

FESTIVE FUN
NOVELLA TWO

Struck
by
~~Cupid~~
Stupid

AMANDA BENTLEY



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NOVELLA TWO

Amanda Bentley

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Contents

Dedication

Playlist

1. Chapter One

2. Chapter Two

3. Chapter Three

4. Chapter Four

5. Chapter Five

6. Chapter Six

7. Chapter Seven

8. Chapter Eight

9. Chapter Nine

10. Chapter Ten

11. Chapter Eleven

12. Chapter Twelve

13. Chapter Thirteen

14. Chapter Fourteen

15. Chapter Fifteen

Bonus Chapter

Also by Amanda Bentley

Acknowledgments

To anyone who's ever been stupid for a guy.

Because same.

Playlist

Listen on Spotify!

1. "Next Ex" by Sueco
2. "Goodbyes" by Post Malone, Young Thug
3. "Trust Issues" by Olivia O'Brien
4. "Walking Away" by Chelsea Cutler
5. "I Can't Hate You" by Kayou, yaeow
6. "Bad Habit" by Black Pistol Fire
7. "We Don't Talk Anymore" by Charlie Puth, Selena Gomez
8. "Just About Over You" by Priscilla Block
9. "stupid" by Tate McRae
10. "Want You Back" by Saint Young, LiL Lotus
11. "Awake" by Godsmack
12. "Somebody To You" by The Vamps, Demi Lovato
13. "Secret Agent Man" by Johnny Rivers

14. "Just Friends" by Olivia O'Brien

15. "Bad" by Royal Deluxe

Chapter One

January 1st

“Who the fuck is Brad?”

My eyes are glued to the screen, watching as the time changes to midnight. *Why the hell is fuckboy Brad writing to me on New Year's?*

“I thought you said you didn't have a boyfriend.” I look up at Lorenzo, whose eyes are burning in the darkness. He searches my face and must see the utter confusion in my expression, because I watch the heat sizzle out from him.

“I don't,” I respond. Brad didn't even show up for our date. A thousand reasons whirl through my mind as to why he'd be writing to me now.

He's horny and alone on New Year's.

He finally remembered that he never showed up.

He's a fuckboy.

“Are you going to explain?” Lorenzo asks, but it sounds more like a demand. I meet his icy stare and straighten myself on the bed.

“I don’t owe you anything, *Lorenzo*.” He must like sex with shoes on because mine are still on my feet, just like last time. I search the bed for my dress and toss it over my head once I locate it. I feel way too vulnerable to be half naked in front of him.

I could have sworn after we had sex, when I caught him looking at me, that I saw something more. But obviously, my mind was playing tricks on me. A moment ago, he was kicking me out. He didn’t even bother to offer me a ride home this time.

“You think you’re gonna fuck me and have some other guy texting you?” His tone oozes anger, and it infuriates me.

“You can’t be serious.” I start to laugh as I finish sticking my hands through the sleeves of my dress.

“Deadly.” I stand up from the bed and take the few steps that close the gap between us. I crane my neck, leveling him with an icy stare of my own.

“First of all, *you* fucked *me*. Then, you kicked me out. I don’t even know why you invited me to this party if you were just gonna treat me like *shit!*” I spit the last words, hardly recognizing my voice.

“Kicked you out? The fuck are you talking about?” His voice is louder, filling the small space between us and reverberating off the walls that suddenly feel too close.

“You offered to order me an Uber!”

“You were half asleep! And in case you forgot, I first offered for you to stay here. I thought I was doing you a goddamn favor!”

This has quickly turned into a screaming match, but I’m too peeved and drunk to care. “Oh, how thoughtful of you! I’ll just invite her to a party where she doesn’t know anyone, keep ditching her, shame her when she’s too drunk, and abandon her after we finish *having sex!*” I shove his shoulders on the last word, but his feet stay rooted in place.

“Is that the fucking story you’re telling yourself? Jesus Christ.” He shakes his head in disbelief, causing my blood to boil. My breathing is too heavy, and I swat at the now uncurled tendril in my face.

“I hate you.” The words escape my lips out of anger, but they feel as real as they sound. “Fuck you and your friends with benefits *bullshit!*”

I storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me. I run—literally run—down the hall and out the front door into the dark night. My heels clap along the pavement as fireworks explode around me, yet I find nothing to celebrate. I’m aware that I’m acting like an overly emotional teenager, but I’m too pissed off to give a damn.

When I reach the driveway, I catch sight of Lorenzo’s car. If I had a bat, I’d smash it through one of his stupid windows.

I need to calm down.

I take a few deep breaths, steadying my racing heart and mind.

This is all my fault, really. I knew it was a bad idea to come here. Hell, I knew it was a bad idea to have sex with Lorenzo in the first place.

Whatever pull he has on me ends tonight. He hasn't even come out to check on me or explain himself, so all the more reason.

When I feel for my purse, I realize I left it in the room. I debate just leaving it there, but I never took my phone back from Lorenzo. Which leaves me no choice but to go back inside.

I take a few more moments, releasing my hair from its bun and brushing my fingers through the knotted strands at the front. Once I feel calm and put together, at least more so than I was minutes before, I walk back into the house.

The music from out back is thumping, and the rowdiness of the crowd confirms that everyone is getting drunker by the minute. I, on the other hand, sober up with each passing second. I'm only just now noticing that there are at least fifty people back there.

I turn down the hallway and open the bedroom door. I'm not sure what I did expect, but I know it wasn't Lorenzo sprawled in the bed on his back, still shirtless, tossing my phone back and forth between his hands.

“There’s my princess,” he says. I honestly can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic or serious. I don’t like either option.

“My phone, please,” I respond in a purposely neutral tone. I walk over, pick up my purse, and hold my hand out expectantly.

In hindsight, it was idiotic of me to think that he’d place the phone in my hand and I’d walk out of here with my dignity intact.

Instead, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me to him, so that I stumbled onto his body with my legs hanging off the bed. I try to release my wrist while simultaneously wiggling myself off of him. Not only does he make it impossible by bringing his other arm around my waist and shifting me so I’m laying evenly on him, but the feel of his hard, toned chest is distracting me in every way that I can’t afford right now.

“Lorenzo, give me my phone and let me go.” I sound so much more put together than I feel. I stare at the blinds covering the window over the bed, refusing to glimpse into those eyes that make me do things I shouldn’t.

“Not until you talk to me.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.” Before I can stop myself, I add, “And if you wanted to talk to me so badly, you would have come outside.”

“Sound logic, princess. It’s almost as if I didn’t know that I had your phone in my hand, forcing you to come back to me.”

His words settle in, and I grit my teeth. “That’s grand of you, really. You could have brought me my phone, but no. You force me to come back in, knowing I’m pissed. You’re *such* a gentleman.”

“I never claimed to be one, Kate. In fact, I made it quite clear that the opposite is true.”

The anger bubbles again, but now it’s only directed at myself. He’s right, he did make it clear. I want to go home, forget this ever happened, and make good on my resolution of no dating. Or sex. Or anything with guys. What better time to really implement that than New Year’s?

“Can you *please* give me my phone so I can go?” The defeat in my voice reflects how pathetic I feel. The fight that was in me moments ago is gone.

Lorenzo takes my chin between his index finger and thumb, tugging down so I’m forced to look at him. When my eyes meet his, I’m surprised to find them open and earnest.

“Kate.” My name on his tongue is a wicked curse and a magical spell. My brows lift up and my lips part. His eyes track each movement as he slowly licks his lips.

His head moves an inch, and I’m certain he’s going to kiss me. When his lips are a hair away from mine and his eyes flutter close, my hand flies out and snatches my phone like a snake striking its prey.

Lorenzo’s head cocks back as I wrench my wrist from his grip, leaping off of him.

“Leave me alone. I mean it.” I glare at him with the most murderous look I can muster. It must work because his eyebrows arch in surprise. If I was foolish, I’d think I saw a flash of hurt in his eyes, but I know better than to think this man gives any damn about me.

I pivot and exit the room, not bothering to shut the door at all this time.



“Char, just leave it alone.” I take a swig of my mimosa, normally reserved for Sunday brunch. But New Year’s fell on a Monday this year, and I demanded that she come out with me so I could fill her in on the party last night. It didn’t take any convincing at all, seeing as we didn’t go to brunch yesterday. She had plans with family, and now she wants all the juicy details.

Her words, not mine.

“Two more questions,” she pleads. I nod, placing my glass on the table. “He hasn’t even texted you?”

“Nope.” The word pops on my lips to portray indifference, but I look away so she won’t see the disappointment that tinges my eyes. He’s doing exactly as I asked by leaving me alone, but once my emotions settled after arriving home last night, I kept glancing at my phone in hopes that he’d say *something*.

“And what about Brad? What did he say?”

“I haven’t looked. What good will that do? He showed me his true colors. I’m tired of giving out chances when all that ever leaves me is disappointed.” My arm brushes my boob, rubbing against my sore nipple. The *last* reminder I need is Lorenzo’s teeth sinking into them.

“But you don’t even know what he said!”

“Charlotte!” My use of her full name has her eyebrows raised. “I took your advice with Lorenzo, and look where it got me. I can’t think of a single excuse that fuckboy Brad could have which would result in me thinking he deserves another chance. Or even an acknowledgment from me. I’m done ignoring red flags. *Done.*”

I see the sting of my harshness painted on her face, and I instantly feel regret. “You’re right,” she says meekly. “I’ll stop. You know what’s best for you.”

“Thank you,” I reply. But I’m unable to meet her stare. Because the truth is, I wish Lorenzo could have been more. That he would have wanted more.

But he doesn’t. I have to accept that and move on.

Chapter Two

January 2nd

The return to work on Tuesday is uneventful despite my anxiety over possibly seeing Lorenzo. I can't thank the universe enough that we're in different departments, because otherwise it would be impossible to avoid him.

I'm tempted to tell Victor that I'm going to work through lunch, but I can't keep up this charade forever. The reality is, we work at the same company, which means I have to see him. Might as well rip the band-aid off now.

So I grapple with my courage, lose miserably, and follow Victor out of our set of cubicles to the break room. Once I have my usual lunch consisting of a turkey sandwich, apple, carrots, and hummus laid out in front of me, I force myself to listen to the conversation of my coworkers and not my panicked thoughts.

"I think he's been at the Westland branch," Victor says.

"Yeah, I heard he'll be there for a few weeks. He's trying to restructure the organization over there," Alexandra replies.

“How many branches are there, again?” Matteo asks. He’s only been with us a few months.

I swallow my bite of sandwich. “Three.”

“So ours, Westland, and...?” Matteo muses.

“Grove Shores,” I inform him. All three are neighboring towns, so Rowan’s able to work out of any branch, as needed. Our town branch, Azalea Pines, is his primary office. His house, where the holiday party was, is a ten minute drive away.

Remembering the holiday party causes my heart to ache, the memories of Lorenzo and I flooding my mind. His touch on my skin, his lips on my neck, the cord of lights around my...

I inhale sharply and my head snaps up, sensing him before seeing him. He just walked into the break room. It’s uncanny the way my thoughts somehow seem to always connect to him.

Uncanny but irrelevant.

I’m sticking to my guns and I’m not engaging with him. Even if he tries.

But he doesn’t. He doesn’t glance in our direction, which must be purposeful, as we always sit at the first table across from the entry. He keeps his head down as he walks past our table to where I’m sure the IT group is seated. I can’t be sure if I imagine the faint scent of cinnamon and smoke or if it actually wafted over.

It’s silly that we’re segregated by departments, but that’s the way the cookie crumbles. You get closer to the people sitting

in your vicinity when you work, and naturally you stick to what you know.

I've never been more grateful for it than today. It forces us to have some distance. The desire to look at him, to call out to him, to demand those answers I never got, is thrumming under the surface. But I drown it and keep my focus on my table.

The minutes tick by excruciatingly slow. I'd been so worried about what would happen if we talked, that I didn't prepare for if we *didn't* talk. It's proving to be more difficult than any conversation would have been.

Hearing his muffled voice and laughter hurts more than I think it should. I mean, I hardly know the guy. And what I *do* know is off-putting, at best. So what if we had sex—twice? That doesn't automatically foster feelings. Right?

This is the first time I've had sex with someone I'm not at least casually dating, so I guess I wouldn't know. I should ask Char.

The moment my watch ticks to 12:29, I jump out of my seat. It was abrupt enough that all my coworkers whipped their heads to me, and even some of the employees at the neighboring table.

"I've got a lot to get done today," I say with an awkward chuckle. I take my bag of trash, which I prepared to dispose of the moment I could, and dump it in the can near the fridge. But then, I make a crucial mistake.

Maybe my subconscious likes to torture me. Because instead of turning left, which would face me to the door, I turned right, which means I'd have to circle around to leave.

It also means that Lorenzo is in my perfect line of vision.

Which wouldn't be a total problem if I could have just glanced away hurriedly and rushed out of the break room in the most casual, non-attention seeking way, like I had planned to.

But it *is* a total problem, because Lorenzo's eyes are one hundred percent on me. There's no question about it. And when my eyes land on his, they're chained. I couldn't pull away if I tried, which I haven't.

His piercing stare sets me at more ease than I've felt since I was half asleep on him, yet my heart is racing as though I'm facing my death.

I've always heard of those moments, usually in fictional shows or movies, where it feels like time ceases to exist. But I'd never experienced it before now.

It's the best feeling.

I can't tell you how much time has passed, but he finally frees me, turning his head back to his table. I react quickly, walking out of the room and down the hall to my office space. When I'm safe at my desk, colleagues straggling in with laughter and chatter, I release a breath and put my forehead in my palms.

This isn't going to work. I need to get away from him. Far, far away.

I act impulsively, logging into my computer and pulling up a web browser. I go to a job search site, entering in my qualifications to see what's posted. When I'm halfway through the listings, I come to my senses and exit the browser.

I love my job. Rowan is a wonderful boss, the office is right by my apartment, and I love my coworkers. I can't let another fuckboy ruin that for me. Searching for another job is stupid.

He makes you stupid.

I let out a growl of frustration and pull out my phone to text Char.

"Thought you had a lot of work to get done?" Victor's voice startles me enough that I jump in my seat. He chuckles. "I'm just teasing. You okay? You've seemed off."

"Yeah... yeah, I'm good. Just trying to get back into the work groove. The holidays have me all thrown off." It's the truth, just not for the reasons I'm leading him to believe.

"Okay, good. Just checking." He goes to his desk across from mine and places his headphones on before clacking on his keyboard.

I resume typing out my text to Char.

Me: Does sex lead to feelings for that person?

We both have iPhones, so I see that she reads it immediately. Her chat bubble populates a moment later.

Char: no

Well, that's not what I wanted to hear. I lock my phone and place it on my desk but it buzzes again.

Char: what happened?

I should have thought this through before opening the can of worms that is Char. I don't reply to her, deciding to put this on the back burner ~~for now~~ forever.

Chapter Three

January 6th

I need a distraction. I made it through the week with my normal routine, save for fighting myself from succumbing to Lorenzo's presence in the break room at lunch. But today is Saturday, and while I'd normally clean my apartment after my morning Pilates class, I'm too busy pacing my living room in hopes of releasing some of this frantic energy.

My thoughts have been absorbed in Lorenzo all week, and it's driving me insane. I could get drunk, but that leads to stupid, reckless choices. I could call Char, but that's going to prompt her to discuss my dating life again, and I'm just not in the mood.

I did eventually catch her up on the incident in the break room Wednesday, if you can even call it that. She didn't leave me much choice, texting me ten times before work ended. I called her on my short walk to Pilates so I would have the perfect excuse to end the call. She didn't have much to say, but she did express her sympathy. Ew.

Tomorrow, Char and I have brunch. But today... I don't know what I'm going to do. I force myself to pull out my

cleaning supplies, slap my gloves on, and get to work. Nothing scrubs your thoughts clean like sanitizing every surface of your home.

That's exactly what I do. I go for a deep clean after building momentum, even though I did one two weeks earlier. I scrub every nook and cranny of this apartment. When I finally shower and put fresh clothes on, I make myself some lunch while Friends plays in the background.

I plop down on the couch with my salad and pasta, and Felix curls up at my feet. My phone vibrates on the coffee table and I nearly drop my fork when I see the notification.

Tinder: You haven't swiped in a while. Your profile will be hidden starting tomorrow. Swipe now to stay visible!

I meant to delete that damn app after receiving Brad's message notification. But in the heat of the fallout with Lorenzo, I must have forgotten. I take a bite of my salad and slowly place my fork down, then swipe on the notification.

No time like the present. I'm going to delete my account and this damn app, making good on my promise to fuck off with men. The app takes a moment to load, and I glance at the TV, chuckling at my comfort characters.

When I look back down, the app's loaded and I don't know if it's a glitch or what, but I'm staring at Brad's message to me.

Brad: Kate, I'm so sorry I didn't make our date. I was on my way when someone cut into my lane and I swerved to avoid them. I ended up running off the road and hit my head pretty good. Doctors kept me in the hospital a few days to make sure it wasn't serious and my phone was damaged in the crash. I'm finally back in the swing of things and I got a new phone.

I reread the message three times, blinking hard to make sure this isn't a dream. Once I'm convinced it's real, my heart aches for him. What a terrible way to spend Christmas! And here I was calling him fuckboy Brad when he was in a terrible accident, just like Char suggested.

The skeptic in me begs the question—what if he's lying? But something tells me he's not. What kind of nut case would he have to be to make some shit like that up? Then again, my history with men would prove that I somehow attract the wrong ones.

