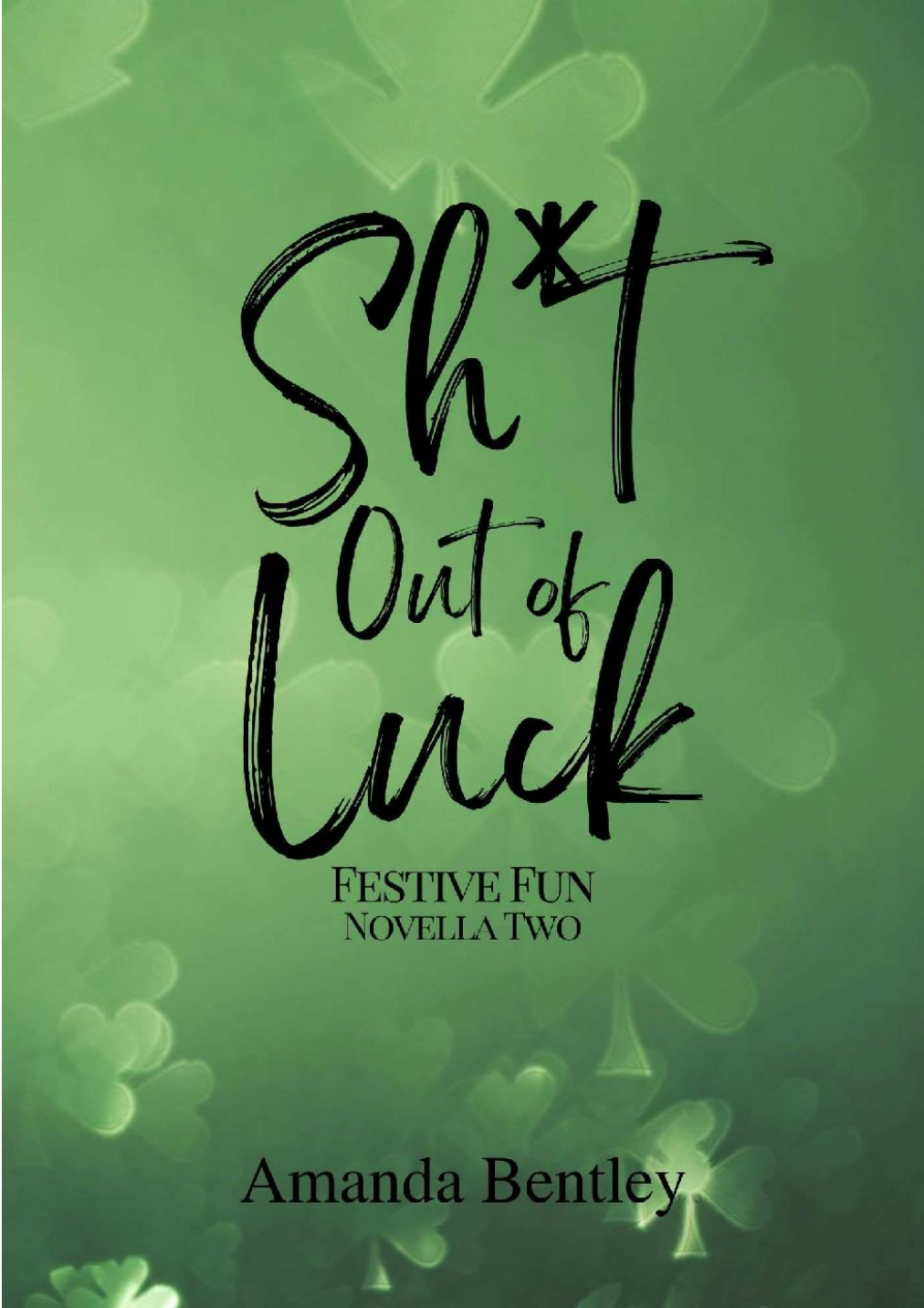


FESTIVE FUN  
NOVELLA THREE



Sh\*t  
Out of  
Luck

AMANDA BENTLEY



Sh\*t  
Out of  
Luck

FESTIVE FUN  
NOVELLA TWO

Amanda Bentley



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Sh\*t Out of Luck (Festive Fun # 3)

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Book Four Info

Also by Amanda Bentley

Acknowledgments

To anyone who's ever been down on their luck.

# Playlist

Listen on Spotify!

1. "Circles" by Post Malone
2. "CHRONICALLY CAUTIOUS" by Braden Bales
3. "DEVIL" by Shinedown
4. "Shape of You – Acoustic" by Ed Sheeran
5. "Addicted" by Saving Abel
6. "Falling Slowly" by Vwillz
7. "Big Man, Little Dignity" by Paramore
8. "Inside Out" by Eve 6
9. "Friends Don't" by Maddie & Tae
10. "Just Pretend" by Bad Omens
11. "Stay" by Post Malone
12. "Know" by Saysh, Anderson Rocio
13. "She Knows" by J. Cole, Cults, Amber Coffman



# Chapter One

February 18th

I've never doubted my ability to read until this moment. My eyes squeeze shut, my face scrunching along with them. There's no way I read that right.

Why would Brad Atkin's name be on a police report in Santi's guest bedroom?

Is Lorenzo really stalking me? It seems to be the only explanation. Why the hell else would there be a report for Brad in Santi's house?

Better yet, why is it in his guest bedroom?

It dawns on me—Santi mentioned having a roommate. Everyone has left except for Lorenzo.

*Is this his room?*

I force my eyes open and scan the room haphazardly. I need to read the rest of the report. I need to know what it says.

Recovering the paper from the floor, I straighten it and read the narrative.

Dispatch received call from anonymous witness advising that a car was seen crashing into a tree on highway 135 (see page 2 for location details). Arrived at the scene of collision at 2001 hours. Ambulance (requested by dispatch) arrived at approximately 2003. Victim stated unknown V2 was attempting to get in V1's lane but did not see V1. Victim swerved to avoid collision and hit a tree. V1 is extensively damaged (see detailed report on page 3). Victim described feelings of dizziness and nausea. Victim's hands showed lacerations over knuckles and fingers. Victim advised he did not see the license plate of V2 but described it as a black coupe. Victim is unsure of V2 make and model. Victim could not make out features of V2 driver. Paramedics dictated that medical assistance should be utilized and Victim accepted.

The door knob turns as I finish reading. I choose not to hide the paper. I choose not to shut the bottom drawer of the nightstand. If *he's* stalking me, *I'm* allowed to snoop.

“Where do you live?” I demand the second Lorenzo shuts the door behind him.

Still in just his boxers, I watch his muscles tense as his eyes flick to the paper in my hands then back to my face. His eyes widen, almost imperceptibly. I wave the report for emphasis.

“Why were you digging through my shit?”

“Why do you have a police report with *Brad's* name on it?” I counter, my low and lethal voice unfamiliar to me.

He doesn't answer and he doesn't move, his wary eyes analyzing.

“You *are* stalking me, aren't you?” I ask, recalling the night he stormed in on my date with Brad. A range of emotions flicker deep in his irises, settling on reservation.

“Stalking is extreme.”

“Extreme? I'll tell you what's extreme. Finding out that you have a police report for a guy I went on *one* date with! How? Why? I—”

I've started babbling because I'm at a loss, trying to wrap my head around the facts here. Why in the hell would he be so obsessed that he's stalking me, yet not want to be more than friends with benefits?

“I wanted to make sure you weren’t going to see a crazy man.”

“What, so this was for protection?” I scoff and toss the paper. “This was some heroic gesture? How can you expect me to believe that?”

He takes a hesitant step towards me, as though I’m a growling dog that’s prepared to bite. “I care about you, Kate.”

“You care about me?” I laugh mirthlessly. “This feels like *way* more than caring. This is creepy. This is—” I glance at the fallen piece of paper. “How did you even get this report? Why is there only one page?”

The questions are coming to me faster than I can spew them. This feels dirty, disgusting, out of control. Out. Of. Control. It’s too much. This is too much. Too much for so little.

“Kate.” He’s in front of me now, though I’m not sure when he moved. I’m sinking into the depths of this chaos like quicksand.

“Hey.” His tone is soft. He pulls my trembling chin up with a finger. I stare into his eyes but I’m not seeing anything; the ringing in my ears is too loud. The pounding of my heart is too distracting.

“Why?” I whisper. I zero in, staring deep into his eyes. I see desperation, I see yearning, I see... pain.

“I was trying to protect you,” he whispers, a crack in his voice. He places his hands on my waist tentatively, and for a

moment, I let him.

But his touch doesn't provide the comfort I need.

I take a step back, his hands sliding off. I shake my head.  
"You make no sense to me."

"Let me try," he says. He looks so earnest, so sincere, it confuses me more.

"Why are you so desperate to protect me yet you don't want anything more?"

"You said you weren't looking for a boyfriend."

"What, so this is my fault now?" The shock is melting into puddles at my feet.

"That's not what I meant. It's just—"

"Tell me. What did you mean?"

"I thought this was a mutual agreement!"

"It is!" I let out a grunt of frustration. "But I wouldn't call stalking me on a date 'casual'."

He looks away and his jaw ticks, but he turns back and bores his eyes into mine. "I ca—don't—want anything serious. It has nothing to do with you."

"Have you ever had a girlfriend?"

He starts to shake his head but stops, looking down.

I laugh humorlessly. "I'm her, aren't I? I'm that stupid, idiot girl who gets strung along, hoping she's different. That she can be enough."

His eyes snap to mine. “Don’t say that. Of course you’re enough.”

“Don’t  *fucking* lie to me!” My voice is getting louder.

“Just because I don’t want anything serious doesn’t mean I don’t care about you!”

We’re back to screaming, just like Valentine’s Day. My head is spinning. This doesn’t feel right. None of this feels right. I take a few deep breaths, my eyes fluttering shut. Thankfully, Lorenzo stays silent, allowing me a moment.

“You haven’t answered the first question,” I say evenly.

“Which?” he replies coolly. I’m certain he knows exactly which I’m referring to, but I humor him anyway.

“Where do you live?”

He hesitates. His shoulders sink, his chest deflates. “Here.”

“This house?”

He nods and tosses his hands out. “This room.”

“Why?” My voice is a broken whisper.

“Because,” he answers, not feigning ignorance this time. “I don’t like to show people where I live. I don’t like others knowing about my personal life.”

“Are you telling me all your friends tonight don’t know you live here?”

His silence cracks my slowly freezing heart.

“I’m leaving.” *Fuck* not running away; I should have left earlier.

*But then you wouldn’t have found the report.*

“Kate, please,” he says, wrapping a hand around my wrist. There’s a deep rooted plea to the way he says it, like his heart will replicate mine if I walk out that door.

Like all my choices surrounding this man, I make the wrong one. I don’t move.

“I’ve known them all for years. Santi and I both. It’s different. I haven’t known you that long, I haven’t... I wanted to keep this as casual as possible.”

“So you achieve that by lying to me? By stalking me?”

“I fucked up,” he says. His eyes belong to a traitor. Yet I want to believe that the remorse I see in them is genuine.

“Look, I get that people lie. But you have to understand that this is all so fucking weird. We’re hooking up in a room I thought was your friend’s guest room, only to find out it’s actually your room. Then, you have an incident report for a guy I went on *one* date with in your drawer.”

I see his dark depths shift, like the bricks for the wall are being cemented as we speak. Call me a dumbass, but I still hold hope that some explanation he provides will change this, will reverse the damage.

“You’re not just some chick. I invited you to the New Year’s party for a reason.”

He's trying to convince me, to make it seem like his intentions were pure.

“You're driving me insane.”

“You've been driving me insane for months! Join the *fucking* club!” He has the nerve to actually look irritated by that fact, and I'm not sure why, but it's what makes me believe him.

I inhale deeply, trying to clear my thoughts. He doesn't reach for me again, despite the pulsing need to feel him.

“How can you not care if I date Brad again?” *If I'm going to get any answers, now's the time.*

“Of course I care, Kate. I want you to be mine.” He runs a hand through his hair. “But I know that's not fair. It's not fair of me to ask you to be with me at arm's length and expect you not to date.”

He's giving me serious whiplash.

“I'm so confused...” Trying to calm my racing thoughts is like trying to douse a fire with oil. It only causes it to burn brighter. “You keep me at a distance yet stalk me. You stormed in on my date yet tell me to let you know if I do continue to date him.”

“Fuck!” He claws at his chest. “You think I want to feel like this? You think I want to think about you constantly? To feel possessive over a person for the first time in my life? To feel like I need you?”



My stomach drops, tingles spreading down my arms. I'm not sure if I should be enamored or afraid.

I settle somewhere in the middle. "This is only confusing me more."

His jaw ticks. "I'm sorry. I wish I could be clearer."

"What does that even mean? Just *be* clearer."

I've never felt so pathetic. I'm basically begging him for answers. Basically putting my entire emotional self on the line for someone who's only filling me with doubt. I hate being so pushy, so nosy, but I can't help it.

I made my peace with being friends with benefits, with this never being more. But he keeps making these strange, cryptic confessions that rattle my brain and have me thinking about more when I know I shouldn't.

"Answer me this first, princess." The use of my pet name doesn't make me feel any better. "Why don't you want a boyfriend?"

"I—" The vulnerability of the truth feels too painful. "I don't want to get hurt."

His brows pinch together as he searches my eyes. "I don't want to hurt you. I'll walk away right here, right *now*, if I'm hurting you."

"I'm not hurting. I meant what I said—I'm down for friends with benefits. But at this point, you're making no sense to me. I feel like I've been clear on what I want. I haven't lied."

He bows his head for a moment before meeting my eyes again. “I know.”

“I know that I’m annoying with my constant questions, demanding answers. But it’s for a reason—I don’t want to leave room for misunderstanding. And at this point, I don’t understand you at all.”

He nods, his eyes volleying between mine.

“Honestly, you’ve never told me once why you don’t want to be my boyfriend. *Why* you only want to keep things casual.”

He sighs and looks out the window. Time passes slowly and all too quickly. “Because I’m not capable of loving you properly.”

I literally bite my tongue to refrain from asking why. My eyelids feel so heavy. This is exhausting.

I nod. “We can figure this all out. We can just see where things go, like you said.”

He slowly turns back to me, his steely eyes full of resolve. “There is no we. There is you. There is me. This is fun.”

His words stab into my heart, cracking the newly formed ice. I wonder if he can see the shards in my eyes. I refuse to cry so I ball my fists tightly at my sides.

“What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Make a choice.” He’s calm, too calm. If he cared so much, if he needed me like he says he does, then why wouldn’t he take all of me? Let me have all of him?

“I need to think about all of this,” I say. My eyes sting from the effort it takes to resist the tears pricking them.

Lorenzo nods his head, then picks up the report. He tosses it back into his drawer and closes it.

It’s symbolic, really, what opening a drawer can result in. This is why I like having boxes mentally shelved. I can pretend they don’t exist.

But this box is wide open and I have to decide what to do with it.

“Do you want me to drive you home?” he asks. He has my clothes in his hand and passes them to me. I take them, holding them close to my chest.

I should take an Uber; being around him is too intoxicating. But every fiber of my being wants to be near him, to share the same air.

I let out a heavy, mangled breath. “Sure.”

He nods, retrieving a pair of black jeans from the dresser tucked in the closet. I tear my eyes from him and we put our clothes on in silence. He sits at the edge of his bed while tugging on a long-sleeved black shirt, keeping his face down. Once I’m redressed, I realize my shoes are still by the pool.

“My shoes...” I can’t form a coherent sentence. My mind is racing a mile a minute.

“I’ll grab them.” He stands up and walks to his closet, quickly opening and closing a drawer. “Here.” He turns around

and tosses me a pair of keys. They bounce off my open palm but I catch them when they fall back down.

“I’ll meet you out there.”

I nod and follow him out of the room. He breaks left to the patio and I turn right towards the front door. When I step outside, the cool breeze blows on my exposed skin, and I suddenly feel the weight of my wet hair. My feet absorb the coldness of the brick walkway.

My teeth begin to chatter, so I run to his black Audi, unlocking the doors with the fob. My fingers touch the cold metal of the car, and I rush inside. I look for the key to insert into the starter but I don’t find one. I glance behind the steering wheel and locate a button that says ‘start engine stop’.

I forgot they’d made those.

I drop the fob into the cup holder and press the button, but it doesn’t start. Something flashes on the screen between the speedometer and tachometer. I lean over the center console to look at the words above an image of a foot over a line: `Press brake pedal to start engine.`

It takes me a moment to comprehend that I need to press the break with the button. I debate waiting for Lorenzo, but my bones are rattling from the cold. I crawl over the center console and sit in the driver’s seat, placing my foot on the break. My shaking becomes more intense from the nerves of having my hands over a steering wheel, even if the vehicle *is* off. The amount of anxiety I have just from being in the driver’s seat is ridiculous, I know that.

But that's the thing about fear. Once you let it take control of you, it grows into an insurmountable reality, no matter how false it is.

