

Hold My Hand



AC OSWALD

Chapter 1

SAVANNAH TURNED THE KEY IN the lock to her front door. Her hand shook. She straightened her jacket and carefully stepped inside, trying not to make any noise.

She tiptoed to the kitchen and switched on the light.

“Who is she?”

“Jesus, Bethany, you scared the shit out of me!”

Bethany leaned against the kitchen counter, her eyes red rimmed and puffy. She looked as tired as fuck.

Savannah knew that her next words would seal the fate of their relationship. Truth or lie? Either way, Bethany was going to get hurt.

“Seriously, Savy. Tell me her name. I want to know.” Bethany sounded so powerless, as if she had already given up the fight.

A fist in her jacket pocket just barely kept her hand from shaking. She swallowed back a lump in her throat. “Lory,” she said. “Her name’s Lory. Loredana, actually. She’s Italian.”

Hurt simmered in Bethany’s eyes. She looked like she’d been punched in the stomach.

“Isn’t that what you expected to hear?” Savannah asked.

For a while, no one said anything, and the silence became suffocating.

“Do you want me to leave?” Savannah tried to keep her gaze steady. She had just thrown away five years, five long, happy years together.

Bethany picked up her shoes and put on her jacket over her old Mickey Mouse sweatshirt and pajama pants.

“Where are you going, Beth?” Savannah’s gaze followed Beth’s every movement.

“I’ll go to my mom’s place for now, I guess,” Bethany whispered. She removed the hair tie from her ponytail, and the strands cascaded onto her face.

Savannah knew this was so she wouldn’t see her tears. She saw them anyway.

“I’m sorry, Beth. I really am.” She sighed. “You deserve better.”

Bethany’s head snapped up. “I deserve better?” She let out a sarcastic laugh. “Just tell me why. I want a reason, okay? Then I’m out.”

What to tell her? There was no way she could give her the real reason. She had made her decision, and there was no turning back.

“It’s not you, it’s me.” Wow. What a cliché.

Bethany shook her head. “You can’t even give me a real reason. Don’t you think I deserve that much?”

She did deserve that much. She deserved all the good things in the world. Bethany was the most kind-hearted, funny, beautiful, loving person Savannah had ever met. Which was why all this was for the best.

“You’re right,” Savannah said. “It’s just that I realized...” Her throat closed over. “I realized I moved on, okay? This is not what I want. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with you in this apartment.” It was hard to keep her voice even. “I don’t want to have kids. I need space.” She felt evil speaking those words when she saw the effect they had on the one person who meant the world to her.

“Space to spend time with your Italian chick?” Bethany mopped her tears with her sleeve. “I’m sorry my pizza sucked.”

Savannah couldn’t bear it any longer. She leaned against the fridge, her eyes shut. “Maybe it’s best if you leave now.”

She tried to focus on her breathing. This would soon be over. She’d let Bethany leave, and then she’d move on; she’d somehow make it. She’d somehow manage alone. It was for the best—at least the best for Bethany—and Savannah needed to remember that.

The door clicked closed. First the kitchen door, then the front door. Then the apartment fell silent.

In the silence, she finally could let loose. Tears streamed down her face, and she sank to the floor, punching the linoleum next to her.

This was what she had wanted, what she had planned. It was the only way to get out of their relationship. It *had* to be this way.

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“*Stay strong,*” she told herself and fumbled through her bag. She pulled out a small bottle of pills and poured two into her palm.

“Fuck this shit,” she said aloud and swallowed the pills, blinking away tears that refused to stop. “Fuck this shit.”

* * *

A year later and Bethany still asked herself what she had done wrong.

Sometimes it didn't feel like a year. Sometimes it felt as if they had kissed only yesterday.

They had not spoken since that night Savannah broke up with her. Bethany had picked up her stuff while Savannah was at work. She left her key on the kitchen table. She had wanted to leave a note but hadn't known what to say:

Please change your mind.

Whatever I did, I'm sorry.

You're mean, Savannah. Mean. Here's your stupid key.

I hope you'll be happy with her.

I could have learned how to make better pizza. You should have told me.

Call me, please.

In the end, she had ripped up the would-be note and stuffed it into her jeans pocket. What was there to say on such a small piece of paper? What *could* she say after such a long relationship?

Bethany knew she wasn't the smartest person in the world, but she was an expert on Savannah Cortez. She knew how to analyze Savy's emotions, her actions, her words. But for a while before their breakup, Savannah had become distant and cool, and Bethany had become confused.

Leaving early and coming home late had become routine with Savannah. She never said where she was going, and she seemed to have lost all of her happiness. Bethany had known something was wrong, but whenever she tried to talk it out, Savannah closed up.

What had made Savannah do it? Why cheat with someone else?

Even after all this time, not knowing the answers drove Bethany nuts. And now, even with a new girlfriend in her life, she couldn't stop thinking about Savannah.

She was happy with Amber, her new girl. Amber was nice, pretty, friendly. A sweetheart, really. But all these images, all these questions, all these unresolved feelings—they still hadn't left her head.

She and Amber didn't live together, and Bethany didn't think she wanted to take that step anytime soon. Trusting someone new wasn't easy, even though Bethany tended to see only the good in people. But then, where had trust gotten her? She'd had her heart broken. Badly. And as much as she tried to deny it, the break with Savannah had taken away *her* happiness. The world had felt gray. With one conversation, all her plans for the future had been erased.

Then, two months ago in July, Amber became a new client at the salon Bethany had started working at. They'd started chatting about miserable dates during one appointment, and Bethany had almost dropped her scissors when Amber started talking about dating a woman with a fetish for fake moustaches. They both started laughing uncontrollably. It had been a long time since Bethany had felt so lighthearted. One week later, she and Amber met for dinner, which led to sex, which led to more dates. It had been easy, especially since Amber and Savannah couldn't have been more different.

Bethany tried to ignore how much she missed snuggling with Savannah on the couch. Or linking pinkies when they went shopping for groceries. Or being pulled into a protective hug whenever they watched a silly horror movie.

She and Amber hadn't even had a real fight yet. Sure, there had been small disagreements, but at some point, Amber would smile and tell her they should just forget about it and that it would be okay. With Savannah, there had been countless fights. Was it ridiculous to miss fighting, to miss the look Savannah would give her when she had done something wrong? She missed the way Savannah would carefully approach her from behind and position a shy kiss on her cheek as an apology.