Well, supposing it is real, I should wish him well.

Me: Hey Brad. I'm so sorry to hear that, I hope you're doing okay! Thanks for letting me know. I definitely thought you stood me up. Haha.

I send the message and dial Char immediately after. She picks up on the second ring.

“Hey, toots.”

“You’re not going to believe this!” I switch to the Tinder app and read her the messages, her intermittent gasps the only other sound.

“I told you! Told. You.”

“I know, I know. But come on, what are the fucking chances of that?” My mind is still reeling, trying to both process and believe that this is real. Does this mean I need to change my tune? That my declaration of anti-men is no longer valid?

“Are you going to reschedule?”

“Jeez, Char. I don’t fucking know! He might still be injured. I don’t know how bad this was. Plus, I’m responding days later. He’s probably forgotten about me by now.”

“I highly doubt that. He still reached out to you.”

“I swore off men, remember?” I’m not sure if I’m trying to remind her or myself.

“Under different circumstances!”

“I know, I know... ugh! Why couldn’t he have just left me alone? Why is this happening?”

“Calm down. Just wait to see if he even replies. I doubt he forgot about you, but it’s possible. Take some—”

My phone vibrates in my hand and I pull it away from my ear to look at it.

Brad: I figured that's what you thought and I feel terrible. Please let me make it up to you? I'd still love to take you out

Char is calling out my name so I bring the phone back to my ear to read her the message.

“Oh my god, he sounds like a sweetheart!”

“Fuck!” I let out a frustrated sigh and rub my thumb against my nail to calm my nerves.

“Why don't you just reply and tell him to give you some time to think? You don't have to make any decisions now. If it's meant to be, it will be.”

“Yeah... yeah, you're right. That's exactly what I'm going to do. Thanks, Char.”

“Anytime. See you tomorrow?”

“Of course. Bye.” I hang up and reread Brad's new message, then formulate my response.

Me: You have nothing to make up for. You were in an accident! I feel terrible for thinking the worst of you. But if I'm being honest, I need some time to think. I sort of swore off men after you didn't show and I need to gather my thoughts on all this.

He replies immediately.

Brad: I completely understand. I'll be waiting for your response. I need to take it easy for the next couple of weeks, anyway.

Me: I hope you feel better.

I originally typed 'let me know if you need anything', but I realized that besides the fact that we had a date scheduled, I actually don't know Brad at all. It would be weird of me to offer myself to him when I just said that I'm not sure if I want to date.

I throw my phone on the coffee table and pause the TV, needing silence to process my thoughts.

This throws a wrench right in the dumpster fire of my love life. I have no idea what to make of Brad's accident when I'm still not over the Lorenzo bullshit. I'm going to take some time to think, just like Char suggested. Once I'm clearheaded, I can figure out what I want.

Chapter Four

February 6th

“I think I’m gonna go for it,” I say, placing the cloth napkin over my legs.

“Yeah? I think it’s worth a shot! What do you have to lose?” Char replies, excitement etched into her features. She’s refrained from asking me anything even closely related to dating for the past month, and I’m so grateful for it.

“My dignity,” I joke. “But a car accident is a great excuse. That sounds terrible, but you know what I mean.” Char chuckles. “He seems like a really sweet guy and I owe it to him—and myself—to give it a chance.”

Char beams at me. “Good for you, Kate. I’m so happy to see you back to your usual self.”

I feel completely back to normal. It’s been weeks since I’ve had any interaction with Lorenzo and it took this time for me to realize just how much our little escapades affected me. The first couple of weeks after Brad wrote to me were confusing and hard. Hearing Lorenzo in the break room, feeling his presence, made it really difficult to fully detach.

I threw myself into my routine and did my absolute best to ignore the onslaught of memories I'd recall as I ate my lunch. I forced myself to listen to my coworkers' discussions and respond so that I wouldn't have to feel the way my body just wanted him to touch me. Or hell, for him to even just look at me.

Because that was one thing I did not expect, was his absolute indifference towards me. If it weren't for the fact that I'm certain I'm sane, and we actually did have sex twice, I would have thought I'd made it up. He acted as if he'd never even spoken to me before. He'd enter the break room and wave to our table without ever looking at me.

I suppose I treated him the same way, so I had no right to feel hurt. But my pride felt wounded, as though I was exactly what I feared—just another notch in his bed post.

That fear was further cemented when I heard a high-pitched, flirtatious voice float over while eating lunch one day. I turned my head out of curiosity, only to find Sara standing extremely close to Lorenzo. Too close for what I deem normal employee interaction.

In the past weeks, every once in a while, she'd greet him exactly like that, and I forced myself to ignore it. We were just a fling and he's allowed to do whatever he wants. It's really not about jealousy, either. It's what she represented—that I truly meant nothing to him.

Because as much as I like to deny it, I liked what we could have been.

But he was gone the last two weeks, apparently training at the Westland branch. When I didn't see him the first day, I figured maybe he was sick. On day two, I got suspicious but figured if he was fired or something, I would have heard. By day three, I had to know what was going on. I broke my self-imposed rule and searched his name in the employee database, confirming it was still there. I pulled open the Teams messaging app and sure enough, in his status, it stated he was training at the Westland branch.

Then, I mentally berated myself for searching him up and reaffirmed my choice to let him go. The remaining week and a half made it so I could feel as good as I do now. Clearing my mind with his absence, my new resolve, and time brought me a serenity I haven't felt in a long time.

That led me to the conclusion that our intimate acts, while reckless, were necessary. It made me realize what I don't want. Plus, knowing I wasn't actually stood up changed my perspective.

So, I'm going to give Brad a chance. I'll write to him tomorrow after work, because there's no better day than Monday to start something new, and we'll plan a new date.

The waiter brings our food and we eat as Char catches me up on the few suitors wanting to take her out on Valentine's Day. She's always loved the sappy holiday. I find it monotonous and unoriginal. A day to show people you care? Shouldn't we be doing that every day?

I realize I'm being a tad cynical. There's nothing wrong with sharing your love for other people on a specified day. I don't harsh Char's mellow, helping her review the different guys and decide which is her best option. Once the bills are paid, we go shopping for some new clothes and lingerie after she convinces me. Or, maybe it was the few mimosas.

"You're going to need it," Char says with a wink as she loops her arm in mine. We walk down the street to the boutique nearby, and she chooses all the articles of clothing for me to try on.

Life is good.

Chapter Five

February 7th

Lorenzo: so youre looking for a new job

He texted me after lunch and I still haven't responded three hours later. I haven't been able to wrap my head around the fact that he even *knows* I did one random job search over a month ago.

He's back at our office, and it became clear within moments of him walking into the break room that the reprieve was useless. His effect on me is exactly what it was two weeks earlier. I bared my teeth and made it through the half hour without looking at him. He didn't look at me, either.

After spending the time I should be focusing on work ruminating over his message, I concluded that he must be watching me. I didn't tell anyone about looking for other jobs, except maybe Char. I texted her to confirm that she didn't somehow tell Lorenzo. Not only did she confirm she's never even seen him, she didn't know I ran a job search.

This is exactly what I hate about him. He makes me crazy from just seven measly words on a screen. It was the same craziness that drove me to look up jobs in the first place.

Maybe it was his energy in the bar that night that had me assaulting my ex. It's the only reasonable explanation to all of this. Because now, after two weeks of detoxing him out of my system, I'm right back to where I started.

Desperate to hear his voice, pining for his lips on mine, and needing his banter to remind me I'm alive.

You're accepting Brad's new date, and you're not getting involved with Lorenzo again.

Fine. But getting some answers won't disrupt that plan.

I pull out my phone and type out my reply with too much force.

Me: How do you know about that?

I stare at my phone after the message is sent, impatient for his reply. Damn him and his android bullshit; I want to know if he's seen it or not. I lock the screen and toss my phone into my bag after a minute, refusing to let him have an inkling of control over my emotions.

Then, I dig it out of my purse and place it next to the mouse pad on my desk.

I focus on my new loans for the rest of the work day. My phone screen doesn't light up once. I check it every ten

minutes until five, then pack it into my bag and walk to Pilates.

By the time I've returned home, showered, eaten dinner, and laid in bed to wind down with some reading, I haven't gotten a single message from him.

Honestly, fuck him. I'm not going to respond if he ever does get back to me. I shouldn't have responded to begin with. But my curiosity got the better of me. I still have a nagging feeling to learn more about him. I mean that's my right as his ex... sexual partner. Right?

I type his name into my social media search engines again, but still get no results. I debate doing a deeper search on the web, but I refrain. This is the exact *opposite* of forgetting about him and his bullshit. This is feeding into everything he probably wants me to be doing.

Maybe he's on dating apps. I could check Tinder.

Oh my god, Brad! I open the Tinder app and type out the message I'd mentally prepared to send him at 6 pm. It's 8:30 now, so I'm only a couple hours behind.

Me: Hey, sorry I took a while to get back to you.

Let's reschedule that date :)

The message sends and I stare at it for a moment, toying with the idea of just searching Lorenzo's name. I'm already in the app, it'll only take me two seconds. What's the harm?

Then I can go back to pretending he doesn't have any importance in my life. Because he doesn't.

That hurts more than it should.

I search the app for a place to look him up, but I quickly learn that you can't search for a specific person on here. I guess that makes sense, given user privacy. But right now, privacy can go straight to hell. I want to learn about this guy in any way I can.

My phone buzzes in my hand with a new message and I ignore the disappointment when it's not Lorenzo.

Brad: I'm so happy to hear that!

Me: How are you feeling, by the way?

I mentally berate myself for not asking that off the bat. How could I not show sympathy for what he must be going through?

Brad: A lot better, thanks for asking. I'm basically back to normal. Luckily there were no lasting injuries.

Brad: I'm out of town for work, but why don't we go out on Valentine's Day? Is that too cheesy?

Valentine's Day. That feels like a lot of... pressure. What if I hate him? I don't want that day to be tarnished with our date forever. Maybe I'm just overthinking this. I don't care for the holiday to begin with.

Me: Valentine's Day works great! Where should I meet you?

Brad: How about I pick you up this time, that way there's no risk of you being stood up.

Pick me up? That feels reckless. I'd much rather take an Uber.

Me: What if there's another accident? Now we're both injured.

Brad: I'll be driving so cautiously. I'll have precious cargo in the car.

His response has me smiling, despite myself. He seems like such a sweetheart. Maybe this will be for the best.

Me: That's very sweet, but I'd rather meet you there. I'll Uber.

Brad: Understandable. I wanted to surprise you with the location so maybe just don't look up the address?

He's out of his mind if he thinks I'm going to just give an address to the Uber driver. I channel my inner Char and try to send a less "Kate" response.

Me: No promises.

I send a second message with a winky face, internally cringing. I hate this flirtation stuff. He responds a moment later with the word 'fair' and an address. I immediately put it into a web search, confirming it's to the bookstore ten minutes away.

I know my trust in men is shit, but I'm actually a little excited.

Chapter Six

February 8th

Lorenzo still hasn't responded. I know I'm not supposed to be thinking about him, but I can't *not* think about him. His stupid, elusive message dug out the coffin I thought I'd buried, making it impossible to ignore. Back to square one.

That's why I'm standing outside of the break room, waving to employees who pass by as I wait for him to arrive. I have to know how he knew about me searching for jobs.

I'm not going to admit that I'd love to hear his voice, to feel his energy.

He finally appears down the hall, in his typical all black clothes. His sleeves are rolled up, his forearms on full display. The veins are prominent, and I have to tear my eyes from them to zero in on his face and remember why I'm standing here waiting for him.

The reason fades just as suddenly when I take in his expression. His brows are furrowed, his eyes piercing straight into my soul. They're alight with a fire but it's not the one I saw the couple of times we had sex. This seems like an unsatiated hunger... as though he's yearning.

But for what?

As he nears, I try to fight my body's reactions to him. But it's futile. My heart fastens and my fingers twitch, begging to reach out to him. My lips tingle with the need to feel his tongue swiping over them.

Focus.

I open my mouth to speak as he approaches, and then he does something that I should have seen coming. He walks right past me and starts to break left for the break room.

My hand throws itself on his forearm involuntarily. Just as before, he flexes as though by instinct rather than calculated decision. He halts and turns his head to me slowly.

“Can I”—I clear my throat to clear the lust lodged in it—“Can I talk to you?”

He glances down the hallway before meeting my eyes. “Sure, princess.”

His words send a wave of shocks through me, but I brush it off and remain determined. I nod towards the other end of the hallway, past the break room door, where there's more privacy. I head that way, his sure steps behind me causing one side of my lips to tilt up.

When I reach the end of the hallway and turn back to him, he walks into my front and retreats as though I set fire to his skin. Our eyes meet, though, and that time stopping phenomenon occurs again. His lips part, and it takes everything in me not to bite down on my lower lip.

“How did you know about the job search?”

The fire finally leaves his eyes, replaced by a steely coolness. “You can’t take a hint, can you?”

My eyebrows pinch together with an incredulous look. “What hint?”

“I didn’t reply to your message. I haven’t talked to you in weeks.”

Is he fucking serious right now? “I told you to leave me alone.”

He stares at me and I swear I can feel the shards of glass from his icy stare penetrate my irises. But I don’t let it deter me, no matter how much it stings. “You can’t expect me to ignore a text like that. I’m prepared to report you for harassment.”

It’s a bluff, but I’m doubling down. I want some damn answers, now.

He scrutinizes me before responding. “Some of the IT guys I shadowed at the Westland branch were reviewing the flag reports. Your search was in there.”

I blink. “What are you talking about, flag reports?”

“Come on, princess. You must know the company has employee monitoring software on all the computers. We have it on the entire network.”

I’m an idiot. I should have known better than to look that up on my work computer. It’s just further proof of the crazy

behavior this man makes me do. But why does Rowan flag employees who search other jobs?

“Okay... but why did you text me and then ignore me? And why did you wait to ask me? You were in Westland last week.”

“I...” He trails off and glances down before facing me again. “I shouldn’t have texted you. You asked me to leave you alone, and I want to respect that.”

I don’t know what to make of his explanation. It would explain his extremely distant behavior and lack of contact. But something feels off.

“Look, I just want to move past what happened. It doesn’t have to be weird,” I say.

He lets out a breath. “Okay.”

Something still feels off, but I chalk it up to the post-sex-not-really-a-break-up awkwardness. “Okay.” I hold out my hand in offering.

He doesn’t take it. “I gave you an answer. Now you give me one.”

My hand falls to my side and I eye him warily. “What answer do you want?”

“Who the fuck is Brad?”

I’m not sure what I expected, but it wasn’t that. I laugh and he frowns.

“That’s what you want to know?” I ask, amused. “You made it clear from day one that you didn’t want to be my boyfriend.

That it was just for fun.”

“Technically, I said that on day two.” I cross my arms and he continues. “I want to know because apparently he was important enough that you stormed out on New Year’s, demanding I leave you alone.”

I huff. “You seem to be forgetting everything else I said that night.”

“I’ve forgotten nothing.” His voice sounds lethal, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I don’t owe you any explanations about who I do or don’t choose to date.”

“So you’re the only one who gets to ask questions?”

“You’re so infuriating!” This is exactly why I need to stay the fuck away from him. I can’t be sucked into his games and secrets.

“The sentiment is shared, Kate.” He grits his teeth after enunciating my name, as though uttering it fills him with disgust.

“You know what? Forget it. Let’s pretend you never texted me, and we can continue our lives pretending as if each other doesn’t exist.”

“I’ve been trying to do that for a month and it hasn’t worked yet,” he hisses, then clamps his jaw shut when he realizes what he’s retorted. My eyes reflect the shock I feel at his confession, no matter whether it was intentional or accidental.

Don't do it, Kate. Don't fall into his trap. You need to stay away from him.

“Stay away from me.” I boulder past him, knocking into his shoulder. He doesn't move an inch, his muscular build absorbing the impact.

As I stalk off towards the break room, he mutters, “You approached me.”

I refuse to take the bait. I blow past the break room and return to my desk.

Chapter Seven

February 14th

My days pass in a focused haze of routine. I go to work, focus on not thinking about Lorenzo, eat my regular lunch in the break room, ignore his presence, finish working, rush out at five, work my ass off in Pilates, then shower and eat dinner. Friends reruns haven't been distracting enough, so I started reading some books to freshen up my financial literacy.

When that *also* didn't work, I decided to download a crime podcast. I've been falling asleep to the discovery of a murder.

Finally, Valentine's Day arrives and I'm filled with anxious nerves about tonight. The likelihood of Brad getting into another accident is slim, so if he doesn't show this time it's because he just didn't want to. I know I'm being paranoid, but I've lost complete faith in my dating life.

We haven't spoken since we agreed on the date. I'm not sure if that's because he's not a big texter, or he was busy with work, or a million other reasons. But I decide to send a confirmation message to make sure we're still on before breaking for lunch.

The office has been fully decorated with cute little hearts strung on twine. There are red roses in the meeting room, and each cubicle has a paper cutout of on theme decor: cupid, hearts, flowers, and the like. I had a box of sweethearts on my keyboard this morning, which I quickly tucked into my purse.

When I walk into the break room, I find it's also been decorated, including red and pink tablecloths placed on the tables. I grab my food from the fridge and lay it out in front of me as employees filter into the room. My coworkers start discussing their plans for the holiday.

"Joey and I are going to order Greek food and watch a movie," Victor says.