I take a deep breath, my ribs expanding with the oxygen I force in, and press down on the brake pedal. I uncurl the fingers of my right hand that were gripping the leather wheel and slowly drag my pointer finger to the start button. As my finger touches it, the door opens and I jump in my seat.

“Oh my god!” I yelp, my hand flying to my racing heart.

“Just me, princess.” Lorenzo says with an amused grin, my shoes in one hand. He takes in my leg, still extended with my foot on the brake pedal, before meeting my wide eyes. “You want to drive?”

“God, no. I just wanted to turn the car on!” I release my hold over the car parts and clamber into the passenger seat. Lorenzo drops into the driver's side as naturally as rain dropping into a body of water. He drops my shoes on the floorboard beneath me and presses his foot into the pedal without a thought, holding down the press to start button and letting the engine purr on.

“Where's the key?” he asks, tossing his hand onto the gear shift and glancing in his rear view mirror.

“Right here,” I say, pointing to the cup holder. He reverses out of the driveaway, pops the gear into drive, then reaches into the cup holder.

“Cool feature in this car,” he says, placing the fob into a discreet pocket within the cupholder. I meet his eye and my favorite twinkle is there. It’s clear he has a fascination with this damn machine.

“Cool,” I say, but it’s probably the uncoolest thing I’ve ever seen. Cars are purely utilitarian to me, serving the purpose of getting us from point A to point B. I see no pleasure to seek from it.

“You could have driven if you wanted. I don’t mind.” Lorenzo speeds up quickly, and it only just occurs to me that I’m surprised this thing isn’t a stick shift.

“Ohhh, no. No, no, no.” I let out a sort of maniacal laugh, and he pegs me with a curious stare. “No, I don’t drive.”

His eyebrows shoot up into his hair. And then, he belts out a full belly laugh.

“What?” I say, frowning. He continues cackling into the enclosed space, the car steadily increasing in speed. I force my eyes to stay on him and not on the speedometer. I grip the car seat to hold in my nerves.

“A control freak that doesn’t drive? You continue to surprise me, Kate,” he finally says when his laughter settles.

“Excuse me? A control freak?” His eyes leave the road yet again, cutting me with a look that screams, “Don’t kid yourself”. I can’t help it, my eyes shift to the speedometer and my jaw drops.

“Slow down!” One hand flies over my chest while the other claws at his upper arm. He immediately lets off the gas, but he doesn’t hit the brakes. My eyes are still glued to the dash and my breathing slows when the arrow drops from ninety to sixty miles per hour, which is *still* over the speed limit.

“Sorry, babe,” he says, putting his eyes back on the road. He flexes his muscles, reminding me that I still have him in a vice grip. I don’t release him immediately, liking the physical connection. He seems to like it, too, because he doesn’t move at all, even though his hand dangles awkwardly near his thigh.

But I do eventually release my grip, slowly but surely. He adjusts his arm, placing his hand over the gear shift knob.

“Why don’t you drive?” he says conversationally. I pull on my flats as I ponder how to answer him.

“I can admit that it’s a bit of an irrational fear,” I start. He hardly slows down near a stop sign before blowing past it. I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment and tell myself to calm down. “When my parents were teaching me to drive, I backed into my dad’s car in the driveway.”

He waits for me to continue, but I don’t. There’s really nothing more to tell.

“That’s it? You hit your pops’s car and called it quits?”

“I had a full blown panic attack, it was a whole thing. My dad swore up and down that it was fine, which I know it was. But I asked to stop for the day. The next few times my mom or dad asked if I wanted to practice again, I’d say no.” The shame

seeps into my tone, embarrassed from the amount of power I've given to this silly fear. "I just kept thinking, what if that had been a person? Or an animal? I could have hurt someone. I *did* hurt that car."

I expect Lorenzo to laugh at me, or call me something insulting, but it never comes. He slowly nods his head as he turns onto the main road. "Yeah, okay. I can understand that."

My jaw drops but I close it quickly. "You understand?"

"I get not wanting to hurt people, even if the fear behind it is irrational."

"What, so you're some sort of hero?"

"I told you once, and I'll tell you again, Kate. I'm not going to save you."

This time, his words force goosebumps to erupt over my skin. I meant what I said, that I don't need saving. What does that really even mean, anyway? But it's his tone, filled with regret and sorrow, that has me reacting.

It forces the memory of everything I discovered not even an hour ago to seep to the forefront of my mind. Not that it's forgettable, but it's so easy—*too* easy—for me to get lost in him.

As though he senses where my thoughts have gone, Lorenzo asks, "You've never wanted to learn?"

It takes me a moment to remember what he's referring to. "I mean, I feel pathetic not driving. Letting this thing have power over me." He grins at that, mumbling, "Control freak." I



ignore him. “But it’s been so many years at this point. You know Azalea Pines doesn’t require you to have a car. And I’ve placed myself in a position where I won’t need one.”

He nods pensively, turning down the street towards my apartment. It’s quite impressive that he remembers where I live so well. He’s a mental map.

“What do your parents do?” he asks.

I’m a bit surprised that he’s asking about my family. “Um, my dad’s actually a cargo truck driver. My mom studied finance but she stayed home when I was born. Then when my dad made enough money, she decided not to rejoin the workforce. She does a lot of side stuff though, helps in the community and such. She’ll bookkeep temporarily during tax season, too.”

“And your dad never forced you to learn to drive?”

“He’s not the pushy type, really. He kept asking, but I kept saying no. He never pushed further than that.”

Lorenzo pulls up to my complex, directly in front of a parallel parking spot that he could have easily slid into. My eyes shift from my building to him, his eyes already on me.

There’s no twinkle, there’s no amusement. There’s no malice, either. He looks more resolute than I’ve ever seen him.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say quietly. The emotions of earlier have returned with the realization that once I leave this car, I don’t know what will happen.

“Of course.” Fire begins to burn behind his pupils, but the rest of him remains stoic. He doesn’t want it to show.

I decide not to engage. It won’t help either of us.

“See you at work?” I try to be light-hearted, though I’m anything but.

“See ya at work.”

I put my hand on the door handle and pull, but he calls my attention when the door opens swiftly.

“Promise me something.”

His voice is croaky, like when you’re about to start crying. But his eyes are dry and I know his heart is stone cold.

“You demand a lot of promises for a man who doesn’t give any.”

He’s undeterred, the fire turning into an inferno before me.

“Whatever you do, whatever you think. Please *know* that I do care about you, Kate.”

My lips part with the rush of electric shocks. That’s not what I was expecting. My heart picks up speed with the implication of his words.

I nod while blinking furiously, then shut his door and turn on my heel.

Staring into his eyes with the aftermath of his proclamation would make me stupid again.

But it’s time to get smart.

## Chapter Two

February 24th

It's been a week since I left his house. Well, basically. It was like 1 am when he finally dropped me off. I'd like to say I've fully processed everything he revealed but I'd be lying. Or maybe I have processed it but haven't accepted it. Something hasn't sat right with me since leaving. I want to believe his words, but I have a nagging feeling that I'm missing something.

And he's obviously had no problem lying, so I can't just take his word at face value.

We saw each other everyday at work in the break room. I kept up our usual greeting, but I didn't seek him out for more. He didn't, either.

I'm not sure how to feel about that.

On the one hand, it's a good thing, really, that he's respected my requests for space. Well, except for when he intruded on my date with Brad. But on the other hand, I wish he'd reach out. Even just a message, so I know he cares.

*Please know that I do care about you, Kate.*

His words have played on repeat in my mind like a broken record. I want to believe them oh-so-badly.

That's the part that stumps me the most. Does he actually care? His words oppose his actions. I have to be missing something. This must be why doctors can't operate on their own family—emotions get the best of you.

And what about the stalking? Am I supposed to be okay with him constantly looking into the things I do? I'm starting to doubt he overheard someone about my impulsive job search. I think he looked into it purposely.

*Why though?*

That's the question, isn't it? Why be so involved in a woman you claim to only want a casual, friends with benefits arrangement with?

I'm torn from my train of thought when Char walks through the door. We're meeting at Slooshed, an older bar in town. I canceled brunch last Sunday, too down from the events of that night to find the energy to be social.

"Hey, toots," she says, swinging her purse onto the table and plopping herself down in the chair. Her long, cherry tinged hair is fanned across her shoulders. She looks as content as ever, the freckles peppering her nose bringing out her beaming hazel eyes.

"Hey," I respond flatly.

"Uh-oh. Trouble in paradise?" she asks as she flips open the menu. It's another contrast in our friendship—she changes her

order based on mood, while I stick with the same thing every time.

“Paradise,” I scoff. I sip my lemon infused water but don’t add anything else.

“Well? Are you going to spill it, or do I have to pull teeth? The end result is the same.” She peers at me over her menu. This is the only time she ever resembles anything like stern. One brow is arched, and I know she won’t let it go.

“Fine, but let’s order first. It’s a long one.” The server passes by so we place our drink orders. I get a vodka-cranberry, and Char orders a raspberry margarita with a sugar rim instead of salt.

“I need something sweet if I have to hear something sour,” she explains. The server takes my menu; Char holds onto hers when he tries to take it.

I jump right into it, sparing only the details I don’t want to share. I don’t tell her about the way Lorenzo’s dick tasted in my mouth and how much I liked it. I don’t tell her how much prettier Larissa is than me. I don’t tell her how nervous I was to get into the pool in only underwear.

She listens silently, the only reactions I get being her facial ones. When I finish, she blows out a breath.

“First of all, I want to meet Larissa. She sounds dope. Second,” she pauses to lick the sugar rim and take a sip of her margarita. “That’s a lot of shit.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“How do you feel?”

“I feel... confused. It doesn't make any sense! Why do all this shit behind my back when he doesn't want more?”

“Hmm,” Char says, her eyes hazing as she loses herself to thought. “How did he get a hold of the police report, anyway?”

This is why I love Char. She's as curious as I am. My emotions have put me in an unfortunate position, because I should have thought of these things myself. “Great question.”

“You're certain it's the same Brad? It's not that uncommon of a name.”

I pin her with an exasperated look. “What are the chances he has a report with the same name as the guy I went on a date with? A date he *ruined*, by the way.”

“I don't know if I would call it ruined. From the sounds of it, he saved you with incredible car sex.”

“Yeah, well, he ‘won't save me’, remember?” I snide. “What in the fuck does that even mean?”

Char chuckles. “Keep it down, *princess*. We're in public.”

I glance around but no one's paying us any mind. I guess I was getting a little loud with my incredulity.

“Anyway, I read the narrative on the report. It's exactly what Brad told me happened.”

“Yeah... that still doesn't explain how he got the report.”

“He'd need to know his last name, at least.” I sift through my memories, but I can't think of a time I said it aloud, let

alone for Lorenzo to hear.

“Maybe he searched my phone?” I offer, deep in thought.

“When, though? You guys hadn’t hung out since New Year’s.”

“That’s true.” Char is doing so much more for me than being a shoulder to lean on. She’s grounding me, bringing me back to myself. Removing the emotion so I can properly assess this.

“What does your gut say?”

I sip my drink. “Something’s not right.”

She nods. “Trust that.”

We sit in silence for a few moments, each of us reviewing the facts mentally. Eventually, Char speaks.

“Well, the way I see it, you have two options.”

“Only two?”

“Only two. You fuck off from him. Leave his strange, stalker tendencies behind you.”

I know she’s pausing for effect, but I implore her. “Or?”

“Or, you keep seeing him. Learn what you can. Solve this.”

That’s a tempting option. Being totally and completely honest with myself, I’m not ready to let him go. He makes me feel something, and I like having sex with him. Not to mention, he’s fucking hot. I can’t deny that crucial point.

But where will this lead me? I can't continue hoping, even on a subconscious level, that I have some sort of chance with him. I don't. He's made that clear at every opportunity.

"I don't know, Char," I finally say.

"The right thing to do, probably, is to leave it behind you."

My brows rise as high as they can go. "I'm shocked by your... reasonability."

"Unexpected, I know. But I can't really see how this ends well. If you wanted to be with him long-term, it could be worth figuring out before making a decision. I mean, it's kinda hot that he'd feel that strongly about protecting you. *If* that's the truth."

"It is *kinda* hot," I admit.

"But, he's made it clear over and over that he doesn't want anything serious. He's not waving a red flag. He's wearing the damn thing."

I remember his words, and a detail about them makes me question more. "It was weird. It seemed like he was about to say he *can't* be with me... then he switched to don't."

"He may have misspoken. Or maybe he's got a bunch of childhood trauma. Who knows. But the message is clear. He doesn't want more."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."



## Chapter Three

February 26th

**W**ork has always been a sort of escape for me. I'm not a workaholic by any means, but it's a place where I can put my focus on something productive. And working with numbers always improves my mood. They don't require anything from me other than logic and problem solving.

Our audit results came in, so Jasmine and I have a meeting scheduled with Matteo to review them. Jasmine is the lead loan officer, LO for short. While the audits span across our whole company, Rowan has each department review them to ensure we're scoring well.

I finish putting together an estimate for a new client when the clock changes to 10:59. I head over to the small office towards the back of our cubicles. Jasmine is already there, but Matteo is not. I walk in and put my laptop on the desk before taking my seat.

"Hey, Kate," Jasmine says, hardly looking at me before continuing to clack away on her keyboard.

"Hey," I reply. Matteo walks in a moment later and we dive into the results. We quickly realize that we've excelled in all

areas we're in control of. We work on the lender loans for mortgages. A separate team works on Rentals, and it seems they were dinged a significant amount of points.

"That's really strange, Rentals has never been dinged before," Matteo says, chewing on his pen top.

"That we know of. Maybe it happened before we started here," Jasmine responds. Jasmine was hired at the same time that I was brought in as an intern. Matteo has only been here a few months.

"Well, not our circus, not our monkeys, right?" I say lightheartedly. Matteo laughs but Jasmine doesn't.

"Rowan wanted to stop by," she says solemnly. "Maybe it has to do with this."

"Oh, he's in town?" Matteo says. While Rowan is co-owner of the company and boss of our branch, he's often away on business trips or visiting other branches. Broker owners aren't required to be licensed, so he really only manages the business side of things.

Sometimes I wonder if he really even does that. He's the exact opposite of a micromanager, trusting us as employees to do our jobs correctly. So I'm equally surprised that he's popping in today.

"I guess so. He pinged me a few minutes before our meeting and asked us to wait for him," Jasmine responds.

"I wonder if something bad happened," I muse aloud. Jasmine shrugs but Matteo stares at me warily, apparently

sharing the sentiment—something is off.

“They were dinged for submitting incorrect documentation,” Jasmine says, reorganizing the papers and tapping them on the desk to straighten the stack. “I don’t know what, exactly. I wasn’t sent their analysis.”

“Hmm. I wonder why Rowan wants to discuss it with us,” I say.

“*If* that’s what he wants to discuss. He didn’t say. I’ve been telling him for years to let me help him with Rentals,” Jasmine says with her chin lifted. Come to think of it, I don’t know who manages them. I don’t know anything about Rentals, other than people love renting from Valeri Financials because we offer the lowest rental rates.

“Why doesn’t he?” Matteo asks.

Jasmine shrugs. “He says he can handle it and doesn’t want to overwhelm me. But it’s two employees.”

“Who are—” I cut myself short when Rowan raps his knuckles on the door as he opens it.

“Team! How are we doing this fine morning?” He beams at us, his crinkled eyes shining on our guilt ridden faces.

“G–Good morning, sir,” Jasmine stammers.

“Please, call me Rowan,” he says, just as he always does. Jasmine’s always been a pecking order kinda gal. No matter how insistent Rowan is on keeping things casual and informal, she can’t help herself. I’m certain that she regrets every moment of her chastising criticism before he walked in.

“How are you, Rowan?” I say, feeling comfortable with his informality. There’s always that added layer of pressure when you’re speaking to a higher up, but I let the rigidity in me fall when I learned that Rowan preferred the casualty.

“I’m well, Kate, thanks for asking. Let’s jump right into it, I don’t want to waste anyone’s time.” He pulls out the chair from the head of the table, comfortably and naturally taking his place as lead. Matteo is on my right and Jasmine is in front of me. There are a few chairs between us and Rowan, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“I reviewed the audit results. I am aware that Rentals was dinged.” He pauses for what seems to be emphasis, glancing at each of us before continuing. “I have already spoken with them, and they’ll be combing over documents to ensure this mistake doesn’t occur again.”

“Sorry, sir,” Jasmine squeaks. “What was the issue?”

I hold my breath, unsure if that’s information we’re privy to. When Rowan speaks, I let out an exhale.

“Someone dropped the ball.” Again, he pauses. “They sent the wrong lease agreements in.”

His expression darkens, his obvious distaste for the mistake evident.

“Do you need anything from us, Rowan?” Matteo addresses our boss in a professional manner, his hands clasped on the desk in front of him.

“Thank you, Matteo, but no. While it cost us on the audit, it’s not a difficult correction. They’re already working on it. Come the next audit, we should have no issues.”

