not just an easy A for you?”

Unable to help it, I snort 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.”

I busy myself looking at my phone and quickly send Jill a text that I’m okay. No doubt she’s freaking out back at the dorm. Then, I slide off his bed and gather my purse into my arms. “Thanks for...”

“Almost killing you?”

I smile. “I was going to say for taking care of me. Passing out in the middle of a party would have been humiliating.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive now?”

I don’t have the heart to tell him I don’t have a car and that I plan on Ubering back to the dorms because I don’t doubt he’d insist on driving me home. But he’s done enough already and I’m not sure I can sit in a dark car with him and not kiss him... deadly lips or not. “Yeah. I feel fine.”

He grabs my keys off his desk, tossing them to me. They’re not even car keys. Just my set of dorm keys and a bike lock... for a bike I didn’t bring to college. Maybe next semester.

I catch them easily with one hand, grinning. “So, are you going to sit next to me in class next week? Or continue pretending that we’re not friends like you have in the last couple of classes?”

He shakes his head, seeming annoyed by my question. “Can’t you tell that Professor McCay gets weird any time you and I talk?”

I shrug into my mini 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.”

I lift one shoulder to my ear. I want to be liked, especially by the head of our theater department, but it wasn't my fault that *she* got caught doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing. “Who cares? If she's guilty about that, then that's on her. Not us.”

“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.”

His reaction surprises me. Holden seems like a fighter. Not like someone who lets a professor tell him who he can and can't be friends with. “Wow. For someone so sporty, I expected you to have a little more backbone.”

“Trust me,” he says. “You don't want to be my friend, Katherine. It's not meant to be.”

My breath stills. He's knocked the wind from me. “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,” he snaps. “I'm an asshole. I would have fucking kissed you tonight and then not have even waved at you on Monday.”

The pain of his words slices into me. Would he have done that? Kissed me tonight and not even said hello on Monday?

I shake my head.

There's no way.

I might not know Holden super well, but that's not the actions of a man who spent all night at the kickoff party of the year taking care of a drunk girl.

“You’re not that cruel,” I counter.

“Yeah. I am.”

“So what? I’d just be some notch on your bedpost?” I joke.

He snorts, stepping closer to me and brushing the back of his knuckle down my cheek. His lips brush the shell of my ear as he whispers, “Oh, Katherine. To be a notch on my bedpost, I’d need a hell of a lot more than some virgin’s first kiss.”

I inhale sharply and shake my head as white hot tears fill my eyes. “You don’t mean that.”

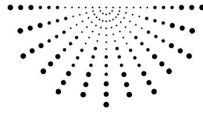
He towers over me, looking down like a king staring at speck of dust on his shoe. “I really do. And I’m sure the guys on the team would love to hear all about tonight.”

The only thing I could think of in that moment was more Shakespeare. For the first time, I know and feel what the bard means by these words. “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.”

Holden rolls his eyes as I step back from him. “What the hell does that one mean?”

I yank his bedroom door open, not bothering to look back over my shoulder at him. I don’t want him to see my tears, but I also know I can’t stop them from falling either. The hot sensation is already burning my sinuses. “If you can’t figure that passage out, then there’s no hope for you, Holden.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



On Monday, I get to our Method Acting 101 class twenty minutes early. So early, in fact, that I'm the first one here.

I settle into a seat in the second row. Normally, I would have chosen the front row, but I don't want to seem too eager. And with my weird first encounter with Professor McCay, maybe Holden's right that playing it a little cool is smart.

I open up my email and my face goes flush. I had a couple interested buyers from my Craigslist ad come in over the weekend, but one email particularly stood out.

He wants to buy the pair listed... as well as five other pairs that I'm supposed to wear each day this week. With pictures of me daily in class wearing them... emailed directly to him.

I don't have the dang slightest clue how to take photos like this. I'm not about to drop trow here and now to get a butt floss selfie.

But I couldn't say no to that offer. I desperately need that \$500 cash he offered me for six pairs of panties.

I scoot down in my chair, taking another glance around the theater, confirming I'm alone. Then, I balance my notebook on the arm of the seat before tugging the waist of my jeans away

from my abdomen, I tug the string of the pink thong higher on my hips and snap a quick picture.

You can't see much. The pattern of the lace. A flash of skin at my hip. Everything else is in shadow. After I crop the photo so you can't see any other details, I attach it to the email for his daily proof and type out a quick response.

Dear Desperate for You,

Here is your proof from today's pair.

Sincerely,

Strapped for Cash Coed

Gulping, my thumb hovers over the send button as I stare at his email address... clearly created solely for his panty-buying purchases. Desperateforyou@gmail.com. But mine isn't much better. StrappedforCashCoed.

That name had been Jill's idea.

"You're here early!" A chipper voice behind me makes me jump, sending my already cracked phone cascading to the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Bailey says. She's a freshman, too. We're the only two freshman in the Method Acting class and if you squint, we could almost look like sisters. Except her hair is a little more blonde with dark roots popping through, unlike mine which is natural. And her skin has the glow of a faux tan.

She picks up my phone, handing it to me, smiling.

Heat blotches against my cheeks as I can see my email open with the photo of my panties attached. If she sees what's on my screen, then she doesn't let her expression show it, instead looking down at me with a big, goofy grin on her face. "Here you go."

“Thanks.” I take my phone and quickly hit the send button, then slide it back into my bag where hopefully no one else will catch me and my stupid pornographic photos.

I’m not proud of what I’m doing to make \$500. But then again, it’s **\$500**. It’s hard to pass up that kind of money, especially when eating ramen in my dormroom every night was getting real old, real fast.

I take a sip of my tea to calm myself down. I’d started training at the cafe this morning for a couple of hours and even though it wasn’t a full shift, the manager made me a delicious hot raspberry chocolate tea to take to class.

Bless that man.

Bailey takes the seat right beside me, still all wide smiles and big doe eyes with lashes so thick and long, I get the strong suspicion they might be fake.

Why is she sitting right next to me in a completely empty theater?

To make friends with you, you idiot. I can practically hear my older sister Mallory’s voice in my head chastising me.

“So um, Bailey, right?” I ask.

She nods. “Mmhmm. And you’re Kate. I memorized the class roster.”

“Wow. That’s... cool.” Okay, cool isn’t exactly the word I’d use to describe that, but I’m really not sure what else to say.

A few students shuffle in and take various seats around the theater. Bailey points to one of the girls and whispers, “That’s Ivy. She’s like movie royalty. Her parents are some big time producers in California and the rumor is she pissed them off

wanting to act on the stage and not the screen.” Then she points to another girl. “She’s from Florida. Apparently she transferred here as a junior from a state school and needs to catch up on some core classes.”

Bailey prattles on about the students as they enter, whispering to me about who’s who, like I could give two craps. On one hand, sure, these were people I was likely going to spend the next few years of my life with in the theater program, God-willing. Some, I might even be sharing stage kisses with and getting to know on deeper, more intimate levels.

But I don’t need to know their stats and history from Bailey’s freaking google search.

Bailey gasps and grabs my arm, nearly making me spill the hot tea. If I’d wasted even a drop of this chocolate-raspberry flavored heaven, I’m not sure I could have forgiven her. “Cripes,” I mutter. “What?”

“That’s Holden Dorsey,” she whispers, even though it’s loud enough for the whole damn theater to hear. Good acoustics here.

Good lord. We’ve been in class with the guy for a whole week and she still seems as shocked as if it’s the first dang day.

“Oh. Yeah.”

“We hooked up,” she whispers, only this time, it’s a real whisper. Directly in my ear and only for me to hear.

Well, *that* has my attention. “What?” I ask. “When?” Heck, we’d only been in school for a week and he spent the entire night of his big party with me, so I know it wasn’t then.

“I met him last year when I came for my tour of the campus. He invited me to a party—”

“He invited you to a party?”

Mr. *I don't invite underclassmen to my parties* invited and hooked up with a high school girl? Gross.

Bailey's face twists. “I was eighteen.”

Well, that makes it better. *A little.*

I shake my head and sit back in my seat, not wanting to look at him.

“Okay,” Bailey whispers, “it actually wasn't Holden who invited me, but his buddy—”

“Duncan,” I mutter.

“Yeah, that was him! His frat got in a lot of trouble that night. Some freshman got too drunk and had to be rushed to the hospital.”

I turn to look at her. “Did you?”

“God, no,” she says. “I know how to hold my vodka, thank you very much.”

I exhale a breath, actively working hard to not roll my eyes at her statement. Like that's some sort of badge of honor. “Well that explains their new policy of no underclassmen allowed at their parties.”

Her gaze snaps to me. “How do you know that?” I shrug, choosing not to answer as Bailey chews her bottom lip. “Maybe I should ask him out? Try again, you know?”

“You want to try again? With Holden?”

She tilts her head, shamelessly staring at him at the back of the theater where he's got his eyes glued to his phone screen.

“He’s so hot.”

I peek over my shoulder just in time to catch his eyes as they lift from his phone, locking onto mine. A smirk twitches. I fully expect him to hunker down in the back, but instead he makes his way down to the first row and shuffles in, plopping into the seat directly in front of me.

Son of a biscuit.

Now I’m going to have to stare at the back of his stupid, perfect head for the next two hours.

He knows exactly what he’s doing and it makes the tips of my ears go red with rage.

I take another sip of my hot tea to cool my nerves.

He doesn’t say a word. Not even a hello, just as promised the night of his party and I hate him even more now after hearing Bailey’s story. Even if he didn’t personally invite her to his party, he still chose to hook up with her. A high school kid. Eighteen or not, it was disgusting.

Thankfully, Professor McCay enters the room, waving a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* in the air and starting the class.

“By now,” she says “You should have at least finished an initial read through of what is most likely the most famous love story in history.”

In front of me, Holden snorts, shaking his head while curling his copy of the script into his fists.

“Mr. Dorsey, you seem to have strong feelings that you’re unable to suppress. Care to share with the rest of us?”

He slouches deeper in his seat and pulls the hood of his sweatshirt up.

“Pass.”

“You can’t pass,” Professor McCay scoffs. “I called on you. Answer the question or get a zero for the day.”

He mutters a curse that makes me blush.

“Fine. 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 flips 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*.”

“Yeah, jaded people,” I mumble and flick the lid of my cup.

“Ms. Harris, do you have something to add?” Professor McCay asks.

“Yeah,” I snap, my leg bouncing while I formulate my thoughts. “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.”

He whips around and glares at me as Bailey inhales sharply beside me. Inwardly I smile, triumphant that I’ve struck a nerve.

“And what exactly do *you* know about any of that?” he asks.

He doesn't flat out call me a virgin in front of the whole class, but the subtext is there, shouting between us. *Don't you flipping dare*, I think and give him a low warning growl. “Don't confuse inexperience with ignorance, Holden,” I say.

Professor McCay claps her hands, getting our attention once more. “Holden... Kate. Please come up to the stage. And bring your scripts.”

Holden freezes, his eyes wide with panic as he asks, “Why?”

“Because you two are going to act out Act two, Scene two. Or better known as: The Balcony Scene.”

“No!” I gasp.

“Yes,” Professor McCay says, her tone stern. “I noticed your chemistry on the first day of class. 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.”

We aren't going to win this. She wants to humiliate us in front of our peers. She wants us to know she's boss and even though we've seen her in a compromised position, she wants to remind us that she can put us in a compromising position whenever she wants to within these walls.

Begrudgingly, Holden and I stand and make our way center stage.

“What other side of the coin?” Holden asks. “What are you talking about?”

“Love and hate, of course,” Professor McCay answers.

“We don’t love each other—” I say, while at the same time, Holden responds with, “We don’t hate each other—”

We freeze about a foot apart.

It’s farther than we were the other night when we were about to kiss... but also it feels so close that my skin is buzzing and alive.

“Okay, then,” Professor McCay says. “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 pauses, taking the steps to the stage slowly so that she stands there in the corner with us. “You know how *wrong* this is, but you just can’t help yourselves.”

Is she talking about us? Our characters? Or is she admitting to us that she knows she’s in the wrong for being in that closet the other day?

Our eyes lock and I’m terrified. It’s the only time in my life I’ve been terrified to act. Nervous? Sure. But the stage is my happy place. It’s home.

Until now. Now it feels like the opposite... like torture.

“And... go,” Professor McCay whispers.

Holden clears his throat, reading Romeo’s lines at the top of the page.

“By a name, I know not how to tell thee who I am.”

He's not looking at me. His head is buried in the script, merely reading, not feeling.

It feels wrong. Off. He pauses, clearly feeling it too. Then, Holden lifts his script higher so that he can intermittently look between me and the lines as he continues reading. "My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, because it is an enemy to thee; Had I written it, I would tear the word."

I lick my lips, tasting remnants of my cherry chapstick and the raspberry tea I nearly finished before class started. I don't need to look at my script. I've had this show memorized for years. But I do because I'm so dang nervous, my knees are shaking.

I can't look into Holden's golden eyes. Whatever nerves I'm feeling are magnified everytime he searches my face for answers. So I bury myself in the script, looking down at the words on the page instead of his intense stare.

"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?"

I steal a peek at him from over top of my script and there's a thousand emotions swimming in the depths of his eyes. Attraction. Appreciation. Chemistry.

I quickly dart my eyes back to my script in hand, pretending to need to read the next line.

As the scene goes on, we've somehow drifted closer to each other, though I'm not sure which one of us took the steps. Maybe we both did. Little, wandering steps until we're standing so close that our knuckles holding our scripts in front of us brush.

I glance up from the script as I'm about to say one of my favorite lines from the show. But catching his eyes peering at me from over the pages makes my throat clam up. I force the words to come out, but I'm a little too loud. And the words are a little too hollow. "Oh, swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon—"

"I don't believe you, Ms. Harris," Professor McCay calls out.

Holden blinks, surprised, and just like that, we're both thrust out of the moment.

"You're giving us what you think the audience wants to see," Professor McCay says. "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."

With a deep breath, I close my eyes and try again. Lava. Tension. I can do this. "The inconstant moon, that changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable."

"What shall I swear by?" Holden whispers, his voice graveled and low. I freeze, taken aback by how natural he is. I hate to admit how talented his is as an actor. He's sexy and charming and everything Romeo should be in this moment. And even though in reality, I did want Holden—I want his kiss. I want his body. I want to know him in ways no other woman has, I can't let myself project *that* girl in these words within the script.

It's too real.

It's all too real.

Again, I choke on the line. "Do not swear at all. Or if thou wilt—"

“Come on, Kate!” Professor McCay shouts. “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?”

Tears fill my eyes and her words ring so true. How can I expect this guy to want me? *Really* want me. Kate freaking Harris. Boring nobody from Indiana.

“—swear by thy gracious self—” I squeak.

McCay’s voice pierces the theater as she shouts, “Take her hand, Holden. Touch her while she talks.”

My tears are no longer that of humiliation. They’re fearful. My words falter, hiccupping as Holden carefully reaches out and threads his fingers through mine. “W-which is the god of my idolatry.”

Our palms connect and he gives a little tug, a gentle pull, bringing me flush to his body. Surprised, I nearly drop my script.

“That’s it, Holden,” Professor McCay goads us. She knows exactly what she’s doing. “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.”

I stutter through my next line, breathless as his hands roam down my arms, caressing my skin. “A-And I’ll believe thou... I mean, thee.” I press my nose deeper into the script. If I can’t avoid his touch, then I can at least avoid eye contact.

His pelvis is pressed to mine and from beneath the zipper of his jeans, he twitches. *It* twitches. Against me. Because of me.

My face turns scarlet.

Next thing I know, he's grabbing the script out of my hand and tossing across the stage as he says his next line. "If my heart's dear love..."

I'm supposed to cut him off with my next line, but my mind is blank. I'm in a fog. A stunned stupor. He threw my script.

He threw my freaking script across the room.

What kind of jerk does that?

Even though there's no space left between us, he snakes his arm around my waist and tugs me harder into him, pressing his erection firmer against me.

Leaning in, his lips brush my ear as he whispers, "I thought this was your dream role?"

My chest hitches with my gasp. "It *is*."

"Then show them what I had a glimpse of this past weekend."

He pulls back from my ear and our hands find each other's, pressing together, palm to palm.

I close my eyes and draw a deep breath in through my nose. Center myself. Focus myself.

I'm not Kate who wants Holden. I'm Juliet. And this is my Romeo.

This is my soulmate.

I open my eyes and allow myself to feel sexual for perhaps the first time in my life. I run my knee up his thigh, allowing my throbbing core to press into his. Shameless. But also with a youthful vulnerability that a virgin might stumble through.