"Isn't that what you do every year?" I say before taking a sip of water.

"Yes. We love our tradition," he says with glee. "What about you guys?"

"I'm going out with my BFF," Alexandra says. "We always do an anti-Valentine's Day."

"Oh, that's fun! I wasn't going to go anywhere," Jasmine says.

"You're welcome to join us," Alexandra responds.

I lose track of the conversation when I feel his presence steal all my air. Every day, it's the same. I feel him before I see him, and I crave him as much as I did that night at Rowan's house. I keep my eyes trained on my food, refusing to look.

I'm about to take a bite of the carrot I dipped in hummus when Victor snaps his fingers in my face.

"Kate! Hello?"

"Sorry." I look at him with a sheepish grin.

"What are your plans tonight?"

"I'm actually going on a date with Brad," I say.

"Ooooh, who's Brad?"

I'm prevented from responding when there's a loud clatter. We whip our heads towards the noise and find Lorenzo at the fridge, the door open and his bag on the ground with the contents splayed across the floor.

I act quickly, turning back to my food and chewing my carrot. I'm not going to get sucked into his world. I've done an excellent job of ignoring him since our conversation, and he's done the same.

"So?" Victor prompts. I take a steadying breath, willing myself to fill with patience. I just want to eat and get the hell out of here. If it weren't for the fact that I do feel close to my coworkers, I wouldn't answer at all.

"We met through a dating app," I respond.

"Is this the first date?" I nod. "And he's taking you out on Valentine's? That's sweet."

"He could be using it to manipulate you," Alexandra chimes in. She's one of those 'fuck men, they suck' types. "You know,

make you think he cares and shit, when really he just wants to fuck you and move on.”

Her words cause me to freeze, but I thaw myself quickly so no one notices. She’s talking about Brad, but my mind went straight to Lorenzo, which brings the pain of his shitty behavior back in full force.

“I’ll definitely watch out for that. I plan on getting to know him tonight, that’s it,” I say.

“Where is he taking you?” Jasmine asks.

“The bookstore over on 9th.”

“Oooh, bold choice,” Victor says.

“You’re meeting him there, right?” Alexandra asks. “He could be a creep.”

I refrain from rolling my eyes and only nod as I grab my phone from the table to see if he responded to my message.

Brad: I was starting to get nervous that you changed your mind.

Aw. His message puts a smile on my face. He seems like a genuinely sweet and caring guy.

Me: Not at all! What time should I be there?

He replies instantly.

Brad: How's 7?

Me: Great! See you then :)

I close my phone and take a bite of my sandwich, glancing up to find Victor, Alexandra, Jasmine, and even Matteo watching me expectantly.

I finish chewing and address them. "What?"

"You had the cutest smile on your face!" Victor gushes. I roll my eyes.

"It's just a first date," I insist, even if I secretly have high hopes for it.

"He sounds sketchy." Alexandra muses, though I'm not sure what I've said that makes him sound sketchy. "Just be careful."

"I'll share my location with Char." I've worked with these people long enough that they've all heard of Char.

"Just be safe, we need you," Victor says sarcastically. I laugh at his underhanded jab at Alexandra and the conversation moves away from Valentine's and into mindless small talk. I finish my lunch and head back to my desk, pleased with my ability to completely ignore Lorenzo for another successful day.

Chapter Eight

February 14th

I begrudgingly skip Pilates so I can take my time getting ready. I lay out the exact outfit I wore the night I met Lorenzo, the same night I was supposed to have my first date with Brad. I loved it and he never saw it, so why let it go to waste? The black high-waisted skirt hugs my body and matches perfectly with the white-and-black window pane patterned, long-sleeved blouse. And I've always loved my knee-high boots.

As I shower, I think about how much has changed since that night. I guess it's not much, *really*. But I feel different. Stronger, somehow. Like I could take Brad being a fuckboy and not showing up. I don't need him or anyone else.

I apply my makeup and pull my hair into a tight bun, debating whether to curl the strands by my face or pin them back. I decided to pin them back, wanting no reminder of Lorenzo. I stare at my reflection in the mirror, lost to the memory of his finger curling around the loose strand as we laid in Rowan's guest room.

I shake my head and blink hard, forcing myself to snap out of it. I can't keep romanticizing a one night stand. I mean, a two night stand. Two one night stands? I don't freaking know.

The thing is, I'm not upset that he doesn't want to be with me. Well, not upset with him, anyway. He made his stance clear from the start. I'm upset over how he treated me, and continues to treat me. He made the comment of friends with benefits, but no friend should act the way he did.

By 6:30, I'm dressed and ready to go, my purse on the side table between my apartment door and couch. I put on my black, square framed glasses and turn the TV on for some Friends reruns in the background to calm my nerves. At 6:40, I submit the Uber request and the driver arrives a few minutes later. I grab my purse and say goodbye to Felix, who's curled up and napping on the sofa.

I settle my nerves on the drive over by rubbing my thumb against the nail on my index finger. As we approach the bookstore, my phone buzzes. My instant thought is that it could be Lorenzo. I roll my eyes and pick up the phone off my lap.

Brad: Just got here, I know I'm a few minutes early. Take your time.

I smile, genuinely happy that he's punctual and courteous. I bet Lorenzo wouldn't even text me. I'd probably pull up to find him leaning against the hood of his car. He'd be dressed

in all black and have that smirk on his face that makes me stupid. His eyes would hold a balanced mix of easygoing and studious.

“Ma’am?” the driver repeats, pulling me out of my reverie. We’re in front of a brick building with large windows, displaying shelves of books and a coffee shop in the corner.

Stop thinking about Lorenzo.

“Sorry, thank you,” I say, opening the door. When I get outside, I realize I have no idea what car he drives. However, there’s a white jeep parked in front with the windows down, and I recognize Brad from his profile picture. I’m happy to see that he looks just as he did in it. He’s staring at his phone but he peers up when I walk to his car. He gives me a shy smile when I wave. He rolls up his windows and scrambles out of the car.

“Hey,” he says. His voice is light and airy, like leaves blowing in the wind. He’s wearing a red and navy blue plaid long-sleeved shirt with khaki pants and hiking boots.

“Hi,” I respond, hearing the same shyness in his expression reflected in my tone. We have a momentary lull filled with awkward, just-met nerves.

I break the ice. “You ready?”

“Yes, sorry. You look beautiful,” he says. His eyes roam over me quickly and respectfully.

“Thanks,” I say automatically. His compliment was expected and completely dull, if I’m being honest. It was

missing that umph, like when...

No.

The wind is still crisp with the setting sun, and it blows on my neck as I follow Brad to the door. Just as he's about to open it, he yanks his arm back. "Shit, I forgot something. Be right back."

He rushes back to his car, yanking open the passenger door and digging in the glovebox. When he shuts the door, I see a box of chocolates in his hands.

Crap, I didn't think to get him anything! It's a first date on Valentine's Day, was I supposed to?

He's standing in front of me before I can answer, and frankly, it's too late, anyway. He smiles shyly, handing me the box.

"I know we haven't met before, but I had to bring *something* for Valentine's Day," he says with pastel pink painted cheeks, his eyes trained on the box.

"Thank you, you're so sweet," I say, taking it. It's a basic box of chocolates you'd find at a drugstore. I don't have the heart to tell him I have a reaction to peanuts and likely can't eat these. I also don't have the heart to tell him I didn't bring anything when I remember I shoved those stupid sweethearts from work into my purse.

I quickly dig them out with my free hand. "Here, I bro— have these for you." Saying I *have* them is true. Saying I *brought* them is not.

“Man, I haven’t seen these things since middle school! Thank you,” he says. I can’t believe how genuinely pleased he looks. It takes everything in me to suppress the eye roll. That’s one thing I can say for Lo—

No.

Brad holds the door open for me and I walk in, feeling strange. Brad strides next to me and heads straight for the coffee bar. I’m pleased to find that the Valentine’s decor is kept to a minimum. Besides the set of heart-shaped balloons floating near the entrance, the only evidence of the holiday is the romantic music playing in the background and heart shaped cookies in the display case of the café.

As we wait behind a couple in front of us, he gingerly places his hand near mine. It feels like he’s eager to clasp my hand in his, but his hesitation only lets our skin brush. I can’t help thinking this is exactly how it should be. Cute touches, awkward moments, and fluffy looks.

Not immediate passion, unclear lines, and rude behavior.

With our coffees in hand, we take a table towards the back. The chairs are plush and extremely comfortable. I sit in the one closest to the wall that gives me a view of the entire shop. I’ve always felt the need to be aware of my surroundings as much as possible. Brad made it easy, taking the seat in front of me.

“This is a nice place, I’m glad you chose it,” I say, trying to fill the silence. I haven’t been to this bookstore in years.

“Getting your message was a surprise, so I didn’t want to screw it up,” he says, placing his ankle over his knee.

“The bar would have just been a reminder of that night,” I say, wiggling my shoulders into the plush chair.

“I’m so sorry about that. I feel so bad you were sitting at that bar waiting for me to show.”

It’s actually not the reminder I was referring to, but I can’t tell him that. “You have *nothing* to apologize for. You were in an accident!”

“Well it was hardly an accident. That jackass was driving way over the speed limit and essentially ran me off the road.”

“Oh my god! What exactly happened?” I lean up, eager to hear of his incident but unsure if I should be asking. He seems just as eager to tell it, though, brushing a finger over the loose hair covering his eyebrow to reveal a yellowish, faded bruise.

“I left my house at 7:45 to get to the bar a few minutes before 8. I like to be on time,” he says matter of factly. “I was on the main road, going about the speed limit, when this car tried to cut in front of me.”

The speed limit on the highway, which everyone refers to as the main road, is fifty miles per hour. He pauses, and I watch his face turn solemn with remembrance. “It was twofold. They probably could have made it into my lane, but I would have had to slam on my breaks. And there was no guarantee that I would have been able to prevent hitting them.”

I gasp and he nods silently. “So then what happened?” I ask, sliding to the edge of my seat.

“Well, in the heat of the moment I wasn’t thinking clearly. I think the driver realized what was happening, because they swerved back into their lane. But it was too late.”

I can’t tell if he’s pausing for dramatic effect or from his own recollection, but I grip the chair with both hands, my nails digging into the cushion.

“I should have hit the breaks. The other car would have gone back to their lane, and it would have been enough. But I didn’t know they would do that, and everything was happening so fast. I had like half a second to react, so I swerved to avoid the collision.”

My brows furrow and he glances at me before continuing. “I was in the right lane. I swerved off the road and spun out, only stopping when I hit a tree.”

My hand flies over my mouth and he adds, “Head first.”

“God! I’m so sorry, that’s terrible.”

“Yeah. I hit my head against the steering wheel but luckily I never lost consciousness. My hands were torn up from the shattered glass, though.”

My eyes fly to his fingers curled around the coffee cup, noticing the fading, pink scars.

“I sat there in shock for what felt like forever. Finally, I tried to open my door but it wouldn’t budge. I had to climb out of my window, which luckily was open.”

I feel a shiver run down my spine at the thought of that happening. It does nothing for my already present driving nerves. I take a few deep breaths to settle myself, not wanting the anxiety to take over.

“My phone was shattered on the floor of the passenger side so I couldn’t call for help. I was convinced I was going to have to walk somewhere to get help. My mind wasn’t right at that point. I was all shaken up and freaked out.”

“I’m sure! How could you not be?”

“Well, just as I was going to start walking, a police officer arrived, followed by an ambulance. When I told them what happened, they insisted on taking me to the hospital. They kept asking me on the ride over if I felt nauseous or if I was tired. I think I was so shocked, I didn’t know what I was feeling. The second they wheeled me into the hospital, I vomited over the side of the gurney.”

My hand is covering my mouth again. This sounds so horrible, and his continued telling of the story is increasing my anxiety. I keep my eyes trained on him. If I let my mind wander, I might go into a full blown panic attack.

“I can’t tell you if it was from the injuries or the processing of the accident. I’d never been in a car accident before that. So anyway, they eventually get me into a room and run some tests. The doctor said he was worried about a concussion, so they kept me there for a couple of days for monitoring. Fun fact—concussion is also known as a mild traumatic brain injury.”

“I can’t believe this. I’m so sorry that happened to you. Are you okay now?”

“Yeah, I feel a lot better. I called my parents from the hospital and they came straight over. Once I got home and was off whatever meds they were giving me, I started to feel really sore. I stayed home from work a few more days and rested. Christmas was ruined, obviously. But my parents stayed with me. Once I was up to it, I finally went to the store and got a new phone. I returned to work and tried to get back into the swing of things. I didn’t make any plans for New Year’s because the doctor suggested I continue to rest and not drink any alcohol. That’s when I finally texted you.”

“Wow.” I don’t know what else to say. How many times can I apologize for something that wasn’t even my fault? Sometimes, there are no words.

“I’m sorry I didn’t reach out sooner. My phone was damaged and I—”

“Please! Don’t apologize,” I say forcefully. “I *completely* understand. That all sounds so scary.”

He grimaces, and I can tell that it really affected him.

“I don’t even know how you’re already driving! Wait—did it happen in this car?” I glance out of the large window to his white Jeep in immaculate condition.

“No, the car was destroyed. The insurance company took about a month to deem it totaled. But I knew I never wanted to step foot in that car again, so I financed the jeep before

insurance paid out. I picked it up the week after I messaged you.”

“What car did you have before?”

“A Honda Accord. I’ve always wanted a jeep, though. I guess that’s the silver lining.”

“I’m glad you’re able to find humor in this.” I can’t. It wasn’t even my accident, and I know I’d never be able to drive again. I don’t drive as it is!

“Well, you haven’t heard the worst part.”

“What?” *How can it possibly get worse?*

“The car that cut into my lane, they never stopped to check on me or take responsibility for the accident. I didn’t even think about it until the officers got there and asked me what happened.”

“Are you serious? What a fucking asshole!” I shout indignantly, causing the couple browsing a nearby shelf to glance over. My hands ball into fists. *What is wrong with people?*

“Yeah. One of the officers said it’s still classified as a hit and run, even though there wasn’t ever a collision. But yeah, it’s pretty shitty.”

“Are they investigating?”

“I mean, the case is open and assigned to a detective. But what investigation can they do? I didn’t have any information other than the car being black. Everything was happening so

quickly, the last thing I was thinking about was a make or model.”

“Yeah, of course.” Poor Brad. What a way to spend the holidays. “Well, I’m so happy you’re okay.”

“Thanks, me too. And thank you for giving me another chance. I’m sure you didn’t have a good night after I never showed up. I’ve been stood up before, it sucks.”

“Yeah...” I consider telling him about the run in with Trent, but I don’t. That tale ends with Lorenzo and that’s a door better kept closed. “It’s fine though, really. It was a misunderstanding. Now I feel terrible for ever calling you a fuckboy.”

Brad laughs. “It wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened.”

“It’s just one of those names.” When our laughter settles, a sense of awkwardness clouds over us. It’s been relatively easy to get lost in the conversation, seeing as he had an important story to share that was sort of related to me. Now we’re finally feeling that typical hesitancy.

“Well, now you know. So let’s put it behind us and have that first date.”

Chapter Nine

February 14th

We continue getting to know each other through small talk, discussing our favorite movies and music. I tell him about my job at Rowan's company, and I'm happy to learn that he also works in finance. He's a financial analyst for a stock trading company, and I can tell by the way he describes his work that he's very passionate about it. It also sounds like he makes a lot of money, based on the types of responsibilities he has.

Brad's eyes match his voice, light and lofty. They contrast Lorenzo's penetrating, intense stare, which I have to keep forcing to the back of my mind.

When we finish our coffees, he offers to refill them but I decline. I don't normally drink caffeine so late, and I know I'll be paying for it with troubled sleep tonight. I excuse myself to the bathroom and he jokes that I better not be running out on him.

On paper, we'd be a perfect match. But something feels... amiss. Like the necessary spark isn't there. I can tell he's very genuine and kind, but if I'm being honest, he's a tad dull.

When I return, Brad seems to have reverted back to the start of our date. He's more nervous and won't meet my eye. I'm about to ask him what's wrong when he fumbles through his sentences.

"Are you okay?" I ask cautiously. I really hope he's not going to start telling me all about his childhood trauma or something equally deep and not first date appropriate.

"I just feel so bad about missing our first date. You're really great."

"Please, stop apologizing! It wasn't your fault." My eyes roam over his pink knuckles.

"I know, but still."

There's another awkward pause, because we both know I've only addressed part of his statement. I'm honestly not sure how I feel about him and I don't want to give him false hope.

I suddenly feel a tickle against my skin, but when I look down nothing's touching it. I can't explain why my eyes jump immediately to the door but then it all makes sense when I see Lorenzo busting through it.

He makes a beeline in our direction, his eyes fixed on Brad. I hop out of my seat a split second before he reaches us.

I glance at Brad and his expression is justifiably puzzled. Not that I have any idea what's about to happen, but I at least know Lorenzo. Just as Brad frowns, Lorenzo's voice steals my focus.

“Kate, let’s go.” I gape at him, my mind trying to process why he’s even here, let alone making demands. He’s standing in front of the little wooden table directly between Brad and I.

Luckily, or unluckily I suppose, Brad speaks first. “Excuse me, who are you?”

God, he’s so kind. Lorenzo will eat him alive.

“The better question is, who the fuck are *you*?” Lorenzo responds. He hasn’t looked at me once, his intrusive glare on Brad the entire time. I watch as he glances down at the box of chocolates lying innocently on the table.