“Sir, I’ve offered before, but—”

“Thank you, Jazz, but I will continue to lead rentals.” Jasmine frowns; she *hates* being called Jazz. Or, quite frankly, anything that isn’t her full name. She eventually nods, reaching for the papers on the long table in a sort of dismissal. Rowan nods back, then turns to Matteo and I.

“I realize this all could have been sent in an email, but I wanted to address this in person.” He shifts in his seat and a look crosses his face too quickly for me to catch. “I request that you keep this ding to yourselves. You all know how important it is to score well on audits, and I don’t want bad-mouthing to start.”

I had no intention of talking to anyone about this, but a strange feeling settles into my stomach with his request for secrecy.

“I prefer to stay behind the scenes and have full trust in my employees. Please don’t give me a reason to get involved,” Rowan adds, standing and tapping the desk. “Keep up the hard work team, I appreciate you all.”

And then he’s gone.



The rest of the work day flew by. When I got back to my desk, there were five new online loan requests and that ate up the rest of my afternoon. I still have one more to finish, but I'll get to it tomorrow. As much as I despise leaving work for another day, that's the nature of the beast at times. I also really wanted to figure out who works Rentals, but I put it on my to-do list for tomorrow. My pilates class was at 5:30 pm, and I don't like to be late.

After working out and showering, I sift through my closet, trying to plan my outfit for the morning. I wish I still had that long-sleeved blouse Lorenzo ruined the buttons on. My skin burns at the thought of him thrusting into me, my head banging into the car. God, I wish I could be back in that moment. To feel him deep inside me over and over again.

I shake my head to bring me back to the present moment. Lorenzo remains a mystery, but a part of me has settled into it. I want answers, and I won't be getting them from him. That much I know. But what he said just isn't sitting right.

*Trust that.*

I have to trust my gut. I need to get more answers. But right now, I need to pick my outfit for tomorrow. While the memory of his car turns me the hell on, the fact that he ripped the buttons off my pretty new blouse ticks me off. Who does he think he is, claiming that outfit for himself? He doesn't own me. He says I'm his, but I'm not. We're friends with benefits, nothing more.

I'm pretty sure the department store where I bought that blouse closes at 9. I glance at the simple silver clock on the wall above my desk and quickly realize the battery must have died; I know it's not 3:32. I step onto my chair and pull the clock off its nail, pulling out the AA battery from the back. I pad over to the hall closet to put a new one in. Once secured, I return to my room and pull my phone off the desk to check the time. There's a message from Char, but I turn the dial on the clock first. I put it a minute ahead of 7:06, because I want the time to be accurate, down to the second. I watch the seconds tick on my phone. At 7:05:59, I push the dial back in.

Once the clock is back on the wall, I swipe open the message from Char.

Char: it might be time for me to join pilates with you

I giggle and reply.

Me: changed your mind? Not a waste of time after all?

Char has been anti-exercise for as long as I can remember. In PE, she would always walk instead of run, and she'd cheer both teams on from within the game because she had to pretend to participate.

Char: I had to walk up five flights of stairs to see the new apartment and I was dying

Me: we need to work those muscles. It's good for you!

Char: ugh

Me: what are you up to? Wanna run to Reno's with me?

Char: is that even a question? What are we buying

Char: be there in 20

Char: make that 10, they close soon

Me: they close at 9, we have over an hour

Char: there's never enough time for shopping



## Chapter Four

February 27th

It's a crisp morning, the cool air nipping my skin as I walk briskly to the office. I'm certain I'm imagining the smokey scent in the air until Lorenzo steps out of the alley near our building, stomping on a cigarette.

We haven't had a real conversation since I left his house, even though we have remained cordial. But I don't need to play games. I've got my new-old blouse on and my confidence back. I don't need to be rude.

"You know smoking kills," I say. *Okay, maybe a little rude.*

He glances over his shoulder, does a double take, then stops dead in his tracks to fully face me. His eyes roam over the blouse, lingering on the perfectly sewn in buttons. While I paired it with the same black waist-hugging skirt I wore for my previous date—*dates*—with Brad, I swapped the knee-high boots for simple black heels.

"Smoking *can* kill," he amends, his lips twitching with suppressed amusement.

I shrug. "Semantics."

There's a pause, and I take a moment to appreciate him. He looks delectable in his trademark black slacks and black dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. We're eye fucking each other not five feet from our office entrance.

"Nice shirt," he comments finally, breaking the silence.

"Thanks!" I beam at him, showing him every tooth in my mouth. I'm buzzing with the power my choice in shirt is providing me. Or rather, the choice to buy and wear the shirt. "I really love this blouse."

"Hmm," he purrs. He glances around and waits for a guy to walk into the office before adding, "I was fond of that shirt, too. But I'm having trouble understanding how it's back in working order. Unless you're a professional seamstress."

I chuckle and take a few steps forward, patting his chest. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

I wish I could take a photo with my eyes so I can forever remember the expression I landed on his face. This new energy I'm expelling is what I want to own forever. Maybe he was right all along. I *am* a badass.

"It's getting late, we need to get in," I say, sliding my hand down his chest to his stomach, which has tightened from my touch. I walk past him and into the building, resuming my brisk pace. I'm not sure if he's behind me, and I refuse to turn around and give him the satisfaction of knowing I want to find out. Just in case, I make sure to sashay my hips with more enthusiasm than I normally would.

*Nothing wrong with flaunting what you've got.*

As I pass the break room, his hand circles my wrist and pulls me into it. My immediate impulse is to tear myself from his grip, highly aware of our public setting. But he maintains his grasp and pushes me into the wall that's shared with the hallway.

"You look absolutely fuckable," he murmurs into my ear. His hard body is pressed into my back. I arch my ass into him, feeling him bulging through his slacks. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind are the shady things that came to light and the reminder that I have investigating to do. But my pussy heats with the all consuming desire to feel him deep inside me, so those thoughts remain suspended for the time being.

His head is still tucked into my neck, his breath tickling my sensitive skin. I inhale deeply, breathing in the cinnamon and smoke. It's more smokey than usual, and while I should be disgusted, I'm that much more intrigued.

"We're at..." The denial is begging to slip from my tongue, but I know *very* well that something about public secrecy turns me the fuck on. We've already done it in Rowan's house, why not his office building, too?

I feel Lorenzo smirking on my skin because he knows damn well what I'm thinking. I glance around me before giving in. "Where?" I breathe. He takes a step back and grabs my lunch bag, stuffing it into the fridge with his own.

"Follow me." As if he's been waiting for this moment his entire life, he stalks out of the break room and down the hall. I

follow, as instructed. Why should I deny myself what I so desperately crave?

He tugs on the knob of what I've always assumed is a broom closet. It opens and he grabs my wrist, pulling me in with him.

My assumption was correct. There's a broom and mop bucket in the corner of the tiny space we're in. There's no table, chair, shelf—nothing to get on top of.

“How are we supposed to do anything in here?” I shout-whisper, dropping my gym bag.

Lorenzo's hand slides up my neck and digs into my hair, pulling me toward him. With his lips over mine, he whispers, “Don't doubt my creativity, Kate.”

His mouth swallows my reply, his tongue claiming every inch of my lips before plunging into my mouth. I moan into him and he shoves me against the solid, concrete wall, tearing his lips from mine to claim my neck.

“Be quiet, princess, or I'll have to leave you panting and wanting for more.” He proceeds to suck on my exposed skin, fisting my hair to hold me in place. I breathe heavily in place of any audible sounds. My clit pulses and my pussy surges, dampening my panties.

Lorenzo hasn't stopped assaulting my neck with his mouth, only adding his teeth in a painfully perfect way. My hands claw at his shoulders, equally begging for mercy and more. I feel him smirk before he pulls away slowly.

“You think you’re cute, huh? You like getting a rise out of me?”

It’s my turn to smirk. My outfit choice had nothing to do with getting a rise out of him, but I can’t say it’s not enjoyable. There really is something to embracing your bold side; I don’t think I’ll ever turn back.

“Princess might be too tame for you. You... you’re a fucking brat.”

In an instant, his free hand is on my throat, applying so much pressure that I lose my breath instantly. My eyes pop open but it takes no effort to keep quiet this time—I couldn’t cry out if I wanted to.

“You know what happens to little fucking brats, Katherine?”

It’s too dark to make out his eyes but I don’t need to see them. I know they’re filled with lust and greed and malice. He wants to hurt me and I want to let him. If I could gulp, I would, but his palm against my throat makes it impossible. I open my mouth to speak but no words come out.

He loosens his grip enough so that I can whisper throatily, “Why don’t you show me?”

He groans so quietly, but it’s enough for me to hear it. He presses his dick into my pelvis and increases the pressure on my neck again.

“You’ve only had a taste, princess. You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

The blood rushes in my ears, my heart races, but I'm not afraid. I'm *exhilarated*.

He releases my neck and I draw in a sharp breath.

"Smart of you to wear this at work... I can't rip it to shreds," he spits. "I'll have to start keeping spare clothes for you."

He runs a finger down my collarbone and past the buttons of the shirts. I puff my chest out, taunting him intentionally this time.

As excited as I am about his implication that this will happen again, I toy with him. "You sound so sure that this isn't the last time."

He chuckles darkly. "You don't need to be my girlfriend for me to know you're mine."

His lips crash over mine in a bruising kiss as his hands grip the back of my thighs. He hoists me up and shoves my back into the wall, forcing me to wrap my legs around his waist. His dick pokes my ass and I rub into it, asking him, *begging* him, for what I want. For what I *need*.

He pulses his hips before shifting a thigh between my legs, my ass resting on it. He brings a hand to his belt buckle, quickly maneuvering it out of the loop. His tongue is swirling with mine but I pull back an inch or so that I have. I bring my hands to his zipper, lowering it as he pops the button.

"Tell me, Kate," he whispers. "What should your punishment be?"

*Fuck, this is really happening.* My pussy is so slick with desire, the walls pulsing with only one thought in mind—fuck me, now. I stroke his dick before pulling it out through the slit in his boxers.

“Fuck me hard,” I whisper back, a bit nervous and a whole lot desperate. His dick throbs in my hand and he pulls his wallet out of his pocket. My back starts sliding down the wall but he shoves his thigh up, supporting me and making me so fucking needy for him.

He holds his wallet out to me. I hesitate for a moment before taking it. “Left.” That’s all he says as he returns his hand to the back of my thigh. He doesn’t move his leg, which I’m eternally grateful for because my pussy is resting right on it. The warmth and firmness of his body is putting a cap on the overflowing desire I have for him.

I open the folds and see foil sticking out of the left side of the cash holder. I pull out the condom and fold the wallet back up, handing it to him. He grabs it with his teeth and whips his head, the wallet crashing into the wall before falling limply onto the floor.

“Open it,” he growls. My shaky hands fumble with the wrapper for a moment, but I successfully tear it open at the corner. I pull out the latex and follow his lead, dropping the foil onto the ground.

That seems to please him because I can hear the satisfaction in his tone. “Roll it on, baby girl.”

And just like that, my nerves sky rocket, shaking the confident foundation I've built. He wants me to roll it on? I've never done that before. I'm back to feeling like a novice around him, but I refuse to let it show.

I think back to my sex ed classes, remembering the teacher rolling the condom onto a banana. I quickly *stop* thinking about that, because it's the biggest turn off in existence. Instead, I grab the tip and bring the opening to his head.

"You got this, baby girl. Get me ready for you." I can't tell if he's aware that I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, but either way, his support helps my confidence flourish. I roll the condom down to the base and squeeze instinctively. The vein in his dick throbs and I'm certain I'm at least doing *something* right.

Just like in his car, he hikes my skirt up, but one handed this time. He's still impressively able to hold me up, and I wonder just how he's come to be this strong.

He slides my panties over, having the good grace not to rip them this time. It's one thing to return home after a scandalous sex act. But having to work with shredded underwear? Hard pass.

He slowly removes his thigh from under me, my pussy aching with the loss of contact. He fixes it quickly, though, bringing his wrapped cock to my opening. His lips hover over mine and I inhale his essence as my eyelids droop.

"Keep your mouth shut, no matter what. Got it?"



I nod, pressing my lips together tightly. He enters me slowly and I wonder what all that was for if he wasn't going to ram into me. He slides in and out slowly, my abs tightening as the pleasure courses throughout my body.

He finally places his lips on mine lightly, and he moans as I kiss him back. Our tongues taste each other slowly, provocatively. I move my hips to match his movements and we breathe heavily into each other's mouths so as not to make noise.

"I love being inside you," he murmurs into my ear. "It's too bad I have to ruin this sweet moment."

He cracks his hand down on my ass like a whip and I grit my teeth together with all my might to keep quiet. Although, it seems totally pointless because that was *loud*. Tears prick my eyes.

"Shhh," he soothes over my lips. I whimper oh-so-quietly, unable to contain myself. "Consider this time a warning." His lips are over mine again, distracting me from the throbs and stings that his palm caused.

I'm for sure going to have a mark.

His lips feel so damn good, though, moving with mine in a steady rhythm. My hips stop moving but his keep tempo with my heart beat. He doesn't make any indication of slapping me again, his breath increasing in depth and sound.

The speed of his hips increase as our hearts and breaths do. His skin is rubbing against my swollen, desperate clit. My legs

tighten around his hips, pulling him closer, deeper. His thrusts become quick and shallow, unable to pull out because of my vice grip on him.

I bite down on his lip when the intensity becomes too much, a quiet way to exert all the stifled screams and moans. He reacts by increasing his speed even more and gripping my hips so tightly that his short nails dig into my skin.

He lets out an involuntary groan that I swear erupts from his chest, and that's my undoing. We come at the same time, his cock deep inside me and my ankles trying to mold into one from the amount of pressure I'm exerting.

His hold on me weakens as we both pant heavily, my back sliding down the wall a few inches. He rests his head on my shoulder, his chest heaving on mine. As our breathing returns to normal, my ankles loosen their hold and he releases his vice grip on my hips. I slide off him, pushing my skirt down.

Lorenzo removes the condom, ties it, and shoves it into his pocket. I watch as he becomes colder and colder with every waking breath. He steps back and recovers his wallet from the ground. I adjust my blouse so the hem sits properly on my stomach, which is currently quivering with the aftermath of my orgasm.

"We can't do this again." My eyes shoot up to his face, but it's too dark to see clearly. "Too risky," he adds.

"Right." I want to tell him how wet it made me, but I'm sure he could feel it. Something feels off again. He had no problem doing it at Rowan's house, but I can see why it's a little

different at the actual office building. Personally, I don't feel sorry about what we just did. How can something that felt so fucking good be regrettable?

“It's my fault. No matter how sexy you look, I should be able to control myself.”

That makes my lips tilt up, not that he can see it. Or maybe he can. Even though I have my glasses on, my vision is only so perfect.

“I really wasn't trying to taunt you,” I say in an effort to exude my independence.

He chuckles, fixing his pants and buckle. I glance around the room again, realizing just how small it is. Lorenzo pulls his phone out of his pocket and opens it to check the time. It's 8:13 am. I'm super late.

*Did he always have a flip phone? I could have sworn it was a regular smartphone.*

“Let me crack the door and listen,” he says in a low voice. I nod and he tiptoes towards the door, pulling the knob silently. We listen and I'm certain there's no one out there.

“I'll walk out first, just in case. Give it like two minutes before you leave.” Again, I nod, unsure if he can see me or not. He opens the door and slides into the hallway, leaving the door cracked.

I hoist my gym bag onto my shoulder, my mind racing with excuses in case someone catches me here. You know, because

all the employees step into the broom closet in their day to day work life.

The time ticks by slowly. I fill it by staring at the second hand clock on my iPhone. Ten seconds before my two minutes are up, my phone nearly gives me a heart attack by buzzing in my hand. The message is from an unknown number that's not saved in my phone.

Unknown: all clear

What the fuck? I know I have Lorenzo's number saved in my phone. I pull up my contacts quickly and confirm he's in there, but the number doesn't match the one he's texted from before.

*Weird.*

I pocket my phone and listen again. When I'm about to make my move, my eyes catch sight of the condom wrapper on the floor. I quickly pick it up and shove it into my waistband, then do another sound check of the hall. Once I feel confident enough that there's no one out there, I dash out of the closet and let the door snap shut behind me. I walk at a rushed pace to my cubicle, not wanting to be a second later than I have to be.

Once I'm at my desk, I load up my computer, login, and let my typical apps autoload. Victor's got his headphones on, seemingly oblivious to my late arrival. I'm about to write to

Lorenzo on Teams when I remember that everything is monitored. I pull out my phone and shoot off a text.

Me: new number?

Unknown: obviously

I save the number into his previous contact. I could reply, but I'm not going to. I've got an ass ton of work to handle today, and starting off nineteen minutes late has me at a disadvantage.



I decide to work through lunch to make up for the time I missed this morning. I'd work through lunch everyday if it meant that's how I'd start my mornings. As my coworkers filter back to their desks, I hear a ping from my computer.

Lorenzo Mancini: you okay?

Kate Appleton: Yeah, why?

Lorenzo Mancini: you werent at lunch

Kate Appleton: Needed to makeup for lost time.