Holden's breath goes sharp and he recites his line again. "If my heart's dear love—"

"Well, do not swear!" I say. Then, I lift my hand and brush my index finger to his soft, wet bottom lip, dragging it, tracing it and circling up to the bow of his top lip as I speak. For all I know it's the only time I'll ever get to touch these lips. "Although I joy in thee, I have no joy of this contract tonight."

He curls his fingers around my hand, stopping me from touching his lips. I pause, thinking he's going to make fun of me. Stop me. But then, he presses my knuckle to his mouth, kissing before sucking my index finger between his lips and nibbling.

My knees go loose. Like, they actually give out on me for a quick moment. Thankfully, Holden's holding me around my waist, because I think I would have hit the floor in a puddle of mush if he hadn't caught me.

Somehow, I manage to finish my monologue as he trails gentle kisses up my arm and circles around me until he's standing behind me.

I whimper as he brushes away the curtain of blonde hair from my shoulder and draws a line from the birthmark behind my ear down to the edge of my shoulder.

I shift my weight, pressing my thighs together, trying to get relief from the throbbing ache in my core as gooseflesh lifts on my skin. A shiver rocks my body as I say, "Good night, good night! As sweet repose and rest..."

His arm snakes around my torso and pulls me back against him, my butt cradling his hard length. A strangled cry escapes me, bouncing off the walls of the acoustic theater. With a slow pulse of his hips, he pushes himself against me. His large hand, still flat against my stomach, lifts with my gasp.

My breath is erratic and uncontrollable. “Come to thy heart as that within my breast.”

“Are you going to leave me so unsatisfied?” he murmurs into the crook of my neck.

It’s not the exact line he’s supposed to say, but it’s close enough. And as he drags his hand up to the base of my ribcage, his thumb strokes, catching the bottom swell of my breast.

I squirm against him, as his lips come to my earlobe, and he grazes his teeth against the sensitive skin, nibbling and sucking.

I’ve never had anyone kiss my ears before.

An explosion lights inside me. I buck against him, the small of my back arching off his torso and I not only gasp, but let loose an uncontrollable cry that comes from somewhere deep inside me.

That simple touch of his mouth to my ear unleashes something inside me. A beast. A hungry beast who needs to be fed.

Reaching back, I fist his hair and yank his head away from my neck, twisting to look at him from over my shoulder. “What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?”

With a glance at his script, he reads aloud, “The exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine.”

My fingers tighten in his hair, pulling his face down to mine. “I gave thee mine before thou didst request it...”

As his eyes search my face, I lose track of my lines. I go silent, my eyes locking onto his full, pouty lips.

Lips I desperately want to kiss.

Lips I will never kiss.

Even if he pressed that mouth I craved so much to mine right here, right now, it wouldn't be my first kiss.

Not between Holden and Kate.

It would be Romeo and Juliet's first kiss.

And they aren't the same thing.

My stomach flips at the thought.

I don't want my first kiss ever to be a stage kiss. I want to experience the real thing first for myself. As Kate, not as Juliet.

Before I can pull back, Holden dips his mouth to mine. On a gasp, my lips part, ready to object. But as his lips skim over mine, barely touching, Professor McCay's voice interrupts us. “Okay!” Professor McCay's loud voice broke the moment between us. “I think that's a good stopping point.”

Holden releases me as applause breaks out from our classmates.

I stumble back a couple of steps, the heady lust-filled fog lifting around us, clearing the air. Clearing my mind.

How could he? He knows I've never been kissed and yet if McCay hadn't stopped him, he would have kissed me right here in front of everyone. My first kiss with an audience of my peers and classmates?

“Don’t ever do that again,” I whisper, pointing a finger in his face.

“Do what?” he asks, seeming genuinely confused.

“It’s unprofessional to touch a fellow actor... to put your lips on them without discussing it first,” I recite. It’s true. It’s a rule of thumb in the theater. You ask your fellow actor permission to touch them. To kiss them.

“Professor McCay’s the one who told me to touch you!” He glances at Professor McCay who is standing with her arms crossed, not getting involved. How convenient.

This is what she wanted, isn’t it? She wanted us to be humiliated like she had been in the closet. It’s our punishment. Our reminder that she holds the power.

“Yeah,” I hiss. “She told you to touch me. Not kiss me. Not put your lips on my ear.”

“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?”

My jaw ticks, tightening, but I refuse to let myself react anymore than I already have. “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.”

He laughs, his lip curling back. “You’ve been watching some pretty pathetic porn.” Then, he leans in, whispering so that only I can hear him. “And if you think what we just did was a kiss? You really are a vir—”

I don’t let him get the final word out. My hand flies across his cheek, slapping him. Hard. The sound of the slap echoes through the silent theater.

“Enough!” Professor McCay says, finally stepping in between us. “You two put on quite a show... on script and off.”

I barely let Professor McCay get the words out before I’m down the stairs and rushing to my seat, ignoring the giggles and murmurs coming from our other classmates.

“Are you okay?” Bailey whispers as I fall into my seat beside her, but I ignore her.

I watch Holden slowly saunter back to his chair in front of me. Then, I lean forward and hiss, “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,” he spits back at me.

Professor McCay clears 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 waves a hand, and from the back of the theater, a shadowed figure comes 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 steps into the light, I recognize him immediately. My eyes are wide with terror. He’s the man we found

Professor McCay in the closet with on the first day of class.

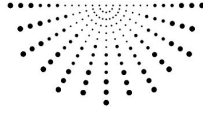
Professor McCay clears her throat, and I jerk my attention back to the stage. Her glare is set directly on Holden and me. “I think it goes without saying that discretion is of the utmost importance. This play is Mr. Langley’s work for the last two years. He will hold auditions for the parts next week. 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?”

Message received, Professor McCay. The threat: Keep our mouths shut about what we saw or she’ll ruin us.

Glancing again at Holden, he’s back to being relaxed, lounging in his seat without a care in the world.

Something tells me if I’m ruined by someone here at the school? It’s going to be the boy in front of me, not the professor on the stage.

CHAPTER EIGHT



The auditions for Keith's original contemporary retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* came quickly on Friday, not giving me a ton of time to prepare. I read every scene that he'd given us, even the scenes I wasn't in to get a sense for his style of writing.

Which I *love*.

I seriously love his writing. I devoured every page he'd handed out in one night and even memorized as many of Julie's lines as I could before our Friday auditions.

Something tells me I'm going to need all the help I can get for this audition since Professor McCay clearly has it out for me.

One by one, she calls us up to the stage to read. Holden read about nine times with nine different girls, including Bailey. I have to admit, Bailey's a pretty good actress. She reads for several roles, including Julie, the nurse, and Mrs. Capulet, Julie's mother.

Finally, I'm called to the stage, only once at the end of class... to read for Julie.

I hold my breath, making the slow climb of the stairs to the stage, waiting to hear Holden's name called to read the part of

Remy with me.

But she doesn't call him.

Instead, she asks Nate to read with me, a sophomore in the class.

I'm surprised, but also relieved.

And grateful that I have the chance to show Professor McCay and Keith what I can do with someone who isn't pushing every button I have.

Nate's handsome. Clean cut. All-American. He'd make a great Romeo... or Remy in this case.

And most importantly, he's respectful as he reads with me. He even asks me ahead of time where my comfort levels are. He's talented, too. Together, we give a really solid performance and as we finish reading our sides, we wait, shoulder to shoulder for further instructions from either Professor McCay or Keith.

With every other person who read, they gave notes and had them do the reading a second time.

After a minute of quiet murmurs between them, Professor McCay stands and says, "Thank you Nate and Kate. You can take your seats."

My throat drops.

No second reading.

No notes.

That can't be good.

Nate gives me a shaky smile and like a gentleman, he gestures for me to go down the stairs first.

For him, this isn't a big deal. He's already been asked to read the part of Remy three other times with different people in the class. He's already gotten his chance with notes to make adjustments.

I'm literally the only student to get up, read once, and be done.

Dismissed.

I take my seat in the audience and try to ignore the roiling in the pit of my belly and the hot tears that dance at the edges of my eyes.

Professor McCay stands centerstage. "Thank you everyone. Consider class dismissed today. The cast list should be posted by Friday evening, but for Friday's class, come prepared to learn Alexandra technique."

Cheeks flushed and thrown off by my audition, I pack my bag, trying to keep my emotions tamped down.

Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's a good thing she doesn't need to see me read anymore? After all, she did spend an entire class on Monday making Holden and me read from the original text. Maybe she saw everything she needed to see from me then?

Professor McCay and Keith are the first ones out the door, not waiting for any of us students to leave first. No doubt, off to discuss the auditions and cast the show.

"You were really good, you know." My breath catches. For a brief moment, I think Holden is in front of me, paying me the compliment.

But when I look up, it's Nate looking down at me smiling.

"Thanks. You were, too. Really."

I stand and he walks out with me. “Seriously, don’t put too much weight on the fact they only had you read once,” he continues. Then, leaning in to me, he whispers, “You were clearly made for the role of Juliet.”

I blush and raise my chin to look into his clear blue eyes. “Thank you. You’d make an incredible Remy, too.”

He shrugs. “I’d love that role, but I think I’m more likely to get Tybalt. They had me read that part like ten times today.”

“That’s a great part, too.”

He grins with a playful shrug of his shoulders. “Yeah, but it’s no Romeo.”

“Well, that’s true,” I laugh.

He opens the door for me and we step out into the lobby of the theater building. “So what are you up to now? Want to grab a coffee?”

“Actually, I have to go to work... at a coffee shop.”

“Ah, so you’re coffee-d out, huh?”

I snort. “Never.”

I pause when in front of us, Bailey rushes over to Addison, all smiles and ass-kissing giggles. Addison shoots a glare my way. My nemesis that chose to haze me for reasons I’ll never understand. Bailey whispers something to Addison and the entire group of mean girls looks at me and cackles.

“Uh, friends of yours?” Nate asks.

“Hardly,” I whisper. Although, I’m caught off guard because I thought Bailey and I were at least on friendly terms. I had no idea she was part of Addison’s entourage.

But then, Addison's eyes light up, shifting from hatred to lusty and focusing behind me. Holden comes out of the theater, eyes cast down on his phone, bumping my shoulder as he passes by me without even an apology.

"Excuse you," I mutter.

He pauses long enough to cast me a glance from over his shoulder, then pulls the cigarette from behind his ear and puts it in his mouth, rushing outside.

Addison trails quickly behind him like a puppy searching for a bone.

"Wow," Nate says. "What a dick."

"You have no idea," I mumble, hiking my bag higher on my shoulder.

My phone buzzes with a new email from *Desperate for You*. There's only one line in the body that reads: Where's my panty pic today?

Shit. With the pressure of auditions, I forgot to send one.

My face grows hot as I slip my phone into my bag and give Nate a wave goodbye. "I've got to run. See you Friday!"

I get to work with a full ten minutes to spare and rush to the employee bathroom. It happens to be right beside the customer restroom, but it's one of the things I appreciate about this coffee shop. That the employees have their own restroom.

I set my bag down on the side table and shimmy my jeans down my thighs to snap a picture for my buyer.

I feel disgusted with myself as I snake my arm around and try to get a decent picture of myself in the white cotton thong with little donuts on it.

Once I get paid for these, I'm going to need to replenish my underwear. I'm selling every cute pair I own—which admittedly isn't that many.

There's a knock on the door and I squeak, my eyes darting to where I'd locked it, thank goodness.

Before I can answer, the lock is turning and the door is opening.

"Someone's in here!" I shout, but it's too late. A muscular guy a little older than me comes barreling into the bathroom, keys in hand.

I'm standing there, pants around my knees, phone in hand, torso twisted, clearly taking a dirty selfie.

Caught red-handed.

"I'm so sorry," he says, but his eyes are glued to my ass.

"Get out!" I shout while yanking my jeans up my hips.

Flustered, his face turns red and he spins quickly around, leaving the bathroom and shutting the door behind him.

I take a long breath, then wash my hands, pressing my wet, cool palms to my face.

How the heck did he get in here when I had locked the door? I'm so embarrassed, but I need to go out there and start my shift. Maybe I'll get lucky and he'll be gone?

But I'm never lucky.

When I open the door, he's still standing there, an embarrassed wince twisting an otherwise handsome face. "I'm so sorry," he says again.

At least this time, I'm clothed.

“It’s fine,” I snap, then walk past him to grab an apron hanging behind the counter.

He follows me. “It’s not fine. I had to pee and the line for the customer bathroom was long.” He hitches his thumb over his shoulder and sure enough, three other people are waiting in line against the wall. “Anyway, my buddy is the manager here and I asked for the master key to use the employee restroom.”

I look up into his green eyes and have to admit, he seems genuinely sorry. “It’s okay,” I say and this time I really mean it. “Just next time, wait until you hear a response before using that key.”

Actually, I was going to talk to my boss today about doing away with those keys altogether.

“I’m Dave, by the way.”

He holds out a hand for me which I reluctantly take. “I’m Kate. If you’ve seen my butt, you might as well know my name, right?”

He laughs at that, but his blush returns, which I have to admit is pretty cute. “I didn’t see much, I promise.”

“Oh, you’re a good liar, too,” I say.

He drops my hand and then rakes his through his hair.

It’s nice hair, too, I notice. Blonde. Curly. He’s the all-American boy next door.

“So, Kate... Can I make it up to you?”

I pause, my hands frozen at my waist where I’m tying the knot of my apron. “Make it up to me?”

“Yeah. Can I take you out tomorrow night? I have a football game, but after, maybe we could grab a bite?”

A date.

He's asking me on a date? This handsome upperclassman who just saw my butt and donut cotton panties is asking *me* out.

I have no reason to say no and yet, Holden's face pops into my mind.

"Um, I don't know..." I finish tying the apron around my waist, cinching it tightly.

"I'm not a creep, I promise. Ask your boss. We've been friends since freshman year."

A million thoughts fly through my head. If I get the part of Julie, my first kiss—stage or otherwise will be coming soon. The humiliation from Monday's class and Holden almost kissing me in front of all our classmates settles thick like molasses in my chest.

I can't let that happen. I need to experience my first kiss—a real kiss—with someone I like. And who likes me in return.

And Dave seems nice. And cute.

And even though I'm pretty sure he's not going to be someone I fall in love with, he's a good candidate for what I need.

Swallowing my nerves, I nod. "Sure. Dinner after your game sounds fun."

His grin widens. "Awesome. Let me give you my number."

I double tap the screen of my phone and quickly swipe away from the naughty selfie I snapped moments ago in the bathroom, hoping to God he didn't see that. I still needed to send that picture to *Desperate for You*.

But it can wait another few minutes.

Dave and I exchange numbers. His demeanor has shifted. Whereas before he was contrite and a little shy, he's now confident and all smiles. Licking his bottom lip, he leans in and says, "By the way, I love donuts."

My cheeks flame and I smack his shoulder. I'm not sure why, but I giggle. A stupid girly sound that I've only made a couple of times in my entire life. "You said you didn't see anything!"

He shrugs as he backs away from me. "I lied."

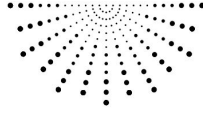
Then, he pushes out the front door and leaves.

Just like that, I have my first college date.

And it's not with the guy I want...

But maybe he's the guy I need.

CHAPTER NINE



In the parking lot of Magic Mushroom, Dave pulls his Land Rover into a parking spot. “Here we are,” he says. “Thanks for coming to the game tonight, too. It was nice seeing a friendly face in the stands cheering for me.”

I lift a brow. *What a flirt.*

“From where I was sitting, *lots* of girls were there to cheer you on.”

His sheepish grin widens and he catches his bottom lip between slightly crooked teeth. The kind of crooked that comes with not wearing a retainer religiously after braces. Not that I would know... my parents could never afford braces for me or Mallory.

“Maybe. But I was lucky enough to be taking the prettiest one out after.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, Casanova. Let’s go eat some pizza. I’m starving.”

“Oh thank God,” he sighs. “I was afraid you were one of those *only order salad on a first date* kind of girls.”

I snort and shake my head. “Oh, no. I’m a pepperoni stuffed crust kind of girl.”

First kiss be damned, I'm hungry. And thanks to the catering gig last weekend, I have enough money in my pocket to cover my half of the bill. I'm not exactly sure how splitting the bill goes on dates like this, but I don't want to be in a weird position of expecting him to pay, even though I secretly hope he does.

I pull the handle of my door, but Dave stops me. "Wait! My momma taught me well. You wait right there."

He hauls himself out of the driver's seat as a text from Jill comes through.