Brad looks over at me with uncertainty, but I’m happy to see he doesn’t seem intimidated. I force my jaw closed, the action grounding me enough to speak.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Lorenzo. I fold my arms across my chest and stare at him, but he won’t look at me. It’s almost as if he’s intentionally keeping his eyes off me. A few moments of silence pass.

“Kate, is this your...” Brad glances up at Lorenzo before looking back at me. I meet his concerned eyes. “Boyfriend?”

I start to laugh and *finally* Lorenzo looks over at me. Or leers, rather. Either way, he gives me the time of day. I shake my head, still giggling.

“I’m not sure why you’re laughing, princess.” The use of the pet name wipes the smirk right off my face. My eyes search his, and I hate that the fire I see burning in them lights me up from the inside.

“Kate—”

“I think you’d better leave now, pretty boy.” Lorenzo’s tone leaves no room for argument. Still, Brad looks up at me and I break my contact with Lorenzo to meet his inquiry. The remorse I feel makes its way to my eyes and it’s enough for Brad to understand. He glances between Lorenzo and I, then nods and stands up.

I should stop him. I should tell him to sit back down and tell Lorenzo to fuck right off. But every molecule in my body wants to know why Lorenzo’s here. As much as I’ve fought him for the last six weeks, being in his presence does fucked up things to me. It’s exactly why I forced myself to stay away.

But right now, his energy is short-circuiting my brain and I can’t focus on anything but his presence. I want answers, and I want them now. I also want to punch him, so we’ll see how this turns out. I’m not sure when I became so violent, but I think I like it.

Lorenzo inches towards me so Brad can leave, but he doesn’t give him much room and leaves no access to me. I’m sheltered behind half of his body as he watches Brad give me one more glum look before turning towards the exit.

It breaks my heart in two, just like I know Lorenzo will, but for the life of me I can’t stop it.

Even worse, I don’t want to.

I watch Brad leave over Lorenzo’s shoulder, my eyes following him as he exits. I tear my eyes away, unable to risk

seeing the pain on his face. Because now I'm that girl, too. I just crushed a poor man's heart—on Valentine's Day—after the horrific accident he went through, all because of the asshole standing in front of me.

It's like Cupid's arrow was filled with stupid serum this year.

“What the fuck was that?!” I shout at Lorenzo, unleashing my anger. I hate what he does to me. I hate that he makes me do stupid things. I hate that he doesn't give a shit about me, then does weird shit like this. I hate that he fucked me twice and didn't even *try* to talk to me.

The anger is growing into rage with every thought I think and every second that passes. Lorenzo doesn't turn around so I grab his shoulder and tug. But he's planted in position, making it impossible to move him.

“Look at me!” When he remains immobile and silent, I circle around him. The space between us is just enough that I can smell him as he breathes heavily, intoxicating me. I would have to move my face forward a few inches to kiss him.

Which I shouldn't even be thinking about, let alone entertaining. My eyes are drawn to his lips like a moth to a flame, my heart rate racing with anger and lust.

When his lips begin to tilt up, I snap out of it. Venom fills my eyes as I stare at him, but I'm surprised to meet something similar in his.

“What are you doing here?” I say with an eerie calm.

“I thought I made it clear you were mine until I saw fit. Or do you not remember that, princess?”

My blood boils, heat creeping over my skin and making me see red. How fucking *dare* he.

“I told you to leave me alone. Do you remember *that?*” I retort through clenched teeth.

“We’ve been over this. You know I do. You also know I respected it for a long time. But fuck that. I’m done.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“I’m not going to leave you alone. Especially when I know you don’t really want me to.”

My heart rate picks up again, but I’ll blame it on my temper even when I know that’s not what it is. “You don’t get to make that decision. I meant what I said.”

“Then why did you stay with me instead of him?” His eyes bounce between mine. “Hmm?”

For a moment, a poor lapse in judgment, I forget why I decided to stay away from him in the first place. But my brain quickly reminds me. The reminder that he returned to the holiday party and took shots off someone else is the first thing to spring to mind.

“You have some *fucking* nerve.” I hiss the words at him in a deadly whisper. “You think you can come in here and disrupt my date when *you*”—I jab my index finger into his chest—“took shots off Sara not even an hour after you had sex with me!”

I'm speaking ten decibels higher by the time I finish my sentence. Standing in front of him put the coffee bar in perfect view, and movement from the employee circling the counter catches my attention. When she reaches us, Lorenzo looks over.

"I'm sorry, but you have to keep your voices down. This is a bookstore," she says awkwardly. "Maybe you could take it outside?"

Lorenzo opens his mouth to retaliate but I grab his hand to stop him. His calloused palm sends a ripple of shocks through me, but I keep my mind focused. "Of course, I'm so sorry."

I pull him before he can try to speak, guiding him through the door. It's darker out now, well into night time, and I squint in the parking lot to locate his car. Spotting the black Audi, I pull him to it.

When I reach the hood of his car, I drop his hand and round on him. I could have dropped it before my feet pounded over, but I didn't want him to get away. That's what I keep telling myself, at least.

"I don't know who you think you are, but you've got another think coming. I'm not going to let you—"

"Were you enjoying your date?"

I blink a few times, thrown off by his question. I was prepared to unleash on him; let him have it once and for all before I call my Uber and return home. Then, I'll look up jobs

—on my own computer, this time. I have to get away from him.

“I—” I should have been. Brad was really nice and we have a lot in common.

Lorenzo smirks and the twinkle in his eye doesn't simmer my rage. It does, however, morph into some sort of heated need. Like I want to crash my lips onto his and then bite the hell out of him.

“I could tell from out here that you were bored out of your mind,” he says, leaning onto the hood of the car. I keep a safe distance, not trusting myself to be close to him.

“You were watching us?” I ask incredulously, facing him. “What are you, my stalker? How did you even know I was here?”

I think about it and reach the only conclusion possible. He followed me from my apartment. He knows where I live from dropping me off after the holiday party...

Which only reminds me of Sara and his bullshit behavior.

“Are you just keeping tabs on me? Are you staking out my house at all hours? I need an explanation now, Lorenzo, or I'm calling the police. This is just... this is too far!”

I'll ignore the fact that a sick part of me likes him being borderline obsessed. Because that would mean he cares, right?

“Calm down, Kate. I'm not stalking you. It was impossible not to hear you flaunting your Valentine's date tonight.”

I'm so stupid. Of course he didn't follow me from my apartment. I was telling Victor and the others exactly where my date was tonight.

"That doesn't explain why you showed up here."

A strange look crosses his face but I can't place it before it disappears. "I wanted to make sure you were safe."

I burst into laughter. This is all just preposterous. After all the shit he's done, he claims to care enough to make sure I'm *safe*?

"You're a fucking loon," I tell him through bursts of hysteria. He's so insane that it's rubbing off on me. Once I collect myself, the seriousness of this returns. "I wasn't *flaunting* anything. My coworkers asked about it. Why in the hell are you listening in on my conversations when you haven't even looked me in the eye in *weeks*?"

"We talked a few days ago."

"Yeah, and you gave me nothing! You talked in circles! I only approached you because you texted me. With more sketchy shit, might I add. I'm not sure I even believe your excuse anymore."

Lorenzo falters, glancing towards his car. I take his moment of weakness to continue.

"And then you have the audacity to storm in and ruin *my* date after you had sex with me—twice—and treated me like shit."

His eyes snap to mine at my final words. “Shit? I treated you no such way!”

He’s shouting, and I shout right back at him. “You dropped me off after doing all sorts of”—my mind loses focus with the thought of him thrusting into me while I couldn’t breathe, but I force it back—“*things* to me in our boss’s house, and then went and took shots off someone else!”

“I told you I didn’t want to be your boyfriend! I made you no fucking promises!” he roars.

“Oh, my bad, then! I just assumed it was human decency to not shit where you eat—TWICE!” I roar back. My heart is pounding in my chest and my fists are clenched at my sides. My hair would be wild if it wasn’t tied back. My glasses are off kilter, sliding down my nose.

“Human decency doesn’t exist, and if it did—” He cuts himself short and runs his fingers through his hair with a growl of frustration. “You make me fucking insane.”

“Hah! Me? You make yourself insane, and me in the process! I did nothing to warrant you storming in here tonight with some jealous—”

His jaw ticks. “I wasn’t jealous!”

“Then what? What in the world would make you want to bust in on my date?”

He breathes heavily but he doesn’t answer, which infuriates me more.

“I asked you to stay away from me, and I thought you were doing that. I’m trying to move on and—”

He rakes a hand through his hair. “I tried to stay away, Kate! Fuck, I tried! But I...” His eyes reach for mine and I see a glimmer of pain. “I can’t anymore.”

I scrutinize his face for any signs of dishonesty, but I find none. His eyes are wide open, filled with a mixture of remorse, guilt, and yearning. For the second time tonight, I burst into humorless laughter. The nerves of all of this have become too much, and I can’t seem to do anything but drown them out with meaningless noise that sounds like laughter. Between fits of giggles, I catch Lorenzo’s frown and start to laugh harder.

“Please tell me what’s so comical, princess. I’d love to share a laugh.”

“You—” I continue to laugh and Lorenzo drums his fingers on the hood of his car impatiently. When I finally settle, he watches me expectantly. “You expect me to believe that *you* care about *me*?”

“Of course I care about you,” he replies automatically, as if I’m the insane one for even questioning it.

“Lorenzo, I’m starting to think you care about no one, let alone me. Cut the bullshit and tell me what you really want.”

“There is no bullshit. I want you, Kate.”

I let his words wash over me, but my mind won’t believe them. My heart, on the other hand, is pitter-pattering stupidly and hopefully.

“I’m not going to be one of your floozies. Why don’t you go for Sara? She seems *more* than willing.” I hate the bitterness in my tone, but screw it to all hell.

“Are you ever going to let this Sara shit go?”

“Let it go? You storm in on my perfectly *nice* date and expect me to let go of the fact that you were with someone else just after you had sex with me?” I’m shouting again and I don’t care.

“I wasn’t with her! It was a body shot. You’re not my girlfriend. You weren’t supposed to be anything more than a one night stand.”

I can’t stop my face from contorting with the sting of his words. He looks pained at my response, his eyes volleying between mine. He blows out a breath as I watch what seems to be a battle of varying emotions in his eyes.

His mouth opens and closes before his eyes soften. “I was *trying* to forget about you.”

My eyes narrow. “What does that mean, exactly?” His behavior, even the couple of times we did hookup, does nothing to convince me that his words are true.

“I was trying”—he takes a step closer, and my body stiffens—“to forget”—another step—“about”—I want to lose myself in the cinnamon and smoke on his breath—“you.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “I need more explanation.”

He tosses his hands in the air. “Why do you need everything broken down to you like it’s some data analysis sheet?”

“Why are you as unclear as a weather forecast three weeks out?”

“Keeping things simple is not the same as being unclear.”

“Things aren’t always so simple, Lorenzo!”

He takes another step towards me, and my fingers twitch. “They’re not so complicated, either.”

“Why would you need to forget about me? It was one night.”

“Don’t lie to yourself, princess. We both know what we felt.”

I frown, at a complete loss. “Are you saying you want to date me?”

“Not at all.” Another step.

“Then what?” I take a tiny step forward. “I can’t let you ruin me.”

He chuckles darkly. “Fine. I won’t ruin you, princess. But I won’t save you, either.”

He takes the final step, our chests rising and falling in synchronicity. He leans his face down as he licks his lower lip, then takes it between his teeth.

“I don’t need you to save me.” My eyes are glued to his mouth, and my breath lodges in my throat.

“That’s exactly why I want you.”

Chapter Ten

February 14th

His lips crash on mine and a groan erupts from his chest. I throw my hands around his neck and he lifts me by the waist, my ass slamming into the car. His hands roam all over me with rushed fervor, like he can't get enough but at the same time it's too much.

At least, that's how it feels to me.

I claw his neck so tightly, my nails dig into his skin. I remember his words about not being soft, so I don't hold back. I bite into his lip, releasing the pent up rage I've built at him over the past few weeks. He groans again, this time into my mouth. I moan in response while my nails rake his shoulders.

Our tongues thrash against each other and he hovers over me, forcing my body to splay out on the hood. His hands grasp at my bun and pull firmly, just enough that I feel the pressure on my scalp.

"Goddamnit, I've missed you," he says against my lips. His hands prove it, making up for lost time by ravaging every inch of my skin.

I want to admit that I've missed him, too, but I don't want to put myself in that vulnerable position. I also don't want to stop kissing him. Instead, I bite into his lip again with much more force. I shouldn't be surprised at the growl that erupts from his chest as he grips my hips with excruciating force.

I'm not sure how people who hardly know each other can feel such yearning, but the truth of it is obvious in the way we're touching. My hips pulse up, trying to meet his body, but the distance forced on us by his feet on the ground doesn't allow it.

"Just as greedy as ever. I love it," he growls. The woman he brings out of me is back, and she smirks against his lips. I follow his line of sight when he pulls his head back to look around the lot. There's only one other car here, likely the employee who kicked us out. There are a few street lights in the distance, but it's otherwise deserted.

"Come here," Lorenzo says. I sit up and slide down the hood, my legs dangling off in preparation to stand. But Lorenzo grabs my thighs and hoists me onto his hips, carrying me to the side of his car with my ankles locked around him.

He shoves me against the door, holding me up and kissing me voraciously. I absorb each swipe of his tongue like a desert animal who hasn't had water in a week. I feel him fumble with the door handle, pulling it open and keeping his lips pressed to mine as he pulls the front seat lever.

He tugs at my legs so I unlock my ankles and he drops me onto the backseat. Once he joins me, I waste no time in

wrapping my arms around his neck again. He kicks his foot out a few times, banging it into the door, before he catches it and pulls the door shut.

My panties are soaking wet, and his next words cause them to dampen further. “I should punish you for wearing the first outfit I ever saw you in for that fucking guy.”

I moan and he sucks my upper lip into his mouth, lapping at it with his tongue and causing my head to spin. His words were possessive and completely unwarranted, but all I can focus on is that he remembers what I was wearing that night.

The crazier part is that I kind of want to know what he means by punishment. But his mouth has made its way down my collarbone and to my chest as he pulls on the nape of my neck. I’m lost to the sensation.

“Admit that you were bored,” he growls, pushing my breast up so he can suck on the exposed skin. I don’t want to tell him he’s right because I don’t want to be thinking about Brad right now. He was sweet and heartfelt—everything I should want—but the only person I care to have right now is doing wonderful things to my body.

His teeth scrape my breast as he pulls away. “Kate.”

He looks me directly in the eye and I pull at his neck but he doesn’t budge. I huff and roll my eyes, looking away. He tugs my chin so I’m forced to face him, and I stare into his intense eyes. I feel like I should see jealousy or possession, but all I see is worry.

“Aw, are you worried I may not want you back?”

“That doesn’t worry me in the slightest, princess.” He removes his finger from my jaw and trails it down the front of my body, landing on the hem of my skirt. He pulls it up so it sits on my waist, my legs and panties bare to him. He runs a finger over the thin scrap of lace that feels much too thick. “Why would I be worried when I know you’re this wet for me?”

His words send another surge gushing out of me, and my hips pulse of their own accord. His lips pull into a smug smile and as much as I hate that he’s right, I have higher priorities right now.

“Fine. I was a *little* bored.”

He breaks into an all out grin, and I roll my eyes again. “A badass like you will never be satisfied with a bore like him.”

I lift my hips again, this time consciously. I want less talking and more action. He obliges, slipping his finger into my panties and pulling as he glides down my slit.

“Fuck,” he groans, reaching the end of my pussy and sliding his finger back up. When he reaches my clit, he expertly rubs it in slow, precise circles. My eyes roll into the back of my head and he swallows my moans with his mouth, our lips lapping each other greedily.

I’ve never wanted anything more than this in my entire life. The need building in my gut and extending outward is the single most important thing in my life right now. If his rock

hard dick trying to break out of his jeans is any indication, it's clear he feels the same.

He moves his finger to my pussy and starts to slip a finger in, but his hand is limited due to my underwear. He growls in frustration and pulls his hand out. I'm about to whimper from the loss of his touch when he bunches the panties in his fist and tears them clean off.

"I'm going to take you right now, and you're not going to move." He's inches from my face and looks more serious than a tornado warning. His hands grip my hips and lift me up, shifting me so I'm pressed against the corner where the car seat meets the door.

He rises to his knees and unbuckles his belt, not bothering to take it off before unbuttoning and unzipping his black jeans. He pulls down his pants and boxers at the same time, leaving them to rest on his upper thighs as his dick stands at attention.

He digs a condom out of the pocket behind the driver's seat, ripping it open with his teeth. He spits the piece of foil onto the floor of his car and I'm mesmerized by his lips. How is this the first time I'm noticing how perfect they are?

I follow his movements, watching as he rolls the latex down to the base. He fists his cock before dropping his hands to my sides, his elbows pressing into me due to the confined space.

Is it possible to be simultaneously breathless and full of air? He's all of my oxygen as he steals it. My eyes roam across his body and land on his face at the same time that his eyes finish raking over my body. Our eyes lock.

And suddenly, we're not just about to have sex. Something happens, something I can't describe as anything but magical. It's cheesy, I know. But there's a reason these lines still exist.

I'm transfixed on his pupils, dilated not only with lust, but something deeper. More meaningful. I wouldn't call it love, because that's just crazy. But what is it, then?