I watch the screen but he never types back. I was pretty proud of my innuendo, but either it went over his head or he didn't want to respond to it. As he made abundantly clear, everything here is monitored.

I get back to work to reduce the amount of loans sitting on my desk. Fifteen minutes to quitting time, I realize I've forgotten to look into Rentals. The note I scribbled on my paper to-do list reminded me, so I pull up the work database. Working through lunch today helped lessen the load, which I wouldn't have needed if I hadn't been late.

It was technically time theft, but fuck if it wasn't worth it. I'm a little bit afraid of the fact that I don't feel a morsel of remorse. I mean I should, shouldn't I? Maybe Lorenzo is a bad influence on me.

Or maybe I really did have it in me all along. Just like he said all those months ago.

Once the database loads, I roam to the search bar and type Rentals. No results populate, so I clear the search and scroll through the columns to find positions. A quick scan, because it's in alphabetical order, confirms rentals isn't listed. I search under Loan Officers but I know everyone listed.

*Hm. That's weird.*

I shift in my seat, wincing from the soreness on my butt cheek caused by Lorenzo earlier. I read through the different positions until I land on LO Support. I didn't even know we had a support team, but LO has to stand for Loan Officer.

There are only two names listed: Carter Wright and Dwayne Buchannon.

*Carter and Dwayne...*

It can't be Lorenzo's friends. Can it?

I type Santi into the search bar, but nothing pulls up.

It could be a coincidence, but something tells me it's not. I *know* something isn't right. Him having Brad's police report is too strange, and while his explanation fits, something feels amiss.

And he obviously has no problem lying.

I should heed Char's advice and fuck off from him. The image of him pounding into me earlier flashes across my mind and my pussy aches.

Fucking off from him is easier said than done.

I glance at the clock and hop out of my seat, realizing it's a few minutes after five. I rush to throw my stuff in my bag and race to pilates.

I'll sweat this out and see what comes back to me.

## Chapter Five

February 28th

I know it's the wrong thing to be doing. I *know*. But I want to keep seeing Lorenzo. The decision was made for me when we saw each other outside of the office yesterday morning. All I could feel was an inexplicable pull to him, and our closet escapade solidified that fact.

I knew then that I wasn't prepared to let this go.

*You need to get answers.*

I know I do. But I'm almost... afraid of what I'll learn. It could lead to me being unable to have sex with him. To no longer feeling him all over me and bringing me to the best orgasm of my life. Whatever the female version of blue balls is was what I experienced after leaving his house that night after I found the police report.

Once I'm tucked into bed with Felix curled up on my pillow, I pull up the web browser on my laptop. No matter how afraid, I have to learn what I can.

I first go to Glenmar County's Police Department and walk through the steps for ordering a report. I confirm what I was



certain of—you need a first and last name or a case number. And that's just to search for it. In order to obtain a copy, you have to send a request via email or go into the station. If you're not listed on the report, you must be authorized to obtain a copy.

So how Lorenzo had either of those things... that's the question, isn't it?

Next, I run a search on the house that he and Santi live in through the county appraiser site. The information I find there is shocking. The house is owned by none other than Rowan Valeri.

Are they renting the house from our boss?

I make a futile attempt at locating Lorenzo on some social media platform, but the result is still nil. I search instead for Rowan, only finding his professional business information. The only social media site I find him on is LinkedIn.

*Probably because he has to be.*

I rub the skin around my thumb nail, pondering this information. Seems I wasn't off the mark when I thought Lorenzo knew Rowan at the holiday party...

The question is, why is Lorenzo living in a house Rowan owns?

Could this explain why Santi doesn't like me? Maybe he's hell-bent on HR policies of no internal dating. If Rowan even has that rule. Plus, I know from my earlier search that Santi doesn't work there. Unless... is Santi his real name?

I set a reminder on my phone for tomorrow morning so I can review the handbook. Then I hit call on Char's contact.

"Princess," she says after the second ring.

"Seriously?"

"What, I can't play around?"

I giggle but stifle it quickly. "No time. I have an idea."

"Oooh, I can feel this is going to be good! Hold on, let me grab my glass of wine from the other room."

"How's the packing going?" Char is in the process of moving apartments. She's staying in the same building but getting a bigger place to accommodate her working from home. She's going to use the extra room to run her interior design business, Live in Style. "Are you sure you don't need help?"

"I've been packing slowly for the last month. All I've got left is the kitchen. And no offense, toots, but you're organizational crap will freak me out. I like to just do my own thing, blast some Fleetwood Mac, and get it done."

"I like Fleetwood Mac!"

"Not the point. Okay, I've got my sauv, now spill it."

"We want answers, right?" I snuggle into my sheets, Felix purring peacefully on the pillow.

She chuckles. "Sure, yes."

"Let's go PI on his ass."

She lets out a hearty laugh and there's a pause I attribute to her taking a sip of wine. "Ladies and gents—Kate the Badass!"

"You know," I muse. "Maybe he wasn't wrong, after all."

"Of course he wasn't. Do you really think I'd be friends with anyone less?"

"We're getting off track. Answers. Something's not right and I need to know what."

"I'm all in, girl. But"—she takes a gulp of wine—"are you sure you know what you're getting into?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you sure you want to spend your energy jumping down this rabbit hole? Why not just leave this behind you? No man is worth that much effort."

A flash of his hand around my neck passes through my mind, followed by the sound of his palm on my ass.

I sigh. "I know."

"Let's fucking do this! What do we want to know?"

"I made a list." I pull the yellow legal pad filled with my scribbled notes off the nightstand. "First things first—how did he get that police report?"

"Yes. I can scour the county's website, figure out—"

"Already done." I fill her in on my searches.

"So he had to know the case number *or* his last name. Or both."

“Right. And he would have needed authorization to pull it. His name wasn’t on that report.”

“Outright asking him is not an option, is it?”

“I don’t want him to know I’m snooping. That’s like, 101.”

“True.” We stay silent for a moment. “Okay, what else?”

“Why did he lie about living at Santi’s? And why do they live at our boss’s house?”

“Oh my god, yes! So suspish.” Char takes another drink from her glass. “What’s Santi’s last name?”

“Oh, yes,” I reply, shoving the phone into my shoulder and grabbing my pen to jot down ‘Santi’s last name?’.

“What if he’s related to the boss or something?”

I feel a rush of excitement. “Yes! That would explain so much!”

“You know, I need to meet this guy. When are you going to see him again?”

A blush creeps into my cheeks. “Well, actually...”

“Kate! You dog.”

I recount the events of earlier in the office. She whistles, laughs, and gasps, egging me on to spare no detail. When I finish, she tsks.

“You, my friend, are royally fucked.”

“He’s not royal, Char.”

“I *mean* that you don’t stand a chance. You’re in too deep.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Don’t deny it. I mean, listen, I probably would be, too. He sounds pretty irresistible. I get why you want to go PI on his ass.”

“Right, let’s review.” I look at my list again. “Okay—police report, living at Rowan’s, Santi’s last name, Carter and D working in Rentals, the convers—”

“Wait, his friends work in entals?!”

I explain my findings from earlier and the audit results that were dinged.

“This just keeps getting weirder and weirder. And who’s Rowan?”

“Our *boss*.”

“Jeez, sorry. I’m trying.”

“I know, and I appreciate it.”

“What was the last thing on your list?”

“The conversation I walked in on in the garage! That was so weird.”

“Oh, that’s right! He said something about sacrifices, right?”

“Yeah,” I reply, reflecting back on that night. One of the most frustrating things in the world is the way our memory fades the farther away we get from what it tries to remember. Like an out of focus image that just gets blurrier and blurrier

with time. “I think he said he’s sacrificed enough. Santi was saying something about choices.”

“We’ve got a lot to learn, toots.”

“Exactly. So how do we go about finding all this shit out?”

“Well, for the police report, maybe the station can tell us who’s gotten copies of the report. And when. You didn’t notice a print date on the paper?”

“No, I didn’t.” I think back, trying to pull the image of the report from memory. “Maybe it was there? I don’t know. I was too shocked he even had it to notice a date.”

“I get it, toots. Well, let’s try going down to the station.”

“Wouldn’t that information be confidential? They’re not just going to tell us whatever we want to know.”

“You called me in for a reason, Kate. I have an idea.”

## Chapter Six

March 1st

“Okay, so we’re just going in and asking for the report?” I ask Char. I grip my purse and glance up at the Glenmar County’s Police station. “I skipped pilates for this ‘great idea’?”

“Hey, don’t get snippy with me. I have a backup plan, but I figured we should try the easiest route first. They might just give it to us and then we can pry for information. Some people don’t care to follow the rules.”

I sigh. “Fine, let’s try.”

Five minutes later, we exit the station with the exact answer I expected—they can’t share who’s received a copy of the report and they can’t give out a copy of the report to persons not related to the incident.

“Well, it was worth a try,” Char says.

“Was it?” I ask sarcastically. This felt like a giant waste of time, and as much as I love Char, sometimes her optimism pisses me off.

“How the hell did Zo get a copy?” Char murmurs, ignoring me.

“Zo? What are you, best buds or something?”

“Didn’t you say his friends call him Zo? I think it’s cute,” she says with a shrug.

“You’ve never even met him!” I snap.

“Kate, quit it! I’m trying to help.”

I push my glasses up and rub the bridge of my nose. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I’m just frustrated. I’m not sure why I care so much. I really should just let all of this go.”

“Okay, but you *do* care. Sometimes that’s all you need to know.”

I nod and we start walking down the block to Char’s car.

“What about Brad? You could just ask him,” she suggests.

“What? I’m not going to ask Brad. What would I say, ‘Hey, sorry I took off like that on V-Day. By the way, can you get me a copy of your police report? Remember the guy who showed up? Yeah, he’s kinda sketchy. Anyway, I’d like to look into him.’ Be serious, Char.”

Char laughs as she unlocks the doors to her car. “Alright, point taken.”

“So, what now?” I ask after we’ve buckled our seatbelts and Char pulls onto the road. “I feel like we got more questions, not answers.”



“Now, we really act like PI’s. Let’s get our hands on his report. Hopefully, it has a print date on it. I’d like to read it, anyway.”

“Yeah, I’d like to reread it, too. Let’s just snap a picture of it. Ugh! It would be nice if we could get a full copy, I want the other pages. You don’t know anyone in law enforcement?”

“If I did, that would have been plan A.”

“True...” I peer at her skeptically. “You really think we can get his copy? I don’t want to get caught.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“Seriously, you didn’t see the look on Santi’s face when I overheard their conversation in that garage. If looks could kill, I’d be loong gone.”

Char’s face shines with sheer determination. “Well, Santi can answer to me. My girl wants answers, so damn it, we’re going to get them.”



Lorenzo: im picking you up in ten

I pull the ponytail out, shaking my hair loose to get in the shower. Lorenzo’s message buzzed at the perfect time, because I would have missed it had I gotten in a moment sooner.

Me: I’m sorry, did we have plans?

Who does he think he is? When he doesn't answer after a minute, I hop in the steaming shower, prepared to rinse off the day. But every fiber of my being feels alight; there's no denying that I'd love to see him.

I reach my arm out of the shower and grab my phone from the toilet tank, propping it on the shower caddy so it doesn't get wet. I lather my strawberry scented shampoo into my hair, scrubbing my scalp. I lean into the mini-massage, listening to my mellowed out thoughts.

Where in the world does he want to take me right now? I would be perfectly happy if we drove back to that bookstore. We could park in the same spot, make it a tradition. I could do without him ripping my clothes, but if it leads to—

Lorenzo: its a surprise

I hate surprises. They make my mind race like crazy. But if it involves Lorenzo... I'm willing to bend.

I rush my conditioning process, only leaving it in my hair for thirty seconds instead of the normal two minutes. I rush into my room after throwing a towel over my hair and drying off my body so I can pick out an outfit.

I prefer having more time, but I throw on a pair of skinny jeans and a loose, white blouse. I tousle my hair dry and run a comb through it, knowing I'll have to leave it down if I want it to dry properly.

*He liked my hair down better, anyway. And I could use the relaxation I get from it.*

Once I throw my flats on, I glance at my clock for the time. I'm right at the ten minute mark from when he texted. I scurry to my kitchen, prepare a water bottle, and throw it into a purse. Right then, my phone buzzes. I don't even check it, I rush out the door without a goodbye to Felix.

My veins are buzzing with the excitement I feel from unexpectedly getting to see him tonight. I run down the stairs rather than have to waste a moment waiting for the elevator. Once I get to the lobby, I slow my pace so I don't run out there with too much enthusiasm.

He doesn't need to know how excited I am.

I push the door open, a gust of air blowing into my hair. His black Audi is stopped in front of the cars parked parallel on the street. He's looking down at what I can only assume is his phone, so I take the moment to appreciate him in all his glory without his eyes interrupting my train of thought.

He's dressed in all black, as per usual, and his hair is unruly, sticking out from behind his ear. It's perfectly imperfectly, as corny as that sounds. As I step closer, I feel his energy exuding from the car as though it were a palpable object I could reach out and grab.

I pull the handle but the door doesn't open. His head shoots up and he peers at me through the window, a smirk pulling at his lips the second his eyes meet mine. His fingers unlock the doors without breaking eye contact, and I tug the door open.

“Always so ready for me, princess,” he purrs. His innuendo is not lost on me. I settle into my seat.

“You’re lucky I didn’t have plans tonight,” I reply, shutting the door. He peels off not a second later, causing my head to thrash into the headrest. I take a deep breath and will myself to remain calm. “Or maybe you already knew that, seeing as you’re stalking me.”

If I’m going to snoop, he needs to think that I believe him. I’m also bluffing. I don’t plan much on weekdays, sticking to routine and the mundane. But when the guy you’re hoping to see writes to you, you go. Even if he is a glowing red flag.

“I prefer the term protective,” he jokes. “And you’re here, so some part of you must like it.”

“Or maybe I’m too stupid to do better.”

“You’re not stupid. I’m just irresistible.” I snort but a small smile plays at my lips. He glances at me before returning his eyes to the road, one hand tossed over the steering wheel. He rolls down the windows and leans his elbow on the frame.

“Where are we going, anyway? I hope I’m dressed appropriately.” I glance down at my jeans, my hair whipping into my eyes with the blowing wind. It’s still early in the night, so the temperatures haven’t dropped below sixty.

“You look stunning as always, Kate. And it’s not because of the clothes,” he says off-handedly. “Although, those jeans do hug your hips in a very fuckable way.”

I'll never understand the way he can drop such sexy statements into casual conversation, as though his words don't shake my very core.

"I, um, thanks," I mumble, unsure of how to respond. I may be more confident, but his abrasive nature still isn't normal for me.

"I'm going to help you."

"Help me? With what?" I scoff. There's his arrogance again, always thinking I need something from him.

"You'll see," he says, turning to me. That sparkle I've come to love is present in his irises, and tingles shoot through my core. He turns back to the road, his foot still accelerating the vehicle. I force myself to keep my eyes on the road rather than glance at the dash to see how fast we're going.

"What do you normally do on weekdays?" I ask, deciding now's as good a time as any to get to know more about him. "Besides work, of course."

"Gym, chill," he says simply. I wait for him to continue, but he never does. He turns right at the street before the main highway, and my eyebrows pinch in confusion.

"Where are you taking me?"

"What part of *surprise* don't you understand?"

I cross my arms in a very childlike manner, regretting it the moment it's done. He chuckles.

“Gym? Chill? That’s pretty vague,” I finally respond. I’m not able to help myself. I know it must come off as annoying, me pestering him with so many questions. But I’m just as annoyed that he gives me so little information.

“I go to the gym every day, but other than that, I don’t stick to a plan. Whatever life throws at me.”

I frown, pondering his statement.

“You know, it would be nice if you would share more about yourself. Aren’t we *friends* with benefits?”

“What, you feel like you don’t know me?”

“Not well.”

“What do you want to know? What could I possibly tell you that would make you feel like you know me better?”

“I don’t know, anything... What’s your favorite color?” I probably know that answer, based on his apparel, but it was the first thought that sprang to mind.

“What, you think knowing my favorite color tells you anything about me?”

I roll my eyes and huff. “Kinda, yeah! What if I wanted to buy you a present or something? How would I know what color to pick?”

He laughs heartily at that. “You want to buy me a present? Is that what this is about?”

“No! I just... I don’t know. I’d like to know you better.”

When he doesn't respond, I turn to look at him. His expression has darkened. Before I can ask him about it, he turns left and I glance through the windshield to find that we're in a large parking lot.

"Time to learn, Kate," he says. He throws the car into park in the middle of the asphalt concrete road.

It takes about two seconds for my brain to catch up with what's happening. "Oh, no, no, no." My head is shaking vigorously.

"You have to face your fears sometime, princess."

"You said you weren't trying to save me. This feels an awful lot like saving!" It's a low blow, but I don't care. I don't want to do this, especially now. I've had no time to think about it, process it... there's absolutely no way.

"This isn't about saving you. This is about empowering you."

I stare into his eyes, looking as resolute as mine. This is obviously going to evolve into a fight; only one of us can win.