JILL:

Go get him, tiger! Grrr!

I don't bother responding to her, but also can't help but notice the email from Desperate for You in my inbox. I'd sent him a picture of my panties earlier today.

Our emails have been getting a little longer. A little more flirty. Although I can't bring myself to cross that line. Once I hand off these panties to him, I'm done. Out of the sex work business for good. I'm just not cut out for this.

Every photo I snap, I'm terrified I'll get caught.

Well, caught *again* since technically Dave already caught my x-rated photo once.

I tuck my phone away just as Dave pulls open my door and playfully gestures for me to exit. "M'lady," he jests.

With a laugh, I follow him into Magic Mushroom and as he's asking the hostess for a table, a large table of students shout out to Dave. One of the guys cups his hands around his

mouth and bellows, “Dave! Hey, Dave! Over here!” Then, he waves us over to join them.

The hostess gives us an apologetic smile. “It’s about a thirty minute wait for a two-top, unless you want to pull a couple chairs over to your friends.”

A table of jocks isn’t exactly the romantic first date I imagine on the night I hope to get my first kiss, but Dave looks at me, all sweet smiles and asks, “Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, waving a hand. “Sounds fun.” I hope I sound believable, but I’m not sure I do.

He doesn’t seem to notice my nerves and gives my hand a little squeeze, then pulls me over to the end of the table where two empty chairs await us.

I stop abruptly in front of the table, my eyes landing first on Holden... then on Addison, sitting beside him. Sitting beside him with her arm draped across his shoulders.

And she’s giving me the most evil smirk ever.

He’s on a date with Addison?

It would be hard enough to sit across from him on a date with *anyone*, but why her? Why the one girl who seems determined to make my life a living nightmare?

While Dave high-fives some of his friends, I duck my chin to my chest, trying to hide my frown since I can’t seem to rearrange the hurt expression from my face.

“What’s up, guys? Great game!” Dave says, then adds, “Oh, this is Kate.”

One of the guys kicks out the two chairs beside him, saying, “Join us.”

Duncan clears his throat, stealing a quick look at Holden. “I’m sure they want their own tab—”

He doesn’t even finish his sentence before Dave is sliding into the chair beside Chris. Then, he pulls the seat next to him out for me. The seat directly across from Holden.

Holden bites the inside of his cheek, and gives me a curt nod. “Hey, Katherine.”

Again with calling me freaking Katherine thing. I narrow my eyes at him, ignoring the way they itch because of the stupid eye-liner Jill convinced me to wear. It so isn’t me, but she insisted I should try a little makeover for this date.

And it kind of worked. I felt a little more confident dressed up like this. Like I actually belonged on Dave’s arm. It even gave me the boost I needed to photograph a little bit more of my body for my thong selfie I sent to my panty buyer... not that Jill knows anything about that.

I couldn’t bring myself to tell her about my new business venture. So far, she thought it was one and done for me with that first pair.

“Your top is *so* cute,” Addison says, breaking me from my thoughts. Then, she leans across Holden, her breast brushing his forearm as she takes a french fry from the basket at the center of the table. Turning her eyes on Holden, she nibbles the end of the fry suggestively.

“Um. Thanks,” I respond, knowing full well her compliment is bull-hockey.

Dave, completely unaware of the tension between me, Holden, and Addison drapes his hand casually across the back of my chair, the tips of his fingers brushing my shoulder.

I sit in silence for a few minutes as everyone around us talks about the game and other sporty things I have no knowledge of. I was barely able to follow the game tonight, let alone the conversation around me with play by play details. If it hadn't been for Jill beside me, explaining what was happening, I would have been totally lost during the game.

I stare at the food in the center of the table to share. Mozzarella sticks, garlic knots, and french fries. I'm so hungry, but I don't want to just start eating other people's food. Besides, maybe pizza and a garlic heavy meal isn't the best option before my first kiss. So instead, I opt for a french fry, the least of the evils in front of me.

It's crispy, salty, and delicious and I don't regret my choice until Dave reaches for a garlic knot and pops the whole thing in his mouth. Well dang. Now *I* have to eat a garlic knot, right? To cancel out his icky garlic breath? At least if we *both* have garlic breath, maybe the kiss won't be bad?

My thoughts are wandering to whether I take a garlic knot for myself when I catch Holden staring at me with that same cocky smirk he always sports when he's feeling superior to me.

I fold my arms and snap, "What?"

"Nothing."

I drum my fingers against my bicep. "Well, it must be something. You're smirking."

He glances at Dave who's caught up in some conversation with his friends, going over plays from the game, then looks back at me. The only person at the table who seems to be listening to us is the one person in the whole world I wish would disappear—Addison.

But Holden either doesn't notice or doesn't care. "I was thinking... you look nice."

His words slam into me like a blast of air conditioning after being in the humid summer air. Nice. He thinks I look nice? This has to be a trick. Or some weird macho bullcrap now that I'm on a date with one of his teammates.

Instead of saying thank you like my mom taught me, my scowl deepens.

This only makes him smirk wider. He leans across the table, bringing his face inches from mine. "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 him, the screech of Addison's chair against the floor echoes through the pizzeria. She stands up and stomps to the other end of the table, joining her other girlfriends, which I note, is lacking Bailey.

I guess she *hasn't* made it to Addison's inner circle yet. Or more likely, Addison is using Bailey to irritate me... and succeeding.

"Way to go, dummy," I say, jerking my head to where Addison stomped off. "Guess you won't be getting laid tonight."

He glances briefly at Addison, shooting us dagger eyes from the other end of the table. "C'mon," he says. "You know me better than that. I'm not on a date with Addison. She ambushed me here."

The hum of laughter swells around us and I ignore the way my stomach tingles at his confession that he's not here on a date with Addison. The betrayal knotted in my chest from earlier unravels.

Dots of perspiration bead down my neck and I swipe my hand over my glistening clavicle. The little AC unit above the door is unable to keep up with dozens of post-football game co-eds and the late summer humidity. Although it's warm in the restaurant, I'm not sure if that's the catalyst for my sweat or if it's the heated gaze Holden has fixed onto me.

His brows lift. "How are your panties holding up in here?" he asks.

My face goes pale. *How could he know? Could he have found my Craigslist post?* "M-my what?"

"In this heat," he whispers. "You know. With your *sweat issues*."

Oh. He doesn't know anything. He's just being a jerk. The same big, fat jerk who made fun of my butt sweat on the first day of class.

"My panties are none of your concern. But Dave hasn't had any objections tonight," I whisper.

I smile triumphantly, but it immediately fades as I note the wince of pain in his big brown eyes.

I hurt him? Well that's unexpected. And it doesn't feel as good as I'd hoped it would.

"Hey," Duncan says, nudging Holden. Immediately, the look is wiped from his expression as Duncan asks both of us, "Didn't you two have some sort of big theater thing this week?"

The waitress comes over and sets a Coke in front of me that Dave must have ordered for me. Surprisingly sweet and astute since I mentioned only once in the car that I have an unhealthy obsession with the soda.

“We had auditions,” I tell Duncan. “For a modern Romeo and Juliet retelling.”

Dave snorts beside me, and I’m surprised to discover that he’s back to listening to us. “Sounds boring.”

I swing around to look at him, but he’s not even focused on me. Instead, he’s staring at our server’s tanned, bare legs as she bends over, delivering the rest of the drinks to our table.

It’s the first time since Dave walked in on me in the bathroom that he truly annoys me. “Huh,” I huff on my exhale. “Well, *I* think football’s boring,” I say, crossing my arms.

“What?” Dave cries and suddenly, his attention is back on me, the server’s legs all but forgotten.

The guy beside him, who Dave never bothered to introduce me to, laughs. “Dude, you gonna let your girl do you dirty like that?”

One of the other guys, Brandon, I think I heard Duncan call him, rolls his eyes and stands 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,” Holden corrects him.

Surprised, I turn my attention briefly to Holden. Huh. Well, that was unexpected.

“I don’t know,” I answer with a shrug. “I guess it went fine.”

“Fine?” Holden says, incredulous. “You were the best Julie in the damn class. Keith would be crazy not to cast you as the lead.”

“Maybe. But Professor Mc—”

Dave interrupts me, looking back and forth between us as it seems to dawn on him for the first time all night that Holden and I know each other. “Wait, you two have class together?”

“That’s his easy A!” Brandon exclaims. “Remember? He needed a free ride elective.”

Ignoring them, Holden holds my gaze. “Seriously. You were phenomenal. No one in the class could take their eyes off you when you were on stage.”

I shake my head and grab another 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.”

“McCay is just feeling you out still... after that memorable first meeting you had.”

Shaking my head, I can’t help the chuckle that bubbles up out of me. Playfully, I fling the french fry at Holden. With a laugh, he dodges it easily. “You had that memorable first meeting too, and she’s not tearing *your* performance a new one.”

“Yeah, because my audition sucked. Everyone knows I’m not going to be an actor.”

I blink, surprised. He really doesn’t know? He doesn’t see his raw, incredible talent. He is truly one of the best actors in that whole class... and he isn’t even in the department. Heck, he isn’t even *trying*. “You seriously think you sucked?” I ask. But when he opens his mouth to answer, I don’t let him. I know it’s just going to be self-deprecating or macho here in front of his friends, or a healthy mixture of both. “You’re an incredible actor, Holden. You’ve got this raw, natural talent that most people in our class would kill for.”

He snorts. “Yeah, right. I’ll probably be cast as Montague number three in the fight scene and that’ll be that. Fine by me. I get my extra elective and can get out of theater altogether after this semester.”

I shake my head, completely dazed by him. “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.”

“Don’t you mean ‘Tyler, Mercer, or Remy?’” he snarks, mocking the contemporary names Keith had rewritten.

His tone leaves an uneasy feeling in my stomach. Keith is a grad student and he and Professor McCay have made it clear that they’re treating it like a casting showcase. Not only for Keith, but for the actors in it, too. Which means directors, writers, producers, even casting directors might be invited to see it.

“Whatever,” I snap and lean forward toward him on the table. “This show means a lot to us in the class... so if you’re cast as a lead, you better take it seriously.”

After a long beat of silence, Duncan slaps a hand on Holden’s back. “I guess that ‘A’ really will be an easy one for you.”

Dave’s hand slides from where it’s resting on the chair down across my back and shoulder, grazing my dewy skin.

“Oh,” Dave says, leaning into my ear. His breath cascades over it and I shiver, staring intently into Holden’s eyes as I remember the feel of his lips on my ear. I wish it was his mouth this close. His breath skimming across my sweat-dotted

skin. I wish it was Holden who was taking me home tonight... not Dave.

I wish Holden would be my first kiss.

Dave interrupts my thoughts, saying, "You're kind of sweaty, babe."

The goosebumps disappear with his statement.

It's not sexy. Or charming. Or funny.

I swallow and say, "Yeah. It's kind of stifling in here, isn't it?"

Holden's stony eyes shift to Dave and if I'm not mistaken, he seems angry. *Really* angry. Maybe even *jealous*.

"Want to get out of here?" Dave asks.

Slowly, Holden's eyes shift back to me. We sit there for the longest second in eternity locked in each other's gaze.

Say something, I think. Stop me from leaving with Dave.

But he doesn't.

He doesn't say a dang word.

So I nod to Dave. "Yes. Let's get out of here."

I don't look back at Holden as we're leaving the pizzeria. I don't even care that I'm starving but all I've eaten is a few handfuls of communal french fries.

I just want to be away from that heady look in Holden's eyes. A look that's wrought with jealousy, desire, and something darker. Not hatred, but resentment perhaps? Resentment that he feels something for stupid little me.

Dave smiles a goofy grin down at me as he holds the door open.

Dave may not be a deep guy, but he's nice. And he's going to be my first kiss tonight even if I have to grab him and jump him here in this parking lot.

We make it back to his car and he shrugs apologetically. "Sorry about that," he chuckles, hitching his thumb over his shoulder. "I know a food truck close by—"

Licking my lips, I step closer to Dave, angling my chin up at him. "I'm okay. Maybe we could just go... park somewhere?"

His eyes go wide and his head bobs up and down, nodding. "Um, yeah. Holy shit, yeah."

I swallow as I reach a hand up and drag my palm up his arm. He's not as muscular as Holden. Then, I mentally smack myself for comparing them.

Stop thinking of Holden.

Dave cups my jaw and just as he's about to lean down and kiss me, a male voice calls out through the parking lot. "Dave! Yo, Dave!"

Dave and I both blink in surprise.

"Duncan? What's up?" Dave asks.

I narrow my eyes at Duncan and cross my arms. "Yeah, Duncan," I snap. "What could you possibly need *right now*?"

"Dude," Duncan says, his eyes wide and words exaggerated. "It's my car. I'm out of gas."

He points at a Rav4 parked a few cars away.

There's no *way* that's Duncan's car. Forget the fact that it has one of those decals with stick figure families on it, but it's got a rosary swinging from the rearview mirror.

“*That’s* your car?” I ask pointedly. “Really?”

“It’s um, over there somewhere,” Duncan says, waving in a general direction to his left.

He and Dave share a silent look for three long beats. Finally, Dave gives Duncan a nod before he turns to me. “I’m sorry. Let me run you home really quick and then I’ll come back—”

I turn back to Duncan and cross my arms. “Tell me, why can’t one of the ten other people in there take you to get gas? Brandon or Chris or Addison or Holden.”

“They’ve all been drinking,” Duncan answers quickly.

“Holden hasn’t,” I retort.

“He had a few before you arrived.”

I shake my head. Just whose side is Duncan on?

That’s a stupid question.

Holden’s. He’s always on Holden’s side. And that’s something I need to learn fast. The world will always side with a rich, silver-spooned butthead like Holden over me.

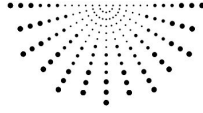
“I’m sorry about this, Kate,” Dave says. “But it’s bro-code. When a brother needs me, I have to be there. You understand, right?”

I glare at Dave for a long breath. “Oh, I understand. But you’re taking me to that food truck off LaGreia before dropping me off at the dorms. Because I’m starving and I’m *not* going home hungry.”

And this is not over. I glare at Holden through the window of the pizzeria as I climb into the passenger seat of Dave’s car.

Oh, no. It’s not over by a long shot.

CHAPTER TEN



“*H*e clam jammed you!” Jill cries out, eyes wide behind her black rimmed glasses.

Soda spurts out my nose and I cover my palm over the spray just in time to catch it from landing all over the floor. I rush to our sink and clean myself up. “What?” I manage to sputter as Jill shimmies out of her dress.

While I had been on my date with Dave, she went to a party with a couple of other girls on our floor. It’s almost one in the morning and she’s only now getting home. Meanwhile, I’ve been home for over two hours after my bust of a date.

“Clam jam!” she repeats. “You know... instead of cock block?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” I say and inspect the way her chin was a little red and raw. Leaning in, I inspect it, narrowing my eyes and she pokes me away.

“What are you doing?” she asks and pulls flannel pajama pants up.

I smile wider. “Well, *I* might have been clam jammed tonight, but it looks like you weren’t! Your mouth and chin are raw from smoochin’ someone! Who was it? Someone with scruff obviously.”

She bats away my hand and crawls into bed. “He’s a sophomore,” she says. “Majoring in poetry.”

I scrunch my nose. “There’s actually a major in poetry?” What the hell do you do with a degree like that? Other than teach poetry.

Jill sticks her tongue out at me and grabs a bag of Twizzlers before crawling into her bed. “He’s brilliant,” she says, taking a bite off of one of her Twizzlers.

“I don’t doubt that,” I say, genuinely happy for her, even if I am a little jealous that she’s making out at parties while I still have yet to have had my first kiss. “What’s his name?”

“River.”

I press my lips together to suppress my smile. “With a name like that, he was destined to become a poet, wasn’t he?”

Biting her bottom lip, she lobs a Twizzler across the room at me, but I duck it like a certified Ninja. “Well, not everyone is destined to sell their panties online!” she teases back.

Giggling, I pick up the Twizzler where it landed on my bed and nibble on the end. “Seriously though, who *am* I right now?”

“A sex worker,” Jill says. “A sex worker who’s never been kissed. You’re basically Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.”

Oh, man. Jill doesn’t even know the half of it.

I roll my eyes. “Except Vivian had been kissed. She just didn’t let her clients kiss her.”

Jill gives a thoughtful *hmmm* while chewing her candy. “Good point.”