He searches my eyes, pausing to pierce me with a stare so intense I might melt into the plastic and leather beneath me. Under any other circumstance, I'd break the contact, afraid of its intensity. Be it the close proximity, the mix of emotions, or the carnal need, I can't tear away.

I'm not sure how long we remain there, motionless and mesmerized, but eventually, he inches himself into me.

It's torture, really, the slow pace with which he moves. But I also don't want to shatter the rawness of this moment, so I don't rush him or move at all.

Once he's all the way in, he holds himself there. My pussy tightens from both the feeling of him deep inside me and the swooping in my belly. This feels more real than it should. Too real.

"You're so beautiful, Kate," he whispers, his forehead pressing into mine. "And sexy as fuck."

I inhale sharply, the swooping in my stomach growing as though I'm freefalling on a rollercoaster. I'm saved from responding by him speaking again.

“Now be a good girl and don’t fuckin’ move,” he says. And then he pulls out of me and rams back into me in the blink of an eye. Ironically, my lower back rams into the door behind me from the force. My eyes seek out his fearfully, but he must understand the difference between me moving intentionally or inadvertently.

He continues to relentlessly pound in and out of me, making me breathless. He’s watching his dick slide in and out of me, and I’m about to lean my head back on the car door when his eyes snap to mine.

“Don’t. Fucking. Move.”

I stare at him with wide eyes, nodding my head a fraction of an inch. He resumes watching himself slide in and out of me as he bites down on his lip. Watching him heightens the pleasure I feel. I want to spread my legs more so he can get deeper, but I force myself to stay still. As a result, my muscles start to tighten from the growing intensity. When my inner thighs squeeze his hips, he looks at me.

He steals my breath with the heat in his eyes and the sin on his lips. “Relax for me, baby.”

I force the muscles in my body to loosen, and my pussy unclenches with them. He slows his pace by a hair, but it’s enough that I catch my breath. He lowers his face to my ear and whispers, “I’m going to ask you to do some things, and I want you to listen.”

I nod my head, incapable of uttering words. He thrusts in deeply but doesn’t remove himself this time. His hips begin to

pulse, making it so his very full dick fills me. I grip his shoulders, our chests rising and falling together rapidly.

“Stop tightening your pussy,” he growls into my ear. I focus on relaxing my muscles again, but only accomplish it about halfway. I feel his dick throb inside of me and it causes me to tighten up all over again.

He stops moving and pulls his head back so he’s facing me. I can smell the cinnamon and smoke from his lips only an inch above mine; if I wasn’t so full of orgasmic need, I would finally ask him if he smokes.

“You agreed to listen.” I give a small nod, my wide eyes staring into his completely smoke filled orbs. He kisses me deeply and begins moving again, so I put all my effort into loosening myself.

It works, and the impact is instantaneous. He feels too deep, the sensation too good. I moan and he picks up his pace, pulling out a little more with each thrust. When he pulls out all the way, he thrusts back in and my pussy clenches again.

“It’s too much,” I tell him, panting.

“You can take it. Show me, baby. Be a good girl for me.”

His words motivate me to listen. Somehow, I keep my muscles relaxed and he just fucks me. I don’t like that word, but there’s no other way to describe it. My head knocks into the window repeatedly, the sound becoming the theme song of our show.

He reduces his pace gradually, eventually nuzzling his face into my neck. He throws a hand over my breast, squeezing tightly. My nipple pebbles under the lace bra, rubbing into my blouse.

“You’re mine,” he growls into my ear. When my only response is a moan, he pulls his head out of my neck to look at me. “You’re. Fucking. Mine.” His hand releases my breast to pull at the buttons on my collarbone, yanking them so the fabric tears. I gasp, glancing down at the ruined shirt.

My wide eyes find his fire filled ones and I nod, afraid if I don’t make some acknowledgment I’ll be going home naked. One side of his lips tilt up, making me feral with need.

“Tighten up now, baby.” I do so immediately, the relief consuming me and making my eyes roll into the back of my head. My climax builds to the breaking point as Lorenzo thrusts in and out of me. His breath all over me and his scent consuming my senses is what tips me over the edge.

I freefall into wonderland as Lorenzo whispers in my ear, “That’s right, give it to me, Kate. I want to hear you.”

I moan and he grabs my hips, pounding into me at high speed before following me into the oblivion. He’s buried deep as he collapses on top of me, our breaths heavy and our heads light.

He rolls his head to the side and I look at him, appreciating his hooded eyes and sated smirk.

“That felt fucking amazing,” he says, pulling off the condom and tying a knot.

“Mhm.” I have a sappy grin on my face, but I couldn’t care less. I feel too good to do anything but enjoy this high. I close my eyes and lie still, nestled under him, enjoying the feeling of his body all over mine. He’s extremely warm; his chest rising and falling makes me feel safe for some odd reason.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but as my head clears, I peek my eyes open to find him staring at me.

“What?” I mutter through my smile.

“You’re... nothing. Just admiring you.” If I didn’t know better, I would think he almost looked shy.

“Will you admit you were jealous now?” I tease.

His grin comes slow. “Why would I be jealous when I know you’re mine?”

I return his smile, infatuated and totally sated. I want to reach out and comb my fingers through his hair, but the action seems too caring. Or, what was the word he used? Intimate. My mind wanders, and the topic of jealousy brings back the memory of Sara, a lump forming in my throat.

“What did you mean, you were trying to forget about me?”

He eyes me cautiously, licking his lips before answering. “Exactly what I said.”

“Why tell me we’re friends with benefits, then?”

“That was after the holiday party, if you remember correctly. Things changed.”

“What things?”

He sighs and stares out the window. “I didn’t think we’d see each other again. I mean, at work we would, obviously. But I didn’t plan on having any other... intimate moments with you.”

I snicker. “Intimate moments?”

He pegs me with his stare. “You don’t seem like the type who’d appreciate me calling it fucking, like I normally would.”

He’s not wrong there, but I evade his statement. It’s unnerving, really, the way he seems to understand me. “That’s another question I have.”

“Of course it is.”

“Stop,” I say playfully, nudging his shoulder.

He smiles, and I dare to think that it reaches his eyes if the crinkles are any indication. “Go on, then.”

“Why *did* you invite me to the New Year’s party?”

“It didn’t work.”

“What didn’t?”

He looks at me as though I’m obtuse. “Forgetting about you.”

“Oh.” I fight the smile playing at my lips. “But why did you stop fighting it?”

He doesn't respond right away, causing my mind to run wild with ideas. Just as I'm about to repeat myself, he speaks.

"I wanted to see you."

"All that thinking for such a basic answer?"

"Some things are better left unsaid, Kate."

What the hell does that mean?

Before I can ask him, he sits up, my head dropping onto the leather seat when he pulls his arm out from under me.

"Come on, let's get you home."

Chapter Eleven

February 14th

My brows furrow but he doesn't acknowledge it, pulling his pants and boxers up swiftly. When he starts to buckle his belt, I feel around for my panties before remembering they were destroyed.

I shift my skirt down and fix my torn blouse so my bra isn't completely exposed, then glance around for the underwear. I'll dispose of them in the safety of my house. When I look at the floorboard, I find it about as cluttered as it was the first time. There's an empty pack of cigarettes, confirming the question I've been wondering.

Doesn't he know that smoking kills?

"Here," he says, dangling the destroyed pink lace underwear in my face. I collect them quickly, my cheeks tinting with the reminder of him ripping them off.

"You're so cute," Lorenzo says. I roll my eyes and follow after he clambers out of the car. He straightens the car seat and holds the door open for me.

"Thanks," I mutter as he shuts it.

I'm delighted that despite his manic driving, he *does* wear his seatbelt. When he's backing out of the parking spot, I glance through the window of the bookstore to the table Brad and I occupied.

"Wait! The chocolates!" I point to the shop but Lorenzo keeps the car rolling.

"Were you actually going to eat those?"

"I can't. Nut allergy. But it feels wrong to just leave them there." It's not a full blown allergy; I break out with a rash all over my cheeks and chest. But I don't like having to explain all that, so saying it's an allergy is just easier.

"Let the lady who kicked us out have them. She's obviously not getting laid tonight."

I swat at his forearm and he chuckles, pulling out of the lot. Then he floors the gas, my head thrashing into the headrest. The roar of the engine as it races down the road has an instant effect on my pulse, and I grip the car seat.

Lorenzo peeks at me then lets off the gas. He obviously remembers my distaste for speeding and cares enough to respect my wishes. Butterflies erupt in my stomach, but I don't let myself fall for it.

A loose strand of string tickles my chest. "Why did you have to rip my clothes?"

His eyes remain on the road and he's so silent, I wonder if he didn't hear me. As I'm about to repeat myself, he speaks.

"I wanted them for me, only."

“See, you are jealous.”

He shakes his head. “Possessive and jealous are not the same thing.”

He glances at me and catches the puzzled look on my face. “Jealousy has more to do with the other person and feeling inadequate yourself. I don’t have a problem with you dating what’s his name.”

“You know his name.”

“What’s your point?”

“That you’re jealous.”

“Possessive.”

He’s making zero sense right now. “What, you want to own me?”

“I want your total attention.”

“Let me get this straight—you don’t care if I date Brad, but you stormed in on my date.”

He sighs. “I want you to be happy. If *Brad* would make you happy, then who am I to stop you? Just because I want you for me only doesn’t mean that I deserve it.”

The way he says his name, almost in mockery, makes me certain that he’s on the same page about the fuckboy status. But his explanation doesn’t explain why he barged in on my date.

“Then *why* did you storm in there?”

“Always needing to know everything,” he murmurs.

“It’s a reasonable question, Lorenzo.”

His lips tug into a frown and a few moments pass before he answers. “If you really want him, if he truly makes you happy, I’m not going to stand in your way. But I’ve seen you when you’re alive, princess. And it wasn’t around *Brad*.”

He can’t be serious. He’s fine with me dating Brad, yet stormed in on my date? I decide to call his bluff.

“Well, then maybe I will see Brad again.”

“Oh, really?” I can see the tilt of his lips from here, and his attitude pisses me off.

“Really.”

“What makes you think boring Brad wants to see you again after tonight?”

My stomach tightens. “I’m sure he’d be open to discussion.”

“If being bored out of your mind is your idea of fun foreplay, then go for it.”

I frown, beside myself. “What happened to being yours until you see fit?” *And growling that I’m yours while we were having sex.*

“You like being mine.”

“Okay, I think I’m understanding. You’re fine with being possessive if I want you to be?”

“There ya go, princess,” he says with an earnest smile. It fades a moment later. “Promise me something, though.”

“What?”

“If you actually *do* decide to date Brad, tell me.”

I should have expected this, but I didn't. I'm utterly confused. Why would he bust in on my date with the guy, have sex with me, and then turn around and say it's fine if I date him?

Lorenzo gives me serious whiplash, and I'm not sure how much of it I can handle. But that'll be future Kate's problem, I guess. Let's see how this laid-back approach works out for me.

Lorenzo takes his eyes off the road to look at me, probably because of my silence. I nod and he puts his focus back on driving, which settles my nerves. I glance at the dashboard and find that he's still going fifty miles per hour in a residential area.

“What's your deal with speeding, anyway?”

He shrugs. “It's fun.”

“Is that the only reason you do things?”

“Mostly.” He gives me a lopsided grin as he slows down at the stop sign. When he makes the left, he guns the gas and turns the volume up on the speaker. According to the dash screen, it's a song called “Awake” by Godsmack. The bass blares through the speaker and while I don't listen to much music, it's strangely comforting tonight.

Maybe that's just Lorenzo's essence.

We're not far from my apartment, reminding me that he followed me on my date. I should be a lot more creeped out

than I am. When he pulls onto the curb and looks over at me, I peg him with an insolent look.

“Don’t follow me again.”

“No promises,” he says with a wink. I should be running away from this man at the highest speed possible. But I’m hooked, trapped, by his addictive persona. The orgasms definitely help, too.

“Okay, well...” In all the heated chaos and passion of the night, I didn’t think about what happens next. I put my hand on the door handle and hesitate for a moment, leaving him the opening to speak.

He doesn’t take it.

I open the door and slam it shut, walking off without a word or backwards glance. I should have known better than to think —

“Kate!” I whip my head around to find him watching me through the open passenger window with a smirk on his lips. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”



“Ugh, he’s just so frustrating!” I say to Char, holding my phone between my ear and shoulder as I dig my keys out of my purse. I dialed her as soon as I got into my building and filled her in on the night.

“He’s not your boyfriend, Kate.”

“I know, but why barge in on my date just to say he doesn’t care if I date him?” I put the key into my lock and open the door.

“It sounds like it was all in the heat of the moment. If he was watching you, he could probably tell you weren’t enjoying yourself.”

“But why did he follow me to begin with?”

“He said it himself, he’s possessive. And that he wanted to make sure you were safe. Which is strangely... cute.”

I put her on speaker and tear off my ruined shirt, throwing it into the trash with a sigh. “I know, I know. I’m still trying to process all of this.”

“I’d offer to grab a drink, but I need to get back to my date.”

“It’s fine. I’m just going to spiral in the comfort of my own home.” I’m only half-joking, and she knows it.

“Call me if you need me.”

We say our goodbyes and click. I take off the rest of my clothes, turn on the TV, and cuddle into bed. Felix purrs, rubbing on my leg, so I pet him.

“Why can’t men be like you, Felix?”

He continues to rub on my leg, finally settling into a curled ball at my feet. I zone out with Friends in the background and finally give my thoughts some attention.

I suppose I’ll have to take his explanations at face value. But why does he want me to let him know if I date Brad?

Better yet, why doesn't he care?

Maybe he wants to be able to fuck as many women as he pleases, so he feels obligated to give me the same respect. Which would be the right thing to do, I suppose. I don't understand friends with benefits, or whatever this is. Why can't we just be in a relationship?

You said you weren't going to have a boyfriend.

Maybe that's the only reason this can work for me right now. In a way, it's the loophole that allows me to still have sex without all the extra strings attached. But can I do that without getting hurt?

I guess there's only one way to find out.

Chapter Twelve

February 17th

The rest of the week passed without any incident. At lunch, Lorenzo said hello as he walked past my table, and I returned the salutation. He didn't message me and out of pride alone, I didn't message him.

Because if I'm being honest, I'd love to reach out to him. I'd like to know how his days are going, ask him random questions like what his favorite food is, and make plans to hang out. But I know that my heart can only handle so much rejection, including unanswered messages.

It leaves the ball in his court, but I don't care. I don't want to put myself on the line when I'm not sure where he stands or how he feels. Except that I do. He's made it crystal clear that this is just some sort of fling, not to be taken seriously.

The problem is, there's this small voice in the back of my mind that refuses to believe it. She even sends evidence, like the few times he held a look in his eyes that said it's deeper for him, too.

The sex was out of this world, though I'm not sure if that's because I'd been desperate for his touch, or if it was really that

great. Either way, I've been ruminating over my possibilities since he dropped me back home.

I know he's right—Brad was a tad boring. If Lorenzo hadn't showed up, I likely would have accepted another date. I'd push whatever we could have had forward, because he's really nice and I didn't want to be hung up on Lorenzo.

But then he showed up, or barged in, really, and I was right back to where I started. Wanting him more than I've wanted anything in my whole life, knowing it's the worst thing for me. What can I say, I sure know how to pick them.

Lorenzo had said on New Year's that he would call this friends with benefits if he had to label it... but does that still stand now? Should I even be accepting this type of relationship when I'm not sure it's all I want?

Char's voice speaks from the back of my mind—*“Just do it until you don't want to anymore.”*

It's easy for her to say. She's perfectly content dating for fun, not needing anything more. But I'm not... right? I mean, I've never taken that approach. I've always seen dating as a means to something long-term. Marriage, kids, the boxes in life we have to check.

Maybe that's my problem, though. Maybe I need to just have fun and see where things take me. I've always gotten hung up on following the rules and doing the 'right' thing.

These are the thoughts that have played on loop since Valentine's Day, always ending with one final question: *what if*

I get hurt?

The chances of that are extremely high with a man like Lorenzo. For fuck's sake, he won't even be clear on what's going on between us, let alone any future. And come to think of it, I don't think I know all that much about him.

But maybe... maybe I don't need to. I can use him to satisfy my sexual needs and just enjoy his company when we hang out. Whenever the hell that is, seeing as we made no plans or mention of seeing each other again.

I shake my head and continue wiping off the bathroom counter, finishing my routine Saturday cleaning. When I put all the supplies away and head into my room, I decide I'll text Char to see if she wants to go out tonight.

Imagine my surprise when I see two messages from Lorenzo waiting for me, the second one sent ten minutes after the first.

Lorenzo: princess

Lorenzo: what are you doing tonight

I can't help but break out in a smile, giddy from the fact that he wrote to me *and* called me princess. Because I really love that, even if it is a bit condescending at times. I also find it comical that he won't wait longer than ten minutes to send another message, but will joyfully leave me with no response and no explanation.

Me: Impatient much?

I can hear Char screaming in my ear to flirt, but I ignore it the same way I would in real life. This is my style, and I'm sticking to it. I can't help my snarky comment to point out his hypocrisy.

Lorenzo: what are you doing tonight

Jeez, what happened to a little banter?

Me: Not sure yet. Why?

He doesn't reply immediately like he did before. After fifteen minutes, I pull up Char's contact in my phone. I'm not going to sit around waiting for—

My phone buzzes in my hand and I tap on the messages notification immediately.