Was it ridiculous to still think about the many times they had danced in the kitchen together, waiting for their pasta to cook? To smile when she thought about how dorky they must have looked, hopping around? Savannah would push her against the kitchen counter and kiss her until she felt dizzy. Those kisses were why they ate burnt pasta most nights.

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Amber never burned the pasta. She worked in catering and knew how to prepare a perfect dinner. Their relationship was nice, nothing anyone could complain about.

Was Savannah still dating this Lory chick? At first, she had wanted to track down all the Loredanas in the city to see what the “other woman” was like but then had decided against it.

“You okay?” The question finally woke Bethany from her little trance.

“Sure.” She attempted a smile. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Amber gave her a weird look and pointed at the cone in Bethany’s hand and the chocolate ice cream that was running down her fingers.

“Oh.”

She handed Bethany a napkin and helped her clean up the mess.

“You’re such a child sometimes.” She dabbed at a smear of ice cream on the tip of Bethany’s nose.

Bethany smiled, wiped her nose, and took Amber’s hand in hers. They continued their walk through the park. It was one of the last warm September days, and the leaves had started changing their color. It was a pretty afternoon with her pretty girlfriend. Bethany figured she should be happy.

* * *

The salon wasn’t exactly the hippest place in town, but Bethany loved seeing a lot of friendly faces there every day. The clientele were mostly housewives, some elderly ladies, and children.

Mrs. McClary’s hair was resting in the curling iron when the door jangled open and she heard the receptionist say, “Miss Cortez, it’s been a while. What can we do for you?”

Bethany froze. In the mirror, she saw Savannah talking to Anna at the reception desk.

“Ouch,” Mrs. McClary complained. Bethany had grazed her ear with the hot iron.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” she mumbled. Her hands were shaking. She risked another look into the mirror and made eye contact with Savannah, who looked equally as shocked.

Savannah’s gaze darted away and then fell back on Bethany again in less than a moment, as if she were trying to decide whether or not to turn and run.

“Miss Cortez?”

Savannah visibly startled. “Uh,” she stuttered, “you know what? Um, I’ll come back some other time. I...I’m sorry.”

She turned on her heel, gave Anna an apologetic look, and headed for the exit.

“Excuse me for a minute.” Bethany dropped the curling iron and ran after Savannah. There was no time to think about her actions. Pure instinct made her follow before it was too late. She didn’t know what she wanted to say, but she needed to look at her for a few seconds more. She needed to see an up close reaction to their meeting. She needed...anything but to see her turn her back and go.

“Savannah! Wait, please!”

The glass door closed behind her, and they stood in the street, staring at each other.

Savannah broke their gaze first. She looked down at the asphalt.

“Savy, it’s...it’s been a while.” Bethany tried to smile.

“Yeah,” Savannah replied. “How are you doing, Beth?”

This was beyond weird.

Bethany wasn’t sure what she was feeling, if it was excitement or sadness coursing through her body. She was surprised to feel no anger. Somehow the anger had vanished in the past year. Now all she saw was a person she used to love. She needed to be around her for a little while longer.

“I’m fine. Good. Great, actually,” Bethany babbled, laughing excitedly. “I have a job here. It’s nice.”

“I can see that,” Savannah said. “Much better than that cheap salon at the mall, eh?”

Bethany nodded. She had to resist the urge to reach for Savannah’s hand.

“You look great.” Savannah’s face had gone more serious, and Bethany knew she meant it.

“Thanks. You look...” Her gaze travelled up and down Savannah’s body, and she couldn’t help but frown.

“Hot?” Savannah asked, but Beth only frowned.

“I was going to say ‘thin,’ but...” Savannah had lost a lot of weight since she’d last seen her.

“Rice diet.” Savannah shrugged and pressed her bag close to her belly.

“How are things with...”

“Lory?” Savannah asked in a tone that Bethany couldn’t interpret.

“Yeah, Lory. So, how’s things with you?”

“Everything’s great. I mean... I don’t know. I guess it’s still awkward to talk about it, don’t you think?” Savannah mumbled. Her gaze didn’t meet Bethany’s.

“No, it’s fine. I mean, I’m glad to hear you’re happy. And I’m happy too. I found someone new, and she’s fun to be around, and...yeah. I have nothing to complain about.”

The smile was still frozen on Savannah’s lips, but her gaze softened. “I’m really glad to hear that, Beth,” she said through halting breaths. She sounded sincere. “You deserve to be happy.”

She reached out to cover Bethany’s hand with her own and squeezed it tightly. For a second, Bethany thought she could see a tear in Savannah’s eyes. Then Savannah’s hand was gone from hers.

“I’m on my way to see Lory right now.” Savannah fiddled with her long, dark curls. “But it was nice seeing you again.”

Bethany’s heart pounded faster as something like panic washed over her. She didn’t want to say good-bye to Savannah again without knowing if she’d ever see her again. It was silly to ask her to stay, to ask for her number. She didn’t even know what she wanted from her—friendship? All she knew was that she didn’t want Savannah to go.

“Can we hang out sometime?” She hated the desperate tone in her voice. “Maybe for a coffee? Or a hot chocolate?”

Why did she have to look so tortured? Savannah bit her lower lip and sighed. “I don’t know, Beth. I—”

“Only to talk about good old times, Savy. I know you’re in a relationship. I am too. I don’t want anything from you, okay? Just... I want to hear what you’ve been up to.” Bethany toyed with the zipper of her shirt. “I missed you. I mean... I miss being your friend. We’ve always been best friends,” she added in a whisper.

“Okay.” Savannah kicked at a nonexistent rock on the sidewalk. “I guess a coffee seems fine.”

A loud sigh coursed through Bethany. “My cell’s still the same.” She smiled. “If you still have the number.”

“I know it by heart,” Savannah admitted with a shy smile. “I mean, it’s an easy number. Many threes, not so hard.”

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Bethany smiled and brushed her hand along Savannah's arm. "I'll be waiting for your call," she said softly before she turned and ran back to poor Mrs. McClary.

When she went back inside, she glanced into the mirror. She was *red*, red as a tomato. Her head felt as if it were on fire, yet somehow she felt happy. And yet somehow she also had to fight back the tears. Even after all this time, Savannah hadn't changed. She was still so damn confusing.

* * *

Savannah finally arrived at her destination. She had tried to remain calm, had tried not to let the unexpected encounter with Bethany drive her nuts. She had managed to avoid Bethany for such a long time and thought she was almost over her. After so long apart, she had hoped she could finally be strong without her. How could seeing her still hurt so much after all this time?