Never in a million years did I think I'd be this girl. The girl who sold her used panties online for five hundred bucks. Though, truth be told, this past week was the easy part. It didn't feel real yet. This Monday is the true test... the drop off day. I still haven't arranged how it is going to go down. I think I'm avoiding it because the very thought makes me spiral into a panic. Will I have to meet the guy in person? Shake his hand? Or will we do a shady locker drop off at a bus station or something seedy like that?

Jill's sigh interrupts my runaway thoughts. "So seriously, what are you going to do about Dave?"

I shrug. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" She gapes at me, incredulously.

My brows scrunch. "What *is* there to do? He made his choice. Holden clearly sent Duncan out to do his dirty work and Dave just rolled right over. Why would I even *want* him to be my first kiss after that?"

"So that your first kiss doesn't have to be on stage in front of your whole class, that's why!"

"Oh my God. The cast list." I was so distracted by Holden and Dave, I forgot all about the cast list.

I dive for my phone and open up the student portal. Heat flushes up to my face as I scan the list of characters and names...

Julie/Juliet: Kate Harris.

I got it.

I'm playing the lead.

My eyes flicked down to the name below mine.

Remy/Romeo: Holden Dorsey.

No.

A two-headed dragon is battling inside me. On one hand, I've never been more excited to play a role. I've waited literally my whole life to play any semblance of Juliet in this show. On the other hand, I have to act opposite the one guy in this whole school who seems to unnerve me more than anyone.

And I am going to have to kiss him.

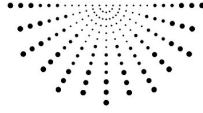
In front of an audience.

I throw my comforter off of me, climbing out of bed and grabbing my purse.

Jill startles, sitting up straight, her red curls even more wild than when she first climbed into bed. "Where are you going?"

"*Out.* Because one way or another, I'm getting my first kiss tonight."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



*W*ith my clenched fist, I pound on Holden's bedroom door with little care that it's currently 1:35 a.m and that Holden has roommates.

Hell, Duncan's the one who let me into the house in the first place. Maybe he sensed I was in no mood to argue. But when he opened the front door and saw me standing on his stoop, he merely stepped to the side and let me sweep in past him.

From the other side of the bedroom door, I hear a gravely, "Jesus Christ, hold on."

The door clicks open and much like with Duncan, I don't wait for an invitation that I know will never come.

I push past him and walk right into Holden's bedroom.

It's been a whole week since I was in this room sleeping off my Benadryl debacle and I didn't expect to be back here so soon... if ever.

"Katherine?" he murmurs, still seeming half-asleep. He drags his palm down his face, rubbing at his eyes.

"You owe me a kiss," I say, poking my index finger into his chest.

His bare, muscled chest.

Oops. I did not think this plan through.

He's shirtless.

And pantless... well, sort of.

I sweep my gaze down his bare torso and my throat goes dry.

Holden sleeps in only a pair of boxer briefs and I'm standing here in front of him, unable to tear my gaze away from his washboard abs.

"You. Owe. Me. A. Kiss." I speak slowly, partially because I'm trying to catch my breath and partially because I'm not sure how awake Holden is.

"How'd you even get in here?" he asks.

"Duncan was up playing video games," I explain. But I don't want to talk about stupid Duncan. I need him to kiss me right now, quickly, before one or both of us lose our nerve. "Now... kiss me."

"Kate, I'm not going to kiss you. Go home." He grabs a bottle of water from his desk and takes a swig.

"Oh, no." I yank the plastic water bottle from his hands and throw it across the room. It smacks into the wall spurting water everywhere.

Oops.

"What the fuck!?"

I ignore the urge to mop up the water and apologize profusely and instead, stand my ground, glaring at him. "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 stupid gas station.”

Holden shrugs with an arrogance that makes me want to smack his face more than kiss his lips. “So?”

“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.”

He 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.”

My heart slams against my ribcage. I know it’s Holden who arranged that, but now, standing in front of him having him admit this feels very, very real. “Why would you do that?”

My question comes out as a somber whisper and I shiver at the storm cloud that darkens Holden’s whiskey eyes. “You’ll have to ask Duncan—”

“Oh, please. I know it was you. You were glaring at Dave all night. Watching every time he leaned into me or 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, either. Does that about sum it up?”

“It was for your own good, okay?” Holden rakes his fingers through his hair, then drops them to his thighs. “Dave’s a fine guy, but he’s a serial cheater.”

I snort and cross my 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.”

His sister? His freaking *sister*? Oh heck no. “Oh. So now I’m your sister in this messed up scenario?”

“No!” He growls, pausing to bury his face in his hands.

“Look,” I say and the word chokes in my throat when I poke him in the chest. Big mistake touching that rock hard chest. I gulp, shake it off and continue with my point. “I wasn’t planning to marry the guy. I just wanted to kiss him! And you ruined it.”

He steps forward, crowding me and I immediately regret taking a step back. “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 with you on stage 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 pushes from my lungs.

Don’t cry, I tell myself. Don’t freaking cry in front of him. Tucking my hair behind my ear, I add, “I just... I can’t have an audience for my first kiss, okay?”

“You saw the cast list?” he asks.

I peer up at him, nodding. “Congratulations... Romeo.”

“You too, Juliet,” he says with a chuckle, still crowding me against the wall.

“The rehearsal schedule is attached to the cast list. We’re supposed to do the kissing scene next week.”

“Next week? Professor McCay really is trying to torture us, isn’t she?” He pinches the bridge of his nose and squeezes his eyes shut briefly.

Torture us... by forcing us into close proximity.

Like this is painful.

Like the very thought of kissing me on or offstage is agonizing.

I tamp down the humbling wave of humiliation that washes over me and instead plaster on my stoniest frown. “I didn’t realize kissing me was such torture.”

He crosses to the other side of the room and turns slowly to look at me.

The moonlight slices in through the open window and highlights his sharp cheekbones with a bluish-white hue.

He takes a deep breath before saying, “Kissing you on stage and not being able to kiss you in real life would be torture.”

A pointed inhale stings my lungs. “Then why are you so opposed to kissing me in real life?”

He takes a long moment before he answers, “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?”

“I don’t do commitments. And you’re girlfriend material.”

Another skip of my stupid, stupid heart. What is wrong with me that these sentences are freaking wooing me? “I *think* there’s a compliment somewhere in there.”

“It *is* a compliment.”

“A compliment and a rejection all at once?” I counter and tilt my head sarcastically. “How sweet. My hero.”

A smirk lifts that mouth that I so badly want to feel pressed to mine. “See? You get it.”

“I call bull shitake.”

A brief laugh breaks through his steely demeanor. “Shitake? I thought you said you were eighteen ... not thirteen.”

I feel the blush take hold of my cheeks and pray that it’s too dark for him to see. “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,” he adds.

Oh jeez. There’s no doubt that the light pink stain on my cheeks was probably now scarlet.

Adorable.

He thinks I’m adorable. That could be good... but then again, I crave more than adorable.

I crave sexy.

I close my eyes and try to channel the girl who’s selling her panties. That brave, sexy girl who’s been taking pictures of her undies and emailing them to a stranger all week. She’s not adorable. She’s hot. She’s bold. She’s daring. “Puppies are adorable,” I say. “Co-eds asking you to kiss them in the middle of the night are sexy.”

His gaze sweeps down to my thin, cotton pajama shorts. It’s a slow, appreciative gaze that lingers first on my legs then lands on my breasts with my taut nipples pushing against the tank top I’m wearing.

In my haste to run out the door earlier, I didn’t think to change out of my pajamas.

Granted, it's not as revealing as *his* sleepwear, but still.

I plant my feet and refuse to shift awkwardly under his gaze.

Let him look.

That's what Katherine would do, isn't it? Katherine, the panty salesman.

Is it me or did he just twitch from within those boxer briefs?

"Kate—" My name is a tortured cry on his lips.

I throw my 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?"

Something in his expression shifts.

He wants to do this.

I can see it in his eyes. It's like he's just barely holding himself back.

And if he sent Duncan to stop Dave from kissing me, then I know just what little push he needs to send him over the edge.

I fold my arms and arch my brow. "Or I'll just go ask Duncan to do it. I think he's still up playing video ga—"

I barely had the threat out before Holden descended on me, closing the gap between us. He grasps me gently by the arms and pulls me against his body.

I suck in a breath as his lips hover over mine, our noses brushing.

A hot ache blossoms in my belly as I skim my palms up his bare, smooth chest. The chest I've been aching to touch ever since I walked into this room.

His groan makes me clench.

I expect him to kiss me hard. To brutally take my mouth in a dizzying kiss. Instead, he slowly dips his lips brushing them gently across mine. A skim of slick, parted lips that leaves me trembling for more.

I intend to say his name, but all that escapes me is an incomprehensible whimper.

I'm not sure who I am right now as I roll my hips against him and press my breasts to his torso, wriggling my body against his for any relief I can get.

I'm mewling like a kitten, begging for scraps of what he'll give me and I don't even care.

He cups my jaw, pulling me impossibly closer as he deepens the kiss, fully taking my mouth in his.

Then his tongue glides inside, brushing like velvet against mine. Tasting me.

Taking me.

He tastes like peppermint and campfire smoke and the slightest tang of citrus lingers on his tongue.

The room spins around me.

No, not just the room.

The whole freaking world tips on its axis. That's how good this first kiss is.

His hands glide down my body and I feel his thumbs hook into the waistband of my shorts and graze over the thin straps of my black lace panties.

The same panties I'd photographed and emailed a stranger earlier.

Some stranger was going to own the panties I had my first kiss in.

Tearing his mouth from mine, the kiss is over with a final raspy gasp.

Despite him ending it, I nibble on his plump bottom lip, aching for more. Grinding my greedy hips against his erection.

Two strong hands squeeze my hips, pressing against the flimsy cotton and he pushes me firmly to arm's length with a desperate groan despite my objections.

I'm launched back to the here and now.

I'm no longer the sex kitten. No longer Katherine.

I'm back to being Kate.

...only different.

Kate who's finally been kissed.

But that wasn't just a kiss.

That was so, so much more.

That was an awakening.

I press my fingertips to my swollen lips, curving into a smile. "That was... wow."

Wow. That's the best adjective I could think of? Good job, Kate.

When I'm met with silence, I clear my throat and try again.
"Is it always that good?"

"No," he says, his voice hoarse. Then after a pause, he adds, "I guess you're just a natural."

I laugh and swipe my tongue across my bottom lip. If I close my eyes, I could almost still feel his lips on mine. "Thank you," I whisper. I'm not sure if I'm saying thank you for the compliment alluding to me being a natural kisser or if I'm saying thank you for finally giving me the first kiss I've always longed for.

But either way, I am grateful.

Grateful...

And unsatiated.

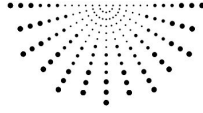
My legs are trembling. My stomach, fluttering. My heart is pounding.

I turn toward the door before I pounce on Holden again and do something I really regret.

I glance over my shoulder one last time at him, then rush out the door grateful for the space to think. To collect myself.

I expected my first kiss to change me. I just had no idea how much.

CHAPTER TWELVE



W hat the feather am I doing here?

A week ago, I never would have dreamed that I'd be spending my Monday before class sneaking around, prepping for a drop off of used panties like I'm some freaking 007 spy.

The email came from my buyer late last night with directions.

I was to go to the campus indoor pool where outside of the changing rooms, there was a wall of lockers. The cash will be waiting for me inside locker number 455 and the code to get in is 1314. I'm supposed to drop the panties inside the locker and walk away.

That's it. Seems easy, right?

But how am I to know he isn't here watching? Taking pictures of me? The whole point is I want this to be anonymous. And there's no guarantee it will be.

But after tossing and turning about it all night last night, I decided since this is the only time I'll *ever* be selling my panties, the risk is likely minimal.

Plus, I was very noncommittal about what day or time this week I'd be going to do the drop off, so unless he's planning on staking out the pool lockers for multiple days, I doubt he'll

be here to see me make the drop off. Especially at the asscrack of dawn before I head to work at the coffee shop.

Of course, there is one added element niggling the back of my mind: The drop off location he chose is our school's pool. For the campus. Which means only people with a university badge can get inside. So this buyer is either a student or faculty of the university.

Up until now, I've been holding out hope that my buyer was just some weirdo who lived in town and not anyone associated at all with my university. And now, that fantasy of anonymity I'd created was being ripped apart with this single drop off. With every face I see on campus, my mind wanders, wondering if they're Desperate for You. Wondering if they've seen pictures of me in my panties.

Clenching my jaw, I flash my student ID at the security guard who hardly blinks an eye at me as I enter.

Despite the catering gig, I still spent the last two weeks pinching pennies and stretching out my one meal plan daily to last three meals. Other than the tacos I forced Dave to treat me to the other night, I hadn't eaten anything other than student meal plan food. And I could not wait to have five hundred dollars cash.

I'm not someone who spends recklessly, but after the week I've had, I'm splurging tonight after my classes.

I'm getting the biggest dang burrito I can find and I'm eating the whole thing in one sitting. None of this cutting it up into three parts to make it last for multiple dinners.

I'd go back to eating ramen and mac and cheese tomorrow. Tonight was a celebration.

Unfortunately, I underestimated how quiet the pool would be on Monday at five in the morning. I assumed most people would be fast asleep or prepping for classes... not swimming at the campus pool at the buttcrack of dawn.

Unfortunately, I'm very, very wrong.

A group of girls comes pouring out of the women's locker room in uniformed swimsuits, their hair all tucked beneath vinyl swim caps and goggles pressing against their foreheads.

I honestly didn't even realize our school had a swim team until this very moment.

"Kate?"

I whip around toward the voice, startled to see Bailey standing there in the same bathing suit as the university team. "Bailey? You're on the swim team?"

She adjusts her goggles on top of her head and gives me an equally weird glance. "Yeah. I mean, sort of. It's the synchronized swim team. What are you doing here?"

"Our school has a *synchronized* swimming team? I didn't even think that was a real sport. Just something women did in, like, the nineteen thirties—"

"Esther Williams," another female familiar voice says behind me.

Cringing, I turn to find Addison standing there with her perfect ballerina body, tall and lithe, clad only in a swimsuit. "Esther Williams," she says again, "was an incredible swimmer, dancer, and actress. But since you are neither swimmer nor dancer, I have to echo Bailey's question and ask you what the hell are you doing here?"

"I, um..."

What *am* I doing here? Addison's right. I'm not a swimmer. I'm not a dancer. I have no good excuse as to why I'd be at the indoor pool on a Monday morning without my swimsuit.

"Well," I croak, trying to buy myself time to come up with an excuse. I glance at my watch. I'm due at work in fifteen minutes. I don't have time for small talk or coming up with stupid lies.

"She's here to see me."

Holden's deep, masculine voice appears beside me and then I feel the weight of his arm land across my shoulders.

Wet. His arm is dripping with water that now saturates into my pink polo shirt.

Despite the fact that he's helping me out of this jam, I pierce him with a narrowed glare, blinking up at him.

"What?" Addison hisses, her eyes darting between Holden and me. "But she's with *Dave*."

Beside me, Holden tightens at the mention of Dave's name.

I clear my throat. "Oh. Um, I'm *not* with Dave. We only had that one date—"

Oh boy. Something tells me I just made things ten times worse. Her eyes flame, glowering at me.

Holden slides his arm off my shoulders, then saunters toward the lockers. Against my will, I take in his nearly bare body, clad only in a speedo. Every muscle he has—which is annoyingly a lot, ripples with each step he takes. His thighs clench. Hamstrings bunch. Back muscles twitch with each gentle swing of his arms.

And his butt... sweet baby Jesus, his butt. There are simply no words to describe how delicious that butt looks.

And based on the stare Addison has locked on him, too, I think it's safe to say I'm not the only one who wants a bite of that juicy double.

In fact, I'm so mesmerized by him, that it takes far longer than it should to register he's crossing toward the lockers. Toward the same set of lockers where my drop off is supposed to happen.

I hold my breath as he passes 461, 460, 459, 458, 457...

Then he pauses in front of the lockers, reaching a hand out.

He turns the code wheel on locker 456. One off from *my* drop off locker.

What the hell are the chances?

Slim. Very, very slim.

Holden opens his locker and pulls out an EpiPen, holding it out to me.

I blink at it—and him—completely confused.

“Here,” he says. “Take it.” Then, he looks at Addison. “Kate has a shellfish allergy and I told her I had an extra EpiPen she could have.”

Addison shifts her weight, crossing her arms. “So you're just here to pick up a random ass EpiPen?”

I take the pen from him and nod. “Um. Yeah.”

“Girls!” An older woman comes out and claps her hands, the sound echoing loudly in the cavernous hall of the pool. “You're two minutes late to practice!”