Lorenzo: my friends throwing a party tonight

I'm sorry, but why does it seem like he still parties like he's in college? Frankly, I didn't party much when I was in college, but I can at least understand it. It's the thing to do. And New Year's is one thing—everyone's partying. But on a random Saturday night?

Is he even inviting me? My phone buzzes again.

Lorenzo: come

Me: Aren't we a little old to be going to parties like we're in college?

Lorenzo: i choose not to live in society's box kate

Lorenzo: you should try it

I do *not* live in a box! There are rules, and I follow them. Getting drunk and getting wild is reserved for special occasions and college years, everyone knows that. The same way everyone knows that you give presents on Christmas.

Or like you and a guy like Lorenzo don't belong.

The thought from left field hurts, digging at something deeper. Maybe the reason I'm judging his lifestyle is because I know I don't fit into it.

I dial Char's number and she answers after the second ring.

"Hey, lovie," she says cheerfully.

"Hi," I mumble, the disappointment I feel oozing out of the two letter word.

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. I'm just convinced this is never going to work."

"Why not?"

“I don’t know if I can handle being casual. It’s all just up in the air and... I need structure.”

Char laughs and she must feel my glare through the phone because she stifles it quickly. “I know you do. But I thought you were going to give this a try. What happened?”

She asks pointedly because she’s known me for years and recognizes this didn’t arise spontaneously. I fill her in on everything as she awards me with appropriate gasps, oohs, and ahs.

“Isn’t it weird to be going to parties often?” I ponder when I conclude.

“I mean... I guess? I don’t know, people can still throw parties if they want to. Especially single people.”

Her words pick at the gash on my heart, but I don’t show it. “I guess.”

“You’ve never been a party person. Also, isn’t he like, five years younger than you?”

“Oh my god! Two years younger, Char.”

“Oh, right. Whatever. That means he left college not that long ago. Maybe he hasn’t left that life. Or he has friends that are still in college.”

I hadn’t thought of that. “That’s true.”

“What did he study, anyway?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. We haven’t really gotten to know each other...”

Char whistles. “Nothin’ wrong with that, toots.”

“You’re the worst.”

I can hear her grin through the phone. “You love me.”

I nod my head. “I do. I feel like we should know at least primary basics about each other, though. Friends get to know each other.”

“So ask him.”

“It must have something to do with web design or tech, seeing as he’s working on our website,” I muse aloud, tugging at the memory from Rowan’s holiday party.

“Hot,” she says. I hear a car honking in the background.

“Where are you?”

“I’m pulling up to Toddies,” she says.

“Toddies? What are you doing there?” That’s where I met Lorenzo for the first time. And got stood up by Brad. And crotch-splotched Trent.

“I’m meeting a date,” she says.

“I don’t ever want to go there again,” I say.

“So don’t. I’m walking in, talk to you later.”

I click and mull over our conversation. Maybe I should just reply to him. I do want to see him, and he did reach out first.

Me: Are you just going to keep ditching me, like last time?

I really need to focus on getting answers from him. He distracts me with his stupid smirk, his heated eyes, and that eyebrow ring. The alcohol that night certainly didn't help, either. My phone buzzes and his response doesn't get me anywhere.

Lorenzo: i wasnt ditching you

Me: We'll talk about it later.

Lorenzo: same place

Lorenzo: larissa keeps asking about you

I'm so happy to see his last message. I really liked her! Maybe I do fit in, after all.

Me: What time?

Lorenzo: 8

Lorenzo: ish

Me: Are you telling me not to be there on time?

Lorenzo: by all means princess come early

Lorenzo: i want to see you

My belly flutters, making me feel equally light and stupid. I
can't fall for him.

I can't.

Cannot.

Will not.

Chapter Thirteen

February 17th

I review my game plan on the Uber ride over. I will be bold. I will be confident. I will be comfortable. I'm not going to play victim in this game anymore when I know what it is. Oh, and I will get answers.

When I arrive, I fix my shirt. I dressed more casually this time, donning tight, dark jeans and a black tee with thin horizontal white stripes. I may not wear all black, like Lorenzo does, but there's no denying it's a color that always works. I decided against fancy heels, wearing comfy black flats instead. For the first time since I can remember, I left my hair down, the waves flowing over my shoulders. I went heavy on the eyeliner and mascara, forgoing my glasses in favor for contacts.

Relaxed and young.

When I reach the door, I pause with my fist halfway in the air before knocking. *Be bold.* I've been here once before. It's a party, for fuck's sake. I don't need to knock like I'm attending some adult wine night. I'll just walk in.

I take a deep breath and glance at my wrist watch, confirming it's 8:01. My gut tightens in anticipation, but I pull on the door knob anyway. A part of me was hoping it would be locked, letting me off the boldness hook, but nope. It opens right up, so I enter.

I glance around, confirming there's no one in my immediate area. I was so nervous the last time, and distracted by Lorenzo, that I didn't really take in the house. The living room is to the immediate right, a worn, black leather couch against the wall next to the door. A large TV hangs on the opposite wall. The words he spoke at Rowan's holiday party echo in my mind — *"I don't watch much TV."*

There's no coffee table, no end tables, no wall decor. Just plain white walls all around the house. The hallway I ran out of on New Year's is to the left, the kitchen behind the shared wall. The patio door next to the small kitchen is propped open, just as last time.

I take slow steps inside and glance down the hallway. When I don't sense any noise or action, I glance out to the patio. When I don't see anyone, I walk down the hallway. There are three doors, all shut. One is at the end of the hallway, and the other two face each other.

I walk to the first door on the right, where we had sex, and pull on the knob. I may have mantra'd too hard, because what I'm doing is completely inappropriate. But I suddenly feel curious. I want to know more about Lorenzo and I'll get that knowledge in any way I can.

From what he told me, this is Santi's house. I wonder if this is Santi's room, or if he has one of the others. And where's the bathroom?

I twist the door knob but the door doesn't budge. It's locked. Great. I feel dumb now, thinking I was sneaking around. But Santi must realize people will do this. If I was having a house party I'd *definitely* lock the doors.

But the door wasn't locked when Lorenzo brought you back here.

I'll add it to the list of questions, along with how he knew there were condoms in the drawer. Is it inappropriate to ask a fling how many people they've had sex with before? Is it ever appropriate to ask that question at all?

I take one last glance down the hallway and then return to the living area, taking in the surroundings again. This place feels... cold. Like no one actually lives here.

I should find Lorenzo, or anyone else that might be here. I walk towards the patio but the door across from the kitchen catches my eye. It must lead to the garage.

Should I scope it out?

I peer through the open patio door, detecting no activity. One minute won't hurt...

I tiptoe over to the door, even though there's no one around to hear me or see me. This feels so wrong, but I'm determined. Curiosity has gotten the best of me. Hopefully I don't die, like whatever cat they talk about.

I reach the presumed garage door and put my ear to the door to see if anyone's inside. When I don't hear anything, I put my hand on the door knob. Then I pause. Who throws a party, says the time is 8, then isn't here?

Maybe they're out back, where I can't see them. If there's even a they. This is Santi's house, maybe he's setting up and Lorenzo isn't even here.

Fuck it, I'm going in. I turn the knob and push the door open, a strange smell hitting my nostrils instantly.

And then voices. *Shouting* voices.

"We don't get to make those kinds of choices, Zo!" My eyes zero in on Santi and Lorenzo, standing by an open freezer.

Lorenzo is nearly unrecognizable. His face is contorted with what can only be named as rage, and his arms are trembling with balled fists. I can't help but notice the veins that cover them, like webs of strength that want to burst.

"I'm not stopping. This is the limit for me. I've sacrificed enough!"

Chills coat my skin from the fervor of his tone. I legitimately feel terrified. I need to leave. Now. I have no clue what they're talking about, but I know I shouldn't be hearing it. I slowly pull the door closed, but Santi's head whips toward me.

Our eyes lock, and his stare turns murderous. I freeze, my eyes so wide they burn. We start and stop speaking at the same time.

“I was just—”

“What the *fuck*—”

Santi turns to Lorenzo, whose hand is on the now closed lid of the freezer. Lorenzo eyes me while Santi stares daggers at him.

“I was just, um, I didn’t know where anyone was,” I say meekly. My voice is small, so small, all those words about being bold and confident disintegrating into dust.

Santi whips his head back to me. “You have no right—”

Lorenzo slaps a hand over his chest and pats him a few times. “We didn’t realize how late it had gotten.” I watch him morph from controlled rage to subdued anger. Someone who didn’t know him at all might think he was cool, collected, but I can see the way his eyes are burning. And it’s not because he saw me.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell Santi, looking at him with all the earnestness and sincerity I can muster. His jaw ticks, but he doesn’t respond, only giving me a curt nod. I glance down in embarrassment and shame. I shouldn’t have been snooping around.

“Come on, let’s go out back,” Lorenzo says. I lift my head, peering at him through my lashes. He’s walking towards me, Santi remaining rooted in place near the freezer. In the center of the space, there’s two couches facing each other with a coffee table in between. The couches are as worn as the one in the living room, but the coffee table looks brand new. The wall

is lined with shelves stuffed full of so many things I'd have to give all of my attention to know what's there.

When Lorenzo reaches me, I tear my eyes from the garage and look at him. He doesn't smile, but he doesn't frown either. Almost as though he wants to forget what just happened and lose himself in me, but is torn between the two.

He pulls the door open wider and brushes past me, my body lighting with the feel of him on my skin. I look at Santi one more time, finding him with the same murderous glare on me. I turn away and follow Lorenzo to the patio, unsure of what to make of what just happened.

"Sorry about that, princess," he says, plopping down on the same patio sofa we sat on last time.

"Santi looked really... angry," I reply, my voice a near whisper. Angry is the tame word, but I'm not going to confess that Lorenzo's friend, possibly best friend by the familiarity in which they were arguing, scares the hell out of me.

"Just ignore him, he can be a stickler at times." Lorenzo waves his hand dismissively. "A bit like you, actually."

I purse my lips but don't respond, something not sitting right despite his dismissal. "Well, I'm sorry. I was just... looking for you."

He watches me for a moment. I can tell he's reading into my pause, determining if I'm telling the truth. Which I'm *not*.

"Totally understandable. We said 8, and it must be past that time if you're here."

I glance at my wrist watch. “8:13, to be exact.”

He chuckles and his shoulders visibly relax before me. Then, his eyes roam over me for the first time, and my heart quickens.

“I like your hair down,” he says. He reaches out, twirling a loose tendril in his hand. It’s not curled the way I’d normally do it, one on each side, but I feel like he prefers it this way. Not to mention, he’s never complimented it before.

I shrug in an attempt to seem nonchalant. “I decided to keep it relaxed tonight.”

“Well it’s working for you, Kate,” he purrs, inching his face closer to mine. His movement causes his bent knee resting on the cushion to shift, touching mine. Electricity erupts from the spot, striking my core. My jaw slackens, my lips parting by a fraction.

“Thanks,” I say, a blush creeping over me. I look away, the emotion rising in my chest feeling too intense for my liking.

Friends. Be friends... with benefits.

“Relaxed is a good look on you,” he says, forcing my attention back to him.

“Where do you see this going?” I blurt out. My heart races from embarrassment coupled with anticipation of his response.

He chuckles, placing a hand on my thigh. I try to push it off, glancing around, but he takes my hand in his and squeezes. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

“I don’t think it’s a difficult question to answer,” I say, pulling my hand away from his and returning it to my lap.

“It’s not. But I’m referring to the *need* to have it answered in the first place.”

“Why can’t you believe me when I tell you who I am?”

He quirks a brow but doesn’t respond, so I continue. “I’m not one of these people who lives on the edge of life, flying by the seat of my pants. I’m structured, ordered, meticulous... the opposite of what you seem to be.”

He studies me for a moment, his eyes sweeping over my face. I feel uncomfortable under his scrutiny, squirming discreetly. But he doesn’t miss a thing, his eyes darting to my wiggling fingers atop my thighs that are shifting with tension.

His attention drifts to the pool, or maybe it’s only his eyes. He seems to be lost in thought after studying me, setting my nerves on fire. But I have no idea what to say, so I stare at my hands on my lap, resisting the urge to pick at the skin around my nails.

“I don’t know where I see this going,” he says, slowly peeling his eyes from the water and back to me. His eyes search mine before he continues. “I’m drawn to you in the most baffling way. Almost like you’re the moon and I’m a hatching sea turtle. I just want to follow the path that leads me to you.”

My throat constricts and my eyes pop as I’m filled with tingles from his words. I’m on the edge of a cliff and I want to

freefall, but I don't let myself jump. I can sense his but before he speaks it.

“But, I'm not looking for anything more than a casual fling.” He stares directly into my eyes as he shoves the dagger in my gut, but I bleed silently. I have no right to feel so intensely about a guy I barely even know. It's illogical, it's insane, it's stupid.

Yet, despite all that and more, it's undeniably true.

My vision goes blurry as I try to keep my thoughts in the background and my heart at a normal rate. I nod lightly, tearing my burning eyes away.

“Where do *you* see this going?” he asks, and my eyes snap to his.

“I—” I never thought I'd wish for someone, anyone, to walk through the open patio door and steal him away so I could have a moment to myself. I even glance behind me, but no one's there. Not even Santi has come out.

When I turn back, Lorenzo has that look in his eye... the twinkle filled with mirth.

“Not such an easy question, is it?”

“Well it's not easy to answer when the other person doesn't give a real answer.”

“That's not how it works. You should know what you want, even if the feeling isn't mutual.”

That hurts right where it shouldn't—my heart. "You seem to think you already know." My tone is defensive, there's no denying it.

"I think I have an idea," he replies.

"Let's hear it." I cross my arms at my chest, turning my body so I also have a leg bent on the sofa.

"This doesn't get you out of answering... but my guess is you want the boyfriend, no matter how much you say you don't. You want the dates, the roses, the eventual engagement ring."

My cheeks flush but I don't break eye contact. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing at all, princess." He's no longer filled with amusement, his tone steely and his eyes cold. "But you're in the wrong place if you're looking for that."

We both know what he means by place, and it's not a location. It's him. His words should deter me more than they do.

"I do want those things..." His eyebrows raise by a fraction, seeming surprised by my admission rather than denial. "*Eventually*. But I really meant it when I said I don't want a boyfriend. I don't trust myself."

"Why date Brad, then?"

I'm not going to admit to him that I needed a distraction because I couldn't stop thinking about him, so I simply shrug. "I want to try casual."

He studies me again, then nods. “Well, I’m here for that.”

“However,” I continue, holding up a finger, “that doesn’t mean we can’t at least identify what’s going on. You know, share our thoughts on what we feel and think.”

He laughs. “Fine. Tell me what you feel and think, Kate.”

“You first.”

“I already told you.”

I roll my eyes but accept that trying to get any more out of him will be like pulling teeth from a child. “Forget feelings, then. What do we call”—I wave my hand between us—“whatever this is?”

His finger lifts to his eyebrow and he pulls on the stud as he presses his tongue into his cheek. “Didn’t we say friends with benefits before?”

“We didn’t, you did. And that was right before you kicked me out of—”

“Not this shit again. I didn’t kick you out!”

“It’s water under the bridge. Let’s just—”

“Is it? Why are you bringing it up, then?”

His analysis is infuriatingly accurate, but I ignore it. “Forget I said it. Let’s call it friends with benefits. I’m cool with that.”

I can tell a retort is on the tip of his tongue, but he refrains from letting it loose. Instead, he lets out a sigh. “Okay. All better now? Anything else we need to identify?”

I start to shake my head but something does come to mind.
“Actually, yes.”

“What's that, princess?” He looks amused, fueling me to ask.

“Where did you keep going on New Year's?”

“What do you mean?”

“When your friends showed up.”

“Oh, nowhere. I was just talking to them inside for a moment.” But the way he averts his eyes has me doubting the validity of his answer.

I want to ask what they talked about. I want to ask why it couldn't be said in front of me. But something holds me back. It doesn't feel appropriate as a non-girlfriend. Instead, I try to gain some clarity. “Should I expect you to act like that all the time?”

“Are you asking me to explain exactly how I'll act at all times we're together?”

“No. But it would be nice to understand how I should interact as your... friend.”

“We'll figure it out as we go. Not everything has to be figured out prematurely, Kate.”

We'll agree to disagree there, so I let it go. Everything's better when it's discussed and talked about. At least, that's how I've lived my life thus far. But that hasn't exactly panned out for me, so I'm willing to give this a try.

I nod and put out my hand in offering. “Friends with benefits.”

He takes my hand in his, shaking his head with a chuckle. “Friends with benefits.”

We shake twice, and then the strangest thing happens. The warmth from our palms touching feels scorching, but not in a physical way. It’s burning my insides, making me want to pull his arm so he falls on me. My eyes meet his and the heat in them confirms he must be feeling similarly.

The world around us melts away, and all I can see is him. All I can smell is cinnamon and smoke. All I can hear is my heart thumping in my ears. All I can taste is the sweet desire for his lips to be on mine.

If we were in a rom-com, this would be that moment where the sappy music starts and you just know they’re going to kiss after an exaggerated lapse in time.

Instead, Lorenzo’s hand tightens over mine before he lets go, my hand dropping onto my lap. Our eyes are still locked, though. The feelings haven’t dissipated, only weakened from the release in touch. The uncomfortability and awkwardness of everything that isn’t being said, at least on my end, overwhelms me. I clear my throat and rip my eyes from him, glancing around the empty backyard.