"It's just a parking lot. There's no one to hurt. I don't care if you damage my car on the wheelstops. The car can be fixed."

"Wheelstops?"

"The parking blocks. You know, that large piece of cement that you park in front of?" I follow his pointed finger and feel like a dumbass for not knowing.

"Oh."

“See? You don’t even know the basics of driving. It’s time to change that.”

My resolve weakens. I stare at my hands in my lap. I’m back to choices.

I can take this opportunity and grow or I can cower beneath the fear.

“Fine.” I pull the door handle without looking at him, leaping out of the car with newfound determination. I don’t close the door since he’ll have to get into the passenger side. When I reach the driver’s side, he’s standing outside the car with one hand propped above the door frame.

My eyes finally meet his and he gives me a wide, approving grin. “Let’s do this.”



An hour later, it’s pitch black out and my mind is reeling. We spent the first fifteen minutes in the same position, me on the driver’s side and Lorenzo on the passenger side. He explained the gear shifts (even though I pointed out that I was familiar, he insisted), the different dashboard gauges, the brake and gas pedals (again, I pointed out that I knew what they were), and how to properly set the rear view and side view mirrors.

Once he felt I fully understood and the car was set up for my use, he had me practice simply removing my foot from the brake. My anxiety started off sky-high, but it tapered after the tenth removal of my foot on the pedal. The car would inch



forward, and I would resist the temptation to slam the brakes immediately, following Lorenzo's instructions as to when to start and stop.

As much as I hate to admit this, he's a great fucking teacher.

The last five minutes were spent coaxing me into simply placing my foot on the gas pedal without actually pressing down on it. My heart felt like it was going to pump right out of my chest. I left my foot on the pedal for half a second before slamming it on the brake. Lorenzo stifled the laugh I *know* he wanted to belt out, only giving me words of encouragement, though I can't recall what they were.

Now, I'm back in the passenger seat and he's pulling us out of the abandoned lot. "That's all for today?" I'm asking as though I'm sad, but really, I'm elated. An hour was more than enough. Too much, really. Being close to Lorenzo was the only thing that forced me to stay put. I love smelling him, hearing him, feeling him.

"I'm pretty sure that's all you could take for today."

"Hey!" I playfully swat his shoulder and he gives me a look like, "Don't act like it's not true."

"So are you dropping me back home?" I do my best to keep my voice neutral so the hope doesn't seep out. I'd love to hang out with him longer. But he doesn't miss a thing.

"Aw, did you want me to fuck you?" he teases. "You know I'd love to." *Do I?* "But I have to go meet someone."

“Who?” The question flies out of my mouth before I can stop it.

He hesitates, turns left in the direction of my place, then glances at me and clears his throat. “Santi.”

“Oh. Okay,” I say dejectedly. I get that he has plans and I’m not the center of his universe, but sometimes that feels like utter bullshit.

His hand snakes up my leg, settling on my inner thigh—*very* close to my clit. “Do you need me to take care of you?”

“What? No, I—” I stammer, a blush creeping on to my cheeks. His fingers slowly move over my pussy and he presses down.

“You sure?”

“You need to pay attention to the... the...” My words are lost to the feeling of him rubbing over my jeans. The thick fold where the zipper meets is giving an extra layer of pressure, causing my clit to pulse with raw need.

“Unzip your pants, Kate,” he commands. The fire has been ignited and I don’t have the materials to douse it. I quickly do as he says.

“Pull them down. We don’t need to be more unsafe by making me fumble my way in there.”

I shimmy my jeans and underwear down just below my ass, so my pussy is on full display. The seat is a little cold, but the heat expelling from my body makes it so it actually feels good.

He slides all four fingers down my pussy and I thank all of my lucky stars that I shaved a few days ago.

“Mmm,” I let out as he starts rubbing my clit with the pad of his index finger. He slides it down and dips it into my now wet pussy, then moves back up and works my clit. It throbs in appreciation.

“Don’t be shy, baby. Tell me how good it feels. I do better with encouragement.”

I forget where I am as he continues to work me. He’s true to his word. The more I moan and curse, the more pressure and friction he applies. Within minutes, I’m panting and close to coming.

His words are my undoing. “I want nothing more than to make you come, Kate. Give it to me like the good girl that you are.”

I explode, the sounds erupting from my throat and chest unfamiliar to me. He increases the speed on his finger until my body goes limp. My arm, which was pressed into the door, collapses onto my lap, and he slows down before sliding his finger down my slit.

He circles my pussy, sliding over the pool of desire for him. I peel my eyes open when he removes his finger from me. His eyes are burning and he draws his finger over his lips, painting them with my come before sucking the rest of his finger clean.

I groan, my pussy aching because I want him inside me. I glance out the window, realizing we’re pulling up to my

complex.

“I wanted to return the favor,” I say in a raspy, just-fucked voice.

“It’s not a favor, Kate. It’s an honor.” My eyes go wide with the implications and I swallow hard. Before I can reply, he glances at the time in the center of his car, then back to me.

“You can take care of me another time. I really do have to go.” I believe he’s really pressed for time because I can see the now familiar look of undiluted desire coursing through his eyes.

“Tonight was...” I start, trying to think through my orgasm haze. “Unexpected, yet wonderful.”

“*You* were wonderful. You’ve got this, I promise.” His close-lipped, joyful smile is one that I snap a mental picture of, wanting to remember it forever.

I smile back and our eyes remain locked for a moment. That strange thing happens again, where time stops and my heart beats erratically in my chest. This is a dangerous feeling.

I disconnect us and open the car door. As I’m about to shut it, he speaks.

*Why does he always wait for the last moment?*

“It’s blue, by the way.”

My eyes seek his, the only light being that of the reflected street lamp. “What is?”

“My favorite color.”

## Chapter Seven

March 2nd

**B**etween the extra energy in my body from not getting in a workout yesterday and today being Friday, I'm absolutely buzzing. I've been fidgeting at my desk all morning without even finishing my cup of coffee.

At least it benefited me in knocking out the rest of the loans I had from yesterday. While new ones came in this morning, I want to spend the few minutes before lunch handling *personal* work. I peer over my shoulder to confirm no one's paying me any attention. Of course, they're not; why would they be?

Next to me, Victor looks as he always does—erect posture, eyes on his screen, hand resting comfortably on his mouse, and his headphones on. Usually when I need his attention, I have to tap him on the shoulder or ping him through Teams because he keeps the music on so loud.

Maybe I should try listening to music while I work. I typically find music distracting, which is why I don't end up listening to it much. It's one of those things you always do *with* something—driving, exercising, working, cleaning the

house. I don't drive, and while the instructor does blast high-paced music at pilates, it's only beats; no lyrics.

I prefer to take in all that music has to offer. The sounds combining into rhythm, the words the artist chose to connect to it—it's all consuming for me. So while I could listen and work or clean, it ultimately takes away from both tasks.

I turn back to my computer and tackle the easier job—researching the employee handbook. It's a stretch, but it *could* be the reason Santi dislikes me so intensely. I'm the last person to judge someone for being a stickler for the rules. It wouldn't explain how he *learned* about the rule, unless Lorenzo told him, but it's easy enough to cross off my list.

I'm able to locate the policy quickly, which basically says it does not prohibit the development of friendships or romantic relationships so long as it does not adversely affect the work environment. The only thing that is strictly not allowed is for persons with a familial or romantic relationship to have authority over the other.

So Santi remains a mystery. Next, I pull up the database and click on Carter and Dwayne's names. It looks like they both started around the same time in May of last year. I'm not sure why the fact that they work here intrigues me. I guess it feels strange that I met them face to face and they didn't bother to mention it, even when they asked how Lorenzo and I know each other.

I'm interrupted from my thoughts when Victor raps his knuckles on my desk. "Ready for lunch?"

I glance at the time on my computer, realizing it's already 12:01. I'm usually the one that rounds everyone up but I'm all distracted. "Shit, sorry. Time's getting away from me today."

"Pshh. Today? The amount of new loans we've got coming in this week is insane."

I put my phone into the pocket of my casual Friday dark jeans and follow Victor to Alexandria's desk. "Oh good, so it's not just me?"

"Nope, not just you."

"What are we talking about?" Alexandria locks her computer and stands to join us.

"The amount of work that's come in!" Victor says.

"Oh, yeah. Jasmine was telling me they're running additional ads. I guess Rowan wants to increase the amount of Rentals we're getting but the ads bring in more for all of us."

Her mention of Rentals piques my interest. "Why does he want to grow Rentals?"

Alexandria shrugs. "I don't know. Didn't ask. Oh, Matteo's out today." She steps into the lead, exiting our set of cubicles and heading towards the break room. While I normally make it in there, seated with my lunch, before Lorenzo gets in, today we ran a few minutes late. I see him a few steps ahead of us.

I wish I could call out to him. Maybe he'd snake his arm around my waist and pull me close. Or hell, we could just say hello without it seeming like anything more than friendly coworker behavior. But although the company policy allows

us to carry on a relationship, I don't want all the questions it will bring in from my friends here.

I previously felt stupid for my situation with Lorenzo, which is why I didn't say anything to them. But now that I've come to terms with our friends with benefits arrangement, it's not about the embarrassment. I kind of like having this thing that's just... ours.

How would we have secret sex in the broom closet with the same amount of excitement? No one even gets to wonder about him putting his hand around my neck, or slapping my ass to the point that it leaves a bruise.

I'm so lost to the thought of our sex that I don't realize we're at the fridge. And Lorenzo's just finished pulling his lunch from it.

"Hey," he says with a head nod. His expression portrays complete neutrality but his eyes are a dead giveaway. To me, at least. They're singeing and I know with every fiber of my being he's lost in the same memory I am: the broom closet.

"Hi." I let my coworkers grab their food while Lorenzo lingers a second too long. His eyes convey a clear message—I want you, but not now.

I tilt my chin in acknowledgment and reach for my lunch. He turns on his heel and heads toward his usual table. It takes nearly all of my lunch break to come back to Earth from our interaction and remember that I still have investigating to do.



That's the problem with him. He distracts me in all the best and worst ways.

I need to stay focused. Impulsively, I act on an idea. Once I've discarded my trash and packed up my contents, I pretend to read something intently on my phone so my coworkers don't question me as they leave. When Lorenzo walks past, I step up behind him. He notices immediately because he breaks away from his group to fall into line with me.

"So, where's my present?" he says in a low, playful voice. It takes me a moment to register what he's talking about. We're walking with our arms inches apart, but I feel his energy falling off him in waves and crashing into me.

"Haha. Funny."

"You don't normally hang around, princess. I'm trying to piece together what's on your mind."

"Did you learn that while stalking me?" I joke. It might not be a joke, though, which wipes the grin off my face. "There *is* something on my mind, but it's nothing to do with presents."

He waits for me to continue and I debate how to phrase this in the most open-ended way so I can gauge his reaction. I finally settle on, "I didn't know Carter and Dwa—D—work here."

I study him as he keeps his head facing forward as we walk. He remains... too expressionless. "Yeah, what about it?"

"I just find it weird that it wasn't mentioned when we all hung out."

“Not everyone feels the unyielding need to explain every little thing, Kate.” He’s become snippy, and while it may have bothered me before, it no longer does. So what if it’s annoying? I’m owning it. I want fucking answers and there is nothing wrong with that.

“Well, we were—” I recall Rowan’s request for secrecy, which still fills me with a sense of dread. But I redirect. “I was reviewing something and saw their names. It just surprised me, that’s all.”

I continue to study him but his expression remains inscrutable as he comes to an abrupt halt at the entrance to my department. “Guess the cat is out of the bag.”

His tone is back to playful, and I start to doubt that he sounded irritated at all. I decide to push my luck. “How did you find this job?”

His smile falters and he checks the hall before responding. “I’ve got to get back to work, we can talk about this later.”

He doesn’t give me an opportunity to respond before walking off. I head to my desk and mentally review our conversation. Will we? Talk about this later? When’s later?

I’ll guess I’ll have to wait to find out.

## Chapter Eight

March 4th

“It’s really kind of cute that he wants to teach you to drive,” Char says through a bite of her omelet.

“It’s actually been... helpful,” I say with surprise. Lorenzo texted me yesterday in the same fashion he did the first time. We drove to the same lot and drove around for another hour. This time, I was able to put my foot on the gas pedal without immediately slamming the brakes. I even pushed down on it, accelerating a few feet before letting off. “I’m surprised how kind and understanding he is with teaching me.”

“So even if he turns out to be some weird, psycho stalker, at least you’re getting good dick and driving skills.”

I laugh into my mimosa. “You never fail with your optimism, Char.”

“It’s part of my charm,” she says with a wink. “But today, we’re focusing on me! It’s time to get into party mode.”

We’re going shopping for her housewarming party after brunch today. The party’s set for next Saturday, and while this is Char’s wheelhouse, she makes me tag along for moral

support. I say she makes me, but I do it willingly and with gusto. What else are best friends for?

We map out the different stores she wants to go to. I let her dictate as I jot it all down in my travel journal. I list out the different items we need and once it's all written out, she informs me of the food she already put on order.

Once our veins are swimming in mimosas and we finish eating, we go down the list of stores. We're at our third stop when we run into him. We gathered the party decorations—she's going for a rose gold aesthetic—and got in line behind no person other than Santi.

I've still got a light buzz going from brunch and he's facing forward, so I know he hasn't noticed me. I'd normally say hello to someone I recognize but his distaste for me causes me pause. His cart is full of green decorations—hats, confetti, streamers, banners, and more hidden beneath what I'm able to see.

I really don't want him to see me. Today's not the day for weird looks and hateful remarks. I motion to Char and point towards the exit, mouthing that I'm going to wait outside.

“What?” she attempts to whisper, but it comes out at full volume. *Damn mimosas*. And of course, Santi looks back to the source of the noise.

Our eyes lock and I watch the realization hit him. He grimaces, but to my surprise, he speaks. “Kate.”

“Santi, hey,” I fumble through my words, astonished that he’s actually treating me with any ounce of respect. “Funny running into you like this.” *Is it funny? Stop talking like an idiot.* “Um, what brings you here?” *Seriously? Who talks like that?*

He glances at his cart, only affirming how stupid of a question that was. “I’m prepping for our St. Patrick’s Day party. College tradition we’re keeping.”

“Oh, that’s fun.”

“I’m sure you’ll be there.” I feel a sting in my chest, because Lorenzo hasn’t mentioned any such party. But I brush it off in the next second—we’re casual and he doesn’t have to invite me anywhere. It’s fine.

I’m about to let Santi know exactly where I stand on the matter when Char cuts in, tapping a finger to her chin. “Santi, Santi. You look so familiar. What’s your last name?”

I hold back the burst of laughter. She’s a genius, even if her attempt is very forward. Santi’s eyes sweep over Char and a look crosses him that I haven’t seen him wear before.

“I’ve never seen you before,” he finally replies. *Why are they so good at evading questions?*

“You might think that,” Char says conversationally. “But I dye my hair, like, all the time. I lost a bunch of weight, too.”

My eyebrows cinch together because that’s a complete lie. She’s always looked exactly as she does, minus the hair dying. That part’s true.

“Hmm, I’m pretty good with faces. You from around here?”

“Yep, born and raised like my girl, Kate.” She throws an arm over my shoulder and Santi looks at me as though he forgot I was here. The reminder that Char is my friend places him back into a position of reservation.

“Nice to... catch you guys later.” He moves up as the person in front of him leaves the register, putting his items on the counter. Char and I give each other a silent look. Then her eyebrows shoot up and she throws her arm off me.

She moves to the front of the cart and starts sifting through the plates and pack of balloons, seemingly looking for something. She keeps this up as Santi continues putting his stuff on the counter and the employee rings them up. Once it’s all bagged and the noise stops, Char turns her back towards me and keeps digging through the cart.

She never actually grabs anything because she’s watching Santi pull his wallet out and insert his card into the machine. Once the employee nods his head for the approved payment, Santi slides the card right out and slips it back into his wallet.

Char straightens as Santi pushes his bag filled cart out of the line. “It was nice to see you, Santi!” She waves enthusiastically.

He looks at us over his shoulder and only gives us a head nod before picking up his pace and leaving the store.

“Ugh, that was awkward. Why did you have to do that?” I mutter as we start putting her items on the counter. I regret

ever thinking that was a genius move.

“You gotta take opportunities as they present themselves, Katherine.”

“Yeah, well that got us nowhere, fast.” We grab our filled bags and put them in the cart. Once Char has paid, we exit.

“Well, luckily for us, I have perfect vision.”

My head whips to her. “You saw it?”

She nods. “Yep. Looks like we were right. Santiago Valeri is indeed related to your boss.”

## Chapter Nine

March 10th

I pass Char the box filled with rose gold candle holders so she can set them on the wood grain dining table. While her apartment is limited in space, her interior design skills come in handy for party planning as well. We've spent the afternoon transforming the place to host the twenty or so people she has coming over.

"Thanks!" she says, taking the box and placing it on the table. As she takes them out of the box, I head to her kitchen to grab a lighter. "We're making great timing, people should start trickling in in about an hour or so. That gives us time to get ready."