Why, oh why did Beth have to start working in that stupid salon? She certainly hadn't been there the last time Savannah had dropped in.

It would be stupid to call her. It would be insane. What would they even talk about? There was nothing Savannah could say to her.

Her legs quivered as she walked up the few steps to the huge front door of the multistory brownstone and rang the bell next to the correct name tag: *Dr. Loredana Valentini—Oncologist*.

Chapter 2

ANNA APPROACHED BETHANY AS SOON as Mrs. McClary had left the salon. “What was that about earlier?”

“What do you mean?” Bethany asked, although she already had a pretty good idea what her colleague was referring to.

“You running after Miss Cortez.”

“I didn’t know that you knew her,” Bethany said slowly.

“She’s been here a few times. How do *you* know her?”

Bethany swallowed. “She’s my ex. We’ve dated for five years.”

“Oh.” Anna grimaced. “I didn’t know.” She gave Bethany a compassionate look. “I’m really sorry. You must be... You must feel terrible.”

“It’s okay.” Bethany shrugged.

Anna’s whole frame stiffened. “I know it’s often hard in relationships to deal with...well...such *things*,” she mumbled. “Uh...how is she doing? Miss Cortez, I mean.”

Bethany raised an eyebrow. She didn’t understand why their breakup seemed to be such a big deal to her coworker. She frowned.

“Um. I don’t know... She seems okay. She’s in a relationship with someone else.”

“Oh, I see.” Anna ran a hand through her hair. She seemed worried she was on dangerous ground. “Well...if you see her, tell her she can come in anytime, and send her my best wishes.”

Bethany’s frown only deepened, but she nodded. “I will.”

She grabbed a broom to clean up around the chair when the small glass door swung open and Amber came into the salon. She was carrying a huge tray covered with aluminium foil.

“Hey, baby.” She balanced the tray on one arm and hugged her with the other. Then she kissed her on the cheek. “You done yet?”

With a bright smile, Bethany nodded, then rubbed Amber’s back. “Almost. Just cleaning up. How are you?”

“Good. I brought us some canapés from work. Made sure to save you some of your favorite shrimp cocktails.” She beamed at Bethany. “Thought we could take them to my place and pop in a movie?”

“Sounds good.” Bethany nearly threw her scissors and combs back onto the shelf, then grabbed her jacket. “Bye, Anna. Have a great night.”

As they left the salon, Amber wrapped her arm around Bethany’s waist and leaned her head against her shoulder. “And how was your day? Anything special happen?”

Bethany thought back to Savannah. Then she looked at Amber, the woman she had grown to like, maybe even love, more and more in these past two months. Bethany really wasn’t a friend of lying.

She sighed. “Actually...yes. I’ll tell you over dinner, okay?”

Amber’s eyes drew together, and she studied Beth’s face.

“Okay,” she said. “Tell me everything.”

* * *

Savannah was so used to needles that she didn’t even blink anymore when a particularly long one slowly disappeared inside her arm. She stared at the wall in front of her while Dr. Valentini took her blood sample.

She wasn’t much older than Savannah, maybe only by a couple of years. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Like shit, honestly.” She avoided meeting Loredana’s gaze.

“I’m going to send these to the lab.” Lory inched out the needle and put a cotton ball on the bleeding spot. “If everything’s fine, we can start the next round very soon.”

“I don’t want another round of chemo,” she said.

Loredana paused.

“What do you mean you don’t want it? What are you talking about? It’s not a matter of wanting, Savy. It’s important.”

Silence followed, punctuated finally by an ironic chuckle. “I’m done with it, Lory. Seriously.” She grabbed her hair and tugged on it. The wig fell off in her hand. “You see this?” she said. “My hair’s gotten longer again. It’s

almost covering my ears. I'm slowly getting back to my old self. I was at the hairdresser today, looking for a new wig, a slightly different one. But then I thought, what for, you know? It's pointless."

"Savy..." But Savannah waved her off.

"If I get a chance to feel normal again during my last days, then I want to take it. I don't want to go through all this shit again just so you can tell me that there are new metastases everywhere a few weeks later. It's a fucking joke. I'm so done with it."

Loredana closed her eyes and let out a deep breath.

"Savannah, where is this coming from? You're so mixed up today. I haven't seen you this way since..."

Savannah looked the other way.

"Are you talking to her again?" Loredana asked.

More silence. Loredana sighed again. "How? When? Where?"

Savannah toyed with her fingernails in her lap. "The salon. She's working there now."

"Did you tell her the truth?"

"No, I certainly did not tell her. And I'm not going to."

"You should," Loredana stated matter-of-factly. "You know you should."

"That's what you told me the last time." Savannah rolled her eyes.

"Yes, and I'll tell you over and over again. You should have listened to me back then. You've been feeling miserable. Before you broke up and after, not telling her didn't make anything better for you. Not at all."

"It wasn't supposed to make it better for *me*. It was supposed to make it better for *her*," Savannah half yelled, close to losing her temper.

Loredana shook her head. "Savannah, this logic, it's... Oh my, she's going to find out anyway sooner or later."

"Yes, when she reads about my death in the newspaper."

"Savy!"

"What?"

For a long moment, Loredana seemed at a loss for words. "Okay, so even if I don't want to contemplate it happening that way, let's talk hypothetically here," she finally said. "So she reads about your death. What then? Do you have any idea how that's going to make her feel? That you completely shut her off? She's going to think that you didn't trust her, that you'd rather deal with all of this alone instead of having her by your side."

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“I wrote her a letter. She’ll get it after I’m gone. It will explain everything,” Savannah said.

“I think you’re punishing yourself with this behavior, though I don’t know for what reason. But then, why would you listen to me? I’m just your doctor, not your therapist or your confessor, right?”

“Right,” she replied in a bitter voice.

“So? Are you going to meet her or what?”

Savannah nodded. “One last time...” she paused. “To say good-bye.”

* * *

When Savannah arrived at their old favorite café downtown, Bethany was already sitting at a small table in the corner of the room. Her blonde, wavy hair hung in wide curls around her shoulders and shimmered in the dim light of the lamp above her. She stared at the table as she drew circles with her index finger on a napkin. She looked so innocent and beautiful, it broke Savannah’s heart.