“So, when *are* people getting here?” I glance at my watch and feel complete shock when I realize it’s already 8:45.

“Should be any minute,” he replies. He leans back on the sofa, stretching an arm across the back so his hand is right by my shoulder. So little space, and yet, so extremely far.

“What about Santi? Where is he?” I look behind me, as if I expect to find he’s been standing there listening to us.

“He’s probably wrapping up around the house,” Lorenzo says as he digs a small, black phone out of his pocket, dropping it onto the cushion. I open my mouth to ask him who else lives here but he starts waving.

“Oh my god!” The squealing from behind makes me turn around, finding Larissa there. “You’re here! I kept asking about you!”

She does a cute little run over to me, dropping her bag on the ground and throwing her hands around my waist as I stand up. I didn’t realize what she was going for until the last second, so I nearly fall back into the couch with her weight on me. But she squeezes tightly, inadvertently holding me up and simultaneously comforting me.

“Hi,” I let out, my airflow constricted with her embrace. I squeeze her just as tightly, hearing Lorenzo chuckle from beside us. I turn to look at her but my hair is in my face, so I pull back.

“Shut the fuck up, Zo,” she says to him before turning back to me. “Why didn’t you come back sooner? I kept asking about you but you know how this guy is with information.” She rolls her eyes and I feel a sense of relief over the fact that he seems to be reserved with everyone, not just me.

Although, when I think about it, that's not a good sign. Aren't you supposed to be the one they're always different with?

I force a laugh. "Yeah, I've just been... busy." I suck at making excuses, if that's not evident enough already, so I just use the typical, safe line. Not something stupid, like, say, grocery store.

"Maria couldn't make it tonight, she had to work a double," Larissa says to Zo. He nods, his lips turning down with a look of indifference.

"Where does she work?" I ask. I still think she didn't like me, but it doesn't hurt to ask. Besides, it'll be awkward if we just stand here.

"She's a waitress at Flamingo's," Larissa says. "She works day time shifts but every once in a while, she's gotta pick up a night shift."

"Oh, that's that bar and grill?" I say conversationally. I can't help but feel a little out of place. I'm still the outcast here, even if Larissa is really nice to me.

"That's the one." Her eyes volley between Lorenzo and I. "So are you two fucking, or what?"

My eyes blow out and my jaw drops, taken totally aback by her forwardness that I didn't expect in the least bit.

"I—We—" I look over at Lorenzo for backup but he's chuckling with that twinkle in his eyes, his arms crossed over

his chest. I look back at Larissa and she wears a similar look to Lorenzo. Or Zo, as she says.

“We’re just friends,” Lorenzo says coolly, finally saving me from the moronic expression I must have all over my face. His words are true, yet they sting just the same. I suppose I should be thankful, seeing as I’m the one who insisted on secrecy.

But it stings because I know that’s all we’ll ever be and he doesn’t seem to give a shit about it. I shouldn’t. I don’t want to. But I know that pain; it’s from feeling unwanted.

Larissa narrows her eyes at him, but I nod. “It’s true.”

I glance at Lorenzo but he watches Larissa, seeming to be intent on not looking at me. Like he’s purposely avoiding me.

“Well *you* I’ll believe. This guy fucks a different girl every other week so I figured... are you okay?” She must be asking about the blood draining from my face. I gulp and nod my head, unable to formulate words.

“That’s a little exaggerative, don’t you think, Larissa?” His words are calm but his tone isn’t.

“You know what I mean,” she says, waving a hand in the air dismissively. “I figured when Kate didn’t come back around she was just another plaything.”

My throat constricts but I repeat my mantras: I am bold, I am confident, I am intelligent. We’re friends. With benefits. It doesn’t matter what he’s done. Or what he does, I guess.

My heart thumps erratically in protest.

Chapter Fourteen

February 17th

Turns out, this isn't a party. It's a get together, though Lorenzo says Santi always calls them parties no matter the amount of people they invite. Secretly, I'm relieved. Not only because parties drain my batteries faster, but because it doesn't feel so... immature.

I know he's a couple years younger than me, and we're not actually together, but I would feel strange constantly going to parties that feel like we're back in college. There's no shot pong, or beer pong, and Lorenzo doesn't keep running off because we're all hanging out under the patio awning.

Santi came out a few moments after Larissa, and not long after more of their friends arrived. I recognized a couple of them from the New Year's party. It didn't take me long to figure out that they're all pretty close.

Lorenzo, or Zo as everyone here calls him, and I remained on the sofa. Larissa took up the chair next to me, while a guy named Carter is in the chair next to her and across from me. Santi sits on Zo's other side, and he's been just as rude as he

always has been with me. A few of their other friends pulled up plastic chairs, but I don't remember their names.

“You want another drink, babe?” Larissa asks, rising from her seat. I glance down at my bottle of beer, finding it nearly empty.

“Yeah, sure,” I tell her. “Actually, I'll come with you.”

We make our way to a cooler tucked behind the patio door, which has now been shut. I guess they only keep it propped open for *actual* parties. Larissa hands me a beer, then grabs one for herself and shuts the cooler.

“Hey, sorry for asking about you and Zo,” she says, popping open our bottles of beer with the bottle opener laying on a table against the wall.

“Oh,” I say, caught off-guard. “Not a problem. I can, uh, see how you might think that.”

“Yeah. He doesn't ever bring new people around, really, so I thought it had to be sex. That, *and* he stopped messing around with Maria.”

It feels like the ground beneath me disappeared, my stomach falling out of my ass like I was thrown off a cliff. I keep my expression neutral and pick at the label on the beer bottle.

“What, they were a thing?” I ask. The curious tone I use sounds convincing to me, and Larissa doesn't hesitate in answering so she must believe it, too.

“Oh, yeah. I mean, they never dated or anything. Zo doesn’t date. But they hooked up pretty regularly.”

“Oh.” That’s all I can say, but then I recall her previous words. “Wait, I thought you said he has—fucks—different girls all the time.”

“Yeah, that’s still true. But Maria was like a constant. She’d get jealous anyway, and it was always some sort of drama.” Larissa rolls her eyes and tosses our caps into the trash bin before walking back towards the circle.

I guess that’s all the information I’ll be able to get for now. It’s probably all I can handle, if my nerves are any indication. Is that who I am? Maria’s replacement?

“Lari, I beat D at the courts the other day, right?” Carter demands the moment she folds her feet under her legs.

“You really think I was paying attention? I was on my phone the whole time,” she replies, sharing a look with me as though it’s obvious they’re being petulant. I play along, but I feel completely out of place. I’m the outsider, sitting in on an obviously very close knit group of friends.

Carter sucks his teeth. “Don’t be like that.” The guy next to Carter laughs, and I can only conclude he’s D.

“What’s your real name?” I ask before I can stop myself. D stops laughing and looks over at me, eyeing me up and down before responding.

“Dwayne,” he says. He gives me a look I’m finding is shared amongst these guys. It’s the same look that Santi and

Lorenzo give me, though Lorenzo gives it less often and typically with heat. It's this piercing stare, like they're sizing me up; figuring out what I'm about.

I nod my head, unsure of what else to say or how to explain why I asked. Really, I don't think it's a far out question. But his demeanor makes me feel like I just asked him for his goddamn social security number.

Then Larissa does something that makes me like her more than I already did. "Carter, D, Lou for Louis, Melanie, Santi, and Zo."

I follow as she points to each person in order of our circle. Carter, D, and Santi simply stare, but Lou and Melanie nod to me. Lorenzo stares at his beer bottle. I feel like a dolphin in a desert, so I keep my face neutral, holding back the appreciative smile I want to give Larissa. Or Lari, I suppose.

"Nice to meet you all," I say meekly. It feels pathetic, really, that I'm acting so small. Now more than ever, I wish I could call on that person I was on the night I ran into Trent, just so I could have an ounce of courage and not feel so insecure.

"Don't let her fool you with that act." My eyes dart to Lorenzo, watching as he lifts his eyes from his bottle to his friends. "She'll fuck you up if you mess with her."

I can't help myself, I break out into a full blown grin. His lips tilt up, and I get that feeling again—like there's no one else in the world except for us.

But then I remember what Larissa just told me about Maria, and my smile falters. I can tell Lorenzo caught it, though he doesn't know the reason. He doesn't address it, either, which I'm grateful for.

"Oh yeah?" Lou says with a lopsided grin. He leans forward, propping his elbows onto his knees. I can tell he works out regularly, his biceps and triceps begging to tear out of his v-neck black shirt. His hair is buzzed short, his jaw clean shaven. He gives me the impression of being someone with brute power.

Before I can reply, D's voice filters in from my left. "How do you two know each other?"

In opposition of Lou, D has long, wavy hair that looks like it hasn't been washed in over a week. He also wears black, but a tank top rather than a shirt. He's built, too, but not as large as Lou. His eyebrow is quirked in expectation, his face nothing short of mean mugging.

"Work," Lorenzo replies on my behalf. I nod in agreement, figuring that's the safest answer. I catch Santi shift beside him.

"Yeah, work," I say. And then, because I can't let something go unexplained, I add, "He spilled water on my laptop while he was shadowing me."

It's a bold faced lie, and Lorenzo's mouth twitches with his repressed smile because he damn well knows it.

D, however, doesn't seem entertained at all. A quick sweep of the group confirms none of them do, save for Larissa. I also

note they're all in black. Is that some sort of code for them? Is that a thing, friend groups wearing the same color?

I wouldn't know, seeing as my only real friend is Char. Maybe it is a thing, though, because I did choose darker apparel for my attempt at casualty tonight, unintentionally matching Lorenzo.

Now I wish I had worn something else, just to solidify the fact that I don't belong here. It's obvious by the way they're treating me.

"Anyway, I'm going to whoop your ass again tomorrow, and you'll be buying me lunch again." Carter breaks the tension filled silence and I let out a breath. My mind races with my options, because I feel the raw need to run as fast as I can from here.

I don't belong with these people. I'm older, for starters. Lorenzo's friends are a breed I would never associate with. Hell, *he's* a breed I wouldn't normally associate with. This isn't going anywhere productive, other than some exciting company and sex.

Mind-blowing, toe-curling sex. But sex, all the same.

I'm a grown woman. I can just order an Uber and leave, explaining that I need to get home early. Or I can offer no explanation, taking a leaf out of Lorenzo's book. But leaving puts the attention on me, even if just for the moment, and I really don't want to deal with that.

I take a sip of my beer and glance at Larissa, who's watching the guys in discussion. I'm not paying attention at all, the thoughts in my mind too loud to focus on anything else.

Fuck this. I'm going to leave. And I'm not coming back again. I stretch my legs in front of me, warming my body up for my escape. Lorenzo's eyes dart to my movement with a quirked brow.

When my eyes meet his, I can tell he knows exactly what I'm planning to do. Just like I can tell that he's prepared to stop me.

I really don't want to cause a scene, so I bring my legs to rest against the base of the patio couch. His head nods ever so slightly. He turns back to D and Carter, who seem to still be arguing about this silly basketball game.

I can do this. I wore my hair down. I dressed to market. I am here to be bold. I can be bold. I need to stop running away any chance I get because I'm uncomfortable. The rules between us were made clear. Well, as clear as they can be when Lorenzo is involved. I can't act out because I don't like the repercussions.

So I lean back and force my body to situate itself. I take another sip of my beer, and then remember I am literally holding the tool to aid me. I turn my sip into a chug, tipping the bottle high so the bitter liquid slides down my throat. When I lower the bottle, resting it on my thigh, I lick my lips, noting that the bottle is now half empty.

My eyes roam over to Lorenzo of their own volition, and I find him watching me. I also find Santi watching Lorenzo. If it weren't for Santi leering at him, I might be able to enjoy the hint of hunger in Lorenzo's eyes.

I turn to Larissa and decide to take up conversation with her. She engages animatedly, and I drink large gulps of my beer as she speaks. My beer is empty after three rounds, so I stand up to grab another, asking her if she needs one. She declines.

I grab two beers anyway, figuring if I'm going to down them quickly, there's no use in getting up twice. I return to my seat and try to twist the top off of the first, but it doesn't budge. Lorenzo rises from beside me and walks over to the cooler area. I guess I should have offered him a beer.

Then again, I don't owe him shit. The one positive thing to this arrangement, it seems.

He returns, pausing in front of me with the bottle opener laid out on his palm. I peer up at him through my lashes, taking it from him.

"Thanks," I say. He nods and takes his place next to me, this time sitting about an inch closer. I doubt it's enough for anyone else to notice, but I've been acutely aware of his distance the whole time. I wonder if it was intentional or subconscious. He picks up the beer he left on the ground and holds the neck, taking a small sip.

No one ever gets too drunk. Larissa and I continue chatting, but it's mostly her talking and me listening. Every once in a while, she interjects on the conversation of the others with a

joke or correction of fact, but otherwise she gives me all of her attention.

I learn about where she works. She tells me that she moved here when she was starting high school, where Lorenzo introduced her to Melanie and Maria. She quickly became friends with them, and they introduced her to the guys. As she tells me stories about shit they got into, I realize a few things.

That explains how close knit they all seem to be; they've known each other for years. I remember learning in my college Psych class that groupthink is a very real phenomenon. I've just never seen it in the flesh before.

We had very different high school experiences. They seemed to party on the weekends and hangout most weekdays. I studied my ass off to keep up my excellent GPA so I could get into a good college with a scholarship. On the weekends, I'd help my parents around the house and make plans with Char to watch movies, play games, or simply read next to each other.

Once we were juniors, Char made friends with some other girls. She'd always invite me out with them, but I would decline. It just never really felt like my scene. Which again, begs the question—what am I doing here?

I'm on my fourth beer of the night, and it's a little warm from being out of the cooler longer. But it doesn't taste so bad. My tongue has gone a bit numb with my buzz, so I don't find myself really caring. I glance at Lorenzo, feeling warm inside when I find him laughing with Santi. I wish he'd put his arm

around me, or make some physical acknowledgment. But I know I'm the one that insisted on secrecy; initially, at least.

And it reminds me of my final realization. I'll never be enough for him. This lifestyle, the types of friends he has, it's not me. I'm along for the ride right now, but this won't be sustainable.

To be honest, I'm not sure why he's messing around with me and not Larissa. She's beautiful, her straight, chestnut hair fanning across her shoulders. Her eyes are large, her lashes long, and the color reminds me of lavender that's been dipped in tar. She's hilarious, kind, and evidently smart. How am I ever supposed to compete with that?

I'm twenty-five. I should be looking for my future husband, not shooting the shit with this group of people I couldn't be less alike. The urge to dash out of here rises again, but I let it simmer. I'm going to stick it out, then decide what to do tomorrow.

Or, when I get home. Am I going home? Are we ever going to have sex?

"Do you want to go in the pool?" Larissa asks, breaking me from my thoughts.

"Isn't it too cold?"

She waves a hand dismissively. "It's heated."

I glance at the long, rectangular pool; the water does look nice. "I don't have a bathing suit."

"They have towels. Come on!"

Is she seriously proposing that we jump in with our clothes on? That... I guess that doesn't sound like such a bad idea. The jeans will probably stick uncomfortably to my legs after, but fuck it. It'll be worth the experience. Yes, I am well aware that's the beer talking.

Larissa grabs us each a fresh beer and I hand her the opener I pocketed. When the tops are off, she walks to the edge of the pool. I polish off my old beer and toss the bottle into the trash before joining her. The noise of the group fades away as I near the water, my mind becoming quieter.

Maybe that's just the alcohol.

Larissa places her bottle near the edge of the stairs and I follow suit after taking a sip. I kick off my shoes and move to dip my toes in the water, but her next action forces me to pause.

I was gravely mistaken. She did not intend for us to go in the pool dressed.

She tears off her shirt, quickly moving to unbutton her jeans. She kicks off her shoes when the jeans are scrunched at her feet, then removes them completely. She stands next to me in her white satin bra and white lace thong. Her body is as tan as her face, and I can't help admiring her beauty while feeling even more inadequate.

She walks down the steps, the water rippling around her body as she wades in. Her hair turns black as it sweeps behind her.

She looks like a damn mermaid. I will always be the fish out of water.

When she turns back to me, the water shoulders high, she speaks and it sounds magical. “What are you waiting for?”

I drop down to the first step, the bottom of my jeans soaking in the pleasantly warm water.

“Take off your clothes!” she says with a laugh. I peer over at the group under the awning, my breath hitching when I find Lorenzo’s heated eyes on me. Before I can indulge, Larissa tsks, pulling my attention. “No one cares, Kate.”

I care.

I’m faced with two choices: either I keep my clothes on, remaining true to the person I’ve always been, or I let my hair down, figuratively this time, and take off the clothes.

It’s sink or swim.

I’m swimming.

Chapter Fifteen

February 17th

I lift my shirt over my head before I can change my mind. My exposed skin erupts in goosebumps, which only urges me to hurry into the comfort of the warm water. I unbutton my jeans, wiggling out of them quickly. In just my maroon bra and cheeky underwear, I leap off the first step.

I drop my head under the water, my hair sticking to my neck and face as it drowns in the pool. I suddenly feel safe, like nothing can harm me. Under here, there's no Santi or Carter or D, giving me strange looks and making me feel inferior. There's no Larissa or Melanie, causing me self-doubt simply by existing with their beauty.