I glance at the clock. "An hour? I thought you said 7 pm."

"Kate, when are you going to learn that no one arrives to parties on time?"

"Not no one. I do!" Char chuckles as I dig through her drawers. "Where the hell is your lighter?"

"Right here." She pulls it out of the back pocket of her jeans. She ignites the flame and starts lighting one of the four



candles lined up in the center of the table that are surrounded by disposable plates and utensils. I push the drawer shut and return to her side.

“Great job with all of this. I think you’ve outdone yourself.” She finishes lighting the last candle and we both eye the living and dining room, which are a shared, open space. There are round garlands strung across the wall adjacent to the front door. Three sets of five balloons are floating in different corners of the rooms, held down by a rose gold weight. Char made a banner that says WELCOME HOME in handwritten script that you’d think came off a printer, it’s that perfect.

The candles start to emit a light, fruity smell. I check the label, finding that the scent matches the name: champagne toast. I glance out at the balcony through the sliding glass door, the beige curtains Char installed held open by floral hooks.

“I really have, haven’t I?” she murmurs appreciatively. Then she claps her hands together. “Okay, now for the best part! Attire!”

We head into her room and apply our makeup, then pull out our dresses from her closet. We bought similarly styled rose gold dresses, both of which end at our knees and hug our bodies. Where mine has a spaghetti strap and straight cut across the chest, Char’s is a halter top that gives an extra umph to her full breasts.

She blasts pop music to set the mood, and it definitely does the job. I let the eclectic sounds fill my bones with positivity.

Tonight is all about fun.

As I plug in her curling iron, she turns the volume down. “I’ve got a few hot, *single* friends coming tonight. Maybe someone will pique your interest?”

“What? I have Lorenzo,” I say automatically. I take her brush and comb it through my hair, removing the knots built up over the day.

“And? He’s not your boyfriend.”

I wonder if it will ever stop stinging when someone points that out. My eyes find hers in the mirror but she’s focused on straightening her hair. “True. But I don’t necessarily *want* a boyfriend, remember?”

“Did I say find a boyfriend? No.” She pegs me with an insolent look through the mirror.

I consider her words for a moment. “You’re right.”

“*Be that badass for one more night, Kate,*” she mimics Lorenzo’s words from months ago.

I toss the hairbrush at her with a laugh. “How do you even remember that?”

She shrugs. I pull my hair into its typical tight bun since it’ll show off my back and shoulders in this dress. I grab the curling iron to do the strands in the front. Char forced me to invite Lorenzo tonight but he said he had plans.

He did, however, invite me to his St. Patrick’s Day party. He said, and I quote, “We might be shit out of luck in this world,

but I'll pretend for a day." I ignored his cynical message and asked to bring Char, to which he replied, "It's a party, bring whoever you want. Except Brad."

I laughed lightheartedly because there's no chance I'd invite Brad, or any other guy. Lorenzo and I aren't serious, but when I'm with him, it's all consuming. I don't want *or* need anyone else.

But Lorenzo won't be here tonight. I had no plans of looking for another guy—there's more to life than men. But Char's suggestion did pique my interest. Maybe I can have fun tonight, just like Lorenzo's always going on about. It doesn't have to mean anything and I can take advantage of one of the benefits in friends with benefits—not being tied down.

"Done!" Char squeals, turning to face me. I watch her eyes light up with a twinkle, sparkling like a glass of champagne. Before I can respond, there's a knock at the door. "That must be the food!"

"Here, I'll go get it." I release the curling iron from the strand, placing it on the vanity and checking to make sure the curls are perfect before rushing to the front door. Char paid for the food ahead of time, so I take the trays and set them down on the kitchen counter. Char walks out of her room a moment later with nothing other than a bottle of champagne.

"Cheers, toots," she says, popping the cork. The sound reverberates against the walls, setting the tone for tonight. I grab two of the plastic champagne flutes she bought for the party and hold them out so she can pour.

“Cheers,” I say, holding my glass up. We clink and take a sip, then she walks over to the kitchen and pulls down a bottle of gin from the cabinet above the sink. She’s making French 75’s for tonight, so I grab the drink dispenser and pull out the lemons to juice and slice. She mixes the various gin and champagne bottles into the container, along with simple syrup.

Once the cocktail is mixed and the sliced lemons float lusciously inside, there’s a knock at the door—time to get this party started.



Three drinks and nineteen guests later, the party is in full swing. I made sure to fill my stomach with quiches and finger sandwiches before polishing off the champagne Char served us. I’m spending the night so I don’t have to worry about getting home.

I’ve met some of her friends at parties before, but there are new people here. One of them, Gustav, definitely piqued my interest, as Char put it. He’s surprisingly older, I’d say in his thirties, and has a goatee. Neither of which I’ve ever been attracted to. But he’s got a way about him; a confidence that’s impossible to ignore.

He brought a bottle of vodka and asks if I’d like to take a shot of it. The notion of shots at a party reminds me of the Fireball and Jäger shots I did with Lorenzo, which feels exciting. What do I have to lose? It’s just a shot.

*That led to a hell of a lot more with Lorenzo.*

Gustav slides the balcony door open and waves for me to step out first. The air is cool and refreshing now that the temperatures are warming up with the near end of winter. It helps me become a little more alert through the fog I feel from my few drinks.

Gustav hands me a shot and we loop our arms to take the shot at the same time. I laugh and I feel so light and free. This is the first time in a while that I can remember feeling so careless.

*Since meeting Lorenzo.*

When Gustav takes the shot glass from my hand, puts both of them on the small table between the chairs, and takes a step closer to me, reality hits. It's time to make a choice. He's going to make a move, I can feel it. We haven't spent the last twenty minutes innocently chatting and flirting. This is intended to move somewhere.

*Do I want it to?*

I think I kinda do. When his hand tentatively touches my waist and his face inches towards mine, I inhale slowly. I watch through half-closed lids as his eyes shut and his lips press onto mine.

And I feel... nothing. Just his lip skin on mine. He starts to move his lips and I reciprocate out of reaction, not intention. Maybe I just need to get past the initial awkward phase.

*You didn't need to get past that with Zo. You were into it immediately.*

That was different, though. We'd had a lot of back and forth already, we'd met the night before. He's *way* more my type, which certainly helped. So why does this feel so blah? Gustav is invigorating and fun, I certainly enjoyed the small talk. Shouldn't this kiss feel fun and exciting, too?

I want to feel that intense passion, like I do when I'm with Lorenzo. Maybe that passion only comes with secrecy and blurred lines. I had it with my ex, though. At least when we first met. Maybe it's just with assholes. Either way, when Lorenzo so much as grazes me with any part of his body, everything in me lights up like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

And then it hits me. It's not that I can't have other guys, I just only want *him*. I've been thinking about Lorenzo the entire time I've been kissing Gustav.

I slowly peel myself away from him, his head hanging forward for a second before he recovers. I give him a regretful look and he understands immediately. I'm so grateful when he doesn't ask for an explanation or push for anything more. We smile at each other and he slides the door open for me, following close behind as I walk in.

Then we go our separate ways.



The rest of the evening has been a blast. I rekindled with friends of Char's that I've met in the past, and talked to new friends. Gustav and I avoided each other amicably and while I'd expect to feel awkward, I don't. I'm at peace with my

choice. I guess having sex with Lorenzo in our boss's house and office made me more secure with my sexuality.

It's getting late and most people have left the party. I'm chatting with Char and one of her business associates when my phone buzzes in my lap. I expect it to be an incoming message because no one calls me this late, but my eyes cut to the screen when it doesn't stop buzzing. My heart skips a beat when I see Lorenzo's name.

He's never called me before. I can't explain why I suddenly feel anxious, like his call must mean that something is wrong. I jump out of my seat, which causes Char to stop midsentence and look at me.

"Phone call," I explain, waving my phone at her before rushing to her bedroom. When the door's safely shut behind me, I swipe to answer the call.

"Hello?"

His calm reply filters through the built-in speaker. "Hey, princess."

"Are you okay?" His collected voice tells me he's fine, but I can't figure out why he's calling me when he's never done so before.

"Yeah, just wanted to see how Char's party went."

"Oh," I say, surprise laced into my tone. Then I remember Gustav's lips on mine and I shudder, quickly putting it to the back of my mind. "Um, yeah, it's been fun. There are still some people here."

“Sorry I couldn’t make it, had some... stuff to attend to,” he replies.

“Getting ready for the party next week?”

There’s a beat before he responds. “Yeah, Santi goes nuts over this holiday. I can’t understand it.”

I chuckle. “I don’t think holidays are your thing.”

“I wouldn’t say they’re yours, either. That’s one thing we have in common.”

Wherever he is, it’s quiet. I can still hear the muffled sounds of music and voices past the door I’m leaning against. “That’s true.”

I move to sit on the edge of the bed and switch the phone to my other ear. The thirty or so seconds it takes for me to do that are filled with silence.

My heart quickens with the realization that he may have called just to... call. Which means he was just thinking about me. Which means he thinks about me. But that’s... I mean that’s silly, right? There must be a reason he called.

“So... what’s up?” I ask.

“Oh, um”—he coughs—“I just wanted to apologize again for not being able to make it.”

“Oh. Okay.” When he doesn’t say anything, I add, “I’ll let Char know.”

“Please do.”

More silence.



“Can I bring anything for the party?” I offer to fill the silence.

“Just yourself. Everything else is taken care of.”

“Okay. Don’t forget, I’m bringing Char.”

“Right, of course. It’ll be nice to meet your best friend.”

He actually sounds sincere, which nags me. This entire conversation has been more or less meaningless in terms of a reason to call. It seems like he just wanted to... talk. To me.

“Let’s go for another drive before the party,” he says after I don’t reply, lost to my own thoughts.

*Is that what this was about? It’s still a week away.* “That’s the last thing I want to do before a party,” I whine.

“You’re doing great, princess. We have to keep it up if you’re going to make improvements.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

“Good girl. I’ll pick you up at 10.”

“Does this mean we’re not doing any lessons during the week?”

“I can’t. I’ll be out of town this week.”

My stomach drops with the realization that I won’t be seeing him. “Where are you going?”

“Family trip.”

“Oh,” I say, doing my best to keep the dismay hidden.

Another stretch of silence passes between us, anticipation pooling in my belly. The unspoken words hang in the imaginary space between our phones.

When he speaks, his voice is soft. "See ya then, princess."

"See you then," I reply, my voice just as soft. It gets so quiet that I pull the phone from my cheek, certain he hung up. But he didn't. I bring it back to my ear, about to say goodbye when he beats me to it.

"Later." Then the line goes dead.

## Chapter Ten

March 17th

**M**y driving skills are definitely improving. Although I protested after Lorenzo insisted we do another lesson before the party, like I have most days he takes me out to this lot, I'd be a total liar if I said it hasn't helped. Each lesson, the anxiety is less prominent. Each lesson, we get a little farther than we did the one before it.

Today, I did a complete circle around the wheelstops without hesitation. When I hit the brakes and threw the car in park, I literally squealed and clapped my hands together. Lorenzo smiled at me with so much pride, I had to look away to remind myself that he's not something I own or get to keep forever.

Seeing him today, after missing him all week, reminded me just how strong whatever attraction I feel towards him is. While I'd hoped he would call again, he never did. No texts, either. Breathing in the smoke and cinnamon when I got in his car reawakened my soul and filled my blood with heat, which only makes me more nervous.

That nagging feeling of something being off still hasn't dissipated. In fact, it's grown since all those weeks ago when I found that report. And if all goes well, Char and I will get our hands on it today. I didn't bother asking him about his trip when he didn't bring it up. I don't want to give him any reason to suspect that I've been wondering about him.

We're on the way back to my house for him to drop me off when my phone rings. Mom flashes across the screen and I debate answering it before sliding it back into my pocket. I'll call her when I get home. I glance into the back of the car to admire how clean it is. There's only one pack of empty smokes on the floorboard. I could be wrong, but I get the feeling he cleaned it for me because I'd always make a face anytime I caught sight of the mess.

"Is Char still coming today?" Lorenzo asks as I turn back to face the road. He's got one hand on the steering wheel while his other arm is bent on the open window, his elbow protruding from the car.

"Yes, she is!" I reply enthusiastically. I've grown more comfortable with the friendship part of our relationship. Or situationship, as the case may be. I don't feel the need to hide my true self at all.

"Thank fuck," Lorenzo mutters, his hair ruffling with the wind. I start to lift my hand so I can run my fingers through it, but I let it fall back into my lap. "Santi kept asking. Seems like she really had an impact on him when he ran into you guys at that store."

I didn't realize Lorenzo was aware of that. I hadn't mentioned it because of my paranoia surrounding the whole snooping incident. I'm surprised, really, that Santi would want to see me or Char again. He probably still doesn't want to see me, but we're a package deal, so he has no choice.

"I'm excited for you guys to meet," I say. Before, I'd probably be embarrassed to admit that, based on our casual relationship. Now, I'm not afraid to show how I truly feel. There's power in owning your choices and I chose this. I choose it everyday. And his phone call last week certainly helped.

I couldn't stop replaying our conversation in my mind as I was falling asleep that night. Of course I told Char about it once all the guests left. She was equally surprised and it convinced her that I mean more to him than he lets on. While there is evidence to support that, I'm still wary.

That's why our secret agenda for today—getting our hands on that police report by any means necessary—feels more important than ever. Char and I discussed our action plan and today's finally the day to execute. My stomach rolls over with nerves but I ignore it. Then another pending question pops into my mind.

"Hey, I never got to ask—why did you get a new number?" I slowly turn my head, leaving it at an angle to side eye him. His expression remains neutral when he responds.

"My other phone fell in the pool."

“Oh.” I glance out the window before thinking of something else. “They couldn’t transfer your number?”

I turn my head fully this time, catching his grip tightening on the steering wheel. “I don’t like smartphones. It’s easier to get a new phone with a new number, so that’s what I did.”

“Why don’t you like smartphones?” I ask out of genuine curiosity. They feel like a borderline necessity in today’s world.

“The phone doesn’t need to be smart when the man is,” Lorenzo says. I roll my eyes but feel a strange pit in my stomach. It feels like he’s hiding something. I’m about to push further but we’re rolling up to my building, so I table it.

“Okay, so 1 pm?” I ask, glancing at the time on the dash. It’s 11:37 now, so that gives me enough time to shower and get ready.

“*Ish*. No need to be right on time, babe,” he replies with a grin. It doesn’t feel as condescending as it used to. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he kinda likes my time quirk.

“Lucky for you, I’m on Char’s schedule today. She’s picking me up on the way so I don’t have to Uber.”

“Just think—one day, you’ll be driving yourself.” The thought alone lodges my breath in my throat and he doesn’t miss it. “One step at a time, princess.”

He gives me an encouraging smile and I smile back, then pop the door open. “See you soon.”



An hour and a half later, I'm dressed and packed. My bathing suit and towel are in a tote, along with sunscreen, a sunhat, sunglasses, and a protective UV shirt. I'll do anything I can to prevent getting skin cancer.

As would be expected, Char insisted we go shopping for cute St. Patrick's Day outfits after brunch last Sunday. While I normally have no problem shopping, we were tired and a bit hungover from the housewarming party, so I wasn't keen on the idea.

When she found white crop tops that had bright green sparkling clovers over each breast area, she *insisted* we match. Reluctantly, I agreed, and we found cute denim shorts that are high waisted and cuffed on the legs. The fold sits right under my butt cheeks and unless the mirror's lying, my ass looks damn good. The outfit is solidified with a jean hat that has a green clover stitched into it.

I have never felt so extra in my entire life.

Char wanted to wear her white converse and knee high socks with it, so I bought myself a pair of matching shoes and socks. This entire outfit cost over two hundred dollars but I have to admit, it's damn festive and fun. Plus, Rowan called me yesterday and said I was getting a raise for all the hard work I'd done on the increase in loans we've been getting.

I front face the mirror and raise my hands, watching the crop top slide up but not to the point that it reveals my boobs. I

decided not to wear a bra because this shirt is tight enough. I let my hands fall limply at my side and the shirt settles back into place, stopping at my ribs.

My phone buzzes with Char's message that she's on her way. I call my mom real quick in the interim, telling her this weekend's plans. I leave out that Lorenzo is basically my fuck buddy, only saying that he's a coworker. I end the call when Char texts me that she's outside, promising Mom that I'll give Char a kiss for her.

"I'm so excited!" Char screeches the moment I open her door. I plop down in the seat and she peels off the moment I shut the door. "We look so freaking cute! But excuse me, where are your pig tails?"

"I'm not doing pig tails," I state, pulling on the end of hers after buckling my seatbelt. I left my hair down, feeling like a bun in this cap would throw it all off.

"Party pooper," she huffs.

"I'm excited, but I'm nervous, too. Maybe we should call this off," I suggest.

"Call *what* off?"

"The investigation."

"Phew. I thought you were gonna say going to the party. I did not spend fifteen minutes putting green glitter eye shadow on to not go."