Bailey scurries inside quickly, while Addison takes another long moment to glare at me before turning toward the pool and shutting the door behind her, leaving me and Holden alone by the lockers.

Me, Holden, and a bag of my used panties.

“Thanks,” I murmur and hand him the EpiPen back.

“Keep it,” he says. “I was planning to give that to you anyway.”

“So... you just keep random EpiPens around?”

He shrugs. “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,” I say and stuff the EpiPen into my bag. “Hopefully I never have to use it either.” But EpiPens were really expensive, even with my co-pay. “I didn’t know you were on the swim team.”

“I’m not. It’s just another way to train for football. Good for the joints and breath control.”

I nod as though I have any idea what he’s talking about, even though the knowledge I have about exercise and muscles couldn’t even fill a matchbook.

“What *are* you doing here, anyway?” Holden asks.

My eyes swing guiltily toward the bulletin board beside the lockers where tons of flyers are pinned to the corkboard. Everything from private swim lessons to tutoring, to league teams looking for members. “Um, it’s kind of embarrassing, but I-I can’t swim. And I thought maybe I’d come check out the pool and look into... *lessons*.”

I reach up and rip a phone number off one of the flyers. “I thought Monday morning would be empty but clearly I was wrong.”

He nods slowly, then backs toward the door to the pool. “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.”

Weekend evenings. Duh. Why didn’t I think of that? I’ll remember that for next time...

No, scratch that.

I won’t *have* to remember that because I am *never* doing this again.

Ever.

“Hey, Holden,” I ask. He turns around, his hand curving around the door handle. “Do you know whose locker this is?”

I point to 455 with the red and silver padlock on it.

He gives me a strange look before he shakes his head. “Beats me. They’re not assigned or anything. It’s just first come first served and bring your own lock.”

Then with a final curious look over his shoulder at me, he disappears into the pool room.

Once I’m alone, I pounce on locker 455, turning the dial to 1314. The lock pops open and I yank at the door, freeing it with another quick look over my shoulder.

I exhale sharply. I’ve *got* to relax. No one’s here. No one’s watching.

I gasp at the five crisp hundred dollar bills sitting in the otherwise empty locker.

“Jiminy Crickets,” I whisper. I grab the cash, wadding it up and yank the ziplock bag of panties from my backpack. He had very specific instructions, wanting them each in their own ziplock bag to preserve them, whatever the heck that means.

Frankly, I don’t want to think too hard about it because that ick factor has my stomach in knots. After parsing them out in their own Ziplock bags, I then stuffed all five individually bagged panties in one large sized bag to make transport easier.

Staring at the bag in my grip, I inhale and toss it inside, slamming the locker shut and spinning the lock so it’s secured tightly inside.

Goodbye panties.

Goodbye sex work.

Goodbye to the easiest cash I’ve ever earned.

The back of my neck tingles and I get the feeling someone is watching me, but when I turn around no one’s there.

No one is in the window either.

I glance toward the door where Holden had disappeared through and I ignore the heat that blooms between my legs.

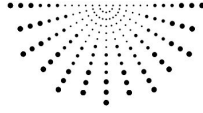
He’s going to ruin me.

I’m not sure how just yet, but I know it.

And what makes it even worse?

I won’t only let him... I’m going to beg him to do it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Since we'd run into each other in the pool Monday morning, Holden had been acting weird.

Weird and distant.

We're at our second rehearsal Wednesday... *the kiss*.

I'm surprised at how calm I feel. A testament to the fact that I'd clearly made the right choice forcing Holden to kiss me on Saturday night. While it might have been weird circumstances for a first kiss, today would have been 10,000 times worse if I walked into class this morning still having never been kissed.

I narrow my eyes, studying Holden as Keith talks privately with him. Maybe the thing that's made me more comfortable today was the exact reason Holden was *not*.

The thought makes my stomach tremble and frenetic energy coils around my spine. The fact that I could have such a profound effect on Holden makes excitement buzz through my veins, softening my blood. Prior to this, I'd thought Holden was impervious to feeling just about anything. But maybe, just maybe, *I'm* Holden's kryptonite.

"Keith," Professor McCay stands from where she's been sitting in the audience and comes up to the stage. "Give me a

moment with Kate and Holden.”

As Keith and McCay walk past each other, she extends her index finger, suggestively running it along the back of Keith’s hand.

It’s subtle enough that if I hadn’t been looking right at her, I wouldn’t have caught it. But when I glance at Holden with my arched brows, a smirk tugs at his full lips telling me he saw it, too.

Professor McCay waves at us both to join her center stage.

I follow behind Holden as we slowly make our way over to her. I’d foolishly hoped that maybe we’d mostly be dealing with Keith for this show, but in only two rehearsals, Professor McCay was all over us.

“Okay,” Professor McCay says, crossing her arms and glaring at us. Even though she’s barely talking above a whisper, her voice is 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 glances between us, ping-ponging her gaze back and forth.

I don’t know what the heck is up with Holden, but I can’t answer her... not truthfully, anyway. I can’t exactly look my professor in the face and say, *Well you see, I ran into Holden while I was exchanging six pairs of used panties for five hundred dollars and now I’m feeling all kinds of awkward around him even though I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know. Oh, and I also forced him to make out with me at one in the morning.*

But since I’m a terrible liar, I press my lips together and drop my gaze back to my script, staring at the lines I

memorized over the weekend.

Finally, Holden breaks the silence. “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 blinks, then looks at me. “Do you agree with his assessment?”

Even though my mouth is empty, I gulp a large ball of nothing, panic flooding me. “It’s not my place to agree or disagree.”

“Not true,” McCay states. “You’re the other lead in this show. Every choice Holden makes from now until the show closes affects you. And therefore, said choices should be made with each other in consideration. So, what do you think? Should I recast Holden?”

Holden glares at me so hard that it’s like he’s trying to coerce an answer out of me. He clearly doesn’t want to be here. He doesn’t want to be an actor or share the stage with me. But I can’t in good faith agree with the choice to recast him. He’s too good. Too talented. Holden owes it not only to himself to explore his acting ability, but he also owes it to Keith, to this show... and to me.

“No,” I say. “Holden’s audition was the best, even if he doesn’t see that.”

McCay’s brows arch in surprise. She expected me to turn on Holden? I tilt my chin higher. *Well, that’s right, lady. I don’t turn on my fellow actors.*

She slowly looks at Holden. “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 your other classmates who'll also work hard in this show. And it's not fair to Kate."

Holden throws his 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 softens. "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."

He shoves his hands in his pockets and nods.

"Well," McCay continues, "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?"

"I'd run in the opposite direction, that's what."

I stifle a snort. I, of all people, know how true that statement is. I've literally watched him run from me multiple times in just a couple short weeks.

"Okay..." Professor McCay says, then waves Keith over to join us. "That sounds like what you, Holden, would do. But what would you do as Remy?"

He drags a shallow breath in before answering, "I would run in the opposite direction. Remy just had his heart broken by Rosalyn. Why the fuck would he jump from that heartbreak into another?"

"Why does anyone?" I blurt out.

"She makes a good point," Professor McCay says and not for the first time today, I'm caught off guard. I thought McCay hated me so much that she'd be blind to see any good points I make. But I stand corrected.

“Why do you think Remy falls so hard, so quickly, after such a bad breakup?” McCay questions Holden further.

With a sigh, he scrubs his palms over his face. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s... like, a rebound thing.” After another long pause, Holden tosses his script to the ground. “I told you I’m not cut out—”

Professor McCay silences Holden 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 asks, “What would stop you?”

“Her laugh.” Holden answers so quickly that it has me darting a look at his expression where his eyes were still downcast, focused on his shuffling feet.

“Her laugh,” McCay repeats, then turns to face me.

I suck in a breath. Is he talking about *my* laugh? Or Julie’s?

“So,” McCay continues, “as he’s walking toward the door, Julie will laugh at something her date says and it will cause Remy halt mid-step.”

“Remy turns around and that’s when you two make eye contact for the first time,” Keith finishes the statement for her, trading a brief look with McCay. “That could work. After that moment, cross to each other and meet center stage to say your lines. Then you kiss.”

I lift my gaze to meet Holden’s molten lava stare but Keith just keeps right on talking despite our intense eye contact. “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."

Then, Keith looks at me. "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."

McCay and Keith give some other instructions to our other castmates. Nate hops up onstage, script in hand and smiles at me from stage right.

I smile back despite the nerves jumping in my belly and give him a little wave.

"New boyfriend?" Holden's bitter voice whispers in my ear.

I snap around to look at him. "Who, Nate?"

All he does is lift his brows in response.

I shake my head no. "We're just friends."

"Newsflash, Katherine. He wants to get in your pants."

Blood rushes to my cheeks. "Not *everyone* is only interested in sex." I ignore Holden's snort, quickly burying my face in my script again, trying to avoid looking at him.

"Can we just get this fucking scene over with?" he mutters from above me.

Can we just get this scene over with?

That's all I am to him.

A line on his to-do list that he needs to check off so he can get his easy A and move on from this class.

Move on from *me*.

“Wow,” I hiss. “The words every girl longs to hear before getting kissed in front of an entire class of her peers.”

He rakes his fingers through his hair and sighs. “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.”

“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 his head, he snorts. “Except I would never *be* in this scenario because I'd be out that fucking door.”

I roll my eyes. “You're not getting it. Method acting is about being you... if you were someone else.”

“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!” I pause to take a deep breath before I really lose my cool on him. “Look, I don't know why you are the way 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?”

As I turn my back to go wait off stage right, I hear him repeat, “Alternate universe Holden.”

After a few moments, the scene begins. I enter, leaning into Parker like the stage directions instruct me to do.

It takes every bit of acting prowess I have to actively not notice Holden across the stage.

According to the stage directions, Remy has to see me first. Parker's hand brushes against my lower back, leaning into me as we fake flirt.

I sneak a glance at Holden. I have to time this laugh just right to stop him before he leaves the stage. Sure enough, he spins, toward stage left, stomping off.

I fall into Parker's shoulder and titter a laugh that I hope is flirty and cute.

Holden halts midstep and slowly, he lifts his eyes to mine.

Something between us shifts.

He feels it too as we slowly cross the stage to stand at center, nose to nose, like magnets connected to us create a pull somehow outside of our control.

And then, he's there, standing in front of me, his scent so potent. Lemongrass. Mint. Soap. The slightest hint of smoke from his daily pre-class cigarette.

Everything about this is so ridiculous.

Me and Holden.

On stage together, acting against all odds as a retelling of literature's most famous couple.

I giggle again, a real laugh this time. And quickly bite my lip, squeezing my eyes shut to stop the moment from divulging into a full on fit of laughter.

Holden chuckles too, quietly and when I snap my eyes open, he's rubbing the back of his neck.

The movement is so sexy, it all but halts my laughter.

"You're staring," I say, reciting my first line.

"Can you blame me?" he whispers back. I'm surprised that he's not looking down at his script.

We stare, lost in each other's eyes for three long breaths. Then, he scoops his hand into my hair, brushing it back from my face.

I'm not expecting him to touch me so soon and my lips part with my quiet gasp at how good his hands feel tangled into my hair.

I take his hand, removing it from where he's cupping my jaw, then press our palms together like it says to do in the script.

"You're pretty harsh on these hands of yours," I say and barely recognize my own breathy voice. "Anyway, isn't holding hands sort of like a kiss... of the palms."

My hands tremble slightly against his, but I manage to keep my voice even.

Until he closes his large hand around mine and tugs, pulling my body flush against his.

Those tight sinews of his chest are firm and hard and I can't help but remember how good he looks without a shirt on.

Every breath I take pulses against him. My heart pounding into him like a drummer keeping a beat. I groan quietly, then close my eyes at the embarrassing flush I know is spreading across my cheeks.

This is it.

The kiss.

He's going to kiss me... again.

He lowers his lips and they tease me by hovering over my mouth.

Well, two can play at that game.

I pull my chin back a fraction of an inch as the corners of my mouth edge into a smile. Our first kiss, I practically begged him. But this time? This time, I'm going to make him work for it.

Finally, with a groan, he brushes his mouth gently to mine.

Brief. Almost sweet.

We pull back for a breath, just long enough for Holden to say his line, "Dear God, give me my sin again."

This time, we sigh and fall into each other, mouths parted and gasping as he takes my mouth.

His hands curl into my lower back, lifting me off the ground as my fingers rake into his hair, tangling his dark curls around my knuckles and tugging at the follicles in a sharp motion that has me mewling into his mouth.

"Okay!" Professor McCay's sharp voice interrupts our kiss.

We jump back, parting from each other.

And I'm panting.

Literally panting.

This man makes me forget who I am. And on a week like this? I need it. I need to forget the girl who sold her used

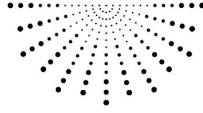
panties to a stranger.

McCay continues, moving to stand in front of the stage. “We may need to save some of that for the bedroom scene. But overall, that was a vast improvement.”

Oh, God. The bedroom scene.

If Holden can make me lose myself this much with a kiss, how in the Holy Hector were we going to make it through an entire sex scene?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*M*y Monday isn't exactly off to a good start.

I'm not someone who can't wake up early on the regular. I've held all kinds of odd jobs ever since I was thirteen. But I definitely wasn't prepared for how thankless the work of a barista is.

The tips are abysmal. The hours are excruciating. And even though the atmosphere is lovely, uncaffeinated people who are late to work are not the most patient or friendly customers.

The upside is that I'm rarely ever late for my morning classes. I'm up at 3:30 a.m. and at work by 4 because this stupid café bakes its own muffins fresh every morning. Why couldn't they just buy muffins and have them delivered like every Starbucks in the area?

But because I start so early, my shift is done by 8:30 and I go right to my 9 a.m. class.

This morning was extra hellacious because I'd apparently forgotten the rising agent in the stupid muffins. And then I over-steamed the milk causing the scalding foam to explode all over my shirt.

Despite the apron I had on at work, I still smell a little like burned milk as I walk up the path toward the theater building.

I freeze mid-step, seeing Holden across the lawn sitting in the grass, writing in his notebook, the lit cigarette bouncing between his lips.

We've had two weeks of rehearsals. We've now kissed on stage multiple times. And Holden's acting is good. Really, really good.

I always imagined kissing a smoker would have been like licking an ashtray, but kissing Holden is the furthest thing.

There had only been just the slightest hint of smoke on his tongue. Not like an ashtray, but more like a campfire. Smoke. Clove. Lemongrass. And a bit of peppermint.

From behind him, Addison bends and covers his eyes, her painted mouth dangerously close to his ear, whispering something.

Jealousy sweeps through me like a wildfire tearing through a dry forest. Holden startles, fumbling to shut his journal.

When he tugs her hand down from his eyes, he first sees me across the quad.

Time slows as he removes the cigarette from his lips and tamps it out against the rock beside him. I watch the expression on his face tighten and shift into something I can't recognize. Then, he tugs at Addison's hand, pulling her down into his lap.

I blink, turning away toward the building. I'd rather spend my few free minutes before class going over my lines than watch whatever that display is.

I only make it two steps before Nate blocks my way, smiling down at me.

“Hey you,” he grins down at me, holding two small paper bags from Starbucks.

“Oh, hey,” I say and nervously tuck my hair behind my ear.

Nate holds out the bags to me. “What do you prefer? Pumpkin spice loaf? Or a chocolate chip muffin?”

I blink stupidly staring at the bags for a long moment. “One of those is for me?” He nods, all smiles. “Wow... That’s so thoughtful.”

He also clearly has no idea I work at the coffee shop and spent literally all morning baking various muffins. I’d eaten three before my shift even ended today ... which kind of renders his gift useless. But I don’t have the heart to break that to him.

“So? Which one?”

I point to the chocolate chip muffin. “I’ve never understood the pumpkin spice craze that’s sweeping our culture. I mean, there’s pumpkin spice everything these days,” I rant. “I like pumpkin. It’s fine. And trust me, I’m as basic as the rest of them, but I’m a little over the pumpkin obsession.”

“Wow, noted. No pumpkin anything for Kate.” He laughs, handing me the chocolate chip muffin. “However, I’m gonna disagree with you one one thing... you are the *least* basic girl I’ve ever met.”

His words catch me off guard and I sputter. “Oh, come on. Plain Jane from Indiana? I’m as basic as they get.”

Nate tilts his head. Taking my free hand, he twirls me around. Then, pressing his index finger to his mouth, he circles me slowly, as though taking inventory of me.