Bethany looked up, and their eyes met. She gave Savannah a warm smile, and Savannah returned it. They exchanged a brief hug when Savannah walked over. She sat down opposite her and folded her hands on the table, not sure what else to do with them.

“I haven’t ordered yet because I wasn’t sure you’d actually show up,” Bethany said shyly.

“Can’t blame you,” Savannah mumbled.

They both ordered hot chocolates with marshmallows.

“So tell me,” Bethany said after the waiter had left, “what have you been up to these past months?”

That question was one she’d expected. She pulled out her list of plausible stories.

“I’ve tried to change my life a little bit. Tried to live a little healthier, to see things, to travel.” She tried to read Bethany’s now-faltering smile. Her empty gaze carried a hint of sadness now.

This was awful. What on earth was she saying to her? It probably sounded to Bethany like *Oh, when you were gone, I started enjoying my life and travelling the world, doing all those things that I couldn’t do with you.*

But what *should* she tell her? *I’ve been through chemo. Still, I’ve got metastases everywhere. Some days I’ve been too weak to leave the house, and the*

meds make me throw up all of the time. I've tried to prepare myself for the fact that I'm gonna die. I've gone through hell. I've missed you every single fucking day.

Yeah, that would be accurate. But not exactly helpful.

"I'm glad to hear you had a good time." Bethany sat up straight and pushed her shoulders back. She cocked her head at Savannah. "What places did you visit?"

Doctor's offices. Hospitals. Therapists. "I've been to Europe. Paris. Barcelona. Very pretty."

Bethany smiled again, wider this time. "I still want to see Paris. Is the Eiffel Tower really leaning to one side?"

"No, that's the one in Pisa," Savannah explained, but not in a snappish or lecturing way. In fact, it made Savannah smile. She would have loved to have seen all of those places with Bethany.

"Oh." Bethany blushed. "I always confuse France and Spain."

Savannah grinned. The tower was obviously in Italy, but she didn't feel like correcting Beth. Geography had never been her strongest suit. "Me too," she said instead.

"So, Loredana has been with you?"

Damn. Oh well. It had been nice for a moment to pretend that there had been no chemo, no CTs, no nervous breakdown. "Yeah, we visited her family in Italy. Beautiful landscape down there."

These lies were ridiculous. *Just change the subject.* "How did you meet your girlfriend? What was her name again?"

"Amber." Bethany smiled again. "I met her at the salon. But we haven't travelled anywhere, at least not yet. She's often at work. She has to cater events and stuff. She's an awesome cook; always brings home leftovers. It's nice."

"Sweet."

Bethany reached out over the table to capture her hand with her own. Savannah recognized it as one of Bethany's typical attempts to comfort her.

"I'm glad we are finally talking again," Bethany said. "I have to say, I was really sad that you cheated on me, but I'm not mad anymore. If this is what you needed to be happy, then I'm okay with that. I wasn't at first, but I am now." She emphasized her words with a nod. "You're special, Savannah, and I hated not having you in my life. We used to be so close, not only

when we were dating but also all those years before that, you know? We were a team. Losing that really hurt me. I didn't feel complete."

Savannah nodded. She felt her hand get sweaty where Bethany touched it and felt the tears swell up again, tears she definitely could not let Bethany see.

"Remember when we were in high school? You always protected me. You've always been there for me, always made me feel safe. When I think back to all this, it still makes me smile, you know? We were best friends. Don't you think we can go back to that? I mean, not now, not right away, but...slowly? Maybe?"

Her voice sounded hopeful. Savannah almost sighed. Bethany was still that little girl she had always known, still the same Bethany whom she had fallen for a long, long time ago, the girl she'd always wanted to protect because she was just too trusting and gullible for her own good. She couldn't stand the thought that people would take advantage of that now that she was out of her life. She sure as hell hoped this Amber chick treated her well. She might be weak with disease, but she'd still kick that woman's ass if she had to.

"I don't know." She slid her hand from underneath Bethany's. "But I missed you too." She knew it was probably a bad idea to say this. It wouldn't help her get out of this situation, but it was a truth she couldn't deny.

"Would you like to see me again?" Bethany finally asked. "I mean, you could bring Lory. It could be like a double date. You'd meet Amber and I'll meet Lory, and we'll do something fun, like, I don't know, miniature golf? Sound fun?"

Now her eyes were practically glowing, and she clapped her hands together in excitement at the idea. Savannah cursed herself for ever having considered this could work out.

"Please, Savy. Say yes!" Bethany gave Savannah her best puppy-dog eyes.

She shouldn't have agreed to any of this. She shouldn't have walked into this café. Where would this stop? They couldn't become friends again. It wouldn't work. She wasn't even dating anyone, especially not her doctor.

"Just once," Bethany insisted. "If it gets too uncomfortable, we don't have to repeat it."

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Fuck this. I can't deal with this. I can't see her with another woman. I can't convince her I'm in a long-term relationship. This is a dead end. I can't agree to this. I won't. I will come up with an excuse now.

“Savy?” Bethany asked carefully. She already looked a little sad again.

“Yeah...” Savannah closed her eyes. “Okay.”

Okay? Savannah mentally threw her hands up in the air to tear at her fake hair. Even after all this time, she was still whipped. She couldn't believe herself.

“Awesome!” Bethany bit her fist, probably to tamp down that wide grin that threatened to overtake her face.

“Awesome.” Savannah tried to sound at least a little cheerful for Bethany, who was emptying her cocoa and looking so happy and relieved, damn it.

Savannah dug into her bag to grab her cell and opened her text app. She shook her head as her fingers flashed over the screen to choose Loredana's name in her contact list and type a message:

I need your help.

Chapter 3

“NO WAY!” LOREDANA HELD HER hands up in front of her body. “No way I’m going to pretend to be your girlfriend. Not only because I’m your doctor, Savy, but mainly because I will not encourage your lies. Nope.”

“Lory, come on. I’m begging you here, okay? What am I supposed to do? Seriously, I need you to do this for me,” Savannah said.

“I’ll tell you what to do—you’ll call Bethany and tell her that you changed your mind and that you want to talk to her, alone.” Loredana looked Savannah straight in the eye. “And then you’ll meet somewhere quiet, and you’ll explain everything. And you’ll see she understands and how you can finally be honest with her.”

Savannah’s teeth clenched. “I thought I could count on you.” Her mind was already racing. People were obviously right when they said lying always got you into trouble, but it had worked out for so long, for over a year. She wasn’t going to blow it all up now.