"No, of course we're going. But it's wrong to be snooping into his stuff like that. He has a right to privacy."



“His right to privacy ended when he dug into your life.”

“Good point. But what if the door’s locked?”

“Kate! We’ve been over this, like, a million times. We’ll try. If we can’t get it, we can’t get it. But this is our opportunity to try. Do you want answers or not?”

She pegs me with a quick stern look before putting her eyes back on the road. She’s always been very understanding of my driving fear, but she’s *extremely* supportive of Lorenzo teaching me to drive.

“I want answers. Of course I do.”

“Okay. Then we do what we gotta do to get them,” she states matter-of-factly. She follows the GPS instruction to turn left and I recognize Lorenzo’s neighborhood. My belly flutters with anticipation of how today will go. Will him and Char get along? Will we get caught snooping or sneaking around? What if we can’t get our hands on that report? Does it even really matter?

“Let’s go, toots,” Char says. I pull the visor down and slide the mirror open, checking my reflection one last time. I left my glasses behind, feeling it was too much with the hat. I didn’t use green glitter eye shadow like Char, instead simply applying waterproof liner and mascara.

“Let’s go,” I say with a grimace. Char beams at me and we exit the car to head up the walkway. Char wastes no time in pounding on the door, and surprisingly, it swings open within seconds.

Santi's broad body fills the doorway so that I can barely see into the house. Music bumps faintly from the speakers, and I can smell the beer from his cup. He's in green bathing suit shorts with clovers all over them. My eyes skim over his chest and double take when I catch sight of the tattoo on it. It's identical to the one Lorenzo has.

"All right, you made it," Santi says, but his eyes are pinned on Char. This is the friendliest he's ever been around me.

"Hell yeah, we did!" she exclaims. Santi hugs the door with his back so we can walk past him, forcing my eyes off the tattoo. *Why do they have the same tat?* Char isn't shy about glancing around the room, and I can feel the disgust oozing off of her from the lack of decor.

"What is this, a prison?" Char says, looking down the hall with an expression of hope that there will be some redeeming quality down it. When she turns back, it's evident there isn't one.

"You guys want a drink?" I can't tell if Santi is purposely ignoring her question or if he didn't hear her. I'm still just as shocked as I was moments before that he's speaking and not just grunting and giving me weird looks.

"Duh. It better be green or I don't want it," Char replies, walking towards the patio as if she owns the place. It doesn't take anything for her to feel comfortable in any scenario.

"I fuck hard with a themed party," Santi says with a shit eating grin. Either he's already drunk, or he really fucking hates me. I feel like I'm meeting a different person.

Him and I follow Char to the back patio, the music bleeding into my ears. Char halts to take in the scene and I stop next to her. There have to be at least thirty people here already, and they're all holding green solo cups.

Santi sidles up to her other side. "The drinks aren't green, but the cups are." He points to the table behind the propped door.

Char glances at it and says, "It'll do."

I feel a brush on my arm and turn to find Lorenzo standing next to me. He's also shirtless, a dark green tie resting on his toned chest and black swimming trunks sitting low on his hips so I get a perfect view of his sculpted figure.

"Look who showed up at the *appropriate* time for once," he murmurs for only me to hear.

I nudge him with my shoulder, my skin sparking alive from the contact. "Don't be a dick. And don't set a time if you don't want people adhering to it."

"That's fair," he says. His eyes travel down my body and back up, and the timidity it once made me feel is no longer present. "What's not fair is how fuckin' sexy you look right now."

Flames. I'm bursting into flames.

"Isn't she so hot?" Char says from my left, startling me. I forgot where we were for a moment. The music thumps in my ears again, and I force myself to focus.

“Lorenzo, this is Char. Char, Lorenzo.” I do a strange motion with my hand, since I’m standing directly between them. Char smiles and puts her hand out, which Lorenzo takes into his instantly.

“Nice to finally meet you,” Char says.

“I couldn’t agree more. Any friend of Kate’s is a friend of mine.”

“Except Brad,” Char says, still shaking Lorenzo’s hand and smiling.

“Char!” I shout at the same time that Lorenzo echos, “Except Brad.”

“I’m only teasing!” Char says, her eyes cutting to mine as she lets go of Lorenzo’s hand. He puts his released hand onto my lower back, pressing gently. I can’t explain why I know it, but I can tell he’s trying to get across that he’s completely unbothered.

“Let’s get our drinks!” I shout with a little too much enthusiasm. I need to get her away from here immediately before she decides to blab about Gustav. Not that I’m necessarily hiding it from Lorenzo, but why light a match and throw it when it might set fire to a good thing?

“Grab them and meet me by the pong table,” Lorenzo says before sliding his hand off me and walking across the pool deck. My body misses the feeling of him immediately, so I rush us over to the drink table. We fill our green cups with beer from the keg, then walk over to the table.

“Kate!” The squealing from my right has me whipping my head towards the sound, just in time to see Larissa barreling towards me. I only just hand Char my cup before she leaps—literally leaps—onto me. I catch her and she wraps her hands around my shoulders as I hold her up by her thighs.

“I’m so happy you’re here!” she squeals into my ear before pulling back to face me. I can smell the beer on her breath but I know she’s not drunk. She’s excitable like this.

“Me, too,” I say with far less enthusiasm, but she doesn’t seem hindered. I let go of her thighs as she unlatches her arms so she can slide off of me.

“Hi, I’m Larissa,” she says to Char.

“I like you already. Char,” she replies, handing me the cups and pulling Larissa into a hug. I knew they’d love each other.

“You do know this is a pool party, right?” Larissa says as Char releases her. She eyes our outfits skeptically.

“I brought my bathing suit,” I say, wiggling the bag on my shoulder. Her and Char both laugh.

“Aye, Kate. You’re so funny,” Larissa says. I look between the two of them quizzically.

“Just wear your bra and underwear,” Char explains.

“What? Why would I do that? Bathing suits were made for exactly this,” I say indignantly.

“You can wear your bathing suit—”

“It’s fun! We’re only young once!” Larissa cuts Char off.

“I’m not even wearing a bra,” I whisper loud enough so only they can hear.

“Even better,” Larissa says with a grin.

I glance nervously at the pool. It was one thing to do it when there weren’t many people here, and in the dark. It’s another to intentionally not wear my bathing suit at a *pool party*.

“I... I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Well think quick, I’m ready to go in, like, now,” Larissa says, peeling her white shirt off to reveal her lacy green bra underneath. It’s so sheer that I’m certain the second she gets into that pool we’ll all be seeing her nipples through it.

“Let us finish our beers first, Larissa,” Char says, clearly sensing my discomfort. “We’ll join you soon.”

“Fine. And call me Lari,” she says before jogging to the poolside and peeling off her shorts. She was already barefoot, so she leaves the clothes in a pile and dives into the water. On the shallow side.

*Mermaid.*

“Come on, let’s go play with Lorenzo,” Char says, taking her beer and guiding me forward by the elbow.

“I just don’t understand...”

Char laughs, carting us towards the pong table.

“Perfect timing,” he says, giving me another once over before meeting my stare and biting his lower lip. “You guys

are playing against me and Carter this round.”

## Chapter Eleven

March 17th

A couple rounds of some green liquor shot pong later, and I am drunk. Not in the bad way, when you're seeing double and ready to vomit. But in the good way, where you feel like there's nothing more important than what you're doing at this moment.

From the looks of it, Char is feeling just as good. Her and Lorenzo kept up a healthy dose of smack talking, which had me giggling throughout our games. Carter and Lorenzo kicked our asses the first time, but the second time we only lost by two cups. Which means Lorenzo must be feeling pretty good, himself.

He walks up to me and I start to giggle, giddy with the nice weather, drinks, and friends around me. He doesn't pull me in physically, but his eyes scream what he won't. They're full of dark promises and I want to hear every single one of them.

"Nice game," I say, poking him in the chest, right where his tattoo is. "Hey, why do you and Santi have matching tattoos?"

He shrugs and looks away. "College shit."



“Get a room, love birds,” Char says obnoxiously. I glance around on instinct, used to our sneaky behavior. I still don’t really want everyone knowing our business, but I do realize it must be obvious. Why would I be the only coworker he keeps inviting over?

“I’ve got a room, babe,” Carter shouts from across the table with a wink. Char deadpans but I catch the teasing twinkle in her eye.

“Please. Don’t flatter yourself.”

Santi’s voice floats over from across the lawn. “Yeah, fuck off, C.” I squint against the sunlight to find him staring rather protectively at Char.

“Just sayin’.” Carter winks again, which leads me to believe he’s mostly joking. *Mostly.*

“A room does sound nice,” Lorenzo whispers into my ear. He moved to stand at my back, his head leaned into the crook of my neck. Goosebumps erupt over my skin at his words. I turn around to face him, taking a step back so we’re not right in each other’s spaces. I can’t help that I still want to keep a minimum of PDA. I’m not actually his, and he’s not actually mine.

“I bet it does,” I say with a coy smile. The drinks have me loose and silly, so I’m toying with him. Because a room really does sound nice. It’s been a couple of weeks because each time we’d finish the driving lessons, he’d have somewhere to be. He did finger me again one time, but that’s just an appetizer.

Right now, I'm craving a main course.

"You gonna tell me you don't need me as much as I need you right now?"

I make a show of checking him out as though I'm inspecting him, then I shrug. "I could take it or leave it."

He nods with a toothy grin. "Keep lyin' to yourself, princess. I bet your pussy's already wet for me."

I scan the area around us but no one is within earshot. Wondering where Char ran off to, I glance behind me and locate her near the pool, stripping her shirt off.

When I turn back, Lorenzo's heated gaze is sweeping over my body, finally landing on my lips. He hooks a finger through a loop on my jean shorts and pulls me to him, my hips resting against his thighs.

"Tell me. What would I find if I stuck my finger into these shorts?"

My clit throbs and desire trickles out of me, but I play nonchalant with a shrug. "Guess you'll have to take them off to find out."

He licks his lower lip and leans in by a fraction. I play with the end of the tie on his chest. "What's up with this, anyway?"

"Santi's idea."

"I'm surprised he was able to convince you."

"If you're a good girl, you'll learn exactly *why* I agreed to wear this silly tie." His smirk comes slow. "Either way, I'm

gonna fuck that attitude right out of you.”

I want to find out how this plays out. “I can do that.”

His smile gets wider. He twirls a finger through a strand of hair on the side of my face. “Do what?” When I don’t answer, his smile fades. “Say it, Kate.”

“Be a good girl,” I mumble incoherently, looking at the ground.

He lifts my chin up with his finger, his eyes boring into mine. “Louder,” he whispers darkly.

“I’ll be a good girl.”

His chest rumbles. He takes my hat off and runs his hand through my hair, fisting it at the base on my neck. He starts to lean but suddenly stops and looks around as though he just remembered where we are.

He places the cap back on my head and tugs my hair. “Let’s get out of here.”

He reaches for my hand and tugs me through the house and to his room. He pauses, pulling out a key from his pocket and unlocking the door. I watch him drop the key back into his pocket as he pulls me into the room, making a mental note. Either I need to get a hold of that key or ensure he doesn’t lock the door behind us.

The moment the door snaps shut behind me, Lorenzo grabs me by the hips, lifts me, and tosses me onto the bed. I quickly forget about the stupid lock and key when he starts to crawl on top of me, his bent knee between my legs. He presses it into

my pussy, my shorts providing an extra layer of pressure. I sit up on my elbows to bring my lips to his. He wastes no time in gliding his tongue across my lips and into my mouth. I moan audibly into him, letting cinnamon and smoke consume every part of my senses.

His hands roam over my thighs, grip my hips, massage my waist, then creep under my crop top. He pulls away from my lips and tilts his head back to look at my body.

“You’re killing me in this outfit.”

“I’ll have Char dress me more often, then.”

“Don’t get me wrong, you’re sexy in anything. But these shorts... I’ve wanted to rip them off since the moment I saw you.”

I bite down on my lip, then answer seriously. “Please don’t rip them.”

He chuckles darkly. “I won’t rip them. But I am going to take them off.” His fingers trail down my stomach, which tightens in anticipation. He pops the button and pulls down the zipper before slipping a finger into the waistline of my shorts and pulling them off torturously slow. I raise my hips, and to my surprise, he speeds up the process.

Once they’re forgotten in a heap on the floor, I kick off my shoes to let them join. He peels my socks and panties off, adding them to the pile. I meet his fiercely determined eyes as he brings his face towards my pussy. “I want to taste you,” he growls.

I don't get a chance to respond. He grips my inner thighs and pushes them open, my legs splaying out and my hips stretching. My pussy throbs in anticipation, my clit aching to be touched. His hot breath teases me as he slowly brings his tongue to my entrance.

My muscles tense up, causing my hips to thrust forward and his upper lip to rub against my clit. It feels so good that I do it again intentionally. He lets me continue, bringing his tongue to swipe across my clit, replacing his lip. I'm aching when he finally slides his hands from my thighs and curls two fingers in my pussy.

I pant and moan, gripping the bed sheets. His free hand grabs one of mine, placing it on his hair. I grab a fist full and tug, releasing my building tension. He groans and rocks his hips against the bed where his dick is pressed thickly into it.

When I start to get close, I pull on his hair harder. Instead of increasing his speed, like I desperately need, he slows down. I whine and grind my hips into his face while pushing down on his head. His tongue does a final sweep down my slit before he crawls over me, his dick resting over my slick pussy. If I started thrusting I could get the perfect friction and would come immediately. He lowers his face to a mere inch from mine.

"Now I want you to taste you," he whispers before he brings his lips to mine in a featherlight touch. I indulge him as our lips move together sensually. I bring the tip of my tongue to run across his lips, inhaling and tasting my own scent at once.

It's more intoxicating than I could have imagined, especially now that it's mingled with him.

He smirks against my lips. "I knew you'd like that."

I smirk back in confirmation. I rock my hips into him, satisfying my clit's throbbing, unignorable need. He leans back and pulls his shorts down, kicking them off. He throws his nightstand drawer open, taking out a condom and ripping it open with his teeth. I don't know what it is about him spitting the foil out, but it causes a surge of wetness to gush out of me.

He slides it on quickly before thrusting his cock into me with force. My head falls back with instant pleasure. He doesn't take his time, keeping a steady, quick pace that has both of us out of breath within minutes. My clit swells, rubbing on him and bringing me close to the brink.

"You're such a good girl, Kate. I love filling you up with my cock," he grunts between thrusts. "You take me so well."

The tie starts to flap with his exertion and he glances down at it, then looks back up to me with a devilish grin. "I almost forgot. You're too distracting." He slows down, to which I whimper, but he ignores me. He removes the tie and holds it taught before bringing it out around my head. A thrill shoots through my spine.

"As much as I'd like to hold this," he says, finishing the knot and holding the fabric out to me. "You're going to pull it."

“I...” I stare at the tie, suddenly nervous. “You want me to do it?” “You’ll know the right amount of pressure to use. And I’ll get off on the fact that you’re still at my mercy and happy to please me.”

I start to pull on the tie, feeling it tighten around my esophagus. He resumes his pace from before, which brings me back to the pleasure of this moment. When my airway becomes a little restricted, I stop. Lorenzo’s eyes are so hooded, they’re almost closed. The only reason I know they’re not is because they alternate watching my face, my neck, and his dick sliding in and out of my pussy.

As my moans become louder with the building climax, he lowers his body onto me and thrusts into me deeply. I’m just drunk enough that I don’t care if anyone hears. Our bodies are slick with sweat, sliding against each other with his movements.

His lips cover mine, our tongues swiping each other in hazy lust. He puts his hand over my wrist and tugs slightly, causing the tie to tighten around my throat. I feel my vein thump into the fabric and my breathing gets shallower.

“That’s it, baby girl. Give yourself to me,” he growls into my mouth between breaths. “Give. It. All. To. Me.”

He pulses deep inside me and I explode, moaning into his mouth. He swallows my cries and bites down on my lip, which only causes my orgasm to intensify. As it peaks and settles, he slows down. It takes a moment for my alcohol and orgasm clouded mind to realize he hasn’t come.

“What about you?” I mumble after releasing my grip on the tie.

“I’m gonna come for you, don’t worry.” His voice is still all sex while my entire body is limp and I’m ready for a nap.

I watch him intently as he pulls out and rips the condom off, tossing it on the nightstand. With his knees on either side of me, he crawls up my body until his dick is right at my mouth.

“Please me, princess. Do what only you can do for me.” I don’t make him wait a second longer, because how the fuck do I say no to that? I strain my neck to take him into my mouth fully, the faint taste of latex coating my lips, mouth, and tongue. He’s still rock hard from fucking me and I’m certain this won’t take long.

I run my tongue down his shaft as I keep a tight suction with my lips. He groans and strokes my cheek. “Fuck, Kate, that feels so fucking good. Such a good fucking girl.”

His moans and praises are totally doing it for me, reawakening the need in my pussy. My clit begins to throb, wanting to feel the same pleasure I’m providing him.