I pinch off a piece of the muffin even though I'm not the slightest bit hungry and nibble on it. "Hmmm," he says. "No Uggs. No Pumpkin spice latte in hand. No Han Solo fall boots. Nope, I'm sorry to break it to you, Kate, but you are decidedly *not* a basic betch. I would even venture to say you're the farthest thing from a basic betch I've ever seen."

My smile grows but before I can say anything more, my phone buzzes against my back pocket.

I yank it free and see an email from Desperate for You.

I'm certain my face has gone fiery red and when I look up at Nate again, he's holding the door to the building open for me, his student ID already in his free hand. "I'll, um, be inside in a second. Thank you again for the muffin."

His smile drops briefly, but he nods, then disappears into the theater.

I make a mental note to bring Nate one of my freebies I get from the café this week. Then once I make sure no one else is around me, I toss the uneaten muffin in the trash can beside me and open the email. I haven't heard from this buyer since the day I dropped the panties in the locker. I got a simple email of receipt that he had gotten the panties.

Good morning,

As much as I love the six 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 inhale such an acute, sharp breath that my lungs pinch.

This is a far cry from just wearing some panties all day and dropping them off.

This special request is dirty. Filthy, actually. And the thought of doing it made the ache between my legs pulse.

I gulp, staring at his signature. *Your admirer*. He doesn't even know me. It's creepy and weird.

And deeper down, I hate to admit that the thought of it thrills me just the tiniest bit.

Oh my God, I'm so messed up.

I shake my head and punch out a quick response.

That was a one time thing, I type. I'm out of the sex work business.

My thumb hovers over the send button for the briefest moment before I press it.

I exhale and slump against the wall.

The money is good. But I only needed it before to buy me a little time until my job at the café paid me.

I don't have that excuse anymore.

And I have no idea who this guy is, other than he has access to the university somehow. He could be literally anyone. For all I knew, I see him daily.

No. I couldn't do this again. There's no reason—

My phone buzzed with another email.

I'll pay you three hundred dollars for one pair that you masturbate in.

I'll make it six hundred if you include a picture of your hand in your panties.

Twelve hundred if you include a video.

Flames lick across my face.

“What’s making you blush so hard?”

Holden’s raspy voice booms above me and in a frenzy, I shove my phone into my bag. “What? N-nothing.”

“N-nothing?” he repeats, mocking me, then his gaze sweeps down my shirt, stained with the exploding milk from earlier as well as a few splatters of coffee from work. “Jesus, Katherine. How much coffee did you drink this morning? Or did you just come wearing it?” His gaze shifts to look at the trash can beside me as if he knows I tossed Nate’s muffin in there minutes ago.

But unless he’s been watching me the last five minutes, he can’t know that...

I make a note to start packing a change of shirts in case the espresso machine spits at me again. Because it pains me that Holden’s not wrong. I look like a dang mess.

His eyes narrow and the harsh guy mocking me slowly morphs into concern. “What’s wrong, Katherine?”

I gulp and shake my head. “Why do you think something’s wrong?”

He shrugs, but his eyes are no less assessing. “A hunch. You’re usually much quicker to spar with me. This morning you’re... quiet.”

“Well nothing’s wrong,” I say. But even as the words leave my mouth, the email from the panty buyer tugs on my mind. Twelve hundred dollars. For basically doing nothing. That could put a hell of a dent into what I owe on my student loans. Not to mention the cost of books and meal plans and—

No. I force those thoughts from my mind. “I’m fine,” I snap at Holden. I’m taking out my frustrations on him and even though it’s not fair, I can’t seem to temper my responses.

“Okay then,” Holden says, clearly not believing a word I’m saying. “Shall we?” Holden gestures to the theater before he holds open the door for me.

I force the tortured look off my face and tilt my chin high, strutting into the theater with all the false confidence I can muster.

For the next two hours, I’m not Kate—sex worker, panty saleswoman, barista, and poor student.

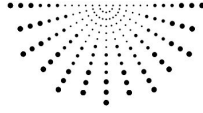
I’m Julie.

And he isn’t Holden... he’s my Remy. My Romeo.

My hero.

But looking back into those golden brown eyes, I gulp. Because we both know he’s anything but.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I get back to the dorms late that afternoon and I'm so tired, my eyes are burning. These 3:30 a.m. wake up calls are catching up to me.

My phone rings and I glance down to see my mom calling. Wearily, I slide my thumb across the screen. "Hey, Mom."

"Hey sweetie. You sound tired."

On cue, I pop a yawn, covering it with the back of my free hand. "Yeah, long week."

"It's only Wednesday."

Tell me about it.

"How's everything at home?" I ask, trying to divert her attention away from how tired I sound.

"Oh, we're good. It's strange being empty nesters," Mom says, her voice chirping.

I'm not exactly sure what could possibly have changed that much with Mallory and I both out of the house. We spent most of our nights alone doing homework or at the pub, helping out. My parents live and breathe that pub they own.

But instead, all I answer with is, "Mm, I bet."

“Anyway, the bursar’s office called me today. Apparently there was some mix up with your dorm room payment.”

My spine goes steel straight and I stop walking through the middle of my dorm hall. Someone behind me slams into my shoulder and grunts a “Hey, watch it,” as they slide past me and send an annoyed grimace over their shoulder at me.

“That’s not possible,” I say. “My dorm room is covered by my scholarship.”

“Hmmm,” Mom hums. “The woman was pretty clear that the payment of \$6,200 was missing.”

Six thousand two hundred *dollars*?

A cold sweat beads at the back of my neck. It’s a mix-up. It *has* to be a mix-up.

I got the top pick of the dorms because of my scholarship. It was in the paperwork. Jill, too. We’ve talked about it nonstop how lucky we are as freshmen to be in the new dorm with bathrooms of our own.

“That’s a lot of money, sweetheart. And you know how your father feels about this school. I could probably help you out a little, but—”

“It’s okay, Mom,” I croak. “I’ll take care of it.”

She pauses for a breath, then repeats, “That’s a lot of money.”

“It’s a mistake,” I say quickly. “My dorm is covered with the scholarship.”

Again, silence on the line.

“I thought so, too,” Mom says. “But do you have a back up plan in case it’s *not* covered?”

Heat replaces the cold fear in my veins as Desperate for You's email from yesterday slides into my mind.

"Mom, I have to go. I need to sort this out."

"Okay. Keep me posted. I love you."

"I love you, too."

I hang up, then turn on my heel and go straight to the bursar's office.

* * *

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, I enter my dorm room like a zombie. Jill looks up from the book she's reading, stretched out on her bed and smiles at me. "Hey."

"Mmph." I collapse onto my bed, face down.

"Um, rough day?"

"Mmhmmm." My response is muffled by the pillow in my face. I roll on my side. "Did you know that because we picked the new dorm room with all the new amenities that our scholarship is only covering half of it?"

Jill's face screws into a frown and her glasses slide down the bridge of her nose. "Seriously?"

"*Seriously.*"

She nibbles her bottom lip. "My parents are handling the financing for me," she admits with a guilty shrug. "I didn't realize that. How much do you owe?"

"\$6,200 for the year's room and board. \$3,100 by the end of next week for the first semester of housing."

Jill hisses an inhale. "Holy shit. That's a *lot.*"

“Yep.”

She pauses briefly, worrying her lip. “Do you *have* that kind of money?”

“Nope.”

“What are you going to do?”

With a sigh, I examine my friend from across the room. We haven’t known each other all that long and yet, I’m closer with her than anyone.

How sad is that?

Jill has other friends. Lots of them, actually.

Best friends from childhood and high school that she talks about. But not me. I spent way too much time after school acting and working at the pub. There wasn’t time for friends, other than Ian.

And I hadn’t realized how much I was missing by not letting people in.

But just how much can I trust Jill? She knows about the one pair of panties I sold, but I’m not sure I could admit to the rest of it. Especially potentially selling panties that I masturbate in and then sending photo or video evidence. It’s next level.

I’m not even sure I can admit to Jill I’m considering it, let alone *do* it.

“I’ll think of something,” is all I tell her.

She gives me an odd look before responding with, “I can get you more catering nights if you want them.”

I nod, even though I’m so exhausted from my morning shifts at the cafe that the thought of being a cater waiter at

night and adding to the hours that I'm on my feet makes my exhausted eyes brim with moisture.

I press my heels into my damp eyes, willing the tears to stay back. "I just need a nap," I say. "I'm so tired I can't even think straight."

Jill hops out of bed and tosses her book on top of her pillow. "I'm going out to the ping pong tournament down in the quad tonight anyway. So you can have the room to rest." She grabs her purse out of her closet, slinging it around her shoulder. "Text me if you want to join, okay?"

Even though I'm sure she can see that I'm on the brink of tears, she doesn't say a word about it. A true testament to how well she knows me, even in our short friendship.

Pausing at the door, Jill adds, "Kate? It's going to be okay. Next year, we can move into the cheaper dorms. Private bathrooms are overrated, anyway."

The door shuts behind her, leaving an eerie silence in the dorms.

I spend thirty minutes tossing and turning in my bed, but sleep is so far away, it's pointless to keep trying to nap. At this point, it's almost dinner time anyway.

I groan and toss my blanket off of me, glancing down at my body. I'm not hideous. My tan, muscled legs peek out from beneath my skirt and from the angle I'm looking down at myself, my boobs look bigger than their normal small B-cup size.

It's all about angles and lighting, right? This guy doesn't know what he's requesting of me, though. I can count on one hand the amount of times I've brought myself to climax. Religious parents and masturbation don't exactly mix.

I can't help but wonder who he is. My buyer. My admirer. Mr. *Desperate for You*. Is it the same mystery of who I am that excites him, too? Not knowing if the girl sitting at the library beside him has panties he keeps in his drawer at home?

I hate that this turns me on.

I hate that I'm a freak.

And yet, the V between my thighs pulses, aching to be touched at the thought of who he might be.

I grip my phone in my trembling fingers of one hand, while hiking my skirt to my hips with the other.

My panties today aren't the worst. Little hipster cheeky panties that are pale pink with red cherries.

Rather appropriate, actually.

My heart skips nervously in my chest as I glide my hand down my belly, working my fingers beneath the elastic waistband. For a long minute, I hover my fingers above my swollen clit, unsure of whether or not to proceed.

From between my legs, I throb, aching for release.

I need this.

I need the money.

And what's the harm in touching myself... for him... just this once?

Twelve hundred dollars is more than I can make in a month at the café. The truth is, even if I work the rest of the semester doing double shifts at the café *and* catering, it still probably wouldn't be enough to cover the cost of this dorm room for the year.

That thought is nearly suffocating. It's the final push over the ledge. A cry heaves out of my lungs as I press my fingers to my clit, sensations exploding across my skin.

I squeeze my eyes shut and snap the picture before I can think too hard about it.

There. Half of the plan is already done.

I can always record the video now... and then choose *not* to send it, right?

Right.

And if I position the lens right, he won't see a thing. Nothing more than movement beneath the material of my panties.

I swallow against my dry throat and tilt my phone, examining each four corners of the screen to make sure I'm not revealing anything. There's no mirror or reflection. No distinguishing birthmarks on my thighs. No jewelry on my hand or wrist.

A shudder tears down my spine as I hit record, then start working my clit with one finger. I'm already wet and while I would normally close my eyes, I don't dare look away from the screen.

It's kinky and dirty and so unlike me.

So unlike Kate, but not unlike Katherine, I can almost hear Holden's voice whispering in my ear.

Is this what he pictures when he says the name Katherine. Soft, feminine me, writhing with my hand between my thighs.

A gasp escapes my parted lips and I moan loudly, a mewling sound that's entirely out of my control. My toes curl

against the plain gray comforter and my hips buck as I convulse, spasming against my sopping wet finger.

Panting, I end the recording and before I can chicken out, I attach the video and the picture to the email and hit send.

It literally takes four seconds before I start panicking.

Why did I just send that? What if he doesn't pay me for the video and photo? I don't know anything about this guy and I'm just freaking sending porn willy-nilly through the campus Wi-Fi—

Before I can finish the thought, my phone buzzes with an email response from him.

Two words.

Fucking hell.

His response sends a thrill through me that I try to ignore. I nibble my lip and as I'm wondering how to ask him for payment, another email comes in.

If I had your venmo, I'd pay you right now. Would be easier than a locker, wouldn't you say?

I gulp and type a response.

Wouldn't my venmo account reveal my identity? And yours?

Seconds tick by before my phone buzzes.

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.

He has a point. It would be easier than trips to a locker... although I still need to get him the panties one way or another. I nibble the edge of my fingernail as I set up my first Venmo

account. It's way faster to set up than I thought and I realize he's right. I can keep my account as private as I want. I use a cartoon image of a rose instead of a profile picture and name my account @AnyOtherRose.

I give it a final once over, just like the video I filmed, to make sure there's nothing in there that might reveal my identity, then I email him the QR code.

\$1200 is deposited within seconds and my mouth goes dry at the sight of that much money in my account.

I feel both exhilarated and like I need a shower, all at once.

A message pops up in the inbox of my Venmo from @LightBreaks90

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Anytime... and I mean anytime you want to send me photos or videos, I'll pay.

Surely, he's exaggerating.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

Really? Any time?

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Yes. Like right now.

I roll my eyes.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

I just sent you a video and a picture, what else could you possibly want to see?

It takes a moment for the next message to come through.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Your face, for one.

I gasp.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

Absolutely not.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Okay, then. A picture of your spread legs.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

Try again.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

A picture of your spread legs wearing the
panties.

I chew my bottom lip. That's not so bad... considering
what I already sent him. Still, I'm suspicious.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

Why?

@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 look up at the mirror on the wall opposite of my bed and catch my bright pink cheeks in my reflection. Seriously, who am I right now? Just a couple weeks ago, I'd never even been kissed. Now I'm sending dirty photos for money?

Shaking my head, I start to type I can't do this, but I'm interrupted by his next message.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

\$400

Four hundred dollars. For just one more picture.

That puts me halfway to what I owe for this semester's dorms.

My throat clenches, but I spread my legs, place the camera between them, and snap a picture. I check it, making sure you can't see my face.

My entire body flushes hot as I look at the picture.

It's sexy.

I'm sexy.

And even though you can't really see what's beneath my panties, sure enough there's a damp circle dead center.

A little bit of my shirt is in the picture and I almost crop it out, but I decide instead to leave it. He can't see anything. And it's a nice shot of my boobs.

I attach it to the email and hit send.

Another \$400 ticks up in my account and he messages back again.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Are you a virgin?

I nibble my fingernail a moment before I type my response.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

Yes. Can I ask a question?

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Anything.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

What do you do with my panties?

There's a long pause as three dots appear next to his name.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

How detailed do you want me to get? How much can your virgin ears handle?

Is this what sexting is? Am I freaking sexting with a guy who I don't know? Who could quite literally be older than my father?

Yet, it felt weirdly safe.

Deceptively safe.

Because this isn't safe. It's the farthest thing from safe.

When I take too long to respond, his message pings.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Rose? Did I scare you off?

Rose. The nickname suits me, especially based on the handle I used with my small nod to Romeo and Juliet.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

I want to know.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Good girl.

A shiver of delight tumbles down my spine at the phrase. Before I can dwell too much on my reaction, his next message comes through.

@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—

The dorm room door flings open and Jill skips into our room. I yelp, comically nearly tossing my phone across the room, I'm so dang jumpy. Jill gives me a strange look as I catch my phone and press it to my chest, panting.

Like she has X-ray vision and can see the messages. Can see my videos and photos.

“Geez,” she says. “What’s up with you?”

“Nothing.” I glide down from my bed, tugging my skirt further down into place.

She shrugs and I breathe a little easier knowing that she can't hear the pounding of my heart. “Okay, weirdo.”

“What happened to ping-pong?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes and grunts. “The thing they don’t tell you about ping-pong? Is it’s the most boring game in existence. Want to grab some dinner at the dining hall?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Let me just...”

Just what? Finish sexting this guy I don’t know?

Jill waves me away, not even realizing that I had tapered off, not finishing my sentence.

“Take your time,” she says. I have to pee first.

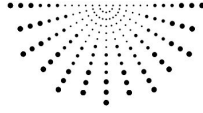
Once she’s locked herself in the bathroom, I fire off a final message.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

I’ll drop the panties off at your locker tomorrow.

Three dots appear next to his name, but I swipe out of the app before he can respond.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



That Saturday night, I'm reminded of what Holden told me at the indoor pool on my last drop off; that Saturday nights are usually empty at the pool. Everyone's at the football game or partying.

Jill has to work all night on a catering gig, so I'm totally in the clear to go out without anyone hounding me where I'm going so late.