She flipped through the contact list on her phone. What was Plan B? She needed a female desperate enough to play her date—someone she could pay, someone Bethany didn’t know. As she strode toward the door, Loredana’s voice trailed behind her.

“Savannah, seriously, don’t make this more complicated than it already is. And do me a favour and stop stressing yourself so much; you need to get some rest, I don’t like seeing you so—”

The door slam cut off the rest. Already she was sending out texts to random ex-coworkers, but she and Bethany had been so close they basically knew all the same people.

The more she thought about it, the more she realized she was running straight into a dead end. This was a ridiculous plan. It was mean.

She had told many white (and not-so-white) lies in her life, mostly for her own benefit, but this was bad, even for her. What had started out as a plan to protect Bethany was transforming into a massive act that'd be impossible to keep going forever. She should simply cancel. Why couldn't she call her, tell her she was sorry, tell her that they should stop seeing each other? She had typed the text saying as much five times already and had deleted it each time. Five times she had tried to hit the damn *send* button, but she always backed out.

The truth was, after even a few minutes spent talking to Bethany, Savannah felt alive again for the first time in a year, but the feeling made her hands go clammy. Bethany reminded her of a time when her world was still perfect. When it was everything she ever could have hoped for.

But now, her life was falling to pieces, slowly slipping out of her hands. She had wanted to be the selfless lover who spared her girlfriend the pain of losing her. It had made total sense to her back then. But seeing Bethany had turned everything upside down again. How had she not anticipated the flood of feelings that would come back in that damn café? It had reversed all her selflessness into a cruel, selfish need to cling to Bethany, the person she still loved. She wanted to revel in the comfort of being near her when the whole of existence felt dark and senseless. Life was fucked up. She hated it.

Then again, what if fate really existed? What if it had been her goddamn fate to run into Bethany in that salon? Maybe somebody up there was telling her she was foolish for trying to get through this on her own?

No. Fate could go screw itself. It had made her sick in the first place. Fate was a bitch.

Savannah collapsed onto a bench in a nearby park and let herself rest a few minutes. A few children played hide and seek under the watchful eyes of their mothers. There was probably no way out of this, she thought. *Either tell Bethany the truth, or shut her out of your life once and for all.*

This fucking helpless feeling was eating away at her. Meeting Bethany's new girlfriend, getting Loredana to play her date—she had actually managed to tell herself that it was possible, that she could handle it, that it would go well. But now that date wasn't going to happen, and there was nothing to

look forward to anymore. She'd have to go back to this emptiness, and the thought gutted her. She had been so used to it, so used to pretending she was okay without Bethany. Why had Bethany pushed for this? Why did she have to remind Savannah that she wasn't okay at all?

For the first time since their meeting, tears were running down her cheeks, hot and fast.

Her fingernails dug into her palm. Fuck her life, fuck Loredana, fuck Bethany, fuck her own body, its weakness. Even those stupid women watching over their kids pissed her off. Savannah decided she didn't care she had no right to feel this way; she certainly couldn't help it. In another reality, it could be Bethany and her over there in the play area. She would have made a kickass mother, strict but loving. And Bethany would have been an even better one. Hell, Bethany *was* going to be a great mother, only with someone else.

Her cheeks were completely wet by now, and she'd sort of forgotten that anyone else could see her. So she winced at the unexpected touch to her shoulder.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" A tired-sounding, raspy voice interrupted her pity party. The old woman's hair was gray, and her wrinkled face twitched with concern. Savannah told herself that she would never look like that; she would never age. The sentiment sounded mean even in her own head, she thought.

"Can I help you somehow?" the woman asked.

Savannah jabbed at her tears to wipe them away. "No." She cleared her throat. "No thanks. Unless you're my fairy godmother and can grant me three wishes, I guess there's nothing you can do for me."

The old lady's expression widened with a beatific smile.

"You know, sometimes it seems as if everything's going wrong, honey, as if there'll never be a way out of our problems, but we should never give up. Even in the darkest times, there's still hope," she said. "And sometimes, when we least expect it, the happy times are waiting right around the corner."

Savannah sniffled, then blew her nose with a tissue the woman handed her. "It doesn't look like it." She started to sob. "It really doesn't look like it."

The woman sat down next to her and began toying with the golden amulet she wore around her neck. “Oh, honey, you’re far too young and pretty to be so desperate.”

An ironic laugh clutched at Savannah’s throat.

“You know, sometimes,” the woman continued, “when I feel a little sad or when I’m missing my husband, I try to remember what makes me happy. I try to live every day as if it were my last. That doesn’t mean I have to do special things. I simply do what makes me feel better in that moment, go for a walk, have breakfast on my porch, call an old friend.”

How she wanted to tell the woman to shut up, that she had no idea what she was talking about, but she could see the woman meant well, and Savannah didn’t want to be rude.

“I’m sure you have a lot of good friends,” the woman said. “Call one of them. Do you have a boyfriend? I’m sure such a pretty girl has all the boys waiting in line on her doorstep.”

That got Savannah’s eyes rolling. “You know, I’m really not in the mood to talk, actually,” she decided. “I’m really sorry, but things are more complicated than you make them out to be. Not that I’d expect you to understand.” She rose from the bench. “I should get going.”

“I hope everything will be better soon. Try to appreciate the little things,” the woman advised.

Savannah pulled out the closest thing to a smile that she could manage. “Will do,” she said and continued her walk. She wanted to leave the park as fast as she could.

Her phone vibrated with a text just as she turned the corner. It was Maggie, her coworker from back when Savannah had still been able to work a real job. As she read the message, a jolt went through her, and her eyes widened. Her tongue ran over a sliver of her bottom lip as she read it once more to make sure she wasn’t imagining things, but the words remained the same:

Perfect, I really need the cash. Count me in.

* * *

Bethany leaned back against Amber. She picked up some foam and blew bubbles through the bathroom. Amber was sitting behind her in the tub, massaging her shoulders and peppering soft kisses along her neck.

“How do you feel about the whole double-date thing? Honestly?” Her fingers caressed along Bethany’s wet skin. “What do you know about Savannah’s girlfriend, anyway?”

She sighed at Amber’s touch and sank a little deeper into the tub as she attempted an honest answer. “I don’t really know anything about her.” The muscles in her jaw turned downward into a frown. “I know she’s Italian and that she introduced Savy to her family in Europe. I suppose she’s very pretty too.”