“Fuck, I’m so close,” he says. Just as I’m certain he’s about to come, he pulls out and throws his hand over his cock. A second later, he cums all over my chest. I watch it ooze out of him, my clit pulsing with his dick as though it’s my own orgasm. I moan as he slows down and hollows out, his body releasing its tension.



Our eyes meet as he collects his breath. He collapses onto the bed next to me, never breaking eye contact. I get lost in his eyes, wanting more. I could go for round two after that blow job got me going again, but a glance at the nightstand reminds me that Char and I still have answers to get. I'm so close, yet so far. Another thought strikes me, my biggest fear with this plan. *What if the report's no longer in there?*

My stomach sinks but I renew my determination. It has to be in here, it just has to be.

"What's on your mind?" Lorenzo asks, his voice like molasses.

I'm about to say nothing, when I decide to go with a vague truth. "You."

He smiles, his eyes closed. I watch him as his chest resumes a normal breathing pattern. He looks so calm and peaceful, and I realize these are the only glimpses I get of this side of him. Something tells me they're reserved for me.

Sensing myself going into dangerous territory, I whisper, "Come on, let's get back to the party."

I loosen the tie and lift my head to remove it, tossing it onto his ribs. He pats it with his eyes sealed shut, then groans. "Fuck the party."

"Come on, it'll be fun. Isn't that what you're all about?"

He peeks at me and sighs. "Fine, let's go."

I sit up, prepared to leap off the bed, when I feel something trickle down my chest. I look down and see his cum leaking onto my stomach. Lorenzo must have been watching me because he swipes two fingers over it and rubs it into my skin. Then his fingers travel to the remains on my chest and rub those in, too.

“Marking your territory?” I tease.

“As much as I’d love for you to wear it the rest of the day, it is a pool party. Here.” He bends over the bed and picks up a black tee that I didn’t realize was down there. He hands it to me.

“Thanks,” I say, wiping off the drying cum. His mention of the pool makes me wonder if he’d care about me only wearing my underwear in front of all these people.

I finish cleaning up and pass him the shirt back, which he barely grabs before tossing it back on the floor. When I shift to get off the bed and redress, he reaches for my wrist. “Kate.”

“Yeah?” I turn and look down at him.

“Can you... um—” He looks so flustered, his eyes becoming more alert. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Oh.” A blush creeps into my cheeks. “Um, yeah, of course.”

I watch his eyes twinkle and I can feel that shift happening. The one where the blurred lines feel too blurred and everything that hasn’t been said between us feels like a heavy

weight I no longer want to carry. So I tear my eyes away and slide off the bed, putting my clothes and shoes back on.

## Chapter Twelve

March 17th

I have that just-fucked hair and pink-tinged cheeks, I can feel it. I run my hands through my hair meekly and search for my hat that Lorenzo tossed into the corner of the room. As I place it on my head, he puts his trunks back on and knots the tie around his neck.

I walk over to the door and pull it open as a sudden idea springs to mind. Lorenzo walks up and pauses next to me. “I’ll lock it,” I say with a small smile, trying to seem like I’m just being thoughtful. To my delight, it works. I twist the lock and instantly move it back so the click still sounds. I shut the door and follow Lorenzo back to the patio.

“Who are all these people?” I ask him.

“You met my friends from high school. Most of the rest are Santi’s friends. We went to the same college, but he did a lot more socializing.”

I nod, my eyes wandering across the different crowds of people. I spot Char and Larissa still in the pool, along with Maria and Melanie. I take a step forward then turn to check in

with Lorenzo, who's watching me. "Go ahead. I'll catch up with you in a bit."

I nod, and our eyes linger for a moment before I head to the pool. All of them are in their bra and underwear, including Char. No one seems to care at all, though.

"Hey! Where the hell were you?" Larissa says as I kick my shoes off.

Crap. I didn't think this part through. "I—"

"Get your bathing suit and join us!" Char interjects. I meet her eyes and she winks. I look back to the pong table, finding my bag still tucked underneath. I jog over and grab it, then go inside to change. Once I've got my two-piece black bikini and sunscreen on, I stuff my clothes inside and wrap my towel around my body. I place my bag down on a patio chair and pull out my sun hat and glasses, then drop my towel on the deck near the stairs and wade into the pool.

"You came prepared," Maria says with no hidden sarcasm. I can't blame her for being bitter, so I don't feed into it.

"Yep. My dad had skin cancer and I don't need to follow in his footsteps."

Melanie and Larissa nod, and Char smiles proudly. "Good for you, toots."

While I have her attention, I give her the signal we discussed, rubbing my earlobe. I see in her eyes that my message registers, so I swim over to them grouped up in the water. We chit chat about random shit until Char says she

needs to use the bathroom, which means she's going to do *it*. That sets all the butterflies in my stomach loose.

I watch her grab her towel and wrap it around her body before entering the house. Maria, Melanie, and Larissa keep talking, so I scan the party until my eyes land on Lorenzo. He's on the lawn, a cigarette hanging off his lips. I watch as he takes a drag but doesn't remove it, letting it dangle from the side of his mouth.

"Do you smoke?"

I turn to Larissa, embarrassed she caught me staring.

"Oh, no," I reply. Not that anyone in my family's had lung cancer, but it's a habit I have no intention of picking up. "You?"

"Nah, just the green stuff. Lorenzo won't smoke bud, though, just cigarettes."

"Oh," I say, unsure why she's telling me any of this. My buzz has mostly worn off post sex, but maybe she's drunk. I spot a group of cups by the poolside, remembering that while I was in Lorenzo's room, they were still partying. "Cigarettes are worse than weed, though, right?"

"As far as health goes, definitely. But my aunt, Zo's mom, died from a drug overdose. So he's pretty particular about what he'll use."

I peer at him again, my heart lurching for him. As though he can sense it, his gaze wanders to mine. The side where his cigarette is hanging tilts up, and he takes a pull. He turns back

to Carter and D as he blows out the smoke. “Damn, I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t talk about it. But I thought it was only fair that you know, seeing as you guys can’t even keep it together at a party.” My eyes widen but my shoulders relax when I realize she’s teasing.

“He started smoking after she died.”

“How old was he?”

“13.”

*13? That’s a long time to be smoking.*

Larissa must see the shock etched onto my face, because she adds, “He doesn’t smoke too much, though. A few a day, max.”

A few too many, in my opinion. I watch him again, and as he takes a pull, I find it hard to be upset. I have no idea what it’s like to lose a parent, especially to something as terrible as drugs. Plus, he does look pretty sexy with it.

Larissa rejoins Maria and Melanie’s conversation and I glance back at the house. Damn it, I got distracted with Larissa’s information. How long has Char been in there? It should have only taken five minutes max. That was the agreed upon plan—get in there, snap a picture, get out. I drift over to the stairs and grab my towel, stepping up and wrapping it around myself. I pad over to my bag and pull out my phone but don’t see anything from Char. I shoot off a message and nervously wait, rubbing my thumb for some sort of comfort.

When I don't receive a response after two minutes, I glance to where I last saw Lorenzo, finding him in the same spot. The cigarette is missing but he's still engrossed in conversation with the guys. I glance at the pool and around me, making sure no one's paying attention. I drop my phone into my purse and slip into the house.

When I reach the room, I open the door quietly and shut it behind me. Char's standing at Lorenzo's closet, a dresser drawer open. Her face is paler than I've ever seen it.

"What?" I whisper urgently, stalking over to her.

"Kate..."

"What?" I say a little louder. My nerves are shot with her behavior. Why is she at the dresser? The report was last in... I whip my head to the nightstand and see the drawer open. He must have moved it.

"This report was printed weeks before your date with Brad. Look." Her trembling fingers twist the page towards me. My stomach plummets when I see December 27th stamped on the top left.

"Okay... okay, but what can that mean?"

"Well, I read the report, and..." She points to the narrative and it takes me a moment to reread the line.

Victim advised he did not see the license plate of V2 but described it as a black coupe.



I look up at her and her wide eyes meet mine. “Lorenzo’s car...”

My brows furrow. “No... I...”

It can’t be. I reread the line, my mind reeling. How did I never make that connection? And while my initial reaction was to deny it, the more I think about it... the more I *can’t* deny it.

There are truths in life that are impossible to ignore once brought to light—that instinctual, inexplicable feeling in your gut. I know it in my heart of hearts—Lorenzo ran Brad off the road that night.

And didn’t stop.

The same night he and I...

I throw a hand over my mouth.

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

My vision blurs and my heart thumps erratically.

“Kate, that’s not all.” She shifts the report in her hand to reveal a small bag. She grips it between her fingers.

“Is that—” I may have never done drugs, but I know what white powder is. “This doesn’t...” My mind reels. Didn’t Larissa just tell me mere minutes ago that his mom died from a drug overdose? I replay our conversation.

*So he’s pretty particular about what he’ll use.*

No, no, no. No! The room starts to spin before me and my hands feel shaky. I grab the report and reread that line. *A black*

*coupe...*

The Audi. The car I've been learning to drive in. My hands have touched the steering wheel that ran Brad off the road. My fingers curl, feeling dirty from the sheer fact that they've been implicated in any way. Why wouldn't he have stopped?

My eyes shoot to the drugs in Char's hand, then to the open drawer. There are tons of bags, some fuller than others.

My head is shaking. I'm trying to speak but the words aren't forming. Char's hands grip my shoulders and I look at her face when she gives me a rough shake.

"Kate. Kate! We need to get out of here. Focus." I zero in on her eyes, her pupils reflecting the fear I feel. I nod slowly, trying to stay in the moment. To settle my pounding heart, the blood rushing through my veins.

Char gives my shoulders another shake but the room starts to spin faster. I lose my footing but her hands hold me up. "Kate! Let's go."

She grabs my hand and pulls me towards the door. I glance back and catch sight of the open nightstand drawer. "Wait," I mumble. "The... the drawer."

Char glances back, looks at me with concern, debating whether to just say fuck it or cover our tracks. She releases my hand and jogs over to the nightstand and dresser drawers, shutting them. My eyes linger on the used condom, still atop the nightstand. It's insane to think that not even thirty minutes

ago, we were in here. Together. Him full of terrible secrets and me unable to imagine the severity of them.

Char replaces her hand in mine and we exit the room. “My bag,” I say. The movement has my voice more sure, but it’s a facade. I’ve moved into autopilot. Every atom in my body wants to move into a full blown panic attack, but Char’s grip on my hand and our rush towards the front door grounds me enough that I don’t succumb.

“My bag,” I whisper.

“Let’s just leave it,” she says in a rush.

“My phone’s in there.”

“Fuck. Fuck!” She glances around the living room, then towards the patio. “Okay. I’ll go grab the bag real quick. Get outside and wait for me.”

I nod. When she takes a step away, I say, “Our clothes.”

She doesn’t look back. “I’ll try.”

I watch her walk out, then beg my lead filled legs to move. I feel like there’s extra gravity keeping me down, holding me hostage. My mind is going numb and I can’t think. But I repeat two simple words.

*Get out. Get out. Get out.*

My legs finally cooperate. I focus on each step, slower than they should be. I pull the door knob and it feels like the door is made of stone. I don’t realize I didn’t shut the door until I’m

down the walkway. By the time I turn around Char is rushing out of the house, shutting the door behind her with a slam.

“Come on, I’m ordering the Uber.” Her phone is in her hand and she’s typing away. My bag is slung on her shoulder but I don’t see our clothes. “Thank god, there’s someone three minutes away.” She presses a few more buttons and then looks up at me.

“Our clothes,” I say in monotone. I don’t recognize my own voice. I’m like a zombie, focused on practical matters only, void of emotion.

*He ran Brad off the road. He does drugs. He is a bad, bad man. I’ve been fucked by a bad, bad man.*

“Kate!” Char’s fingers are snapping in my face. “I know, toots, but I need you to hold it together until we’re in the car.”

She hoists the bag higher on her shoulder and grabs my hand, taking one glance behind her before dragging me to the road. An Uber pulls up after some amount of time, but how much it is, I have no idea. Time seems to have stopped existing for me.

She opens the passenger door and gives me a light push. I scoot into the car and she slides in after, slamming the door and patting the headrest in front of her. “Go, go,” she tells the driver.

His eyebrows pinch together but he turns his head towards the road and accelerates. A tear is rolling down my cheek but I don’t remember feeling like I needed to cry.

“Fuck,” Char whispers. I turn to her on my right to find her looking out of the back window. I follow her line of sight, my eyes landing on Lorenzo. He’s running down the driveway, coming to a sudden halt where the concrete meets the gravel road.

His desolate face fades from view as the car drives further away, then turns left.

The tears haven’t stopped streaming.

## Chapter Thirteen

March 17th - Lorenzo

There are moments in life where you feel like you're in complete control. That's how I've always felt when I'm behind the wheel. The smooth leather under my assured fingers, the sound of the engine purring in my ears. The world's scenery blurred with my speed, my body alight with the adrenaline that courses through my veins.

It's one of the few times I feel alive.

Until I met her. Until I was buried deep in her pussy, when every inch of my bones sparked to life. I was more alive than I'd ever been. But I wasn't in control at all. Each time after, being near her was enough to feel that spark again, to feel just as alive and out of control.

That terrified me.

I knew the risks, but wanting her overshadowed them. My entire life has depended on my control. On my ability to limit what I say to who, what moves I make. To remain in a position of power in an utterly powerless situation. The resulting pain I've felt has never taken center stage, never held any ounce of

importance. Because it doesn't matter. It doesn't change the fact that I'm here. That I have to do what I have to do.

But that pain has become a part of me. It's never what I focus on, but it's unignorable, nonetheless. Like a rotten apple, it eats at my core and reduces me to mere fragments of a man. It's a pain I'm accustomed to, but that doesn't change its potency.

And yet, that pain feels like a pinprick compared to what I feel now.

I'm running down the road, desperate to follow her, wishing for a way to turn back the clocks. To question Char when she was picking up her clothes from the pool deck and then stuffing them into her bag.

My own survival skills bit me in the ass. I didn't spring into action. I held back and watched, piecing together what she was doing before jumping to conclusions.

I knew she wasn't with her. I scanned the pool and lawn, confirming what my body already knew—she wasn't out here. I *always* feel her presence.

Once Char went into the house, I broke away from my friends and rushed inside. I still didn't feel her, but I refused to believe it. My trusted instincts had to be betraying me this time. There's no way this sense of doom could have validity.

I rushed to my room to find her, praying she was inside. The moment I put the key in and realized the door wasn't locked, every part of my body knew. My bones sparked but it wasn't

from the current of feeling alive—it was the all-consuming fear I'd been trying to prevent from morphing into reality. I threw my door open, my eyes quickly scanning the room. Nothing seemed out of place, but I rushed to the closet. I threw the two drawers open, but only one was in disarray.

The one with the report.

“Fuck!” I yelled into the abyss.

I ran out of my room and out the front door, the door banging into the wall. The car drove away in the next instant and I knew there was no way I'd catch her.

“Kate!” I shouted, knowing damn well the car wouldn't stop but unable to restrain myself. Char's head turned in my direction and her lips turned down, but the car kept moving and I couldn't see anything anymore.

My legs suddenly stopped, though I never told them to. My chest shrunk, my heart pounded. I couldn't breathe. I bent over and put my hands on my knees, forcing oxygen into my lungs so I wouldn't lose my ability to think.

My face felt wet. I looked towards the sky as I reached a finger to my cheek, certain it had to be raining. But it wasn't. And then I realized it was from tears. I remembered the last time I cried—ten years ago. If it hadn't been for the moisture, I wouldn't have known I was crying at all. My heart was hollow, intentionally numbed so I don't have to acknowledge just how miserable this life really is for me.



I heard the sob erupt from my chest and I did the only thing  
I knew how to.

I ran.

I'm still running.

I run until my eyes can't see and my ears can't hear and my  
mouth can't breathe.

I run until all I can feel is the desperate need to stay alive.

I run until all I can feel is the *illusion* of control.

## Book Four Info

Please don't hate me for this... but Novella four, Light Me Up,  
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## Also by Amanda Bentley

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### **Review Sh\*t Out of Luck**

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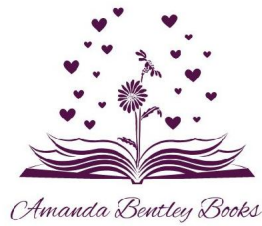
# Newsletter

## Acknowledgments

I'm so thankful to anyone who took a chance on this series and fell in love with it the way I have. When I posted the blurb and cover reveal for this book, I was astounded with the amount of excited comments and dm's I received. It was one of those moments where I realized *I'm really doing this!* It means so much to me that the work I create impacts you and can bring some joy to your day :)

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Amanda Bentley loves escaping into fictional worlds through reading and writing. A typical Pisces, she's as much a mood writer as she is a mood reader. She likes her book boyfriends morally grey, but she'll read any book with romance (preferably drenched in spice and angst).

When she's not writing, you might find her chasing her wild toddler, or on stage, performing improv with her husband. She's a creative, free spirit, and while she loves a fun adventure, there's no place like her bed with a book.

Amanda can be found on TikTok and Instagram under [@amandabentleybooks](#). Her DM's are always open!