I hold the pair of panties from last night in my hands and quickly stuff it in a sandwich bag and bury it in my backpack.

I've never done anything like this in my whole life, which I've determined is why I'm so excited by it. It's not that I actually get off on this depraved stuff. It's the fact that I've lived my entire life by a code. I've been nothing but *the good girl* my entire life. And for the first time ever, I'm being bad.

Very bad.

So bad that I'm not even sure what I'm doing is legal, but I'm too afraid to google it. What if the very act of googling it puts me on some sort of government watch list for God's sake?

I'm dressed in all black, like some sort of spy with the pair of panties tucked safely away in my backpack. And I even brought my bathing suit and a towel. If the pool is truly as

empty as Holden says, I might dip into the hot tub tonight. Sure, its main intended use is for athletes, but I'm a performer. I dance. I use my body as a tool on the stage and I have every right to use the hot tub as any other student at this school.

At least, this is what I'm telling myself.

I get to the pool and flash my ID at the half-asleep security guard and glide silently toward the lockers with the stealth of an undercover agent.

As Holden had promised, the place is absolutely empty.

There's not a soul. Not a footstep. Not a splash.

Not a breath outside of the exhale that leaks through my parted lips in a relieved sigh.

I head to the locker and quickly unlock it with the exact same code as last time and yank the door open with a deafening rattle—1314

I pause, waiting to see if anyone else is around, having heard the clatter.

Silence.

Still no one.

“Thank you, Holden,” I whisper. Guilt shivers around the edges of my consciousness at saying his name aloud.

Holden.

This whole thing feels like a weird betrayal to him though I don't know why.

We're not dating.

We're not even friends.

Well, not exactly.

And yet, he gave me my first kiss, so I feel this odd sort of loyalty to him.

That's what this is, I think. This guilty feeling is just my weird biological cogs inflating what we are to each other. So this job of mine feels like cheating when it's not.

It's the furthest thing.

You can't cheat on someone who isn't your boyfriend.

I exhale and yank the locker door open, startled to find a wrapped present inside with a card resting on top, the name Rose scribbled on the front in blocky handwriting.

I smile, picking up the card first and turning it over in my hand.

It's a small 4 x 5 notecard with roses pressed into the border.

On the back, it says:

A LITTLE GIFT... SINCE I CAN'T OFFICIALLY GIVE YOU A "HAND." ANY VIDEOS OR PHOTOS YOU WANT TO SEND WILL BE MOST WELCOMED.

-LIGHT

I pick up the small, rectangular wrapped box and open it.

I gasp.

Out loud.

Inside the box is a small vibrator, a pair of panties, and another, um, *accessory* that I don't recognize. It looks like jewelry with a long chain connecting... clamps?

I lift the panties out of the box. They feel expensive.

Lace, but not the cheap, scratchy lace panties I buy from Target. This feels like woven silk. And in place of the thong part, it has a string of pearls.

Pearls.

I mean, what is even the point of wearing these if they don't cover you at all?

I drop the stuff back into the box and shove it into the bottom of my bag, dropping the sandwich bag with my used panty into the locker in its place.

The irony isn't lost on me. How different our two packages and presentations are.

His, lavish and expensive. A gift with a personalized card, gold tissue paper, and satin ribbons...

And mine. Panties stuffed into a Ziploc sandwich bag.

If that's not an allegory for my whole flipping life, I don't know what is.

Face burning, I shut the locker and turn the dial on the lock to make sure it's secured tight and safe.

I glance at my phone. 10:30 p.m.

Jill won't be home until after midnight. She's working the reception for the football team tonight... which is precisely why I didn't take her up on her offer to get me a gig working it.

As badly as I need the money, I can't bring myself to serve food to Holden, Dave, and Duncan... not to mention Addison and any other friends of theirs that might be there.

I'm not *that* desperate...

Yet.

Besides, if I keep selling a few more videos to this buyer, I might be good for the first semester's payment, at least.

I peek into the pool, relieved that no one is here still. The hot tub beckons me, steam rising from its still surface.

I quickly change into my swimsuit, then pad back out to the pool room with my phone in hand and towel slung over my arm.

Setting a timer for forty minutes on my phone, I place it on the table off to the side, turn on the jets, then sink into the steaming blissful waters with a sigh.

My head falls back against the lip of the hot tub and I close my eyes as the water swirls and bubbles around me, jetting against my lower back.

I'm not sure how long I'm sitting there in absolute bliss before there's a small splash beside me. When I open my eyes, I scream and nearly launch out of my skin.

There's a man sitting in the hot tub beside me.

Not just any man...

Holden.

"Horking jackrabbit, Holden!"

A laugh explodes out of him. "Horking jackrabbit?"

I roll my eyes. "We've been through this already. Religious parents, remember?"

"Oh, I remember. Ever care to try cursing? Now that you're on your own?"

"I wouldn't call college *on my own*, but I don't know. Cursing just seems so... unnecessary."

He tilts his head. "How so?"

“Why say fuck when frack or flip or fork works just as well? Saying fuck seems so uncreative.”

He presses his mouth together, smothering his smile, but making that dimple even deeper. “Noted. Fuck is uncreative.”

“Exactly. Wait a minute,” I interrupt our stupid conversation and point at him. “Why aren’t you at that football party thing?”

He tilts his head, momentarily surprised. “How do you know about that party?”

I shrug. “Maybe I was invited.” It’s not a lie. I was invited... to work it.

He doesn’t challenge me on this, but his eyes narrow just the same. “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.”

His dig, referencing when I got drunk after taking Benadryl, isn’t lost on me. “Well, aren’t you the responsible one?”

He shrugs and sinks deeper into the water. “Just pretend I’m not here.”

We both know that’s impossible and I eye the exit.

He doesn’t know how long I’ve been here. For all Holden knows, I’ve been in here an hour and it’s time to go. I could just wish him a goodnight and slip ou—

“Don’t even think about it, freshman,” he says.

I turn my glare from the exit back to Holden. “Don’t call me that.”

“Fine. Don’t even think about it, *Katherine*.”

“That’s not much better,” I mutter.

“Your name isn’t much better than freshman?” His whiskey brown eyes flare with provocation. “Noted.”

“You know what I mean,” I counter.

“Do I? What I *know* is that you were debating making a run for it.”

Dang. Caught.

His eyes close once more and I allow my gaze to roam down his shirtless torso and notice that he does seem to be favoring his left shoulder a little, cradling his elbow with his right hand.

I crane my neck and gasp when I see the full extent of his injury on his left shoulder. “Holden,” I exhale his name and lean over to run my hands over the bruise blooming across his shoulder.

It’s huge.

Swollen. A bright, angry red with purple marks starting to pigment in splotches.

“You need ice, not a hot tub,” I say, horrified. “What happened?”

He gives me a long, soft look before saying, “I got sacked by some dude on the other team and landed on it weird.”

That sounds like the understatement of the year.

“Is it broken?”

“It dislocated on the field, but the medic popped it back in during halftime.”

I gape at him, sure that my eyes are bugging out of my skull. “I’m sorry. The medic *popped it back in* and then what?”

You just kept playing?”

He gives me a little smirk and shrugs with his non injured shoulder. “The show must go on, right?”

“Not if you dislocated your fudging shoulder, Holden! Cripes!”

Once more, he fights a smile. “You’re cute when you’re worried about me, you know that?”

I start to object, but the words die before they cross my tongue. I *am* worried about him. Saying otherwise would be a flat out lie.

I lick my lips as the muscles bunch at his triceps and pecs and heat pools in my belly. I snap my eyes forward, breaking the spell his perfectly chiseled body has over me.

I am not turned on by him. Nope. Not even a little.

Not even when he calls me cute and stares into my soul with his heated golden-brown eyes.

“We have a show to do,” I remind him. “I need my Romeo to be able to use both his arms.”

“It’ll be fine in a week,” he says, though I’m not sure I believe him. It looks really bad. “Don’t you worry about me, Freshman.”

“Stop that.”

He chuckles, a throaty sound that coils deep inside me, constricting something inside myself I didn’t realize even existed.

Ten minutes, I think. I’ll sit here for ten more minutes and then I’ll leave. It won’t look like I’m fleeing because 20-30

minutes is usually plenty of time for a person to stay in a hot tub.

My mind wanders to the alarm I set on my phone and I wonder how much time is left before it goes off. Maybe I'll get lucky and it's further along than I think it is.

The light sound of water splashing draws my attention back to him and I find he's slid closer to me. His eyes narrow as he takes me in, sweeping my body from head to what's hidden beneath the churning water.

My breath hitches and I'm grateful that he can't see much below the surface of the water. Despite my bikini, I feel suddenly very naked sitting here in this hot tub with him.

After taking his sweet time staring at my body, his gaze eventually roams back to my eyes. We stay there, locked in each other's stare for several long breaths like an intense game of chicken.

I will not lose.

I will not look away first.

His eyes shine with sin. Sin and something else I don't recognize at first...

Vulnerability, maybe?

I should run from Holden. Get out of this hot tub and run far, far away without looking back.

He's warned me of as much.

Multiple times.

But something draws me to him. Something inexplicable and powerful. Like being called into the ocean's waves despite

the warnings of a strong undertow. I'll let Holden sweep me beneath the surface; allow myself to drown in him.

“Rose,” Holden says finally.

My breath snags in my throat. “Excuse me?” I croak.

“Those roses are dangerous,” he says, his voice just above a whisper.

Rose.

My venmo handle. Could it be—

“On your bathing suit.” Holden’s eyes break away from mine, flicking down to my bikini top. “Roses.”

Oh.

Right.

My bikini is white with red roses... two rose blooms on my breasts of the bikini top, strategically placed right over my nipples.

The flutter in my stomach calms but I can’t help the surge of disappointment I feel that he isn’t my Light.

Despite everything, I secretly wish it’s Holden behind all these messages.

It would be easier in so many ways if it was someone I like on the other end of these emails. Someone I’m attracted to. Someone I could see myself playing these naughty games with for free.

It feels less seedy that way.

A laugh tumbles out of me, and despite myself, I shake my head. “Right. Of course.”

“You love roses,” he says.

“I do.”

“What is it you love about them?”

I pause, thinking. There’s many answers to that question, including but not limited to the multiple rose references in Romeo and Juliet. “The smell,” I finally answer. “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,” Holden says as though he’s piecing together an image.

“I guess so. I even use the same rose oil she used to use.” It’s just the simplest scent. Just rose scented oil in a roller ball. But I loved how soft and romantic I feel when I wear it.

Holden’s smile grows wider. “I’ve noticed. You always smell like roses and cherries.”

Cherries. “You noticed that? My perfume and my cherry lip balm?”

“Noticed it?” he snorts. “You’re like a walking garden most days.”

I blush, embarrassed that maybe I’ve overdone it on the perfume. A flutter of Holden’s knuckle to my cheek draws my attention back to him. “Don’t blush,” he whispers. “You smell perfect.”

My breath hitches, stalling somewhere at the back of my throat. But I don’t shrink away from his curious finger as his knuckle teases down my jaw, dragging a line down my neck.

His touch pauses at the strap of my bikini top, hooking into and tugging gently. Letting go, it ricochets back against my

skin with a small, stinging slap.

My nipples pucker against the scratchy spandex of my bathing suit and gooseflesh pebbles on my skin despite the heated temperature of the hot tub.

“Holden,” I groan, looking up. His lips are inches from mine.

I want, more than anything in this world, for him to kiss me again.

I want his lips on mine, exploring not just my mouth and tongue, but every centimeter of my body. I want to feel his kisses while the heated water of the hot tub bubbles around us, tickling over the rest of my skin.

The alarm on my phone blares, slicing through the silence.

I jump away from him as reality leaks back in.

He’s still Holden. Star quarterback.

Jerk extraordinaire.

And I’m just the virgin freshman who’s selling her panties to pay for college.

Holden’s brows wrinkle between his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

What’s wrong?

Everything.

Everything is wrong.

I’m here at this stupid pool on a Saturday night to deliver panties to a buyer so I can pay for school.

Panties that I masturbated in.

And photographed it.

And videoed it.

And I liked every second of it.

Tears burn at the back of my eyes and I squeeze them shut against the emotions flooding me.

I'm sick.

Depraved.

And as badly as I want to kiss Holden, I can't do it now.

Not tonight.

Not while I have this side job I'm hiding from him. I need to quit first. I need to message the buyer and tell him it's done.

Then, I'll come back to Holden. I'll come back and kiss him and let his hands roam every which way he wants.

"Nothing," I say. "Nothing's wrong." I glide backwards from him and jump out of the water to turn off my alarm.

When I spin around, he's turned to watch me, chin on his fist and looking up at me, admiring my body in a way that makes me feel entirely like a woman and nothing like the inexperienced college freshman I truly am.

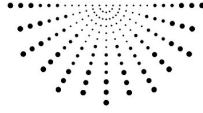
There's no doubt in my mind. He can see how turned on he makes me. He can see my arousal through the low slung bikini bottoms. See my puckered nipples pushing against the triangle top covering my breasts. See right through my hard exterior directly to the dirty girl I secretly am inside.

I snatch the towel from beside my phone and twist it around myself to cover my dripping body from his gaze.

"You're going to ruin me, Holden," I whisper, clutching the towel to my chest as water sluices down my legs and arms.

His eyes shoot up to meet mine and after a long breath, he gives a sharp, quick nod. “You’re already breaking me, Katherine. And I can’t find it in me to stop you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I get home from the pool and immediately send Light a message.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

The panties are in the locker. But I can't do this anymore. Consider me retired.

His message comes in within minutes.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Understood. No pressure to continue, but out of curiosity, can I ask why?

I don't owe him an explanation, but I respond regardless. Maybe because I have no one else I can confide in about this. I type out my response as I wiggle out of my wet bathing suit and climb into my pajamas.

@ANYOTHERROSE:

I like someone. And I can't do this and pursue that someone.

Three dots appear beside his name and I empty my backpack, freezing at the gift box that falls out onto my bed.

Crap-tastic. After the whole Holden run-in, I forgot to put his gift back in the locker.

My phone buzzes with his message.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

So you're choosing him over me and my money?

@ANYOTHERROSE:

Yes. I'm sorry.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

What if I offer you more money.

I inhale a sharp breath, anger heating my body. He thinks he can buy me off? I squeeze my eyes shut. Of course he thinks he can buy me off... he's literally been buying pieces of me.

@ANYOTHERROSE

No. No amount of money will change my mind.

I feel immediately better as soon as that message sends. Like ten thousand pounds is lifted off my chest.

@ANYOTHERROSE

I can return the gifts to the locker tomorrow.

I climb into bed and pull the covers up around my waist.

@LIGHTBREAKS90:

Keep them. Consider them a bonus. Best of luck, Rose.

My fingers hover over the keyboard as I debate writing more.

I like Holden. And he clearly likes me, too, even if he's fighting it. But do I really want a guy who fights his feelings for me so hard? Wouldn't I be better off dating a guy like Nate?

Or would I be better off not dating at all, keeping this job and paying off my debt?

I don't answer the message and instead, lean across to plug my phone in and fall asleep before Jill comes home.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, Jill and I are at the dining hall and I'm staring at my lunch, pushing my uneaten salad around my plate.

"You're quiet today," Jill says. "Everything okay?"

I snap my eyes to hers, filled with fear that I'm so easily readable. "Yeah, I'm fine." An obnoxiously shrill giggle comes out too as I add, "Just stressed about the dorm payment."

She nods, concern tilting her brows. "Next weekend there's two catering gigs... neither is on campus, if you want in. It's probably a couple hundred bucks plus tips."

"Yeah," I say. "I'd appreciate that." I'm going to need as much honest work as I can get now that my side hustle is gone.

"Are you working today?" I ask.

She grunts. "Yeah. There's this stupid fancy tea party for some group out in the suburbs."

“Tea party?” I scrunch my nose. “I didn’t realize people still had those.”

“Not past the age of five, at least,” she mutters with a sigh. “I should probably go get ready for it. We have to dress in *garden party* attire,” she says, throwing air quotes around the phrase.

“Have fun with that,” I say, trying my best to smile and tease her like nothing’s weighing on my mind.

“I’ll try. See you tonight.” She hops up, taking her tray with her and depositing it in the dirty dish bin before running off back toward our dorms.

I sit for several minutes, pushing my food around my plate with a sigh. I’m too stressed to eat, yet, I paid for this food, so I force down a few more bites.

Denim clad thighs appear in front of me and I slowly look up to find Duncan, Holden’s roommate, standing in front of me. “Katherine, right? Holden’s friend,” he says, all smiles.