“Don’t you think it will be weird? I mean, she’s the woman Savannah cheated with, after all. I don’t mean to sound judgemental, Bethany. Like, I don’t want you to think that this makes me uncomfortable or anything, because I’m fine with it. I just don’t want you to get hurt by bad memories.”

Bethany entwined their hands together and kissed Amber’s fingertips. “I know. I’ve thought about it too. But she’s been my best friend, you know? My best friend since I can remember. We’ve been inseparable since we were six years old. That’s more important to me than the fact that our relationship didn’t work out, you know?”

“I understand,” Amber said slowly. Her chin rested on Bethany’s shoulder. “And if it gets too weird, we can still leave, right?”

“Right.” Bethany gave her girlfriend’s hand a quick squeeze.

“Do you think she’s changed? Savannah, I mean?”

Bethany had to think about that for a while. “Well, she seemed more... mature? I don’t know.”

“Was she immature when you knew her?”

“Um, sort of. It’s weird, but there’s something about the way she talks, the way she acts, that’s more...serious. She used to be very outgoing when we were younger, always having the last word, always telling people what she thought of them, even if they didn’t want to hear it. She was so energetic. She drew all the attention to herself when she entered the room. But I think she must have grown up a lot since then. When she enters the room now, she looks a lot...smaller.”

Amber’s fingers disentangled themselves. A beat of silence passed. “And how do you feel about that?”

It was hard to put into words what she had felt. It had been a different Savannah, though that didn't necessarily mean anything bad. Her hair had been different too.

"Beth, are you over her?" Amber asked so quickly that it was barely understandable. A moment later, she mumbled, "I'm sorry, I just..."

"Honey," Bethany whispered, "of course I'm over her. I mean, I love her, I do. But as I said, I love her as the person who's been so important to me my whole life, not as the person I want to date. She broke my trust, but I know she's a good person at heart, a good friend. But I want to be with you, okay?" she paused. "Just you."

She turned around to capture Amber's gaze with her own, then smiled and placed a kiss on her lips.

Amber smiled back. "Okay," she said. "I guess I just needed to hear that."

* * *

"All right, repeat it again!"

Maggie looked up at the ceiling with a loud huff.

"My name is Loredana Valentini. I'm from Orbetello, a pretty Italian city that's a one-hour drive from Rome. I have an older and a younger sister, and I'm a doctor. In my free time, I like to go jogging, and I play tennis—"

"What's your favorite movie?"

"Is it really that important?" Maggie's eyes scanned the long handwritten list of details she was supposed to remember.

"Am I paying you for this or not?" Savannah hissed back.

"Yes, geez, *chill*. My favorite movie is *Letters to Juliet*. My favorite singer is Tina Turner." She paused. "Do you seriously think anyone's gonna buy that I'm Italian? Have you looked at me? I'm a redhead, for God's sake."

Savannah responded with a glare that could cut diamonds. "You better make them believe it! And Italy has plenty of redheads, so I don't want any excuses."

Maggie frowned as she pushed the piece of paper aside and leaned over the table's surface, with her face close to Savannah's. "All this trouble because you don't want to tell your ex that you're sick? To protect her? What are you, some kind of nut? Isn't that all a little...*exaggerated*?"

It took all Savannah's willpower not to kick her out. She had never really liked Maggie, but she knew she had to at least try to play nice if she wanted this date to happen. Maggie was her last chance.

"Listen to me, Ginger. Stop your smartass remarks and play along, understand? I have my reasons, and I swear, if you screw this up, if you tell her anything, I'll kick your ass!"

"Okay, okay. So what exactly are we doing, anyway? Are we going out for dinner? Do I have to kiss you?"

Oh, good point. They'd have to seem intimate around each other, wouldn't they? The thought of being all touchy with Maggie was a total turnoff. "Look, we're gonna play miniature golf. Don't worry. We'll keep all the kissing and touching low level."

"Great."

"Great." Savannah forced out a smile and stood up. She pushed the list against Maggie's chest. "Have this memorized by tomorrow."

Savannah gave her a push toward the front door, glad when Maggie finally trundled out of the apartment with her study guide. Savannah's eyes closed, and she let out a deep breath. Back in the kitchen, she swallowed her medication and wondered how many wrong choices she had made in her life. If she was making herself go through so much trouble to be around Bethany again, why had she left her in the first place? Why had she wasted a whole year?

Her hands shook, and her breath was short when she pulled the blanket over her body in bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to sleep. This all made her head spin, and she felt lightheaded. But she needed sleep; she'd worry about the rest tomorrow.

* * *

Bethany and Amber were already waiting in front of the miniature golf course when Savannah and her "date" arrived in Maggie's rusty, old Geo Metro. Savannah's eyes widened at the sight of Bethany and Amber standing next to each other, and she truly hated the fact that Amber looked so damn flawless. The couple hadn't noticed them yet as they were still too busy giggling about whatever silly joke Bethany had just made.

Her motivation for this was slowly disappearing, yet Savannah had to get through this date. She had underestimated the effect it might have on

her to see Bethany with someone else, and they hadn't even said hello to each other yet. She wanted her ex-girlfriend to be happy, but as long as Savannah was still alive, she was supposed to be *her* Bethany; she was not supposed to be with another woman who made her laugh and smile. This wasn't what Savannah had wanted to put herself through.

Bethany finally saw them. There was such a sparkle in her eyes as she waved them over. Savannah grabbed Maggie's hand, yanking her away from her attempts to kick the Metro's slightly deformed door closed. They walked over toward Bethany and her new girlfriend, hands entwined, and Savannah forced herself to smile, unsure whether to hug Bethany or go for a simple handshake.

Bethany made the decision for her by wrapping her arms around Savannah's thin body. The hug was longer than she had expected, and Savannah noticed her ex still wore the same perfume, a scent that engulfed her with memories. Their bathroom had smelled like this every morning when Savannah had entered it. Bethany was usually the first one showered, dressed, and preparing breakfast, while she had grumpily climbed out of the warm shelter of her bed.

When she finally let go of the embrace, Bethany turned to Maggie, her smile friendly but less warm than only seconds ago.

"Hi." She held out her hand. "You must be Loredana. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," Maggie replied politely. "Savannah's told me all about you. Good to finally put a face to all the stories."

Savannah shifted from one foot to the other as she looked at Amber, who frowned at the scene in front of her. Savannah could almost see the wheels turning in the other woman's head, and she wondered if Amber was smarter than she had wanted to give her credit for. She hoped she was being paranoid, but part of her was sure that Amber would be able to put two and two together at some point. She was only dragged out of her thoughts when Bethany finally introduced Amber.