But all things must come to an end. My lungs scream at me after I've forced them to stay under for far too long. I push off the bottom of the pool and my head breaks through the surface, waves rippling from my exertion. I inhale deeply and my lungs thank me. I'm so grateful I have waterproof makeup on, or I'd look like a racoon.

"Yes!" Larissa says, pumping a fist in the air. A few of the water droplets coating her hand splatter on my face. I break

out in a beaming smile.

“This feels really nice,” I say. Larissa wades over to her bottle of beer, taking a sip then leaning her arms across the pool deck. I follow her, my eyes quickly scanning the group in front of us. All are listening to Melanie speak except one. Lorenzo.

His eyes are all over me, but I’d swear it was his touch. I can feel it as real as I can feel the water consuming me. Something changed when I entered this water. I don’t know if it was taking the clothes off, or just the choice to do it, but I feel free.

Or at least I did. Now, I’m trapped by Lorenzo and his ever captive hold over me. He licks his lower lip and takes his eyebrow piercing between his index finger and thumb, completely unashamed of staring at me and making it known.

Every fiber in my being wants me to look away, but I don’t. Tonight, I’m bold. Tonight, I’m telling fear to suck it. Tonight —

“Yoo-hoo!” Larissa waves a hand in front of my face and the spell is broken. She turns back, following my line of sight, then turns back to me with a knowing grin.

“Spill it, sis. You into him?”

“Um,” I stammer. My cheeks grow pink with my embarrassment.

“Come on, you can trust me,” she says, turning into a puppy dog I can’t say no to.

“I don’t know, it’s complicated.” I look away, staring at the reflection of the moon on the surface of the pool.

“I knew it!” she whispers. I’m grateful for her desire to keep this under wraps, but I’m frustrated I’m that obvious. “Why lie about it?”

I don’t whisper, but I keep my voice low enough that the others can’t hear us. “I insisted on secrecy and I think he’s just... respecting that.”

“That’s probably a good thing, anyway. The group can be... protective.”

Is that what she calls it? I thought they were just downright rude. Her eyes take in my expression and she sighs. “Try not to take it personally. We’re close knit. Outsiders can leave... vulnerabilities. Cause change.”

I nod, understanding that on some level. I’ve never had a group of people I share that with, but I can imagine it would be difficult.

Now that the cat’s out of the bag, I decide to dig for information. “Why didn’t he and Maria date?”

“I told you, Zo doesn’t date.” She raises her legs, kicking her feet under the water. “I love him, and he might kill me for telling you this, but be careful.”

“Oh, I’m not looking for a boyfriend,” I defend, not wanting to seem like some lovesick sap that’s hoping for more.

No matter how true that might be.

“Zo’s my cousin, so I’m immune, but I’ve seen a lot of girls get crushed by him.” Her confession shocks me. They’re cousins? I volley between her and him, noting some resemblance.

“Well, no need to worry. Like I said, I’m not looking for a boyfriend. And if I was, Lorenzo would *not* be it.”

She laughs. “Good. That means I get to keep you. You won’t stop coming around just ‘cause he starts fucking some other chick.”

A pit grows in my stomach, the only part of me sinking in the water. I mask the dismay and remind myself that it’s the exact arrangement I’ve agreed to.

“Thanks for being so nice to me,” I tell her lamely. I sound like a five year old who was pushed into the dirt by a school bully. But Larissa doesn’t seem phased by it.

“You seem like good people. I tend to have a good eye for shit like that.” She smiles at me and I return it with equal warmth. I grab my beer bottle and take a sip, no longer feeling the need to chug it down. I’m already buzzed, and Larissa’s kindness has warmed my heart.

God, I’m such a sap.

“How long are you planning to be in here?” Lorenzo’s voice startles me, causing me to drop my bottle into the pool. I recover it before any water gets into the opening.

“As long as she fuckin’ wants, Zo,” Larissa says with a sass I can tell is meant for playful banter.

Lorenzo kicks her elbow lightly with his boot. “Fuck off, I wasn’t asking you.” He looks at me expectantly, his eyes full of deep intensity.

“As long as I fuckin’ want, *Zo*,” I say, a playful smile at my lips as I quirk a brow. He rolls his eyes as Larissa bursts into laughter.

“Bring us a couple beers, would ya?” Larissa says. Lorenzo’s eyes linger on her face before narrowing.

“She told you?” he asks, but I can tell it’s rhetorical.

“It was obvious,” Larissa says, waving a hand dismissively. Lorenzo turns his head to me, his eyes asking if I’m okay. Mine tell him I am. He nods.

“Awwww,” Larissa fawns.

“Stop,” I mutter. I look down and tap my fingers on the water, watching the ripples I create. Lorenzo walks away without another word.

“My lips are sealed, don’t worry. But I have to mess with that dick,” Larissa says. I chuckle, not blaming her in the slightest.

“Here.” Lorenzo returns carrying two open bottles. Larissa takes them and places them beside her. I finish off the rest of my bottle.

“I think everyone’s leaving soon,” Lorenzo says to Larissa. She nods, taking a chug from her bottle.

“All right, I’m getting out.” She turns around and pulls herself onto the deck, the water falling off her body gracefully. *Mermaid.*

I swim to the edge but when I place my hands on the deck to pull myself out, Lorenzo steps a boot between my palms. “Can I join you?”

I peer up at him through my wet lashes, feeling very nervous. “Sure.”

He pulls his shirt off and I try to slyly stare at his displayed body. I normally have to look at him in the dark and in the heat of our moments, so I don’t get to simply admire. His shoulders have that sexy cut, his chest and abdomen carved in a subtle way. His tattoo pulls my attention, and I stare at the star in the middle. It almost looks like the star is falling in the swirl, like a tornado.

My eyes travel south, right to where the jeans sit snug on his hips. I watch his fingers pop the button and unzip the fly, then tug at the waist band. I look to his face and find him watching me. I wait with bated breath, expecting a sarcastic remark.

It takes a few beats to realize it’s not coming. His gaze is soft, nurturing almost. He removes his boots when the jeans are scrunched on top, kicking the jeans off after.

Then he jumps into the water next to me. He comes up for air quickly, shaking his head so water droplets sprinkle all over me.

“Thanks for that,” I say. Guess the sarcasm was meant to come from me. He smiles, and it seems really genuine. It’s not filled with arrogance or jokes.

“So. You gonna infiltrate my life?”

I quirk a brow. “You invited me, mister.”

“Mister. Wow. Such a proper title.”

I flush, but he chuckles. “I’m teasing. You could call me an ass eating bastard, and I’d still love it. Just having your attention is enough.”

My stomach does that funny thing, and I look away. He can’t say cute things like that to me. It leads me down the wrong path.

When I gather the courage to look back at him, I find him staring at the moon. His back is to me, and I admire the curves of muscle that shape it. I want to reach out and stroke him, or latch my legs around his hips and my arms around his neck.

But friends with benefits reserve their touches for the bedroom, don't they?

Or the car.

Instead, I swim to his front. He slowly shifts his moon filled eyes to me. My lips part when I see that he looks... sad.

“You okay?” I ask without thought.

“Yeah,” he says. For once, I actually watch his emotion change, rather than catching tiny glimpses of it and doubting it was there to begin with. I’m not going to press him for

information he's not willing to share, but that doesn't stop the burn of curiosity.

“So, you told her about us?”

“Not exactly...” I glance at the patio area, surprised when I find it empty. “Where did everyone go?”

“Did you think I was lying to Lari?”

“No I just... I didn't think they'd be gone so quickly.”

Our vibe feels slow tonight. Pensive. It's not charged with the usual electricity I'm accustomed to. Perhaps it's the lack of copious alcohol. Or rage.

“We see each other enough”—my heart drops, thinking he's referring to us—“so when it's time to wrap, we wrap.”

I nod my head. “Doesn't that mean you—uh, we—need to leave soon?”

He shakes his head.

“Does Santi live here alone?”

“He has a roommate.”

“Oh,” I respond. “Why haven't I met him?”

He averts his eyes. “He's away.”

Always such snipped responses. This one's not worth digging into, so I don't.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“About 11:30.”

“Shit. I should probably get going soon.”

“I can drive you home.”

“Oh. Okay, thanks.” Something feels strange now. Maybe it’s not us that’s different tonight. It’s him.

“Only after I’ve fucked you.” He says it so matter-of-factly that it takes me a moment to register his words. Once I do, the response is immediate. My face flushes with warmth and my pussy throbs.

“No response to that, princess?”

“Um, okay.” I don’t know what else to say. I feel like a novice. He pulls my wrist, bringing our chests together. My bra rubs against his chest and he glances down.

“I’ve never liked barriers,” he whispers as he unhooks it skillfully. His fingers run down my spine, stopping just before my ass.

“We’re outside,” I say, covering my breasts with one arm.

“No one else is here except Santi,” he says. He inches his face closer to mine so that I feel his hot breath all over my lips. I’m suddenly craving smoke and cinnamon.

My eyes lock with his the moment he places his lips on mine in a featherlight touch. Again, it’s different. Slow, tantalizing. Not the typical passion we have behind our movements. The lower part of me wants to speed things up, throw myself into the fire. But I allow his lips to guide me, moving against mine in a breathtaking way.

My hand tentatively falls away from my chest, wrapping around his broad shoulders. My bra dangles on my arms. He

bends his knees and I wrap my legs around his waist. We're moving in quiet synchronicity, an unspoken knowledge zinging between us.

He swipes the tip of his tongue across my lips slowly, making them part. He doesn't take the immediate access, instead moving his hands along my back while our mouths sort of hover in place. I'm not sure when my eyes fluttered close, but all I see at the back of my lids are bright stars.

He presses on my back, trying to pull me closer to him. But there's no space left. He's all over me, I'm all over him. I lose track of our hands, gliding on every part of each other. I lose track of our tongues, finally exploring each other.

I'm entirely consumed by him over every part of me.

It completely drowns out any warnings my brain tries to give. All I care about is this moment, memorizing every second of it. Because, like all moments with him, it'll fly away and leave me wondering if it ever existed at all.

Lorenzo groans and I feel it shake every bone in my body, a tremor not from fear but from gratification. His dick is now pushing into my core, causing me to swirl my hips over him in need. He doesn't shift or give into it, simply allowing me to grind.

It's equal parts torture and pleasure. I want him to pleasure me but I also want to keep as we are. Every part of me is ablaze with the water on my skin and the heat of his touch. His hands move from my back to my neck to my hair and I'm drowning and burning and flying all at once.

He tugs on my hair before pushing my mouth closer to his, our lips bruising each other. But it doesn't hurt. It demands more, screams for more.

He keeps a hand in my hair and moves the other to my panties, toying with the line at my hips. I thrust into him now, begging for him to give me more.

He inserts one finger and glides it across my skin, but not in the place where it aches. I moan, my lips separating from his. He takes the chance to move his mouth to my neck, biting and sucking in yet again a bruising way. I lean my head to give him more access, wrapping my hand around his neck so he can't leave.

His finger slowly trails down towards my pussy. He glides it over each lip before sliding up my soaked center. When the pad of his finger grazes my clit, I moan.

“Fuck, Kate,” he groans, his lips hovering over mine. “I love hearing you.”

His scent intoxicates me as he sucks my lower lip into his mouth. I can feel his erection pressing into my pussy, begging for access. He slips a second finger into my panties and massages my lip over my clit in the most tantalizing way. He does this repeatedly as I moan for him, our tongues trying to memorize every inch of each other.

Then, he torments me. He slides his fingers out and brings his hand to my shoulder, pulling me away gently.

“If we don’t go inside, I’m going to fuck you right here and now.” His voice is predatory and I’m not alarmed in the slightest. In fact, I want that. I want him to ravage me and make me forget my own name.

Santi is still here.

There she is, that voice of reason, returning full force with the lack of his consumption. I simply nod and unlock my ankles so I fall into the water. I turn around and he grabs my ass with both hands, growling his appreciation. My pussy slickens with desire that's lost to the water. As I swim to the stairs, my swollen clit pulses with every fraction of movement.

“Wait my bra,” I say, turning back when I realize I’m about to get out topless. Lorenzo is right behind me with a strap looped over his finger. I’m not even sure when it fell off. He holds it out to me and though I’d expect a smirk, he’s too consumed by the lust that fills him.

I know, because I feel the same way.

I wrap it on and bring my hands to my back but he’s already there, snapping it into place. I reach for my shirt and jeans, water dripping off me in catapults. The chill in the air bites my skin; I really wish I had a towel.

“Give me a sec,” he says. He runs over to a plastic shed, digging for a moment before pulling out two towels. His boxer briefs, soaking wet, hug his every muscle. I want to claw my hands into them. I want to free his dick so I can—

“Here,” he says. I look up at him standing in front of me, and this time the smirk *is* there.

“Thanks,” I say, looking away.

“Hey.” He tugs on my chin with a finger. “You don’t need to be embarrassed. You’re welcome to stare at me all you want. I take every chance I get to absorb your beauty.”

My cheeks flush, but I nod. I need to get more comfortable. I’m bold. I wore my hair down. I can do this.

“You’re... You’re really hot,” I say. *You sound like a 13 year old.*

He chuckles before his eyes bore into mine. “If I’m a fire, you’re an inferno.”

“Isn’t that like hell?”

“Fuck yeah, baby. I’ll sin every day of my goddamn life if that means I get to end up in you.”

My entire body is alight. I might burst into ashes if I’m not careful.

Tonight, I’m going to feed the flames. I need him all over me, now.

“Let’s go,” I say after wrapping the towel around my body.

He takes my hand and guides me to the same room we used on New Year’s. I’m about to pull on his arm to tell him it’s locked when I remember I was sneaking around. How would I explain that?

To my surprise, the door opens when he pulls on it. Maybe Santi unlocks it when everyone leaves? My body shakes from the memories when I walk into the room.

“We could go to my place, you know,” I say. I’m dying to ask about the locked door but I can’t let him know I was looking around.

“I can’t wait that long,” he says. Once he shuts the door behind me, he pushes me into it with more force than necessary, my towel falling into a heap on the floor. The sound makes me self-conscious, fully aware that we’re just going to do this at someone else’s house. But my fear dissipates when he’s all over me again.

This time, we are impassioned and rushed and needy. The tenderness of the pool is gone. Maybe it was the water that kept us cool.

I let the fire take me, burning out of control. I roam my hands all over his body and he grunts and groans his appreciation. My lips travel over his neck, kissing his tattoo, licking his chest, drinking in all of him. He pulls on my hair, arching my neck so he can bite on my breasts, but I’m too enthralled to feel any ounce of pain.

My mouth moves down, my ass pushing away from the door and forcing him forward. All I can see is his bulge in those boxers, and I want the full show. I pull them down, his sharp intake of breath sending a shiver down my spine.

“So you’re a giver, too?” His voice is all velvet, smooth and rich. I drop to my knees, letting the boxers fall around his

ankles. He flexes, his hips pushing forward so his dick is right in front of my mouth and ripe for the taking.

I peer up at him, finding his eyes directly on my mouth.

“Do it, princess, or I’ll make you.” Velvet with a hint of malice.

I don’t waste anymore time. I wrap my lips around his dick, which throbs in response.

“Fuck,” he moans. I swallow him down, hugging my lips over my teeth. On the way up, I swipe my tongue along his vein. His groans applaud me as I continue the journey. He puts his hand on my head, following my movements, trusting the process.

I pick up my pace, lapping his dick with my tongue. It tastes just as he smells, and my pussy soaks with desire as I suck him off. I’m desperate for his—

POUNING ON THE DOOR.

My lips pop audibly from the suction when I pull them off. I snap my head up to look at Lorenzo, who’s staring at the door. His eyes are fighting to widen.

“Zo! I need to talk to you.” Santi’s voice filters in through the cracks, sucking out all of the heat.

Lorenzo groans and glances down at me before bending down to pull his boxers up.

“Give me a sec, babe,” he whispers to me.

Babe.

I crawl behind the door so when he cracks it open, I'm hidden. The abandoned towel scrunches against the frame.

“What’s up?” Lorenzo asks.

“She in there?”

He knows about us? I guess it makes sense after the New Year's party. How many others know? Am I being silly with this secrecy thing?

Lorenzo's eyes graze mine before he looks back up and nods.

“Come to my room,” Santi says. Lorenzo gives me an apologetic look before opening the door wider and stepping through.

What could be so important that he wouldn't tell Santi to fuck off?

When the door clicks shut, I stand up. I look around the room, taking in the vaguely familiar black sheets on the bed, the lone nightstand, the empty walls, and the closet.

I wonder how long he'll be gone for... should I snoop around? Whose room is this, anyway? Is it a guest room? A second look at the bed tells me that can't be the case. The sheets are rumpled and the pillows look like they've been recently slept on.

I've probably got at least a couple of minutes. I move directly to the nightstand, pulling open the top drawer where he'd pulled out the condom on New Year's Eve. There's a

small pile of condoms, twenty or so, beside scraps of paper and trash. *Maybe this is the designated hookup room.*

I open the drawer below it, finding a single sheet of paper. It's an incident report from Azalea Pines Police. I pull it out, bringing it near the window for light.

The paper falls to the floor when I throw my hands over my mouth to stifle my scream.

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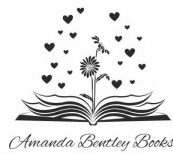
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Amanda Bentley loves escaping into fictional worlds through reading and writing. A typical Pisces, she's as much a mood writer as she is a mood reader. She likes her book boyfriends morally grey, but she'll read any book with romance (preferably drenched 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.

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