I ignore the part about Holden, tucking a stray hair behind my ear and give him an uneasy smile. “It’s Kate, actually. Not Katherine. That’s just a weird, um, inside joke between me and Holden.”

“Kate,” he repeats and plops down in Jill’s abandoned seat. He drops two to-go boxes down in front of him. “How’s it going?”

“Um... fine. How’s Holden’s shoulder?”

Duncan cringes as he snaps open the lid on one of the to-go boxes, then lifts a massive burger out of it. “You know about that, huh? I didn’t see you at the game.”

I press my lips together and shrug, not wanting to give away the fact that Holden and I ran into each other at the hot tub last night. “Well, he is my Romeo,” I say. “And Jill was working catering for the party last night.”

“Jill. The redhead, right?” With the burger halfway to his mouth, Duncan pauses, licking his lips like he was remembering a juicy steak dinner.

I narrow my eyes. I don’t doubt Duncan’s a good guy... generally speaking. But I don’t like the far off look in his green gaze as he repeats my roommate’s name. “Yeah. The very smart, very hard-working, very talented writer who happens to have red hair. Her name is Jill.”

“Easy,” he chuckles and takes a big bite of his burger. “I was just trying to place the name.” The burger is halfway gone after only three bites and he wipes at his mouth with a napkin before dropping it and leaning back in the chair. “So, is Holden enjoying this theater thing?” he asks, waving his hand at me, like I, personally, represent the ‘*theater thing*.’

“I don’t know if he’s enjoying it or not, but he’s really good. He’s got a lot of raw talent.”

Duncan gives a thoughtful *hmm* sound and tips his chair back on two legs.

“Why?” I ask.

“Coach was asking me,” Duncan says. “Holden’s been a little distracted at games and practices lately. Has the guys worried.”

“And you think that’s because of theater?”

“No, *Coach* thinks it’s because of the theater,” Duncan says, dropping the chair back on the floor. “The rest of the

team thinks it's because he hasn't gotten laid since school started."

My heart skips in my chest, fluttering against my ribs. In a move so reflexive, I'm powerless to stop it, my gaze jerks up to meet Duncan's. "He hasn't?"

"Nope," Duncan says and shuts the lid of the to-go box even though he only ate about half of his burger. "Pretty weird considering that guy was known for having a different chick in his bed every weekend. No girlfriends, mind you. He doesn't get serious with anyone, but he sure liked the casual shit. Or at least, he used to."

I bristle at the statement. I'm not sure how to take any of it.

Duncan grabs a napkin from the center of the table and wipes his mouth. "But I don't think that's why his football game is off," he adds.

"You don't?"

Duncan shakes his head, wadding the napkin in his fist. "Nope. I don't think it's theater. And I don't think it's blue balls. I think ... it's *you*."

I suck in a breath. "Me? He doesn't even *like* me. He barely tolerates me."

But even as I say the words, I know they're not true. Last night, he liked me.

He liked me enough to try to kiss me.

To stare at my body in the bikini.

Duncan slides the untouched to-go box of food across the table toward me with a twinkle in his eyes. "He's home resting his shoulder today. But I've got a study group thing at the

library to get to. Would you mind bringing Holden his lunch for me?"

I stare at the to-go box.

Holden's food.

"I... I think I'm the last person he wants to see."

"If you really believed that, your face wouldn't be the shade of Jill's hair." Duncan snorts as he stands and grabs his half eaten burger box. "He took some painkillers before I left, but he was starving. So feel free to wake him up... however you see fit," Duncan adds with a wink.

"But if he's sleeping, how do I even get in—"

"It's a keypad on the front door. The code is 1314."

Heat floods my face and I snap my gaze to Duncan's. "Did you say the code is *1314*?"

Duncan nods. "Yeah. We each have our own pincode for the front door."

"And..." I gulp against the racing pulse thrumming at my jaw. "And 1314 is *your* code?"

He gives me an odd look. "Hell no. I'm not trusting you with my code. That one's Holden's." With that, he disappears.

I stare at the box of food he left.

This is a lot to process for one lunch. Holden hasn't had sex since meeting me. Duncan thinks he not only likes me, but likes me so much that it's affecting his football game.

And now... 1314.

The exact same code I'd been given for the locker at the panty drop-offs.

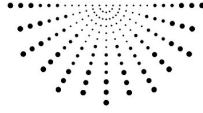
The locker in the pool where Holden always mysteriously showed up every time I made a drop off.

It's too big of a coincidence.

I take a deep breath before standing and grabbing the food for Holden.

It's time to put on my big girl panties and face the music.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



*M*y knees are shaking as I get off the bus near Holden's condo.

The burger and fries from the food hall are no doubt cold and rubbery by now, but that's not why I'm here.

I need to know.

I need to see if Light is Holden.

If Desperate for You is Holden.

And if so, does he know I'm Rose?

Or is this just one giant, insane coincidence?

Coincidences like this don't happen, a tiny voice whispers in the back of my mind.

I squeeze my eyes shut as I turn the corner from the bus stop and walk the block to his front door. Lucky for me, he lives very close to the off-campus bus stop.

I lift my trembling fist to the door and try knocking first before using the code Duncan gave me.

No answer.

The keypad of their door taunts me, teasing, torturing me with the code that I know personally matches my high roller.

The man who's single handedly been bankrolling me for a couple weeks.

I'm not sure how to feel about it yet.

A piece of me is holding out that maybe, just maybe, it's a big misunderstanding. Maybe he's not my buyer. Maybe it's his roommate? Or someone who knows his code?

Although, truly, that's even worse.

Despite everything that's happened so far with Holden and me, I trust him far more than I trust another random person.

Swallowing, I give one more try and ring the doorbell.

Still nothing.

Snaptastic.

I punch in the code I've come to know so well over the last couple weeks. The light on the Schlage lock buzzes, turns green, and a robotic female voice says, *Unlocked*.

I poke my head inside first and peek around the immaculate open concept living room/kitchen that I recognize from the party I helped cater the first week of school.

It's way too clean to belong to a bunch of college boys. *They must have a cleaning service that comes*, I think as I quietly shut the door behind me. "Holden? It's Kate. I have lunch for you," I call out into the otherwise silent house.

Still nothing.

Bugger.

I make my way down the hall to where I know his bedroom is and give a soft knock on that door.

Once again, no answer.

Maybe he's not even home? Maybe he got tired of waiting on this burger from Duncan and left to get lunch himself?

I'm about to abort the mission when I hear a quiet grunt from inside his bedroom and a whole other sort of paranoia sweeps my body. What if he's in there with someone? Duncan said he hasn't been with a girl since the start of school, but maybe that changed? Or maybe Duncan doesn't know his best friend like he thinks he does?

I think I might actually puke if I walk in on him with someone in bed.

"Holden?" I croak again quietly, my mouth nearly pressed to the door.

No answer.

I clench my jaw and open his bedroom door, my heart pounding at the wild thoughts racing in my mind about what might be on the other side.

Please don't be with anyone, please don't be with anyone...

But as I open the door, all I'm met with is Holden in bed, fast asleep. He's got a towel draped over his eyes, his good arm flung over top of his head while his bad shoulder is wrapped with an ace bandage and several melting ice packs.

And he's deliciously shirtless.

Heat flares at the apex of my thighs and every muscle in my body clenches with the flood of desire. The styrofoam box holding his food cracks against the press of my fingers and I quickly set it down on his desk.

I've been seeing way too much of Holden's bare chest lately.

Or not enough? A wicked voice whispers inside me.

He gives another grunt, his mouth twisting in what I assume is pain. But he's still fast asleep.

The drawers on his desk call to me.

If he did buy my panties, surely they'll be here somewhere in his bedroom.

My fingers twitch as I reach out and open the top drawer on his desk.

Again, shockingly tidy and organized for a college kid... but no panties.

I open the second drawer. A notebook. Pens. A few checkbooks.

No panties.

The third drawer down looks like more of the same and I'm about to close it when the corner of a notecard catches my eye.

Fancy notecards... with roses pressed into the corners.

I shift some Post-Its to the side and pick up an entire pack of blank notecards... just like the one that was waiting for me in the locker, signed by Light.

Beside them rests what looks like a journal. I flip open the first page and peer at the blocky handwriting.

It's an exact match to the note I received.

I immediately shut Holden's journal, guilt twisting in my belly as I sneak a peek at him from over my shoulder, still fast asleep.

It's all enough. Between the code on the door, the notecards, and the handwriting, it's enough to know that

Holden is the one who has been buying my panties. That I've been sending him pictures and videos of myself.

But I need to see them. I need to see the panties.

They must be here somewhere.

I spin around and freeze as I spot his nightstand.

The nightstand is where everyone keeps their naughty stuff, right? Especially when he claimed to use my panties to... well, take care of himself.

As silently as I can, I sneak over to the drawers there and pull open the bottom one first.

There, still folded in their individual bags, are my panties. Every single one. Each sandwich bag is marked with Holden's handwriting describing what I'd been doing that day.

I lift the pink pair, the first pair from the day we were asked to read together in class. In blocky letters, it says:

**READ ROMEO TO HER JULIET. KISSED HER EAR.
SHE LIKED IT AND HATED IT.**

One by one, I flip through the panties and study his notes. Sucking in a sharp breath, I gasp as I lift the pair I recognize to be what I wore on my date with Dave. The night Holden broke us up. The night I came over and demanded Holden kiss me.

POPPED HER KISS CHERRY.

Tears blur my vision.

This was why he wanted photo evidence every day of the panties I wore? So he could record what we did... what *I* did that day and then secretly get off on it?

A shudder tumbles down my spine. It's disgusting.

It's degrading.

I should hate him. I *do* hate him.

And yet, heat blooms between my legs.

Traitorous desire floods my core.

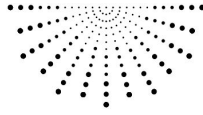
And as much as I hate Holden, I hate myself just a little bit more.

I wipe the back of my hand against my eyes and shove the panties back in the drawer, standing and rushing out of Holden's room.

I don't know how. And I don't know when. But I will make Holden pay for this.

I will get him back for his depravity if it's the last thing I do.

EPILOGUE



*H*olden

5 YEARS LATER...

Famous Broadway director, Reid Bradley and I stand outside of the small downtown theater on First Avenue in New York City. Plumes of smoke surround us as the other theatergoers smoke their pre-show cigarettes.

The curls of smoke crook their fingers toward me, beckoning me to light the emergency cigarette I keep with me at all times, despite the fact that I haven't smoked in years.

I inhale a deep breath of second hand smoke and sigh as memories flood me with the carcinogen. Dammit. Why does that hit have to be so fucking sweet?

Reid studies the program he'd gotten inside the door. "Fringe Festivals," he sighs. "Where talent is rarely discovered and many shows are ripped off by more well-known playwrights."

"Damn, man. Defeatist much?"

"You're too new to this, Holden. Give it a few years, you'll be jaded, too."

“New? I’ve got three Tony Awards under my belt,” I scoff as I purposefully step into a cloud of smoke someone blows my direction and inhale deeply. *Fuck, that’s good.*

“And so fuckin’ humble about it, too,” Reid mutters.

Even as I admit that out loud, I can feel the eyes on us. Reid and I might not be the type of celebrities that get recognized grabbing coffee at Starbucks, but in this crowd of hungry playwrights and undiscovered actors? We’re the goddamn chum in shark-filled water. Not a soul at this show tonight doesn’t recognize us.

But thankfully, no one is approaching us to get a photo or a signature.

“Keep in mind,” Reid continues, turning those mentor eyes on me, “this is going to be your first time directing a show rather than starring in it. It’s a totally different beast.” He pauses, reading the bios inside the program. “And need I remind you, I’ve got *ten* Tony Awards on my shelf. So I don’t want to hear about your measly fuckin’ three.” He tosses a wink in my direction, then smacks my elbow with the back of his hand. “Come on. I want to get good seats.”

I groan and follow him into the theater. “We’re not going to sit in the front row are we?”

“Fuck no. Good seats when you’re as known as we are? It means the back row where we can slip the fuck out in the first ten minutes if it’s terrible.”

“Thank Christ.”

We climb the stairs to the back row of seats in the dusty, dank theater. The whole place probably only seats seventy people total.

And it's far from filled tonight. Granted, it's a nine p.m. show on a Wednesday. Not the best time slot and not the best location... even for the Fringe.

Reid leans over to me and whispers, "Something tells me we're not going to be able to slink out of here even if we wanted to."

I open the program and suck in a breath of air so sharp, it could puncture my goddamn lungs. Kate Harris's black and white headshot stares back at me from the first page.

She's as stunning as I remember. Gorgeous with cascading long, blonde hair. Eyes that could drill a hole into me. Full, wet lips parted in such an innocent way that still had whispers of *come fuck me* in the undercurrent. In the four years since I'd seen her last, not much had changed.

And yet, everything had changed.

She's no longer the young, virgin freshman that taunted me my senior year of college.

She's a woman.

A woman who's an actress here in New York.

A woman with a life of her own.

A woman with experiences of her own...

That don't involve me.

She's a woman with a sordid history.

A sordid history because of *me*.

I fucked up. I fucked up so big with her that I could barely look at my own damn reflection for a year.

And despite trying to apologize for years... and years of her ignoring me... I gave up.

Kate doesn't want anything to do with me or my attempts at reparation. She's made that perfectly clear through the years.

But now, seeing her headshot staring back at me? I'm not done trying to make amends. One way or another, I'll make it up to her for what I did. How I ruined her. How I shattered her.

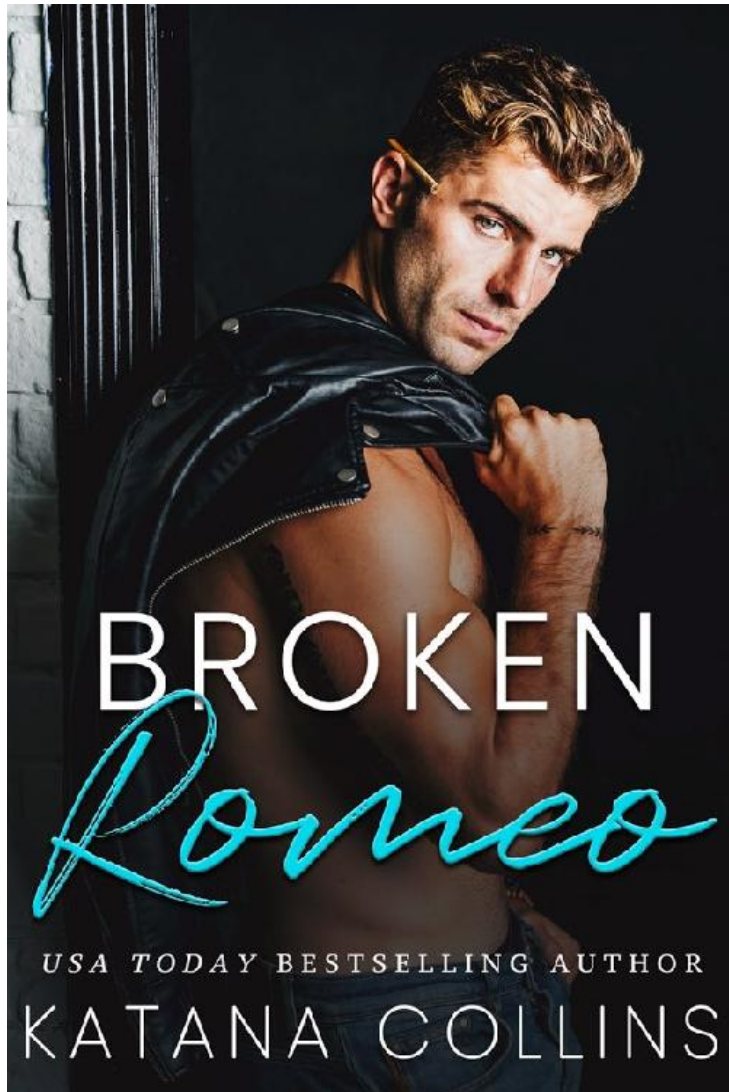
My shattered Juliet.

One way or another, I'll repair you.

THANK you for reading SHATTERED JULIET! I hope you loved this first installment of Holden and Kate's epic, emotional love story.

Dying to know what happens next? [Order Broken Romeo](#) now! Or subscribe to my [Patreon page](#) to get early access to both Broken Romeo and Rebel Romeo!





BROKEN

Romeo

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATANA COLLINS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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 [Patreon](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) or in her [reader group, Kat's Kittens!](#)

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