"Hi, Savannah," Amber said, in a bright yet distant tone. She bit her lip and took a few long seconds to extend her hand in greeting. "I've certainly heard a lot about you as well."

Savannah didn't miss the message there, and she couldn't deny that it made her angry. *Who do you think you are? Bethany's big protector?* She squeezed Amber's hand a little harder than necessary as she shook it.

"Sooo, let's get the clubs?" Maggie said, perhaps a little more loudly than necessary. They made their way over to the old lady sitting behind the counter. She handed them the clubs, a scorecard with a pen, and a little basket with four golf balls in different colors.

"Here, I guess you want the blue one?" Savannah handed Bethany the small blue ball.

Bethany plucked it from her hand and grinned. "Can I start?" she asked and was already storming over to the first mini-fairway, where they only had to play the ball around a corner to get it into the hole.

"Sure, babe. Start," Amber said and gave Beth a playful slap on her butt. Savannah gripped the club a little harder.

Bethany positioned herself in front of the tee and focused on the flag at the far end.

The other women waited patiently while Amber eyed Maggie closely with a sly side-glance. "I hope you don't mind me saying this, Loredana, but you don't really look Italian."

Savannah coughed.

"That's what I hear all the time," Maggie replied. "My grandfather was Scottish, you know?" She smiled. "Damn those recessive genes."

Good girl, Savannah thought to herself. They'd practiced that scenario often enough.

"Mm." Amber raised her eyebrows. "And what kind of doctor are you?" she continued.

Savannah stared at Maggie and could almost see her squinting with concentration. She had forgotten it, hadn't she? Great. Of course she couldn't rely on her to remember.

"Oh, one for the sick people," Maggie responded casually after a second. Bethany, who had repeatedly missed the hole, looked up from her ball and frowned. "Those are especially important," Maggie quickly added.

Savannah couldn't believe her ears. She cleared her throat before bursting into fake laughter. "Ha-ha. You're so funny, dear."

When Bethany's ball finally found its way into the first hole, Savannah quickly grabbed the red one out of its basket and started playing. They

were slowly making their way through the nine different fairways, each one getting a little trickier. Bethany never managed once to sink her putt in less than ten tries, though everyone chose to ignore the rules at the sight of her sad, pouty face.

“I’m not the best putter.”

As Bethany checked her scorecard, Savannah let her hand rest on her shoulder. “You’re doing fine,” she reassured her with a smile. “We all suck at this.”

From the corner of her eye, she caught Amber’s glare but chose to ignore it. She was highly aware that this contest wasn’t about miniature golf anymore.

It was Savannah’s turn again, and she could already feel the exhaustion kicking in. Miniature golf might not be the most active sport, but she wasn’t used to being on her feet for so long. Constantly having to kneel down to grab the ball and using all her strength for the more forceful strokes was more exhausting than she’d expected. Cold sweat forming on her forehead, her vision was a little blurry, and her hands were beginning to shake in an effort to try and keep the club straight. She stumbled a step backward, right into Maggie, who managed to catch her.

“You okay?” she asked. Savannah nodded.

“I don’t want to have to call the ambulance. You fainting was not part of the deal,” she whispered into Savannah’s ear.

Savannah pushed her away. “I’m fine,” she hissed and tried to finish her game. She didn’t dare look at Bethany, though she could feel her eyes burning holes into her back.

Savannah tried focusing on the red ball, but she could see two—no, three—of them, and it was hard to make out which was the real one. She tried to hit one but missed. Her breathing was getting shorter, and little black dots were dancing in front of her eyes. Heat wave after heat wave was rushing through her body, and she pushed down the need to rip off her suddenly terribly tight clothes.

Just breathe. She wouldn’t allow herself to faint. Not in front of Bethany.

Her legs were shaking, and her head was spinning. The voices that surrounded her suddenly sounded so far away, as if there were cotton candy in her ears.

"I...I think I need to sit down for a moment," she managed to say and stumbled over to the nearest bench. Bethany dropped her club and was next to her in an instant.

"Savy, are you all right?" She patted Savannah's back.

"I...yeah... I guess I didn't drink enough water. You know how easily I dehydrate." It seemed like a plausible enough explanation.

"Hon, please get Savy some water and a candy bar, ok?" Bethany said. Amber looked skeptical but quickly made her way over to the little shop.

Maggie sat down at the other side of the bench, twirling her red locks around one finger.

"Don't get me wrong, but I think it's time to call it a day." She extended a strand of her hair and examined it idly.

Bethany didn't stop stroking Savannah's back until Amber arrived with water and chocolate.

She quickly unwrapped the Snickers bar and handed Savannah the water bottle.

"I thought you were a doctor. Shouldn't you help your girlfriend?" Amber asked Maggie, the judgment in her voice unmistakable. "One might think you'd know what to do in such situations."

Savannah was too weak to care that Maggie was useless in her role. All she wanted was to go home and lie down. *With Bethany next to me, stroking my back. And my hair. And maybe kissing my forehead.*

She shook her head. She had to get rid of these thoughts, these feelings. She softly pushed Bethany's hand away.

"It'd be nice if you could take me home now, Lory," she told Maggie, who shrugged and got up from the bench as she fumbled for the car keys in her pocket. When she finally found them, she held out her hand for Savannah to take and helped her off the bench.

Savannah turned and gave Bethany an apologetic look. "I'm sorry," she said. "But we were almost done anyway, right? And I didn't count the points, but I suppose you would have won."

"Of course she would." Maggie rolled her eyes. "It was nice meeting you both. Enjoy the rest of the day."

"Yeah," Bethany hesitated. "Feel better, Savy!"

Savannah knew she wasn't going to feel better anytime soon. In fact, she already felt worse. She closed her eyes for a second and tried to erase

the image of Bethany's sad, concerned face. She sank down in the not-very-comfortable car seat and let her head rest against the window. What had she gotten herself into?

Her body had shown her once again that it was a bad idea to think she could hide behind this mask for much longer. What would Bethany think? Savannah had embarrassed herself. Should she call her when she got home and apologize for ending the date so abruptly? Maybe send a text? Do nothing?

She looked over to Maggie, who hummed along with the song that was playing on the radio. She had apparently decided not to talk. But Savannah needed to talk. She needed to fucking talk about this. She could call the real Loredana when she was home, but all she'd get would be a big "I told you so," something she didn't need to hear.

When they finally pulled up outside Savannah's apartment, Maggie cleared her throat.

"My money?" She held out her hand.

Savannah had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep herself from yelling at Maggie. She knew she had no right to be angry. Maggie had played her part as best she could and had done everything Savannah had asked her to. She owed her.

Still, she fumbled for the money and threw it on Maggie's lap. Then she got out of the car without another word and slammed the door shut, which took about all her remaining strength. Once inside her apartment, she made a beeline straight for her bedroom and let herself sink onto the mattress, not bothering to remove her clothes. Her hands were still shaking. She rolled over a bit and opened the drawer of her nightstand to get her medication. She swallowed it without blinking and added two sleeping pills. The knot in her throat was thickening, and tears built up in her eyes, but she hoped the drugs would kick in too fast for her to care.

* * *

Bethany still hadn't fallen asleep. She had been staring at the ceiling for hours now as if it'd soon present her with answers to all the questions in her head.

"Why are you torturing yourself?" Amber asked into the completely silent room.

"I'm not," Bethany said quietly.

"You are. It still hurts you. Even after all this time, it hurts, and I don't blame you, 'cause it's only natural. Plus, we both know that something is truly odd here."

Amber took Bethany's chin in her hand. Her green eyes held Bethany's gaze until Bethany let out a sigh.

"It's not odd. She's with someone else. These things happen. It's not—"

"That's not what I'm talking about, Beth," Amber interrupted her. "It's not weird that she's dating someone else; it's weird that she's *pretending* to be dating someone else."

Bethany tried to study Amber's face in the dark room. "I don't know what you're talking about," she mumbled and pushed Amber's hand away.

"Babe," Amber started again. "I don't know Savannah like you do, but she was really thin, Beth. Thin and pale and weak and shaky. Don't tell me she's always looked like this."

"She said she was dehydrated," Bethany replied.

"And 'Loredana'? I mean, seriously? The girl looked like Lindsay Lohan. I'm not buying it."

Bethany had never before seen her so emotional. "Amber, I don't know why you're getting angry. It's none of our business anyway."

"It became our business when you decided to go on dates with your ex again, Bethany!" Amber replied, her voice curt. "With your ex who cheated on you and lied to you and who's clearly still lying to you."

Bethany sat up in bed, turned on the lamp on her nightstand, and glared at Amber. "You've gotta be joking. These are all empty assumptions, Amber. This is making no sense. You're just criticizing because it bothers you that I'm seeing her again. At least have the guts to tell me the truth."

Her voice was higher than usual, louder than usual. Bethany paused. This was their first real fight, wasn't it?

"Are you closing your eyes to this on purpose?" Amber continued. "It's not that hard to see the obvious, Beth; it's happening right in front of your nose. You could save yourself a lot of pain if you'd be willing to see people for who they really are instead of always searching for the good in them."

"Are you calling me naive?" Bethany gripped the sheets a little harder.

"No, Beth. I'm worried, okay? Have you looked at Loredana's car?"

"I liked it. There was a rainbow sticker on the back door."

“Beth. It was an old Geo Metro, probably built like two decades ago. Loredana is supposed to be a doctor. Doctors have money. They can buy far better cars.”

That was it. Bethany got out of the bed and put on her clothes.

“Where are you going?” Amber jerked upward. “It’s the middle of the night!”

“I’m tired of people treating me like I’m some child,” Bethany said, “as if I can’t make my own decisions, as if I weren’t a grownup just like everybody else, able to decide who to trust and who to talk to.” The zipper to her bag closing sounded like a screech in the quiet of Amber’s bedroom. “I’m tired of people telling me what’s best for me. I can decide what’s best for me, okay? And right now, that would be sleeping in my own bed.”

When she got to the door, Bethany turned and winced at the hurt reaction in Amber’s eyes. But Amber’s words were making Bethany’s head ache. She needed to get out of there immediately. The last thing she needed right now was Amber reminding her how deep the wound of her break with Savannah had been and how many unresolved emotions, fears and insecurities she was still carrying inside of her. “You’re just jealous,” she said with a groan. “You’re making too much of all this because you’re jealous that I used to be in a relationship with Savy.” Even if she felt sorry for Amber, she knew she had to leave.

“Beth, if I’m making this all up, then why were you lying here, sleepless, staring at the ceiling all night?”

Amber’s voice softened, and Bethany closed her eyes, as if that was what it took to make this all go away. They had been together long enough that Bethany could recognize the plea to stay buried in Amber’s words, and she paused at the door, her fist clenching and unclenching around the handle to her bag.

“Don’t want to talk about it,” she grumbled finally.

Something in Amber’s expression closed itself off, and Bethany bit her lip to see it. “Listen,” she said, “I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

Amber just nodded. “Beth?” she asked when Bethany was already almost out the door.

“Mm?”

“I love you.”

Bethany froze. It felt good to hear Amber say it, to hear that she was loved. It did. But Amber was jealous, and Bethany couldn't deal with this when all she wanted to do was get some unhindered sleep.

But none of this was easy for either of them; she knew that. And what would happen if she left now? Could she really do that to Amber? And more importantly, did she really want to be alone right now?

She sighed, defeated, and sat down at the edge of the bed again.

Amber, meanwhile, looked confused, then spoke carefully: "Will you hand me my MacBook, please?"

Bethany nodded, handed Amber her laptop, and lay down next to her. She stared at the screen as Amber opened Google.

"What are you doing?" Beth whispered, but Amber didn't reply. Her eyes were fixed on the search bar where she typed in the name of the person who had confused them most during the night, *Loredana Valentini*.

"Two million two hundred sixty thousand hits?" she mumbled in frustration and tapped her chin. Her cursor went back to the search bar and Amber added the word *doctor*.

"Two thousand three hundred ninety two hits. That's something to work with," she said, scanning the page before finding the first link that looked promising.

"I fucking knew it," Amber mumbled and scrolled down the webpage she had just found. Bethany turned pale.

The woman who smiled at them from the screen was dark haired, had huge brown eyes and a friendly smile and was wearing a white doctor's lab coat. Same name. Same city. It had to be her.

"Believe me now?" Amber asked. "So, if this is Dr. Loredana Valentini, who was that girl we met today?"

Bethany had absolutely no answer to that. She didn't know what to believe anymore.

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HOLD MY HAND

BY AC OSWALD

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